

FAKE NEWS, ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITY IN MEDIA REPORTING IN CASE OF SECURITY THREATS AND SENSITIVE ISSUES. AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH OF THE PRACTITIONERS' EXPERIENCES*

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Abstract

The article presents the results of an empirical research dedicated to the views that institutional communicators (spokespersons), journalists, and security studies experts hold on the phenomenon of fake news, ethics and responsibility in media reporting in case of security threats and sensitive issues. The study aims to provide a practical overview, capitalizing the on-field expertise of practitioners in security and law enforcement fields, and bridging the three perspectives into a unified approach for efficiently managing strategic communication in media reporting.

Aiming to encourage and empower spokespersons to get out of information bubbles, to critically address fake news and develop responsible and accountable communication patterns and behaviors in the relationship with their audience, a sociological field research has been undertaken at the level of three European states: Romania, Spain and Greece. The empirical process aimed to understand the phenomenon of fake news, ethics and responsibility in media reporting in case of security threats, and to identify the training needs, further necessary information and abilities of the target groups. The data were collected from the pool of spokespersons, journalists,

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practitioners, experts and other stakeholders in the field of security and law enforcement. The research was based on a triangulation process, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, and offering a practical overview on the phenomenon of fake news and ethics in media reporting, strategic communication, critical thinking, media literacy and responsible communication in case of security threats and sensitive issues.

The analysis of the processed data allows the identification of a set of good practices, schemes and strategies dedicated to institutional spokespersons, and (young) journalists in the field of security and law enforcement, and relevant stakeholders, in relation to responsible and ethical reporting. It identifies methods of increasing resilience to disinformation and other related aspects, and draws the needs for acquiring, developing and strengthening skills and key competences, in order to foster strategic communication, critical thinking, media literacy, fake news resilience, media ethics and responsible reaction. The results are suitable to be integrated into a practical overview of any type of approach for efficiently managing reporting in case of security threats and sensitive issues.

Keywords: *hybrid Media reporting, security threats, fake news, disinformation, strategic communication, critical thinking.*

Purpose and objectives

The main purpose of the analysis was to develop an empirical overview of the phenomenon of fake news, ethics and responsibility in media reporting in case of security threats and sensitive issues. The analysis aimed to:

- register behaviors related to practices, schemes and strategies of responsible and ethical communication in case of security threats and sensitive issues;
- register opinions related to identifying fake news and disinformation and connected aspects;
- identify means of resilience and protective factors in case of fake news and disinformation and connected aspects;
- identify needs for learning and training related to ethical and responsible media reporting in case of security threats and sensitive issues.

As part of the exploratory research, the empirical study addressed experts, practitioners and future practitioners in media reporting and public communication in security and law enforcement fields. This approach allowed for the collection of qualified opinions

and factual data, conferring a high value to the information collected. The research analysis may contribute in terms of responsible and ethical communication, literacy on fake news, disinformation and other related topics, themes to stress in connection to necessary skills and competences to be further developed and strengthened. The exploratory process allowed the interaction with the expertise and needs of both experienced and less experienced individuals from the target group categories within the study.

Research methodology

Methods, techniques and instruments: The research was based on an exploratory process, studying concepts, attitudes and behaviors in relation to sensitive issues for the public. The analysis sought to identify and clarify aspects connected to ethical and responsible media reporting, to ways of dealing with fake news and disinformation and related aspects, when addressing the public. The process allowed a deeper understanding of the opinions, attitudes and behaviors, and, at the same time, it outlined the needs for learning and further training of the subjects.

The exploratory research allowed:

- the (better) understanding of ethical and responsible communication strategies;
- the exploitation of opinions related to the protective factors against fake news and disinformation and other related aspects;
- the identification of the needs for acquiring, developing and strengthening skills and key competences related to ethical and responsible media reporting in case of security threats and sensitive issues.

The exploratory research was implemented through an empirical process, which assumes the direct observation of the reality, by collecting data through a sociological investigation. The empirical study was developed through a process of triangulation, applying both quantitative and qualitative methods. This strategy allowed both the collection of data from a higher number of respondents and the introduction of questions in the semi-structured interview guide, which

targeted the explanation of un-detailed answers marked in the questionnaire.

The study followed the configuration below:

- the quantitative method: self-applied questionnaire (on paper/computer assisted web interview);
- the qualitative method: individual interview based on a semi-structured interview guide.

