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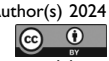

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Public service media as pivotal in combating misinformation and disinformation: prerequisites and approaches

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Abstract

The communicative environment of public service media (PSM) has changed considerably due to the digital transformation. This includes the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms, which has the potential to undermine democracy. Against this background, the paper argues that the role of PSM should be expanded beyond the core tasks of high-quality, diverse and impartial reporting. PSM should increasingly also act as institutions that monitor social media, evaluate, and validate external information. In addition, they should engage in enhancing media literacy and developing genuine PSM platforms. The paper discusses the opportunities and limitations of each approach and addresses prerequisites for PSM, such as political independence and societal trust. It thus contributes to the understanding how PSM can continue to fulfil their democratic role under new conditions.

Keywords

Public service media, disinformation, fact-checking, media literacy, platform

Introduction

In the digital age, public service media (PSM) operate in an environment where misinformation and disinformation are spread, especially on social media platforms. This poses a threat to democracy. Consequently, this paper argues that the remit of PSM should be broadened and sharpened to not only provide high-quality, diverse and impartial news, but also to proactively combat false narratives (Horowitz and Lowe, 2020). In this regard, this paper looks at three approaches PSM can take to fight misinformation and

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disinformation: (a) engaging in rigorous fact-checking (e.g. Horowitz and Lowe, 2020; Horowitz et al., 2022; Kyriakidou and Cushion, 2021), (b) enhancing media literacy (e.g. Horowitz et al., 2022), and (c) creating genuine PSM platforms to provide credible information (e.g. Thomaß, 2020).

Despite some of these tasks also being offered by private-sector media, PSM occupy a special position due to their commitment to informing and educating the general public, coupled with an obligation to impartiality (Kyriakidou and Cushion, 2021: 533). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the diversity in PSM across various countries, which influences their approach and effectiveness in tackling misinformation and disinformation, for example, regarding their political independence or societal trust (Horowitz and Lowe, 2020: 181–182; Horowitz et al., 2022). Consequently, this paper further looks into the fundamental prerequisites for PSM in any country to successfully implement these approaches.

The paper is organised as follows: following the introduction, it defines the terms misinformation and disinformation. Subsequently, the paper explores why PSM are uniquely positioned to fight misinformation and disinformation, before discussing the prerequisites for PSM to be successful in this task. This provides a foundation for an examination of three approaches – fact-checking, enhancing media literacy, and creating genuine PSM platforms to promote quality journalism over misinformation and disinformation. Each approach is described and exemplified, with opportunities and limitations analysed. Finally, a conclusion is drawn.

Misinformation and disinformation as threat to democracy

Misleading and false information is discussed in both the literature and society under various terms. Consequently, in this section, the phenomenon, in its various manifestations, is first systematised and defined. While the term ‘fake news’ is often used, it is widely criticised for its political instrumentalisation and its inadequacy in addressing the disinformation challenge (e.g. Tandoc and Seet, 2022: 4; Wardle, 2018: 951–952). The criticism also includes the tendency to narrow the focus to text-based website content and neglect the importance of visual material or posts on social media platforms and messaging apps (Wardle, 2018: 952). In response to these limitations, several researchers have proposed different categories or typologies of the phenomenon (e.g. Nielsen and Graves, 2017: 3; Tandoc et al., 2018; Wardle, 2018: 953).

Park et al. (2020) classify misleading or false information into four categories according to their intent to deceive and/or harm. (a) Misinformation includes false information that is disseminated without intent to deceive or harm. (b) Malinformation has an intent to harm but not to deceive. This category includes targeted campaigns against individuals or institutions. (c) Non-information is disseminated with a high intent to deceive but a low intent to harm. A typical example could be government reports that are overloaded with trivial details to obscure key facts. (d) Disinformation is characterised by a high intent to deceive and a high intent to harm (Park et al., 2020: 163–164). As this paper mainly focuses on false information, misinformation and disinformation are particularly relevant.

The ecosystem of misleading and false information is complex. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) disaggregate it into three elements: agents, messages and interpreters.

First, they underline that the agents are involved as creators, producers, and distributors of false and/or harmful information. Motivations can be different at each phase. Second, they emphasise that understanding the communication of these agents (e.g. duration, accuracy, message target) is essential to understanding the extent of their impact. Third, they stress the critical role of how messages are interpreted, such as commenting or sharing in support or opposition (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017: 25–48). Horowitz and Lowe (2020) summarise this phenomenon, suggesting that the term 'information disorder' captures 'a panoply of pertinent issues, challenges, and questions that are widespread and have serious implications for society and democracy' (Horowitz and Lowe, 2020: 178).

