AARHUS UNIVERSITY

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA. HOW DO THEY TALK ABOUT ONLINE DISINFORMATION IN VIEW OF THE 2019 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS?

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Abstract

Having a transparent electoral campaign is an essential aspect of every democratic society. However, the advent and the diffusion of the Internet brought additional challenges, in particular, the issue of online disinformation, threating citizens' right to an unbiased vote. Indeed, if on the one hand, the Internet and especially social media made easier for everyone to access the news; on the other hand, this new way of communicating has also facilitated the dissemination of misleading information, making sensationalist and biased content viral very quickly. This has implications on the way people stay informed and engage with politics and becomes even more relevant during an election period like that of this year's European Parliament elections.

As a matter of fact, the 2019 European Parliament elections were brought to the attention of the public more than in the past due to the many challenges that the EU is facing right now, which question the future of the European integration process. This is why the EU institutions cooperated to limit as much as possible the damages caused by the disinformation campaigns aiming to influence people's voting behaviour. Nevertheless, if it is true that every segment of the EU population could possibly fall for misleading information; those who are more at risk are youth. In fact, according to the Eurobarometer surveys, they are not only those who vote less in the European Parliament elections but also those who use the most social media and are more confident in their ability to tackle online disinformation. However, being digitally native doesn't necessarily mean being media literate.

Therefore, with my thesis, I want to examine European university students' opinion on existing obstacles in gathering online information regarding EU politics and what they classify as the biggest threat to transparent and cognizant voting in the context of the 2019 European Parliament elections campaign. In doing this, I decided to conduct a thematic analysis, which uncovered eight themes, of four focus groups composed by a total of 42 European university students and conducted during the early days of the EP elections campaign; two focus groups took place in Aarhus and two took place

in Brussels. My research question is the following: "*How do European university students talk about the use of social media and the issue of online disinformation in view of the 2019 European Parliament elections?*"

The results of my analysis were overall fairly homogeneous among the different focus groups; presenting only occasionally some differences between the perceptions of those based in Aarhus and those based in Brussels on specific topics such as the exposure to news related to EU politics. Moreover, there was a general understanding of the problem of online disinformation, described by most as a hindrance to a transparent and informed vote. However, even if the large majority of students outlined potential obstacles of accessing and reading a piece of information on the Internet, especially on social media, this was rarely understood as something directly affecting them.

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Introduction

Nowadays, for many European university students reading daily news means being able to orientate in a jungle of sources coming from the vast amount of posts and alerts present on their newsfeed. While some stories derive from reliable websites or official pages of trustworthy media outlets, other content is shared by users and pages with the aim of spreading disinformation and this can even happen when the students aren't directly following them. In view of the 2019 European Parliament elections, which are even more relevant than the previous ones because of the unstable situation present in most of the EU countries with the rise of populism, migration and the forthcoming Brexit; having a transparent and democratic election campaign seems to be a very critical issue. As Stephan Mündges points out, there is a general fear of the spread of large disinformation campaigns aiming to influence the elections' result as happened during the Brexit vote and the last US presidential elections (Mündges, 2019).

Since 2016, the word "post-truth" has become part of the Oxford dictionary's vocabulary, a fact that, together the huge development and diffusion of social media, can be considered the symbol of the current situation of online information; describing the ensemble of problems that afflict and influence our daily interaction with the news spread on the net. It marks a new era in which, according to the Oxford dictionary, "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). The concern is thus not only the growing presence of online disinformation but, as Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Lucas Graves pointed out, how and where people get their news from. There is a more generalised scepticism toward the actors dominating the contemporary information environment, which appears to affect the whole population and consequently, the outcome of these elections (Kleis Nielsen and Graves, 2017).

The current situation is seen by the EU institutions as a possible threat to the democratic process, especially in view of the European Parliament elections. "*I want Europeans to be able to make their*

political choices next May in fair, secure and transparent European elections. In our online world, the risk of interference and manipulation has never been so high. It is time to bring our election rules up to speed with the digital age to protect European democracy," said European Commission President Jean-Claude Junker during the 2018 State of the Union (European Commission, 2018).

The European Commission developed different strategies to guarantee free, fair and secure elections. One of them is the "Action Plan against Disinformation", providing an increased budget for the External Action Service's Task Force working to identify online disinformation. Another attempt to fight misleading news is the creation of an alert system between EU institutions and its member states for sharing information on disinformation campaigns and close monitoring of the application of the 'Code of Practice' by Facebook, Google and Twitter (European Commission, 2018). However, the first results regarding the progress made by these online platforms show a lack of a serious commitment to actually fight disinformation. "*We encourage the platforms to accelerate their efforts, as we are concerned by the situation. We urge Facebook, Google and Twitter to do more across all Member States to help ensure the integrity of the European Parliament elections in May 2019*," declared in a joint statement the Commissioners Andrus Ansip, Věra Jourová, Julian King and Mariya Gabriel (European Commission, 2019).

Nevertheless, other than the capacity of an online platform to effectively tackle inaccurate and false content, we should also consider how people access and understand the news they find online, or rather their level of media literacy and its possible implication on their voting behaviour. The term is generally defined as "*the ability of a citizen to access, analyse, and produce information for specific outcomes*" (Aufderheide, 1993). Indeed, with the growing use of the internet as a means to read the news, it is crucial that citizens understand how to interact with the different types of media, what types of information they can find in the different channels and the possible implication that all this could have on the elections' outcome.

According to Tornero, Paredes and Simelio, the EU institutions have played a fundamental role in developing of media literacy in Europe, especially by broadening the scope of this concept with the inclusion of two dimensions: the protection and promotion of human rights and the social and economic aspect. In fact, in the last years, the European Commission has launched several initiatives to promote digital literacy among member states and has also set up a group of experts with the task of providing their knowledge and guidance on policies on the subject. In addition, several studies have been conducted on the topic, influencing the Commission's strategy for the promotion of digital literacy and raising awareness on the need of comprehensive media education in long-term teaching and training facilities within the different EU countries (Tornero, Paredes and Simelio, 2012). This concept is an essential factor to guarantee the existence of active European citizenship within our digital society. It represents a fundamental competence not only for the youth, which are defined in European policy as those aged 15-29 years (Perovic, 2016, p 4) as it will be discussed in chapter 2 but also for kids, adults and elderly people.

However, the level of media literacy is not homogeneous, it varies among the different EU member states and the different age groups. According to the 2018 Media Literacy Index conducted by Marin Lessenski on the resilience potential of 35 European countries to post-truth phenomenon, the states that are most capable of tackling misleading information and their ramification are the North-western European countries, such as the Scandinavian ones, the Netherlands, Estonia and Ireland. While, the countries in the lowest position of the ranking are the ones located in South-east Europe, such as Croatia, Albania, Macedonia, Turkey, Hungary and Greece. Following Lessenski's analysis, education appears to play a key role in determining people vulnerability to the post-truth phenomenon. Indeed, the lowest-scoring countries of the index are also the ones generally having poor or mediocre education performance (Lessenski, 2018).

The outcomes of a recent Eurobarometer survey on "Fake News and Disinformation Online" appear to lead to a similar conclusion; the ones who feel more confident in tackling online disinformation

are people from North-western European countries, or rather those that, according to Lessenski's results, have a higher level of education. Anyhow, the survey shows that even if online disinformation is seen as a generalised problem across the European Union, the majority of the people think they are able to tackle 'fake news'. In fact, on the one hand, 85% of the respondents said that online disinformation is a problem in their country. On the other hand, 71% of them believe in their capability to identify news misrepresenting reality (European Commission, 2018, pp.15-18).

Even though everyone is more or less affected by the spread of misleading information within social media, the portion of the population that rely most on them to read the news are the youth. According to the Eurobarometer statistics, young people (15-24 years old) are usually the ones who trust more online sources, but at the same time the ones who come across 'fake news' more frequently (European Commission, 2018, pp. 9-10). However, being young does not necessarily mean being more digitally literate. For instance, research issued by Stanford University on 7,800 students of varying levels in 12 American states revealed that the respondents' consistent inability to determine the credibility of an online news source (Wineburg et al., 2016).

In Europe, different studies showed a similar situation. For example, an analysis conducted by Tatiana Shopova among 60 first and second-year students in Bulgaria, demonstrated that most participants rarely used print media (books, newspapers and magazines) to assist the learning activities and relied heavily on the electronic media. The research has also revealed that 45% of the respondents had no skills to evaluate information critically and 64% of them had difficulties in verifying the authenticity and reliability of the data collected (Shopova, 2014). These outcomes are also supported by a broader survey issued by the European Association for Viewers Interests (EAVI), which concerns the measure of national media literacy levels in Europe. According to what reported by the EAVI analysis, more than 70 % of the people aged between 16-24 held a poor or middling critical understanding of information present in the media (European Association for Viewers' Interests, 2011, pp 73-75). As these researches show, we must overcome the common idea of considering young people as naturally

savvy in using new technologies, because the relationship between youth and the new media channels to gather, read and understand online information is much more complicated.

Moreover, this complex relationship could have a crucial role in influencing youth understanding of the European Parliament elections and their intentions to vote. As another EAVI analysis demonstrates, more than half of the youth participants said they are willing to vote in the upcoming elections. However, 85% of them regularly read misleading information relating to the EU on their social media feeds and the vast majority believe that online disinformation will have an impact in the result of the European Parliament elections (Thompson, 2018). These data are quite interesting if we compare them with the ones of the Eurobarometer related to the voter turnout in the 2014 European Parliament elections. Young people aged between 18-24 were the ones holding the most positive view on the EU but also the largest group of abstainers (European Parliament, 2014). For the 2019 elections, the situation is similar; almost 67% per cent of the aforementioned age group think that the EU membership is a good thing, but only 37% is disposed to vote in the forthcoming elections (European Parliament, 2018).