The quantitative approach allowed the identification of themes and concepts, strategies and schemes related to ethical and responsible media and public communication. At the same time, the qualitative one allowed the clarification of concepts, the description of the schemes and strategies, and a correct conversion from theory to practice.

The data has been collected throughout 2019, from March to August.

Target group: The analysis relied on the on-field experiences, best practices and current workflows of institutional spokespersons, (young) journalists, and security studies experts, bridging the three perspectives into a unified approach for efficiently managing strategic communication in security and law enforcement fields.

The questionnaire has been answered by 127 respondents, out of which 90 from Romania, 8 from Greece and 29 from Spain. Out of the total respondents, 39 are women and 88 are men. A third of the sample (44 respondents) have declared that they have between 11 and 20 years of experience in the field, 22 are working in the field for less than a year and only 7 have a 21 to 30 years of experience. Most of the respondents with 11 to 30 years of experience in the field are institutional spokespersons and journalists. Respondents with lower than 6 years of experience in the field can be found in each of the professional categories targeted in the study. The interviews have been conducted with 28 experts in security and law enforcement fields from Spain (10), Greece (10) and Romania (8).

Results of the research

In order to understand the responses of the participants to the study, they have first been asked about **the significance of a “security**

threat” or a “sensitive issue” in relation to their fields of work. In case of the participants from the public relations field, a security threat is considered through the impact of the message over the public, which “is likely to create fear of panic among the population”, or which can “generate vulnerabilities for the institution’s image”. It may be caused by false, “incomplete”, or “distorted” information, or by a “lack of a firm and complete institutional point of view”. The participants who work on field interventions consider threatening a situation where a mission is faulty, or where there is a leak in the system and an employee proceeds to “declaring, violating, as well as offering personal information, or transmitting unpublicized information”. The presence of harmful actions are also mentioned as security threats, like “terrorism, nuclear energy and soft targets”, or like “those that endanger the existence of the state, for example corruption”. As a general remark, security threats or sensitive issues are considered to be any situations that endanger the individuals or the society as a whole.

Radicalization or extremist messages are seen as negative actions towards the constitutional structure of the societies, which lead to the increase of hatred and the rejection of diversity. Also, the participants evaluate that it is difficult for the population to identify terrorist communication, as the society does not think of habitual ways in the possibilities of a terrorist attack.

*“So, I think as far as they are trying to destroy our way of life, they are trying to destroy the constitutional structure of our societies.”
(Academia)*

“I think that it is almost impossible to distinguish terrorism from communication. It is in the roots of terrorism to spread threat and to challenge the society. I would say that probably in the last two decades there have been more successful use of communication and they have realized that they cannot really win.” (Academia)

For the respondents to the questionnaire (N=127), a **successful message** includes clear information (88, 10%), true data (73, 80%), and brevity (46, 80%).

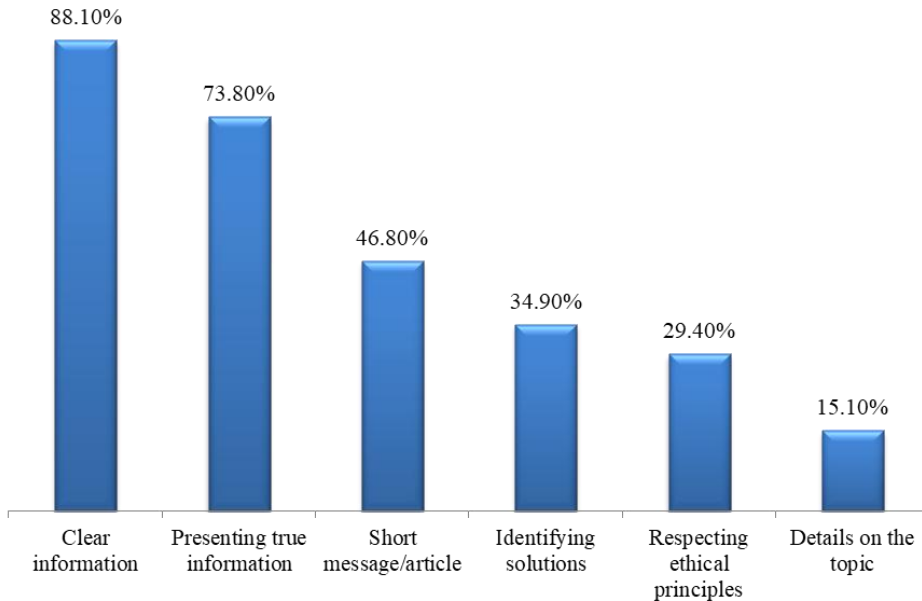


Figure 1: Indicators for a successful message (Source: the author)

A successful message is seen as one that reaches the target audience, and which the target audience receives as intended. A successful message must be clear, “with noise” and “interesting for the people”. It also has to be adequate and offered at the right moment. In the case of media, a message is considered effective when it is published in the main newspapers, so it is validated by the professionals. The social networks are a more difficult to monitor channel, though. In case of the general public, the impact could be monitored through the social media channels, while at political level, a successful message will create awareness among politicians so they would act or comment about the issue.

