

Disinformation and its impact on academic research: A field study at the National Higher School of Political Science in Algeria

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Abstract:

Disinformation has emerged as a contemporary topic within scientific research, largely due to the information revolution and the rapid advancement of modern technologies. This study seeks to examine the impact of disinformation on the academic community, with a particular focus on academic research in the field of political science. A descriptive research design was adopted, using a questionnaire distributed to a sample of 30 Master's students enrolled at the National Higher School of Political Science. The findings reveal that 80% of the participants frequently encounter inaccurate or misleading information while conducting online research related to political science. In addition, more than half of the respondents reported that disinformation substantially undermines the quality of their academic work. The study recommends enhancing awareness of disinformation and methods for addressing it within academic research. It also highlights the need to adopt new strategies to ensure the quality and credibility of research outputs in political science, as well as integrating educational materials that promote media literacy and critical evaluation skills into academic curricula.

Keywords

Disinformation; scientific research; political science; National Higher School of Political Science; Algeria

1. Introduction

Scientific integrity represents a fundamental pillar of academic research within classical scholarly traditions and continues to serve as a central component of ethical and methodological training in universities worldwide. It is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of academic and scientific ethics, guiding researchers in the accurate use of sources, rigorous documentation, and strict adherence to methodological standards. Accordingly, educational programs place considerable emphasis on cultivating integrity from the early stages of university education through to the preparation of dissertations and theses, where students are expected to master citation practices, source evaluation, and distinctions between various types of references. The rapid expansion of digital technologies and the global information revolution have profoundly reshaped the landscape of scientific research. While these developments have facilitated unprecedented access to vast amounts of information, they have also generated significant concerns regarding the credibility and reliability of the data used in academic work. As a result, the concept of scientific integrity has re-emerged at the centre of academic discourse, particularly with respect to the quality of digital sources, the accuracy of information, and the methodological challenges inherent in verifying online content. Today, the credibility of scientific research depends more than ever on the validity of the information, hypotheses, and evidence upon which it is constructed.

In the field of political science, these challenges are particularly pronounced. As a discipline devoted to the analysis of political structures, processes, and power dynamics, political science is especially susceptible to misleading or manipulated information. The growing prevalence of disinformation, whether political, ideological, or strategically driven, poses a significant threat to the reliability and rigor of academic research. Consequently, students and researchers must navigate a complex informational landscape in which distinguishing factual content from fabricated narratives has become increasingly difficult.

Within this context, the present article seeks to explore **how Master's students at the National Higher School of Political Science perceive and assess the impact of disinformation on academic research**. More specifically, the study aims to address the following questions:

To what extent do students perceive disinformation as influencing the quality of research in political science?

How competent are students in evaluating the credibility of information obtained from online sources related to their field of study?

To what degree are students aware of the strategies employed to verify the reliability of political information available online?

Does their academic training sufficiently equip them to confront and mitigate the challenges posed by disinformation?

Study Methodology and Research Tools

Given the nature of the study's subject matter, the descriptive method was adopted for the completion of this research. Data were collected through a questionnaire distributed to a random sample of Master's students from all specializations within the school, in addition to the examination of official documents related to the teaching units across all levels at the National Higher School of Political Science.

2. Study sample

2.1. Academic level

The study sample consisted of 30 students representing all three years of the Master's program. The sample was selected randomly, taking into account the specific structure of the training at the National Higher School of Political Science, which includes a two-year preparatory cycle followed by a three-year Master's cycle. Efforts were made to ensure that the sample adequately reflected the distribution across the three academic years, with a slight emphasis on the third year.

The first-year Master's students constituted **33.34%** of the sample, while

second-year students represented **26.66%**, and third-year students accounted for **40%** of the participants. This distribution provides an objective assessment of the final-year group, who are in the process of preparing their graduation thesis. It also allows us to evaluate their level of awareness and understanding of electronic and digital scientific credibility, as well as the extent to which they have benefited from prior training in technical and informational research methodology. The table below presents the numerical and relative distribution of the study sample across the three levels of the Master's program:

The level	Number of Occurrences	Percentage
First Year Master's	10	33.34%
Second Year Master's	08	26.66%
Third Year Master's	12	40%
Total	30	100%

Table1: Academic level

2.2 Specialization

The study sample is distributed across two academic specializations. The first and larger group comprises students from the Department of International Relations, representing **63.33%** of the total sample. The second group consists of students enrolled in the Public Policies specialization, accounting for **36.67%**.

