Jus et civitas	Vol. XII (LXXVI) No. 1/2025	11 - 20	A Journal of Social and Legal Studies

Fake News and Traditionalism Narratives in the Romanian Mass-Media

Elena Claudia MIHAI

Petroleum Gas University of Ploiești, Romania
elena.mihai@upg-ploiesti.ro

Abstract. *Many specialists agree that, in the era of information, the wars became informational also. Fake news and certain topics of discussion that are sensitive to a specific nation are often used to manipulate and misinform the population. This article aims to clarify and identify the spread and types of "traditionalism narratives" used in Romanian mass-media content, available online also. It explains why such narratives are so popular in Romania, so it makes connections with the psychological portrait of this nation. These narratives are frequently used in news, talk shows, cultural programs, political campaigns to create a sense of belonging and legitimacy. Considering the traditionalism and religiosity that characterize Romanians, speeches that include such ideas, strongly loaded with values, are increasingly successful. Which are the main categories of traditional narratives presented in Romanian mass-media content? What effects can these ideas have on the population, given its prolonged exposure to such discourses?*

Keywords: *traditionalism narratives; Romanian mass-media; fake news; disinformation; cultural portrait of Romanians;*

DOI: 10.51865/JETC.2025.1.02

Introduction

Fake news, disinformation, manipulation through mass media and social networks are increasingly widespread these days. The current social and political context favors the use of modern, informational "weapons". In this context, it is more difficult to distinguish truth from lies.

Romania provided, especially in the last period, a case study for how traditionalism shapes the dynamics of disinformation. High levels of religiosity, strong attachment to family values, and a politicized understanding of national identity make traditionalist narratives central to Romanian political and cultural life. This environment creates fertile ground for misinformation actors to exploit deeply rooted beliefs to legitimize and accelerate the diffusion of fake news.

Romania has experienced repeated waves of fake news over the past decade, especially during major political and health crises. Key examples include disinformation campaigns during the constitutional referendum on the definition of family, anti-vaccination narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic, and influence operations during the 2024-2025 elections.

Most content of Romanian mass-media channels and internet content – social media posts also – included themes such as "threats to the traditional family," "Western moral decay," "religious persecution," and "national sovereignty," reflecting a strategic use of traditionalist frames.

Given the psychological and cultural specificity of the Romanian people, such themes have found fertile ground here. Dissatisfaction with the current political class, the low standard of living of many Romanians, comparison with other nations that have a better quality of life, the fueling of criticism by various opinion leaders have all contributed to the development of topics related to how good it was "before", to traditional and orthodox values.

The Romanian psychological portrait reveals a paradoxical dynamic: while individuals often possess strong informal critical skills and adaptive strategies, low institutional trust, emotional reactivity, and social network reliance can amplify the circulation of disinformation. Rather than arising from passive media consumption, susceptibility often stems from social and psychological mechanisms that prioritize trust, emotion, and identity over formal verification.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing effective counter-disinformation strategies. Approaches focusing solely on fact-checking or media literacy may have a limited impact unless they are embedded in trusted social networks, leverage emotional communication, and address the underlying trust deficits in institutions.

Fake news and fake content

The phenomenon of fake news has evolved into a pervasive and increasingly amplified issue within the contemporary information ecosystem. Initially emerging as isolated or marginal incidents, the dissemination of fabricated or misleading information has grown in both frequency and sophistication, often serving strategic interests. In particular, political motivations represent a significant driving force behind the intentional creation and circulation of disinformation. Such narratives can influence public opinion, shape electoral outcomes, and destabilize democratic processes.

"Disinformation is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinformed by malicious actors. A third category could be termed mal-information; information, that is based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country" (UNESCO, 2018, p. 44).

Fake news can take many forms, such as:

• Made-up information;

• Manipulated information: distortion of information or real images

• Information from false sources

• Misinformation or ill-intentioned information: misuse of information

• False contexts or connections: real information shared with false contextual information. For example, when the headline of an article does not reflect its content.

• Satire and parody: funny information is presented as if it were true. Although not usually considered fake news, this category can deceive readers intentionally (Morales, 2019).