“A successful, effective message is one that achieves the effect that the issuer thought it will have.” (Academia)

*“From our point of view, a successful message is one that fulfills the function we had previously thought for that message. The fundamental thing is to tell what it is of interest for the people.”
(Institutional spokesperson)*

*“In the 21st century, when you have a lot of impact in social media, you can say that your message has reached the public. Even if it’s a negative reaction, if people are talking about it, it means that your message has reached the general public. If the rest of the main news outlets in that country pick up the story, we consider it a success.”
(Journalist)*

The success of the message is also connected to its purpose. For instance, an informative one contains explanatory text accompanied by a link or a video; an inspirational message contains a short text and puts great focus on the visual (photo, graphic or video); in case of the news and updates, it should contain a very short text with a link to the news article.

The main risks when reporting on security threats or sensitive issues are considered to be the possibility of being misunderstood (N=127) (76, 4%), of transferring panic to the public (70, 1%), and the generalization of the issue (53, 5%).

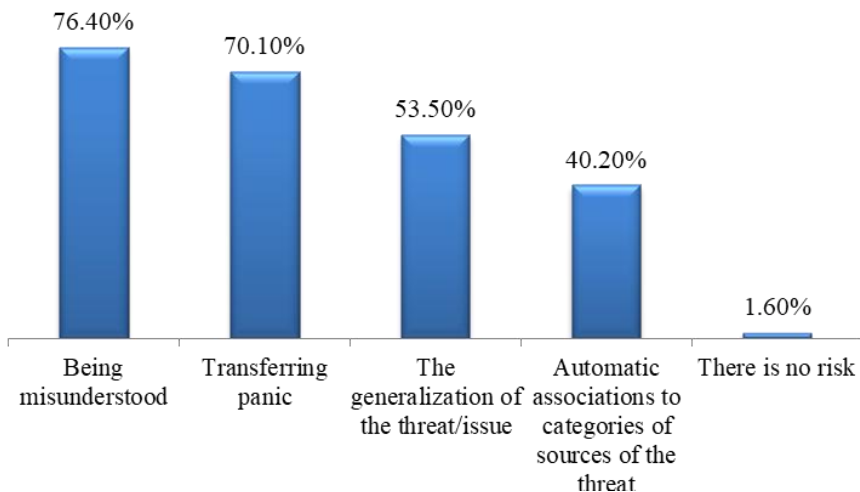


Figure 2: The main risks when reporting on security threats or sensitive issues (Source: the author)

In order **to ensure a positive response** from the public when communicating on security threats or sensitive issues, the participants to the study highlighted a series of strategies/solutions they apply or recommend. **These strategies focus on three aspects: 1) the content/form of the message, 2) the action of reporting and 3) the intervention itself.** In what concerns **the message**, it has to be clear, “short, concise, and to ensure that the situation is under control”, “easy to understand” and it has to present “real and verified data”. The communication must present the solutions to the problem, as well as the preventive and counteraction measures that are being undertaken. **The action of reporting** should be prompt, ongoing during the development of a certain situation, “early, which is before accumulating fears”. It is also highlighted that it is important to communicate “with compassion the information with impact over the communities or families”. “Correct selection of the information that are of interest for stakeholders, verifying the information before publishing it and communicating continuously with the press institutions, the opinion makers, the online environment and the social networks”, “the communication of clear and true information directly to the target group through the own web pages or through socializing networks”, or “the dissemination of the institutional message by the opinion makers outside the institution” are actions to be taken into consideration when reporting. Besides the content and the form of the message and the ways of addressing to the public, it is important also to focus on presenting **the intervention** itself, by communicating “about the undertaken actions”, taking into consideration “the equilibrium between the needs of the public for immediate and complete information, and the need of the institution to ensure the confidentiality of specific situations established by the law”. On the other hand, other participants suggested that a positive response is dependent on “giving only the main information, without details which could put in danger the problem solving by the authorities, ensuring the safety of the citizens in the same time”. It is also mentioned the importance of measuring the impact of the message over the public.

