

Fighting Disinformation during the COVID19 pandemic: the role of PSM through social media initiatives

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Combate à desinformação durante a pandemia da COVID19: o papel do SPM através de iniciativas nas redes sociais

Resumo (PT): Sabendo que o SPM continua a apresentar elevados níveis de confiança entre as audiências e compreendendo o papel de liderança que este serviço deve desempenhar na promoção da literacia mediática e especificamente no combate à desinformação devido ao seu compromisso com valores democráticos, este artigo apresenta um estudo de caso comparativo entre os operadores públicos em Portugal (RTP) e na Alemanha (ZDF) analisando as atividades desenvolvidas por eles entre março de 2020 e novembro de 2021 no combate a desinformação através dos seus canais no Facebook e do Youtube. O estudo concluiu que ambos os operadores utilizam, na maioria das vezes, ambas as plataformas para promover a programação da televisão, no entanto apresentam conteúdo relevante sobre este tema nestas plataformas. Esses conteúdos são diferentes em termos de quantidade, abordagem e engajamento do público.

Palavras-chave: Serviço público de media, Literacia Mediática, Desinformação, Pós-verdade.

Fighting Disinformation during the COVID19 pandemic: the role of PSM through social media initiatives

Abstract (EN): Knowing that SPM continues to present high levels of trust among audiences and understanding the leading role that this service should play in promoting media literacy and specifically in combating disinformation due to its commitment to democratic values, this paper presents a comparative case study between public operators in Portugal (RTP) and Germany (ZDF) analyzing the activities developed by them between March 2020 and November 2021 in combating disinformation through their Facebook and Youtube channels. The study found that both operators use both platforms, for the most part to advertise their television programming, however they present relevant content on this topic on these platforms. These contents are different in terms of quantity, approach, and audience engagement.

Keywords: Public Service Media, Media Literacy, Disinformation, Post-truth

Introduction

In the digital world, where the wide and varied supply of content, distribution platforms, and new technologies are available to audiences with increasing ease, the legitimacy of the Public Service Media (PSM) has been constantly challenged (Połowska & Beckett, 2019; Lunt, Livingstone & Brevini, 2012). For many researchers who advocate for PSM in the digital age, the relevance of this service is connected to its commitment to democratic values.

Ensuring these values, it is argued, is increasingly important in the digital context if individuals are to exercise their citizenship fully. One of the ways through which PSM is expected to perform its social responsibility of educating and informing its audiences and, thus, contribute to democratic societies, is through the promotion of Media Literacy (ML), which is fundamental for the establishment of healthy democracies (Buckingham, 2019).

In the universe of the digital natives (Prensky, 2001) and the global village (McLuhan, 1964) that never shuts down and is constantly connected, not being able to understand media and its messages critically is a form of social exclusion (Buckingham, 2019; Carlsson, 2019; Pinto et al., 2011). Technological advances, while positive on many levels, have brought disruption to communication (Teixeira, 2018; Santaella, 2018) and caused what Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) called "informational disorder." In the era of "post-truth" (Santaella, 2018), in which emotions and beliefs are the basis of information credibility (Santaella, 2018; França, Stuart & Ribeiro, 2018; Esteves & Sampaio, 2019; Spinelli & Santos, 2018) disinformation finds fertile ground to develop, especially through social media. And in the context of the current Coronavirus pandemic, the danger of fake news to human life is even more evident.

Recent studies show that the pandemic aggravated the problem of disinformation, increasing rumors, stigma, and conspiracy theories, and putting people's health at risk (Islam et al., 2020; Giordani, Donasolo, Ames & Giordani, 2021). Just like the virus, disinformation has spread fast and highlighted the importance of governments and public institutions to look at this problem with urgency. The World Health Organization has stated that the Covid pandemic comes also with the infodemic: "an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find

trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it"¹. This overabundance finds space to grow especially through social media use, which has increased around the world by 20 to 87% during the pandemic (Bin Naeem, Bhatti & Khan, 2020). Research conducted by Bin Naeem et al. shows that "of the 1225 fake news stories analyzed, social media accounted for spreading half (619, 50.5%) of the stories about COVID-19. The other 50% of sources include multiple sources" (2020, p.2). The research stated that professionals and authorities directly involved in finding solutions for the infodemic "should ensure that accurate information is published and disseminated" (2020, p.1).

Based on this reality, this research tried to understand how PSM operators, which have a specific responsibility to promote media literacy among their audiences (Council of Europe, 2012, European Union, 2020²) have been tackling the problem of disinformation through their social networks, the main place where this infodemic has been finding space to grow. Is PSM actively using its social media channels to fight disinformation and educate its audiences? If so, how? We answered these questions through the analysis of posts related to disinformation published on the Facebook and Youtube pages of the PSM operators in Portugal (RTP) and Germany (ZDF). We also presented a theoretical discussion about the challenges PSM has been facing in the digital era and how the promotion of ML initiatives could potentially strengthen the PSM legitimacy in this context.

Research question and goals

Based on the problematic discussed above, this study attempted to reply to one main question:

1. Have PSM operators in Portugal (RTP) and Germany (ZDF) been using their social media networks (Facebook and Youtube) to fight disinformation? If so, how?

With this question in mind, we established two goals for this research:

- ✓ Track the posts developed by RTP and ZDF to help fight disinformation through their Facebook and Youtube channels during the pandemic;

¹ Understanding the infodemic and misinformation in the fight against COVID-19: https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/52052/Factsheet-infodemic_eng.pdf?sequence=16&isAllowed=y

² European Union, 2020. Council conclusions on media literacy in an ever-changing world: <https://bit.ly/3scLrNS>

- ✓ Identify and discuss the main characteristics, differences, and commonalities between the approaches of each one of them.

1. PSM challenges in the digital environment

The transformation caused by the digital revolution brought great challenges for the Public Service Media (formerly called Public Service Broadcasting - PSB), which had already been weakening in Europe since the 1980s with the arrival of private operators, the transmission of the TV signal through new technological formats, in addition to the economic growth and the privatization of goods and services (Fidalgo, 2003).

