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# “I sometimes have doubts about the news on Facebook”: Adolescents’ encounters with fake news on the internet

Joyce Vissenberg<sup>1</sup> and Leen d’Haenens<sup>2</sup>

## Abstrak/Abstract

Fake news is increasingly present on the internet and on social media, and youths, who mainly follow the news on these platforms, are at risk of being misinformed and deceived. This study aims to serve as an important knowledge base about adolescents’ definitions of, experiences with, and opinions about fake news on the internet. A qualitative content analysis of open-ended survey responses regarding experiences with fake news online among 214 Flemish youths (aged 15 to 19) provides insight into the sources of fake news, the topics covered in fake news, and the characteristics of fake news according to these youths. This study contributes to the field by giving insight into adolescents’ experiences with fake news and serves as an important base for further research into youths and fake news on the internet.

*Kehadiran berita palsu semakin meningkat di internet dan media sosial. Para pemuda, yang utamanya mengikuti berita melalui platform tersebut, memiliki risiko mendapatkan misinformasi atau menjadi tertipu. Studi ini berupaya untuk menjadi dasar pengetahuan yang penting tentang definisi, pengalaman, dan opini para remaja tentang berita palsu di internet. Analisis konten kualitatif terhadap respon dari survei terbuka pada 214 pemuda Flemish (usia 15 hingga 19 tahun) tentang pengalaman dengan berita palsu memberikan pengetahuan tentang sumber dari berita palsu, topik yang dibahas di dalam berita palsu, dan karakteristik berita palsu menurut para pemuda tersebut. Studi ini berkontribusi melalui pengetahuan tentang pengalaman para remaja dengan berita palsu dan berguna sebagai dasar yang penting untuk penelitian selanjutnya di bidang pemuda dan berita palsu di internet.*

## Kata kunci/Keywords:

adolescents, Belgium, fake news, online survey, qualitative content analysis

*remaja, Belgia, berita palsu, survei online, analisis konten kualitatif*

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## Introduction

For today’s youths, the internet in general and social media in particular serve as their main source of news and information about current events (Apestaartjaren, 2018; Imec, 2019). According to the 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, almost half (44%) of young people turn to their social media feeds first to follow the news (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). These platforms, however, are the spaces where fake news and disinformation have been flourishing in recent years, especially since the 2016 US presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Concerns have been raised that fake news, and the misinformed audience that follows from it, might be harmful to the political environment, because it “potentially represents risks for our democratic processes, national security, social fabric, and can undermine trust in the information society and confidence in the digital single market” (High Level Group on Fake News and Disinformation, 2018; Rapp & Salovich, 2018).

Youths in particular may be more susceptible to accepting and acting on fake news than adults, due to the tense and complicated relationship between their experience with digital platforms and their relatively limited cognitive development (Metzger et al., 2013). On the one hand, today's youths are often considered "digital natives" because they have been raised in an environment saturated with digital technologies. Thanks to this experience with digital media, they are expected to be highly skilled to successfully navigate the complex contemporary media environment (Metzger et al., 2013). On the other hand, however, the fact that they have been a part of this media-rich environment does not automatically imply that youths are able to critically evaluate news and information. At their relatively young age, cognitive and emotional development has not completely finished yet, which might inhibit them from successfully distinguishing credible from non-credible information (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008).

Due to this heightened susceptibility to misinformation it is crucial to investigate ways of combating fake news and disinformation on the internet and hence of protecting youths from these deceptions. Scholars and industry experts have devised several tools and solutions, ranging from artificial intelligence-based fact checkers to news literacy interventions, that might be helpful. However, a crucial first step to developing a successful solution aimed at youths seems to have been skipped, as knowledge of their definitions of, experiences with, and opinions about fake news largely appears to be lacking from the literature. Yet, this knowledge about fake news from the perspective of youths themselves, instead of the experts that develop these solutions, is essential. Hence, the current study aims to fill this important gap by performing a qualitative content analysis on open-ended survey responses from 214 Flemish adolescents concerning their experiences with fake news on the internet.

## **Literature review**

### ***Adolescents' news consumption***

In recent years going online has become central in adolescents' lives, as many of their daily activities now take place in the online environment. Youths communicate with friends and family through social networking sites and private messaging apps, they play online games against opponents from all over the world or they watch the latest episode of their favorite show through online streaming services. Their news consumption activities are no exception (Shearer & Matassa, 2018). Through their smartphone screens, today's youths are able to continuously stay up to date with events from all over the world at any time of day.

