IMPACT OF POLITICALLY MOTIVATED FAKE NEWS ON PUBLIC OPINION: A CASE STUDY OF DELIBERATE DISSEMINATION OF DISINFORMATION

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Abstract

The contemporary world faces a significant challenge in combating the proliferation of fake news, a term with varying interpretations among scholars. At its core, fake news refers to factually incorrect information lacking verifiable sources or citations and may serve propaganda or clickbait purposes. In recent years, fake news has gained momentum, particularly through social media platforms, creating a broader context of misinformation and disinformation. This paper conducts a case study analysis of the "Babale" media narrative to examine how politically motivated fake news has wielded a substantial impact on public opinion. This influence has manifested in confusion and heightened aggression in communication and, in certain instances, has been utilized to incite hatred toward the ruling party. The deliberate intent to sway public opinion through this case underscores the media's susceptibility to becoming a "vehicle for disseminating fake news" and its role in deepening the divide within public discourse. The central inquiry of this paper revolves around the effects of fake news on public opinion and its subsequent implications for social and political relationships. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data, along with a review of relevant literature in the field, has contributed to the formulation of the main hypothesis. The core proposition posits

that fake news detrimentally influences individuals on a personal level and extends its impact on society as a whole. This influence is typified by an escalation in communicative aggression, particularly when such disinformation is produced by political entities. Furthermore, the audience's or commentators' responses to one another exacerbate the existing discourse.

Keywords: fake news, disinformation, public opinion, media, online audience

1. INTRODUCTION

The "Babale" case exemplifies a prominent illustration of how political actors can orchestrate deceptive events, leveraging the individual and mass media, and disseminate fake news within the realm of public opinion. In the contemporary digital age, propagation using such misleading narratives often transpires through the medium of new websites and web portals, strategically established in the lead-up to significant events, notably elections. The potential to fabricate and promote such news has demonstrated its capability to intrude upon pivotal processes, sometimes culminating in unprecedented ramifications, including the destabilization of a nation's government (Snyder, 2018). The global prevalence of fake news, a practice that has thrived alongside traditional media like radio and television, can be traced back to its historical roots, particularly within communist societies. In these contexts, the media was harnessed as a vehicle to promote both news and incitement by fabricating stories about socialist heroes and warriors who purportedly made noble sacrifices for grand causes. These deceptive narratives emanated from media outlets controlled by the governing communist party, personalizing news inextricably linked to untruths about the communist party's societal accomplishments (Godole, 2014). The use of media for the dissemination of deceptive narratives is not limited to any specific political or geographical context and is not unique to any particular region, as illustrated by the "Babale" case that gained notoriety in Albanian media outlets. The case revolved around allegations that the brother of the former Minister of the Interior engaged in discussions with a person concerning illicit drug dealings. Upon scrutiny, it was revealed that the audio recording did not feature the brother's minister's voice; instead, it constituted a falsified fabrication where an individual identified as "collaborator x" falsely alluded to a fictitious partnership with the brother of the minister for drug trafficking from Albania to Italy. Consequently, investigations were launched to examine the events surrounding this incident. In this contemporary instance, political actors sought to exploit media platforms to fabricate and distribute a false narrative, showcasing the persistent challenges associated with disinformation campaigns in various forms and settings. This example underscores the enduring relevance

of understanding and countering deceptive narratives and their impact on media, politics, and public opinion.

The new media platforms for public opinion communication are susceptible to the propagation of unverified and misleading information, often accepted as truth by a global audience. This contemporary era has been described as a "post-truth situation", wherein individuals are collectively exposed to illusions, myths, untruths, desires, ideologies, passions, and collective sentiments rather than verified, professionally authenticated facts. A prevailing belief is that in the digital media landscape, this illusionary content spreads more rapidly than the truth (Tufekci, 2018). Moreover, it has been experimentally demonstrated that audiences exhibit a greater proclivity for content that is untrue, sensational, or mythologized, as opposed to scientifically grounded information (Postman, 1985). A cursory examination of prime-time television programming reveals that political opinion-based programs significantly outnumber those dedicated to the dissemination of scientific knowledge. Hence, the term "world-known fact" may paradoxically signify an unambiguous and self-evident fact. However, its status as a "known fact" does not preclude its being contested by segments of the populace (Atske, 2022). In the realm of two-step flow theory, the notion of "social proof" implies that when an event or idea is held to be true by a multitude of people, it stands a greater chance of being perceived as factual and accurate (Bugini, 2018).