The fragmentation of audiences, access to new platforms, and on-demand consumption are some of the realities that confront the relevance of a service that, having no competition in broadcasting, is used to produce and promote universal, standardized content. A production solely based on the responsibility of distribution and not on the exchange, partnership, and collaboration with the audience and society as a whole. In other words, a model that no longer fits in the current context.

One of the main challenges that the digital context imposes on PSM is to seek its audiences not as targets, but as partners in the production strategies of its content (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007), promoting a service that is indeed oriented to the demand of its audiences, with productions that are popular and attractive, but still distinct from the commercial offer. Achieving these goals while safeguarding values such as universality, and ensuring social cohesion and innovation in an increasingly multicultural world in which content offerings are extremely varied, segmented, and made available through increasingly modern digital platforms is no simple task, and it is due to these (among other) challenges that the value of PSM has constantly been challenged. Połńska & Beckett (2019) question the relevance of PSM within the context of economic and cultural globalization. "How practical is this aspect of PSM's mission in societies like ours, which are increasingly diverse and divided, and whose current democracies are so problematic? (Połńska & Beckett, 2019, p. 7).

In an article published in 2020 by Ezra Eeman³, Head of the Digital Department at EBU (European Broadcasting Union), the author suggests that to the transition between the traditional public service model and a public service media that is consistent with the

³ Survival skills for the streaming wars. Content Crash – Part 4.: <https://bit.ly/3HcGzFR>

current digital reality to happen, institutions must look at digital platforms as a space that, to be used to its full potential, needs an exclusive, unique strategy, not a replication of the methods used for content distribution in other types of media.

Eeman suggests that digital platforms should (1) be a destination in themselves (rather than a place to repeat the same content broadcast through television, for example); (2) offer differentiated, non-linear programming tailored to online audiences; (3) present curated content; and (4) put audiences at the center, privileging interactions with them and valuing their preferences.

The same article suggests that what the digital context demands from PSM is not just the distribution of the same content adapted to different media, but the development of a planning strategy that arises from the real needs and expectations of audiences, and that results in diverse and specific content for distribution on different platforms, both online and offline. This effort requires a closer relationship between the service and its audience.

1.1. Levels of trust in PSM

Despite the challenges PSM faces today, it is still the most trusted news source in Europe (European Broadcasting Union, 2021; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021). Both PSM in Portugal (RTP) and Germany (ARD and ZDF) are named as the most trusted news outlets in their countries.

Tsfati & Cappella, (2003) define trust as "the expectation that the interaction with the trustee would lead to gains rather than losses" (p. 506). The new media landscape allows for these trustees, who no longer see gains over losses in the interaction with a news brand, to move quickly to a different brand, especially in the digital space, to look for information. These alternative media news outlets, however, are the ones that are most likely to contain and promote disinformation.

Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris & Eisenegger (2019) explain that "Ideally, citizens' trust in the media is closely linked to media operating independently from vested interests (both political and economic) in transparent and free democracies" (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019, p. 3673). The type of media that comes closest to the ideal of independent media is Public Service Media, which declares independence "from political, commercial and other influences and ideologies" as one of its core values (European Broadcasting Union, 2012).

Despite the legitimacy crisis PSM has been facing, it is still seen by the citizens as the most reliable source of information. So how could PSM take advantage of this credibility by using their own online spaces to educate their audiences and fight disinformation?

1.2. Media literacy as a tool for legitimizing a PSM in crisis

Considering the challenges that PSM faces in establishing its value as a service that is indeed relevant to the digital society, and reflecting on the commitment of this service to democratic values, it seems important to think about how ML, which is also committed to goals linked to the consolidation of democracy, can strengthen the value of PSM. By placing itself as a central actor in promoting LM goals, using its credibility with audiences and its content production and dissemination spaces to approach these audiences and co-create with them, the PSM and its mission can take on a new meaning within the digital environment, strengthening its value.

This argument has also been discussed by Radoslavov (2014), who suggests that by fostering media literacy, PSM creates value for its mission. According to the author, media literacy can be seen as a merit good since "increasing media literacy levels for the public consists of a merit for society as a whole rather than for the particular benefit of an individual" (Radoslavov, 2014, p. 207). Commercial broadcasters not being able, or not showing interest in producing content that promotes media literacy, PSM would then be responsible for making up for this lack, guaranteeing society the benefits of a media-educated community and thus strengthening its social value.

The democratic role and the value of the PSM has become especially relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has brought the intensification and acceleration of digitization and challenged PSM ability to adapt and respond to the new demands of the audiences, including an even greater. One of the responses of the European PSM to this challenge was increasing the release of informative content, which had an increase of 22% in March 2020 in comparison to the month before (European Broadcasting Union, 2020, p. 5)⁴. The same EBU report showed that the German PSM (ZDF and ARD) were those chosen by their consumers with the highest level of credibility (86%) in relation to the coverage of the Coronavirus pandemic (European Broadcasting Union, 2020, p. 7).

⁴ Public Service Journalism in the Viral Age. EBU, 2020: https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/strategic/login_only/News_Report_Fast_Forward_PSJ_in_the_Viral_Age.pdf

PSM in Europe presents high levels of trust among their users, and levels are increasing. Despite the rise of these levels, the distrust regarding online content is high, due to the spread of fake news, especially via social media channels⁵.

1.3 Media literacy as a tool to fight disinformation in the post-truth era

The definition of media literacy is not a consensus among researchers. Livingstone, Papaioannou, Grandío & Wijnen (2012) call this attempt at conceptual framing a "battle," a "tension" among scholars in the field. Potter, (2010) refers to the approaches to this field of study as "a large complex patchwork of ideas" (p. 686) and Buckingham, (2003) states that media literacy is far from having a straightforward and drift-free definition.

Despite the different nomenclatures (media literacy, digital literacy, media, and information literacy - MIL) and definitions surrounding the field of media literacy, one of the classic concepts that are still very often referred to when talking about this subject is the one described by Aufderheide, (1993), who defines media literacy as "the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes" (p. 6).

Over time, media literacy has been approached from a protectionist and later from a technological perspective until it reached a more critical approach (Pinto et al., 2011), which seeks to educate citizens about the media and its messages so that they can interpret them critically, make increasingly conscious decisions and participate more actively in the digital space (Buckingham, 2019; Labio-Bernal, Romero-Domínguez & García-Orta, 2020; Sayad, 2019).

