In Media We Trust - A Solution to Disinformation and Fake News in Albanian Audiences during the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract

In this study we have analyzed the impact of disinformation and fake news in Albanian Audiences during the Russia-Ukraine war and we present the solutions given from the Albanian audiences and Albanian journalists in fighting these phenomena.

We have explored how the Albanian audiences have reacted to the information received from the international and national media during the Russia-Ukraine war, what media narratives were disseminated and how endangered these audiences were. We have investigated the role of Albanian journalists and their recommendations to minimize the spread of disinformation in times of crises. Do we trust the media? What is the main and immediate solution to disinformation and fake news during crises? What about other solutions?

Two hypotheses have been formulated: Hypothesis 1 (H1): Albanian audiences have been faced with disinformation and fake news, creating uncertainty about the accuracy of the events during the Russia-Ukraine war, and Hypothesis 2 (H2): To fight disinformation and fake news primarily it is needed that media and journalists increase their professional level.

By means of a qualitative content analysis in the Albanian media (mainstream and social) and two online questionnaires on Albanian audiences (N=387) and Albanian journalists (N=42) we find that Albanian audiences have been faced with disinformation and fake news and in order to fight disinformation and fake news primarily it is needed that the media and journalists increase their professional level.

Keywords: disinformation, fake news, media trust, Albanian audiences, propaganda in Albania, disinformation narratives in Albania, Russia-Ukraine war

1. Introduction

The audiences face many risks coming from disinformation and fake news (Tsfati et al., 2020). Questionable content was disseminated during the Russia-Ukraine war to Albanian audiences as well as attempts to raise public awareness through the means of mass communication (ABC News Albania, 2022). Consequences on the receivers of information from media contents about developments of Russia-Ukraine war have to do with the processes of generation, dissemination, reception and judgment of media content; in short, with the process of mass communication and the challenges it brings and with the way in which audiences receive and use media content, i.e. with the level of their media education (Potter, 2019).

The research shows that the issue of disinformation and fake news during the Russia-Ukraine war among Albanian audiences has not been scientifically explored and it deserves attention, with the aim of not only researching and analyzing the situation but also aiming to bring concrete solutions to the fight of this phenomena, which can be considered to be applied more widely than in Albania.

Previous scientific researches in Albania have been focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, while the Russia-Ukraine war and its effects on Albanian audiences are a new reality. When Artan Fuga and Mark Marku (2020) monitored media content during the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania, they came to the conclusion that the Albanian citizens were informed about international news because it was produced by international media with professional and ethical standards. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, Albanian audiences have encountered aggressive disinformation and influencing activities in the media and virtual space. The public report of the Albanian State Intelligence Service (2020) shows that the main objectives of the information operations of the disinformation actors were the promotion and amplification of political, social, ethnic, religious divisions; the gradual reduction of trust in the democratic system, national and international institutions; the breakdown of national cohesion between NATO and EU member countries;

manipulating public perception on them and presenting their governance models as successful in managing the situation in relation to Western countries and international organizations. This seems to have been aided by the high internet access of Albanian residents, which seems to be increasing every year. Based on the results of the Survey of the Use of Information Technology (ICT) (2022) during the year 2022 in the age group 16 - 74 years old, 82.6% of the population in Albania use the internet, of which 91.6% use it several times during the day.

Seeing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Albanian audiences and the appearance of a new reality, the effects of the media content from the Russia-Ukraine war, we have decided to analyze the impact of disinformation and fake news on Albanian Audiences during the Russia-Ukraine war and exploring the solutions given from the Albanian audiences and Albanian journalists in fighting this phenomenon. Do audiences fall prey to disinformation and fake news in times of crisis and how do they expect information disorders to be minimized? How do journalists expect information disorders to be minimized? Do audiences trust traditional media? How do they use the online ones? Do audiences trust professional journalists? What do they expect from them? What are the solutions that improve the situation according to audiences and according to professional journalists? Is there a common denominator?

Two hypotheses have been formulated: Hypothesis 1 (H1): Albanian audiences have been faced with disinformation and fake news, creating uncertainty about the accuracy of the events during the Russia-Ukraine war, and Hypothesis 2 (H2): To fight disinformation and fake news primarily it is needed that media and journalists increase their professional level. It has been chosen whether the verification or rejection of these two hypotheses to be done through the means of a qualitative content analysis in the Albanian media (mainstream and social) and two online questionnaires on Albanian audiences (N=387) and Albanian journalists (N=42).

The war between Russia and Ukraine was broadcast to millions and billions of people around the world, through mainstream media as well as social media. Among these audiences were the Albanian audiences. Since February 24, 2022, Albanian audiences have been receiving information about the developments in Ukraine, because of the "bombardment" with information from the media, but also because of their explicit questions on the developments of this war. Albanian audiences thus became the object of media messages, but on the other hand, these audiences actively used the media to be informed, comment or share media products related to the Russia-Ukraine war.