From a pedagogical and analytical standpoint, the differentiation between these two specializations provides added value to the study. While students share a common foundational curriculum during the preparatory stage, the specialization phase introduces distinct programmatic structures and disciplinary orientations. This diversity

enhances the representativeness of the sample and allows for the capture of a wider range of perspectives regarding the use of information sources and exposure to disinformation in academic research.

An examination of the curricula of both specializations (International Relations and Public Policies) demonstrates that their scientific, methodological, and exploratory course units inherently require substantial reliance on electronic and digital sources. Research topics commonly addressed in these programs, such as international and regional conflicts, sustainable development, human rights, democratic transition, and Algeria's foreign policy, are highly dynamic fields dependent on current data, real-time statistics, and continuously updated reports. Consequently, students in both tracks are systematically directed toward electronic information environments, making them particularly exposed to the challenges posed by digital disinformation.

Specialization	Number of occurrences	Percentage
International Relations	19	63.33%
Public Policies	11	36.67%
Total	30	100%

Table2: Specialization

3. Study Terminology

- **Disinformation:** Disinformation refers to false information that is deliberately created to harm an individual, social group, or international organization. It is characterized by the intentional production of false content or the manipulation of existing information to construct a misleading narrative (The Future of Free Speech: Toolkit on Misinformation and Disinformation, 2004).

Several related concepts are associated with disinformation:

- **Information Pollution:** The presence of large volumes of information among which the recipient cannot distinguish accurate from inaccurate content (Kurt & Askim, 2012).
- **Misinformation:** False information that is not intentionally created to cause harm.
- **Harmful Disinformation:** Information based on factual content but manipulated to inflict damage on an individual, organization, or state (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).
- **Research:** Scientific research is defined as a systematic process of inquiry through which solutions to specific problems are sought via comprehensive and precise examination of all relevant evidence and data (Muhammad Sarhan, 2019).
- **National Higher School of Political Science:** The National Higher School of Political Science (NHSPS) is a public institution with scientific, cultural, and professional mandates, possessing legal personality and financial independence. It serves as a centre of excellence in higher education and operates under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The school was established by Executive Decree No. 251-09 on 24 Sha'ban 1413 (corresponding to August 10, 2009) upon the proposal of the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Since 2016, the institution has been governed by the regulatory framework stipulated in Executive Decree No. 176-16 (June 14, 2016), which defines its statutes and operational guidelines.

4. Scientific research and the concept of disinformation

4.1 Conducting academic research via the internet in the field of political science

Conducting Research on the Internet	number of Occurrences	Percentage
Yes	30	100%
No	0	0%
Total	30	100%

TableNo.03: Conducting research on the internet

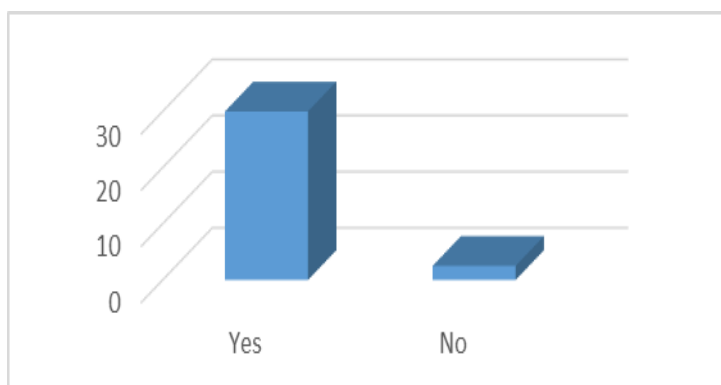


Figure01: Conducting research on the internet

The table above indicates that 100% of the student researchers at the National Higher School of Political Science rely on the Internet for conducting their research. This finding reflects the students' proficiency in digital scientific research and their capacity to navigate the virtual research environment. The extensive use of online resources is facilitated by the advantages offered by virtual libraries, the efficiency in completing research using readily available and open-access sources, and the variety of research platforms provided by both Algerian and international universities. These resources include thesis repositories, digital library indices, and electronic platforms hosting specialized national and international scientific journals.

