



The degree of students' possession of media literacy skills when confronting false news during crises - an exploratory study on a sample of media students at the University of Annaba during the Corona crisis -

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Abstract:

The study aimed to investigate the extent of media literacy skills among students when dealing with news during crises and the role of these skills in countering fake news. Many studies emphasize that this role becomes more prominent during crises due to the proliferation of false information. To achieve this, a survey methodology was employed on a sample of 30 media students at Annaba University, utilizing an electronic questionnaire.

The study concluded that Facebook serves as a significant news source for the study sample. Additionally, students demonstrated a conscious interaction with fake news disseminated through social media platforms, albeit to a moderate degree. The perceived primary roles of media literacy and digital skills, from their perspective, were limited to prudent reception, with little attention to their role in production. The study underscores the university's responsibility in shaping students in accordance with its principles and enhancing their critical thinking by incorporating media literacy into its curriculum.

Keywords: *Fake news; Crisis; Media literacy; Digital literacy; COVID-19 pandemic; Skills.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become fertile grounds for the dissemination and flow of information in general, particularly false and fabricated news, especially in times of crises. This phenomenon has emerged in an environment saturated with various traditional and digital media outlets. The prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic marked not only the spread of a serious virus worldwide but also an overwhelming and rapid dissemination of fake news, rumors, and misleading information. This phenomenon has been described as an "information pandemic." It became imperative to activate the role of media and digital literacy to assist in proper and positive engagement with media content by activating and employing certain knowledge and skills.

Hence, the study embarked on investigating the availability of media and digital literacy skills among media students in dealing with news during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring whether these skills play a role and have an impact in detecting fake news and guiding proper engagement with it.

This exploratory study focused on surveying the opinions of a sample of "Media and Communication students at Baji Mokhtar University in Annaba" through the following problem statement:

To what extent do media students possess media literacy skills when dealing with fake news?

- a. What is the nature of news circulating during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- b. What are the key media and digital literacy skills among media students?
- c. Do media and communication students verify news sources during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- d. How have media literacy skills among students contributed to countering fake news?

- Importance of the Study:

The significance of any scientific study is evident in its importance and its ability to address the subject at hand. The current study derives its importance from the crucial nature of its topic, which revolves around the availability of media literacy skills among media students and their role in countering fake or misleading news, especially in times of crises. The widespread dissemination of such news through social media platforms, particularly concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the urgent need to employ media and digital literacy skills. This importance is further emphasized when dealing with a specific audience, such as media students, as it is presumed that they should reinforce appropriate measures to avoid many problems arising from misleading media messages. Furthermore, these skills are deemed essential in the twenty-first century.

- Study Objectives:

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Identify the nature of news that circulated during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Uncover the key media literacy skills among media students.
- Assess the extent to which media and communication students verify news sources during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Explore how media and digital literacy contributed to countering fake news.

- Study Limitations:

This study was conducted on a human sample selected from media and communication students at Baji Mokhtar University in Annaba, Algeria, comprising a single group in the year 2021.

II. Study Type, Methodology, and Tools:

This study falls within the realm of descriptive research, providing a description and explanation of the phenomenon by collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. The data are categorized to facilitate analysis and interpretation for drawing conclusions (Daoudi & Boufateh, 2007). The study utilized a sample survey methodology as it helps extract information from original community members through the responses of the sample individuals, particularly concerning their current circumstances (Ali Mahmoudi, 2015).

The study's tool took the form of an electronic questionnaire. The questions and axes were designed to directly serve the study's problem and enable the answering of its questions and achievement of its objectives. The aim was to present specific information, opinions, and ideas within the context of the study's topic, without the researcher's interference in the participants' self-reports. The electronic questionnaire, in this context, refers to a digital document containing questions related to opinion polls or characteristics of a specific activity. The collected responses provide the statistical data desired for analysis (Abdel-Magid El-Baldawi, 2007).

The electronic questionnaire is a method for understanding the thoughts and attitudes of a group of individuals regarding the study's topic. It is instrumental in determining the level of satisfaction and acceptance among the public, as well as understanding prevailing cultural patterns regarding a specific phenomenon. The electronic questionnaire is widely used in quantitative research to collect data systematically, translated, and dissected into variables, dimensions, and research indicators, with questions designed in a methodical manner. Respondents are asked to indicate their opinions on the proposed questions or statements. The electronic questionnaire, conducted online, differs little from traditional surveys, except for its internet-mediated nature. It gradually became more effective in data collection, saving time, money, and effort (Delyo, 2019).

-Study Population and Sample Selection:

The study population comprises students of the Faculty of Information and Communication Sciences at Badji Mokhtar University in Annaba, Algeria. Due to the challenges in reaching all individuals and interacting with the questionnaire, a purposive sample was taken, consisting of 30 individuals out of 145, representing 20% of Master's students in Audiovisual Communication. This non-probabilistic sample was deemed suitable for the exploratory purposes of the study, facilitating quicker responses under the given study conditions.

-Definition of Concepts and Study Terminology:

It is crucial to define concepts in any study. Some key concepts in this context include:

- **Media Literacy:** Defined as "planned efforts by formal and non-formal educational institutions aimed at empowering individuals with media and its products. It involves developing knowledge and skills related to media selection, critical analysis of messages, and creative participation in symbol and meaning production to build informed citizens contributing to societal growth and stability" (Abdulhamid, 2012).