Gradon (2020) considered that there are numerous possibilities of who the potential instigator of disinformation campaigns could be. "It could be nation-states aiming to influence the situation abroad; it could be rogue governments deliberately seeking to disrupt the life of the foreign population; it could be any group or entity intending to benefit economically or politically – be it terrorist organization, extremist group, or organized crime. Alternatively, it could be – as it frequently happens in the on-line environment – a group of non-state actors who run the so-called trolling campaigns for the sheer objective of spreading chaos and confusion" (p. 137).

Recently, in regards to COVID-19 pandemic, but with other subjects also, such as: elections in Romania and in Republic of Moldova, support for Ukraine, the intelligence reports point primarily to Russia and China as the main initiators of disinformation campaigns.

Some authors (González-Padilla and Tortolero-Blanco, 2020) mention the contribution of Artificial Intelligence in creating fake news. Artificial Intelligence allows for creation of the so-called "deep fakes" (that are not a synonym to 'fake news'). By definition (Wardle, 2018, in González-Padilla and Tortolero-Blanco, 2020), deep fake is the term currently being used to describe fabricated media produced using Artificial Intelligence. By synthesizing different

elements of existing video or audio files, AI enables relatively easy methods for creating "new" content, in which individuals appear to speak words and perform actions, which are not based on reality.

According to the European Commission (2018), the sustained proliferation of disinformation is supported by a complex interplay of technological, economic, and algorithmic mechanisms embedded within the digital communication infrastructure. Three structural components have been identified as central to this process:

a. Algorithmic amplification and personalization

Digital platforms increasingly rely on algorithmic systems designed to maximize user engagement, reflecting the underlying commercial logics of attention-based business models. These algorithms prioritize the visibility of content that is sensationalist, emotionally charged, and highly personalized; as such content tends to generate more interactions, including likes, comments, and shares. In doing so, algorithmic curation creates "information bubbles" and "echo chambers," where users are disproportionately exposed to information aligned with their pre-existing beliefs. This process not only enhances the aggressiveness of fake news but also contributes to the polarization of public discourse and the entrenchment of misinformation within specific communities.

b. Advertising-driven economic incentives

The economic structure of the digital media ecosystem further amplifies the dissemination of disinformation. Online advertising models are predominantly based on engagement metrics such as impressions, clicks, and views. Sensationalist and viral content, including disinformation, tends to perform well under these metrics because it elicits strong emotional responses and encourages rapid sharing. Advertising agencies and networks, often operating through programmatic systems, inadvertently reinforce this dynamic by placing advertisements on platforms that disseminate such content, thereby providing financial incentives for its continued production and circulation. This results in a self-reinforcing cycle where sensationalist disinformation is both economically and algorithmically rewarded.

c. Technological facilitation and artificial amplification

Finally, technological infrastructures themselves play a critical role in enabling and magnifying disinformation flows. Automated services, such as bots, coordinated inauthentic behavior, and networks of fake or simulated profiles, can artificially inflate the reach and perceived legitimacy of false narratives. These orchestrated campaigns often operate at scale, simulating organic user engagement and thereby manipulating public perception of credibility and consensus. This technological layer of amplification enables disinformation campaigns to reach broader audiences more rapidly and with greater impact than would be possible through organic user activity alone.

These structural mechanisms illustrate how disinformation is not merely the result of individual actors disseminating false content but is embedded within a broader socio-technical system that rewards and amplifies sensationalist narratives. Understanding the interplay between algorithmic personalization, economic incentives, and technological facilitation is therefore crucial for developing effective regulatory, technological, and societal responses to the escalating challenge of fake news (Morales 2019).

Effects of fake news

A 1,014 participants survey, realized in Hong Kong (N = 1,014), shows that perceived severity of the disinformation relates negatively to general media trust (Lee, 2024). The author considers that negative relationship is particularly strong among people who trust governmental institutions more, believe in law and order more, and emphasize civil liberties less.

Media trust is an important concern because it underlies people's capability to agree on facts about public matters, which is in turn a prerequisite for meaningful public deliberation. Thus, disinformation constitutes a serious concern especially because of its possible negative impact on media trust.