4.2 Perceived Confidence in Assessing the Credibility of Political Information Sources

Assessment of the Credibility of Political Information Sources	number of occurrences	Percentage
Very confident	05	16.66%
Confident	10	33.33%
Neutral	05	16.66%
Not very sure	07	23.33%
Not confident at all	03	10%
Total	30	100%

Tableno.04: The degree of confidence in the ability to assess the credibility of political information sources

Figure2: Assessment of the credibility of political information sources

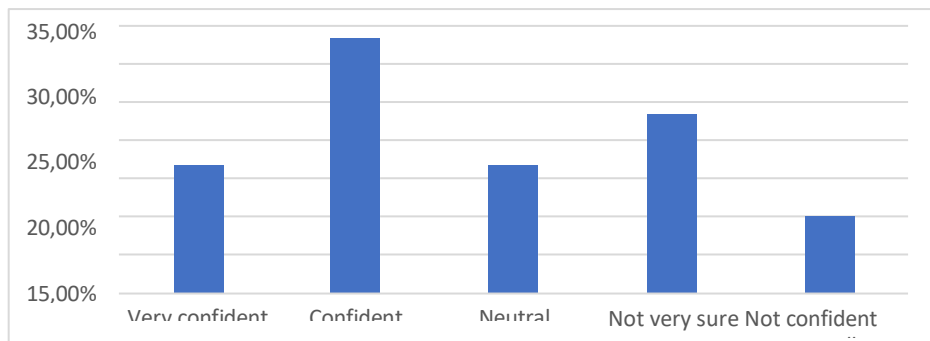


Figure2: Assessment of the credibility of political information sources

Regarding the perceived awareness of student researchers in

evaluating the credibility of political information sources (across International Relations and Public Policies specializations), the study revealed important insights relevant to the assessment of disinformation in academic research. In terms of absolute confidence, 16.66% of students reported “complete trust” in the sources they use. The proportion expressing general “trust” nearly doubled this figure, reaching 33.33%. When combined, these two categories indicate that approximately 50% of students approach their information sources with confidence (very confident or confident).

The neutral category, students who were hesitant or undecided, accounted for 16.66%, equal to the proportion expressing absolute confidence. Meanwhile, 23.33% of students reported being “not very confident” in the credibility of their sources, and 30% indicated complete lack of confidence.

These findings provide a comprehensive overview of students’ awareness regarding the reliability of information sources. Roughly half of the sample engages with sources confidently, while the other half exhibits varying degrees of uncertainty (neutral, not very confident, or completely lacking confidence).

4.3 Exposure to Incorrect or Misleading Information During Online Research in Their Field of Specialization

Confrontation with Incorrect or Misleading Information	number of occurrences	Percentage
Yes	24	80%
No	06	20%
Total	30	100%