"We seek that the message is not flat, only with text, and it contains visual data. For this, we use emoticons, dots etc." (Institutional spokesperson)

"I think that the role of media is to create confidence." (Academia)

Among the **factors that determine the efficiency** of the communication/reporting activity are considered to be the use of images, the short reaction time, the validity of the information, the credibility of the communicator, using efficient channels of communication, but also characteristics of the content already mentioned above – clarity, shortness, transparency, ease of understanding, presenting interesting aspects etc. In what concerns the communicators, the participants evaluate that they "have to know very well the field of activity, to have the capacity to elaborate complete and pertinent point of views and to always find solutions"; other important factors highlighted are "the level of training of the spokespersons, how well they know the procedures and the way of intervention of their own structures, the intervention technique, the specific legislation, the way they communicate with the logistic support they benefit of", but also "the relationship they have with the mass-media representatives". Technical language is to be avoided, and also the references to the institution or job titles. Not including personal opinions and presenting only facts may lead to the efficiency of the message. The public is an element to be taken into consideration when reporting; the message can reach the targeted response also if it is designed based on the characteristics of the audience.

"We try to make reports without including personal opinions. We only write facts. We leave the opinions for the newspapers, or the television, so our main aim is giving the information as quickly as possible, and trying not to do any mistake." (Journalist)

A **message can fail** "when a piece of information is missing", or "when someone chooses an irrelevant part of the message you are

trying to provide the society with.” Also, if the information is not adjusted, or if it is not offered at the right time, or it contains technical perspectives, it can lead to a failure in terms of communication. If the message does not reach the public, it may also lead to the loss of trust in the respective news media. Also, a message is prone to fail if it involves political or economic motivation for dissemination. Elements like noise, semantics, or cognitive dissonance are to be taken into consideration as signs of a failed message.

Twenty-five of the respondents to the questionnaire declared that they have faced the situation of reporting on a security threat or a sensitive issue which has been discussed by the public in a different way than presented, so it created confusion, misunderstanding or panic. In such cases, they proceeded to further explanations, “by using a simple language”, “with arguments and pertinent solutions”, but also to finding institutional partners who wanted to disseminate the message, and establishing a “permanent dialogue with the mass-media representatives to clear the unclear aspects”.

A negative response from the public may occur, according to the participants to the study, as a result of delays in communicating, the use of general descriptions, not using the principle of “a unique voice”, not using verified data, or the use of “an aggressive style to attract attention (which determines the loss of trust)”. Among the factors that enable or allow the dissemination of faulty messages on a large scale, there were mentioned the internet itself and the socializing platforms as propagation channels, from the perspective of “the huge speed of the communication flow” and the possibility of circulating fake news, “the thirst of celebrity” of the communicators, the lack of reaction, or the lack of training of the communicators.

When talking about the discrepancies between social reality and messages received by the public, the majority of respondents to the questionnaire (103 out of 127) evaluated as a main cause the “creative” media coverage that is balancing between obtaining profit and respecting ethical standards of reporting.

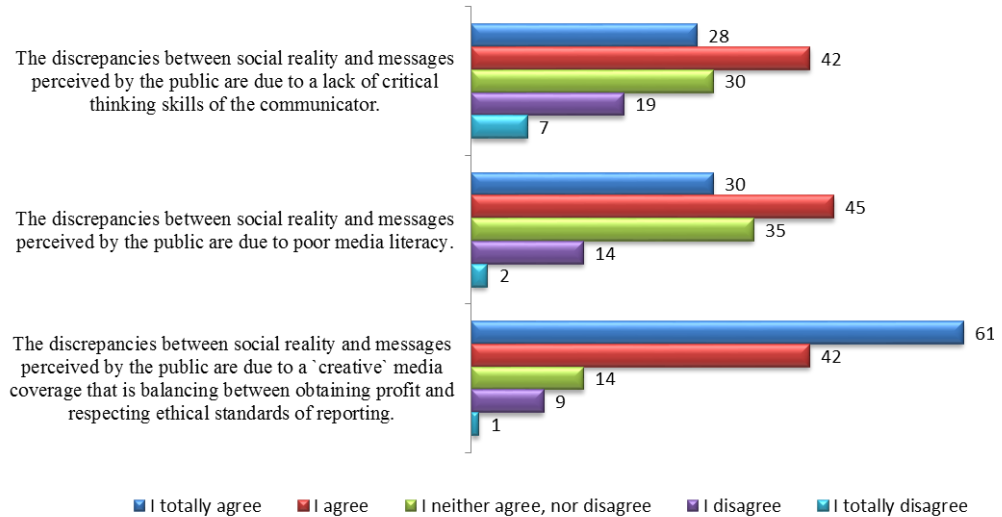


Figure 3: The factors that enable or allow the dissemination of faulty messages on a large scale (Source: the author)