Nevertheless, the term "world-known fact" carries inherent contradictions, reflecting a paradox while also remaining open to interpretation. The verification of news cannot hinge on mass opinion but rather should rely on the meticulous work of fact-checking experts and evidence management professionals. The erosion of expertise and the proliferation of fake news have contributed to the devaluation of knowledge (Nichols, 2017). Also, individuals who lack direct contact with the events reported by the media tend to shape their beliefs based on their preferences rather than an objective understanding of reality. In the contemporary landscape of mass communication, which receives a plethora of information from global media outlets, collective perception tends to be amorphous and shaped by an incomplete grasp of facts (Lippman, 1922).

1.1 Main Objectives and the Significance of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to comprehensively investigate the influence of politically motivated fake news on public opinion. By conducting a case study analysis of the "Babale" media narrative, the research aims to elucidate how such disinformation can significantly shape public perception and behavior. This study seeks to identify and analyze the various manifestations of the impact of fake news, particularly in terms of creating confusion and heightened aggression in communication. By doing so, it aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how fake news can disrupt public discourse. Another crucial objective is to evaluate the role of the media in facilitating the dissemination of fake news, especially when it is politically

motivated. The study intends to shed light on the media's susceptibility to being used as a conduit for such disinformation. In the end, the study aims to explore how the influence of fake news on public opinion affects broader social and political relationships. It seeks to uncover whether the incitement of hatred toward a ruling party, as exemplified in the "Babale" case, contributes to increased polarization and division within society.

This study holds considerable significance in several key aspects:

→ In the era of the digital age and information age, the proliferation of fake news has become a pressing concern. This study addresses a contemporary challenge by delving into the mechanisms through which politically motivated fake news influences public opinion.

→ By analyzing the role of the media in disseminating fake news, the study contributes to the discourse on media literacy. It highlights the importance of critical media consumption and fact-checking in an age where misinformation abounds.

→ The study's exploration of the implications of fake news on social and political relationships offers insights into the dynamics of contemporary societies. It aids in understanding how divisive narratives can affect the social fabric and political climate.

→ The findings of this research may inform policy development and countermeasures to combat the spread of fake news. Understanding the impact of politically motivated disinformation can lead to more effective strategies for mitigating its influence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The intentional propagation of politically motivated disinformation represents a formidable threat to public opinion, the ramifications of which are explicable through the analytical frameworks of several prominent communication theories. The strategic dissemination of fake news enables actors with political agendas to exert influence over the public's salient cognitive cues, thereby shaping the collective perception of significant political events and figures (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The implications of this orchestrated framing resonate with Entman's (1993) conceptualization of media framing, wherein politically motivated misinformation strategically structures narratives to impact public interpretation and discourse.

Zollmann and Matthes (2017) argue that the inherent human propensity to gravitate toward information aligned with pre-existing beliefs becomes a salient factor in the risk assessment of politically motivated fake news. The theory underscores the potential polarization within information consumption, fostering insular informational ecosystems. Building upon this, Noelle-Neumann (1974) accentuates the risk of stifled dissent within public discourse as a consequence of the fear of social isolation. This theory posits that individuals, cognizant of the prevailing majority opinion, may be deterred from

expressing dissenting views, thus contributing to the perpetuation of politically motivated misinformation within societal discourse.

Furthermore, Festinger (1957) elucidates the psychological implications of politically motivated fake news. He examines the discomfort experienced by individuals when confronted with conflicting information, prompting cognitive adjustments to mitigate dissonance. This cognitive maneuvering can manifest as either outright rejection of misinformation or intricate cognitive acrobatics to reconcile it with pre-existing beliefs, both of which underscore the manipulative potential of fake news. Simultaneously, Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain how politically motivated misinformation strategically exploits group dynamics, exacerbating social divisions. By targeting specific social identities and accentuating intergroup distinctions, politically motivated misinformation engenders societal discord, thereby jeopardizing the cohesion integral to democratic societies.

