



Article

Disinformation and Local Media in the Iberian Context: How to Protect News Credibility

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Abstract: Regional and local media outlets have much more credibility than news organizations placed at a national level, according to polls. In a context fueled by the spread of disinformation, audiences seem to trust close journalistic sources, while national and international leaders are seen as polarized. However, local journalism has few resources for fact checking. In this context, we explore some of the strategies developed by local news organizations to avoid the proliferation of fake news. This study uses a multiple-case study on four local media outlets from similar media systems (Spain and Portugal) as a qualitative research strategy. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with local journalists and secondary data analysis, we examine how these media outlets deal with fake news, shedding light on internal fact-checking resources and other original strategies applied. From our interviews, their journalists are aware of the problem, asking for more training; whereas their organizations have different approaches to the digital platforms where most of disinformation circulates. These findings contribute to the scant literature on the role of the local field in disinformation, arguing that the social mission of local journalism may be a guarantee against fake news if their journalists are trained.

Keywords: disinformation; fake news; local media; news credibility; fact checking



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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been huge academic debate on the terms of disinformation and fake news. Although “disinformation” is the preferred concept for academia, “fake news” has gained a great deal of attention due to the massive use of this term by Donald Trump. This type of news is defined as misleading information that is portrayed as real news (Anderau 2021). This phenomenon was already present in the past, but concern among scholars is growing due to the remarkable increase in online disinformation since 2016.

On this matter, Baptista and Gradim (2022) found a changing meaning as before 2016, it only referred to satirical information. The goal was to entertain the audience through humor. Now, it has acquired a cynical dimension that threatens journalism and democracy by confusing the audience about what is real. These authors present fake news as an attack on pre-existing beliefs based on deception. Therefore, it goes beyond classic misinformation situations, such as journalistic error or unverified sources. By contrast, disinformation demands intentionality from the creator, who aims to deceive people. Also, Tandoc et al. (2018) include the perspective of the audience. They consider that fake news is co-constructed by the audience so that their fakeness depends a lot on whether the audience perceives the news as misleading.

It was in 2016 when the Russian interference in the US presidential election triggered the fame of “fake news”. A study developed by Allcott and Gentzkow showed that during the US presidential election period, the average US adult read at least one fake news article, with a higher exposure to pro-Trump articles than pro-Clinton articles. They also considered that “if one fake news article were about as persuasive as one TV campaign ad,

the fake news in our database would have changed vote shares by an amount on the order of hundredths of a percentage point” (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, p. 232). Previously, one of the most acknowledged political decisions based on false reports was the US war on Iraq in 2003 (Lepore 2019). Almost two decades later, the COVID-19 pandemic became an opportunity not only for fake news producers but also for fact-checker platforms and media (Musi et al. 2022; Naeem and Bhatti 2020).

When information is presented as fake or misleading, the credibility of journalism is called into question (Martin and Hassan 2020). Ognyanova et al. (2020) state that the major concern about fake news is the damage to the public trust in democratic institutions, which could destabilize the functioning of political institutions and the role played by the media. However, research exploring the consequences of fake news consumption in today’s political environment is still scant. According to Strömbäck et al. (2020), trust is fragile and faces different challenges within contemporary news providers. One of most outstanding is fake news, as it tears apart the trust of citizens in the democratic system.

Previous literature describes news credibility as a multidimensional concept that involves the perceived believability of news items, organizations, and sources (Meyer et al. 2010). Nevertheless, for some authors such as Paskin (2018), credibility is related to the credibility of the article itself; hence, quality and accuracy are core values that ensure that feeling, but this perception of accuracy also overlaps with the trustworthiness of the journalistic source to provide noteworthy information.