- **Operational Definition:** The procedural skills and abilities (selection, access to media, media content criticism) that enable the recipient to choose media (visual, auditory, electronic) that suits personal, intellectual, and cognitive needs. It also involves the ability to analyze media content (media messages, programs, news, advertisements) and evaluate it, creating a critical thinking framework (comprehension, analysis, evaluation of information).

- **Digital Literacy:** Described as an umbrella encompassing various cultural, skill-oriented, cognitive, and creative learning types related to communication with modern digital technologies (Covello, 2010). Recently, the term "digital citizenship" emerged as a modern concept within digital literacy, aiming to establish optimal methods, programs, and systems to guide and protect all technology users, particularly children and teenagers (Omar Khalil, Maawad Ibrahim et al., 2021).

- **Operational Definition:** A set of values and principles (digital access, digital behavior, digital law, and digital security) regulating the digital world, protecting users from undesirable technological influences (digital addiction, isolation, rapid spread of news without verification). It provides rules to guide individuals toward rational use of modern technology (internet, computers, mobile phones, databases).

- **Crisis:** A serious threat that can jeopardize the goals, values, beliefs, and possessions of individuals, organizations, or countries, whether expected or unexpected. It is defined as an unexpected event that disrupts the mind, indicating a decisive or imminent change (Ibrahim Al-Kilani, 2009).

- **Operational Definition:** A problem or dilemma that is mostly unpredictable and negatively affects decision-makers (institutions, individuals, states, societies), requiring control over situations and decisions.

- **Pandemic:** The highest escalation of a crisis, particularly in the context of health crises, denotes the widespread geographical nature of the disease's impact, requiring direct interventions and supervision by international organizations, especially the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020).

- **Operational Definition:** The term "pandemic" is attached to a severe crisis, and in the context of this study, it refers to a health crisis, indicating the spread of a disease across geographical regions. This requires direct interventions and supervision by international organizations, especially the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020).

- **COVID-19:** A target of coronaviruses affecting the respiratory system, potentially leading to death. First reported on December 31, 2019, in China. Studies by the World Health Organization indicate that it targets vulnerable groups and those with chronic diseases, immune deficiency, heart diseases, and diabetes (United Nations Population Fund, 2020). The name is derived from the English words "CO" (corona), "VI" (virus), "D" (disease), and "19" indicating the year of the pandemic's emergence (World Health Organization, 2020).

- **Operational Definition:** A viral pandemic emerged in China, specifically in Wuhan, in the year 2019. It rapidly spread across the globe, claiming the lives of millions of people. Known as COVID-19, this virus is associated with Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS).

- **False or Deceptive News:** False or deceptive news stories are narratives that are generally untrue and often sensational in nature. They are crafted to be disseminated widely, either for the purpose of generating revenue, promoting a public figure or political movement, tarnishing the reputation of an entity, as noted by the Dictionary Browse (2020).

- **Operational Definition:** False or deceptive news encompasses a wide array of stories that propagate untrue narratives across various subjects (political, economic, social, health) with the aim of influencing public opinion—shaping attitudes, behaviors, and values—favorable to a specific entity (institutions, companies, individuals) or for the purpose of humor and mockery of personalities or events. It is worth noting that there are synonyms for false news, such as:

- **Fabricated Content:** Entirely false content that is completely or partially different.

- **Forged Content:** Disseminated by impersonating genuine sources.

- **Misleading Content:** Involves directing information in a way that implies or directs accusations against an individual, entity, or issue.

- **Manipulated Content:** Subjected to manipulation through editing or other modifications to deceive.

- **False Context:** Presenting accurate information but within a misleading framework.

- **Fake Linking:** Attaching headlines and images unrelated to the content (Abdul Fattah, 2018).

- **Rumor:** Promoting a different story with no basis in reality, often involving exaggeration, sensationalism, or distortion of a mostly true story. It aims to achieve psychological impact on public opinion, whether locally, regionally, globally, or nationally, for political, economic, or military goals within one country or multiple countries, or on a global scale as a whole (Jamal Al-Far, 2014). Various terms and labels have been used, but the content and purpose remain consistent. In this study, we adopt the term "false news" as it is deemed closer and more comprehensive.

1- Media and Digital Literacy:

Media and digital literacy play a significant and crucial role in our lives on various levels, especially in the face of technological developments and the information revolution that has occurred since the beginning of the last century. The need for media literacy has become urgent, as it provides skills and expertise to understand how to deal with media messages, particularly in combating false news. This element includes an introduction to media literacy, starting with its origin, objectives, importance for the user, its characteristics, principles, and its main areas and strategies.

1-1. Emergence of Media Literacy: Media literacy is a relatively recent field that traces its origins to

the first half of the twentieth century. In 1933, scholars such as Lewis and Thompson proposed educating young people on distinguishing between high and popular cultures in Britain during the 1950s. This concept later emerged in the United States to keep pace with the increasing influence of media such as radio and television on people's lives, particularly in education (Bucht, 2014). Since the 1960s, the concept of media literacy appeared in theories and discussions on media with the aim of developing cultural and media awareness. Over the past forty years, the concept transitioned from marginal interest to a global movement. It has been integrated into education and learning about media in university curricula in many countries worldwide.

1-2. UNESCO's Role in Promoting Media Literacy: With the advent of the Internet in the early 1990s, UNESCO, with the support of the education ministries of the European Union, adopted the Mentor project to promote media literacy in Europe and the Mediterranean countries. Upon the project's completion, experts and consultants

decided to establish an international organization to promote media literacy globally, leading to the founding of the International Organization for Media Literacy in May 2002 (Shaib, 2019).