The rapid dissemination of false information on social media platforms highlights the role of politically motivated fake news in shaping public perceptions and the challenges of countering it (Pennycook and Rand, 2018). Examining the intricacies of modern political information dissemination, it becomes evident that fake news and disinformation have wrought significant disruption within conventional media structures. Also, in the digital age, the prevalence of political misinformation and conspiracy theories has become a prominent concern, with their potential to influence public perceptions and beliefs taking center stage. This phenomenon underscores the substantial impact of fake news on exacerbating political polarization and shaping public opinion within the context of modern media landscapes (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler, 2020). In response to these challenges, there is a pressing need for a thorough comprehension of these phenomena and the formulation of strategies aimed at alleviating their adverse effects on journalism and public sentiment (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018). Fake news poses real challenges, with the media having a vital role in shaping public opinion and safeguarding the public from the risk of being manipulated (Hanson, 2016). Fake news has emerged as a substantial challenge to modern journalism, posing a considerable threat to the integrity of news reporting and public opinion formation. False information can travel faster and reach more people than true information, emphasizing the potential for politically motivated disinformation to influence public views (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018). Furthermore, disinformation can be used as a strategic weapon in modern conflicts, and politically motivated fake news can influence not only public opinion but also geopolitical dynamics (Giles, 2019). An additional spectrum of fake news is revealed during or in upcoming political elections, where politically motivated disinformation can affect electoral outcomes and public trust (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Moreover, the use of social media for political mobilization, which often includes the dissemination of politically motivated fake news, can shape public perceptions and behaviors (Woolley and Guilbeault, 2017). A matter of concern is the echo chambers on Facebook, which expose like-minded individuals to politically biased content, including fake news, with potential consequences for shaping public opinion

(Flaxman, Goel, and Rao, 2016). Moreover, echo chambers not only expose individuals to politically biased content but can also contribute to reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and isolating individuals from diverse perspectives, further underscoring their potential impact on the formation of public opinion.

Examining the risks associated with politically motivated fake news, the study conducted by Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) delves into strategies for correcting misinformation, including politically motivated false information. It also addresses the inherent challenges of effectively mitigating the impact of such misinformation on public opinion. In their study, they propose a range of strategies for correcting misinformation, including politically motivated fake news. These strategies encompass carefully framing corrections to align with individuals' existing beliefs, utilizing visual aids for clarity, providing explicit warnings about the falsehood, leveraging expert sources for credibility, and employing repetition to reinforce accurate information, all aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of corrections in the face of deeply ingrained misinformation.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology comprises several key components:

1. **Qualitative Interviews with Editors in Chiefs of Online Media:** These interviews serve as a qualitative exploration of the editorial decision-making processes and practices surrounding the dissemination of news articles, with a particular focus on the "Babale" case. Through these interviews, valuable insights into editorial standards and news selection criteria are gathered, shedding light on the role of media organizations in the propagation of politically motivated fake news.

2. **Monitoring and Analysis of 154 News Articles:** The research methodology incorporates a quantitative dimension that entails the systematic monitoring and analysis of 154 news articles concerning the "Babale" case. These articles are sourced from five distinct online media platforms, including BalkanWeb, CNA.al, Newsbomb.al, Syri.Net, and Dosja.al. This comprehensive analysis offers a multifaceted view of the dissemination of politically motivated fake news across various online media outlets. It provides valuable empirical data to evaluate the extent and scope of the impact of such misinformation on public opinion.

3. **Analysis of Public Comments:** To ascertain the influence of politically motivated fake news on public opinion, the methodology entails an examination of public comments within the context of news reporting on the "Babale" case. A total of 1791 online media comments were gathered during the initial week following the release of these news articles, spanning May 17, 2018, to May 24, 2018. These comments were subjected to a rigorous categorization process based on three primary criteria: the tone, or the level of aggressiveness expressed in communication; the credibility toward the published news; and the

credibility toward the media organizations disseminating the news. This analytical approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how politically motivated fake news influences public sentiment and perceptions, both regarding the news content and the media entities involved.