Fake news consumption is based on being spread via social media (Baptista and Gradim 2020), which is especially successful when dealing with topics from local and national politics (Pérez-Curiel et al. 2023). Local media promote a strong commitment between journalists and citizens, showing a great value to the community (Park 2022). This may be helpful against disinformation, which is also reinforced by fact checkers that use local news coverage on the ground to fact check materials (Lowrey 2017). Nonetheless, the action of local media outlets is endangered by the progressive disappearance of journalism initiatives, creating the opportunity for disinformation. These news deserts were first a trend in the US (Abernathy 2018), but they are reaching other territories such as the Iberian Peninsula in Europe (Jerónimo and Sánchez Esparza 2023). Another problem is the presence of low-quality news at the proximity level as they mostly lack a verification process (Morais et al. 2020; Rivas-de-Roca et al. 2020).

Following the above, the classic contribution on elements of journalism by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) considers that verification is an essential element, explaining why journalism follows a scientific-like approach to obtain the right facts. But time pressure is boosting a trend of local journalists publishing unchecked information, especially when it comes from traditionally reliable sources (Himma-Kadakas and Ojamets 2022). Besides that, there are also emerging problematic cases on social media, including image and audio manipulation (deepfakes) that have, at present, a limited impact on fact-checking routines (Weikmann and Lecheler 2023). In this changing backdrop, our main purpose is to examine the shaping of verification tasks in local media (O1), with a particular focus on polarized areas.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Fact Checking against Disinformation

A cornerstone of journalism is the provision of reliable information. Media outlets have extensively used verification tasks over the years with the aim of reducing mistakes. Most works on journalism studies have focused on the positive effects of the craft by applying ethics criteria. At the national and international level, there is an awareness to protect credibility and trust since they are concepts that legitimate news outlets. They seek to work as a guarantee of the quality of news items for citizens. In this sense, people may use them to contrast information that reaches them through social networks. This fosters the decision of some news organizations to set up fact-checking sections, which assess news reports employing advanced technology, such as automatic fact-checking applications.

As disinformation increasingly emerges as a social concern, media practices have oriented to renewed fact-checking techniques that mix technology with journalistic values to deal with fake news (López-García et al. 2021). Additionally, news media have adopted several measures that range from hiring workers or emphasizing the content of the aforementioned sections. From a technological perspective, visual data experts are required to supply more engaging content to the public. Beyond that, it is still key to correct mistakes. This action is evaluated as essential to restore credibility. However, prior scholarship shows that these errors are not commonly corrected as they are seen as something inconsequential (Maier 2007). Furthermore, some readers assume that their complaints would be ignored by the news organization.

As some authors point out, the media literacy of the audience plays an essential role in dealing with fake news, disinformation, and misinformation: “When information consumers and users are digitally literate or are given media and information literacy training, they are expected to have and exhibit the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes that position them as know-how to obtain authentic and credible information; how to critically evaluate and verify the authenticity of information or news; when to use information; and how to ethically use it” (Dame Adjin-Tettey 2022, p. 4). In the context of an advanced socio-technical society, journalism moves from the need to create critical thinking to a critical situational awareness (Erdelez et al. 2019).

Concerning how to manage disinformation in the Iberian context, many fact-checking initiatives have been launched since 2016 that connect with the ideals of journalism. Concretely, they defend informative transparency and accountability (Rodríguez-Pérez et al. 2023). The fact-checkers in Spain and Portugal follow the work of the pioneers in the US but face challenges such as the scarcity of resources (Moreno-Gil et al. 2022). For instance, Portuguese fact-checking organizations are small and rely only on sources linked to press offices (Durr Missau and Storch 2022). Fact checking sometimes needs to be reproduced in news media to be legitimized (Graves and Konieczna 2015).

Beyond that, the generalization of fact-checking actions has also altered newsroom routines in traditional media. On the one hand, these media outlets should convey trust, as perceptions of disinformation are determined by reduced trust in news media (Hameleers et al. 2022). On the other hand, they have to be able to verify false visual content in multimedia format (Thomson et al. 2022). All these changes lead to an internal transformation of media outlets, which is not affordable for those with few resources, such as local newspapers.

2.2. Disinformation in Local Communities

Disinformation studies mostly miss the shaping of this phenomenon at the local level, but some scholars have recently started a discussion on how the decline in local journalism fuels the dissemination of disinformation (Jerónimo and Esparza 2022). Although these media outlets are scant and trust in official sources is low, surveys around the world collected by the Digital News Report 2021 (Newman et al. 2021) highlight the resilience of proximity media as they managed to maintain trust at 53%, which is the highest level found.