Scholars suggest that media literacy should be less focused on individual technical abilities and more oriented to collective purposes (Lunt et al., 2012), contributing to "a shared sense of responsibility in society" (Paris Agenda, 2007⁶). This collective purpose of media literacy, also discussed before by Radoslavov, (2014) is especially relevant when taking into consideration how disinformation, referred to by Colomina, Sánchez Margalef & Young (2021) as "false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted intentionally to cause public harm or make a profit" (p. 2) can put democratic processes, human rights and people's health in danger.

⁵ Trust in Media. EBU, 2021 https://www.ebu.ch/publications/research/login_only/report/trust-in-media

⁶ Paris Agenda or 12 Recommendations For Media Education, 2007: <https://bit.ly/3t2e9jJ>

This has been shown evidently through the Covid pandemic, "which has led to a spike in 'fake news' about hoaxes, pseudoscience and conspiracy theories, thereby breeding distrust in public institutions and putting lives at risk" (Colomina et al., 2021, p. 18). Disinformation has also caused a lot of political disruption around the world. One of the most well-known cases was the American presidential elections in 2016, after which the terms "fake news" and "post-truth" started to become popular due to the discussions about results being influenced by the spread of false information. These happenings and many others around the globe show that "disinformation can serve to confuse or manipulate citizens; create distrust in international norms, institutions or democratically agreed strategies; disrupt elections; or fuel disbelief in key challenges" (Colomina et al., 2021, p. 3).

The risks of disinformation to society have been repeatedly evidenced and are undeniable. But the solution to this problem is in no way obvious or easy to find. Governments, public and private institutions, and scholars around the world propose different solutions to the problem of disinformation, and many of them agree that fighting disinformation requires joint work from different spheres of society (Sayad, 2019).

The Media Literacy Index 2021⁷, which evaluates European's countries' resilience to fake news and post-truth, proposes that "media freedom, quality of education, interpersonal trust and e-participation can (...) be related to the level of resilience of a society to fake news, post-truth and related phenomenon " (p.4). In this index, Germany occupies the 8th position and Portugal the 11th.

Esteves and Sampaio (2019) and other scholars (Barreto & Lopes, 2020; Buckingham, 2019; Sayad, 2019) discuss the relationship between media literacy and disinformation and explain that without media literacy people have a higher tendency to share false information in addition to having a hard time identifying them.

1.4 Consumption of online content, social networks, and initiatives to fight disinformation

The Internet has allowed access to information on a global level and has transformed information consumption habits. Although the classic means of communication still

⁷ Media Literacy Index 2021 Double Trouble: Resilience to Fake News at the Time of Covid-19 Infodemic: <https://bit.ly/36BCPrS>

subsist, social networks have arrived, established themselves among the media, and continue to gain more and more space, presenting a new way to produce, promote, and consume content.

In 2020, for example, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*⁸ pointed social networks as a source of information and highlighted Facebook as the most used social network for this purpose. If on the one hand the benefits of increased and facilitated access to information are undeniable, on the other hand the exposure to this vastness of informational content, especially in the digital environment, is worrisome, creating what some researchers call informational disorder or pollution (Lopes & Bezerra, 2019; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Esteves & Sampaio, 2019), and increasing the spread of false information. Reporting false content and promoting truthful information in a transparent way is a way to protect and advance democracy, and it is in this sense that PSMs should present a particular interest in the issue of combating disinformation.

In Portugal, the Coronavirus pandemic was a milestone in the transformations of online habits. A study entitled “Comunicação e Desinformação”⁹ published in early 2021, demonstrates how the pandemic and the confinement established in mid-March 2020 transformed media consumption habits among the Portuguese population. The research concluded that in all age groups investigated there was an increase in online news consumption.

In 2022, the report produced by OberCom¹⁰ showed that, although television is still considered the main source of information for the Portuguese citizens, especially among the elderly, the Internet is used by 79% of the population to access news, and 19.6% of respondents said they specifically use social networks to get informed.

In Germany, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022¹¹ showed that although news consumption levels are still high, there has been a decline from the levels studied in 2020 during Covid. Also according to this study, Germans are more inclined to pay

⁸ Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2020
<http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/overview-key-findings-2020/>

⁹ Comunicação e Desinformação: <https://medialab.iscte-iul.pt/comunicacao-e-desinformacao/>

¹⁰ OberCom report 2022: https://obercom.pt/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/DNRPT_2022_FINAL_14Jun.pdf

¹¹ Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022
https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf

for online content (14%) and online news consumption has surpassed news consumption through television.

Even though disinformation, considered as false information disseminated with the intention of causing harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), it is a reality in numerous countries around the globe and is fostered by social media tools and social media interactions (Santaella, 2018; Delmazo & Valente, 2018), the strategies that drive it vary according to each country's reality.

According to a report by OberCom 2019¹², Portugal is in a middle position in the disinformation ranking among European Union countries. Even though it is not at the top of this list, the document stresses that this result is a warning for Portugal: disinformation in the country is a reality and its dimension is capable of provoking the manipulation of public opinion. Germany occupies the 4th place in this ranking. A more recent study, from Eurobarometer 2021¹³, found that only 39% of Portuguese and 40% of Germans consider to have encountered disinformation online.

A 2019 study made by Humprecht (2019) that compares fake news in English-speaking and German-speaking countries explains that while in both groups fake news is mostly related to general issues that impact society as a whole, in Germany, fake news is more targeted at immigrants and political institutions. The study also revealed that in Austria and Germany "a substantial part" of fake news is produced by the press itself (journalists, bloggers). The research related this finding to the discussion regarding the so-called "lying press" that emerged from the right-wing populist national party in Germany (Humprecht, 2019). Another discussion promoted by this study and related to this article is the hypothesis that the publication of biased news tends to be lower in countries with a strong Public Media Service, which is the case in Germany. Although the author concludes that this hypothesis can only be partially proven, this relationship can be thought of in other contexts. A paper published by the European Broadcasting Union (European Broadcasting Union) in 2021 that discusses the relationship between PSM and democracy found that "the greater audiences of PSM, the lesser citizens' concern about and perceived exposure to misleading or false information" (European Broadcasting Union, 2021, p. 35). This same study showed that PSMs that receive

¹² OberCom 2019: https://obercom.pt/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FakeNews_OberCom_2019.pdf

¹³ Eurobarometer: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2263>

appropriate funding are also less exposed to fake news and, regarding the spread of fake news by digital platforms, countries with stronger PSMs show greater transparency in the dissemination of their content. The study concludes that "the presence of well-equipped PSM thus seems to contribute to higher editorial standards (European Broadcasting Union, 2021, p. 37)".

