Examining Journalists' Perception of Fake News and their Attitude Toward Debunking Disinformation

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Abstract

Fake news and other forms of disinformation pose a serious threat to the news ecosystem and the informing of audiences, who are increasingly dependent on online sources of information. After the attention paid to the spreading of fake news, researchers have focused on the study of the negative effects that different typologies of disinformation are prone to having on audiences. Similarly, great attention has also been paid to the motives that users have for the spreading of fake news.

These studies, which combine various disciplines, attempt to analyze the psychological factors and motives that lead users to engage with online fake news. On the other hand, several studies have analyzed the role of platforms and their algorithmic logic, as well as the main approaches for addressing this significant problem. Although much effort has been devoted to the phenomenon of disinformation in social media, the role of professional journalists in exposing false information has not been given the necessary attention.

Albania is a country with a high rate of fake news and conspiracy theories. This study will investigate the Albanian journalists' perception of fake news and the risk in them being used as a means of (dis)informing the audience. It will also focus on how this perception affects their behavior and willingness to debunk disinformation on social media. Making use of a national-level questionnaire, to which 270 journalists contributing in the Albanian media responded, the study aims to answer some important questions about the role of journalists in addressing disinformation issues in the social media space. The findings from this study indicate that although journalists in Albania perceive fake news as a danger to democracy, the media and the journalism profession, they do not seem motivated to engage in the debunking actions and exposing of fake news circulating online.

Keywords: journalism, fake news, social media, debunking, disinformation, democracy

1. Introduction

At a time when the tendency of audiences to get information via social media has increased progressively and in compliance with the pace of developments in the field of information technology, concerns about the authenticity and accuracy of the content remain a matter of high interest both for researchers and media professionals. The truthfulness and accuracy of information that audiences consume is directly related to opinion and decision-making, both essential elements for the functioning of democracy (Humprecht, 2019). For a significantly long period of time, the verification and accuracy of information was within the responsibilities of journalists and media professionals. However, at the present new ecosystem of news, in which the position of professional journalists in relation to the production and distribution of news is challenged by other actors, such as the common users of a given platform, the situation is even more complicated. Fake news, conspiracy theories, and other forms of falsified information pose an increasingly high risk of polluting the flow of information, especially on social media platforms.

Scholars and critics in the media argue that fake news, deliberately fabricated information, and the denunciative discourse towards the media, which appears especially in the public discourse of political actors, could affect democracies in various ways, ranging from changing public opinion, to the delegitimization of traditional journalism (Vu & Saldaña, 2021).

It goes without saying that professional journalists cannot ignore the issue of disinformation and fake news, as, in the times being, it is related to the nature and existence of this profession. As the use of social media among journalists has increased, turning into a professional routine, the risk of exposure to fake news that circulates on these platforms increases correspondingly; the same goes for the challenge to be engaged in identifying, detecting and exposing this sort of information.

From the perspective of journalists, social media are not solely useful channels for the publishing of content. These platforms have several functions related to media and journalism, in which all stages of the process of information production and distribution are included. The literature of this field identifies at least five usages of social media in journalism. These include content publishing, research, user engagement, meta-communication of the editorial staff, and audience monitoring (Neuberger, Nuernbergk, & Langenohl, 2018; Hermida & Melladob, 2020). Regardless the fact that they use social media in numerous ways, journalists seem to have contradictory attitudes when it comes to their perception of the impact these platforms have on their profession. On the one hand, it is widely accepted that social media has had a positive impact on the profession, making journalists more responsible towards the audience, while, on the other hand, it is underlined that with the increased use of the Internet and social media, journalists have increasingly sacrificed accuracy in exchange for speed (Weaver & Willnat, 2016; Himma-Kadakas & Ojamets, 2022).

Fake news also has a negative impact on audiences' trust in journalism, which, in turn, undermines the media's role in society. Reporters feel that fake news, which has the power to spread several times faster on social media, (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018), is overshadowing the information they produce.

Fake news tend to go viral online, surpassing the coverage of verified information. Similarly, they tend to encourage a more significant user engagement and to have a negative impact even on the digital economy of professional media. Moreover, the content of fake news is often filled with accusations against journalists and traditional media, paradoxically spreading the idea that they produce false information (Tandoc, Jenkinsb, & Craftc, 2018).

Recent studies on fake news tend to focus on the definition of "fake news" and its effect on the information of audiences, exploring the phenomenon from the audience's perspective. For more encompassing research, this study analyzes the phenomenon of fake news from the perspective of professional journalists.

This study aims to provide answers to some significant questions, to shed light on the attitude of the community of journalists in Albania towards the phenomenon of fake news and their willingness to be involved in exposing false information. More specifically, do journalists perceive fake news as a threat to their profession and to democracy? Are journalists engaged in fighting the phenomenon of "fake news"? In addition to these questions, the study researches the correlation between the perception of fake news as a risk and the predisposition to fight it. These and other similar questions are directly related to the responsibility journalists feel when the truth is threatened, distorted and attacked (Waisbord, 2018). Taking these into consideration, the research questions this study poses are as below:

RQ1. To what extent, do Albanian journalists perceive fake news as a threat to democracy and journalism?