1-3. Objectives and Importance of Media and Digital Literacy: The increase in exposure to traditional and new media has intensified the responsibility of media literacy in guiding news consumption. This reaffirms its importance and drives it to achieve a set of objectives.

1-3-1. Importance of Media and Digital Literacy: In the era of the information revolution and the vast flow of news, the possibility of the recipient becoming a victim of everything presented to them, without distinguishing between what harms and what benefits, has become very likely. Hence, the significance of media literacy is crucial, as it constitutes a fundamental right for every citizen worldwide. The need for media awareness has become urgent, especially in times of crises. Many things are harmless to be ignorant of, and media literacy is not one of them. Media and digital skills are essential in the twenty-first century, being an effective factor in promoting a culture of dialogue in society. They help the recipient to be positive, actively participate in the development and progress of their community, and contribute to its construction. Furthermore, the importance of media literacy lies in utilizing the potential of new media as an opportunity that must be seized, encouraging the production, dissemination, and broadcasting of media content that reflects the recipient's nationalism, culture, and civilization (Al-Shammari, 2010).

1-3-2. Objectives of Media and Digital Literacy: The development of awareness in media literacy aims to instill an understanding of its role in society and the world among recipients. It emphasizes the ability to support effective communication at both local and global levels. The process of developing awareness in media literacy occurs on two levels— theoretical and practical. The theoretical level involves knowledge of theories related to social communication, public communication, cross-cultural communication, and media.

The practical level is facilitated by raising awareness in media literacy through skills such as information gathering and organization, critical thinking skills for examining their accuracy, making informed decisions in dealing with them, whether accepting or rejecting, flexibility in understanding information, effective writing skills, speaking and active listening skills, social and cultural communication competency, and media literacy (Sayed Ali, 2020).

The objectives of media literacy vary due to the diversity of its criteria, theories, and connections to other concepts such as media awareness and media culture. They focus on the content and information received by the user. However, they converge on the necessity of imparting critical understanding, analysis, inference, and the ability to choose what aligns with individual principles and values. It involves excluding anything that contradicts those values, whether at the auditory, readable, written, or visual level (Khaled Abu Azzam, 2019).

The objectives of media literacy expanded when mass media became part of daily culture for individuals. This includes transforming the audience from passive consumers of media to understanding its role in shaping perspectives towards the reality they experience. This empowerment allows individuals to be critical thinkers who control the interpretation of what they receive, known as the active audience model (Shaib, 2019).

Reasons for Interest in Media and Digital Literacy: There are several reasons that drive our interest in media and digital literacy in the current and future periods.

Negative habits associated with the use of modern technology have emerged, such as electronic addiction and the occurrence of organic diseases like eye dryness and joint pains. Additionally, psychological disorders, such as isolation and introversion, have been observed in some users of modern communication devices to an exaggerated extent. There is an increase in crime rates associated with the use of modern technology, as well as time wastage in front of screens affecting overall productivity and neglect of social tasks. Furthermore, there is the theft of information through the internet, and the use of websites for threatening individuals, extortion, fraud, and theft (Translated from Arabic; original text by the author Shaker, 2019).

1-4. Principles of Media and Digital Literacy: Digital literacy is based on a set of principles that guide and regulate it, including the following (Omar Khalil, 2021):

- Digital Equality: It is essential to provide equal infrastructure for all users, and ensuring this infrastructure is a priority for the national government.
- Digital Rights and Responsibilities: Just as governments define rights and duties in their constitutions, there are also rights and duties in the digital world, such as privacy and freedom of expression. Therefore, digital citizenship must play a role in educating individuals about these rights in a correct manner. On the other side, there are duties such as considering the feelings of others, adhering to laws, and more.
- Digital Education and Culture: Digital citizenship allows any citizen to become a producer of culture. They can showcase their achievements and creativity using modern technology and express their opinions on any product, contributing to the culture.

Various types of digital literacy education exist, given the vast field for applying and testing the standards and skills of digital education. These include Information Literacy, which involves the ability to obtain information through digital platforms and distinguish accurate and true information from misleading sources. Visual Literacy has become necessary due to the increased reliance on modern media and communication on images and visual content. Digital education provides methods to distinguish accurate visual content and produce visually sound content that conveys a correct communicative and informational message. New Media Literacy refers to the ability to access media content through new media, analyze it, criticize it, and reproduce it correctly. Lateral Literacy, a crucial type of digital literacy, refers to the user's ability to obtain information from multiple sources in a single content, which includes written material, visual content, search engines, and electronic links. This helps users distinguish biased information from others (BadrQarni, 2020).

1-5- Fields of Media and Digital Literacy: Researchers agree that media and digital literacy have nine important areas for the appropriate use of technology, forming the foundations upon which the digital society is built. These can be outlined as follows:

- Digital Access: Every individual should have the technology that qualifies them for full participation in the digital society.
- Digital Commerce: This involves digital awareness of exchange processes, barter, and e-commerce methods over the internet to be an effective consumer in a new world of digital economy.
- Digital Communication: Electronic exchange of information with others, understanding what should be exchanged, and what should not be, to avoid legal accountability.
- Digital Culture: Responsible use of digital technology and knowing when to use it in the context of a new society.