Both the German and Portuguese political landscape, as well as in other countries, suffers from the firing of disinformation. The campaign period for the parliamentary elections in 2021¹⁴ and the campaign for the 2019 parliamentary elections in Portugal were marked by the circulation of false information and hate speech (Cardoso, Narciso, Moreno & Palma, 2019), especially on social media, showing that disinformation can also be used as a political strategy.

In Germany, one of the initiatives developed by the government and that has been most discussed by academics and media professionals is NetzDG, a law implemented in 2018 that holds responsible and fines digital platforms with more than 2 million users, such as Youtube and Instagram, for the propagation of "illegal content." The aim of this law is to combat hate speech disseminated online, however the law has been the target of much criticism claiming that this is an initiative that limits free speech. Despite not dealing with disinformation directly, this law, as well as other German initiatives, is a way for the German government to pressure large digital platforms to be more transparent about how they regulate and moderate their content¹⁵, which can indirectly contribute to the fight against disinformation.

In Portugal, an initiative worth mentioning was the "Portuguese Charter of Human Rights in the digital age"¹⁶ that came into force in May 2021, and which, among other points, highlights the need for protection of the individual against disinformation in the digital environment. This charter, which is assigned to the Law n.º 27/2021, indicates, for example, that entities that promote disinformation can be reported to ERC (Entidade Reguladora para Comunicação Social) and that the state supports (official) fact-checkers and the creation of quality seals produced by reliable institutions. In Portugal there are

¹⁴ Period for the parliamentary elections in Germany: <https://observador.pt/2021/09/18/alemanha-quantidade-e-agressividade-de-fake-news-aumentam-na-campanha-eleitoral/>

¹⁵ Disinformation: The German Approach and What to Learn From It: <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/analysis/disinformation-german-approach-and-what-learn-it>

¹⁶ Portuguese Charter of Human Rights in the digital age: <http://milobs.pt/carta-portuguesa-de-direitos-humanos-na-era-digital-em-vigor-a-partir-de-julho/>

two fact-checkers, and in Germany there are four. Like the NetzDG in Germany, the "Portuguese Charter of Human Rights in the digital age" has also received a lot of criticism and has been accused of being an instrument of censorship.

2. Methodological approach

To find the answers to the questions proposed in this research, we chose to do a documentary analysis of the posts focused on disinformation published by the German (ZDF) and Portuguese (RTP) PSMs on their social media channels, specifically on Youtube and Facebook. The goal of this study was to find out the differences, similarities, and peculiarities of the projects developed by the two public operators to understand the approaches of each one of them regarding educating their audiences and fighting disinformation.

The methodology used to reach this goal was the case-oriented approach, developed through a comparative case study of commonalities (Ragin, 1999) between RTP and ZDF. Ragin (1999) explains that this method is mostly used for a research design with a small number of cases to understand these cases (not necessarily building a correlation between them), focusing on the question of "how" (as in: How does it happen?)” (Ragin, 1999, p. 1142), and not “why”. Since this research is based on a descriptive analysis, dedicated to the documental analysis of two case studies, there was no construction of a hypothesis.

The choice of the cases to be studied in a study always depends on the research’s goals and ambitions. In the case of this analysis, we were interested in understanding how two public operators that, despite having their specificities, are ruled by the same guidelines and recommendations at the European Union level, present initiatives towards fighting disinformation to their audiences through social media. The operators chosen for this study were RTP (Portugal) and ZDF (Germany). These operators were chosen because they are part of a wider research that has been developed within the scope of a Phd, and which studies both operators withing the context of the responsibility of PSM in the promotion of media literacy.

2.1. Social media channels choice and research period

Facebook has been the most used social media channel in Europe, with an average of 80% of use¹⁷. Despite the high popularity of this and other social media networks, citizens' trust in them has been in decline since 2015 in Europe¹⁸. A survey from the Oxford University's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2020)¹⁹ showed that social media is considered the main source of disinformation, and Facebook specifically is the one platform that "is seen as the main channel for spreading false information". The survey also showed that Youtube is the second channel, with a much less significant percentage (6%) when compared to Facebook, which people are most concerned about in terms of disinformation spread. Since these two media channels were the ones pointed out as the main sources of social media disinformation, they were the ones selected for this research.

Following this 2020 study, a 2022 Obercom report²⁰ highlighted the large space that social networks have occupied as news disseminators in Portugal. The report pointed out that "social networks are taking an increasingly predominant role in the news diets of the Portuguese, representing a substantial slice of news consumption through the Internet" (OberCom, 2022, p. 93). Facebook is used by 75.9% of people who use the Internet in Portugal, with 48.7% using it to consume news. Although Facebook is still at the top of the podium, the percentage of individuals who seek this platform to consume news has decreased since 2015. Following Facebook is Youtube, with this platform being accessed by 67.7% of respondents for general use, and 24.5% for news consumption (OberCom, 2022, p. 36). In Germany, according to Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022, Facebook also appears as the social network most accessed by respondents, being 41% of this access for general reasons, and 17% for news consumption. Next is WhatsApp, and third is Youtube, which is accessed by 52% of respondents for general reasons and 14% for news consumption. Since Whatsapp is a platform that did not fit the objectives and questions designed for this project, since it is not a platform for public dissemination of content, but rather an application to exchange messages, and considering that Facebook and Youtube appeared at the top of the list of

¹⁷ Social Media Stats Europe (December 2020 to December 2021): <https://bit.ly/3t5N9zI>

¹⁸ EBU, 2021. Trust in Media 2021: <https://bit.ly/3hd4wJI>

¹⁹ Executive Summary and Key Findings of the 2020 Report: <https://bit.ly/353UCYj>

²⁰ OberCom Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Digital News Report Portugal 2022 https://obercom.pt/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/DNRPT_2022_FINAL_14Jun.pdf

the main social networks used both in Portugal and in Germany, these were the two networks chosen for this study.