The findings of the study indicate that, although the perceived severity of disinformation is generally associated with lower levels of trust in media, this relationship is neither linear nor uniformly strong. Instead, it appears to be contingent upon a range of mediating and moderating factors that shape individuals' interpretive frameworks and information-processing behaviors.

Disinformation and fake news can be conceptualized as political stimuli embedded within individuals' informational environments. The way in which these stimuli are perceived, interpreted, and acted upon is influenced by pre-existing cognitive orientations, ideological predispositions, and contextual factors that guide individuals through a complex political landscape. Recognizing and integrating this conceptual principle provides a more nuanced analytical lens through which to examine the mechanisms by which disinformation influences attitudes, perceptions, and democratic engagement. This approach allows for a more precise specification of the conditions under which disinformation exerts its effects and enhances our understanding of its broader societal implications (Lee, 2024).

Rather than being entirely invented narratives, fake news frequently involves manipulative framing strategies. These include the decontextualization of otherwise trivial or factual information; the strategic emphasis or selective amplification of certain elements; the hypertrophy of a marginal or minority characteristic perceived as a broader threat; the conflation of correlation with causation; and the overgeneralization of isolated phenomena. Moreover, disinformation is often disseminated not primarily for the informational value of its content but for its affective and mobilizing potential, its capacity to evoke fear, anger, enthusiasm, or apathy, and, crucially, for its virality and ability to circulate widely across communication networks (Cristea and Fîrțală, 2023).

This layered and strategic construction of fake news underscores the need to approach the phenomenon not merely as a matter of factual accuracy but as a socio-communicative process that exploits cognitive, emotional, and structural features of the contemporary media environment.

The main issue does not lie solely in the existence of fake news itself, but rather in the degree to which the public is susceptible or resistant to its influence. The extent to which the cognitive dissonance deliberately generated by disinformation affects individual attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors plays an important role. Equally important are the verification strategies employed by media users — particularly within digital and social media environments — to assess the credibility of circulated information and, where possible, to identify and evaluate the original sources of its dissemination. The variability in these individual and collective verification practices plays a crucial role in determining the overall impact and diffusion of disinformation within the public sphere (Cristea and Fîrțală, 2023).

"The information itself has to become a weapon, which is not really possible if it is only a staging of reality. In order to use the information as a weapon, this must be transformed and modified taking into account the objectives of the conflict. As a result of these interferences, when the information is inaccurate, incomplete, decontextualized, based on rumors, or the result of

disinformation campaigns, impulsive reactions can be triggered and emotional decisions made, even stopping an action that is in progress. A duel of stories appears then, in which the contenders are the 'who' and 'how' the narration of events is established" (Morales, 2019, p. 46).

Psychological portrait of Romanians

In the case of Romania, several cross-cultural studies (e.g., those conducted within Hofstede Insights or the World Values Survey framework) offer insight into broad tendencies often discussed in psychological, sociological, and cultural analyses.

Main tendencies are:

1. Collectivism with Individualistic Aspirations

Romanian culture reflects a hybrid orientation between collectivism and emerging individualism. Traditionally, strong family ties, community bonds, and interpersonal networks play a central role in shaping identity and social behavior. This collectivist foundation often translates into a preference for trusting personal networks over institutions.

2. High Uncertainty Avoidance and Adaptability

Many studies highlight a relatively high sensitivity to uncertainty, associated with a preference for stability, predictability, and clear rules. This trait may be historically rooted in periods of political and economic instability.

3. Moderate Power Distance and Ambivalent Trust in Authority

Romanian society displays moderate acceptance of hierarchical structures, often respecting authority figures but simultaneously expressing skepticism toward institutions. This ambivalence can manifest as compliance in formal settings coupled with critical or informal resistance in private contexts. Trust tends to be higher in personal relations than in public institutions, reflecting a pragmatic, experience-based view of authority.

4. Emotional Expressiveness and Social Warmth

Culturally, Romanians are often characterized by emotional expressiveness, sociability, and warmth in interpersonal interactions. Hospitality and solidarity in close circles are highly valued.