TableNo.05: Confronting incorrect or misleading information

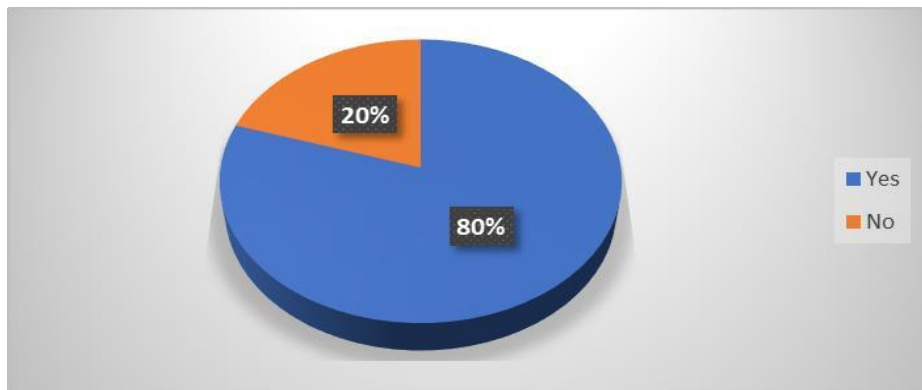


Figure3: Encountering incorrect or misleading information

It is evident from the table above that, regarding students' ability to distinguish between credible and misleading information, the vast majority, 80% of the sample, demonstrate the capacity to differentiate accurate from misleading content. These students regularly encounter incorrect or misleading information during the preparation of their academic research. Conversely, a minority group, representing 20% of respondents, reported that they had not encountered any incorrect or misleading information.

This discrepancy can be attributed to several factors:

1. **Methodological training:** Students' ability to discern between credible sources and manipulated information may be strengthened by the methodological instruction they receive, enabling them to identify errors or intentional distortions in data.
2. **Reliance on credible sources:** Many students adhere to rigorous academic standards set by their institutions, consistently using verified and authoritative sources in their research.

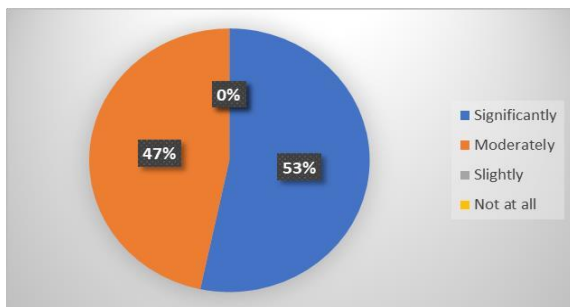


Figure4: The impact of disinformation on the quality of research

3. **Limited critical evaluation:** The group that reported no exposure to incorrect or misleading information may lack the ability to distinguish between primary and secondary sources or may not yet have developed sufficient critical thinking skills to assess the reliability of data against original sources.

4.4. Rate of Impact of Disinformation on the Quality of Political Research

Impact of disinformation in the quality of political research work	Number of occurrences	Percentage
Significantly	16	53.33%
Moderately	14	46.67%
Slightly	0	0%
Not at all	0	0%
Total	30	100%

TableN.06: Percentage of the impact of disinformation in the quality of political research work.

Based on the fundamental requirements of scientific research and its methodological stages, which necessitate the collection of information and data from credible sources, any deviation from these methodological standards negatively affects the quality of the resulting research, particularly when references rely on contradictory, inaccurate, or misleading data. The table above indicates that 53.33% of students at the National Higher School of Political Science believe that disinformation has a significant impact on research quality, while 46.67% consider the impact to be moderate. Notably, no respondents reported that disinformation has little or no impact on the quality of research. These findings are consistent with the broader perception among student researchers that combating disinformation requires enhanced awareness of the methodological rigor demanded by scientific research.

5. Credibility of Sources and Its Impact on Political Research

5.1 Students' Trust in Online Political Sources During Academic Research

Level of Trust in political sources	number of occurrences	Percentage
Very confident	02	6.66%
Confident	07	23.33%
Neutral	11	36.67%
Not very sure	09	30%
Not rust at all	01	3.33%
Total	30	100%

TableNo.07: percentage of trust in political sources found by Students via Internet for their academic research