The research period of this study was established taking into consideration the great increase of disinformation spread around social media during the Covid-19 pandemic, as previously discussed. Based on the infodemic reality and the interest in tracking how the PSM operators have been dealing with this reality, the research period established for this study was from the first month of lockdown in Europe, in March 2020, until the end of November 2021.

2.2. Data collection

In order to develop the document analysis, achieve the goals and answer the research questions set for this study, four main steps were taken during data collection:

- ✓ First, we looked for the official Facebook and Youtube pages of each public operator (RTP and ZDF) from their respective official websites;
- ✓ Then we went through other pages that also belong to the public operators. (See the list of pages on charts 2 and 3, in the Results section);
- ✓ In the third phase we used the search engines on RTP and ZDF's Facebook and Youtube pages to search for results using the keywords "fake news" and "disinformation".

Analysis material for this study was found between 30/12/2021 and 04/01/2022 and the results of this research were filtered based on the following criterias:

Inclusion criterias:

- ✓ Posts that would directly tackle the issue of disinformation or fake news in the mentioned social media channels;
- ✓ Informative posts that would clarify issues surrounded by doubts, rumors, or conspiracy theories;
- ✓ Posts published between March of 2020 and November of 2021.

Considering that media literacy promotion and related content need to be "instrumental" or "critical-reflexive" (Martín, 2008, p. 113) and also in view of the understanding that the fight against disinformation should be done in an objective and clear way, two types of content were excluded from the analysis:

Exclusion criterias:

- ✓ News pieces, because they are a specific niche of information dissemination and do not fit within posts specifically developed to fight disinformation;
- ✓ Satire posts, for not being a form of clear and safe information, but a type of entertainment that might confuse audiences.

After collecting and filtering the results, some indicators were established for the development of the analysis. According to Quivy & Campenhoudt, (2005), indicators are "easily observable features" (p.112) in an investigation. Based on the goals set for this study, we established the following indicators of analysis:

<i>Chart 1. Indicators of analysis</i>	
Posts Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Posting date ✓ Content type (photo, vídeo, live, series, documentaries, etc.)
Target audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Age group (when specified in the platform)
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Discussed theme

3. Results

In total 68 posts were found on RTP and ZDF's Facebook and Youtube pages linked to disinformation. Charts 2 and 3 present the pages of each public operator (RTP and ZDF) where analysis material was found. The main results related to the indicators "posting date", "age group", "content-type" and "discussed theme" were presented in text form in the next paragraphs describing the results for each platform.

<i>Chart 2: list of pages on Facebook</i>					
Facebook – RTP			Facebook - ZDF		
Webpage	Likes	Followers	Webpage	Likes	Followers
Ensina RTP	17.798	18.886	ZDF Volle Kanne	104.821	148.935
RTP	566.741	595.205	ZDF ZOOM	35.658	40.223
RTP2	286.325	318.465	37 Grad	194.533	291.749
RTP MADEIRA	222.776	247.739	ZDF	723.741	751.358
RTP PLAY	22.685	49.514	ZDF heute	1.283.507	1.502.687
RTP1	418.183	441.821	-	-	-

Chart 3: list of pages on Youtube							
Youtube - RTP				Youtube - ZDF			
Channel	Since	subscribers	Views (all vídeos)	Channel	Since	subscribers	Views (all vídeos)
RTP	March 13th, 2006	539.000	486.109.261	ZDFheute Nachrichten	August 5th, 2019	542.000	297.065.806
-	-	-	-	Scobel	September 13th, 2019	101.000	5.794.436

3.1 RTP

3.1.1 Facebook

The results on RTP's Facebook page included eighteen posts, eleven from the year 2021 and seven from the year 2020. Most of the posts, 13 of them, promote the television programming and do not constitute content created especially for the social network. Based on the analysis of the indicators described above we came up with the following results:

Chart 4: Facebook RTP	
Target audience:	✓ From the selected posts, only one directly indicates the target audience, which is the post on the page Ensina RTP called: "Do you know what "fake news" is?" The post is aimed at primary, middle, and high school students;
Content-type:	✓ The results show that the theme of disinformation was discussed through Facebook lives and posts about series, documentaries, and TV and radio programs:

Themes:

1. Predominance for general topics within the disinformation theme itself, such as: Fake news on the internet and the evils of disinformation, in the post announcing the "Cautionary Show" ("Programa Cautelar") from 04/06/2021 or

the debate about conspiracy theories in the post announcing the program "Is it or isn't it" ("É ou não é")? Posted on 02/02/2021;

2. Posts encouraging reflection on the impact of lies on society, narrating historical facts, such as the post promoting the series "The Greatest Lies in History";

3. Post promoting a campaign about credible information in journalism called "Nem tudo é o que parece. Prefira sempre JORNALISMO" ("Not everything is what it seems. Always prefer JOURNALISM") posted on 30/05/2020;

4. Post from 14/06/2021 discussing the "Charter of Human Rights for the Digital Age", implemented in the country in mid-July 2021. The post proposes interaction with the audience, posing questions such as "How will it be possible to protect citizens from demagoguery and manipulation online? Will it be possible to fight lies and disinformation without the risk of censorship?";

5. Live about Covid 19 on the radio channel Antena 1. The live, called "Conspiracy Theories", aimed to discuss how and why these theories arise and multiply, posted on 02/04/2021;

6. Post from 25/08/2021 about an episode of the show "Impatience of the heart" in which disinformation is discussed from the perspective of psychologists.