Yet, research reveals that active news consumption by today's younger generations is decreasing, as only 69% of youths between 16 and

24 years old say they follow the news on a daily basis, a number that has declined with 15% since 2017 (Imec, 2019). While an unlimited variety of news sources are at their disposal, social media seem to be their preferred source of news (Imec, 2019; Newman et al., 2019). A study with Flemish youths reveals that more than three quarters (78%) of youths predominantly consume news through their social media feeds, followed by more traditional sources such as television (74%) and radio (61%) (Apestaartjaren, 2018). More than half of them (57%) say they use social media to stay up to date with the news on a daily basis. About half (49%) of Flemish youths specifically use the private messaging functions of social media, such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, to talk about the news with friends and family. Youths prefer 'soft' news about cultural events, sports, and celebrities and are the least interested in 'hard' news regarding political or societal matters (Apestaartjaren, 2018; Deprez, Janssens, & Vermeulen, 2018). However, despite this decline in news consumption and indifference towards 'hard' news topics, youths still acknowledge the importance of following the news (Imec, 2019; Marchi, 2012; Meijer, 2007). Indeed, scholars have argued that the fact that their news consumption patterns differ greatly from those of previous generations does not automatically imply that youths are uninformed, but rather that they are differently informed about current events than their parents and grandparents are (Head, Wihbey, Metaxas, MacMillan, & Cohen, 2018).

### ***Online fake news***

It has been on these same social media platforms that fake news has been flourishing in recent years. In the current study, fake news is defined as "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). It is estimated that at least three stories published by renowned publishers in the month before the 2016 US presidential election were fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). While this number seems rather low, it is important to note that most fake news stories gain traction as they are shared and go viral on social media, potentially reaching millions of users (Lazer et al., 2018). For example, one study estimated that between 2006 and 2017, around 126,000 fake news stories had been tweeted more than 4.5 million times by around 3 million Twitter users (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

In 2017, a BBC expert panel put forward fake news and disinformation as one of the challenges that is facing the 21st century (Gray, 2017). Indeed, the potential dangers of accepting fake news as true and acting on it have been described by many scholars and experts. For example, the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Disinformation (2018), brought together by the Eu-

European Commission, has acknowledged the dangers and risks that fake news and disinformation entail for democracy and democratic processes. A vast research tradition has laid bare the effects of exposure to media contents, including news, on the audience's beliefs, attitudes, and values (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986), which might in turn affect voting behavior. Fortunately, audiences are becoming aware of the dangers of fake news on the internet. Audiences in general and younger generations in particular have clearly expressed their concerns about the impact of fake news on society (61%) and on themselves (36%) (Imec, 2019). More than half of the social media users expect the news that they read on these platforms to be inaccurate (Shearer & Matsa, 2018).

However, due to the constant streams of information from a wide variety of sources online and on social media, audiences do not always have the capability to critically reflect on the accuracy of the news stories they encounter and are hence at risk of accepting fake news stories as true (Anderson & Rainie, 2017). Youths are even more at risk than adults of being exposed to fake news online and regarding it as true due to five unique characteristics of their news consumption patterns. First, they generally are rather passive news consumers. Research with Flemish youngsters shows that they do not actively look for news themselves but rather consume news when they are bored and scroll through their social media feeds or when someone in their social network has explicitly recommended an article (Apestaartjaren, 2018). Second, youth's news consumption is characterized by selective exposure, as audiences carefully select news and information that matches their attitudes and beliefs (Slater, 2007; Stroud, 2008; Winter, Metzger, & Flanagan, 2016). A recent study revealed that 43% of youths between 16 and 24 years old only wanted to follow the news about topics that they found interesting (Imec, 2019). Because their interests generally lie with news about culture, sports, and celebrities rather than news about politics and society (Apestaartjaren, 2018), youth might lack the relevant knowledge to recognize fake news stories about these important topics. Third, youths are often characterized as news avoiders. About half of adolescents ignore or avoid the news by neither following it through traditional channels nor through digital and online spaces (Edgerly, Vraga, Bode, Thorson, & Thorson, 2018). Research has shown that these patterns of news avoidance among adolescents are persistent over the years (Shehata, 2016). The lack of experience with the news that follows from this might prevent them from successfully distinguishing true from false news. Fourth, studies have found that adolescents' news exposure is rather incidental, as youth believe that news reaches them through social media rather than that they actively look for news (Craft, Ashley, & Maksl, 2016; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). Indeed, social media platforms

allow youth to be exposed to news and information that they would otherwise not actively seek (Wohn & Bowe, 2016). Fifth, youth's news consumption patterns are rather fragmented, as youths prefer to 'snack' on news and often are exposed to it while they are monitoring one or multiple other screens (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015). Therefore, their attention to the news articles might be lower, and they might not be able to distinguish between fake and true news stories due to the attention that they have to divide between different screens.