However, trust problems could be related to political parallelism, which has been confirmed as a trend in Southern Europe (Hallin and Mancini 2017). In this context, the Spanish News Media Association (AMI in Spanish) underlines several reasons that have allowed it to retain readers in the local field, which are mostly focused on the relationship between proximity and trust (AMI 2020): By contrast with national and international levels, readers are usually familiar with journalists and sources. Furthermore, local and regional media deal with issues that affect people directly. As the public has the chance to know these facts first-hand, the breakthrough of false information is low.

The success of local newspapers is linked to their geographical position and proximity values (Engan 2015), which serve as the main principles according to Njaastad’s criteria: closeness in time and space, consequences, culture, and emotions. The internet has modified

the roles of time and change, creating a space dimension that mixes many contexts in a time continuum.

Local media have shown an ability to identify with the public, probably because of the remarkable accountability of their contents (Izquierdo Labella 2010). Additionally, these organizations are innovative, being more likely to introduce digital formats into their news (Leupold et al. 2018). Despite this theoretical adaptability to audience needs, many local and regional media are suffering a huge crisis. Their business models are undergoing a deep transformation with fewer advertisers and less economic revenue at the same time that fake news is becoming part of the media landscape (Hayes and Lawless 2018).

Some authors point out that local journalism has some longstanding problems. One of the most acknowledged is poor quality, which overlaps with the lack of distance from the sources and the dependence on information from public local institutions (Morais et al. 2020). In countries with a tradition of polarization, there is a pattern toward the professionalization of institutional sources (Rivas-de-Roca 2022). They aim to control the proximity agenda by providing press releases and other communication materials. As local and regional media are usually small news organizations, they depend on these institutions but also on news agencies that are located far away to provide content (Czarniawska 2012).

Besides these problems, the objective of proximity journalists has not changed over time: providing close stories that are helpful to citizens (Huxford 2007). In a digital scenario, it is also true that these media outlets could seek to appeal to digital audiences by using spectacularized contents (Jenkins and Jerónimo 2021), which can be a pathway for fake news. Nevertheless, journalism in the Western world is still a craft defined by a normative role to the point where local journalists perceive themselves as watchdogs of power that ensure an informed-based democracy (Hanusch 2019).

As stated, proximity is an essential feature of good local and regional journalism. Its mission is to provide a service to the community (Jenkins and Nielsen 2020), which means fulfilling the information needs of the society (Straubhaar 2007). Based on the results of a study carried out by Costera Meijer of the largest local TV broadcasting service in Amsterdam (AT5), the author describes what kind of social role the audience wants its local media to perform. She identifies several trends: "(1) supplying background information (unbiased, reliable, good-humored, fast and multi-perspectival); (2) fostering social integration, or giving citizens insight into how the city "works"; (3) providing inspiration; (4) ensuring representation ("voice", "recognition" and "mirroring"); (5) increasing local understanding; (6) creating civic memory; and (7) contributing to social cohesion, or a sense of belonging" (Costera Meijer 2010, p. 327).

Most previous works have focused on the social function of proximity journalism or the changing media context, but there is a lack of research that empirically examines the actions of these media outlets to fight fake news. Specifically, the strategies applied to reinforce news credibility are little explored. An exception is a recent study on Spain and Portugal, which outlines that the time and resources available in the newsrooms are key to understanding the level of fact checking in local media outlets (Jerónimo and Sánchez Esparza 2023). Collaboration with other news media outlets to debunk disinformation is still scarce, at least in Spain (Palomo and Sedano 2021). Accordingly, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1. Do media professionals have a clear and common vision of what disinformation implies?

RQ2. How is disinformation managed in the newsroom?

RQ3. What verification strategies are used, and for what purpose, at the local and regional levels?