Albanian audiences have been informed mainly in two ways about the developments of the Russia-Ukraine war: through the professional media (TV, online media, newspapers, radio) and through social networks. Professional media used as their main source the international media, distributing fake news in several cases. International media reports have circulated in these social media that have contained fake news and sometimes alerts that these were fake, but also anonymous profiles and media products that have distributed uncertain information.

The mainstream media newsrooms in Albania have not focused on sending special teams for constant reporting on the Russia-Ukraine war front. The heads of these newsrooms have sporadically sent a few teams to the borders with Ukraine at the start of the conflict, while for some journalists such as Blendi Fevziu (RTV Klan, 2022), Muhamed Veliu (Top Channel Albania, 2022), Thimi Samarxhiu and Julian Kasapi (Top Channel Albania, 2022), Klodiana Lala (News 24 Albania, 2022), Taulant Kopliku (ABC News Albania, 2022) or Drini Zeqo (RTV Klan, 2022), it has been reported that they had reached the vicinity of Ukraine, even entering dangerous areas. In the absence of their sources from the scene, the media in Albania have referred to American or British media such as CNN, BBC, Reuters, etc. but with rare exceptions also Russian ones such as Russia Today, Sputnik etc.

The research does not aim to deal with the Russia-Ukraine war from a historical point of view except for the effects of its developments on the Albanian audiences during the processes of production, dissemination and acquisition of media information as well as information disorders and how it can be minimized. This research brings together several disciplines; studies on media and journalism, political communication and those of victimology or cyber security.

1.1 Audiences, Disinformation and Fake News – Concepts and Research Studies

Audiences are defined in different ways: by place, by people, by the particular type of medium or channel involved as well as by time (McQuail, 2020).

Several authors have carefully studied audiences, including Webster (2008), Webster and Phalen (1997), Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973-1974) or Livingstone (2005). Webster saw the audience as a mass because of the media's effects on them, and as an agent but he also talks about mixed models of how we define audiences. McQuail (1997) makes sure to advance in the division of the most specific typologies of audiences, to see the audience not only under the effect of media messages, so defining the audience as a group or as a public; audiences with their needs or preferences, the audience of the medium, audience defined by channel or content but also the audience as a target, as a participant, as a spectator, etc.

Research in theories of use and gratifications emphasizes how individuals use communications in their environment to satisfy their needs and achieve their goals. This model of studying audiences is centered on 5 elements, among which

viewing audiences as active in the entire mass communication process, the need for gratification and the choice of media belongs to the audience member and that many of the purposes of using mass media can be drawn from the data provided by individual audience members, where people are self-aware enough to be able to re-portray their interests and motives on particular occasions (Katz et al., 1973-1974). The relationship between audiences and the public, should be taken into consideration according to Livingstone (2005) as public refers to a common understanding or involvement in a common forum because public implies an orientation of collective and consensual. There is a contradiction in Livingstone's eyes (2018) regarding the fact that the importance of the media is increasing in many areas of life, but on the other hand, people's engagement with these media remains insignificant.

Although we can insist on theoretically seeing the audience in a specific angle; as autonomous to select the media contents that interests them or as a host of the media contents and therefore powerless not to be influenced by their effects, it is a fact that audiences nowadays are facing challenges related to their tranquility and security. It seems that the technological development, masterful growth in the development of propaganda or complex disinformation campaigns has led to the need to ask how audiences today cannot become part of or at least not fall victim of questionable content.

Having an education, for example, does not guarantee protection from these questionable contents, but it is interesting how Chang, Mukherjee and Coppel (2020) argue that a limited education (including media literacy) plays a significant role in the victimization of individuals, because enables them to access social media, but it does not enable them to recognize or make rational choices in favor of accurate information. They think that the lack of awareness and skills to identify fake news from verified news increases the circulation of questionable material.

Media literacy refers to what Potter (2019) calls increasing the ability to exercise control over the large number of messages encountered through daily media exposure. The purpose of propaganda when audiences encounter these questionable content remains the same as what Bernays (2017) defines for modern propaganda: a sustained effort aimed at creating or shaping events to influence the relationship between the public and an enterprise, idea or group. While today we are in the circumstances where it is being studied what influence conspiracy theories have or what Post-Truth is. In this case McIntyre (2018) points out that "Post-Truth" is about a form of ideological supremacy where practitioners try to force someone to believe in something whether or not there is evidence for it.

If we go back to the challenges that audiences face today, we can mention some of them, grouped into what are called information disorders. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) define dis-information as information that is false and intentionally created to harm a person, social group, organization, or state, while mis-information is indeed false information, but not created with the intent to cause harm. While mal-information according to them remains information that is based on reality and that is used with the intention of causing damage to a person, organization or country. Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2017) in a paper on the definition of fake news remind us that there are 6 ways of operationalizing fake news: satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation through photos, propaganda and advertising and public relations. Their work brings us different views of authors who have dealt with the study of fake news, discussing for example how fake news resembles real news at first glance, thus building a network of fake websites, concluding that the role of the audience in the definition of fake news remains important, raising the questions: Does fake news remain fake if it is not perceived as real by the audience? In other words, can an article that looks like news but does not have any factual basis and with the immediate intent to deceive, be considered fake news if the audience does not buy into the lie? While fake news according to Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2017) plays with the legitimacy of journalism and remains a work of fiction, it seems to be constructed by the audience because the truth depends so much on whether the audience perceives the lie as true. Thus, whether the audience falls prey to fake news or not.