### *The Belgian context*

According to the Belgian Expert Group on Fake News and Disinformation (Belgische Expertengroep inzake fake news en disinformatie, 2018), there is no proof that fake news is being produced in Belgium. However, due to the borderless nature of the internet, it is possible that Belgian audiences are exposed to and potentially influenced by fake news produced in other countries and that has reached them through the internet. Yet, knowledge about the extent of influence of fake news from other countries on Belgian audiences is limited.

According to a Eurobarometer survey on fake news and disinformation in Europe, almost a third of the Belgian audience (31%) says they come across fake news at least almost every day, 32% say they encounter it at least once a week (European Commission, 2018). Only a small majority of Belgians (59%) say they are at least somewhat confident that they can identify fake news or disinformation (European Commission, 2018); 70% of Belgians consider fake news to be a problem in Belgium, 75% consider it a problem for democracy in general (European Commission, 2018). In Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), 62% of people is worried about the influence of fake news messages on society, while 35% is worried about the influence of fake news on themselves (Imec, 2019).

### *The current study*

Fake news is flourishing on the internet. Because youths spend much time in these online environments, they are at risk of being misinformed by the fake news stories that are spread on social media platforms. While several tools and solutions have been proposed by scholars and industry experts, crucial first steps towards an understanding of youth's experiences with fake news on the internet seem to have been skipped. Therefore, we aim to answer the following research question:

RQ1: What experiences do adolescents have with fake news on the internet?

### **Method**

We aim to answer this research question through an analysis of open-ended survey responses from a sample of 214 Flemish adoles-

cents. This method has previously been employed by Tandoc et al. (2018), who analyzed open-ended survey responses to study how news audiences verify news on social media. The sample was recruited by students in a third bachelor course in Communication Studies. The online survey on Qualtrics was distributed through the students' social networks and served as a pilot test of a larger survey on adolescents' credibility evaluation strategies of online news. Next to questions on news consumption, news literacy, and credibility evaluations of online news, the respondents were asked the following open-ended question: "Can you give some examples of moments where you have had doubts about the credibility of news?" The respondents were allowed to write down as many examples as they could come up with, and no character limit was set.

In total, 440 respondents had started the survey. However, after deleting unfinished cases and filtering out cases that did not meet the sample requirements during data cleaning, a final sample of 214 meaningful cases remained. This sample consists of 59 boys (27.6%) and 155 girls (72.4%) between the ages of 15 and 19 years old ( $M = 16.41$ ,  $SD = .939$ ); 106 (49.5%) of these respondents filled in a valid answer to the open-ended question, while 108 adolescents left the field blank or wrote that they did not know or could not come up with an example. In the 106 final responses, general themes and subthemes were distinguished which were then translated into codes. We made sure that each code was related to the research question and that each relevant response (or parts of a response) received a code. Finally, the links between these codes were established.

## Results

The answers that emerged from the open-ended survey question were categorized into three broad categories: responses pertaining to the *sources* of fake news, responses concerning the *topics* that are covered in fake news articles, and responses regarding particular *characteristics* that typify fake news articles.

### Sources of fake news

Several responses referred to the sources where the respondents have encountered fake news or news of which they doubted the credibility. Most mentioned as sources of fake news by the adolescents in this study are social media platforms. Particularly Facebook and Instagram are the least trusted sources of news among Flemish youth. News on these social media is seen as undifferentiated and short-sighted. According to the respondents, articles on these platforms often contain clickbait, which reveals that the news is probably fake.

"I sometimes have doubts about the news that I read on Facebook and Instagram."  
(Girl, 17 years old)

"Especially quotes that are short-sighted, such as an article that is posted on Facebook which has a provoking and short-sighted title because they often are short, over-simplified statements." (Girl, 17 years old)

Several respondents also mentioned different news sites that were not always credible. These news sites were often associated with the popular rather than the so-called quality Flemish press or with alternative online news sources. For example, the Flemish popular newspaper 'HLN' (Het Laatste Nieuws; "The Latest News"), although leader on the news market reaching one in two people everyday, was mentioned as an untrustworthy news source by different respondents:

"With newspapers like 'HLN' or 'Gazet van Antwerpen', I sometimes take things with a grain of salt". (Girl, 16 years old)