- Digital Behavior Rules: Standards for behavior or actions expected by users of digital technology.
- Digital Law: Represents legal rights and restrictions governing technical use, apart from unethical digital use, and adherence to the laws of the digital society.
- Digital Rights and Responsibilities: Reflects the requirements and freedoms extended to all users of digital technology, behavioral expectations, and responsibilities that align with the nature of life in the digital age and the consequences of violating them.
- Digital Health and Well-being: Relates to the physical and psychological well-being of the body structure related to the use of digital technology, requiring culture and methods for technology users to protect themselves and their minds through education and training.
- Digital Security: Involves precautions that all technology users must take to ensure their personal safety and the security of their information, preventing unauthorized access by any other person or hostile entity (Shepova, 2014).

2-Fake News and Crises: Crises provide fertile ground for the spread and emergence of rumors and misleading news.

2-1. Fake News and the COVID-19 Pandemic: The COVID-19 crisis, like other crises, created an environment conducive to the spread of fake news and the creation of rumors. The rapid transmission capability of social media networks exacerbated the situation, prompting urgent measures to limit this news and address this epidemic accompanying the coronavirus.

2-2. Ways to Counteract Fake News: Combating fake news poses a significant challenge in the digital age, and there are several ways to achieve it:

- Enhancing Media and Digital Literacy Skills: Skills such as research and verification on the internet and distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources.
- Checking the Sources: Individuals must verify the source of the news and ensure its credibility before believing or sharing it.
- Education and Awareness: Promoting awareness of how to identify fake news and unreliable sources.
- Verifying the Accuracy of News: Before sharing or believing any news, individuals must verify its credibility. Several websites serve this purpose.
- Valuing the Methodology of Reliable Media: Supporting and encouraging reliable media and professional journalists who adhere to standards of integrity and objectivity in their news coverage.
- Not Contributing to Rapid and Widespread Sharing: Ensuring that published information is accurate and reliable before sharing it.
- Developing and Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills: Enabling individuals to evaluate information and analyze it logically before making any decisions based on it. Through these methods and guidelines, individuals and communities can combat the spread of fake news and contribute to creating a more transparent and reliable media environment (Ireto, 2019).

Thirdly: Field Study: Presentation and Analysis of Results

III. Results and discussion :

1-Introduction to the Study Sample:

Table (1): Distribution of Sample Participants by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	9	30%
Female	21	70%

Source:CurrentStudy

The table above illustrates that the proportion of female participants in the study was the highest, estimated at 70%. The explanation for this is that an increase in the number of females compared to males in universities has become well-known. Some studies assert that this phenomenon is not arbitrary; rather, it is influenced by a set of social, cultural, and educational factors. Statistical data from official sources in Arab countries, including Algeria, support this trend. The Ministry of Education reported that the success rate for girls in the Baccalaureate exam has exceeded 60% in recent years. Additionally, a study conducted by the American Psychological Association in 2014, involving about a million male and female students from various Arab countries, revealed that females outperform males from early childhood to university. This trend may also be explained by the fact that girls are generally more cooperative and patient in reading and completing questionnaires (trtarabi, 2019).

Table (2): Distribution of Sample Participants by Age

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 21	1	3.3%
21 to 25	10	33.3%
25 to 30	19	63.3%
Total	30	100%

Source:CurrentStudy

The results from the table above show that the age group between 25 and 30 years old ranked first with a percentage of 63.3%. Typically, the age range of 21 to 25 corresponds to the Master's degree level. This distribution may be explained by the fact that the 20% category, referred to as "20%", usually consists of students who pursued their studies in the classical system or the old batches of the LMD system in Algerian universities. These students are characterized by seriousness, discipline, responsibility, and cooperation, making them more responsive to researchers' requests when presented with questionnaires.

-First Axis: Students' Patterns of Digital Network Usage Amidst the Spread of the Coronavirus.

Table (3): Distribution of Participants According to the Degree of Usage of Social Media Networks and Websites

Usage Degree	Frequency	Percentage
Low	0	0%
Moderate	6	20%
High	24	80%
Total	30	100%

Source:CurrentStudy

The table above indicates that the majority of surveyed students (80%) use electronic networks during the COVID-19 pandemic to a high degree. None of them reported using it to a low degree. This reflects the prevalent use of social media networks in society, especially among youth and university students. The internet has provided users, particularly students, with an environment that allows them to interact and receive information actively through social media platforms. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, these platforms served as a means to alleviate the impact of isolation resulting from quarantine and necessary social distancing measures. The significance of the pandemic, its direct connection to citizens' lives and health, and the implementation of preventive health measures contributed to an increased reliance on media in these challenging circumstances.

Studies and statistics have confirmed that over a billion and a half students, for instance, needed online education due to COVID-19. Digital technology has been at the forefront of strategies to combat the pandemic, proving to be a public utility. In countries most affected by the pandemic, regulations were adjusted to enhance internet capabilities. A report from the United Nations committee indicated that around \$100 million was needed to provide broadband services for everyone in Africa. The World Bank Group launched the Digital Economy for Africa initiative, revealing the urgent need for it during the pandemic (Diop, 2020).