In order to **reduce the spread of harmful actions** to the public, the respondents to the questionnaire consider that the communicators and the media should allocate the necessary time to understand what it is happening (75, 90%, N=108), should contribute to the raising of awareness among the public (68, 50%, N=108), or should contribute to the building or the reestablishment of trust in national institutions (56, 50%, N=108).

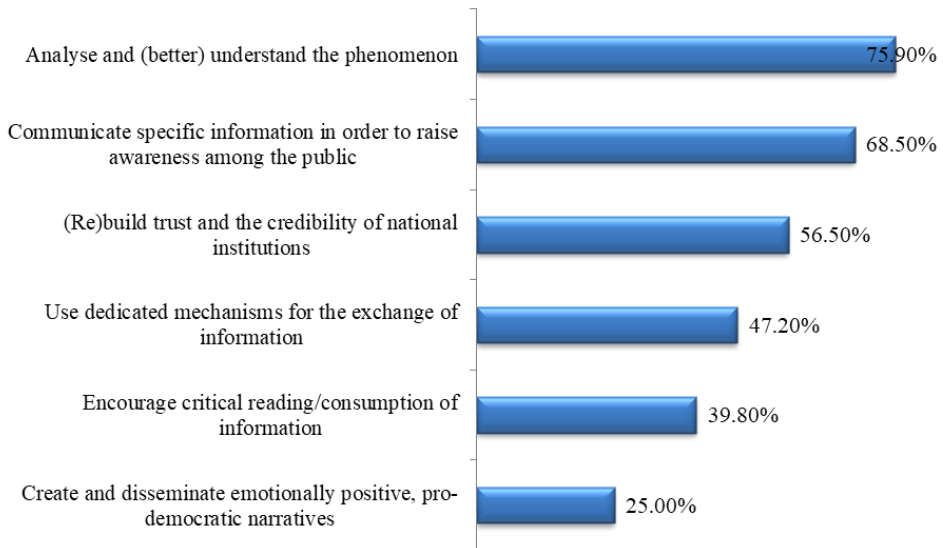


Figure 4: Efficient counteractions or preventive actions
(Source: the author)

When dealing with fake news, the participants to the study evaluate as efficient counteractions or preventive actions: sending the reader to official sources, discrediting the author of the hoax, collaborating with partners for disseminating the answer to fake news, relying on valid sources, answering fast and in a credible manner, but also “exaggerating on victories” and “minimizing defeats”. Also, the use of common sense, the reach of reliable sources, or the use of more than one source can contribute to the discarding/ avoiding of fake news.

“Veracity goes first, and speed second.” (Institutional spokesperson)

“We have prepared a series of infographics that we usually publish when we have an emergency. And we inform people only through official sources.” (Institutional spokesperson)

“What we usually do when we find a hoax is to discredit the author of the hoax, make it clear and even ask the rest of the Twitter community to help us corner that user who has put a hoax on the table and which is not true news.” (Institutional spokesperson)

“Well, I would say that we use our common sense when we obtain a piece of information that could be of interest. We have to evaluate both the source and also the information.” (Cybersecurity expert)

In order to verify the sources, the participants to the study mentioned as efficient techniques the use of automated fake news detectors, the activation of plug-ins for blocking fake news and the use of crowd intelligence and expert intelligence.

During **the preparation phase**, before reporting to the public when addressing a security threat or a sensitive issue, the majority of respondents declared that they totally agree and agree that there are necessary actions to be taken, like double fact checking, verifying the assumptions, reaching out to other sources, identifying the gaps, collecting evidence and information disproving the relevant fake news and presenting the information aligned to the social reality. There was, though, a minority of respondents who disagreed with these type of actions, the most indicated being verifying the assumptions (15) and collecting information disproving fake news (19).