"Especially news articles from Newsmonkey [Online-only news source aimed at youths and young adults] do not look like they are based on real facts". (Girl, 17 years old)

It seems that the adolescents in this study perceive some sites to be less trustworthy news sources than others. Because youth are aware of this, they pay more attention on sites they consider to be trustworthy when they want to be informed about important matters:

"I often read things that are complete nonsense, for example about celebrities, but these things are often published in these dubious newspapers. But I don't have doubts about articles relating to societal problems because I read these in 'De Standaard' [Flemish quality newspaper with a printed as well as a digital version, a website and an app] which I think is a trustworthy source."  
(Girl, 16 years old)

"When I see something on Facebook about rape or violence, I often think it is exaggerated or not true, because then it would have been on the real news". (Girl, 17 years old)

### Topics covered in fake news

Two main lines of news coverage were considered to be less credible by the adolescents. First is news about celebrities, which the adolescents in this study mainly associated with gossip and tabloids and hence considered fake. Second, we notice that news concerning national affairs is regarded as most credible, while news that either hits closer to home (i.e. taking place in the direct environment of the respondent) or is not at all part of their daily environment (e.g. international politics, wars, and foreign conflict) is considered less credible.

"About ISIS and the news from America"  
(Boy, 16 years old)

"When friends of me were in the news, I knew exactly what had happened but that did not correspond to what was told in the news." (Boy, 16 years old)

### Characteristics of fake news

Some respondents did not provide an example of fake news, but rather mentioned characteristics of fake news in their responses. One of the most striking clues showing that an article was fake news according to the respondents is the language that is used in the news story. Writing style in general and spelling errors in particular revealed that a news story potentially was less credible. Other clues that a news article might be fake concerned the information in the article. According to the respondents, when different publishers write different versions of the same story, when they share information that has not been confirmed yet, or when the article contains incomplete or biased information, it might be fake:

"When the news coverage is partisan or incomplete, for example political matters or the war between Erdogan and Syria." (Boy, 15 years old)

Several respondents mentioned that they recognized fake news articles by the degree of sensation and shock. They found that less credible articles contain clickbait titles and often cover unrealistic events. Furthermore, according to the respondents the journalists who write these articles exaggerated the events to elicit a sense of shock or sensation in the audience:

"The people from the news article can always twist things, leave things out or change things to make it more dramatic." (Girl, 15 years old)

"Sometimes the news media really try their best to bring shocking news, without paying attention to the facts." (Girl, 17 years old)

### Discussion

In recent years, concerns about the presence of fake news, especially on the internet, and its potential influence on audience's attitudes and broader political and democratic processes have risen. Youth might be more at risk than adults to be exposed and influenced by online fake news due to their mostly online news consumption and unfinished cognitive development. Therefore, it is important to investigate youth's experiences with fake news, which serves as a crucial first step for the study of news literacy in times where fake news and disinformation flourish on the internet. The current study aimed to explore ado-

lescents' experiences with fake news on the internet by means of an open-ended survey question, which was part of a larger questionnaire on news consumption and news credibility evaluations.

Despite the fact that the Belgian Expert Group on Fake News and Disinformation (2018) has not found evidence for the production of fake news in Belgium, half of the respondents in this study were able to report an example of a moment where they had doubted the credibility of news. They gave descriptions of sources that they estimated had published fake news, of the topics that were covered in fake news articles, and of certain characteristics of these fake news articles.

The adolescents in this study predominantly mentioned sources associated with social media platforms, the Flemish popular press, and online alternative news sites where they encountered fake news. This finding resonates with studies on trust in news media, which found that audience's trust in popular or online-only news sources is lower than their trust in quality news sources or sources associated with the public broadcaster. Indeed, a study with American youths has found that their levels of trust in news are rather low, especially for online news media as they are aware of the fact that news on these platforms might be biased or incorrect (Madden, Lenhart, & Fontaine, 2017). For news on topics that they found important, such as societal issues, the respondents reported to turn towards more trustworthy news sources.

From the responses emerged that youths distinguish between topics that are more likely to be fake news than others. News coverage on two main topics is most often considered to be false by the youths in this study. First, they mainly consider news about celebrities to be fake, because they associate it with gossip magazines and tabloids. Second, we determined that youths' credibility perception of the news depends on the degree of closeness of a topic to the adolescents' environment. The adolescents in this study reported the least doubts about the credibility of news about national affairs. However, they reported having more doubts about the credibility when the news moved further away from their daily environment, such as coverage about international conflicts or foreign politics. Similarly, news that hit closer to home was mentioned several times as being less credible.