5. A Tendency toward Contextual Thinking

Romanian cognitive styles often emphasize contextual reasoning and situational interpretation rather than rigid adherence to abstract principles. This can facilitate flexible thinking, but may also contribute to relativism and skepticism toward universal rules or narratives. In the context of media consumption, this tendency sometimes results in selective trust and vulnerability to informal sources of information.

6. Resilience and Pragmatism

A recurring theme in psychological and sociological analyses is a strong sense of resilience, cultivated through historical experiences of political transformation, economic hardship, and social transition. This resilience is often accompanied by pragmatism — a focus on practical solutions over ideological purity — and by a capacity for humor and irony as cultural defenses against adversity.

In 2015, Daniel David published "The Psychological Portrait of the Romanian People", a comprehensive study on the psychological characteristics of these people. By analyzing the cardinal aspects of the Romanian cultural environment, in relation to a larger number of other countries/ cultures, the former is characterized by higher scores on: concentration of power, uncertainty avoidance/ defensive style, conformism, power seeking, need for achievement, survival values, religiosity, and cynicism. Lower scores were recorded on: femininity, pragmatism, confidence in achieving aspirations, rhythm of life, trust in people, defiance, relativism, non-

acceptance of justifications for divorce and abortion, the importance of friendship, values such as: universalism, benevolence, hedonism, stimulation and self-determination.

Increased conformism makes Romanians prone to obedience and dogma, having a high level of religiosity.

Considering these results, the author of the study believes that: "Romanians have a collectivist culture, but without being an extreme/ strong collectivism. Values, such as tradition and conformism, which also characterize a collectivist culture, come to Romanians from the (historical) need for security" (David, 2015, p. 165).

"Traditionalism narratives"

"Traditionalism narratives" refers to mass-media – internet included – topics, such as: "traditional family", "religious persecution", "Western moral decay", "national sovereignty", "the bright past", reflecting a strategic use of traditionalist frames.

In a comparative analysis of 15 countries, Schwartz and colleagues (2014, apud Lee, 2024) identified six political values as having appeared regularly in the literature: moral traditionalism, blind patriotism, equality, civil liberties, law and order, and free enterprise.

The public is unprepared for the influence of mass media on their own behaviors and attitudes, considering that the influence occurs on others, not on themselves (Fotiade, Popa, 2008).

Righetti (2025) made an empirical analysis using data from the 2017 European Values Study (EVS) to examine how fundamentalist traditionalism relates to social marginality, and thus misinformation vulnerability, in the Italian population. The author controlled for religious belief and practice to isolate the unique contribution of culturally diffused traditionalist worldviews. The findings reveal that stronger adherence to traditionalist values is positively associated with higher levels of social marginality. This relationship suggests that moral conservatism – exemplified, for instance, by anti-gender movements – emerges within a culturally vulnerable nexus, where rigid normative frameworks may amplify individuals' exposure and susceptibility to misinformation. In such contexts, inflexible moral convictions can function both as a protective identity marker and as a cognitive vulnerability, shaping how individuals interpret and respond to contested social narratives.

Methodology

In order to identify the "traditionalism narratives" diffused in the Romanian mass-media content, we've used the content analysis on the most accessed news content available on the internet. We've investigated traditional narratives presented in the online content of: Antena 3 CNN (private TV channel), TVR (national TV channel) and Adevarul (national private newspaper with online context also) in the last year.

Modern content analysis aims at both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions. The two-angle approach to the material guarantees a rich and nuanced body of textual information, highlighting that in content analysis, qualitative and quantitative dimensions are more closely interwoven than in any other sociological research method or technique.

The recommended material for qualitative content analysis is represented by open questions from semi-structured interviews and in-depth, unstructured qualitative interviews.

Results and discussions

In Romanian mass-media content, traditional narratives (or "traditional narratives") are recurring stories, themes, and discursive frames that reflect cultural identity, historical values, and national symbols. These narratives are frequently used in news, talk shows, cultural programs, political campaigns, and advertising to create a sense of belonging and legitimacy. The main categories of traditional narratives presented in the analyzed mass-media content, identified by us, were:

1. Nationalist and identity narrative

It promotes the idea of an "authentic Romania", of traditions and national unity. It is based on symbols such as: the traditional village, the popular costume, the church, national heroes, medieval history.