3. Method

To answer the research questions raised here, a multiple-case study was conducted. This strategy combines different techniques by breaking the quantitative–qualitative dichotomy, which explains its relevance to the prior scholarship on legacy media and fact

checking (Ufarte-Ruiz et al. 2020). Specifically, we rely on secondary data analysis and in-depth interviews with local journalists. This qualitative method provides knowledge from a worker's experience and opinion (Wengraf 2001) as a way of knowing what is happening in the newsroom in terms of measures against fake news. It is also relevant to explore what the opinions of journalists are about the credibility of their organizations.

The interviews were held online and manually transcribed. For the selection of participants, public lists of journalists and snowball sampling were used, while for the data analysis, we followed the six-step procedure of the thematic analysis defined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, creation of initial codes, creation of themes, reviewing of coding, definition of themes, and drafting the final report with results. Following a set of professional questions on career paths, the interviews were structured into three subsections.

The first subsection concerned the impact of disinformation in proximity media. Here, interviewees were asked about their assessment of the flow of false contents at the local level. Second, we provided questions on journalistic routines. They were requested to explain the working of their newsrooms in terms of practices and organizational mechanisms. Lastly, the third part focused on tools or challenges in the management of disinformation from the journalists' experience: what strategies have been deployed, and how the company has collaborated with other organizations. All these data were complemented by publicly available secondary materials about the selected media outlets, such as website information, funding schemes received, or reports on news consumption and the presence of news deserts.

The interviews took place between 2021 and 2022, lasting between 50 and 65 min. For the choice of the sample, our research covers four case studies, with the aim of fostering a comparison between nearby media realities. The research design of the multiple-case study includes two countries: Spain and Portugal. We decided to select these countries as they both have a polarized media system. They also share geographical and linguistic features; thus, disinformation in these territories may function in a similar way. This would influence not only the journalistic treatment found but also the strategies to protect news credibility. In Spain, we selected *Diario de Sevilla* and *Montilla Digital*; in Portugal, *Região de Leiria* and *Sul Informação*.

Table 1 shows the collected characteristics of the sample. The choice of the Spanish newspapers is justified because they are leaders in the largest region in Spain (Andalusia), mixing an urban (*Diario de Sevilla*) and a rural approach (*Montilla Digital*). Regarding the Portuguese media outlets, both were pioneers in digital journalism and are placed in distant regions from the capital. We do not aim to study the news coverage carried out by these media but, rather, to provide insightful findings from an in-depth analysis of the four case studies. They would be examples to conceptualize the role of local media against disinformation as well as delivering tools to protect news credibility.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

Newspaper	Scope	Unique Users	Position of Responsibility
<i>Diario de Sevilla</i>	Province of Sevilla	364,781	Journalist
<i>Montilla Digital</i>	Campiña Sur (comarca)	295,924	Journalist and management team
<i>Região de Leiria</i>	Area of Leiria	100,000	Journalist and management team
<i>Sul Informação</i>	Alentejo and Algarve	70,000	Management team

Data comes from OJD (the Spanish office that monitors the dissemination of newspapers) and Google Analytics.

Some additional information is needed to put the selected media outlets into context. *Diario de Sevilla* is one of the most important newspapers in Southern Spain. It is part of

the Joly Group and was published for the first time in 1999 among strong competition. For this reason, the group decided to create newspapers in as many cities as possible, while always having a local and regional perspective. In this sense, *Diario de Sevilla* was the first newspaper founded by the Joly Group outside the Spanish province of Cadiz, which was followed by *El Día de Córdoba*, *Huelva Información*, *Granada Hoy*, *Málaga Hoy*, and *Diario de Almería*. Therefore, the group developed a regional and diverse scope at the beginning of the 21st century. Regarding digital transition, the group was a pioneer in transferring its newspapers to websites, establishing specific paywalls for opinion articles in each media outlet of the holding. Despite this transformation, printed news remains the priority, as stated by the interviewee (Cristina Valdivieso), a journalist with a wide-ranging career specializing in social and local news in the area of Seville.