Table (4): Distribution of Sample Participants According to the Most Used Social Media Networks for Obtaining Pandemic News

Social Media Network	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	28	38.35%
Instagram	17	23.28%
WhatsApp	4	5.47%
Twitter	0	0%
YouTube	18	24.65%
Websites	6	8.2%
Total	73	100%

Source: Current Study

The table above illustrates that the Facebook application tops the list, while YouTube and Instagram closely follow. Websites rank second to last, and WhatsApp is at the bottom. The preference for Facebook is primarily due to its significant impact as a platform that facilitates information exchange, interaction, and access to personal profiles among users. Social media networks, especially Facebook, have played a crucial role in revolutionizing direct communication among users. Other social networks and websites, such as YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter, were linked to Facebook, contributing to the widespread use of these virtual applications. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these platforms served as essential tools for information exchange and staying connected, especially given their role in addressing the challenges of isolation and the need for real-time updates on the pandemic.

Regarding the lack of use of Twitter by students, despite its reputation for reliability and diligence in verifying pandemic-related news, the low familiarity with media literacy among students and the lack of awareness of the importance of reviewing site policies for dealing with pandemic-related news may explain this.

Table (5): Distribution of Sample Participants According to the Average Daily Usage of Digital Networks

Average Hours	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1	1	3.3%
1 to 3	10	33.3%
More than 3	19	63.3%
Total	30	100%

Source:CurrentStudy

The table above confirms that nearly two-thirds of the participants spend more than three hours using social media networks daily, indicating intensive usage. This suggests a heightened interest in COVID-19 news within virtual spaces, given the abundance of pandemic-related information on these platforms.

Table (6): Distribution of Sample Participants According to Preferred Times for Accessing Pandemic News

Times	Frequency	Percentage
Morning	2	5.55%
Evening	9	25%
Night	7	19.44%
Depending on Circumstances	18	50%
Total	36	100%

Source:CurrentStudy

Table 6 indicates that the highest percentage is recorded for accessing news "Depending on Circumstances." The "Morning" period had a very small percentage. This can be explained by the pandemic-induced changes in people's sleep patterns and wakefulness, leading to new habits such as daytime sleep and waking up at night. The preference for accessing news "Depending on Circumstances" during the evening and night aligns with global changes in sleep patterns during the pandemic.

Table (7): Distribution of Sample Participants According to the Type of Followed Pandemic News

News Type	Frequency	Percentage
Local	17	34.69
Regional	2	4.08
Global/International	30	62.5
Total	49 (question with more than one answer)	100%

Source:CurrentStudy

The table above shows that the most followed news by participants is global and international news, exceeding 62%. This is attributed to the global spread of the virus, despite preventive measures like border closures. People remained connected through social media, staying informed about pandemic-related developments worldwide. The increase in feelings of isolation and changes in daily life patterns during the pandemic contributed to participants seeking a human connection in the context of global crises, explaining their interest in international news. The table also suggests a possible link between pandemic news and conspiracy theories, given their global and international dimensions.

Table (8): Distribution of the Sample According to Exposure to False Information about the Coronavirus

Exposure to False Information	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	30	100%
No	0	0%
100%	30	Total

Source: Current Study

All participants in the sample confirmed that they had previously been exposed to false information about the coronavirus. This, if anything, indicates the widespread dissemination of false and misleading news during crises, especially those circulated through social media networks. This aligns with the findings of the study conducted by "Abu Bakr Habib Al-Salehi" (Al-Salehi, 2020), which concluded that a significant portion, approximately 67% of the sample, had encountered false news. These figures reflect the awareness of students regarding the prevalence of false news during crises. However, it does not necessarily imply their understanding of how to appropriately deal with it.

Table (9): Illustrates how the Sample Participants Deal with Fake News

Method of Dealing	Frequency	Percentage
Sharing it	1	%2.70
Commenting on it	12	%32.43
Contacting Publishers	5	%13.51
Ignoring it	19	%51.35
Total	37(question with more than one answer)	%100

Source: Current Study

Reviewing the data in the table above reveals that 51% of the respondents do not care when exposed to false news. Only 13 of them actively contact the publishers, while the remaining values range between 2% of those sharing the news to 32% commenting on it. This suggests that there are two types of audiences: one actively and positively engaging with news, critically selecting information based on personal experience and societal upbringing, and the other, more passive and easily influenced, often spreading rumors and myths.

Table (10): Clarifies Criteria for Distinguishing Fake News about the Coronavirus

Criteria for Distinguishing News	Frequency	Percentage
News Formulation	6	9.23%
Credibility of the Publisher	21	32.30%
Official Confirmation	3	4.61%
Frequency of Participation	4	6.15%
Interactive Comment Monitoring	9	13.84%
Comparison with Other Sources	22	33.84%
Total	65	100%

Source: Current Study

From this table, it is evident that the primary criteria for distinguishing fake news, ranking first and second, are "Official Confirmation" and "Credibility of the Publisher" with percentages ranging from 32% to 33%. Following these, "Comparison with Other Sources" is at 13%, then "News Formulation" at 9%, and finally, "Frequency of Participation" and "Interactive Comment Monitoring" at 6.15% and 13.84%, respectively. Participants are aware of the existence of false news, as indicated by tables (8) and (9), and react by directing their attention to news sources, assessing their credibility and identifying the original source. However, this contradicts the results of table (10), suggesting that students may not thoroughly check their responses, or they may lack a comprehensive understanding of media literacy concepts and indicators.