Perceptions of misinformation are important, several other authors who have studied them in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic tell us. They create the impression that the pandemic is difficult to control, and this in turn increases public concern. Their findings show that the perception of misinformation can have important psychological effects even when audience members reject the information as false (Matthes et al., 2022). Just as it is important to understand that fake news needs turbulent times in order to work, such as troubled times and social divisions (Tandoc et al., 2017). The study on trust in the media during crises and the use of their contents brings interesting data that the use of online news and social media increases in these periods and the same has happened regarding to television news, while the use of radio and newspapers remain at the same levels as before, and are even decreasing (Aelst et al., 2021). This is because online and social media as well as television offer faster media coverage but what is also noticed is that the greatest increase in the use of media content during crises was related to those people who had trust in media news before the crisis, emphasizing once again the great role that trust in the media has in the use of media content. Likewise, Aelst et al. (2021) conclude that people who experienced higher concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic increased their news consumption the most regardless of the specific type of media, thus confirming that concerns and anxiety about a crisis are drivers of usage of media news as particular people with lower levels of media news consumption before the crisis increased their news use.

Although fake news researchers point out that these "news" play with the legitimacy and credibility of journalism, **some** other research studies conclude that it is the traditional media that facilitates the spread of disinformation and fake news because it helps spread it by talking about it and this shows that social media is not the main driver of the spread of fake news in the general population (Tsfati et al., 2020).

If we return once again to the purposes why disinformation and fake news spread to the general population, propaganda and persuasion were two of the main reasons. A study conducted on social media in Romania shows that negative manipulation increases the likelihood of sharing political news, but fabricated and highly biased information tends to be rejected, satire and parody did not produce significant effects, while "soft" fake news did most influential (Corbu et al., 2020). Studies show that while people share and discuss media content on digital media, they do not manage to do an in-depth verification of it to identify fake news (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

2. Albanian Audiences Engage in Troubled Times – Disinformation Narratives and Fake News

The discussion on fake news and Russian propaganda in Ukraine has started since the last period of the Soviet and post-Soviet system and information was used as a powerful weapon to destabilize Ukraine, both in the traditional media and also in the newer ones given that false stories were created and spread to influence public debate; media news as well and social network websites were used to spread fake news, but also attacks were carried out in the virtual space of government agencies (Price & Barry, 2017). Ukraine's response to Russia has ranged from banning Russian TV channel broadcasts, access to Russian websites, to the creation of a ministry to combat Russian propaganda.

Erlich and Garner (2023) researched the effects of Russian propaganda on Ukrainian residents, finding that they can distinguish true stories from disinformation, although many are ambivalent about the veracity of a variety of disinformation. Disinformation about the economy was believed more than that about politics, history or the military and was found that although Ukrainians were able to distinguish true stories from pro-Kremlin disinformation, they were equally unable to distinguish disinformation.

These conclusions highlight a problem that should be analyzed further. Assuming that a better media literacy is achieved for citizens, the question remains whether there is certainty that they will distinguish fake news and disinformation completely? It appears that being a follower of a political party affects whether certain disinformation is believed or not, while those who supported Russian politics for example were less likely to distinguish true claims from pro-Kremlin disinformation (Erlich & Garner, 2023).

In a report on the evolution of Russian narratives about Ukraine and their export in the Ukrainian media, it is emphasized that some of the most important ones are: "There is a civil war in Ukraine", "There is a high level of Russo phobia in Ukraine", "Nazism flourishes in Ukraine ", "Ukraine is a failed state" and "Ukraine is a puppet of the West". The authors of the research come to the conclusion that Russia's attacks with these narratives on Ukraine have 3 main directions: the aim of the Russian audience to create an image of Ukraine as an enemy and to obtain a social mandate to implement their aggressive policy; the Ukrainian audience's aim to destabilize society and force it to make peace on Moscow's terms and the international audience's aim to legitimize Russian policy (in order to consolidate the Kremlin's influence in areas they consider their spheres of influence and to achieve the recognition of Crimea as a Russian territory and the easing of sanctions) (Tsekhanovska & Tsybulska, 2022).