All these data show that it is crucial to know how young people, (I will focus on the definition of youth and on the choice of a specific age bracket as a sample for my analysis in the next chapters), make sense of online disinformation and that their views on the issue could have an impact on the final elections' results. Moreover, the selected age group represents not only the youth holding the right to vote in these European Parliament elections but also the age group that relies mostly on the social media to read the news and the one that votes less. Since, as I will discuss later on, education could have a key role in determining someone's decision to go to the polls, the aim of my research is to understand what students within the chosen age group think about online disinformation in the context of the 2019 European Parliament elections campaign.

I want to evaluate their opinion on the difficulties in gathering information on EU politics through different channels and what they classify as the biggest threat to transparent and cognizant voting. I

want also to examine how they relate their engagement in these elections to utilizing social media as a source of news. In doing this, I decided to conduct a qualitative analysis of four focus groups composed by a total of 42 European university students, two groups in Aarhus and two in Brussels, during the early days of the EP elections campaign. My research question is the following: "*How do European university students talk about the use of social media and the issue of online disinformation in view of the 2019 European Parliament elections?*"

In the first chapter of my research, I will reason about the origin of false and misleading information; analysing their historical background, presenting who are those playing a crucial role in spreading this kind of content and providing practical examples of online disinformation. I will also define the words disinformation and misinformation, explaining the difference between the two concepts and why it is better to not use the term "fake news". I will then discuss the psychological and sociological reasons behind people's belief in certain made-up stories despite the evidence, with a specific focus on youth.

The second chapter will examine instead the delicate relationship between youth and news media outlets, whether it is traditional or new media, placing a particular emphasis on how students' interaction towards them has changed in the last years. In this sense, I will introduce the concepts of media and digital literacy, reflecting on their relevance in view of the 2019 European Parliament elections. I will then describe how online disinformation can have an impact on the EP elections campaign; explaining the importance of general awareness of the existence of misleading news to have transparent and unbiased voting.

Subsequently, the third chapter will focus on the existent relation between young people and the European Parliament elections. I will explain how political participation is understood in the literature, with a particular focus on youth and new forms of political activity. I will then look at the issue of low voting turnout among the younger generations in the previous European Parliament

elections and the role played by social media in influencing their political engagement. Finally, I will discuss the strategy of the EU institution to tackle youth detachment from EU politics.

In the fourth and fifth chapter, I will develop a qualitative analysis. Firstly, I will explain the used methodology to collect the data and the advantages and disadvantages of conducting focus groups to answer my research question. I will then justify the choice of thematic analysis as the preferred methodology, why I limited the time frame for gathering the data from January to February 2019 and why I chose to restrict my study to students between 18 and 26 years old. I will then present the coding system and the final analysis, which will contribute to clarify European university students' opinions regarding the use of social media and their understanding of online disinformation within the context of this year's European Parliament elections. The thesis will end with a general conclusion that will reason on the findings and give a detailed answer to the research question.

The post-truth phenomenon in view of the 2019 EP elections. What is disinformation nowadays?

The power of information, together with the journalist's profession the media world in general, have always been key elements within our society and culture; they help us not only to understand what is happening around us, but they change with the society and through the centuries. They constantly renew and improve themselves. However, it is principally with the birth of the Internet that we have a real 'revolution'. Information became dynamic: a continuous flow of news in real-time that can reach a vast amount of people thanks to the new technologies. At the end of 2018, there were about 3.9 billion people surfing the net. This means that more than 50% of the global population had access to the internet (Itu.int, 2019). In 1995, 24 years ago, the percentage of the world population connected

to the internet amounted to only 1% (Internetlivestats.com, 2016). These data make us understand the importance that the internet has reached in our daily life, but also reflect on the consequences of surfing the net for different purposes, including reading and sharing news.

Richard O. Mason defines our society as an information society, because of the systematic exposure to a massive amount of data we face in our daily life and that forms our intellectual capital. However, the process of gathering information and assimilate them is far from being free of dangers. Mason identifies four ethical issues that make the process of building our intellectual capital vulnerable or rather; privacy, accuracy, property and accessibility. These four major issues sum up the obstacles created by the increased use of information technology that can both improve the quality of our lives and, if we are reckless, lead to 'information bankruptcy' (Mason, 1986, 2-5). Therefore, as also Jack M. Balkin points out, being in the digital age gives us both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, this can increase citizens' participation in the public debate, creating the basis to realize a truly democratic culture. On the other hand, the result can be also the opposite and introduce more control limiting democratic cultural participation (Balkin, 2003, p 5).

The great diffusion of the internet has thus changed the world of information, intensifying the phenomenon of the spread of rumours and 'fake news'. Indeed, if false and misleading stories are much older than modern journalism, as Ireton and Posetti explain, it is only in the digital age that we see the manipulation of news stories on an unprecedented scale. "*Powerful new technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content simple, and social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods peddled by States, populist politicians, and dishonest corporate entities, as they are shared by uncritical publics*" (Ireton and Posetti, 2018, p 15). As described by Wardle and Derakhshan, new technologies influence thus the information environment in four ways; allowing to a wider public to create and distribute content, transforming the process of information consumption from private to public, increasing the speed of news dissemination and making it an exchange between trusted peers (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, pp 11-12).

Before going further in the analysis of what is online disinformation nowadays, I believe it is essential to reason about the nomenclature used to describe this phenomenon. As Shu et al. specify, there is not any general academic definition of the term ‘fake news’, but the concept mostly refers to information that is intentionally false and aims to mislead the reader (Shu et al., 2017, pp 23-24). According to what Tandoc et al. found in their study of 34 academic articles containing this term, ‘fake news’ has been utilised to indicate six typologies of misleading information: news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda. To be able to distinguish among them we have to look at their level of facticity, or rather to what extent they are based on facts, and at their level of immediate intention, or rather the degree to which their author intends to deceive the reader (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2017).

Nevertheless, as McGonagle illustrates, the fact that the term ‘fake news’ can cover a great variety of qualitatively different expressions and does not have a clear scope make its usage quite problematic. Furthermore, more and more politicians and public figures use this term to attack individual journalists or the media outlets generally, damaging their reputation and credibility. An example of this is Donald Trump’s constant denigrations addressed to those he calls ‘‘fake news media”, creating a growing climate of hatred towards the journalists' category (McGonagle, 2017, pp 208-209). Therefore, as Ireton and Posetti suggest, we should avoid using such a weaponized and politicised expression and describe instead the issue of what they call “information disorder” with three notions: misinformation, disinformation and mal-information. The first one defines false information that is spread unintentionally, the second one defines false information that is spread deliberately to mislead people, and the last one refers to real information that is disseminated with the intent of harming a specific subject (Ireton and Posetti, 2018, pp 45-48).

According to Fallis, there are three main features that a piece of information must have to be classified as ‘disinformation’. Firstly, disinformation is information, which is intended as representational content that can be both true or false. Secondly, disinformation should be understood as a piece of

information aiming to mislead the reader. Even if it fails to do so, what makes it disinformation is the risk of potentially misinforming someone. Thirdly, disinformation cannot be an accident or a mistake, which is instead a feature of what as been previously defined as misinformation but has to be intentional. Therefore, Fallis understand the concept in the same way as Ireton and Posetti or rather misleading information that has the intention to mislead the reader (Fallis, 2015).

Now that we have a clear definition of what is disinformation, it is important to look at the actors that have a role in spreading misleading content. As Tucker et al illustrate, these actors part of the online disinformation ecosystem are mixed, sometimes even competing among each other. Trolls are those posting provocative messages to stimulate emotional responses; they can act for personal satisfaction or be paid to create inflammatory content. Then there are bots or rather pieces of software that generate a great amount of online content aiming to make electoral propaganda. Fake news websites play also an important role; they are run by individuals producing viral articles to make profit through advertising. Another relevant group is that of conspiracy theorists, who rely on people's fear of losing control or status to spread conspiratorial content, which is often amplified by hyperpartisan media. The last ones are politicians and foreign governments; while the first ones create and amplify disinformation to increase their popularity, the aim of the second ones is to influence the political opinions of those living abroad (Tucker et al., 2018, pp.22-28).

In order to analyse and understand the modern phenomenon of disinformation, it is useful to reflect on its historical context as Jacob Soll outlines, false information and news hoaxes began to circulate in human society 580 years ago with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press. At the time it was difficult to verify the news' sources, as the concepts of journalistic ethics and objectivity did not exist (Soll, 2016). It will be with the beginning of the seventeenth century that historians, among which Galileo Galilei, will commence making their articles' content verifiable by publishing the used sources as footnotes. During the nineteenth century, the growing interest in the classification of humanity in different races and the emerging of discriminatory feelings played a pivotal role in

making the number of false news rise even more. However, as Posetti and Matthews delineate, if the first first-large scale ‘fake news’, or rather ‘The Great Moon Hoax’, was published already in 1835; only with the advent of radio and television in the twentieth century information became accessible to a broader public and satirical news evolved, creating misinformation among inattentive readers.

One century after, with the growing popularity of the internet and the birth of social media, communications passed from being ‘one-to-many’ to ‘many-to-many’, creating the possibility of false information to become viral through peer-to-peer distribution (Posetti and Matthews, 2018). The dissemination mechanisms of disinformation exploit the heedlessness of users, who are looking for concise and appealing stories without really paying attention to the sources, sharing uncertain facts and contributing to spreading them in the net. Therefore, compared to the past, today’s readers do not play anymore only a passive role but also actively contribute, voluntarily or involuntarily, to the diffusion of misleading information through social media.

According to Matteo Monti, this phenomenon is related to a series of ‘technical’ and cognitive, sociological circumstances. On the one hand, we have to consider the ability of social media to reach unilaterally certain users and their capacity to amplify the scope of the content. Any kind of information can become viral in a few hours due to the countless users that every shared link reaches. On the other hand, there are several sociological-cognitive problems such as the cascading dissemination of information, which increases the engagement without allowing any fact-checking over the original story, the polarization of groups, which tends to favour the strengthening of certain beliefs within homogeneous groups and the influence of prior convictions when reading the news (Monti, 2017, pp 83-84).

These observations are supported by different reports, one of which is conducted by the Reuters Institute, showing a general mistrust in the media a great concern about the veracity of the online content, as well as a general shifting from Facebook to alternative platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Snapchat to read the news. This means that people, especially the youth, prefer to

discuss what happens around them through private conversations among an inner circle of friends sharing similar views (Newman et al., 2018, pp 9-12). According to another research conducted by Swart et al., messaging apps allow people to create their own safe space where to debate about public issues, creating links and forming their own opinion on different news content with a limited risk of exposure. "*Employing WhatsApp and Facebook groups, our participants created their own online spaces to facilitate continuous connection within their communities through the exchange of information, each with their own understanding of inclusiveness, engagement, relevance, and constructiveness*" (Swart, Peters and Broersma, 2018, p 4341).

This data shows the importance that social media have in determining how people share and make sense of the news, and this is even more evident among younger generations. In fact, as a Matsa et al. demonstrated in their study, more than half of younger Western Europeans under 30 years old get daily news on social media, compared to only less than a third of adults ages 50 and older. Furthermore, younger people from 18 to 29 years old are overall less confident on how news media are performing than older adults (Matsa et al., 2018). Similar results are provided by Casero-Ripollés' analysis on 549 young Catalonians, which confirms the general rising mistrust towards traditional media and journalists and a great distance from print media as a source of information because of the inability of conventional media to adapt to the new needs of young people. However, these trends do not result in a loss of interest in news consumption, which is still considered highly relevant by the great majority of the survey's participants (Casero-Ripollés, 2012).

Moreover, reading news from a tablet or a smartphone is not the same as doing it from a computer. For instance, as explained by Johanna Dunaway et al., the size and use of a mobile's screen make the process of reading more difficult for the user, inducing him to abandon the text prematurely, stopping maybe at the first few lines after the title, or in general paying less attention to the content of the article than when reading it on desktop (Dunaway et al., 2018). However, differences exist also more in general between printed newspapers and online news. As a matter of fact, many types of research

have shown a lower performance for both consumption and production of information on the screen than on paper.

It is the case of Wastlund et al. study of 72 Swedish students at the University of Karlstad, which found out that students' comprehension of a text on video display terminals was lower than when reading on paper due to higher levels of stress and tiredness (Wästlund et al., 2005). Similar results were given by a research conducted by Mayes et al. on a sample of 40 USA students, who appeared to remember less the information after a screen-based reading, even if it was finished faster, than after a paper-based reading (Mayes, Sims and Koonce, 2001). This is a relevant aspect to take into consideration in the analysis on how students tackle online disinformation because lower attention on the news content certainly affects their capability of assessing the accuracy of received information, or rather their level of media literacy, which will be the main focus of the next chapter.

Youth and media literacy. Why do students need to be digitally educated to vote transparently?

As we saw in the previous chapter, the net is increasingly becoming the source of knowledge on what is happening around us. However, not everyone has a proper understanding of the use of new technologies yet. According to a European Commission report on the digital skills gap in Europe, only 56% of Europeans between 16 and 74 years possess basic digital skills, which means that almost half of the European population is not digital literate (European Commission, 2017). To understand better this issue, it is necessary to reflect first on the meaning of the term digital and media literacy and on why they are essential for citizens to tackle the issue of online disinformation.

Both concepts come from the more general term of 'literacy', which, as Tiziana Mascia points out, refers to the traditional skills of reading and writing. Over time, the simple practice of literacy

developed a more complex and pluralist meaning, making aware that alongside the simple technical learning of how to read and write, the process of becoming literate also involved wider purposes for continuous learning linked to the idea of economic and social growth (Mascia, 2018). As reminded by Elizabeth Thoman and Tessa Jolls, the term media literacy arises only later in time, with the shift from print-based to audiovisual media that created the necessity to learn the language of images and sounds. In a world of instant information and shared communication, what it becomes relevant is not only the message itself but how we understand and evaluate that message (Thoman and Jolls, 2004).

The EU Commission Expert Group defines media literacy as: "*an umbrella expression that includes all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it. These capacities allow the citizen to participate in the economic, social and cultural aspects of society as well as to play an active role in the democratic process. It refers to all kind of media (television, radio, press), through all kind of channels (traditional, internet, social media) and to all ages*" (European Commission, 2019). According to Tibor Koltay, this definition shows that media literacy is considered by the European Commission as one of the fundamental skills that everyone should possess, like the more traditional ones of reading, writing and arithmetic. Therefore, people from all generations need to have a proper understanding of media and its economic and cultural dimension to orientate in the digital world (Koltay, 2011, pp 212-214).

However, as Lewis and Jhally delineate, being media literate doesn't only mean being able to analyse media messages and recognize how they are produced, but it also entails apprehending the intentions behind the construction of those messages in order to become a sophisticated and active citizen in the democratic process (Lewis and Jhally, 1998). No matter if we are talking about new technologies or traditional media, as reminded by Johanna Martinsson, citizens need to develop critical thinking to determine the credibility of the sources and be able to produce media content on all the existing

platforms. Only in this way, it is possible to limit the damages of misleading content spread in the net, allowing the existence of a transparent and democratic public discourse (Martinsson, 2009).

According to Paul Gilster, digital literacy is intended instead as: "*the ability to understand information and—more important—to evaluate and integrate information in multiple formats that the computer can deliver*" (Pool, 1997, p.6). He specifies that assessing information that you find on the net is different from doing it on traditional media because of the "*multidimensional and interactive*" nature of the online content (Pool, 1997). As David Bawden clarifies, Gilster's definition of digital literacy is a broad definition and should not be restricted to any precise technology or to any specific skills, but it should be seen rather as mindsets that allow us to evaluate and process information in any kind of format. Therefore, the term includes not only the functional knowledge of technological tools but also the critical analysis of the way in which digital media have been constructed and the communicative rhetoric that characterizes them (Bawden, 2008).

Digital literacy thus does not substitute the concept of media literacy, but as specified by Canada's Centre for Media and Digital Literacy, it incorporates its definition with new concepts adding the dimension of interactivity and connectivity typical of most digital media (MediaSmarts, 2014). As suggested by Renee Hobbs, both terms: "*encompass the full range of cognitive, emotional and social competencies that includes the use of texts, tools and technologies; the skills of critical thinking and analysis; the practice of message composition and creativity; the ability to engage in reflection and ethical thinking; as well as active participation through teamwork and collaboration*" (Hobbs, 2010, p.17). They are thus fundamental to be able to orientate in the modern information society, providing citizens with the needed skills to master news flows and to participate in an informed and conscious way to the public debate.

In fact, acquiring the right digital competences is a fundamental step to become an active citizen. As specified by Antonio Calvani and Laura Menichetti, a major development concerning the reflection on this topic took place after 2006, when the European Union acknowledged the importance of digital

skills in education and in particular among the key competencies of active citizenship with the Recommendation 962 (Calvani and Menichetti, 2013). The Recommendation 2006/962/EC (2006) established that the critical use of Information Society Technology (IST) is among those skills: "*which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment*."

A similar conclusion is reached by the Eurydice report, whose objective is to provide an updated and complete overview of citizenship education across European schools. The report identifies four areas of citizenship education: "*interacting effectively and constructively with others, thinking critically, acting in a socially responsible manner, and acting democratically"* (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017, p. 48). Among the abilities included in the second area, there are media literacy and the use of sources. Indeed, how explained in the report, due to nowadays complex media environment youth need to be able to critically analyse the tons of information they find online as part of their citizenship learning (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017).

According to Eurostat data, more than 90% of youth in the EU-28 used the internet on a daily basis in 2016 and participating on social media was among their most common online social activity in the 3-month period prior to the report. Furthermore, the report shows that they also carried out some civic activities during the 12-month period prior to the publication of the data, among which the most popular were interacting online and obtaining information from websites of public authorities (Ec.europa.eu, 2017). As mentioned by Alexandra Theben et al. in their report on social media and youth participation, social media have progressively become spaces for political engagement, giving access to different information and thus increased young people's awareness of the political sphere. This has brought new opportunities and forms of participation in public life, as well as new key competencies that youth need to possess to be a functioning member of society (Theben et al., 2018).

Before going further into the discussion, I believe it is necessary to reason about the definition of 'youth'. UNESCO describes it as: "*a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to*

adulthood's independence and awareness of our interdependence as members of a community." Adding also that it can be more fluid than other fixed age-groups, making it more difficult to associate the concept within a specific age range (Unesco.org, n.d.). As explained by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, this term can be thus used referring to different age range depending on the context, and generally, it includes young adults as well. In this paper, young people are classified following EUROSTAT statistics as those aged between 15 and 29 years, unless otherwise indicated (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, n.d.).

It is interesting to link the findings mentioned beforehand with the results of the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer, showing a significant rise in news consumptions and engagement worldwide but, at the same time, low trust in using social media to get informed about what is happening in the world. In Europe, there is an almost 30 points difference in terms of trust between traditional media and social media. Furthermore, 73% of the participants are highly concern about fake news, and only one out of five believes in the current system. In fact, the general population distrusts both government and media. Therefore, even if people are more and more online to read the latest news, they are not so confident about the reliability of digital media. (Trust Barometer. Global report, 2019).

Despite the widespread lack of confidence, it is evident that digital media have played a key role in the last few years in influencing the different sphere of our life: economic, cultural and primarily political. In fact, as argued by Stier et al., digital media became an essential tool for politicians to engage and mobilize citizens during a period of an election campaign (Stier et al., 2018). A clear example is a dramatic increase in the use of social media by Italian politicians during the 2018 election campaign, which has, according to the study conducted by Blogmeter.it, doubled compared to that of 2013. In this case, Facebook had a predominant position by collecting 59% of overall messages and 91% of overall interactions (Blogmeter.it, 2018).

Nevertheless, a recent Eurobarometer statistic shows that not all age groups are actively involved in political debates online during the pre-election period. Indeed, the younger age groups tend to follow

or participate more in the political debate than the older age groups. Furthermore, students appear to be the most active category. What is also striking looking at the report is that almost three-quarters of the respondents answered they are concerned about online disinformation and more than two thirds about the use of their personal data to target the political message they see on the online platforms. These percentages are even higher among the users who claimed to either follow or participate in these discussions (European Commission, 2018, pp. 46-60).

Worrying about finding misleading content online during a period of election campaign seems to be a reasonable concern for the whole population. As a matter of fact, according to what found out by Avaaz Europe-wide analysis on disinformation networks on Facebook ahead of the EP elections, far-right and Eurosceptic groups spread at scale false and distorted content or used 'disinformation tactics' to amplify specific messages. These data were shared with Facebook that decided to shut down 77 out of the 500 suspect pages and groups, which accounted for 20% of the overall interactions. The closed pages had almost three times more followers than the official pages of far-right and Eurosceptic parties combined. Instead, the 500 networks all together collected 67 million of interactions and 32 million followers (Avaaz, 2019).

Even though European far-right groups tend to have good engagement on social media, as Froio and Ganesh's study illustrates, the reach of their content mostly remains within the national boundaries of each far-right formation. In fact, according to what they found out by examining Twitter interactions between audiences of far-right organizations in four Western European democracies, the ideological heterogeneity of those groups limits their transnational potential with the exception of two issues; Islamophobia and economic nativism (Froio and Ganesh, 2018).

For instance, as illustrated by Baboulias, immigration is a central theme in a video spread out by the Hungarian government to reach social-media users in Greece. The video, which received more than 9 million views, was targeting Guy Verhofstadt, a pro-European Belgian MEP, portrayed as the responsible of the current migration crisis in the Continent. This is a clear attempt of European far-

right leaders to transcend the borders in order to influence EU public opinion with anti-migrant rhetoric (Baboulias, 2019). Indeed, as also the research conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute just before the European Parliament elections revealed, the most successful misleading news are the ones sharing an anti-immigration and Islamophobic rhetoric, instead of those directly expressing Euroscepticism (Marchal et al., 2019).

Focusing on those specific narratives to influence people's opinion and thus their voting behaviour, appear to be a successful strategy also according to a data analytics project conducted by Alto Analytics. In fact, the project's outcomes show that a small group of "*abnormal activity users*", representing 0.05%-0.16% of the total and affiliated with far-right groups, was behind 9.55%-11.1% of the social media content related to the EU across the five considered countries. Therefore, less than 0.2% of all users managed to lead the public debate with a huge number of posts, comments and reactions centred on a determined set of narratives (Alto-analytics.com, 2019). These findings are even more interested if we reason on the fact that people's opinions tend to be based on what they see on their news feed. Indeed, as suggested by an analysis on international and domestic students at a US university, young adults' understanding and attitude toward news are based on what they read on social media and who is part of their online social network (Wohn and Bowe, 2016).

It is clear from what has been discussed until now that political debate on social media is far from being unbiased and transparent, especially during a period of elections campaign when disinformation is even more amplified. For instance, according to a report conducted by SafeGuard Cyber in the run-up EU Parliament elections, almost half the population of the European Union would have been exposed to divisive digital content posted by 6,700 bots, trolls, and malicious hybrid actors (SafeGuard Cyber, 2019). This is why it is crucial to promote media literacy among EU member states and its citizens. As Kasra outlines, in a recent report evaluating people's ability to detect the credibility of images that accompany online news, it emerged that those with a better knowledge of online media platforms were also the ones less likely to be deceived by fake images. Therefore,

according to her, the best solution to reduce the potential harm of online misleading or false content appears to be investing in media literacy (Kasra, 2019).

Even if the threat of online disinformation affects the entire European population, it is even more relevant to the youth segment, who, as we have previously understood, not only tends to be the greatest consumer of online news but also the one that is most confident of being able to detect misleading information. However, as Lessenski reminds us: "*young people, who are digital natives may not be that better prepared to address the challenges of post-truth as it necessitates additional knowledge and skills*" (Lessenski, 2018, p 12). In fact, as Lesley Farmer outlines, youth may feel comfortable communicating or utilizing social media for entertainment, but they often lack the necessary digital skills to evaluate what they read on the internet or to engage themselves in an effective way in online political discourse. Media literacy is a fundamental element of someone's education; it is closely related to civic engagement and it is necessary to digital citizenship (Farmer, 2018).

It is thus crucial for youth being able to evaluate and assess any type of media message, to develop the ability to think critically about what they read on different sources. According to Georgiadou et al., critical thinking should be seen as a basic skill akin to reading and writing and thus be included in formal education as soon as possible (Georgiadou et al., 2018). Indeed, as Jolls and Johnsen underline, being a media literate person is a necessary condition to tackle the modern information landscape and to be an active member of an advanced democracy (Jolls and Johnsen, 2018). Therefore, only by distinguish what is true from what it is false, by being able to orientate in the jungle of news spread on the social media it is possible to have transparent voting and to actively participate in the public debate. However, young people's participation and interest in the EP elections, it is another problem itself, and we will discuss it in the next chapter.

Youth and European Parliament elections. How were European students engaged in previous EP election campaigns?

Both at the European and national level youth participation in democratic life appear to be quite low. This could be the result of young people's widespread distrust in the institutions and in the fact that traditional political figures can represent their interests, be close to their problems or talk about them. For instance, according to what reported by Cammaerts et al in their study on youth participation in European democratic life, young people generally believe that voting is a fundamental instrument of participation in democracies. However, they also feel that politicians do not properly listen to their demands or concerns and this is one of the main reasons that discourage them from going to the polls. Therefore, low voting turnout among their category is not simply due to political apathy but to a more complex set of reasons, among which there is a feeling of distance between youth and policymakers (Cammaerts et al., 2013, pp. 7-11).

In fact, as also a recent analysis conducted by Carrer et al shows, despite being pro-European and believing in the EU values, Millennials aged 18 to 35 believe that the European Union and its institutions are not close to the people. If, on the one hand, 80% of the respondents expressed a positive view towards the EU; on the other hand, 89% of the respondents said that politicians fail to adequately communicate the work done by the European Union. Furthermore, 84% of the participants claimed that the EU should find a way to involve more young people in its decision-making process (Carrer et al., 2018, pp. 29-39). This is a crucial point because, as Motti-Stefanidi and Cicognani remind us; "*since European Union countries are participatory and representative democracies, active citizenship in the EU and trust in EU institutions are paramount for the continuation and the strengthening of the EU project*" (Motti-Stefanidi and Cicognani, 2018, p. 244).

In this period full of uncertainties, as the EU Commission explains in its communication 'Towards a new EU Youth Strategy', youth positive engagement with the EU community is essential to the

prosperity of the whole European Union's project (Commission Communication, COM/2018/269/.). Nevertheless, as illustrated in the 'Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life', participation is much more than just voting. Being an active citizen means playing a meaningful role in the policy-making process aimed at building a better society; as well as having the means and the rights to do so. This implies that any policy or action related to the promotion of active citizenship should consider the existing diversities among EU youth and their backgrounds to be as inclusive as possible (Council of Europe, 2015, pp.11-12). In fact, being active in the public life of the European Union and its member states is a right of all EU citizens and it is included in the article 8(A).3 of the Lisbon Treaty (Treaty of Lisbon, 2007).

Until now I have been talking generally about youth without making any distinction in this regard, such as between those who were enrolled in an educational program and those who weren't. However, it is relevant to take into account this division when analyzing the Eurobarometer data on the turnout of the 2009 and the 2014 European Parliament elections. As a matter of fact, the number of students that voted in the 2009 EP elections is of 34%, while the number of the overall youth category (18-24 years old) is 29%. Furthermore, people with a higher educational level tend to participate more in the election; 43% of the people who left school before the age of 16 voted, while 52% did among those whose studies continued to age 20 or beyond (European Parliament, 2009).

Regarding the 2014 EP elections, the percentage of students who voted (37%) is higher than in 2009 but lower among the overall youth category (28%). Students also appear to trust more the EU institutions (55%) than the overall youth category (48%) (European Parliament, 2014). As stated by Macháček in relation to the 2009 European Parliament elections; "*electoral participation may differ in different social segments of 'old' or 'young' generation age categories*" (Macháček, 2011, p. 69). Therefore, education might be a central factor to look at in analyzing youth engagement in EU politics.

A similar situation is present at the global level. As a matter of fact, according to the UN 2016 global youth report, the percentage of young people aged 18 to 29 years always participating in national elections is 44%, while it rises to 60% for the overall population and to 70% for those over 50 years old. Moreover, if gender doesn't seem to be a discriminatory factor, education appears to play a key role in determining youth voting turnout; almost 53% of young graduates affirmed that they always go to the polls for national elections, compared to 43.6 % of all those age 18- to 29 (United Nations, 2016, p. 69). Another example may be found in the analysis of Statistics Sweden on 2014 European, national and local elections in Sweden; where well-educated people voted more than those who only completed compulsory school. For the Swedish parliament, the difference between voter turnout among those with post-secondary education and those with compulsory education is 15%. For the European Parliament elections, the difference between the two categories reaches 33% (Statistics Sweden, 2015).

Nevertheless, as Persson specifies, even though traditionally scholars have always considered education and political participation directly related, more recently a discussion questioning the causality of this relationship has been raised. Persson illustrates three main models explaining the connection between education and political participation. The first model, called 'the absolute education model', describes education as the causal mechanism that triggers political participation through enhancing civic skills and political knowledge. The second model, named 'the pre-adult socialization model', argues the opposite of the first one and describe both education and political participation as the effect of pre-adult factors such as family socioeconomic status and personal characteristics. Lastly, the third model, knows as 'the relative education model', see education as a factor that indirectly affects political participation through social status (Persson, 2013, pp. 690-694).

Therefore, as also Brade and Piopiunik illustrate, the studies on the causal effect of education on political participation give mixed results and there isn't yet a mutual agreement on the issue. Individuals with higher education levels appear to vote more, but this doesn't necessarily mean that

their behaviour is determined by their high level of education (Brade and Piopiunik, 2016). According to Levin and Kelley; "*Education may also mean better-informed voters and ones who are more able to master the complex issues on the ballot. but it will not increase voting behaviour if potential voters feel that they cannot influence policy through electoral politics*" (Levin and Kelley, 1994, p.97). In conclusion, we can say that education could have a key role in influencing citizens' decision to go to the polls, but that there are also complementary aspects to take into account which could also simultaneously affect their political participation.

Giving a clear and precise definition of the term 'participation' is not a simple task. Indeed, as argued by O'Toole et al, the mainstream understanding of the concept is quite narrow and thus presents different flaws (O'Toole et al., 2003). Firstly, it assumes that what the researcher sees as political participation coincides with what citizens themselves conceive of politics, and this is not always the case. Secondly, there is an erroneous tendency of considering a citizen who doesn't engage with the researcher's idea of political activities as politically apathetic. Thirdly, young people are not analyzed as a specific group but rather as a subset of the general population, this means that they are associated only with a conventional way of doing politics (O'Toole et al., 2003, pp. 52-55). Nonetheless, according to Ellen Quintelier, youth may privilege informal ways of being politically active over traditional forms of political participation such as; "*signing petitions, donating money, forming campaign groups and demonstrating*" (Quintelier, 2007, p.167). Their disengagement can be seen more as dissatisfaction towards conventional politics, rather than general political apathy (Quintelier, 2007, p. 169).

A similar scenario is presented by Sola-Morales and Hernández-Santaolalla's survey on university students from Spain and Chile and their attitudes toward democratic participation at the national level. In fact, as the results show, while there was a widespread feeling of scepticism towards the democratic systems of both countries, resulting in a lower voter turnout, the respondents showed an increased interest in other atypical political activities. According to the authors, among those activities an

important role is definitely played by the internet, which even though may not have a direct impact on the policy-making process, could influence the way young people make sense of it (Sola-Morales and Hernández-Santaolalla, 2017).

Related to that, it is interesting to look at Hooghe and Boonen's research on the existing generational differences in the way adolescents and their parents get involved with politics. If on the one hand, the findings demonstrate that younger generations appear to consider less relevant voting and following political news than their parents; on the other hand, they are also the ones who are more engaged with the online political debate. This means that, as the authors suggest, they prefer expressing their political ideas on social media than by going to the polls (Hooghe and Boonen, 2015). Another study on the relation between social media use and youth political engagement in UK, USA and Australia, conducted by Xenos et al, also suggests that nowadays social media are extremely relevant for the political participation of young people (Xenos, Vromen and Loader, 2014).

As Abdulrauf et al affirm; "*It is clear that online political participation via social media makes involvement in politics easier, far less expensive and by extension an extra boost to cognitive engagement*" (Abdulrauf, Binti Abdul Hamid and Sobhi bin Ishak, 2015, p.12) Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that using social media as tools for political engagement is free of challenges. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the process of reading news through social media can be threatened by online disinformation. A recent research carried out by Valenzuela et al reveal a correlation between the effects that using social media to receive information have on political participation and its effects on spreading misleading content. As a matter of fact, participatory users that navigate on social media for news seem to share more unreliable links than those who are less politically engaged. This leads to a paradox because using social media for informational purposes can increase political engagement, but, at the same time, being more engaged is linked with spreading more content, both trustworthy and false information. Therefore, being politically active on social

media, or more in general on the internet shouldn't be seen only in a positive way (Valenzuela et al., 2019, 13-16).

For instance, according to Mosca, online communication with political connotations presents several weaknesses. Firstly, the older generation of politicians hasn't a proper understanding of the full potential of the internet and thus don't always use it in an effective way. Secondly, existing digital inequalities limit the capacity of politicians and social movements to reach the general public through online communication (Mosca, 2013). For example, as he explains, differences between digitally skilled individuals and those who are less digital literate can be the cause of power inequality between the two groups. Furthermore, the aforementioned limits demonstrate that online political action isn't sufficient in itself and cannot be a substitute of offline politics; "*face-to-face interactions still are the core of political action*". (Mosca, 2013, p. 195).

Indeed, as reported by Vesnic-Alujevic, the use of social media as a tool for an electoral campaign is a quite recent phenomenon, which began with the 2008 US elections in order to bring innovative strategies to involve more citizens in the electoral campaign. Regarding the EU, we have to wait for the 2009 parliamentary elections, to see a first attempt to use social media together with more traditional media (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013, pp.12-13). However, as explained by Weiler, even though social media have a great potential in terms of increasing citizens' political engagement, the role they played during the 2009 EU election campaign was only an auxiliary role. There is limited evidence that social media were used for an explicitly political purpose during the 2009 electoral campaign and, according to the author, it is unlikely that they could have a real impact in influencing politically apathetic citizens due to their self-selection nature (Weiler, 2013, p.21).

It is with the 2014 European Parliament elections that, as Nulty et al point out, social media become a relevant aspect of the electoral campaign. In their analysis of the use of Twitter by politicians during the EP elections campaign, they found out that the online debate was mostly related to pro-EU or anti-EU stances, showing the existence of a political discourse focused on EU issues other than being

solely an extension of national issues (Nulty et al., 2016). During the 2019 EU Parliament elections the online engagement, particularly on Twitter, has been quite high. According to what White found out in her analysis on the use of the official hashtags related to this European electoral campaign, the total amount of election-related tweets was 6.2 million; a 273% rise in the volume of Tweets compared to the 2014 European Parliament elections. From the 23rd to the 26th of May, the actual voting days, the number of Tweets EP election-related reached 2.1 million (White, 2019).

Nevertheless, increase the use of online tools to spread political messages during a period of electoral campaign brings also the problem of the presence of disinformation campaigns. As a recent EU Commission press release outlines, Russian sources and other internal and external actors worked to influence the 2019 European Parliament elections outcome. "*The European elections were not after all free from disinformation; we should not accept this as the new normal. Malign actors constantly change their strategies*." This means that online disinformation should be seen as an evolving threat that changes as quickly as the measures developed to tackle misleading information spread on the internet (European Commission, 2019).

For this reason, the European Commission has tried to develop an effective strategy to guarantee a democratic and transparent electoral process. Its work to counter online disinformation started already in 2015, with the creation of the 'East Strategic Communication Task Force' aiming to monitor pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns in Eastern Europe (EEAS Press Team, 2019). However, a more precise plan focused on tackling misleading information in view of the EP elections was developed in April 2018; including a self-regulatory 'Code of Practice' for online platforms to provide greater transparency on the content they sponsor and on the functioning of their algorithms, as well as the promotion of an autonomous network of European fact-checkers monitoring the dissemination of information on the net (European Commission, 2018). After that, in September 2018, the Commission published a set of measures such as recommendations to improve transparency in online political advertisements and the possibility to fight illegal use of personal data with pecuniary sanctions.

Lastly, in December 2018 the Commission issued an 'Action Plan against Disinformation'. The plan has four pillars among which a Rapid Alert System to coordinate the action between the EU institutions and its member states, as well as close monitoring of the application of the 'Code of Practice' by its signatories (EEAS Press Team, 2019).

Even though the overall European approach to tackle online disinformation appears to be, as explained by Butcher, effective as long-term strategy due to its systematic nature, it is not free from weaknesses. For instance, the 'Code of Practice' is entirely voluntary and thus there is not any guarantee of a full commitment from the signatories, who can technically not fulfil individual commitments and still remain among the signatories (Butcher, 2019, pp.13-14). Furthermore, according to a joint report conducted by Access Now, Civil Liberties Union (Liberties) for Europe and European Digital Rights (EDRi), there would be other limitations in the EU response to issue of disinformation. Firstly, establishing an independent and valid European fact-checking network raises issues of impartiality, abuse of power and the benefit-cost ratio for its creation. Therefore, relying on 'fact-checking' as the main solution to the problem doesn't seem to be the right way. Secondly, the East Strategic Communication Task Force appears to be too much focused on Russian disinformation campaigns and the result is a lack of efficiency (Access Now, Liberties and EDRi, 2018).

However, according to Burcher, the EU 'Action Plan against Disinformation' outlines also a crucial point of the Commission and Parliament's communication strategy, or rather the need of building a positive discourse around the European Union to protect from the several disinformation campaigns spread in the net. Sharing pro-EU messages, as the author suggests, would be even more effective if carried out at the national level (Butcher, 2019). This is what the European Parliament tried to do with its campaign called 'This Time I'm Voting', which, as indicated in The Parliament Magazine, counted more than 250,000 volunteers across the EU that cooperated to convince their relatives and friends to go to the polls in May (Banks, 2019).

The campaign was both online and offline, in fact, as explained in the EU Parliament website, besides the only debates on the importance of voting in this year's European Parliament elections, there have been more than 2000 events organized with the same purpose at the local level by NGOs and businesses (Europarl.europa.eu, 2019). In addition, to that there are also online tools and platforms giving information about the EU and its institutions in all the 24 official languages. One of these services is 'What Europe does for me', a website to spread knowledge on the positive impact that the EU has people's lives. It has two sections, one dedicated to present the EU presence in local communities and the other one to explain what the EU does for the single citizen (Europarl.europa.eu, 2019).

Nevertheless, as Napierala observes, the risk of concentrating too much on the achievements of the European Union, without proposing clear solutions to the current challenges faced by the EU, is to provoke side effects. For instance, a supporting message towards the work done by the EU institutions could not be enough to convince those who are discouraged by the widespread crisis discourse undermining EU image; involuntarily increasing in this way the persuasiveness of Eurosceptic messages. For Napierala, the problem is that pro-European campaigns tend to exclude non-voters because they don't give clear answers and don't create passion among the overall EU electorate; to change that they should begin to address the challenges that citizens consider crucial for the future of the Union (Napierala, 2019).

This problematic situation is also pointed out by Zerka, who affirms that European mainstream parties have a tendency to campaign in favour of the preservation of the status quo, instead of proposing a response to young voters' needs, compromising youth involvement in the European Parliament elections. According to him, even though youth tend to be more pro-European than the older generations, if they don't see a clear action plan to respond to the obstacles to build a secure future from the mainstream parties, they could shift their support towards those parties that promise them a hopeful future. As a matter of fact, Zerka affirms that: "*they do not naturally accept the notion of the*

EU as a peace project. For many, their experiences are dominated by job instability, environmental pollution, corrupt administrations, a need to emigrate, and the prospect of becoming worse off than their parents" (Zerka, 2019).

Therefore, as also Marocchi explains, if traditional parties don't make efforts to demonstrate to young people that their voice matters to them and that youth needs are a priority in the party's agenda, they will end up voting for the populist parties who present themselves as an alternative to the establishment. According to her, a major hindrance to a shift in mainstream parties' behaviour is the ageing of the European population, which makes less attractive for traditional pro-European parties to put youth demands at the top of their policy agenda since they represent a much smaller portion of the electorate. A possible solution for Marocchi could be lowering the voting age to 16, this might increase youth political participation and bring more young people to the polls in the long-term (Marocchi, 2016).

An example of this is a survey on first-time voters under 18 in Austrian regional elections conducted by Zeglovits and Aichholzer, which demonstrated that the turnout was higher among youth between 16 and 17 years old than among those between 18 and 20 years old. According to the authors, the Austrian case is an example of the fact that youth under 18 hold political opinions and are interested in being politically active (Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014). A similar point of view is argued by Eichhorn in his analysis on under 18 years old Scottish voters during the independence referendum, whose findings show a clear interest of youth in politics when the future of the country is at stake. For Eichhorn lowering the voting age to 16 years old together with enhancing the role that schools have in political education could lead to more informed youth willing to be politically active (Eichhorn, 2014).

Lowering the voting age is not the only solution to youth abstentionism; in fact, according to Bouza, introducing civic education focusing on the EU and its institutions into national educational systems could be an effective way of addressing the issue. For instance, as Bouza points out, Sweden is one

of the EU member states in which youth are more likely to participate in the European Parliament elections and, at the same time, also one of the countries where students have a better understanding of the European Union and where civic education includes lessons on the EU. Receiving information on the European Union in schools and thus acquiring knowledge on the EU decision-making process, should increase students' belief of the importance of the European Union (Bouza, 2014, pp. 31-32).

Nevertheless, as explained during the round table 'Making the case for European Civic Education', introducing European citizenship education in national curricula depends mostly on the member states' will to do so. "*Ministries of education should include civic education in a curriculum that encompasses European active citizenship. It should be based on a comprehensive and holistic approach: it is about knowledge but also about values and attitudes*" (EUCIS-LLL and European Civic Forum, 2013, p. 10). In fact, besides learning about the EU, it is crucial to feel part and to actively engage in the European community. As delineated in the European Commission report 'Citizenship Education at School in Europe', the concept of civic education is not only about political knowledge but also entails developing critical thinking and social responsibility to allow students to participate in the democratic life of their international, national, regional and local communities (European Commission, 2017).

To sum up, in this chapter I discussed the definition of youth political engagement and its differences with the more traditional forms of political activities; the current challenges that determine a low voting turnout in the European Parliament elections among the younger generations; the role that education has in influencing a greater political engagement and, finally, the existing possibilities to address the issue of low trust in traditional politics that young people show in the surveys. As this chapter demonstrates, youth are not completely disinterested in European politics, but they feel detached from it. There is thus a lot of work to do in this sense, finding a way to make all those young people holding positive views on the European Union interested in becoming active European citizens.

Besides that, it has emerged that, especially for the younger generations, social media play a fundamental role during an election campaign; both as a source of information and as a mean for political activity. Nevertheless, as previously debated, utilizing online tools to receive and share political content present several risks, among which falling for unreliable news. For this reason, as well as the fact that higher education could be a key factor in influencing someone's decision to vote; I believe it is important to evaluate how European university students make sense of the use of social media and of online disinformation in view of this year's EP elections. In the following part of my thesis, I will thus explain why I decided to conduct qualitative research, which method I used to analyze my data, the composition of my sample and its relevance to give a comprehensive answer to my research question.

Methodology

Conducting qualitative research was seen as the right choice to find out university students' opinions on online disinformation ahead of the European Parliament elections. In fact, as Masue, Swai and Anasel affirm, both qualitative and quantitative research methods are suitable for social science analysis but choosing one over the other depends on the purpose of the study. Qualitative research aims to understand a social phenomenon considering the context in which meanings are generated by a targeted group (Masue, Swai and Anasel, 2013). In my case, the attention is on the construction and the framing of meanings in the debate around misleading online content or rather; how university students describe this issue, if they think there is a relationship between online disinformation and a transparent electoral campaign, as well as their intentions to actually participate in this year's EP elections. As explained by Astin and Long, in qualitative research: "*the questions of 'how' and 'why' are paramount. Emphasis is placed on understanding a phenomenon holistically (from different/multiple perspectives) that is bound by the context within which it is located*" (Astin and

Long, 2014, p. 93). Therefore, as we can see, the objective of my thesis is conformed to the definition and the characteristic of qualitative research techniques.

As a method of data collection, I decided that the most appropriate to answer my research question was focus groups. Indeed, as Gill et al illustrate, focus groups are collective discussions on a specific topic set by the researcher, which aim to gather shared views constructed through the co-production of relevant information by the group members (Gill et al., 2008). According to Ivana Acocella, one of the greatest advantages of a focus group's discussion is the interaction among the different participants, allowing clarification of individual opinions and their constant comparison to those of others. If there is a good synergy within the group, meaning that the interactions within it occur naturally and without continuous mediation by the moderator; this can favour the disclosure of a plurality of ideas, as well as a 'chain effect' where the intervention of a person stimulates the others to consider the issue from a different perspective (Acocella, 2011, p. 1132). Nevertheless, as Acocella explains, interactions within focus groups might present also some '*communicative limits*', such as the fear of the group's judgment; which might inhibit a group member from expressing a different point of view than the one expressed by the majority (Acocella, 2011, pp. 1133-1134).

Byers and Wilcox highlight six advantages of using focus groups in qualitative analysis. First of all, they encourage an exhaustive and open discussion among the participants, releasing them of any inhibition and allowing each individual to freely express their opinion. Furthermore, a focus group guarantee a certain degree of flexibility, giving the possibility to explore relevant matters that could arise in the debate other than those listed by the researcher. Another important advantage is the fact that interviewing a group of people together is less time consuming than interviewing each person individually. Lastly, the interpretability of data collected through focus groups is quite clear and straightforward, setting up the basis for formulating a variety of hypothesis on the subject of study (Byers and Wilcox, 1991). As Powell and Single claim; "*the focus group is flexible enough to be sensitive to the personal agenda of participants and draws upon its explicit interactional quality to*

elicit divergent ideas and experiences rather than seek a consensus" (Powell and Single, 1996, p. 504).

Using a focus group as a method for data collection also has some limitations; which, according to Masadeh, are mainly the high organizational costs and the difficulty of the analysis process. Furthermore, due to its nature and the fact the utilized sample is relatively small, focus group outcomes can rarely be representative of the whole population (Masadeh, 2012). Personally, I perceived conducting focus groups as challenging and very time-consuming activity, especially during the recruitment and transcription process. I had to prepare everything for almost two months in advance and finding the right number of participants has been quite complex. In Brussels, where I had much fewer contacts with the university environment, I even had to promise participants a free movie ticket, besides free food and drinks, to convince them to take part in the discussion. Because of that and the fact I had to pay the flight and the hotel when I went to Aarhus, the overall cost of organising focus groups was quite high. The transcription process was also labour intensive and lasted several days.

An additional limitation regards the fact that some of the participants in Aarhus were my classmates. According to Jocelyn Hollander, this could be both an advantage and a disadvantage depending on the particular case. In fact, as Hollander points out, some scholars argue that an antecedent acquaintance among the group members could favour a more natural discussion because of the existing ease with each other; while other scholars describe as more beneficial to the outcome of the debate when participants are completely unrelated (Hollander, 2004, pp. 620-621). However, despite these limitations and as explained in the previous paragraphs, focus group appears to be overall a good methodology if the researcher, as in my case, need to collect a variety of views on a certain topic and analyse how people interact and debate about it in a short period of time. The empirical foundation of my research is data gathered through four focus groups, which I conducted at the beginning of the European electoral campaign in two countries; Belgium and Denmark. The first two

focus groups took place at Vesalius College, in Brussels, on the 4th and the 5th of February. The other two were organized at Aarhus University, in Denmark, on the 14th and the 15th of February.

The total amount of participants was 42 and all the four focus groups were both filmed and recorded. Indeed, as suggested by Dilshad and Latif, using a recorder gives you access to a rich source of data and, since I combined it with video recording and some notes (Dilshad and Latif, 2013, pp.195-196), I was able to avoid missing any important details during the transcription process. In fact, the video recording helped me to better comprehend who was speaking and to clarify some parts of the dialogues that were not fully understandable in the audio files, ensuring a precise transcription of the four sessions. I decided to not analyse the body language of the participants because my research's focus was on the verbal content of their discourse around the use of social media and the issue of online disinformation in view of the EP elections. Therefore, as Isabella McLafferty suggests, I used both video and tape recording only as an auxiliary tool for the transcription process; so that if one of the two failed to provide comprehensive data, I could still rely on the other (McLafferty, 2004, p.191). The final transcripts of the four sessions amounted to around 74 pages and they were saved in different Word documents that I included as an annexe to the thesis.

To select the focus groups' participants, I opted for a purposeful sampling method; or rather, as Michael Q. Patton describes, selecting specific units of a population whose characteristics are key to the purpose of the thesis (Patton, 1990, p.169). In fact, as explained by Palinkas et al, this technique is an adequate choice to conduct qualitative research when there is a limited amount of resources and an interest in analysing the attitudes and points of view of a selected group of individuals on a specific theme (Palinkas et al., 2013). However, according to Gentles et al, there is a lack of clarity among scholars in defining the term purposeful sampling; it is thus necessary that the researcher explains what it means in relation to his specific context (Gentles et al., 2015, p.1779). In my case, purposeful sampling meant gathering a sample whose purpose was giving an exhaustive answer to my research question: "*How do European university students talk about the use of social media and the issue of*

online disinformation in view of the 2019 European Parliament elections?" Therefore, I decided to recruit four subgroups who were formed by European students aged from 18 to 26 years and enrolled in a degree program either in Brussels or Aarhus.

As I previously explained, students are those who mostly utilize social media as a source for news and, at the same time, they are those who are more pro-European and those who tend to vote the most among the youth category. This is why understanding their perspectives on online disinformation in view of the European Parliament elections was seen as a crucial and topical issue. Furthermore, the decision to limit participation to a specific age range was made to bring together a group of people as homogeneous as possible. Moreover, according to a report conducted by Little and Tang on the age differences in graduate employment in various European countries, the average age on graduation was 26.6 (Little and Tang, 2008, p.3). These data are similar to OECD statistics on education, which found out that the average age at graduation was 24.7, varying from 22 to over 27 depending on the countries taken into account (OECD, 2014, pp.1-2). Considering also that in most of the EU member states the minimum voting age is 18, other than for Greece, Malta and Austria (Sabbati, Sgueo and Dobreva, 2019), I thought that gathering a sample of European students from 18 to 26 years old was the most practical and logical solution.

There are different types of purposeful sampling designs and, as Patton outlines, the one that is most suitable to focus groups is homogeneous sampling; which consists of bringing together people sharing similar traits in order to conduct an in-depth qualitative evaluation on that particular subgroup (Patton, 1990, p. 173). For my study, the traits that participants had to have in common were; being European students at Aarhus or Brussels University and being between 18 and 26 years old. Nevertheless, since I couldn't gather a sample composed of all the students possessing those characteristics due to limited time and resources, the best option was utilizing a combination of homogeneous sampling and random purposeful sampling. As Julius Omona points out, in the latter, which could be a good solution when the potential purposeful sample is excessively broad; "*the researcher chooses cases at random from*

the sampling frame consisting of a purposefully selected sample" (Omona, 2013, p. 181). Therefore, I decided to randomly choose participants possessing the aforementioned traits by recruiting them through posts and messages on Facebook, flyers, emails, face to face contacts and also thanks to the help of few gatekeepers.

Initially, I advertised the call for participants mentioning the specific characteristics they have to possess on Facebook by creating posts with detailed graphics and sharing them both on my personal page, as well as on Facebook groups of students based in Aarhus and Brussels. After that, I decided to ask some professors teaching a relevant subject to my thesis topic in Aarhus and Brussels to share my call for participants with their students. I also distributed flyers and I went to speak to two political science classes about my research in Brussels. There are two reasons why I decided to do that only in Brussels and not in Aarhus. On the one hand, I had much more contacts with students in Aarhus since it was the place where I studied my master. On the other hand, I was based in Brussels at that time to finish my traineeship, therefore, it was much more difficult for me to be physically present in Aarhus.

All the participants had to fill in a survey before the actual group interview, which I set up on Survey Monkey, in order to confirm their attendance and specify some personal information (name, age, country and field of study). This allowed me to keep track of the number of participants and the balance of the groups' composition. As a matter of fact, as Mousa Masadeh describes in her paper, the size of a focus group is quite important to ensure a successful discussion within it. Therefore, it should be neither too small nor too big, but a medium-size guaranteeing an adequate involvement by most members and comprehensive coverage of the theme (Masadeh, 2012). According to Freeman, the ideal number of participants ranges from 6 to 12 (Freeman, 2006, p. 492).

Moreover, as Masadeh specifies, even though the group should be comparatively homogeneous, too much homogeneity can prevent from hearing a good range of point of views (Masadeh, 2012). This is why a good balance on gender, country and field of study was present as far as possible within the

focus groups I organised; (I will discuss the issue of confidentiality of data later on). Overall there were 23 females and 19 males, while the country of provenience of the participants were: Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Spain. As for their field of study, a lot of students were enrolled in a degree program in European/international studies or political science, but there were also students studying economics, communication studies, journalism, linguistics, cognitive science and medicine.

The total number of groups was four because I wanted to have an even number of them in both locations. According to David Morgan, three to five groups favour data saturation and if your project is structured in different segments, each segment should have more than one group (Morgan, 1997, p.44). Unfortunately, it was difficult to have the same number of members in each focus group. In fact, even though I tried to move people in different groups to have the right balance in terms of size and composition, some of them cancelled at the last moment. In the end, there were 8 members in the first focus group in Brussels, 12 members in the second focus group in Brussels, 12 members in the third focus group in Aarhus and 10 members in the fourth focus group in Aarhus.

In relation to the identities of the participants and their personal details, there are some ethical considerations to make. Indeed, when conducting a focus group, as Prudence Plummer-D'Amato illustrates, the major concern in this regard is the protection of participants' personal information. According to her, this should be done by explaining to the participants the importance of confidentiality on sensible information revealed during the debate and by clarifying what will happen afterwards to the recordings (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008, pp.127-128). To take part in my study, all the group members had to sign a consent form prior to the beginning of the discussion; giving their approval to be filmed and recorded under the obligation of the Danish Data Protection Legislation and of the GDPR (Regulation (EU) 2016/679). In the consent form, I guaranteed them that I would protect personal data by using pseudonyms in all the transcriptions. To create them I used the first

letter of their name, followed by the first letter of their country and then the first letter of their degree program. For instance, in my case, it would be 'LIE' (Luca, Italy, European Studies).

Furthermore, disclosing the personal details (such as gender, nationality and field of study) of the participants of each of the four focus groups individually could indirectly lead to the recognition of their identities, or rather to what, as Sim and Waterfield point out, is known as deductive disclosure. According to them; "*The moderator can also minimize deductive disclosure, by omitting certain information about participants in a report*" (Sim and Waterfield, 2019, p.8). Therefore, for this reason, and the fact that the focus of my research is on participants' opinion as European students other than their differences in terms of gender, nationality, and field of study; I decided to delete any reference to those details within the different transcriptions. My analysis will thus concentrate mostly on the traits that the participants have in common, (such as being European students at Brussels or Aarhus University and being within the same age bracket), to evaluate how they talk altogether about the use of social media and the issue of online disinformation in view of the 2019 EP elections. Indeed, the overall number of participants is too low to differentiate their voices in terms of gender, nationality or field of study.

Regarding the selection of a venue for the focus groups, I decided to conduct them in two seminar rooms located at Aarhus University and Vesalius College. The reasons for my choice were both convenience and practicality. As Nyumba et al claim, it is important that the participants find the environment comfortable and familiar, can have easy access to it and can seat facing each other with a clear view of the entire group (O.Nyumba et al., 2018, p.23). Furthermore, finding a venue outside the university campus would have been problematic in terms of costs and timing. All focus groups lasted for approximately 90 minutes, which, as Powell and Single outline, is the average length of a session. They also explain that the duration of a focus group is determined by the subject under investigation and the size of the group (Powell and Single, 1996, p. 501). In my case, I set up a limit

of two hours, but the discussion ended earlier, as I was able to ask all the prepared questions and have comprehensive and satisfactory answers in around an hour and a half.