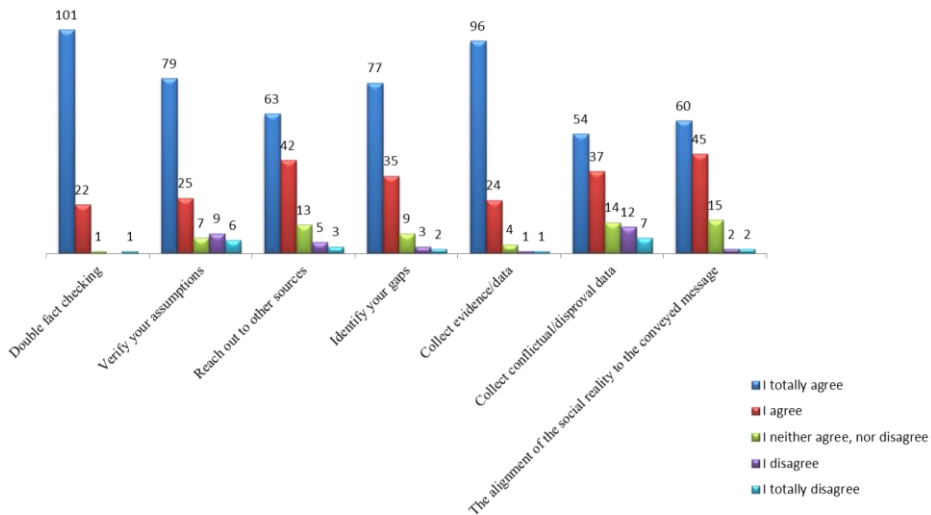


Figure 5: Actions to be taken when addressing a security threat or a sensitive issue (Source: the author)

It is important that the experts in the field are always ready for fake news and threats, are aware of the presence of hoax in social media and become themselves a reliable source for information. During the preparation phase, it is important to include characteristics similar to the ones of the message that has issued a misinformation, so the public can detect easier the false elements. The participants to the study identified as efficient techniques in verifying sources also the use of specialized forums and developing lists of terms used on forums.

“Firstly, giving confidence to the public and to some of our stakeholders. I'm trying to create a narrative trying to explain what happened”. (Academia, Intelligence and security)

“For example, we use some tools to monitor specific sources and we look for a specific list of words in these sources. We have to continuously modify this list of terms.” (Cybersecurity expert)

I use my common sense. [...] My main aim is not to trust immediately the images that I cannot find the origin for. (Journalist)

Also, when reporting on security threats or sensitive issues, the characteristic considered important by the majority of respondents to the questionnaire, in order **to be ethical** (N=124), is truth telling (87, 9%), followed by the preservation of human rights (71, 8%). 18 of the respondents declared that they have at least once found themselves in the situation of having contradictory thoughts on ethical aspects when reporting on security threats or sensitive issues. In such cases, they confronted with contradictory opinions regarding confidentiality of personal data, the principle of competition, or the way it would affect the targeted audience.

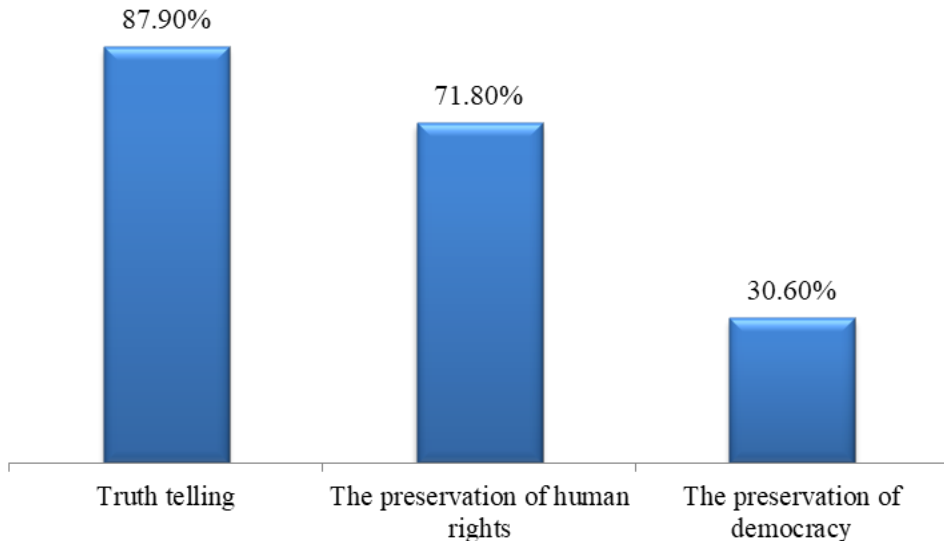


Figure 6: The characteristic considered important to be ethical when reporting on security threats or sensitive issues (Source: the author)

Ethical messages are considered to be able to maintain the balance between the information that is provided without endangering counter-terrorism operations and not causing the increase of hatred. It is also important to rectify possible mistakes and to “give a voice to the victim”. The information must represent the reality, and to be “transmitted with the least possible subjective burden”.