What narratives does Russia "export" internationally? How is the Russia-Ukraine war reported by the international media? Are there certain narratives that are "exported" to the Western media? Is Ukraine being reported as a "victim" and what disinformation narratives are in circulation? Sefer Tahiri, professor at the University of Southeast Europe in Tetovo, North Macedonia, thinks that one of the narratives is that of the media that operates in the online sphere and that mainly proclaim a pro-Russian editorial policy (Free Europe Radio, 2022). According to him, it is evident that in a large part of the traditional media as well as online media, there are condemnations of Russian policy of the occupation that has taken place in Ukraine. He emphasizes the presence of a discourse that gives more importance to the fact that the state of Ukraine is occupied and that the people of Ukraine are victims, drawing a parallel with the historical fate of the Albanians during the Kosovo war.

The main narrative (Note 1) used in the media in Albania, is related firstly to the uncertainty of whether a war was taking place in Ukraine.

> - Is there or is there no war in Ukraine? (RTV Klan, 2022)

This ambiguity was accompanied by images, texts, statements and even videos, which in the form of fake news presented the audience old photos of much earlier moments of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, images from the annexation of Crimea, photos from the Second World War, footage of movies that were broadcast as moments from the real war even up to the call of a phantom organization that asked to donate money to Ukraine. So, the second narrative is about telling untrue stories, using bits of real information.

- Untrue stories, using real bits of information

Stories told by the Albanian media that serve the PR of Ukraine.

- Promoting the image of Ukraine, selecting or reinforcing those media contents that serve this purpose

A video of a Russian soldier being helped by Ukrainian citizens) was widely published in the Albanian media, who was even given a phone to talk to his mother (Jim Heath Channel, 2022. Western media have presented Ukraine as "the good one", "the victim" and Russia as "the bad one", "the aggressor", while this approach has also been broadcast in Albania by Albanian media that mainly referred to these Western media. Very few media in Albania referred in addition to Western media, the Russian media in their reports, among them Hashtag.al (Hashtag.al, 2022), reporting the respective approaches in these articles. The narratives circulating in the Russian media during the war were: "Russia forced to intervene in Ukraine", "Russia is fighting this war for survival", "Ukraine is being used by the West and should make up its mind".

- Damaging further the image of Russia

The media in Albania also took care to report events, situations, developments that served the purpose of showing the Russian leader Vladimir Putin as "bad", "monster", taking care also to present, in contrast, the Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy as "hero" or "victim" (For example, the media reports on his meeting with his wife after 3 months (Dosja.al, 2022).

- The narrative of evoking emotions by talking about a war that affects you, that makes you cry, that makes you excited, that makes you feel anxious or terrified

To help this narrative, a number of methods were used, among which the use of children, such as the Ukrainian girl who sings in the role of Elsa etc. Similarly, other methods are related to the use of beauty, art, emotional moments, etc.

- The narrative of Albania's alignment in the Pro-Ukraine position

This narrative is fed by frequent reports from the Albanian media, through their local sources on support activities (Top Channel Albania, 2022), demonstrations (Gazeta Shqiptare, 2022), statements, even reports on the naming of a street in Tirana "Free Ukraine" (Politiko.al, 2022).

Besides to accurate information, several of fake news have circulated. Elements of these fake contents didn't only consist of texts, but also of photos, for example for Blendi Fevziu, the TV Host of one of the most watched shows in Albania, Opinion on TV Klan, circulated a fake photomontage as of Ukrainian soldiers having captured him, which the moderator denied (Newsbomb.al, 2022). Although there have been attempts in the Albanian media (ABC News Albania, 2022) to help audiences not buy into the fake news during this war, there has been evidence of false information. Some of the fake news that circulated in the first months of the war show the frequency of this phenomenon, some of which were refuted some time later.

The "attack" on the maternity hospital in Mariupol (Russia Today, 2022) where the local and international media accused Russia but then was faced Russia's denial, the suspicious event in Bucha (Balkanweb.com, 2022) where genocide (The Observers, 2022) was claimed and while the media accused Russia, Russia accused the United States of America and Ukraine, the "incident" on Snake Island (Hashtag.al, 2022) where it was claimed that Ukrainian soldiers had been executed by Russian soldiers that was dismissed as fake news even by the Ukrainian authorities, the ghost pilot that was actually only related to footage of a game (Hashtag.al, 2022), the claim of Zelensky's handover (The Telegraph, 2022) the claim that Zelensky was consuming cocaine (Balkanweb.com, 2022) (a fake news), a fake photo of a bombed girl in Ukraine (Lapsi.al, 2022) the debates on the destruction of the Albanian consulate (Hashtag.al, 2022) and other disinformation on Tik-Tok are just a few from the most typical cases of doubts about information distributed.

The detailed analysis confirms the first hypothesis of this study that Albanian audiences have faced disinformation and fake news, creating uncertainty about the events taking place during the Russia-Ukraine war. Since the Albanian media have reported referring to global media reports on the Russia-Ukraine war and since disinformation narratives and fake news have been found during the monitoring, Albanian audiences have therefore encountered disinformation and fake news. Albanian audiences have had limited access to Russian media news on this war as Albanian media have mainly referred to Western media, which have had a pro-Ukraine approach.