4. **Integration with Literature Review:** The methodology is deeply integrated with a thorough literature review. This fusion of empirical data collection and the scholarly foundation provided by existing research in the field ensures the academic rigor and relevance of the research. The methodology is aligned with established research practices, grounding it in the broader academic discourse surrounding the impact of fake news on public opinion.

This multifaceted methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative components, is thoughtfully designed to address the research objectives of exploring the ramifications of politically motivated fake news on public opinion within the specific context of the "Babale" case. It conforms to established research standards while also offering a holistic and data-driven approach to the investigation.

Table. 1 *Number of Monitored News and of Comments in the Online Media*

Online media	Number of news articles	Number of comments
BalkanWeb	31	413
CNA.al	25	252
NewsBomb.al	29	346
Syri.net	51	643
Dosja.al	18	137
Total:	**154**	**1791**

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In recent years, Albania's political landscape has witnessed a growing trend toward polarization, a phenomenon that has left an indelible mark on public discourse and the perceptions of citizens. The intensifying political divide has not only shaped the way politics is viewed but has also deepened the partisan ideologies held by individuals aligned with their respective political parties. Amidst this backdrop of increasing disparities within the public, the "Babale" case emerged as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced in maintaining media professionalism and upholding rigorous standards in news dissemination. It laid bare the vulnerability of the media to the entrapment of disinformation, shedding light on the critical role played by media organizations in the broader context of public opinion formation.

4.1 Analyzing the "Babale" Case: Phases of Dissemination

The analysis of this case reveals several distinct phases in the media narrative, as well as its profound consequences:

→ *Phase 1: Initial Dissemination*

The case originated with an audio recording leaked by journalist Jetmir Olldashi. The recording was subsequently published by Ervin Salianji, a deputy of the Democratic Party. At this stage, the alleged content of the audio was presented as a legitimate investigation into illicit activities involving Agron Xhafaj, the brother of the former Minister of Interior, and Albert Veliu, the witness.

→ *Phase 2: Social Media Amplification*

The news of the "Babale" case swiftly spread through social media platforms. Individuals, political supporters, and those with vested interests quickly seized upon the allegations, sharing them widely. Social media provided an ideal environment for the rapid dissemination of the content, where it gained significant attention.

→ *Phase 3: Media Coverage and Public Reaction*

Mainstream media outlets, driven by the sensational nature of the story, picked up the "Babale" case and gave it substantial coverage. The purported investigation was presented as a significant development in the political landscape. Public reactions were immediate and polarized, with individuals supporting various political factions either condemning or endorsing the allegations.

→ *Phase 4: Investigative Discoveries*

As more information came to light, it became evident that the audio recording was a fabrication. The voice identified as Agron Xhafaj turned out to be that of an entirely different individual referred to as "Collaborator X." Investigations were conducted, leading to the exposure of the fraudulent nature of the case. Legal consequences were imposed on those responsible for the deceit.

In the course of its analysis, this case serves as an illustrative manifestation of the intricate challenges that media outlets and public discourse confront when met with politically motivated disinformation. It underscores the imperative for media organizations to maintain unwavering integrity and accountability in their reporting while simultaneously underscoring the necessity for a well-informed and discerning public audience. To begin with, this case accentuates the susceptibility of media outlets to manipulation by politically driven actors. The fervor to break a sensational story, often without the rigors of comprehensive fact-checking, can result in the dissemination of unfounded and misleading information (Jamieson, 1997). Furthermore, media outlets that initially reported on the case without exercising due diligence found themselves grappling with credibility issues. The revelation that such stories were fabricated cast doubts on the reliability of these outlets, thereby contributing to the gradual erosion of public trust (Rosen, 1999). Beyond its impact on media outlets, this case bore significant implications for public information and discourse. It further entrenched political polarization and reinforced partisan ideologies, with individuals from across the political spectrum rallying behind narratives that aligned with their preexisting preferences, thereby exacerbating societal divisions.

The case also underscores the critical imperative for media literacy among the broader public. It serves as an unequivocal reminder that consumers of news must engage in a process of critical evaluation when it comes to assessing information sources and claims, especially in the context of politically charged content. It also emphasizes the substantial influence of media within a democratic framework. It highlights the indispensable need for media outlets to exercise diligence and responsibility throughout their reporting processes, thereby ensuring that public discourse remains both well-informed and constructive (Carey, 1989).