RQ2. To what extent do Albanian journalists debunk disinformation on social media?

RQ3. Is there a correlation between journalists' perception of fake news's impact on democracy and journalism, and their actions of debunking?

2. Literature Review

Fake news is not a new phenomenon that threatens the information ecosystem (Duffy, Tandoc, & Ling, 2019). False, fake, falsified or fabricated information has accompanied all stages of social development (Greifeneder, Jaffé, Newman, & Schwarz, 2021). Studies on "fake news" were concentrated on three main issues, in compliance with the time period they were run. At first, these studies aimed to provide a definition for the phenomenon and the scope of the problem. During the second phase, a lot of research was done to explore the possible causes that led to the spreading of fake news. In the third phase, researchers have focused on the ability of the proposed solutions to address the problem (Tandoc E. C., 2019).

Additionally, researchers and historians have attempted to study the history of the phenomenon. Some of them have searched ancient times to find examples of fake news, manipulation campaigns and propaganda (Posetti & Matthews, 2018). From a broader perspective, in which all forms of disinformation are considered, it is obvious that ancient history and the middle ages are not lacking in such examples. However, it is encompassed in its name that the problem of fake news - or false information - is linked to the history of the press and media itself. So, the history of fake news should be limited to start with the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1439.

Major events in world history have often been accompanied by various modes of news manipulation and fake news. World War II was also a time when fake news "flourished", with the aim to manipulate the public opinion to be supportive of ethnic cleansing campaigns, massacres, and invasions. A famous example of disastrous consequences was when the Nazi press - Hitler's propaganda machine - spread the fake stories of the Jewish ritual drinking of children's blood (Arqoub, Elega, Özad, Dwikat, & Oloyede, 2020). Similarly, during the communist period of Albania, the press was packed with fake news. Their aim was primarily to legitimize the regime of the time and to denigrate any opposing ideas. The action for the demolition of all worship structures, for instance, was based mainly on fabricated news that blamed supposed crimes on the clergy. (Seferi, 2022).

Regardless of the debate over the historical roots of fake news, it is evident that technological developments and the proliferation of social media platforms have made possible the spreading of false information quickly and efficiently. Social media appears to be quite an adequate environment for the spreading fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). By changing the way people consume news, social media has significantly simplified the sharing of information among netizens (Tandoc, Jenkinsb, & Craftc, 2018).

2.1 Definition of Fake News

Efforts to define the term have increased in parallel with the popularity this term has achieved in public discourse and with the discussion on the potential damage it causes to the audience information and, as a result, to the functioning of democracy (Çela, 2020). Various authors have focused on two main dimensions of the phenomenon: levels of facticity and deception. That is, in the definition of fake news, the orientation basis of researchers is related to the level of truth that a certain news has and to the degree of deception it carries. "Such a typology is offered to clarify what we mean by fake news and to guide future studies" (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018) Taking this approach as a starting point, the concept of "fake news" could be categorized into six different typologies: fabricated information, manipulation, satirical news, humorous news, advertisement and propaganda.

In a sense, fake news is deliberate deception (Walther, Lew, Edwards, & Quick, 2022). Hence, it should be emphasized that the involved information producer(s) is aware of the falsehood of the content s/he has produced as well as of the purpose of distribution. Taking this approach into consideration, fake news is "the intentional deception of a mass audience by non-media actors via a sensational communication that appears credible but is designed to manipulate and is not revealed to be false" (Finneman & Thomas, 2018). From a different perspective, other definitions of fake news put the emphasis on verifiability as a convenient way of proving the falsehood of a certain piece of information. Based on this, fake news can be defined as "articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and that can mislead the reader" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Conversely, this means that an article not entirely verifiable as such cannot be defined as fake news.

On a different page, the success of fake news in gaining the audience credibility is also related to the similarity it tends to display with the traditional news format. A study conducted by several researchers in 2021 found that fake news imitates traditional news in some elements, such as timing, contrast or negativity of the event, and significance, or importance. Likewise, in terms of writing format, fake news uses the inverted pyramid pattern just like real news (Tandoc, Thomas, & Bishop, 2021).). In addition, fake news is also relied on by political actors who often use the term to attack professional journalists who investigate and produce news that they don't like or don't fit their political agenda (McNair, 2021). Recent literature, indeed, has the tendency to make use of a multitude of terms, which refer to every typology of fake news as well as to numerous typologies of false information that spreads on the web. Most of the terms used are related to the purpose or motives of the "information producer" (Tandoc, Thomas, & Bishop, 2021 (McNair, 2021).