3. Methodology of the Study

Two hypotheses have been formulated for this study in Albania: Hypothesis 1 (H1): Albanian audiences have been faced with disinformation and fake news, creating uncertainty about the accuracy of the events during the Russia-Ukraine war, and Hypothesis 2 (H2): To fight disinformation and fake news primarily it is needed that media and journalists increase their professional level.

Beyond the literature review and analysis, we used the methods of media content monitoring and two structured online

questionnaires distributed to Albanian audiences and journalists, to collect the data for these hypotheses.

The monitoring of media content was carried out by selecting news on the subject of the Russia-Ukraine war in the Albanian media and choosing those that have sparked public debate or that were accompanied by fake news or claims that were not true and served certain disinformation narratives. The monitoring of media content related to the Russia-Ukraine war was carried out in the period March-September 2022.

Online structured questionnaires are the main method in this study and they were formulated after a detailed literature review and disinformation and fake news narrative analysis during the Russia-Ukraine war. Two questionnaires with different targets were designed: One for audiences in Albania (17 questions) and one for Albanian journalists (20 questions).

Some of the questions were the same for both questionnaires, while there were also specifics. The questionnaires were piloted on 10 information and education professionals to make sure if they were well understood. During this process, there were some changes in the answer alternatives, adding questions or simplifying answers, in order to have the most complete understanding, especially with regard to the audience, which may not be familiar with certain terminology. The questionnaires went online on July 11, 2022 and remained online until September 18, 2022.

How were the audiences selected to fill it? The target was to get the response of 500 audience members and for this, channels of public figures were used. Public figures ensure a greater visibility of the existence of this questionnaire and for this fact the chances of capturing a larger audience are greater. Which public figures helped? Sonila Meço, a TV host in Tirana with 47 000 followers and Altin Goxhaj, an activist in Tirana with 26 467 followers. Likewise, social groups were used in social networks such as "Information is power" with 2 000 followers, or online media such as Gogo.al, an online media in Tirana with 4500 followers on Facebook, Hashtag.al, an online media in Tirana with 97 000 followers on Facebook. The audiences of these channels appear to be information-seeking audiences. The number of random audience members who completed the questionnaire is 387 (Note 2).

How were the journalists selected to fill it? The goal was to reach a number of 50 professional Albanian journalists. They were contacted in advance at the main newsrooms and then the questionnaire was sent to them online. The type of media was taken into consideration (to represent not only television but also online media, etc.) also different age groups and the location of the newsrooms (preferably distributed throughout Albania; Tirana, Durrës, Vlorë, Shkodër, etc.) The number of journalists who completed the questionnaire is 42 (Note 3).

4. Findings of the Study

The audience questionnaire was designed with several logical sections, starting from the first question, in which the audience would answer whether they were informed about the developments surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war, continuing to the second and third one where they would indicate the frequency of information and through which channels, to continue to the fourth question where they would give their opinion if the most frequent news supported the pro-Ukraine, pro-Russia narrative, etc. The questionnaire continued to a section of 5 questions about the first doubts whether there is or there is not a war, uncertainty in information, did they experience anxiety or fear and what were the causes according to them for these uncertainties as well as the last two sections; from questions 10 to 16 about fake news, their behavior towards fake news or their opinion about the media's behavior towards fake news, and the last one related to the solution they proposed to fight disinformation and fake news.

Some of these basic questions were also asked to journalists, accompanied by other more specific questions related to their work processes reporting or information verification processes. Questions 1-4 addressed with the sources of information, question 5 was about the narrative that dominated the coverage during the Russia-Ukraine war, questions 6-8 asked journalists for information on initial suspicions about the war, questions 9-15 focused entirely on the fake news, the 16th was dedicated to disinformation campaigns, the 17th was about reporting pressure, the 18th was about reporting from the front, the 19th was about verifying information, and the last question was about the solution proposed by journalists to fight disinformation and fake news.

	Sex		Age							Education					
	F	M	18-23	32-37	24-31	38-42	43-48	49-55	Over 55	Bachelor	Master	Secondary	Professional	PhD	Elementary
A(387)	26.6%	73.4%	6.1%	25.1%	23.5%	16.4%	12.1%	9.5%),	7.4%	37.6%	32.6%	15.8%	8.4%	4.2%	1.3%
J(42)	50 %	50 %	4.8%	16.7%	47.6%	19 %	2.4%	4.8%	4.8%	35.7%	64.3%	-	-	-	-

Figure 1. Demographic and other data of the audience and journalists who responded to the study. A=Audiences, J=Journalists (Note 4)

The fact that 94% of the audience asked in the period July-September 2022 was informed about the developments of the Russia-Ukraine war, shows that it was a major issue for them, thus also showing the credibility of the respondents to answer questions about the type of information they had received. They were informed mainly through 3 channels: social networks, online media and televisions with a frequency of 57.7% every time they opened social networks or televisions, 28.6% once a day and even 13.7% of them looked for information on Google about the war.