Figure 1: Print from the post of 25/08/2021 about an episode of the show "Impatience of the heart"

3.1.2 Youtube

Only three Youtube videos from RTP were included, two of them from the year 2021 and one from 2020. The first video is a teaser from the national TV series "A Rede" ("The Network"). The second and third videos are parts of the, also national, "Programa Cautelar". The videos have a short description about what they are about and links to other official RTP pages such as the website, twitter, and RTP PLAY. Other features of RTP's Youtube channel can be seen below:

Chart 5: Youtube RTP	
Target audience:	✓ Information not available on the page;
Content-type:	✓ The videos included a teaser, an educational, informative piece, and an interview.

Themes:

1. The first video, posted on 07/10/2020, is a one-minute teaser about the TV series "A Rede", which is focused on topics about politics and social networks. The series is defined by RTP as "a cyber-series between fiction and documentary about communication in the time of networks";
2. The second video, posted on 07/06/2021, is about one minute long, from "Programa Cautelar" ("Cautionary Show"), with tips on how to fight disinformation, such as the importance of checking the source of the information before sharing, being careful with sensationalist headlines, and denouncing websites that promote false information;
3. The third video, also posted on 07/06/2021 and from "Programa Cautelar", is a six minute long interview with the current President of Portugal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, about fake news, their risks for the country, and the importance of the program.

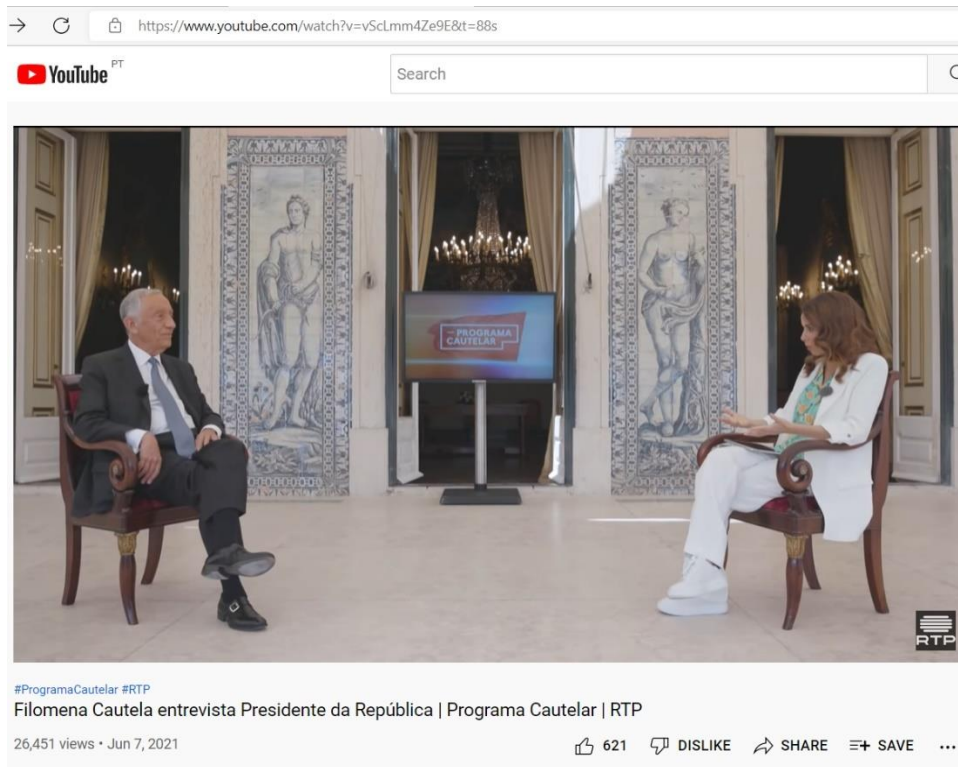


Figure 2: Print from the video posted on 07/06/2021 from “Programa Cautelar”

3.2 ZDF

3.2.1 Facebook

A total of 29 posts from ZDF's Facebook page were included. 18 from 2021 and 11 from 2020. Although most of the posts found on ZDF's Facebook page were publications to promote the TV programming, it was clear that ZDF also creates specific content for the Facebook page. Based on the indicators analysis, we collected the following data:

Chart 6: Facebook ZDF	
Target audience:	✓ Information not available on the page;
Content-type:	✓ Documentary, program episodes, movies and interactive, educational posts;

Themes:

1. The subjects covered vary, ranging from conspiracy theories, freedom of speech, and politics to climate change. On the subject of politics, for example,

there was the release of the documentary "Angriff auf unsere Demokratie" ("Attack to our democracy"), posted on 01/09/2021, reinforcing the importance of quality journalism in elections, as well as the release of the national TV series "Deutscher" ("German"), posted on 12/09/2021, about what it would be like if a right-wing populist party took power in Germany;

2. Despite the plurality of themes, there is a higher incidence of content on topics related to Coronavirus: virus transmission and especially vaccination. The number of posts on this theme was almost the same between 2020 and 2021, with 2020 having only one more post. Posts from 2020 were mainly focused on the explaining of Coronavirus and fake news, while posts from 2021 were mainly focused on the vaccine and conspiracy theories;

3. On 23/03/2020 ZDF released a documentary with the description "Coronavirus is turning our lives upside down. Many people are unsure. And right now, a lot of fake news is spreading on the internet." On 17/11/2021, ZDF posted a short video with the Prime Minister reinforcing the need for vaccination to fight the pandemic;

4. The results show that many posts advertise the television programming, but we also observed that there are interactive and educational posts designed for the social network itself, such as the post of 20/10/2020 about Covid transmission. The post allows one to swipe the screen of their phone and understand interactively the importance of wearing masks during the pandemic. In another interactive post from 14/02/2021 about the Covid19 RNA vaccine, it is possible to swipe the screen on the mobile device and understand how the vaccine is made and how it protects the body from the virus;

5. Conspiracy theories were also the subject of a post on 29/4/2021 promoting a documentary in which psychologists discussed these theories.