Table (11): Media Strategies Employed in Conveying COVID-19 News from Students' Perspectives

Media Strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sensationalism	16	30.18%
Exaggeration and Alarmism	33	62.26%
Citizen Reassurance	1	1.88
Presenting Facts as They Are	3	5.66%
Total	53 (question with more than one answer)	100%

Source: Current Study

The outcomes of Table (12) elucidate that exaggeration and alarmism constituted the predominant media approach in conveying news about the coronavirus, with a percentage surpassing 62%. Following this was the method of fear, with a very minimal percentage. Some students indicated that news either presented facts as they are or reassured citizens, though the percentages were negligible.

These figures highlight the diverse reactions of social media networks and their mechanisms in dealing with this significant and unexpected global crisis, where the majority tended towards exaggeration, alarmism, and sensationalism. Conversely, a very small portion inclined towards reassurance and presenting facts as they are, according to the participants. This may be attributed to the nature of the crisis itself, which intensified day by day, prompting the world to declare a state of emergency. Additionally, the abundance of information about risks (media density) may contribute to the belief in information exaggeration. The conflicts and disputes between sources of information and news production and dissemination lead to polarization, resulting in the exaggeration and sensationalism of information. Furthermore, the decline in trust levels in circulated information about the virus may drive individuals to exaggerate information and engage in alarmism. This is consistent with the findings of a study by Saleh (2021), which indicated that 42.1% of respondents believed there was social exaggeration of information and news related to the "Corona" virus, influencing the perceptions of the Egyptian public regarding the risks associated with "Corona."

- **Axis Two: Motivations for Following News Coverage of the Coronavirus Pandemic**

Table (12): Motivations for Following Digital News Networks' Coverage of the Coronavirus Pandemic

Degree Motivations For Following	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%
Credibility and precision in covering events.	3	10%	12	40%	4	13.3%	9	30%	2	6.7%
Inclusivity in addressing global issues.	6	20%	12	40%	7	23.3%	5	16.7%	0	0%
Dependence on its own sources.	1	3.3%	13	43.3%	10	33.3%	6	20%	0	0%
Reliance on recorded coverage (evidence, arguments, and proof).	2	6.7%	12	6.7%	9	30%	5	16.7%	2	6.7%
Diversity in the nature of news coverage and comprehensive coverage of events.	1	3.3%	17	56.6%	8	26.7%	3	10%	1	3.3%
Accessibility to news and updates at all times and places.	5	16.7%	17	56.6%	3	10%	5	16.7%	0	0%
Familiarity with updates in a short time.	3	10%	16	53.3%	6	20%	4	13.3%	1	3.3%

Source: Current Study

The results of Table (13) indicate the motivations of the participants in choosing social networks to follow pandemic news, as follows:

The participants strongly agreed at a rate of 73% regarding the accessibility to news and updates at all times and places.

The agreement rate for diversity in news coverage and covering the event in all its stages was 70%.

Participants' responses regarding familiarity with updates in a short time obtained an overall agreement rate of 63.3%.

The responses on inclusivity in addressing global issues reached an agreement rate approaching 60%.

Participants' responses regarding credibility and precision in covering events varied, with the agreement rate reaching 50%.

Lastly, responses regarding dependence on recorded coverage obtained the highest neutral rate, estimated at 30%.

From these results, it can be concluded that one of the main reasons participants follow news coverage on social networks for conveying COVID-19 news is the ability to stay informed at all times and places, providing synchronous interaction. Additionally, these platforms cover all pandemic-related news promptly and comprehensively.

These motivations underscore the characteristics of the online audience and the digital network audience in particular. The global nature of the pandemic, with profound impacts on various levels, prompts the audience to seek quick and comprehensive coverage and sufficient information.

Concerning the networks' credibility, objectivity, and precision in covering events, as well as their reliance on evidence and proof, a consensus was not predominant. However, the fact that 50% believe these networks provide news characterized by seriousness, objectivity, and accuracy indicates that the study's participants, who are university students, might not be fully aware that the lack of verification and accuracy in news is a direct cause of its spread. It suggests that these networks facilitated the dissemination of fake news, sometimes intentionally and other times unintentionally, as a response to the desires of the audience.

-Third Axis: Handling of Fake News

Table (13): Degree of Availability of "Media Education" Skills Among Students When Exposed to News on Social Media

degree Exposure Skills	Very High		High		Moderate		Low		Very Low	
	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%
Analyzing and Analytical News	4	13.3	6	20	13	43.3	5	16.7	2	6.7
Seek to Follow the News from Multiple Sources	6	20	10	33.3	11	36.7	2	6.7	1	3.3
Identify Sources of Media Texts and Their Objectives	3	10	9	30	12	40	4	13.3	2	6.7
Distinguish Between News and Opinion	9	30	12	40	5	16.7	4	13.3	0	0
Distinguish Between Real and Fake News	7	23.3	10	33.3	9	30	3	10	1	3.3

Source: Current Study

The results of the above table indicate the extent of the availability of "media education" skills when exposed to media. Respondents answered as follows:

Regarding the statement "I can distinguish between news and opinion," with a total percentage of 70% (ranging from Very High to High), while 13.3% indicated a low degree, and very low degree responses were nonexistent.

Responses about the ability to distinguish between real and fake news showed a percentage of 56.6% (High and Very High).

Regarding the statement "I seek to follow the news from multiple sources," the overall percentage was 53.3% (High), which is a moderate level.

Participants showed a high level of awareness of media text sources and objectives, with an overall percentage of 80% (40% for both High and Very High). However, a third of the participants had a limited ability to differentiate between fake and real news, even though the percentage was low. This aspect should not be neglected, especially considering that the sample consists of media students, who are expected to possess this skill as a minimum in media literacy.