Interesting answers to keep in mind came from the audience in the question session on the doubts in the first days of the start of the war, where a significant part had doubts whether the start of the war was real or not. Even after 5 months since the start of the war, 33.3% of the audience think that the Russia-Ukraine war is not real, and 12.3% of the audience are not completely clear about this. However, 54.3% of the audience 5 months after the war started to think that the war is real. But the percentages are even greater when asked about their doubts at the beginning of the war: 42% of the audience had doubts and 10.9% did not know how to answer. Only 47.1% had no doubts. Asked what factors may have influenced their doubts, the audience listed as the first reason contradictory news (41.7 %), fake news (39.4 %), limited sources of information (35.4 %), suspicious news (33.4%) and do not know how to answer 9.4%.

40% of the audience has experienced insecurity, fear, anxiety, worry about what was happening between Ukraine and Russia and the majority 60% have not experienced these. What were the reasons for those who experienced them? The dominant reason remains unclear information from the media (39.1%), but also unclear information from the media and fear of war as a common answer alternative were clicked by 22.6% of the audience, 17.9% clicked on the option "because of the fear of war", while 20.4% of them do not know how to answer.

82.1% of the audience think that the news in support of Ukraine has prevailed in relation to those in defense of Russia (only 2.9%). 6.3% of the audience thinks that balanced narratives have existed among media content, although 8.7% of them do not know how to answer. These data show that audiences think they not only know the narratives but can accurately determine their approach, identifying the most used one, the one in defense of Ukraine.

As we will see further on, audiences are also familiar with disinformation and fake news and think they can spot them. 86.6% of the questioned audience have encountered fake news regarding the latest developments from the Russia-Ukraine war, only 2.9% of them answer that they have not encountered fake news, while 10.5% do not know how to answer.

What is the audience behavior when they identify media contents as fake news? 69.4% of them say that they did not click on them because they immediately realized that they were fake, 9.7% reported them as fake on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, etc., a small part of the audience (2.2%) shared them on their profile showing the suspicion that they may not be true and only 18.6% of the respondents clicked on them.

This proves with another method the first hypothesis, proven already through the monitoring and analysis of media content: Albanian audiences have faced disinformation and fake news during the Russia-Ukraine war. What this second method brings is that, as the audiences themselves express, they are aware of this fake news by ascertaining them and holding certain attitudes towards them.

On what channels have they witnessed most of fake news? The collected data show that the information broadcast by television (60.5%) and social networks (60.3%) come first, when the audiences were free to choose some of the alternatives presented in the questionnaire. The ranking continues with online media (56.2%), newspapers (21.4%), Google (17.8%) and radio (15.3%). The main reasons according to the audience for the spread of fake news are due to deliberate Ukrainian propaganda campaigns (65.1%), due to clicks (45.2%), due to deliberate Russian propaganda campaigns (28.2%), due to the haste of journalists to publish information without verifying it (27.4%) and from the lack of resources from the war front (19.4%).

What do audiences think of the media's decision about published fake news? 51.5% of the respondents think that the media does not correct the wrong information with a new clarifying news, a significant percentage (35.8%) do not know how to answer this question and only 13.1% think that the media has corrected the news with new information clarifying the wrong information at the beginning. It appears that when audiences encounter fake news in times of crisis, they are looking for accurate information; 68.3% of them look for information in other sources to dispel doubts about the information received, compared to 31.7% who do not do this. The list of sources for finding accurate information according to the use that audiences say they make, is as follows: international media (40.5%), social networks (37.5%), experts who have information (34.6%), Google (30.7%), online media (29.4%), friends (22%), fact checking platforms (17.2%), television (15.2%) and official information channels (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, government, embassies) 5.8%.

What are the solutions given by audience in order to fight disinformation and fake news? According to them, first of all, the media should increase their professional level (47.1%), secondly, audiences must be better educated (23%), thirdly, the strengthening of fact check platforms (22.2%), and finally, the intervention of government, where only 7.7% of the audience think it should be applied.

The same solution comes from journalists. According to them, the main solution in the fight against disinformation and fake news is to increase the professional level of the media (52.4%) during the processes of verification, reporting or writing about events during crises. As the second solution, the use of fact check platforms is recommended by journalists (28.6%), placing audience education in third place as a solution with 14.3%. Government control remains the last of the solutions according to journalists (4.8%).

Just like audiences, journalists also think that the main narratives during reporting on the developments of the Russia-Ukraine war have been in support of Ukraine (92.9%), balanced (4.8%) and do not know how to respond (2.4%). None of them think that narratives in defense of Russia have prevailed in Albania.

Just like the audience, most of journalists think that fake news has circulated in the published media content (83.3%), have not (11.9%) and they don't know how to answer (4.8%). Online media holds the lead according to journalists for the main source of disseminating fake news (75.7%), followed by social networks (59.5%), television (29.7%) and newspapers (5.4%). The reasons they give about fake news spread are different from the reasons that audiences give. If the audiences listed as the first cause the deliberate Ukrainian propaganda, the journalists think that the main cause is the deliberate Russian propaganda (52.5%), due to the editorial policies of the Western media (37.5%), due to the lack of resources on the war front (37.5%), due to Ukrainian propaganda campaigns (35%), for clicks 35%, due to the editorial policies of the Russian media (27.5%), due to the haste of journalists not to properly verify the information (25%).