“You need to keep the balance between keeping people informed and not to disrupt counter-terrorist operations, or to create chaos, or to spread hate on other communities.” (Academia)

“Good information (has to be transmitted), not just what you have seen. If you have one photo of something that has happened five minutes ago and some people invent a story about this photo, I would recommend to have a second photo also.” (Cybersecurity expert)

When I work for the news agency, for me, ethics is simple. [...] I have to try to avoid any mistake at all times and especially if I have any mistake in my report I have to rectify as soon as possible. I always have to be honest with my audience, and I have to avoid misleading. [...] My main objective is trying to present the whole picture and trying to give voice to the victims.” (Journalist)

When addressing their own **level of training**, the majority of respondents to the questionnaire evaluated that they can identify actions with negative impact towards the public, or influential/persuasive/manipulative actions. Few of them (less than 20 for each type of action) disagreed or totally disagreed that they can identify these actions – fake news, disinformation, propaganda, polarizing events, hate speech, discrimination, terrorist threats, disaster crisis, radicalization messages, and extremist messages. The type of actions mentioned to be recognized by the most respondents are fake news and disinformation, while hate speech has been indicated by 33 respondents as an action that they can identify. The data indicate a necessity for training in identifying actions such as hate speech, discrimination, terrorist threats, disaster crisis, radicalization messages and extremist messages, as under 50 respondents (out of 127) totally agreed and agreed that they can recognize it.

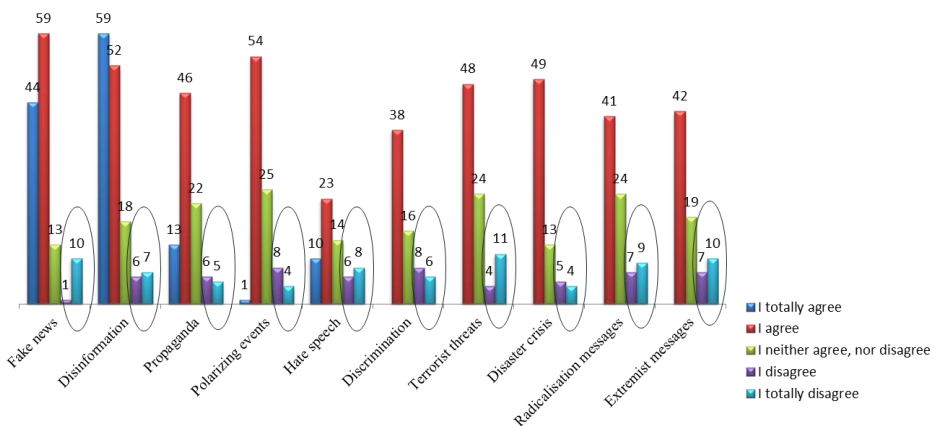


Figure 7: Actions with negative impact towards the public
(Source: the author)

In terms of **further knowledge, skills and competences** that the participants considered necessary for their professional training, in more than 50% of cases (a total of 125 respondents and 542 answers) there were mentioned topics like strategic communication, responsible reaction in relation to the public, and literacy on fake news and related aspects. In less than 50% of cases other aspects were also mentioned: critical thinking strategies, literacy on security issues, developing resilience to fake news and related aspects. In less than 40% of the cases ways of managing public reporting in a responsible way, communicating in case of disaster crisis or ethical reporting, were indicated as topics to be addressed in future trainings.