Concerning respondents' answers to the statement "I strive to follow the news by examining and analyzing," the highest percentage was for the "Moderate" category.

These results suggest that media students, due to their field of study, have an acceptable level of media education skills that enable them to handle fake news

correctly, especially in distinguishing between news and opinion, as well as between fake and real news. However, these skills are not uniformly possessed, indicating a lack of consistent training in media and digital literacy measures with explicit and declared objectives.

Table (14): Reflects the Availability of Media Content Production Skills Among Students

Degree Content Production Skills	Very High		High		Moderate		Low		Very Low	
	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%
Sufficient knowledge of Media Content Production Methods	4	13.3	7	23.3	12	40	7	23.3	0	0
Adherence to Ethical Values in News Content Production	6	20	13	43.3	9	30	2	6.7	0	0
Consideration of Public Interest in Media Content Production	5	16.7	11	36.7	12	40	2	6.7	0	0
Strive to Produce Objective and Responsible Media Content	10	33.3	12	40	5	16.7	3	10	0	0

Source: Current Study

The results of the above table indicate the extent of availability of media content production skills as follows:

Respondents' answers regarding the statement "Strive to produce objective and responsible media content" were largely rated at 73.3% for the high degree. In contrast, responses to "Adherence to ethical values in news content production" were rated at a total percentage of 63.3% for the high degree. Responses about "Consideration of public interest in media content production" were rated at a total percentage of 53.4% for the high degree. Respondents answered the statement "Sufficient knowledge of media content production methods" with the highest percentage, estimated at 40% for the moderate degree.

The results affirm that media students in the sample lack experience and practice in producing media content. However, they expressed a commitment to ethical values and standards, emphasizing objectivity when formulating media messages. This can be interpreted as students responding based on theoretical expectations of news publishers or editors, relying on what they have theoretically studied in various standards, particularly those related to news values and journalistic ethics. Additionally, this may be explained by a lack of media literacy or an incomplete understanding of the concept of media education, especially in its production aspect. Media education is not only about the recipient but also about the sender. This is particularly evident in the context of new media, where users simultaneously act as senders and receivers. This highlights the need for a good understanding of media education skills, both in production and reception.

Table (15): Availability of Skills for Responsible Interaction with News Among Students

Degree Interaction Skills	Very Low		Low		Moderate		High		Very High	
	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%
Adhere to ethical standards in reposting news content	11	36.7	14	46.7	3	10	1	3.3	1	3.3
Avoid sharing and circulating fake news	16	53.3	10	33.3	4	13.3	0	0	0	0
Interact with published media messages objectively	11	36.7	11	36.7	5	16.7	2	6.7	1	3.3

Source: Current Study

The table above shows that respondents' answers to the statement "Avoid sharing and circulating fake news" obtained a high overall percentage of 86.6% for the very high degree, with negligible percentages for the low and very low degrees. Regarding "Adherence to ethical standards in reposting news content," respondents answered with an overall percentage of 83.4% for the very high degree. However, attention should be given to the moderate degree (10%) and the low degree (7%). Regarding "Interacting with published media messages objectively," respondents answered with an overall percentage of 73.4% for the very high degree.

These results indicate that respondents are careful not to share false or misleading news, demonstrating their commitment to sharing accurate media content. They also positively interact when producing media content, albeit to a lesser extent, as shown in the previous table. This can be explained by the respondents' awareness of the need to consider ethical standards in media content production. However, these responses may also be attributed to a lack of media literacy or the students' failure to fully comprehend media education in its content production and consumption dimensions.

Table (16): Illustrating the University's Provision of Media Literacy Reception and Comprehension Skills to Students

Degree Degree of Provision	Very Low		Low		Moderate		High		Very High	
	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%
Critical Reading Skills for News Content	2	6.6	7	23.3	7	23.3	12	40	2	6.6
Understanding, Analyzing, and Interpreting News Content	3	10	7	23.3	6	20	12	40	2	6.6
Training on Detecting Fake	2	6.6	5	16.6	9	30	11	36.66	3	10

News and Misleading Content										
Providing Accuracy and Caution in Receiving News Content	3	10	4	13.3	12	40	9	30	2	6,6

Source: Current Study

The results of Table 17 indicate the extent to which the university provides students with media literacy skills. The percentages represent the degree of provision for each skill category offered by the university.

According to the responses of the participants regarding the university's provision of critical reading skills for news content, the majority (46.6%) indicated a low degree of provision. Similarly, responses regarding the university's efforts in developing students' abilities to understand, analyze, and interpret news content revealed that approximately 47% perceived a low degree of provision. In contrast, responses regarding the university's efforts in providing students with skills to detect fake news and misleading content showed a moderate degree of agreement, with 40% acknowledging this provision. Regarding the training of students on methods to detect misleading media messages, the majority (46.6%) perceived a low degree of provision.

The findings suggest an overall shortage, if not scarcity, of vocabulary, standards, or specializations related to media education in Algerian universities in general and Annaba University in particular. This deficiency is despite the presence of conscientious professors who recognize the urgent need for such education. They are committed to fostering critical and creative thinking among students, as evidenced by the fact that over 26% of respondents believe that the university contributes to shaping media education skills. However, this percentage is deemed insufficient, considering the indispensability of these skills in the 21st century.