Disinformation is generally used to refer to deliberate - and often orchestrated - attempts to mislead or manipulate public opinion via the dissemination of misleading information. Misinformation is usually used to refer to incorrect information that is created and disseminated without any manipulative or malicious intent (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). In contrast, other authors suggest the use of the term 'malinformation' to refer to "information that is based on reality, and used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country" (Marwick, 2018).   Sensational content for commercial intent is one of the most widespread forms of disinformation. They are false information of no ideological background or purpose and their primary goal is to direct user traffic to certain websites in order to benefit from online advertising revenue. Yet another form of disinformation is the one "sponsored by states or governments". In this case, the primary purpose is the influencing of the public opinion (Titcomb & Carson, 2018).

2.2 Fake News and Journalism

Making use of conspiracy theories and the so-called "alternative facts", actors engaged in the production and dissemination of disinformation put into question the integrity of traditional news sources and cast doubt on journalists (Ekström, Lewis, & Westlund, 2020). The producers and spreaders of fake news are frequently supported by politicians or other actors in the public sphere, who target the media and professional journalists using the label, "fake media" "fake news", and so on. These labels are used by political leaders to legitimize censorship as well as to silence the media whenever it takes a critical approach to their work (Egelhofer, Aaldering, Eberl, Galyga, & Lecheler, 2020). In an analysis that considered the future of journalism in a world that has embraced disinformation and distrust, the editor-in-chief of "Huff Post" refers to the time being as a "hell" from which one can get out only by reporting the truth. She also emphasizes the fact that journalists must insist for the truth. "We must move forward through this darkness until we find the light again.   We must avoid apathy. We must denounce fear. We must fight ignorance. The press cannot afford to fall into disarray and depression while reporting on the collapsing world around us." (BELTON, 2021)

Researchers believe that fake news poses a serious threat to journalism, because it not only urges unfair competition to

get the audience's attention but also poses a direct threat to the credibility of journalism. Asimina Michailidou and Hans-Jörg Trenz argue that fake news promoters can manage to undermine the trust of the audience only if their communication style is credible. Therefore, the implication is that the sources of fake news not only undermine trust in the media and journalism but also generate new trust through so-called "alternative facts" (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021). Meanwhile, according to journalism educators, the best answer to fake news is good journalism (Richardson, 2017).

On the other hand, journalists spend time and energy trying to defend their reputations in the face of widespread accusations, mainly from sources that produce and distribute false information (Tandoc, Jenkinsb, & Craftc, 2018). The damage caused to the reputation of journalists decreases the trust of audiences in the information produced by professional journalists. At this point, it should be emphasized that numerous media professionals and researchers are concerned about the effect that fake news has on the role of journalism in the functioning of a democratic society. To better understand the impact of fake news on this significant role of journalism, it is necessary to focus on the relationship among information, activism, citizen engagement, and democracy.

Indeed, one of the biggest problems democratic systems face today - both in countries with a tradition in the functioning of democratic societies, as well as in new developing democracies - is the low citizen engagement. One of the main factors that encourages the engagement of citizens in politics is related to their being informed, especially to the quality of information they receive. If citizens are well informed, their level of involvement in politics and the public debate that takes place in the public sphere is inevitably higher.

It goes without saying that the greater the degree of political involvement of citizens, the more robust the democracy. Subsequently, it can be maintained that journalism, considering its responsibility to accurately inform citizens, plays a critical role for the functioning of any democracy (Vu & Saldaña, 2021). Moreover, it is put forth that fake news has a negative impact precisely on this vital role, damaging the relationship of trust between audiences and information sources. All forms of disinformation, including fake news, directly threaten the ecosystem of audience information and, thereby undermine democracy (Morgan, 2018).

3. Methodology and Data Collection

This research was made possible through the use of quantitative approach. In the framework of quantitative methods, data was collected through a questionnaire conducted with 270 journalists in Albania, during the period October 25-November 30, 2022. Although the term "journalists" has been used for the sake of representation, the selected sample includes professionals ranging from information directors, editors-in-chief, to television news anchors and social media managers. In the absence of an official and confirmed database of journalists in Albania, the data and contacts of the Albanian Union of Journalists, the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA), and the Albanian Media Institute were used to identify the total number of people relevant for this study.

The sample was constructed based on the purposive, non-probability sampling technique and the avalanche sampling technique. The questionnaire was sent to journalists via email or to their other social network accounts and they were asked to forward it to their colleagues in the media in which they were employed. The questionnaire was designed to collect primary data on all the four main dimensions. First, demographic data on the age, gender, work experience, residence and income of the respondents were collected. Second, primary data regarding the use of social media platforms by journalists was generated. To clarify, in this section it was intended to collect data on the reasons why journalists use social media, their preferences regarding platforms, their use frequency and their posting frequency, their number of followers as well as the self-perceived level of knowledge of social media.

The third group of questions is intended to collect data on the perception of journalists regarding the impact of social media use on their daily life and profession. In the fourth and last section, journalists were asked in relation to their knowledge on the phenomenon of fake news, their ability to distinguish fake news, their perceived danger the phenomenon represents for the media and democracy, as well as what their activities to counteract this problem are.