4.2 Features and Reporting of Online Media

During the initial phase of media reporting, as observed in the comprehensive case study conducted across various online media platforms, the predominant reliance on an audio recording released by a prominent member of the Democratic Party of Albania marked a critical stage. This individual concurrently held the position of Secretary for Citizen Action within the party and played an instrumental role in disseminating the content. It is noteworthy that all media outlets presented homogenous news with minor variations primarily confined to titles and word order. This consistent approach to reporting contributed significantly to the perceived credibility of the content among the public. In an attempt to bolster the authenticity of the news articles and accompanying information, the narrative was explicitly conveyed that the audio recording was indeed genuine. Furthermore, the Democratic Party placed substantial emphasis on characterizing it as a product of journalistic investigation, thus negating the necessity for legal or technical validation. Complementing the textual narratives were succinct 6-second video recordings that featured footage of a road, filmed from inside a moving vehicle. These visual elements were accompanied by subtitles, attributing the information to an individual identified as "Collaborator X." This persona played a central role in providing testimony regarding the specific route taken by Agron Xhafaj, culminating in the purported purchase of narcotics from traffickers, all under the purported directives of the former Minister of the Interior's brother. This initial phase of media coverage unveiled several glaring problems within the realm of journalistic professionalism:

→ *Verification and Fact-Checking:* Media professionals should have diligently pursued the verification of the audio recording's authenticity and scrutinized other pieces of evidence before releasing the content. Fact-checking is a foundational practice, serving as a bulwark against the proliferation of erroneous or misleading information (Silverman, 2015).

→ *Independence and Objectivity:* Media outlets must prioritize their independence from political interests. They should act as objective observers and reporters, steering clear of taking sides in political

conflicts and ensuring the fair presentation of information (Rosen, 2003).

→ *Lack of Multiple Sources:* An overreliance on a solitary source, particularly one associated with a specific political group, poses the risk of introducing bias and inaccuracies into the reporting. Media entities should seek information from a diversity of sources to provide a comprehensive and well-balanced narrative (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014).

→ *Transparency:* Transparency should be a cornerstone of media reporting. Media outlets must be transparent regarding their information sources and the methodologies employed during news gathering. Transparency builds and sustains trust with the audience (Kovanch, 2010).

→ *Responsible Headlines and Language:* The use of sensational or misleading headlines can significantly contribute to the spread of misinformation. Media professionals should employ responsible language, both in headlines and throughout the content, to mitigate the risk of inaccuracies and sensationalism (Steele, 2001).

→ *Ethical Reporting:* Journalistic ethics, including respecting individuals' privacy, preventing harm, and ensuring the public's right to access pertinent information, must be upheld to guarantee the highest standards of integrity in media reporting (Ward, 2013).

In the legal proceedings, the court identified key indicators within these records that demonstrated the active involvement of a political actor in preparing and fabricating false evidence, primarily implicating him in criminal activities. In the subsequent stages of the case's evolution, a noticeable shift in media reporting emerged. Three out of the five monitored online media outlets drastically altered their reporting styles, emphasizing the falseness of the allegations. They incorporated statements from the Prime Minister and the former Minister of Interior, essentially debunking the previous claims. Conversely, the remaining two media outlets adopted a somewhat ambiguous stance, suggesting that the case's outcome might be compromised.

The implications of these developments within media reporting extend beyond the specific case itself and have broader implications for the media and the public. They highlight the potential power of media in shaping public opinion and perception, showcasing how media narratives can significantly influence the perceived credibility of information and the individuals involved in a particular case. Furthermore, this case underscores the role of responsible journalism, fact-checking, and media ethics in safeguarding public trust and credibility. It serves as a reminder of the challenges and responsibilities media organizations face when reporting on controversial issues and events and highlights the evolving nature of the media's impact on public discourse and legal processes.