Also in Spain, *Montilla Digital* is a purely online local newspaper belonging to a bigger network that includes newspapers across the region of Andalusia, such as *Dos Hermanas*, *Diario Digital*, and *Baena Digital*. According to their mission statements, all of these have the aim of promoting local information. Its founder, Juan Pablo Bellido, was interviewed since he combines the roles of journalist and entrepreneur. This project was launched to ensure the representation of small towns' values and concerns in the mass media. In addition to that, Bellido is a well-known journalist with a strong commitment to the sector, as shown by his participation as president of the professional media association of Andalusia.

Regarding Portugal, *Região de Leiria* was founded in 1935 and is one of the longest-lasting newspapers in the country. On this matter, it is the oldest newspaper in the Leiria district, which is located in the central region of Portugal. The news coverage especially devotes attention to this area. Although *Região de Leiria* is not a big news organization, it was the first local and regional newspaper to publish online content in Portugal. The digital sphere is key for the media outlet, being currently a weekly publication on paper with daily information on the website. Its digital commitment is also detected in the support received by Google funding mechanisms for innovation projects. Thanks to this help, the newsroom has improved the website and created mobile apps and newsletters. The person in charge of the digital news area is Patrícia Duarte, who was our interviewee. Working for the media outlet since 1996, she is not only a journalist but also a deputy director of the organization.

For its part, *Sul Informação* is a digital native media focused on two Southern Portuguese regions: Algarve and Alentejo. It was founded in 2011 by Elisabete Rodrigues, who is interviewed here. She has an outstanding career in national media but moved with other colleagues to the local field. As the Algarve did not have many local media outlets, they created a digital-only newspaper based on the experience of the only weekly newspaper in the region. Moreover, *Sul Informação* has collaborated with other institutions and entities, receiving funding from Facebook and Google initiatives for the support of high-quality journalism. This kind of help contributes to sustainability in the face of the sharp decline in advertising, but it also shows the increasing links with digital platforms. Our sample includes legacy and digital native media in both countries to obtain an overview of both situations. Key findings and a discussion about the results are presented in the following sections.

4. Results

4.1. Newsroom Practice against Fake News

Within our multiple-case study, fake news is identified as a common problem for local and regional media. There seems to be a consensus among the participants. Accordingly, one of the main reasons is the acceleration of the news industry caused by the rise in digital technologies and the economic decline of traditional legacy media. Based on her experience in *Diario de Sevilla*, Cristina Valdivieso states that “we live in completely digital journalism focused on immediacy. As our newspaper needs to be fast in reporting an issue, some articles may be published without the once usual contrast of sources”.

News provision faces the risk of not being accurate. According to the interviewees, a fundamental factor to explain this transformation of the news information cycle is the

massive use of social media. These networks have made even more direct the communication between proximity media outlets and the public. However, their interactivity overlaps with the lack of filter; hence, anyone can share and spread false information. On the other hand, Elisabete Rodrigues (*Sul Informação*) positively appraised the action of social media since these platforms allow her news organization to be perceived more visibly. As a consequence, a change in newsroom routines is requested to adapt to the closeness with the audience.

It is worth noting to what extent both Portuguese media outlets emphasize the role of social media for engagement. The selected news media in Portugal seem more optimistic about the possibilities of digital platforms at the local journalistic field. Conversely, Juan Pablo Bellido (*Montilla Digital*) in Spain considers that disinformation is becoming more frequent due to them. In addition to longstanding social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram, the problem lies with TikTok or mobile instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp or Telegram. On these platforms, the fast distribution of polarized and spectacular content is a trend fueled by algorithms. It should be noted that there is a rising news dependence on these networks. For instance, some outstanding funding programs for journalism, which are key for economic survival in Portugal, come from Facebook and Google.