All the data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed with the help of the SPSS program. Initially, the data was processed to understand the perception of journalists regarding the danger posed by fake news to the media, to journalism as a profession and to democracy. The respondents have expressed their agreement, through a Likert scale from 1 to 5, for each of the ten (10) provided statements. Then, the data was analyzed to understand the engagement of journalists in the fight against fake news. Again, respondents were asked to express their degree of agreement - from 1 to 5 – to seven (7) statements, each of which represented an action that could be taken when faced with false information on social media platforms. Finally, in order to understand if there is a correlation between the degree of perception of fake news as a danger to the media and democracy and the willingness to take actions that help fight this phenomenon, the "spearman correlation" analysis was used.

4. Data Analysis

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the descriptive data extracted from the processing of the questionnaire. The results of the collected data demonstrate that journalists in Albanian perceive fake news as a serious threat to democracy in the country, but also to the media and their profession. Thus, Table no. 1 presents the descriptive data for question no. 33 (Q. 33), in which journalists have expressed their degree of agreement with the ten (10) statements aimed at measuring the perception of the danger posed by fake news. Based on the results, it could be maintained that journalists perceive fake news as a threat to democracy. More specifically, when asked to which extent they agree with the statement "*Fake news is a threat to democracy*", 72.5% of them held that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed". While only 1.5% of the respondents stated that they "strongly disagreed" with this statement.

The result of this question shows that the concerns of the journalist community in Albania are similar to those of their colleagues in other countries. Studies point out that the "meta-journalistic" discourse considers fake news an external threat to journalism. In other words, fake news is perceived as an external danger, and professional journalism as the means that fights it to defend democracy (Farkas, 2023) (Carson & Gibbons, 2022).   This situation reflects a sort of moral anxiety in relation to information, which demonstrates itself as a perceived threat to the proper informational order, which, in turn, is indispensable for the well-being of democracy (Carlson, 2018).

Table 1. The Perception of Fake News as a Threat by Journalists

The perception of fake news as a threat	Strongly disagree	Somehow Agree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Fake news is a threat to democracy	1.50%	12.20%	13.70%	33.60%	38.90%
Fake news is a threat to the media and journalism	0.40%	8.80%	5.70%	30.50%	54.60%
Fake news has a negative impact on the audience opinion	0.40%	8.80%	3.40%	29.40%	58.00%
Politician are the main source of fake news	2.30%	38.20%	17.90%	24.00%	17.60%
Fake news is mainly spread by those with ideological-political agendas	0.80%	27.10%	11.80%	30.50%	29.80%
Fake news is mainly spread on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.)	0.40%	15.30%	8.00%	31.30%	45.00%
The Covid-19 pandemic resulted into an increase in the spreading of fake news	2.70%	16.40%	9.50%	34.70%	36.60%
Politicians rely on fake news to dictate the agenda of the media and the public	80.00%	21.40%	6.50%	36.30%	35.10%
Professional journalists can restrict the effect of fake news on the public opinion	1.10%	14.10%	3.80%	32.80%	48.10%
Journalists hold the necessary knowledge and skills to identify and expose fake news	4.20%	16.00%	11.10%	38.20%	30.50%

It should be underlined that the data analysis pointed out that the perception of fake news as a threat is related to the age variable of journalists. Although the difference is not considerable, with the increase of the age, the perception of fake news as a threat increases. This deduction is more evident in the cases of the first statement "Fake news is a threat to democracy" and in that of the second statement, "Fake news is a threat to the media and journalism".

Table 2. The perception of fake news by journalists according to age groups

		Base	18-24 a.g.	25-34 a.g.	35-44 a.g.	45-54 a.g.	55+ a.g.
		262	40	122	80	17	3
Fake news is a threat to democracy	Strongly disagree	*1.5%*	-	*2.5%*	*1.2%*	-	-
	Somehow agree	*12.2%*	*12.5%*	*14.8%*	*11.2%*	-	-
	Neutral	*13.7%*	*22.5%*	*14.8%*	*6.2%*	*23.5%*	-
	Agree	*33.6%*	*35.0%*	*32.8%*	*33.8%*	*35.3%*	*33.3%*
	Strongly Agree	*38.9%*	*30.0%*	*35.2%*	*47.5%*	*41.2%*	*66.7%*
Fake news is a threat to the media and journalism	Strongly disagree	*0.4%*	-	-	*1.2%*	-	-
	Somehow agree	*8.8%*	*17.5%*	*7.4%*	*7.5%*	*5.9%*	-
	Neutral	*5.7%*	*5.0%*	*6.6%*	*3.8%*	*11.8%*	-
	Agree	*30.5%*	*30.0%*	*34.4%*	*28.8%*	*17.6%*	-
	Strongly agree	*54.6%*	*47.5%*	*51.6%*	*58.8%*	*64.7%*	*100.0%*
Fake news has a negative impact on the audience opinion	Strongly disagree	*0.4%*	*2.5%*	-	-	-	-
	Somehow agree	*8.8%*	*10.0%*	*9.0%*	*6.2%*	*17.6%*	-
	Neutral	*3.4%*	-	*3.3%*	*6.2%*	-	-
	Agree	*29.4%*	*25.0%*	*32.0%*	*27.5%*	*35.3%*	-
	Strongly agree	*58.0%*	*62.5%*	*55.7%*	*60.0%*	*47.1%*	*100.0%*

More specifically, the total percentage of the responses "agree" and "strongly agree" for the 35-44 added together is a total of 81.3%, while for the over 55 age group, the sum of these two responses reaches 99.6%. For the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups, the percentage of journalists that perceive it as a risk is lower.