What do journalists do when they think that have encounter fake news? 45% say they didn't click on them because they immediately realized they were fake, another 45% clicked on them and only 10% of them reported them as fake news on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, etc.

To the question of whether they have encountered disinformation campaigns (beyond specific fake news) or bombardment with dubious information, 57.1% of journalists answer Yes. 28.6% answer No, and 14.3% do not know how to answer. To eliminate doubts in information, journalists prefer to turn to international media as a source (73.7%), online media (42.1%), Google (28.9%), experts who have information (23.7%), social networks (18.4%), official channels (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, government, embassies) (also 18.4%), televisions (15.8%) and finally fact check platforms (13.2%). Only 28.6% of journalists think that they have not encountered disinformation campaigns, while the rest think that they have or at least do not know how to answer.

The percentage of journalists who believe in a more constructive behavior of the media in relation to the correction of wrong information is greater compared to the audiences. If 51.5% of the audience thought that the media does not correct misinformation with a new clarifying story, only 43.6% of journalists think that the media does not correct it, while 22% of journalists think that the media does correct it compared to 13.1% of the audience that thought the media corrects it. 31.7% of journalists do not know how to answer this question, the same as the high level of the audience, showing a high number of them being unclear to give comments on the behavior of the media.

The main sources that journalists have used to get information about the Russia-Ukraine war are: online media (76.2%), social networks (38.1%), specialized websites with professional information (31%), television (26.2%), newspapers (2.4%) and radio (2.4%). The vast majority (92.9%) think that the original information they receive about the Russia-Ukraine war has its source in the international media, leaving a negligible space for the Albanian local media (only 2.4% of journalists think that the main source on the developments of the war is the local media). Albanian journalists are being informed from Western and Eastern media (52.4%), but 40.5% of the respondents who could choose several alternatives simultaneously prefer Western international media. Journalists think that the news published in the Albanian media have their source in the Western international media (70.7%), in both the Western and Eastern international media (22%) and only 7.3% of them say that the Albanian media have their journalists in the war front.

Like audiences, journalists had doubts at the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war whether it was real. Same as the audience, they think that the factors that have influenced their doubts are related to the presence of contradictory news (37.5%), limited sources of information (34.4%), do not know how to answer 28.1%, suspicious news (25%) and fake news (15.6%). It is interesting to note that even in the period when they were asked, 5 months after the start of the war, 9.5% of journalists still thought that the Russia-Ukraine war was not real, while 7.1% did not know how to answer. However, at its start, a greater number of journalists think that the war was not true, 28.6% of them.

Journalists were also asked about their reporting processes, information verification processes or reporting pressure. Only 3 journalists out of 42 reported on the Russia-Ukraine war from the war front, 8 out of 42 journalists were under pressure to report on the war without verifying the information in 2 or 3 sources, while the way they selected and verified the information during the Russia-Ukraine war was: they always referred to the original sources (64.3%), chose reliable international and national media (40.5%), chose reliable Western and Russian media (26.2%) and used fact check platforms (23.8%). 90% of journalists looked for sources with accurate information mainly in Western media to dispel doubts.

To summarize, we can say that the Albanian audiences and journalists have faced disinformation and fake news about the Russia-Ukraine war during the period February-September 2022. Albanian audiences have had limited access to other narrative approaches on the Russia-Ukraine war, like the Russian one for example, since the main sources of information have been the Western media, which mainly in the February-September 2022 have had an approach pro-Ukraine. The second hypothesis is confirmed: To fight disinformation and fake news it is primarily needed that media and journalists raise their professional level.

5. Conclusions and an Invitation to Discussion

Some of the popular solutions to combat disinformation and fake news are what Van der Linden and Roozenbeek (2021) summarize as algorithmic, corrective, legislative and psychological. Among the solutions studied in more depth by other authors are the education of the audiences, the increase in the level of a more accountable journalism as well as the inoculation-implementation of the idea of "vaccinating" the audiences to make them more immune to the dangers of disinformation proposed by McGuire (1999). A study in the spirit of inoculation theory even finds that public attitudes toward climate change can be effectively inoculated against influential misinformation (Van der Linden et al., 2017). But also another study related to the COVID-19 pandemic concluded that prevention is better than cure, where it brought as a case study the players of the game "Bad News" who engaged in the creation of fake news and learned over 6 common disinformation techniques, thereby significantly improving the skills to resist post-game disinformation techniques and increasing player's confidence in distinguishing fraudulent information (Van der Linden et al., 2020). On the other hand, Frau-Meigs (2022) emphasizes the cooperation between journalism and Media and Information Education and their strengthening in subverting misinformation and for information to dominate.