Surveys, for example by the European Commission, show that a majority of Europeans (68%) often encounter news or information that they perceive to be distorted or misleading (European Commission, 2023: 61). Distinguishing between what is real and what is fake on the internet concerns around half of the European population (Newman et al., 2023: 17). In addition, 81% of respondents see false or misleading information as a problem for democracy (European Commission, 2023: 61). Nevertheless, a majority feel confident about recognising disinformation (European Parliament, 2022: 39). In terms of demographics, men, younger people, and those with a higher education levels tend to be more confident in this respect (European Parliament, 2022: 39).

Regarding responsibility, a Eurobarometer survey asked who citizens perceive as responsible for fighting disinformation. The findings show that only 26% of respondents see online social networks as responsible, while about a third (32%) see citizens themselves as responsible when multiple responses were allowed. In contrast, nearly half of respondents (45%) hold journalists responsible for addressing this issue. In addition, over a third of respondents attribute responsibility to press and broadcasting management (36%) (European Commission, 2018: 24).

PSM as essential in fighting against misinformation and disinformation

Within the spectrum of media organisations, PSM occupy a distinguished position due to their dedication to public value. Consequently, policymakers have recognised their pivotal role in combating misinformation and disinformation (Horowitz and Lowe, 2020: 181). This importance is also confirmed by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) (2018). It underlines that fighting disinformation is central to the strategic thinking of PSM. They point to voluntary initiatives aimed at identifying and mitigating this issue, with a particular focus on fact-checking and media literacy efforts (EBU, 2018: 8).

This scenario is unfolding for a number of reasons: The fundamental role of PSM is to contribute significantly to the public good by informing, educating and entertaining the wider population (Mazzone, 2019: 4). They are tasked with providing access to politically and economically independent and diverse information, thus facilitating the development of opinions in a free and democratic society (van den Bulck et al., 2018: 7). Horowitz et al. (2022) argue that 'PSM and fact-checking organisations are ideal partners due to their shared commitment to impartiality' (Horowitz et al. 2022: 860).

Graves and Cherubini (2016) demonstrate that many fact-checking outlets in Europe are part of established news organisations. This includes, but is not limited to, PSM organisations. Despite this, the majority of organisations in their study are composed of independent outlets or activities of civil society organisations (Graves and Cherubini, 2016: 6). However, they underline that there are regional differences across Europe. In the North and West, media organisations dominate the field, while in the East and South, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and other groups more commonly provide fact-checking (Graves and Cherubini, 2016: 8). The reasons for this are explored below. More recent data from the Duke Reporters Lab show that, globally, most fact-checking organisations are part of media organisations. Others are independent, affiliated with non-profit organisations or NGOs, or associated with academia (Stencel et al., 2022). Nevertheless, even independent or NGO-based organisations often partner with established media organisation, as proposed by Horowitz et al. (2022: 860) in reference to PSM, to benefit from their audiences and editorial resources (Graves and Cherubini, 2016: 10).

Regarding PSM, studies have shown that they enhance social trust and broaden citizens' political knowledge, participation in political processes, and understanding of societal processes (for an overview see Nielsen et al., 2016). PSM also occupy an essential role in promoting integration, education, cultural development, and reinforcing social connections (Schweizer and Puppis, 2018: 114–115). Beyond the content aspect and effects, PSM often have significant resources and audience reach to communicate their work, and are thus 'well placed to move fact-checking from the margins to a mainstream source of information, news, and analysis' (Kyriakidou and Cushion, 2021: 531). Also, Kyriakidou and Cushion argue that bringing fact-checking into the main discourse can strengthen the legitimacy of PSM and audiences' trust in them (Kyriakidou and Cushion, 2021: 531).