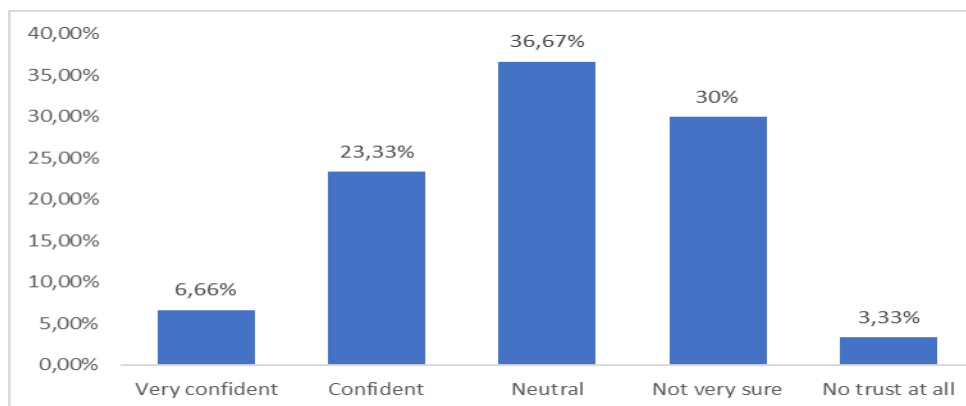


Figure5: Level of trust in online sources

Websites provide a diverse array of sources, and the availability of multiple search engines facilitates the organization and retrieval of information related to research topics. However, the ethical and scientific responsibility for selecting credible sources rests squarely on the researcher. Credible sources, whether in print or digital format, are those that meet the standards required for scientific research.

It is noteworthy that traditional paper-based sources may decline in the future as electronic editions increasingly replace them. Consequently, the use of credible digital sources is expected to expand, provided that researchers apply proper online research techniques, reflecting a high level of trust in the sources utilized. The survey results indicate that very few students express the highest level of confidence in online sources, with only 6.66% reporting “very high trust.” The category “trust” accounted for 23.33% of the sample. When combined, these two levels of confidence represent less than one-third of the surveyed group. This finding raises questions about the extent to which student researchers recognize the importance of

diverse, reliable sources, including peer-reviewed scientific journals and official information from international institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union, and other official data repositories.

Meanwhile, 36.67% of respondents were neutral or undecided, suggesting uncertainty regarding the reliability and significance of digital sources.

5.2 Students' Belief that Internet Rumours Can Influence Their Perception of Political Events

Effect of rumours	Number of occurrences	Percentage
Yes	02	6.67%
No	13	43.33%
Partially	15	50%
Total	30	100%

TableNo.08: The belief that online rumours can influence how students perceive certain political events.

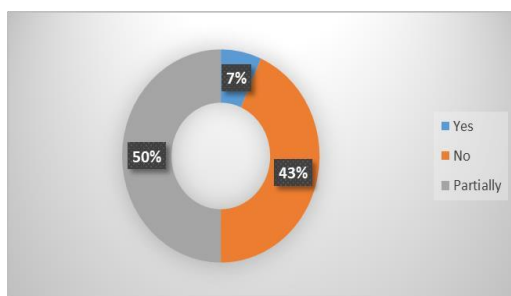


Figure6: Effect of rumours

The findings indicate that most respondents are not significantly influenced by online rumours when preparing their research or interpreting political phenomena. A share of 43.33% reported that

rumours have *no meaningful impact* on their analysis of political events. However, a slightly larger proportion, 50%, believes that rumours exert a *partial influence* on their analytical process.

This partial influence may be attributed to the inherently dynamic nature of political topics, which are often marked by rapid shifts and sudden developments. In such contexts, researchers may rely on primary online sources that provide real-time coverage but lack adequate scrutiny or verification. This situation highlights one of the fundamental methodological challenges in political science and international relations research: navigating fluid, fast-paced, and evolving political environments while ensuring the reliability of the information used in analysis.

5.3 Knowledge of Strategies Used to Verify the Reliability of Online Political Sources

Knowledge of used strategies	number of occurrences	Percentage
Yes	07	23.33%
No	23	76.67%
Partially	15	50%
Total	30	100%

TableNo.09: Knowledge of strategies used to verify the reliability of online political sources