The data show a slightly different trend in relation to the statement "*Fake news has a negative impact on the audience's opinion*". All age groups demonstrate a high level of agreement and no essential differences are observed among the categories. Taking these into consideration, it is deduced that age is a factor that has an impact on journalists' perception of fake news as a threat to democracy, media, and journalism. The impact of age is not possibly proven in all the statements that were part of question no. 33. Upon analyzing the data, it was observed that there was no statistically significant difference in the perception of Fake News impact among journalists based on their years of working experience. However, despite this overall lack of variation, a noticeable division emerged when comparing respondents with less than five years of experience to those with over five years.

Table 3 displays the results of fake news perception based on type of media they work.

Table 3. Fake News Risk Perception based on the type of Media they Work

		Type of media in which they work		
		Total Sample 260	TV/Media 169	Online Media 73
Fake news is a threat to democracy	Strongly disagree	*1.50%*	*2.40%*	-
	Somehow disagree	*12.20%*	*14.80%*	*8.20%*
	Neutral	*13.70%*	*14.80%*	*13.70%*
	Agree	*33.60%*	*29.60%*	*38.40%*
	Strongly Agree	*38.90%*	*38.50%*	*39.70%*
Fake news is a threat to the media and journalism	Strongly disagree	*0.40%*	*0.60%*	-
	Somehow agree	*8.80%*	*9.50%*	*8.20%*
	Neutral	*5.70%*	*6.50%*	*5.50%*
	Agree	*30.50%*	*32.00%*	*31.50%*
	Strongly agree	*54.60%*	*51.50%*	*54.80%*
Fake news has a negative impact on the audience opinion	Strongly disagree	*0.40%*	*0.60%*	-
	Somehow disagree	*8.80%*	*10.70%*	*5.50%*
	Neutral	*3.40%*	*4.70%*	*1.40%*
	Agree	*29.40%*	*32.00%*	*24.70%*
	Strongly agree	*58.00%*	*52.10%*	*68.50%*

The results revealed that journalists working in online media exhibited a higher level of perception of Fake News as a threat to democracy, media, journalism, and its impact on audience opinion compared to their counterparts in traditional media. Among respondents in online media, a significant 78.1% expressed agreement or strong agreement with the statement "Fake news is a threat to democracy." In contrast, only 68.1% of traditional media journalists held a similar view. Regarding the perception of Fake News as a threat to media and journalism, 86.3% of online media journalists expressed agreement or strong agreement, while 83.5% of traditional media journalists shared the same perspective. The data also revealed that a substantial majority of journalists working in online media (93.2%) believed that Fake News had a negative impact on audience opinion. This perception was comparatively lower among traditional media journalists, with 84.1% expressing agreement or strong agreement.

4.1 Active Engagement against Fake News

The second research question aims to analyze the actions taken by journalists in the combat against fake news. In order to have a better view of their attitude and the potential actions they take in this direction, question no. 32 provided seven (7) statements, for which the participants were asked to express their level of frequency. That is, journalists were asked to express how often they undertake each of the actions presented in the question. Each of these statements represents a specific potential action that journalists could undertake when they encounter susceptibly fake news on social media. The respondents, obviously, stated their self-evaluation-based answers in relation to the frequency with which they take the stated actions, through a Likert scale from 1 to 5.

Table 4. The engagement of journalists in the combat of Fake news

	always	usually,	sometimes	rarely	never
Ignore the false tweet/post	*31.3%*	*19.2%*	*23.6%*	*15.9%*	*10.2%*
Report its content so it can be removed	*12.6%*	*15.5%*	*26.9%*	*26.4%*	*17.5%*
If the tweet/post is from a public figure, I encourage colleagues to report it	*11.8%*	*19.2%*	*24.0%*	*23.6%*	*21.1%*
Unfollow/block the person/ account that has posted the false information	*11.4%*	*15.1%*	*25.6%*	*28.9%*	*19.5%*
Send a message to the person that posted the information to let him/her know that it is incorrect	*4.9%*	*12.2%*	*27.7%*	*26.0%*	*29.3%*
Post a comment stating that the information is incorrect/ false	*4.1%*	*13.1%*	*28.9%*	*29.3%*	*23.6%*
Post a correction/ corrected version of the news on my social media account	*3.3%*	*7.3%*	*19.4%*	*30.5%*	*39.8%*

The examination of the data suggests that the propensity of journalists to engage in actions that expose and fight fake news is low. As it is obvious in Table 4, in cases when they come across news, they suspect to be fake, the most frequent action among the responding journalists is that of ignoring. More precisely, in the case of the statement "I ignore the tweet/post", the total sum of those who responded "always" and those who responded "usually" make up 50.5% of the answers. "Ignoring it" refers to the lowest degree of willingness to combat the phenomenon of fake news, as it indicates that journalists embrace a passive approach and do not engage in correcting the news.