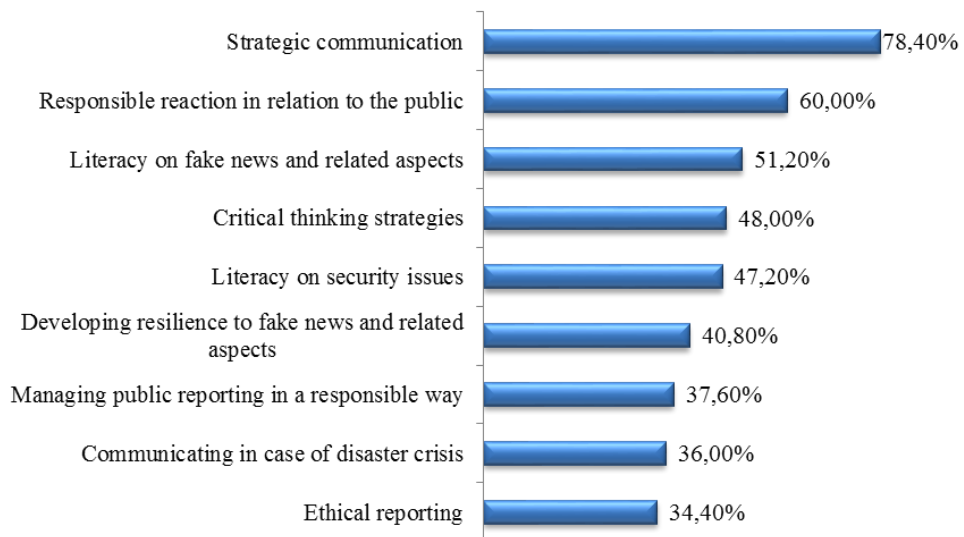


Figure 8: Topics to be addressed in future trainings (Source: the author)

The participants highlighted the importance of literacy into negative actions towards the public, but also the need of practical abilities to analyze, recognize and use tools in relation to it. Also, they highlighted that “journalists must have a clear understanding of the use of terror and racism in the news, in order to differentiate between reporting and manipulating”. An incursion into the legislation, the use

of examples and the development of collaborative abilities are to be taken into consideration for future training.

"I think that propaganda, hate speech, fake news..., especially in the case of fake news, they use a very direct language, they appeal to people's emotions, their messages are very simple and they address not the mind, but the heart, they are very emotional. People tend to believe those fake news easier. It would be great to find a way to report on the truth with the same kind of tools or resources that fake news use." (Journalist)

"I believe that a European and an international policy regarding the education on media and digital literacy, from the levels of young pupils to university students, is urgent and necessary. Digital media literacy includes aspects of reception, production, dissemination of information, as well as critical thinking, communication ethics, protection against misinformation and fake news, among others." (Academia)

"Learning and training is totally necessary, as we have seen in practice that ignorance can lead to the use of stereotype words, intensifying the problem of racist violence. Especially journalists and politicians should be very careful and use a specific terminology instead of an abusive speech. They should exercise more their critical thinking." (NGO)

"Training, especially for junior professionals in strategic communications are vital. Good practices should be taught by professionals that have dealt with crises successfully in the past. I have been in a training where X explained how they dealt with the terrorist attack, which I found very enlightening. In addition, many public figures, like politicians, are managing their own communication, often making many mistakes in terms of sensitivity and political correctness and misinformation." (Community manager)

"I think that the ones involved in communication from public institutions should learn how to communicate. It is important that in a moment of crisis they find a transparent means of communication and designate a person to speak frequently and constantly." (Journalist)

Conclusions

Security threats or sensitive issues are, for the majority of the participants to the study, activities that endanger persons or communities, or the state, that lead to media crisis, to the deterioration of the institution's image, or the propagation of faulty messages regarding the interventions and missions. The clarity, the concise nature and the truthfulness of the message are considered to ensure the success of the reporting activity, while the possibility that the public does not understand the targeted message, provoking panic, or presenting the issue as a generalized matter, are seen as risks when reporting on security or sensitive issues.

A positive response to a reporting activity on security threats or sensitive issues is considered to be the result of focusing on three aspects at the same time, which refer to the content and form of the message, the ways of addressing the public, and the presentation of the interventions undertaken by the authorities. Mandatory actions like verifying the information, being concise, offering true information, being prompt and compassionate, or ensuring the population of the efficacy of the interventions were highlighted by the participants to the study as aspects that lead to the efficiency of the message and a positive response from the public. The high level of training of the communicators, concerning procedures, legislation, and interventions in their field of work, and also the good relationship with mass media, are mentioned (among others) as elements of a successful message. The involvement of the communicators and media in (re)building trust of the people in public institutions or in raising awareness regarding harmful actions towards the public, are necessary steps in reducing the spread of actions with a negative impact over the public.

Further training of experts that work in the field of communication in case of security threats may include theoretical knowledge and practical abilities in identifying actions such as hate speech, discrimination, terrorist threats, disaster crisis, radicalization messages and extremist messages. Also, it resulted the necessity for further knowledge, skills and competences on topics such as strategic communication, responsible reaction in relation to the public, fake

news, critical thinking strategies, security issues, and developing resilience to fake news and related aspects.

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