Media editors emphasize that the "Babale" case highlights a compelling and immediate challenge for modern journalism, necessitating collective efforts to

combat the scourge of misinformation and safeguard the credibility of the news industry. Furthermore, they admit that while the initial coverage of the case was prompted by its perceived urgency and significance, they also recognize the vital importance of enhancing fact-checking and source verification procedures (Koka, 2023). In addition, the evolving dynamics of the case spurred media editors to adapt their reporting methods to align with emerging truths. This adaptability signifies their unwavering commitment to providing accurate and impartial information (Bakillari, 2023). Concurrently, they assert their intention to ensure the public remains informed, even in the face of changing circumstances. This underscores their acknowledgment of the need for vigilance in adjusting reporting practices as new facts come to light (Abilekaj, 2023). Ultimately, media editors hold a profound sense of responsibility toward fulfilling the public's right to information. Their actions and adaptability throughout the case unequivocally affirm their dedication to transparent and ethical journalism (Fundo, 2023).

Table. 2 *Number of News Articles and Sources of Information*

Online media	Number of news articles	Articles based on audio recording (%)	Articles based on other resources (%)
BalkanWeb	31	100%	0%
CNA.al	25	100%	0%
NewsBomb.al	29	87%	13%
Syri.net	51	100%	0%
Dosja.al	18	92%	8%

4.3 Public Influence and Reactions

The data presented in Table 3 provides valuable insights into the diverse public reactions triggered by the "Babale" case, as reported by different online media sources. Understanding these public responses is critical in assessing the influence of media reporting on public opinion and the broader implications for media credibility and public discourse.

Table. 3 *Public Reaction to the "Babale" News Case in Online Media*

Online media	Believed the News	Doubts About Media's Objectivity	Hate Speech Against Ruling Party	Aggressive and Unethical Communication	Loss of Faith in the Media
BalkanWeb	131	62	83	95	42
CNA.al	73	17	66	71	25
NewsBomb.al	164	2	21	130	29
Syri.net	293	37	263	9	41
Dosja.al	54	13	25	27	18
Total:	**715 (40%)**	**131 (7%)**	**458 (26%)**	**332 (18%)**	**155 (9%)**

The data provided via public reactions in different online media sources sheds light on the varying responses to the "Babale" case.

→ *Believed the News:* BalkanWeb and Syri.net received the highest number of people who believed the news, with 131 and 293 individuals, respectively. This indicates a substantial level of trust in these platforms for reporting the case. On the other hand, CNA.al, NewsBomb.al, and Dosja.al had fewer individuals who believed the news.

→ *Doubts About the Media's Objectivity*: BalkanWeb had the highest number of people expressing doubts about the media's objectivity, with 62 individuals. This suggests that readers of BalkanWeb were more critical of the media's impartiality in reporting the case. Syri.net and CNA.al also had a significant number of individuals with doubts, while NewsBomb.al had the lowest number of doubters.

→ *Hate Speech Against Ruling Party:* Syri.net reported the highest number of people expressing hate speech against the ruling party, with 263 individuals. This could indicate a more polarized and hostile audience. BalkanWeb and CNA.al also had significant numbers, while NewsBomb.al and Dosja.al reported fewer instances of hate speech.

→ *Aggressive and Unethical Communication*: NewsBomb.al had the highest number of people exhibiting aggressive and unethical communication, with 130 individuals. This may suggest a more confrontational tone in the comments section of this media source. BalkanWeb also reported a significant number, followed by CNA.al, while Syri.net and Dosja.al had fewer instances.

→ *Loss of Faith in the Media:* BalkanWeb reported the highest number of people expressing a loss of faith in media, with 42 individuals. This could be an indication of the credibility challenges faced by media outlets. NewsBomb.al and Syri.net also reported significant numbers. CNA.al and Dosja.al had fewer instances of people losing faith in the media.

These varying public reactions reflect the complex relationship between online media reporting and public sentiment. The extent of belief, doubt, hostility, and erosion of trust in media outlets underscores the profound impact of media coverage on shaping public opinion and the broader implications for the media landscape and civic discourse. While a larger number of comments can reflect higher audience engagement, it does not always correspond to increased trust in the media outlet or more civil discourse. The tone and content of comments can vary significantly, and media outlets need to consider effective moderation and responsible comment management to ensure a constructive and respectful online environment (Reagle, 2015).