Moreover, journalists could be assessed as potential disseminators of fake news. Many newsrooms use a kind of statement journalism, in which press releases from public and private institutions are directly converted into articles. The emergence of statement journalism is not new, but a relevant question is whether social media have fueled these messages by public figures through social media posts. While all media outlets ultimately address the same issues that are derived from social networks, Patrícia Duarte (*Região de Leiria*) alludes to the loss of value of proximity media:

“Some journalistic projects are only based on press releases, especially in digital field. Many institutions tend to communicate only through social networks, which concern us. When we ask questions to institutions or public officials, they tell us that the answer is already on their Facebook page or that they posted a video or a press release on the subject. It is totally unidirectional, which gives us no choice. This is worrisome because these newspapers are competing with higher quality news media and with higher production costs, but both are evaluated in the same way. We are not talking about the same thing, and I don't know if the readers are capable of differentiating them. On the one hand, this lack of resources leaves regional newspapers in enormous difficulty and, on the other, it is necessary to perceive the use of press releases as also harmful”.

The reasons to prioritize these press releases appear during the news production. In Portugal, our respondents highlight the rising costs at the local and regional level, which form the basis for the lack of human and financial resources. Another inconvenience is the ignorance among the public about the large difficulties of these particular media; hence, the audience holds them to great expectations. That is why one of the Spanish interviewees describes journalists as an enemy to themselves:

“News workers try to be the first in publishing a story, which means not all approaches are included. There is an important risk of providing falsely information, but I would say there is some awareness of the threats of being first. Subscription models show that many readers desire quality; this is a process that requires time and investment to have a good team”. (Cristina Valdivieso, *Diario de Sevilla*)

Quality is seen as a key factor to fight against fake news, but this is linked to media literacy. Most of the participants feel that the audience should be trained in detecting false information. This practice would also ensure the credibility of well-crafted news. Journalists from the selected Spanish media outlets refer to the need to enhance media literacy as the main approach to avoid disinformation. According to them, the level of media training is scant in Spain, and some groups such as children, the elderly and poorly educated people

are especially vulnerable to disinformation. The flow of fake news circulates through digital channels (WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, TikTok, etc.), sometimes boosting conspiracy theories related to migrants or ethnic minorities.

The Portuguese participants also believe that their national public is not aware of this problem. Portuguese society was already affected by weak media knowledge, but the problem has worsened. As a solution mentioned in our interviews, schools may play a role. This means building strong and regular contacts between journalists and teachers so that the latter can address disinformation at lessons. The recommended way to do that is by bringing in examples of news from daily life and reflecting on the conditions that determine their production. School teachers can realize the importance of this curriculum, but they need specific support from public institutions.

While these criticisms form the general pattern, it is also evident from our multiple-case study that the collaboration between newsrooms and classrooms is increasing. All the selected media outlets take part in some type of media literacy program. Therefore, our data illustrates how this concept overlaps with news credibility to the point of being an essential practice of newsrooms against fake news. Likewise, the testimonials enable us to understand the role of social media and press releases in the proliferation of fake news.

4.2. Fact Checking and Professional Profiles

Local newspapers deal with many topics every day, so their journalists could offer findings on how they tackle different stories, including disinformation. The respondents in both countries agree on the newspaper's background work as a factor in credibility. Since this concept is based on trust, the history and principles of the news organization must be communicated to be trusted by citizens. Besides that, journalists require up-to-date training to detect hoaxes. However, the use of automatized tools (bots) is not to the norm for this aim, showing different degrees of collaboration with digital platforms.

In general terms, the interviewees present a high degree of self-confidence in their newsrooms' practices. In *Diario de Sevilla*, it is stated that the news production environment makes it almost impossible for fake news to appear as published articles. When journalists from this newspaper receive a piece of information, they try to verify it by resorting to official sources. These sources may deny the data provided by third parties, forcing the journalist to consult additional institutions, companies, or people. As our participants previously noted, local and regional newspapers enjoy greater credibility due to their connection to the territory, which makes this verification process less difficult.

The credibility of proximity media is a guarantee against fake news. Accordingly, knowing the audience is essential for the selected journalists, but different strategies are mentioned. *Diario de Sevilla* collects the opinions of readers by analyzing conversations on social networks (the newspaper has accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) and the comments on its website. Through these tools, the published content is analyzed. Furthermore, users are potential sources, particularly in close communities, as they can provide first-hand information that later becomes news. The situation described is quite similar to *Montilla Digital*, where some examples are provided to better connect with the public:

“Involving the audience is part of our work. When something newsworthy happens, the citizens are essential for us (. . .), for example, to find out the extent of the effects of a storm, flood, or fire. Our experience shows that the public reacts very quickly and actively through social networks, providing a lot of materials that we can use to create evidence-based news”.