However, actions that demand a more direct engagement on behalf of the journalists to combat fake news are not that widespread by journalists. When asked to declare how often they post a correction on their social media accounts, 30.5% claimed that it happened "rarely" and 39.8% claimed that it was "never" the case. A similar trend is also observed in relation to the statements "*I post a comment saying that the information is incorrect/ false*", and "*I send a message to the person who posted the information to let him/her know that it is incorrect*".

These results can also be related to whether journalists perceive engagement in the combat against the phenomenon of fake news as part of their professional commitment or not. Similar studies have pointed out that not all journalists consider news verification as part of their journalistic responsibilities (Humprecht, 2019). The engagement of journalists in fact-checking as well as in addressing of the phenomenon of fake news in social media depends on the organizational culture, professional values, ideologies, and pre-existing knowledge (Walter, Cohen, Holbert, & Morag, 2019; Kwanda & Lin, 2020).

Table 5 shows the debunking attitude based on the media type journalists are working on.

Table 5. Debunking actions according to the type of media they work

		Media Type		
		Base	Tv	Online Media
	Base	**262**	**169**	**73**
Post a comment stating that the information is incorrect/ false	Never	*39.30%*	*40.20%*	*38.40%*
	rarely	*29.80%*	*30.20%*	*26.00%*
	sometimes	*20.20%*	*21.90%*	*19.20%*
	usually	*7.60%*	*4.70%*	*12.30%*
	always	*3.10%*	*3.00%*	*4.10%*
Send a message to the person that posted the information to let him/her know that it is incorrect	Never	*29.00%*	*31.40%*	*24.70%*
	rarely	*26.70%*	*20.70%*	*38.40%*
	sometimes	*27.90%*	*30.80%*	*20.50%*
	usually,	*11.80%*	*13.00%*	*11.00%*
	always	*4.60%*	*4.10%*	*5.50%*
Post a correction/ corrected version of the news on my social media account	Never	*24.40%*	*26.60%*	*17.80%*
	rarely	*29.00%*	*26.60%*	*31.50%*
	sometimes	*30.20%*	*31.40%*	*30.10%*
	usually	*12.60%*	*12.40%*	*15.10%*
	always	*3.80%*	*3.00%*	*5.50%*
Unfollow/block the person/ account that has posted the false information	Never	*19.50%*	*21.90%*	*13.70%*
	rarely	*27.50%*	*27.80%*	*28.80%*
	sometimes	*26.00%*	*24.30%*	*26.00%*
	usually	*15.30%*	*14.80%*	*17.80%*
	always	*11.80%*	*11.20%*	*13.70%*
Ignore the false tweet/post	Never	*10.30%*	*9.50%*	*12.30%*
	rarely	*15.30%*	*18.30%*	*9.60%*
	sometimes	*23.70%*	*25.40%*	*17.80%*
	usually	*20.20%*	*18.30%*	*24.70%*
	always	*30.50%*	*28.40%*	*35.60%*
Report its content so it can be removed	Never	*17.20%*	*20.10%*	*9.60%*
	rarely	*26.70%*	*27.20%*	*27.40%*
	sometimes	*28.20%*	*27.80%*	*28.80%*
	usually	*16.00%*	*15.40%*	*17.80%*
	always	*11.80%*	*9.50%*	*16.40%*
If the tweet/post is from a public figure, I encourage colleagues to report it	Never	*21.40%*	*23.70%*	*17.80%*
	rarely	*23.70%*	*24.90%*	*19.20%*
	sometimes	*25.20%*	*27.80%*	*17.80%*
	usually	*18.70%*	*14.20%*	*30.10%*
	always	*11.10%*	*9.50%*	*15.10%*

The analysis of debunking actions revealed that journalists working in Online Media displayed a higher tendency toward engaging in debunking compared to their counterparts in Mainstream Media, particularly when considering the combined frequency of "usually" and "always." The higher attitude toward debunking actions observed among Online Media journalists could be attributed to the dynamic nature of the online environment. Furthermore, the study discovered a correlation between journalists' perception of Fake News as a risk and their predisposition to engage in debunking actions. The higher perceived risk of Fake News to democracy, the journalism profession, and its impact on the audience among Online Media journalists might be influencing their proactive approach to debunking false information.