Furthermore, in the digital age, PSM are called upon to strategically adapt and integrate emerging technologies. This is important for maintaining their relevance and enhancing their interaction with audiences (Sehl et al., 2017, 2018). Furthermore, the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation on digital platforms underlines the urgency for PSM to integrate comprehensive fact-checking and to adopt a robust position against these forms of false information as an integral part of their operations. Of course, as mentioned, many of them already do this to some extent, though it is usually not explicitly stated in their remits. This extends beyond their traditional duty to fact-check information used in their own reporting and includes fact-checks on information published by others on social media platforms, often carried out by dedicated teams. As Hjarvard (2018) underscores, PSM must actively serve as monitoring entities that validate and assess information, thereby distinguishing between what is significant and what is not. Increasing their presence and engagement in social media networks through active monitoring and intervention is in line with PSM's long-standing commitment to maintaining quality standards (Hjarvard, 2018: 71).

Prerequesites for PSM

It is important to recognise that PSM across different regions are not the same, but differ. In Western Europe, for example, PSM have a long tradition of editorial independence and

robust regulatory frameworks that guarantee autonomy and protect them from political influence (e.g. Nowak, 2014). The EBU identifies four levels to enable editorial independence and institutional autonomy of PSM: structure and legal status, independent supervision, independent management, and instruments and tools that support independence (e.g. editorial standards and ethical codices) (EBU, 2021: 8–19). Obviously, commitments to editorial autonomy and mechanisms to mitigate political influence are essential conditions to deal objectively with misinformation and disinformation.

In addition, Western European PSM are perceived to enjoy relatively high levels of public trust (Newman et al., 2023). Nevertheless, PSM in several Western European countries are currently under political pressure, particularly from attacks by populist parties (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2022). At the same time, the situation for PSM in South Eastern Europe (KAS, 2019) and to some extent Central Europe, where PSM only replaced state media when socialism collapsed, can be viewed more negatively with regard to their independence – and thus their fight against misinformation and disinformation (Horowitz and Lowe, 2020: 181).

Achieving high trust across different segments of society and widespread reach throughout all parts of society is essential to effectively counterbalance misinformation and disinformation (Horowitz and Lowe, 2020: 179–180). Without trust, it is hard to imagine them fulfilling this task, and without significant reach, their work does not even have the potential to be effective.

Finally, fact-checking teams need resources to actively monitor social media, validate, and assess information. Therefore, sufficient funding for PSM is a key requirement to perform this additional task, though the budget for many PSM has been reduced in recent years (Horowitz and Lowe, 2020: 182).

Three approaches to fight against misinformation and disinformation

This section looks at three approaches that PSM can use to promote an informed population in the midst of disinformation. This may require adapting or expanding their remit.

Fact-checking

The first approach focuses on fact-checking as a procedure for assessing the accuracy and truthfulness of, for example, claims or statements (Graves and Amazeen, 2019). While PSM are not the only organisations with the capacity or responsibility for fact-checking, their public mission and funding make them particularly well-positioned to address misinformation and disinformation (Horowitz et al., 2022: 860). This approach, however, depends on PSM being recognised as independent and credible, as discussed above.

There are already many PSM initiatives for fact-checking. For example, the first political fact-checking initiative in Europe was Channel 4's FactCheck[1] (Kyriakidou and Cushion, 2021: 532), operating in the United Kingdom as a commercially funded PSM organisation. It started as a blog that covered the 2005 general election and

became permanent in 2010 (Graves and Cherubini, 2016: 6). Similarly, Faktenfuchs[2] ('Fact Fox' in English), is a fact-checking initiative developed by Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), a regional PSM organisation in Germany. BR describes its work and standards in detail to the public (see BR, 2022) and addresses challenges such as the selection of claims to fact-check. Faktenfuchs covers an array of subjects, including politics, the environment, medicine and societal issues. The selection of topics for investigation is driven by a mix of sources: suggestions emerge from social media platforms, comment sections, and BR reporting, sometimes directly from BR's own social media editors who monitor user interactions, as well as from general audience contacts. In addition, software tools are used to scan the internet for potentially interesting content. Faktenfuchs also emphasises the transparency of its work, for example by explaining how it selects topics. A number of factors are taken into account such as the urgency of the issue, its relevance, its widespread distribution, the feasibility of verification and the availability of resources (BR, 2022). Since August 2022, Faktenfuchs is as a member of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) (BR, 2022). The IFCN consists of more than 100 organisations dedicated to fact-checking worldwide. The network offers advocacy, practical training, networking opportunities, and support for fact-checking projects or collaborations (Poynter, n.d.a). To meet the quality standards of fact-checking, IFCN members must adhere to a strict code of principles, including non-partisanship, transparency of research, and financial transparency (Poynter, n.d.b).