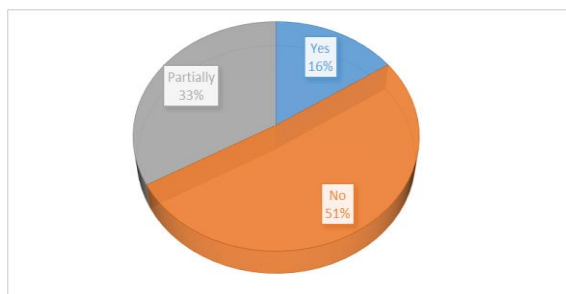


Figure7: Knowledge of strategies used

Ignorance, unsurprisingly, constitutes a major impediment to any intellectual or analytical task. In this context, the group of students who are unable to distinguish between reliable sources and misleading information clearly lacks the methodological and technical skills necessary for engaging critically with credible data, documents, and information. This limitation becomes evident through the general indicators related to students' awareness of the strategies used to verify the reliability of online political sources. The results reveal that a substantial majority, 76.67%, reported having no knowledge of these verification strategies. Furthermore, 50% indicated possessing only partial knowledge, based on responses to open-ended questions designed to differentiate between positive, moderate, and negative levels of awareness. In contrast, a little over one-fifth of the sample (23.33%) affirmed having adequate knowledge of the strategies required to assess the credibility of online information and sources.

This overall pattern highlights a significant gap that must be addressed. It underscores the urgent need to combat this form of informational illiteracy by equipping students, from the earliest stages of their academic formation, with a solid grounding in the methodological foundations of scientific research, ranging from proper citation techniques to the development of fully structured

research papers.

6 Education strategies and training needs

6.1 Training in Media Awareness and Critical Evaluation of Sources in the Context of Political Science Education

Receiving Training	Number of occurrences	Percentage
Yes	07	23.33%
No	23	76.67%
Total	30	100%

Table10: Receiving training

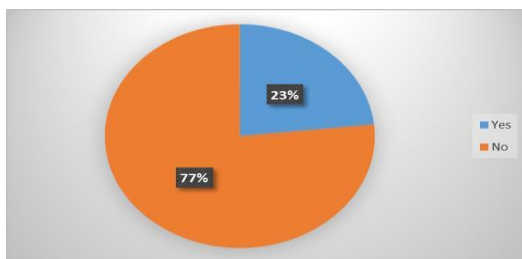


Figure8: Receiving training

The underlying reason for students' lack of knowledge regarding the rules and strategies used to ensure the credibility and reliability of sources becomes evident when examining their responses to the question concerning media awareness or critical assessment training during their academic studies. The findings show that a majority of 76.67% reported not having received any form of training in this domain. Conversely, slightly more than one-fifth of the respondents (23.33%) indicated that they had indeed received such training.

These results point to a structural deficiency within academic

programs, which inevitably places responsibility on the authorities overseeing teaching and training curricula at various levels. There is a clear need to integrate methodological modules as fundamental and practical components of the educational process, with the aim of addressing students' lack of familiarity with research strategies and the principles governing the evaluation and credibility of sources.

6.2. Importance of Integrating an Information Awareness Unit into Higher Education Programs

Integration of Information awareness unit	number of occurrences	Percentage
Yes	26	86.67%
No	0	0%
I don't know	4	13.33%
Total	30	100%

TableNo.11: Integration of the information awareness unit

Based on the data presented in the table above, it is clear that the surveyed students expressed a strong and urgent need to integrate a specialized unit dedicated to information awareness within the academic curriculum. This unit, according to their views, should constitute a core component across all educational levels, undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs. A significant proportion of respondents, 86.67%, supported this recommendation. In contrast, the remaining 13.33% either selected the option "I don't know," reflecting a lack of awareness, or appear to be insufficiently informed about the significance of technological and digital developments and their growing influence on the future of scientific research.

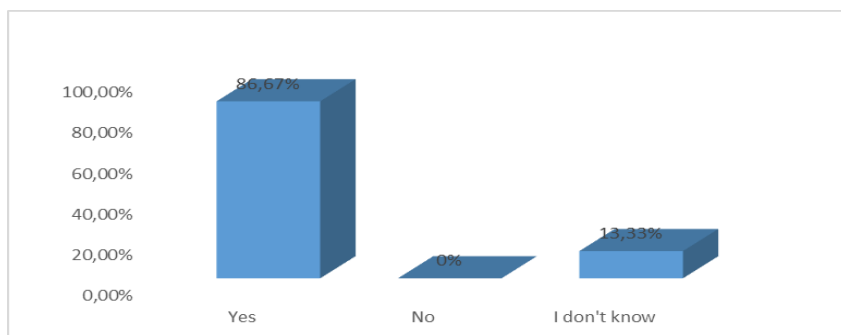


Figure9: Integration of the information awareness unit

7. Discussion of study results:

Through the analysis of the sample concerning the awareness of students at the National Higher School of Political Sciences regarding the nature of disinformation and the degree of its impact on the quality and credibility of scientific research, it becomes essential to emphasize that scientific research fundamentally requires rigor and precision in its methodological procedures, particularly in relation to the selection and documentation of sources, whether printed or digital.