Often appears in a political or cultural context, especially around national holidays.

Typical examples: presentation of the Romanian village as the "heart of the nation"; reports about "real Romanians" who preserve traditions; thematic holiday broadcasts (e.g. December 1 — National Day of Romania).

2. Historical and heroic narrative

Use some important historical figures, such as: Michael the Brave, Stephen the Great, Avram Iancu, or the founding moments of the Romanian state.

It promotes the idea of resistance, struggle for freedom and national dignity.

It is frequently used in political or patriotic discourse, but also in historical documentaries or school textbooks.

Typical examples: TV documentaries about historical battles; invocation of national heroes in electoral campaigns; commemorative spots and military parades.

3. The rural narrative and "simple values"

It presents the Romanian village as a pure, moral place, untouched by corruption or "foreign" modernity. It associates folk traditions with morality, family, Orthodox religion. It is frequently used in entertainment (folklore shows), food advertising, but also in populist politics.
Typical examples: TV folklore shows; advertisements promoting "100% natural Romanian products"; Political campaigns in rural areas.

4. Religious and moral narrative

It is based on the cultural and social influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church. It values faith, family, religious traditions and Christian holidays. Often present in news related to miracles, pilgrimages or moral opinions.

Typical examples: reports about pilgrimages (e.g. Putna Monastery); religious shows broadcast on Sundays; invoking "Christian values" in public debates.

5. Sovereigntist/ anti-globalist narrative

These represent more recent narratives, which are increasingly visible in talk shows and social networks.

It starts from the idea that "Romania must defend its traditions" from external influences (EU, USA, globalization, multiculturalism). It is often used by conservative or nationalist political groups.

Typical examples: criticism of the European Union; promoting the idea of "Romanians against foreigners who impose foreign values on us"; online campaigns to protect "Romanian traditions".

6. Narrative about diaspora and sacrifice

It presents Romanians abroad as heroes of work and sacrifice. It is often associated with the idea of homesickness, suffering and national pride and very present in TV reports during holidays.

Typical examples: reports about Romanians sending money home; interviews with families separated by migration; political campaigns promising the "return of Romanians home".

7. The narrative of modernity versus tradition

The media often uses a symbolic opposition between "modern" and "traditional": city versus village, globalization versus national identity, progress versus traditional values. It can appear either as a tension or as an attempt at balance ("modernity with Romanian roots").

Typical examples: shows about young people who "return to the village"; brand campaigns that combine technology with local traditions; public discussions about the "crisis of values".

These narratives are often used manipulatively (for populism, polarization, propaganda). For example, in the last year, Antena 3 has presented, in its broadcasts, the following dominant narratives:

- Identitarian and patriotic – in the context of the pandemic and international tensions (the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis).
- Religious – used as an element of stability and national solidarity.
- Traditionalist in political discourse – to create clear oppositions: "us vs. them", "Romanian values vs. external influences".

Media forms: thematic segmentations in talk shows about "Romanian values"; live broadcasts and online campaigns around traditional holidays; constant invocation of national identity in political debates.

As the online environment has become essential, Antena 3 CNN has used traditionalism to maintain a stable audience, in an increasingly fragmented media landscape.

Summarizing, TVR uses traditional narratives in an institutional and cultural way, with a focus on identity and education.

Antena 3 CNN creates the same narratives in a political and emotional way, especially in contexts of crisis or electoral campaign.

Adevărul reinterprets these themes in an online, accessible and viral register, adapted to the digital audience.

Conclusion

Given the obvious disinformation purpose of the themes identified and presented above, the main question that arises is how can we distinguish truth from lies and information from manipulation? To this end, specialists, including European forums, make certain recommendations.

In February 2019, the National Cryptologic Center published a guide titled "Disinformation in Cyberspace", which analyzes how cyberattacks designed to erode public trust within a state can, if successful, produce consequences extending beyond economic or material losses, ultimately endangering the very foundations and legitimacy of liberal democratic governance.

In that guide, the National Cryptologic Center points to a fivefold challenge to counteract and stop disinformation campaigns:

1. To detect and stop illegitimate influence attempts on specific issues of social and political polarization.
2. To analyze these illegitimate attempts and differentiate them from processes of political and social influence carried out by legitimate actors.