This correlation could be reinforced by the fact that journalists working in News Media are constantly exposed to the risks posed by Fake News (Vziatysheva, 2020). The prevalence of misinformation in the news industry might foster a stronger sense of responsibility among Online Media journalists to combat false narratives and safeguard the credibility of their profession.

4.2 The Relationship between Threat Perception and Active Engagement against Fake News

In the author's view, it was of interesting to consider if there was any tangible cause-effect relationship between the perception of fake news as a threat on their behalf and the commitment of journalists to combat the phenomenon. Research Question 3 seeks to investigate this potential relationship: whenever the perception of the threat of fake news among journalists is high, their predisposition to engage in fake news counteractions is also supposed to be higher.

Table 6. Spearman correlation

	Q32_A1	Q32_A2	Q32_A3	Q32_A4	Q32_A5	Q32_A6	Q32_A7	Q33_A1	Q33_A2	Q33_A3	Q33_A4	Q33_A5	Q33_A6	Q33_A7	Q33_A8	Q33_A9	Q33_A10
Q32_A1	1																
Q32_A2	0.3705*	1															
Q32_A3	0.4723*	0.5098*	1														
Q32_A4	0.0809	0.1585*	0.2736*	1													
Q32_A5	-0.1467*	-0.0767	-0.0263	0.3420*	1												
Q32_A6	0.1494*	0.2633*	0.3020*	0.3209*	0.2190*	1											
Q32_A7	0.2152*	0.2992*	0.4667*	0.3083*	0.2124*	0.5439*	1										
Q33_A1	-0.0225	0.0436	-0.0027	0.0937	0.1727*	0.1356*	0.1841*	1									
Q33_A2	-0.0342	0.0072	-0.0279	0.0406	0.2164*	0.0639	0.0965	0.6682*	1								
Q33_A3	-0.0197	0.0314	0.0565	0.004	0.2664*	0.0904	0.1225*	0.5116*	0.7011*	1							
Q33_A4	-0.0275	-0.1149	0.0338	0.1287*	0.1606*	0.0229	0.1401*	0.2776*	0.2280*	0.2467*	1						
Q33_A5	-0.0531	-0.1232*	0.0204	0.0941	0.1396*	0.0691	0.1209	0.3330*	0.3780*	0.4000*	0.6295*	1					
Q33_A6	-0.0857	-0.0674	0.0158	-0.0297	0.1018	0.024	0.0897	0.2307*	0.3683*	0.4225*	0.3236*	0.5512*	1				
Q33_A7	-0.0242	-0.0827	0.0199	0.0738	0.1420*	0.0732	0.1815*	0.3062*	0.3325*	0.3521*	0.3292*	0.5253*	0.5738*	1			
Q33_A8	-0.0682	-0.0605	0.1122	0.1445*	0.1527*	0.046	0.1799*	0.2615*	0.3601*	0.3487*	0.4615*	0.6223*	0.5867*	0.5790*	1		
Q33_A9	-0.0373	0.0053	-0.021	-0.0237	0.1213*	0.0184	0.0403	0.3439*	0.4866*	0.4314*	0.2187*	0.3443*	0.4395*	0.4032*	0.4200*	1	
Q33_A10	-0.0044	0.2002*	-0.0184	-0.0398	-0.0334	0.0396	0.0077	0.2712*	0.3440*	0.2194*	-0.07	0.0073	0.1969*	0.0869	0.0953	0.4224*	1

*Statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$

Table 6 gives results of Spearman correlation coefficients for each of the variables. Due to the fact that variables are qualitative variables, Spearman correlation was the most appropriate method to look into the relationship between these variables. A Spearman correlation is a nonparametric test which measures the strength and direction of association between two variables that are measured on an ordinal or continuous scale (Bluman, 2018). A previously highlighted, in question 3 (Q32) journalists were presented with this question "When you come across news that you suspect to be fake; do you undertake the following actions? Rate each statement on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (often)". Thus, questions between Q32-A1 and Q32-A7 provide the respondents with various actions that could be undertaken to combat fake news and journalists rate them on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (often). Questions from Q33-A1 to Q33-A10 show the journalists" perceptions of fake news as a threat to democracy, media and journalism, and so on.

The results of Table 4 point out to a very weak correlation between the perception of the risk of fake news and the predisposition of journalists to engage in fake news counteractions. Therefore, no meaningful relationship was found between these variables.