The initial stages of research demand the ability to access credible information sources through a thorough review of the existing literature. This includes consulting library collections, general reference works, academic journal indexes, and the online catalogue, alongside the researcher's capacity to critically evaluate and compare sources.

At this stage, access to reliable digital resources provides significant support to the researcher. Algerian universities, including the National Higher School of Political Sciences, facilitate this process

by offering online access through the library's website and by providing subscriptions to international databases via the Research Centre in Scientific and Technical Information (CERIST), affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

In its essence, scientific research is inseparable from the verification of the credibility of data, information, and documents, which must originate from accurate, official, and academically recognized sources. Ensuring the advancement of scientific research therefore requires giving substantial attention to all stages of researcher training, with the aim of building the capacity to distinguish between primary scientific sources and unverified electronic sites. For example, the widespread tendency among student researchers to rely on the open encyclopedia Wikipedia weakens the academic rigor of their work compared to internationally recognized encyclopedias such as *Encyclopaedia Universalis* or *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Consequently, methodological guidance must begin at the earliest stages of research training to enable learners to differentiate between scientific sources and secondary or marginal references, particularly in an era dominated by electronic research.

Based on the findings, disinformation can be understood through the following considerations:

- Reliance on sources and references classified as unreliable or unverifiable by competent authorities.
- Scientific rigor requires the exclusion of any data, information, or documents that do not originate from official or academically reliable sources.
- Excessive dependence on social media platforms and the abandonment of specialized, expert-based sources such as peer-reviewed journals or academically recognized works.
- Manipulation of data, information, and statistics by interest or

pressure groups to influence decision-makers, consistent with what is referred to in media studies as *fourth-generation warfare*, where indicators, facts, and data are distorted to shape public opinion, generate frustration, and influence social change.

Moreover, the methodological training received by students, through research methodology modules in the first year of the common core and again at the master's level, combined with the academic rigor imposed by educational institutions, facilitates their ability to distinguish between credible sources and those that intentionally or unintentionally distort information due to lack of specialization or incorrect data transmission.

The results of this study highlight the need to reinforce awareness of disinformation and strategies for addressing it within the context of scientific research. They also point to the necessity of adopting new approaches to ensure the quality and credibility of research conducted in political science. The findings further emphasize the importance of enhancing knowledge and skills related to evaluating the reliability of online political sources, especially given the high proportion of students who lack adequate methodological training in this area.

Consequently, it becomes imperative to integrate a specialized unit on information awareness into higher education curricula, as a core subject across undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs. Such a unit would equip students with the methodological tools needed to understand, evaluate, and use information critically and effectively. This would not only strengthen information literacy skills in the modern knowledge society but also enhance students' ability to engage positively with technological and digital developments,

thereby supporting the advancement and future preparedness of scientific research and technological progress more broadly.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, disinformation represents a critical issue that demands significant attention from the bodies responsible for designing and supervising training programs, with the aim of strengthening students' critical thinking skills. Addressing this challenge requires the integration of regular and mandatory educational workshops and awareness sessions to enhance the awareness of the academic community across all levels of education.

These initiatives must include systematic training in the critical analysis of information and the provision of the methodological tools necessary to ensure students' ability to evaluate, interpret, and extract reliable information. Furthermore, strict guidelines should be established for assessing the credibility of sources used in academic research, thereby encouraging researchers to adopt rigorous standards in source analysis and verification.

By implementing these measures, educational institutions will be better positioned to confront the challenges associated with disinformation and to equip individuals with the skills required to navigate the complexities of the modern information environment effectively. This, in turn, will contribute to improving the quality of scientific research and strengthening the academic community's resilience against misleading or unreliable information.

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