Fake News and the Third-Person Effect: They are More Influenced than Me and You

Assistant Professor **Oana ȘTEFĂNIȚĂ**, PhD

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration,
Bucharest, Romania
E-mail: oana.stefanita@comunicare.ro

Professor **Nicoleta CORBU**, PhD

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration,
Bucharest, Romania
E-mail: nicoleta.corbu@comunicare.ro

Assistant Professor **Raluca BUTUROIU**, PhD

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration,
Bucharest, Romania
E-mail: raluca.buturoiu@comunicare.ro

Abstract. *Recent research efforts have been invested into undermining the effects of digital disinformation, both on a personal and on a societal level. However, because of the complexity of the phenomena, the actual effects of digital disinformation are still under consideration and, therefore, studies published so far focus on the perceived effects of fake news. Against this backdrop, relying on Davison's (1983) third-person effect (TPE) theory, this study aims at investigating (1) the way people perceive the effects of fake news and (2) the possible variables predicting different levels of self-other discrepancy perceptions. Based on data gathered from a national representative survey (N=1107) in Romania, main results show that people have the tendency to consider that distant others (i.e., members of the out-group) are more influenced than themselves or the in-group members (i.e., confirming a strong TPE). With reference to TPE predictors, gender and fake news frequency of exposure are the most*

significant variables influencing of the intensity of TPE, in the sense that (a) women tend to consider that distant others are more influenced by fake news and (b) the more people perceive they are exposed to fake news, the greatest the TPE.

Introduction

Within the new media ecosystem, widely dominated by media content easily swinging between satire and parody, fabrication and manipulation, scholars have been trying to identify the effects of digital disinformation. Although there are significant efforts in this respect, the actual effects of digital disinformation are still difficult to be measured. The difficulties consist in the multiple implications brought by the variety of forms that digital disinformation might take and the numerous possible causes leading some people to be more influenced than others.

In this context, some scholars have tried to determine and analyze if and how people perceive the effects of digital disinformation. Specifically, some recent attempts tackle the perceived effects of fake news in the US context (Calvert 2017; Jang & Kim 2018). Their approach on the perceived effects of fake news is based on Davison's (1983) third-person effect (TPE) theory, stating that people tend to perceive that others (third persons, out-group members) are more influenced by different media messages than people themselves or in-group members. This self-other discrepancy in perception might explain further aspects of people's behavior (e.g., the support for censorship).

Against this background, this article deals with the perceived effects of digital disinformation in a Romanian context, being, to our knowledge, the first attempt made so far in this direction. Relying on data gathered from a national representative survey (N=1107) in Romania, this article aims at offering some insights regarding the perceived impact of digital disinformation in Romania, representing a first step towards explaining further social attitudes and behaviors. Based on the TPE theory, the article investigates (1) the perceived effects of fake news among Romanian people and (2) the predictors leading to various levels of TPE. Particularly, we focus on analyzing people's perceptions about the effects of fake news on three levels: on the personal level (self-perception about fake news effects), on the in-group level (perception about fake news effects on close friends and family), and on the out-group level (perception about fake news effects on distant others). At the same time, we aim at identifying the main variables predicting people's tendency towards considering others to be more influenced by fake news than themselves.