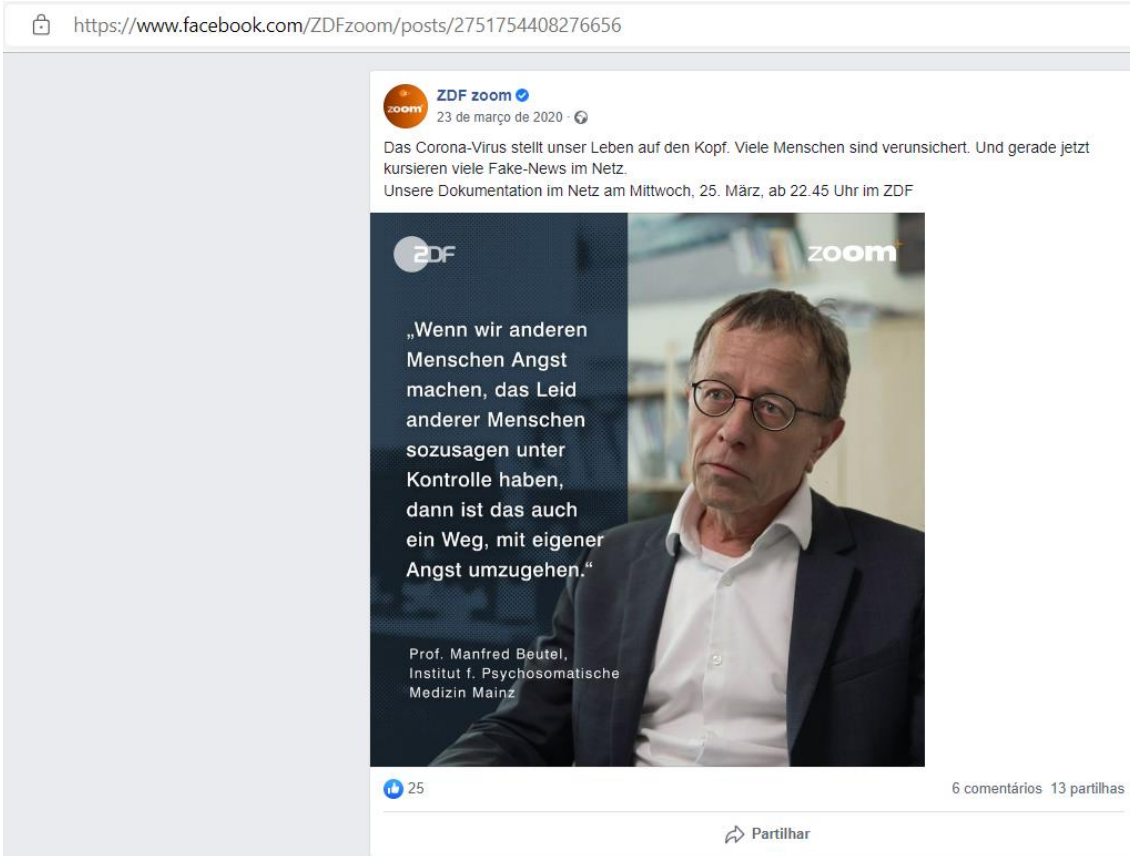


Figure 3: Print from the post of 23/03/2020 - "Coronavirus is turning our lives upside down. [...]"

3.2.3 Youtube

A total of 17 videos from the ZDF YouTube page were included, eleven of them from 2021 and six from 2020. The descriptions of the videos posted are detailed and extensive, fully indicating the theme and content of the video. Other characteristics were noted as shown below:

Chart 7: Youtube ZDF	
Target audience:	✓ Information not available on the page;
Content-type:	✓ The videos include episodes of TV series and shows, as well as educational pieces;

Themes:

1. Increased focus on the Coronavirus issue, especially on the vaccination issue, such as the 12/10/2021 video on Vaccinated versus Non-vaccinated people and the January/2021 video on Covid19 fact-checking;
2. Topics such as conspiracy theories, media and politics, and the importance of science and hate speech in the digital space were also addressed. Some examples are the 23/01/2021 video "Trump and Twitter and what does this mean for free speech?" and the 06/15/2021 video "How do we deal with those who believe in conspiracy theories?";
3. Disinformation is also addressed from the perspective of psychology, for example in the 10/12/2020 video "Vaccination: The Big Fear - Explained Psychologically".

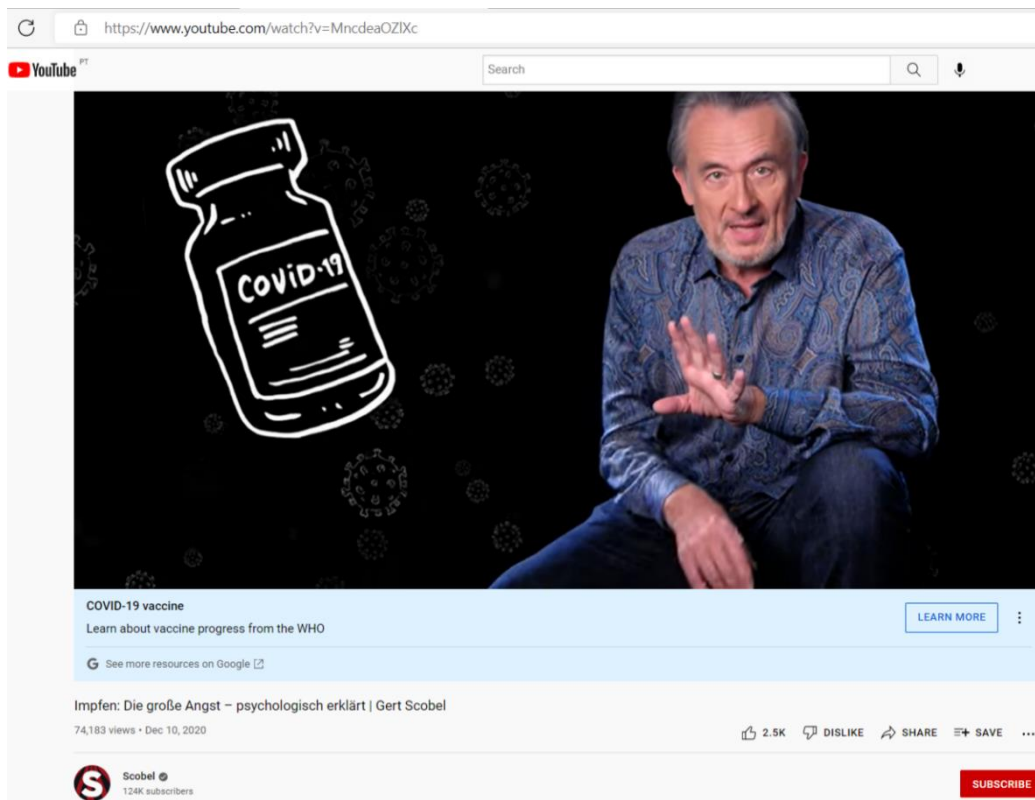


Figure 4: Print from the video posted on 10/12/2020 - "Vaccination: The Big Fear - Explained Psychologically".