Nevertheless, the behavior of fake news usually implies employing certain real facts to misrepresent reality. In order to avoid their circulation, news organizations must be well known and have a good reputation. For instance, *Montilla Digital* is the most followed media in its area, with a special focus on Facebook and Instagram. The principle is to verify information and publish the correct news item on the website but also on social

media. In this case, WhatsApp distribution lists are used to reach more people, although the interviewee wants to ameliorate this impact in the upcoming months.

However, the number of followers is not enough to know the influence of a media outlet in a region. Other variables such as historical background or community engagement should be explored to analyze the digital impact of the news media outlet. Comparing the selected countries, the participants from Portugal highlight the role of Facebook for local communities; meanwhile, this digital platform is no longer used by the youth in Spain. By contrast, mobile instant messaging services are massively employed in the latter country.

Another difference between Spain and Portugal is the collaboration between the media outlets from the latter and big digital platforms. In the context of massive and diverse disinformation, *Sul Informação* received 25,000 euros from Facebook and 5000 euros from Google within funding schemes created as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of this financial help was outstanding in the professionalization of the organization. The money served to develop technological tools and allowed payment for the news. *Sul Informação* was the first newspaper in the Algarve to introduce this possibility, which was only possible thanks to a high level of audience trust, according to its founder. This change, together with a new website, meant the appearance of innovative professional roles, including media usability or community management for all the networks in which the media outlet is present (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn).

The support of digital platforms may be interpreted as a way to counteract their former passivity in stopping fake news. They are now supposed to spread verified content, but it is also relevant their work as news providers. Google has been particularly important in this field, sorting news results, even though it has also contributed to the transformation of newsrooms such as that of the *Região de Leiria* through funding schemes:

“We must be clear: the help of Google was essential. This path that we began in 2017–2018 was key for us to overcome the pandemic. Without it, the pandemic could have been the end for our newspaper. COVID-19 reinforced digital tools, but we were able to react because we had already done a lot of previous work. There is a whole new set of services for readers and advertisers that didn’t exist before Google funding scheme, so we’re talking about a great innovation. For us is innovate or die, but it takes courage to do what has never been tried, what you don’t know if it will work.” (Patrícia Duarte, *Região de Leiria*)

This participant from *Região de Leiria* suggests that innovation is part of the newsroom culture. Beyond this specific case, most of respondents ask for more training in terms of verification as an innovation. Juan Pablo Bellido from *Montilla Digital* holds a future approach about it: “The future is fact-checking. Disinformation will be the main task in the journalistic field and the local media sector will be part of this trend”. It is true that Spain (Maldita.es or Newtral) and Portugal (Polígrafo) count on prestigious fact-checking initiatives that are shaping the media landscape.

Notwithstanding the fact that local journalists acknowledged the importance of fact checking, understood as a way of verification that debunks disinformation post hoc, there is a lack of collaboration between these media outlets and the leading fact-checking initiatives in both countries. This finding is remarkable since local news media have scant resources; therefore, they may need the support of other companies for a proper verification task. However, this collaboration cannot be a real solution. Fact checkers in Spain and Portugal are not usually promoted by news media, being independent startups with a great dependence on official sources, which is especially detected in Portuguese fact-checking companies (Durr Missau and Storch 2022).

According to the participants, the new professional profiles required by the digital sphere are not distant from the basic mission of journalism. Thus, fact-checking practices in proximity media suppose a return to the commitment values developed by the local press. This confirms the persistence of an audience-oriented approach, focusing on readers, even though the verification tasks are developed in an isolated way.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Proximity media are known for their ability to connect individuals with their communities. Local journalists are embedded into community routines, but news media face a structural transformation that has weakened the sector. Our research aimed to explore the strategies created by local news media to gain credibility in the Iberian context. The multiple-case study sought to shed light on the spread of fake news in proximity media and how journalists tackled this problem. Our analysis took place within a media ecology marked by the relevance of fact-checking initiatives (Lowrey 2017). As these projects are aimed at a foundational mission of journalism, their practices could be useful for the rest of the media landscape. Based on the data, three contributions are provided, answering the research questions.

Our first finding furthers our understanding of the dissemination of fake news and the awareness of this phenomenon at the local field level. Journalists from this sector put social media and the increasing speed of the information cycle in newsrooms as threats that increase disinformation. The literature has extensively described the difficulties of local news media in adapting to technology (Bastos 2015), but journalists from the selected media do not allude to this as a problem. Conversely, they consider that the main risk is the journalistic self-pressure derived from tight deadlines in the digital age.

The second contribution shows strategies to protect local news credibility. Even though fake news is recognized as a problem, these media outlets do not resort to automatized tools in order to assist the verification process. Likewise, the background of each newspaper works as a key element to ensure audience trust. Credibility is then related to the prestige of news organizations. However, in times of a fragmented news ecosystem (Anderson et al. 2014), this may not be enough to ensure the sustainability of the company.

In this regard, the role of social media is highlighted in our qualitative study. The influence of these networks impacts news production and consumption, including at the local and regional levels. It should be acknowledged that other studies based on qualitative methods with local media journalists have shown that there is a fear of the audience not being able to distinguish proximity media content within the vastness of the internet (Morais and Jerónimo 2023). This concern was not mentioned here, but some differences were found in terms of innovation. Specifically, the collaboration with digital platforms is quite different between countries. According to our data, proximity news media in Portugal seem more likely to collaborate with big digital companies (Facebook and Google) for journalism, ranging from technological tools to media management.

As the challenges ahead are digital, the respondents refer to the need for professional profiles in the news sector. These professionals, who could have knowledge of fact checking, are still required in the newsrooms. Participants also mention that the value of local and regional media lies in a media organizational culture that is under transformation, as stated by the literature (Deuze and Witschge 2018), but the data collected in our research showed that knowing the audience remained the core value of proximity media.

In addition to spotting some trends on the strategies against disinformation, with a special focus on the experience of journalists, our study contributes to discussions on the role of proximity media in the digital sphere. In local and regional news media, the phenomenon of disinformation could be more challenging since they have less resources. Media literacy is assessed as a solution to enlarge media training, enhancing the relationship between newsrooms and society. The social dimension of proximity journalism links to this purpose.

Finally, the results illustrate that the news media chosen in Spain and Portugal continue to serve the interests of society, but there is a convergence related to a changing relationship with audiences, which demands new approaches. The concept of community now alludes to digital groups that are threatened by disinformation, since news sites depend a lot on digital platforms, even for funding. Proximity and a scope oriented to the audience are news values for local journalism, explaining the interest in media literacy and the attention devoted to readers.

The main novelty of our study lies in the fact that local journalists in the Iberian context convey a stronger feeling of responsibility compared with the broader media. Although the local sphere may be seen as distant from the international and national patterns that shape most of the disinformation, the proliferation of false information is also a problem in this field. The cases studies show how the background of the newspaper and an audience-oriented approach can be a solution toward this threat.

In conclusion, local journalism is a type of media practice whose characteristics make it resilient but also less flexible to the structural transformation of news. Our empirical findings reveal patterns of disinformation management, pointing to the need for more training and showing the existence of different approaches to digital platforms. Nevertheless, the sample is small, which is a methodological limitation. Future research could expand the scope of this work through larger samples and more extended timeframes as well as comparing the findings with other media system.

In terms of methods, quantitative studies such as surveys should be developed to understand the use and risks of fact checking in local journalism, whereas the qualitative approach of interviews may be complemented through focus groups that will enable a better knowledge of the newsroom. Together with disinformation, another relevant concept that may be addressed is platformization. Since social media are crucial actors for local journalism, and content is increasingly being designed with digital platforms in mind, a widely discussion is necessary about the changes in news credibility at the proximity level where most journalism is practiced.

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