This reality is supported by previous studies, such as Mustafa Kachairi's conclusion that 93.15% see a pressing need for comprehensive media literacy education in journalism and media departments. This necessity extends to the development of critical thinking skills, the use of accurate information verification methods, and the cultivation of a cautious approach in receiving news content. Another study led by Suleiman Abu Al-Qasim also emphasized the lack of awareness regarding the urgent need for media literacy education in all educational stages, not just at the doctoral level.

These findings align with a study conducted by researchers, including Mustafa Kachairi, on media and information literacy in Algeria. The study revealed that 75% of university students have a weak knowledge level in media and information literacy. This weakness is attributed to the lack of attention to integrating relevant courses and specializations in media and digital education, especially in communication departments and faculties. These results reflect a lack of awareness regarding the urgent need for these courses at all educational levels, not only at the doctoral level, as is commonly practiced in the field of public relations.

Table (17): Representing Students' Media Interaction and Engagement Skills

Degree Skills	Very Low		Low		Moderate		High		Very High	
	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%	fr	%
Contribution to raising awareness about the importance of avoiding the dissemination of news from unknown sources	5	16.6	5	16.6	11	36.6	6	20	3	10
Organization of awareness activities to limit the misuse of media	3	10	3	10	10	33.3	10	33.3	4	13.3
Strengthening awareness of the importance of freedom of expression and responsibility simultaneously	2	6.6	7	23.3	13	43.3	5	16.6	3	10
Encouragement to conduct specialized media research in this field	5	16.6	4	13.3	8	26.6	9	30	4	13.3
Organization of specialized workshops in this field	3	10	1	3.3	8	26.6	9	30	9	30

Source: Current Study

The table above illustrates the degree to which students possess media interaction and engagement skills. The percentages indicate the availability of these skills at different levels.

According to the data in this table, participants' responses regarding the enhancement of awareness of the importance of freedom of expression and responsibility simultaneously achieved the highest percentage for the moderate degree at 43.3%. Concerning participants' responses about contributing to raising awareness among students about the necessity of avoiding the dissemination of news from unknown sources, the moderate degree also ranked the highest at 36.6%. The high degree was 33.2%, while the low degree was 30%, with relatively close percentages. Participants' responses regarding organizing awareness activities to limit the misuse of media showed a higher percentage for the low degree at 46.6%. For encouraging students to conduct specialized media research in this field, participants responded with 43.3%, which was the highest for the low degree. As for organizing specialized workshops in this field, the highest percentage was for the low and very low degrees, reaching 60%.

From the presentation above, it is evident that universities provide students with a moderate level of media interaction skills in both dimensions: strengthening freedom of expression and respecting others' opinions and contributing to raising awareness among students about avoiding the dissemination of news from unknown sources. This could be attributed to the recognition of authorities about the dangers of spreading false news and the urgent need to equip students with conscious media interaction skills, especially during crises where misinformation is prevalent. However, this

awareness is moderate and insufficient, and students still need more attention to these aspects.

Regarding organizing awareness activities to limit the misuse of media and encouraging students to conduct specialized media research in this field, as well as organizing specialized workshops, high percentages indicate weak efforts to equip students with media interaction skills in these dimensions. This aligns with Mustafa Kachairi's study in 2021, which recorded that nearly 80% of professors believe that the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research does not assign significant importance to media education as courses or scientific activities. This is evidenced by the fact that, until 2020, only a few laboratories in some universities began organizing scientific conferences on media education topics, and very few graduation theses addressed this subject. About 62% attribute the students' lack of media interaction skills to the university's insufficient recognition of the importance of media education as a specialization that can positively impact students, the university, and society as a whole.

IV. Results:

After analyzing the data collected through the electronic questionnaire and interpreting it, the following results have been extracted to address the study's questions:

1-Nature of News During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

-Concerning the nature of news circulated during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was observed that students predominantly follow global and international news. This is unsurprising, given the global nature of the pandemic. The news topics primarily revolved around the spread of the virus, preventive measures, and the associated repercussions.

2-Media and Digital Literacy Skills of Media Students:

Regarding the importance of media and digital literacy skills among media students, their responses affirmed their ability to differentiate between false and accurate news. They are cognizant of the risks of participating in the dissemination of false information, albeit at a minimal level. However, they do not show a strong inclination to employ these skills to contribute to countering this type of news.

3-Media Students' Inquiry into News Sources:

Regarding the inquiry into news sources during the COVID-19 pandemic, students acknowledged the importance of this step. However, there is a discrepancy in their responses, indicating a lack of significant interest in taking practical steps in this regard.

4-Contribution of Media Literacy Skills in Countering Fake News:

Concerning the contribution of media literacy skills in countering fake news, students primarily refrained from sharing or reposting such news. However, their participation in organizing awareness activities or campaigns against fake news was minimal. This emphasizes a greater focus on incorporating media literacy as criteria and curricula within relevant specialties.

V. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the study revealed a widespread dissemination of fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic, termed as an "information pandemic," especially on social media platforms. Activating media literacy skills became crucial as a defense against the dangers of false and misleading information. Students, who are key players in

facing the "information pandemic," demonstrated some media literacy skills but exhibited only moderate utilization. The study underscored the need for more effort in raising awareness about the dangers of fake news, emphasizing media and digital literacy skills, and highlighted the university's responsibility in training students on these principles to enhance critical thinking.

In summary, the findings suggest that media literacy skills can play an effective role in shaping future generations of journalists and media professionals who are socially conscious and contribute responsibly to crisis management.

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