4. Discussion

This study set out to investigate whether and how PSM in Portugal and Germany (RTP and ZDF) have used their Facebook and Youtube pages to fight disinformation. The research was developed based on the argument, discussed in the theoretical framework, that by educating their audiences to navigate the digital environment critically, thus promoting media literacy, PSM could respond to social needs linked to the advancement

of democracy, and could, therefore, increase their value and legitimacy in the digital era (Radoslavov, 2014).

The results of this study showed that both RTP and ZDF present ways to fight or draw attention to the dangers of disinformation through Facebook and Youtube. But, despite ZDF few interactive and educational posts designed for the social network itself, posts made by both RTP and ZDF focus mostly on promoting their television programming. This reality of promotion rather than the production of original and specific content for social media is quite different from the scenario proposed by Ezra Eeman (2020)²¹, who argues that a PSM that is aligned with the needs of the digital world and that is relevant to its audiences in this present time must present an "exclusive, unique strategy, not a replication of the methods used for content distribution in other types of media," as well as "be a destination in itself (rather than a place to repeat the same content broadcast through television, for example)".

We acknowledge that this study is focused on only two social networks and that the keywords, the period, and the method of analysis chosen are not broad enough for an in-depth analysis of the social network strategy of the two operators as a whole. However, within what was observed, we can conclude that the posts on YouTube and Facebook related to disinformation are limited, and specific and do not seem to be part of an action plan that seeks to fight disinformation within the social media channels. Especially on RTP, posts are published mostly to promote their shows in television programming.

Within the topic of disinformation, Covid, and especially vaccination, was the most covered subject by ZDF. This may be related to the vaccination rate in Germany which, by December 2021 had only 67% of the population vaccinated with the two doses²². This same subject of vaccination was treated with less incidence by RTP. That can also be associated with the vaccination rate in Portugal. By December 2021 the country had already 87% of the population vaccinated with the two doses²³.

²¹ Survival skills for the streaming wars. Content Crash – Part 4: <https://bit.ly/3HcGzfR>

²² “Germany declares war” on anti-vaccine people: <https://bit.ly/3sf5U4T>

²³ Vaccination in Portugal: <https://bit.ly/3HeqVRk>

The topic of "conspiracy theories" about Coronavirus was also addressed by both RTP and ZDF. Conspiracy theories, according to (Santaella, 2018) were fostered in the post-truth era and became major issues during the pandemic (Cardoso et al., 2020).

It was also observed that few posts discuss the basic skills to identify disinformation, an ability that according to the study by Jones-Jang, Mortensen & Liu (2021) is essential for audience learning. One of the few posts that focused on this matter was a YouTube video and a Facebook post on RTP titled "What are fake news?". ZDF addressed the issue indirectly in a Facebook video that exemplifies the experience of companies that have invested in digital skills training, including how to detect fake news, for their employees.

The topic of disinformation was also addressed from the perspective of psychology. This can be related to the literature on post-truth that states that this era is intrinsically connected with emotions (Cooke, 2018; Santaella, 2018; Spinelli & Santos, 2018; Esteves & Sampaio, 2019). For this reason, it is necessary to understand, from the perspective of emotions, how people deal with false information, and conspiracy theories and, most importantly, why they accredit them.

In terms of engagement, ZDF is the operator that, besides stimulating more audience participation in the posts, has a higher amount of likes, comments, and shares on Facebook. On Youtube, RTP has a higher amount of views, but the channel has been active since 2006 while the channels belonging to ZDF are active only since 2019.

Both ZDF and RTP have used influential public figures to address issues related to disinformation. RTP, for example, published a YouTube video about "Programa Cautelar" with the current president of Portugal being interviewed about the importance of discussing the topic of disinformation, and ZDF published a Facebook video of the prime minister reinforcing the importance of vaccination and the concern about anti-vaccine people. Using public figures to address these issues can be a way to try to give credibility to the information and draw the audience's attention to the importance of the content being addressed.

5. Conclusions

In response to the question proposed for this paper (Have PSM operators in Portugal (RTP) and Germany (ZDF) been using their social media networks (Facebook and Youtube) to fight disinformation? If so, how?), we can state that yes, RTP and ZDF

have been using their Facebook and Youtube pages to address the issue of disinformation. The two public operators do this in different ways: through documentaries, series, debates, lives, and informational videos. The two PSMs use both platforms, for the most part, to advertise their television programming. ZDF is the operator that has shown to develop, even if occasionally, specific content for Facebook and Youtube. The results showed a prevalence of themes related to the Coronavirus, such as vaccination, conspiracy theories, and fact-checking of information about the virus.

Based on these results, we can say that both ZDF's and RT'S Facebook and Youtube are not being used to their full potential when it comes to producing content to combat disinformation. RTP showed low levels of engagement in relation to ZDF. The low interaction may be because perhaps the social media channel audiences are not being treated as a specific audience, but as if they were an extension of traditional media audiences, such as television. We understand that it is urgent for media to appropriate digital spaces as a way to promote media literacy (Jorge, Britos & Santos, 2016), and in order for PSM to approach and be seen by audiences as a truly relevant service also within social media and achieve legitimacy among their audiences, it is necessary not only to offer these audiences education, but also to educate them in the language and format from which they can, and want to learn.

Despite the choice of keywords widely used by the media, we agree that the search option with the terms "fake news" and "disinformation" is an evident limitation of this study. That is because, eventually, other publications that did not necessarily present the referred terms may have been excluded from the search, making it impossible to have a comprehensive view of the initiatives proposed by both public operators. For this reason, we suggest as an indication for future work the inclusion of these and other key words for data collection.

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