The data illustrates that politically motivated fake news can have a significant impact on public opinion. While a notable portion of the audience initially believed the news, it also resulted in a considerable percentage of individuals engaging in hate speech and aggressive communication. This highlights the

divisive and polarizing influence of such fake news. Additionally, the data shows that a fraction of the audience developed doubts about the media's objectivity and experienced a loss of faith in media outlets, emphasizing the need for responsible and ethical journalism to maintain public trust. Overall, the data underscores the far-reaching consequences of politically motivated fake news on public discourse and media credibility.

→ *Believed the News (40%)*: This suggests a substantial portion of the audience found the initial reporting credible. This level of belief in the news indicates the effectiveness of the media in conveying the fabricated story as a genuine investigation.

→ *Doubts About the Media's Objectivity (7%)*: These respondents expressed doubts about the media's objectivity in reporting the case. This reflects a segment of the audience that was critical of the media's impartiality. These doubts may have arisen due to the sensational nature of the news and concerns about the media's role in verifying the accuracy of the information.

→ *Hate Speech Against the Ruling Party (26%)*: A significant 26% of respondents engaged in hate speech against the ruling party. This indicates a polarized and hostile environment within the public discourse. The high percentage of hate speech suggests that politically motivated fake news has successfully fueled animosity and antagonism among readers.

→ *Aggressive and Unethical Communication (18%)*: This implies that the reporting of politically motivated fake news may have contributed to a more confrontational and hostile tone in public discussions. Such communication is detrimental to constructive dialogue and highlights the potential for misinformation to generate aggressive responses.

→ *Loss of Faith in the Media (9%)*: This indicates a decline in trust in media outlets due to their involvement in disseminating politically motivated fake news. The loss of faith in media outlets is a concerning consequence, as it can erode public trust in journalism as a whole.

6. CONCLUSION

The examination of politically motivated fake news and its impact on public opinion, as explored through the "Babale" case study, reveals a complex challenge facing contemporary media and society. The theoretical approach highlighted the complexity of politically motivated fake news, emphasizing its ability to manipulate public discourse, deepen polarization, and erode trust in media institutions. Drawing from the literature on misinformation, media effects, and political psychology, this theoretical foundation provided valuable insights into the mechanisms through which fake news operates and influences public opinion.

This case study demonstrated that the initial phase of reporting, driven by a single source and fabricated evidence, exposed vulnerabilities in journalistic

practices, such as a lack of fact-checking, transparency, and ethical reporting. As the case evolved, some media outlets adapted their reporting, while others remained steadfast in their initial positions. Public reactions exhibited varying degrees of belief, doubt, aggression, and loss of faith in the media. Shin's (2020) study on how partisans consume news on social media found that individuals tend to follow and engage with news sources that align with their preexisting political beliefs. This selective exposure to like-minded content contributes to the reinforcement of existing political ideologies and potentially amplifies the polarization within society. This finding aligns with the conclusions in this study, highlighting the importance of media literacy and responsible reporting to counteract the impact of politically motivated fake news and promote a more informed and united public discourse.

Drawing from the results, several recommendations can be formulated:

1. Strengthening Fact-Checking and Verification: Media organizations should prioritize rigorous fact-checking and source verification before publishing potentially inflammatory or unverified content. Adhering to journalistic standards is crucial to maintaining public trust.

2. Ensuring Independence and Objectivity: Media outlets should strive to maintain independence from political interests, ensuring objectivity in their reporting. A commitment to unbiased journalism is essential to mitigating polarization.

3. Transparency and Responsible Reporting: Transparency about information sources and the reporting process builds trust with the audience. Media professionals should employ responsible language and headlines to minimize sensationalism.

4. Public Media Literacy: Enhancing public media literacy is essential. Empowering the public to critically evaluate information sources and claims, especially in politically charged contexts, can help combat misinformation.

5. Ongoing Research: Further research is needed to delve deeper into the dynamics of politically motivated fake news, examining its long-term effects on public opinion, political behavior, and social cohesion. Exploring the role of social media platforms in facilitating the spread of fake news is another crucial avenue for investigation.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges posed by politically motivated fake news requires a multidimensional approach involving media organizations, policymakers, and the public. By implementing these recommendations and conducting further research, we can better understand, combat, and mitigate the impact of fake news on public opinion and democratic discourse.

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