Also, figure 1 provides a point distribution of the mean ratings of Q32 and Q33. The distribution of these two variables shows a very weak positive relationship between the variables.
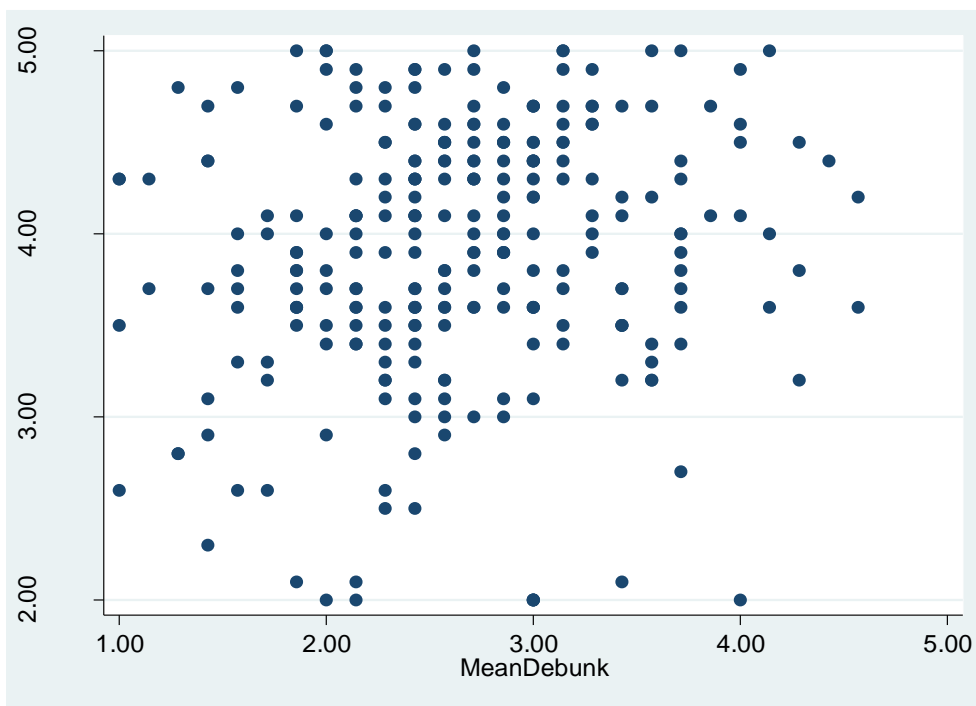
Figure 1. The average evaluation scores of Q32 (MeanFakeNews) and Q34 (Mean Debunking)

5. Conclusions and Discussion

This study undertook an investigation of the perception and engagement of journalists to expose fake news and disinformation. One of the main objectives of this study was to explore the correlative relationship between journalists' perception of fake news as a threat to democracy, media, and journalism and their engagement in actions combating this phenomenon in social media.

The results of this study pointed out that journalists in Albania perceive the phenomenon of fake news as a threat to the functioning of democracy. They also have a similar perception of the danger posed by fake news to the media and the journalism profession. Hence, the study reaches similar conclusions to those reached by studies carried out by several researchers in the field. This demonstrates that the perception of fake news among journalists in Albania is not different from that of their colleagues; indeed, they view it as a threat Nonetheless, an in-depth analysis of the data demonstrated that there is a very weak correlation between the perception of the risk of fake news and the predisposition to actively engage in combating it. The analyzed data showed that even those who believe that fake news poses a threat to the media and journalism do not engage in exposing disinformation. Despite the low engagement attitude, the data shows that journalists working in online media show a slightly higher tendency toward debunking actions compared to their counterparts working in mainstream media. The new media journalists show a high perception of Fake News risk compared to journalists working in mainstream media.   The higher perception of risks and the proactive stance of Online Media journalists in countering misinformation could be attributed to the high explosion they have in the dynamic online environment. It also highlights the significance of their role in combating Fake News in the digital age. Future studies could examine in detail the profound reasons and motives that explain this relationship.

In conclusion, it could be maintained that overall journalists in Albania do not seem to be significantly motivated to engage in exposing fake news and combating disinformation on social networks.

A possible explanation for their lack of motivation and engagement is that Albanian journalists face numerous challenges and are subject to significant pressure in their daily work. In an environment where resources are limited and political influence is strong, journalists may find it difficult to engage in combating fake news and disinformation. The results of the study point to another challenge to be faced by journalists and the Albanian media, in general. Under the present circumstances, of an increase in the spreading of fake news and disinformation in social media, it is essential for journalists to be actively engaged in the combat against the threatening phenomenon and to keep the integrity of information. This includes even the journalists and editors, developing their skills in fake news detection so that they do not misinform their audiences (Adjin-Tettey, 2022). This is also a valuable service in line with their professional vocation that they would perform for the public benefit. This is in line with other authors who suggest that for the public benefit journalists shall use the term of fake news less often and more

consciously (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020; Egelhofer, Aaldering, Eberl, Galyga, & Lecheler, 2020).

The addressing of this challenge goes through the active engagement of Albanian journalists in combating fake news and disinformation on social media, and the community should take measures to increase journalists'' awareness and engagement. This could be achieved through investing in training sessions aiming at the development of skills to identify, assess and expose fake news. Additionally, institutional support and the appropriate environment to encourage a more active engagement on behalf of journalists in this respect should be created. An essential future challenge is the conducting of more studies that shed light on the reasons why journalists are not actively engaged in exposing and combating the false information – fake news and disinformation - circulating on social media platforms. Another issue of interest to be researched in future studies is related to the identification of approaches that would address the problem of disinformation supported by the journalist community.

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