Regarding whether PSM should engage in fact-checking, the effects are also relevant. Research on the ability of fact-checking to correct false beliefs shows mixed results (see the systematic literature review on the effects of fact-checking by Nieminen and Rapeli, 2019). Nevertheless, some studies actually find evidence that fact-checking can counteract misperception (e.g. Porter et al., 2017; Weeks, 2015; Weeks and Garrett, 2014). It should be noted, however, that ideological attitudes can play a role in whether fact-checking works (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). There has also been discussion of backfire effects, whereby fact-checking may serve to reinforce false beliefs. Although Nyhan and Reifler (2010) observe this phenomenon, other studies do not find backfire effects (e.g. Weeks and Garrett, 2014; Wood and Porter, 2019). A reason for these different outcomes is thought to be motivated reasoning, meaning that individuals process information in a way that fits with their existing beliefs (Lodge and Taber, 2000).

Furthermore, concerns have been expressed regarding the selection of statements for fact-checking and the overall evaluation methodology (Nieminen and Rapeli, 2019: 304). The credibility of fact-checkers is critical to the effectiveness and perceived reliability of fact-checking (Bhattacherjee, 2022). Birks (2021) notes that the distinction between fact and opinion is not always a clear-cut one. In fact, '[t]here is a spectrum of informed judgement and interpretation that lies between the discrete, observable and widely witnessed fact and the value-based opinion about what ought to be' (Birks, 2021: 83). Lim (2018) demonstrates that in a comparison of fact-checks from two major US fact-checking organisations, they showed a high reliability in judging claims to be clearly false or true. Nevertheless, agreement was lower for medium categories like 'half true' or 'mostly false'. As a result, Birks (2021) asks for the rationale behind claims to be explained and context given in order to be useful for public debate. At the same time, he points out that this may be perceived by some as partisan (Birks,

2021: 83). Similarly, Kyriakidou and Cushion (2021) argue that it can be challenging for PSM to maintain their impartiality when assessing claims and counterclaims (Kyriakidou and Cushion, 2021: 534).

Enhancing media literacy

The second area in which PSM can exert a considerable influence is the enhancement of media literacy, which includes strengthening citizens' ability to critically assess the media content to which they are exposed (see also Horowitz et al., 2022: 860).

Several examples of PSM demonstrate this practice including the following two: MDR, a regional PSM organisation in Germany, hosts Medien 360 Grad[3], a platform focussed on exploring media literacy, media culture, and media policy. A main feature of Medien 360 Grad is its interactive approach, inviting users to submit claims or narratives for fact-checking. The platform also provides educational materials, including articles, videos and guides, aimed at enhancing users' ability to recognise misinformation and disinformation, verify sources, and critically evaluate news content. Another approach is taken by SRG, a Swiss PSM organisation that, in collaboration with partners, has launched a digital self-test that aims to enhance media literacy and to improve the ability to deal with misinformation and disinformation. The Newstest[4] is available in German and French and is based on a German study (Meßmer et al., 2021). It is structured around five areas: navigating news websites and social media, assessing the quality of news, determining the reliability of information, sources, and images, critically interacting with online information, and understanding media and digital platforms (SRG SSR, 2023).

Data from the Media Intelligence Service of the EBU demonstrates that media literacy projects are considered relevant by PSM: At least 54 of the EBU's PSM organisations offer media literacy projects (EBU, 2023: 33) and 86 percent of the EBU PSM organisations consider media literacy projects to be of extreme or substantial importance (EBU, 2023: 34). These initiatives target the general public and parents, with a focus on children, schools and educators (EBU, 2023: 35). The methods used include the provision of school materials for students and teachers, workshops and articles aimed at enhancing media literacy (EBU, 2023: 39). They focus primarily on news, with a particular emphasis on tackling misinformation and disinformation (93%). Understanding media mechanisms and navigating media content are also important issues (80%), as is developing general digital skills such as evaluating online information and using online platforms (77%). Democratic participation (70%) and online safety (70%) are also common subjects in these programmes. In 2023, a significant number of initiatives indicated plans to focus increasingly on advanced digital skills, particularly in relation to generative AI and algorithmic recommendations (41%) (EBU, 2023: 36). This may include issues such as deepfake images and the operation of algorithms and their consequences and emphasises the evolving nature of media literacy projects.