-Both audiences of the age group from 18 to over 55 years old questioned in this study, and the journalists who work with the information, think that the first solution to fight disinformation and fake news is to increase the level of professionalism of the Albanian media; and as a second solution according to audiences is media literacy. These audiences feel that they can identify disinformation narratives and fake news, and even adopt certain attitudes towards them: by not clicking on suspect media content, by clicking on it, and even sharing it on their social media profiles with suspicions that they are not true.

-The study brings a concrete solution: increasing the professional level of the media and journalists to fight disinformation and fake news, thus providing an orientation for the media, their supporters, those interested in avoiding disinformation campaigns, etc. The solution is agreed between the audience and the journalists. This seems to be the common denominator.

-The study emphasizes the reliability of the media (Newman & Fletcher, 2017) (Note 5) as a solution to disinformation and fake news, redimensioning once again the role of journalism as a "gatekeeper" and verifier of information, as well as how professionals should serve their audiences because they expect this to happen.

-The study highlights the audience's awareness in distinguishing fake news and disinformation, finding that there was disinformation and fake news in Albania during the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as the clarity in the behavior towards them, which finding is also consistent with the monitoring analysis in this research study and the conclusions that journalists bring.

-The study highlights the awareness of journalists and the lack of their complex to express that they should work more to increase their professional level, not putting a finger first on the audiences and the work they must do to educate themselves. Audience education on media and information for journalists was offered as a third solution after the use of fact check platforms, which in fact remains a professional job that journalists must continue to do at the same time as the work with their sources.

Despite the interleaving of the two methods, monitoring and structured online questionnaires, this study again has its limitations.

First, there is a need to analyze the situation in larger audiences than the one where it was studied, Albania. It would be interesting to conduct this research in Europe and beyond as well.

Secondly, it should be more explored how it is explained that increasing the professional level of the media is seen as the first solution in the fight against disinformation and fake news. Is the audience's request for the media to become more professional related more to the trust that this audience has in the media or more to the audience's lack of will to sharpen their skills in media literacy? Because the audience may be not interested to increase their level of media education or because no matter how hard they try, the restrictions on the full verification of information penalize them?

Thirdly, the credibility of the media should be studied in more detail, but also the repositioning of the role of the professional media in the concepts that audiences currently have in times of crisis. It is also necessary to study how the dynamics can change if we decide to use the solutions that Nic Newman and Richard Fletcher (2017) (Note 6) give to strengthen the trust in the news: the distancing of news organizations from information that has not followed the same professional path of verification (increasing of news quality and minimizing clickbait), a better job at separating facts from opinions and thirdly a media with a higher representation of all types of audiences.

Fourthly, the dynamics of the media-audience relationship in the face of disinformation and fake news dangers must be considered, as well as the re-dimensioning that we must do to the approaches between the theories of media effects and those of uses and gratification when we examine the whole phenomenon of disinformation.

Finally, let's keep in mind some important questions that may arise after the conclusions of this study: what should continue to be the main guarantee that audiences are correctly being informed and that disinformation and fake news are minimized? Where should we look for and expect professionalism first, in institutions, audiences or journalists? Where should we look for and expect professionalism first, in institutions, audiences or journalists, and which of them can we trust the most?

Notes

Notes 1. March-September 2022 Monitoring

Notes 2. See at the findings of the study the demographic data of the audiences and of the journalists who answered the questionnaires.

Notes 3. See at the findings of the study the demographic data of the audiences and of the journalists who answered the questionnaires.

Notes 4. The questionnaire was published in the Albanian language. The audience members who answered the questionnaire have many professions and their locations are all over Albania but also outside it, mainly in the diaspora. The media where the journalists who answered the questionnaire work are mainly television, online media and newspapers: Klan News, A2 CNN, ABC News, Gazeta Tema, Syri Tv, News24, BalkanWeb.com, Faxweb.al, Shqiptarja.com, Ora News, Report Tv, MCN TV, Faktor.al, Gazeta Shqiptare, ACQJ, Vizion Plus, City News Albania, OCCRP, Hashtag.al. Media sectors covered by journalists who have answered: international news, politics, current affairs, showbiz, culture, region, economy, social issues, crime and corruption reporting. Their location is mainly in Tirana.

Notes 5. Nic Newman, Richard Fletcher, Bias, Bullshit and Lies Audience Perspectives on Low Trust in the Media, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, Digital News Project, 2017,5: They draw the conclusion that 40% of audiences in 9 countries trust the media and they think that journalists do a good job in controlling the reliability of the sources, verifying facts and providing evidence to support certain claims. Audiences in the USA, Germany, and Denmark seem to have more confidence in the professional integrity of journalists and transparency in the processes they follow than in Great Britain, France, or Australia.

Notes 6. Nic Newman, Richard Fletcher, Bias, Bullshit and Lies Audience Perspectives on Low Trust in the Media, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, Digital News Project, 2017, 6

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