3. To adequately put into context the attributions of the actors' intentions and abilities with disinformation goals in order to define the small or large dimension of those actors in the global network of mass communication, which is already taking place in any democratic process.
4. To arrange information campaigns about disinformation, its intentions and scope. Underline the fact that the attempts of some actors are intended to fool public opinion saying they can exert 'total manipulation', when they have neither the resources nor such ambitious intentions in most cases.
5. To introduce good practices in academic circles or through the press, describing attempts at disinformation campaigns in social networks, so as to adequately assess the scope that these campaigns and how they share space with legitimate information which, by and large, is the one that reaches the people in terms of both, quantity and quality (Morales, 2019).

UNESCO's specialists (2018) considered that it is important to distinguish messages that are true from those that are false, but also those that are true (and those messages with some truth) but which are created, produced or distributed by "agents" who intend to harm rather than serve the public interest. Such mal-information – like true information that violates a person's privacy without public interest justification - goes against the standards and ethics of journalism.

"Notwithstanding the distinctions above, the consequences on the information environment and society may be similar (e.g. corrupting the integrity of democratic process, reducing vaccination rates). In addition, particular cases may exhibit combinations of these three conceptualizations, and there is evidence that individual examples of one are often accompanied by the others (e.g. on different platforms or in sequence) as part of a broader information strategy by particular actors. Nevertheless, it is helpful to keep the distinctions in mind because the causes, techniques and remedies can vary accordingly" (UNESCO, 2018, p. 44).

The recommendations for journalists and newsrooms are to pay more attention to promoting quality by improving:

- Accountable, ethical journalism practices and evidence-based reporting;
- Fact checking and the calling out of disinformation and misinformation;
- Verification of data, sources, digital images;
- Engagement with the communities that journalists engage and ensuring the news agenda is in tune with societies" needs (UNESCO, 2018).

If information harassment or disinformation turns information into a new weapon, that is to say into an instrument used to attack or defend, and if such disinformation is intrinsically intentional, we could be facing activities that may pose a real threat to national security, putting at risk goods and rights that should be legally protected.

Perhaps the time has come to open a serene and calm debate to assess the need to provide a legal framework for the issue of disinformation, as it has become one of the problems that generates more uncertainty (Morales, 2019).

References

Cristea, D., & Fîrțală, V. (2023). Fakenews is much more than fake content. *Technium Social Sciences Journal, 46*, 290–297.

David, D. (2015). *Psihologia poporului român. Profilul psihologic al românilor într-o monografie cognitiv-experimentală* [*The psychology of the Romanian people: The psychological profile of Romanians in a cognitive-experimental monograph*]. Polirom.

European Commission. (2018). *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation*. https://blog.wanifra.org/sites/default/files/field_blog_entry_file/HLEGReportonFakeNewsandOnlineDisinformation.pdf

Fotiade, N., & Popa, M. (2008). *Evaluarea nivelului de competenţă în mass-media* [*Assessing the level of media competence*]. ActiveWatch–Agenţia de Monitorizare a Presei.

González-Padilla, D. A., & Tortolero-Blanco, L. (2020). Social media influence in the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Brazilian Journal of Urology, 46*(Suppl.1), 120–124. https://doi.org/10.1590/S1677-5538.IBJU.2020.S121

Gradoń, K. (2020). Crime in the time of the plague: Fake news pandemic and the challenges to law-enforcement and intelligence community. *Society Register, 4*(2), 133–148. https://doi.org/10.14746/sr.2020.4.2.10

Lee, F. (2024). Disinformation perceptions and media trust: The moderating roles of political trust and values. *International Journal of Communication, 18*, 2388–2410.

Morales, S. (2019). Information warfare: Feed information with disinformation. *Documento de Opinión IEEE, 45/2019*.

Righetti, N. (2025). Anti-gender fundamentalist traditionalism and vulnerability to misinformation. *Journal of Media and Religion*. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2025.2541098

UNESCO. (2018). *Journalism, "fake news" and disinformation: A handbook for journalism education and training*. https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews