Public Libraries – Key Actors in Fighting Misinformation in the Future Digital Society

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Abstract: *Fake news* is disseminated to distribute deliberate misinformation, usually on social media. They reduce trust in communication systems and, more fundamentally, in our democracy, because third parties become able to exploit our beliefs, emotions, and identities. The misinformation-related issues are progressively amplifying in this ICT & AI-based century and have become a significant problem in our globalized world. This paper focuses on public libraries and their future key role to be played in fighting and debunking this stringent problem of misinformation, presenting the new approaches in this area in the US, more exactly implemented by the research team from the University of Washington and subsequently, the specific situation in Romania pertaining this issue. This new role of public libraries will be defined and, in our view, they need to be more engaged than they currently are. It will become even more critical as libraries are increasingly considered key points for disseminating accurate information. Libraries will be able to serve as vital pillars in the fight against fake news by promoting information and digital literacy, offering trusted sources, providing fact-checking resources, fostering critical thinking, conducting community education, and upholding intellectual freedom. These skills and resources will enable users to verify claims, debunk misinformation, and find accurate information on a particular topic, written or visual. Consequently, libraries could serve as community hubs for nowadays needed education – including fake news debunking, supporting the truth, democratic rights, and civic engagement. The steps required to achieve this goal in Romania are recommended in this paper.

Keywords: libraries; misinformation; fake news; debunking; democratic rights.

Introduction

The ability to recognize fake news and debunk misinformation are personal and civic duties of high importance to protect democratic values, enhance national security, promote international stability, safeguard human rights, ensure access to accurate information, and preserve trust within society. In this century, when Information & Communication Technology (ICT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are fast evolving, and information dissemination is facile and rapid, the educational and civil society actors must act in a pro-democratic, active way and also with specific resilience, to combat disinformation, which is spreading faster and with an increasing frequency, even aggressively (Pomeranstev, 2023). The present fake news display in online social media, more and more frequent in Romania, is generated mainly by extremist populist propaganda, being amplified in the context of the invasion of Ukraine (Răducu & Hercigonja, 2023).

Fake news, as part of the propaganda created to distribute deliberate instability (Pomeranstev, 2023), usually on social media, and disinformation are two sides of the same coin, which undermine and can gradually reduce the trust in legitimate communications systems – i.e., social media, mass-media, radio-TV media – and, more fundamentally, in democracy – because they effectively exploit our beliefs, emotions, and identities (OCDE, 2022). It may be mentioned that the critical difference between misinformation and disinformation is that misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information that is unintentionally spread, while disinformation refers to false or misleading information that is intentionally spread, to deceive or manipulate others (UNHCR, 2022). These two aggressive types of attacks are increasingly evolving in this

ICT-based century and have become a significant global problem (Botha & Pieterse, 2020). As current and future important pillars in fighting misinformation, public *libraries* are and will be able to serve as community hubs for the specific education needed in the future - including in digital literacy, critical thinking, fake-news debunking, and democratic engagement (Naygren, 2017). In such a complex context, libraries, as trusted sources of information, will be able to support raising awareness concerning the dangers of fake news (Sullivan, 2019), debunking them, and being able to equip community members with the necessary tools to quickly recognize, beware and combat misinformation (Dar, 2021).

Public libraries are strong pillars to support the truth and the civic and democratic values

According to recent studies, the role of libraries nowadays is debunking misinformation since "the skills and abilities that are activated with the use of the tools, instruments, resources, materials, activities, examples, videos, tutorials, eLearning courses, checklists, etc., provided from the libraries, are the most effective tools for learning to seek information and evaluate it according to its rigor, thus responding to the demand of the scientific community for tangible learning" (Herrero-Diz & López-Rufino, 2021, p. 9). Also, the same study has shown that, from a sample of 206 public libraries analyzed, randomly distributed around the world, the most common facilities offered by libraries in combating misinformation were those that combine fact-checking skills and critical thinking - accounting for 67% out of the total, followed by those that spot fake news (19%). In addition, the study shows that adult education takes place mainly through self-information; while most of the training made by a person is of self-learning type, *the second most significant part is carried out in libraries*.
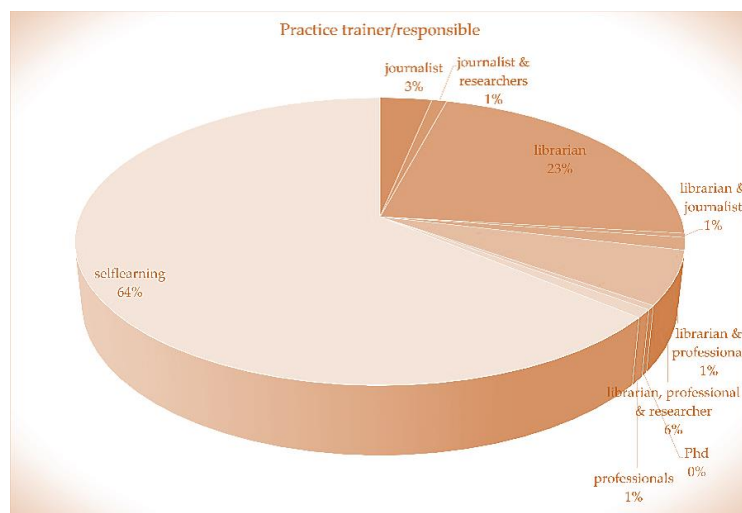

Figure 1. The adult education responsible
(Herero-Diz & Rufino, 2021, p. 5)

Moreover, digital literacy for fighting misinformation is compulsory in forming and maintaining healthy democratic abilities. Thus, according to the Council of European Union Recommendation (2018, p. 1), "the ability to act as a responsible citizen and to participate fully in civic and social life" is directly correlated to digital literacy, as it "requires the ability to use, critically understand and interact with both traditional and new forms of media and to understand the role and functions of the media in democratic societies." Also, as Kivinen and Edu (2022, p. 2) showed, "various actors use the internet and social media to spread disinformation, and they often use the language of science to give credibility to their claims. This undermines trust in science and, more broadly, trust in *democracy*".

Besides, fighting misinformation must be done on as many channels as possible, including the educational system, mass media and libraries (Sullivan, 2019). As

Bârgăoanu showed (2018), when people are confronted with more facts and more information on more channels, they become more emotionally reserved, learning how to manage better their often-extreme feelings that digital content creates, thus being less vulnerable to misinformation. Sociological studies also show that education, daily news coverage, and rejection of populist attitudes correlate with higher levels of trust in the West and democracy (Nahoi, 2023).

The team of researchers from the University of Washington drew insights and specific approaches as part of the action *Co-Designing for Trust* (University of Washington, 2022), a project funded by the US National Science Foundation, to support the development of new digital literacy approaches for addressing the impact of misinformation on underserved communities. They emphasized that misinformation, or false and misleading information, is a fundamental threat to democracies in the ways that it compounds socio-political divides and undermines trust in public information and institutions. Its scale and complexity require not only technology and policy solutions but also a reimagining of how to educate the public about what constitutes trustworthy information (University of Washington, 2022).

In recent years, scholars and educators - including the above mentioned team - have explored fundamental modifications to paradigms for teaching information and media literacy in a digital age. Many new approaches have demonstrated initial success in providing critical thinking and fact-checking skills (Young et. all, 2021). Research revealed that effective educational interventions need to do more than only teach critical thinking and fact-checking skills (Gilmour, 2024). Misinformation exploits *identities and emotions* to expand social divisions, exacerbate political polarization, and trigger psychological responses that encourage resistance to competing claims. To be effective, interventions must provide skills to assess the truthfulness of information and skills *to reflect on and regulate sociocultural and emotional attachments to information* (University of Washington, 2022).

Such a holistic transformation of digital literacy requires deep community engagement so that solutions are locally contextualized and grounded in the realities of how communities produce, use, and act on information. To create these interventions, the US researchers have been working with a group of institutions called digital literacy interventionists (University of Washington, 2022). These interventionists, which include libraries, schools, and community organizations, shared a common interest in using formal and informal education to address misinformation. They are also each a cornerstone of their communities, and they have deep knowledge of how to design education to resonate with local beliefs, interests, and values. They used *participatory design* (Coward, 2022) to support these interventionists in developing effective and locally contextualized digital literacy approaches. For example, it is about engaging librarians in designing digital literacy programs that they afterward should use to teach their communities new skills to resist misinformation. The team at Washington University has found this approach to be particularly effective because it allows people to combine expert knowledge in digital literacy with the local knowledge of the library partners (University of Washington, 2022).

A recent research carried out in Romania (Stănciugelu, 2023) analyzing the Romanian mass media and social media, has found attacks with anti-Western messages and misinformation on a swift rise in the last few years. Anti-Western messages on Romanian social media in 2021, compared to the previous year, have increased almost six times (Stănciugelu, 2023). Moreover, the same study of social media in the Romanian language also showed that anti-Western messages were ten times more visible in 2022 than in 2021.

Subsequently, analyzing the prevalence in online media and social-media environment of fake news and anti-democratic messages Stănciugelu, (2023) showed that on *Facebook* are present the most numerous anti-globalizing messages, those being correlated with RO-exit from U.E. and NATO topics. Thus, out of the 2,091 messages of this type on social media platforms, 1,909 were shared on Facebook. Secondly, there is the online written

press, with 369 messages, followed by the national media, with 263 messages. In addition, Sultănescu (2022, p. 43) showed, concerning the messages related to the North-Atlantic Alliance that: "the most active (and potentially impactful) areas of Facebook conversation about NATO contain *negative* elements, and the most visible reference in connection with the ongoing pandemic is a conspiracy theory belatedly debunked as fake news, while positive proactive communication related to NATO's actions during the pandemic was not among the most visible content mentioning this institution."

Considering the context presented above, namely that fake news and disinformation are spreading rapidly - leading to misinformation and confusion, Romanian librarians will and need to be able to actively work to counter and fight false or misleading information, also preserving the integrity of the information they disseminate, if they are to combat disinformation properly. It is essential to specify that in this very moment (i.e., 2024), public libraries are involved in an intense process of infrastructure and ICT resources modernization, with the support of the European funds (from NPRR - National Plan for Recovery and Resilience). More specifically, the measure "Funding schemes for libraries to become hubs for the development of digital competencies," managed by the Ministry of Research, Innovation, and Digitization, has as the overall objective of this call for a project dedicated to the public libraries to improve the basic digital competences of communities with limited access to digital training and of the vulnerable groups. Thus, funding will be provided for libraries to be renovated and equipped with computers and modern technical facilities so that county and municipal library headquarters will be transformed into hubs for digital skills development, change, and modernize their IT equipment. The target is 1,030 Romanian public libraries to develop essential skills such as digital literacy, communication, media literacy, digital content creation, digital security, and digital entrepreneurship education for 100,000 citizens, especially from disadvantaged communities (MIPE, 2023). In this context, Romanian public libraries will be well equipped to become crucial pillars in the future correct information literacy and debunking fake news processes.

Case study. Opinions of Romanian librarians on the role of libraries in tackling misinformation

Methodological approach

In recent years, it has been shown that there is a massive need, both among librarians and within the communities where they come from, for understanding and debunking the phenomenon of disinformation and combating the spread of fake news (Finley, McGowan, & Kluever, 2017). We have been interested to what extent, this activity related to misinformation and, the larger intervention of information literacy, is or could be consecrated as a permanent library service in Romania. As a result, during an event organized by Progress Foundation, we have asked the opinions and attitudes of Romanian librarians.

In July 2024, 21 representatives of county libraries across Romania and the Republic of Moldova have been present for an event lead by Progress Foundation. The event had as main purpose to understand, among others, the need for other projects where the foundation can partner public libraries. Within the event, we have asked 4 specific questions to the librarians present and recorded their opinions as part of a participatory exercise using the method world cafes. One of the questions was: "To what extent is combating misinformation a service library must provide. Provide arguments for your answer." Löhr, Weinhardt and Sieber (2020) consider that world cafes (WCs) can be employed as a participatory method of data collection for a large group of participants, a quality method, particularly when used as complementing other methods. In our case, we have used WCs and then asked 4 librarians who have provided the most compelling answers and had previous experience with information literacy programs, to explain and provide further details via email, post event.

Table 1. County of residence for the librarians who attended the world cafes session

The number of librarians involved in the study (WC)	County	Town
1 person	Arad	Arad
1 person	Braila	Braila
2 persons	Calarasi	Calarasi
3 persons	Constanta	Constanta
1 person	Hunedoara	Deva
1 person	Galati	Galati
1 person	Neamt	Piatra Neamt
2 persons	Arges	Pitesti
1 person	Valcea	Ramnicu Valcea
1 person	Dambovita	Targoviste
1 person	Mures	Targu Mures
1 person	Gorj	Targu-Jiu
2 persons	Tulcea	Tulcea
1 person	Salaj	Zalau
2 persons	Chisinau	R. Moldova

Main findings

The notes from the world cafes indicated general ideas like: "fake news debunking is important to happen in public libraries", "libraries should play a role in combating disinformation", "in the past we have attended such courses and we need more". As the results show, it was clear that librarians are interested and have an open attitude towards both learning and delivering this as a services, however the answers were too general. During the debriefing discussion, we have noticed that the librarians present at the event have used interchanging the terms: fake news/ misinformation/ disinformation/ information literacy – thus not having a clear understanding of the differences among them.

Based on these ideas, in approximately one week after the world cafes exercise, we have sent an email to 4 county librarians who have been more active as part of this activity, namely to the representatives of county libraries from Neamt, Dambovita, Gorj and Galati. Their subsequent answers have been more detailed. For instance one librarian said:

> "*The role played by public libraries in combating disinformation is far from being defined. Rather, they should aim to have a stance of neutrality, not by rooting in the dominant culture, but rather by providing an unbiased platform that collects, preserves, and displays voices and viewpoints that do not align with the dominant culture. Although neutrality itself appears nowhere to be outlined as a specific policy in the Library Law of Romania, the importance of approaching its users, as well as information sources, with a neutral approach is nevertheless reflected in the formulation of the idea that public libraries should contribute to free education of opinions. It means that these institutions should assume a pertinent position in relation to the information provided and that they should support a free exchange of views in their other activities. In practice, this inherent difficulty in taking and maintaining a neutral position (and lack of understanding of what neutrality means) is not an inactive or passive process, as abstention in conflicts can appear as a form of moral evasion. In evaluating*

> *information, the pursuit of neutrality paradoxically involves a judgmental stance, as perceptions of trust and credibility are inherently influenced by values, beliefs, and social context* (A.B., m., Neamt County Library)."

Another librarian mentioned:
> "*Public libraries are also a space for meeting and socializing. These institutions represent a place of trust, for those who frequent them, that offer quality services.* (V.V., m., Dambovita County Library)"

Another librarian, from Galati County, explained that there have already been implemented projects on combating fake news in several areas of Romania, being urgent, needed, and requested by the communities (e.g., in the Sibiu, Constanta, and Gorj counties). Within them, trainers with expertise in debunking disinformation held media workshops on topics related to fighting disinformation, propaganda, etc., for high school students. These actions had a significant impact, were well received, and were considered useful by the young people involved in these workshops.

As a general result, we ascertained that all the librarians were highly favorable to the efforts of understanding and fighting misinformation. Also, they wanted to be involved in future actions to fight disinformation through their activity. Nevertheless, there were still some terminological and conceptual confusions among the participants, demonstrating that the training and the deepening study actions of these fields for librarians would not only be very well received, but also very beneficial for them and their target groups. It is useful to mention that one of the most frequent confusions made by the participants was between *cyber security* and *fake news*, as well as the right to personal identity security and online misinformation. Also, it would be desirable and helpful to have interactive training for librarians in these fields, who later will become trainers themselves in their communities, they could be made aware of the risks produced by disinformation and to recognize fake news, text or visual type, and to debunk misinformation, as a part of digital and media literacy competences increase in public libraries.

Conclusions and recommendations

As a conclusion for the specific case of Romania, in line with the results of our study case, we see a great need for this fake-news debunking service to be developed, especially for understanding but also to combat the phenomenon of misinformation, which is increasing. Although only initial inception in actions have been carried out so far, they are also insufficiently systematized and particularized for Romania's needs. It is noteworthy that, in the most developed and democratic countries, there is an increased interest in this field of combating disinformation in libraries, being supported by academic research and local adaptation of both curricula and exercises part of action learning, while in Romania, these actions are deficient and require extensive intervention accordingly.

Providing training, transferring expertise and knowledge, including good practices examples to librarians from different communities in Romania - to increase their knowledge and access to the current practices in combating misinformation and fake news related to the present process of public modernization of Romanian libraries - would be not only a very actual, needed and valuable future intervention but is also a very desired one by the librarians. Instructing librarians to debunk and combat misinformation will equip them with the necessary knowledge and tools to identify, address, and educate others, Romanian youth or adults, about false or misleading information. In addition, the training's target groups will be empowered to promote and disseminate critical thinking, information literacy, and *trust* in reliable information, all essential in the digital age where disinformation can spread rapidly.

These kinds of actions have been recognized as very urgent and necessary, both by the Romanian librarians themselves and by the governmental actors, all of them admitting a pressing need for knowledge and actions in combating disinformation and the propagation of fake news, which are increasingly widespread phenomena in Romania and abroad. Considering all that has been presented in this paper, it is essential to emphasize that the role of libraries globally and in Romania is far from outdated or obsolete. Libraries are becoming more and more visible, active, and important in the future society, including their support for democratic values. This desideratum is currently in evolution in Romania and must be supported, both with public and private resources and investments, thus supporting the development of a healthy society.

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