Media literacy projects offer opportunities for empowerment, but they also come with challenges. Often, these initiatives lack an evidence-based approach, which limits the ability to determine their effectiveness in combating misinformation and disinformation (Dumitru et al., 2022). Furthermore, experimental evidence suggests that Media and Information Literacy (MIL) training may only have short-term effects on the ability to

identify fake news (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). Although information literacy can enhance the recognition of disinformation, media, news, and digital literacies may not provide the same benefits (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). Krämer (2021: 22) describes media literacy as 'at best half of the solution'. He notes the limitations of media literacy, even at its highest level, without a solid foundation in general education, world knowledge, and institutional structures that support the evaluation of plausibility and source credibility (Krämer, 2021: 23).

Genuine PSM platforms

Recently, the conversation around the need for genuine PSM platforms has intensified, highlighted by initiatives such as the 'Beyond Platforms Initiative', 'SDEPS – Shared Digital European Public Sphere', 'EPOS – European Public Open Spaces' and 'POS – Public Open Spaces' (Thomaß, 2020).

Genuine PSM platforms are those managed by PSM organisations, rather than by commercial entities. Ideas include platforms where several PSM organisations and non-commercial organisations, for example, from the cultural sector, bundle their content for a wider audience and allow for active audience participation. This model seeks to counterbalance the influence of commercial platforms like Meta, which may prioritise commercial interests and inadvertently have a negative impact on democracies (e.g. Thomaß, 2020: 7). In contrast, it is believed that with access to reliable PSM sources, the spread and impact of disinformation on these commercial platforms could be significantly mitigated (Thomaß, 2020: 13–14). These genuine PSM platforms could foster public-interest spaces that are independent of government and market pressures, adhering to high-quality standards (Grassmuck, 2018).

Some small-scale projects have already started; for example, the German PSM organisations ARD and ZDF have been working on a technological solution for their platforms to present each other's content on their respective platforms. They also mentioned that they could imagine including more public-value-oriented players in the future (tagesschau, 2024). However, the realisation of a more comprehensive genuine PSM platform, for example, across Europe, depends on media policy decisions as well as the willingness of various relevant actors to share a space (Thomaß, 2020: 13–14), so that implementation remains uncertain.

Conclusion

Misinformation and disinformation impact society as a whole, calling for an expanded remit for PSM. PSM can play an important role in combating disinformation due to their public service remit. The literature has discussed three approaches to PSM in this respect: dedicated fact-checking (e.g. Horowitz and Lowe, 2020; Horowitz et al. 2022; Kyriakidou and Cushion, 2021), enhancing media literacy (e.g. Horowitz et al., 2022), and building robust genuine PSM platforms (e.g. Thomaß, 2020). Although these approaches offer opportunities, they have been shown to have limitations. For example, ideological stances can affect the effectiveness of fact-checking efforts in correcting false information (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). One limitation of media literacy

projects, although they have the potential to empower, is that their effectiveness in combating misinformation and disinformation is often not tested (Dumitru et al., 2022). Additionally, experimental evidence suggests that MIL training may only improve the ability to identify false news in the short term (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). Finally, genuine PSM platforms could create public-interest spaces with the potential to mitigate the spread and impact of disinformation on commercial platforms. However, their realisation depends on political decisions and the willingness of various relevant actors (Thomaß, 2020: 13–14).

Beyond the opportunities and limitations, it is important to recognise that these strategies are not universal remedies, as PSM organisations are, as discussed, not all the same. For PSM to effectively undertake this, it needs to meet several prerequisites: (a) ensure political independence, (b) garner high trust across different segments of society, (c) achieve widespread reach throughout all parts of society and (d) maintain sufficient resources (see also Horowitz and Lowe, 2020: 181–182; Horowitz et al., 2022). Therefore, whether PSM can play a strong role in combating disinformation depends on the organisation and the country context. In some cases, private-sector or non-profit media may be better positioned, or both might contribute or collaborate (see also Horowitz and Lowe, 2020). Consequently, the responsibility for addressing disinformation should not fall on PSM alone. It is a collective task that requires engagement and action across the media market and the entire societal spectrum.

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Notes

1. https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck.
2. https://www.br.de/nachrichten/faktenfuchs-faktencheck,QzSIzl3.
3. https://www.mdr.de/medien360g/index.html.
4. https://newstest.ch.

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