The adolescents in this study mentioned several characteristics that might reveal that an article contains fake news, such as a sensational tone or politically biased information. This list of characteristics is a first indication that youth, like adults, pay attention to these cues in news articles to determine the credibility of online news. This is in line with the Dual Processing Model of Credibility Assessments (Metzger, 2007), which states that audiences often lack the motivation and the ability to evaluate the credibility of information and hence employ heuristics, that are

triggered by these cues that allow for quick, intuitive, and effortless credibility judgments. As this study only served as a first exploration of adolescents' experiences with fake news, further interventions in carefully designed experiments in the laboratory are needed to thoroughly study the heuristic processes that guide credibility assessments of online news.

Some responses suggest that youths may have a rather low level of trust in the news media. This is plausible, as recent studies have determined a decline in the level of trust in news media in Western societies (Edelman, 2019; Media Intelligence Service, 2019). Another study suggests that younger people especially take a sceptic stance towards news media (European Commission, 2016; Gallup & Knight Foundation, 2018). Only a slight majority of Europeans believes that their national media provide trustworthy information (European Commission, 2016). Overall, trust is highest for public service media news (Media Intelligence Service, 2019). Traditional media (television, radio, and written press) are the most trusted, while online news is considered less trustworthy (Edelman, 2019; Media Intelligence Service, 2019). Social media, which are the most popular news source for youths, simultaneously seem to be the least trusted sources for news in Europe (European Commission, 2016; Media Intelligence Service, 2019). However, as the aim of this study was to investigate the sources of fake news, the topics covered in fake news, and the characteristics of fake news according to youths, youths were not explicitly asked to describe their trust in the news media. Therefore, the current study is unable to provide enough evidence to support the suggestion that this trust may be low, and further research focusing on this specific matter is necessary.

This study has two main limitations. First, the responses that emerged from the open-ended survey questions were only qualitatively, and not quantitatively, analyzed. Hence, the results of this study remain of rather descriptive nature. However, because the goal of this study was to explore adolescents' experiences with fake news and because the responses provided us with rich qualitative data that allow for thorough exploration and identification of nuances in these responses, we do not consider this a problem. Furthermore, this exploration of youth's experiences with fake news serves as an important basis for further research on the topic, because it is necessary to first understand their definitions of, experiences with, and opinions about online fake news before quantitative research into their critical news literacy practices can be conducted.

Second, there is a risk of response bias. It is possible that certain respondents might not have been motivated to think about an answer and instead left the response field blank or wrote that they could not come up with an answer. This

shows in the non-response rate of the question, as half of the respondents were recorded as missing answers. Moreover, respondents might not have reflected carefully on an answer but rather filled in the field quickly, so some responses might not be accurate. There is also a possibility that respondents might have made up their responses because they could not immediately come up with an answer. However, we estimate that the response bias in the valid responses remains rather limited in this study, as most responses point towards the same direction without any significant deviations.

Despite these limitations, this study serves as a meaningful contribution to the field of adolescents' online news consumption, as it carried out a necessary first exploration in their definitions of, experiences with, and opinions about the recent emergence of fake news on the internet. Researchers wishing to elaborate on this topic may have these responses in mind when setting up further qualitative or quantitative studies into adolescents' experiences with fake news on the internet. Furthermore, the current study has implications for practitioners in the field of media literacy. In recent years, many European countries have placed great attention on stimulating media literacy in their school-aged population (McDougall, Zezulkova, van Driel, & Sternadel, 2018). In Belgium, Mediawijs, the Flemish Knowledge Center for Digital and Media Literacy, aims to give each student in primary and secondary education access to news through their project "News in the Classroom", which contains educational tools, information packages on news, and the opportunity to order printed and digital newspapers to use in the classroom. The insights from the current study might aid in gaining an understanding of youths' experiences with fake news, which might be beneficial to the development of tools and interventions aimed at improving the media literacy of children and youths.

## **Conclusion**

The current study aimed to gain an insight into adolescents' experiences with fake news on the internet by means of a qualitative content analysis of open-ended survey responses from 214 Flemish adolescents between 15 and 19 years old. The results indicate that youths are aware of the presence of fake news stories on the internet. They listed several online sources that they feel publish fake news, the topics that are covered in these fake news stories, and the special characteristics of these fake articles. The current research contributes significantly to the field as it serves as an important knowledge base concerning youths' experiences with fake news on the internet. Further research on a larger scale, using quantitative methods, is necessary to further investigate and map youths' experiences with fake news on the internet.

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