To develop the questions, I firstly made a brainstorm of all the themes I wanted to address during the group's discussion and then I selected those that were more closely related to the aim of my study; taking inspiration from the literature presented in the previous chapters and in particular from Naomi Thompson's report on youth and their involvement in this year's European Parliament elections (Thompson, 2018). I ended up drafting 13 questions; beginning with a general presentation of my research and an icebreaker in the form of a personal introduction; finishing by asking the participants for a reflection on the whole debate. According to Krueger et al, the focus group moderator should avoid asking too many questions because this would limit the time that participants have to answer each question, compromising the success of the focus group. As they suggest, I opted for open-ended questions, starting with more general topics and subsequently moving to more narrow themes (Krueger et al., 2001).

Since I had a limited budget, I had to fulfil the role of the focus group's moderator. I was aware of the relevance of this duty to guarantee a productive discussion and ensure the correct developing of the focus group. As Anita Gibbs explains, a moderator has to be neutral and confident, facilitate the group interaction, involve all the participants in the debate and create an informal and relaxed atmosphere. Furthermore, during the dialogue it is crucial to monitor too dominant behaviours from group's members, ask probing questions and avoid being judgmental (Gibbs, 1997). I tried to follow these suggestions as much as possible; starting the session with a general introduction of myself and the study, creating an informal environment by offering them food and drinks, letting the group members know each other, using probes when needed, rephrasing questions that participants did not understand well and maintaining the right degree of neutrality to their answers. I also tried to keep the focus of the debate on the main topics relevant to my thesis.

Analysis

As a method to analyse my dataset, I chose thematic analysis. In fact, as Mohammed Alhojailan outlines, thematic analysis is used to classify collected data in recurring themes and relate them back to the research question. According to him, it is an adequate method "*for any study that seeks to discover using interpretations*" (Alhojailan, 2012, p.40). Furthermore, it allows a certain degree of flexibility; favouring a broad understanding of the existing links between participants' behaviours and thoughts that were gathered at different times and circumstances during the whole research project (Alhojailan, 2012). To develop a structured analytical process, I decided to follow the 'six-phase' approach illustrated by Braun et al; familiarization, generating codes, constructing themes, revising themes, defining themes and producing the report (Braun et al., 2018).

During the first phase, I print all the transcriptions, I read them in-depth to become familiar with the entire data corpus and I took several side notes regarding the most relevant issues raised by the participants. After that, I transferred the Word documents containing the four transcriptions into Nvivo11, where I started to code the collected data. Since the dataset was gathered specifically for my study, as Braun and Clarke suggest, the best way to find patterns within the collected data was through inductive thematic analysis. This means that the analytical process was data-driven and the identified themes were more related to the answers given by the participants rather than to the questions I asked them. Furthermore, as they point out, when utilizing this approach: "*the specific research question can evolve through the coding process*" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.84). In my case, I broaden my research question during the analytical process in accordance with the themes found.

The subsequent phase consisted of sorting the coded and collated data in broader themes. The 13 questions I asked during the four focus groups helped me to filter and code what the participants said during the discussion. However, the identified patterns weren't a mere repetition of those questions,

but, as previously mentioned, an accurate representation of similar concepts and ideas expressed by the groups' members in the answers to those questions. During the fourth and fifth phase, I revised the preliminary themes by modifying them when necessary, I developed a thematic map to understand the relationship between the themes and I decided their names. Lastly, I developed the actual analysis of my thesis, presenting the final results and explaining their relation to the research question.

I identified nine different recurring themes, which are outlined in the table below.

Theme	**Description**
Theme a	The term 'fake news' is firstly associated with Trump and Russia
Theme b	Social media increases the spread of misleading information
Theme c	European Parliament elections are seen as 'second-order elections'
Theme d	Political engagement is necessary to be informed about the EU
Theme e	The future of the European Union is at stake
Theme f	Assumptions about education and its hypothetical key role in tackling online disinformation
Theme g	News is mainly obtained from online sources
Theme h	Assumptions about existing generational differences in the understanding of the modern information system

a. The term 'fake news' is firstly associated with Trump and Russia

When I asked the participants what they could think of when hearing the term 'fake news', they gave me as a first answer 'Donald Trump' in all the four focus groups. Showing that, for the majority of this group of students, Trump played a major role in popularizing the term in the USA, as well as in the rest of the world. They affirmed that the growing discussion and interest around online disinformation is mostly related to him and how he utilized the concept.

LEC: "*I would say Trump, right?*" (general laughs)

Moderator: "*Why Trump? Can you elaborate a little bit*?"

LEC: "*Because he claims that he actually invented the term. Like he claimed to invent a lot of things."*

ASC: "*Yes. Skyscrapers*." (general laughs)

A similar answer from a different focus group:

MDC: "*Trump*".

Moderator: "*OK. Can you please elaborate a little bit?*"

MDC: "*Yes sure. I mean for me it wasn't really a topic before*."

MCM: "*Who's that?*" (General laughs)

MDC: "*It wasn't really a topic for me before the Trump administration. It wasn't a thing for me fake news before his election.*"

As we can understand from these two extracts, the discussion on 'fake news' sees Trump as the main protagonist who, according to those students, not only contributed spreading this word globally but may have even invented it. In fact, as the debate went on some of the participants claimed that he weaponized the term to undermine any type of criticism towards him or his work. According to them, he thus provoked an overusing of this word, which lost its real meaning to become an easy way to avoid confrontations and to target those media going against someone's view. This understanding of the concept is also supported by some scholars; for instance, Mason, Krutka and Stoddard claim that Trump not only uses the term to delegitimize journalists and news outlets but also that this can have permanent consequences on how the public opinion perceives the current media environment (Mason, Krutka and Stoddard, 2018, p. 3).

NIG: "*The term 'fake news' is used in the United States. It comes from the US and I think Trump mostly uses, as you said, when he dislikes something and when he's criticized. Everything that every news organization criticizing Trump says is labelled as 'fake news'*."

KNH: "*It seems to be like your way out of explaining yourself or trying to explain what happened, what might be the truth. I mean he does use it quite often to just kind of brush off things, like trying to get away from uncomfortable situations.*"

And an analogous view is expressed by a participant from another focus group:

MGG: "*I think with Trump it's more the case that he takes actual news and claims that they are 'fake news'; even though they are like maybe even unbiased or just a little bit biased. But then you have the actual fact there, right? And he is just saying that they're all fake.*"

As we can observe, most of the participants seem to understand the problem of utilizing 'fake news' to describe the phenomenon of online disinformation. Indeed, for them, other than describing actual misleading information the term appears to have political connotations. News that is true but inconvenient for the president is labelled as 'fake news'. However, this doesn't happen only in the US, but the participants reported how a similar situation is present in Europe as well and not only in the political sphere. Misunderstanding its sense or using it outside of its original context has become a common practice also for public opinion. In fact, as Joshua Habgood-Coote outlines, people appear to disagree a lot on what the term 'fake news' actually means; moreover, its repeated misuse legitimate anti-democratic propaganda shared by certain political actors such as Donald Trump (Habgood-Coote, 2018).

EFI: "*A word that also comes to my mind is 'mainstream', somehow. I mean, I won't deny that it is an event or an element that is very dominant in our society right now and in the media as well. People talk about it in general. But somehow, after Trump has brought it up, I feel like it's on the surface very often. Even I have some teachers here at University who said in the first*

lecture: 'Yeah well if the syllabus is outdated, don't worry it's fake news.' Well, I feel like this is becoming a term that is very overused and it's kind of annoying at this point."

It is also relevant to notice that in three focus group out of four, the second actor that people associated with the term 'fake news' was the Russian state. As we have seen in the previous chapters, Russian sources were indeed among the external actors who tried to influence the EP elections outcome through disinformation campaigns (European Commission, 2019). Participants firstly related the dissemination of misleading information to political actors rather than to journalists or ordinary citizens. Political actors who were mostly foreigners; as matter of fact, national or European figures weren't really mentioned in the first place. Moreover, if Trump's application of the word 'fake news' was mainly described as a defensive strategy against his political opponents, the Russian government's strategy was represented as an attempt to actively influence foreign citizens or as a way to show off their political power. Here there are two examples of this from two participants of different focus groups:

JDG: "*I think, besides Trump obviously, I also often think about the Russian state and the media agency Russia Today, which is also known to promote a very pro-Russian government narrative about current affairs.*"

MGG: "*Actually, I think also about Russia, because Russia conducted a whole disinformation campaign and information warfare. They spread fake news consciously to scare people. Like they actually want the false news to get caught to show how much they can influence other countries or the political debate in other states.*"

b. Social media increases the spread of misleading information

Most of the groups' members claimed that social media and particularly Facebook favour the diffusion of disinformation on the Internet. New technologies were represented as means to spread inaccurate or misleading information due to their features that make communication fast and direct,

but also more difficult to be checked. They pointed out the fact that a soon as you open your social media profiles it is impossible to avoid links and posts containing false or sensationalized content. This is in line with the literature presented in the previous chapters, such as the findings of the Eurobarometer on "Democracy and elections"; which showed that students were the ones who mostly used social media to discuss politics during the pre-election period and, at the same time, those who were most concerned about the presence of online disinformation on online platforms (European Commission, 2018). However, even if all participants acknowledged the existence of online disinformation, most of them didn't explain if they were taking specific precautions to tackle the issue.

TGC: "*On Facebook, you click on a weird article that claims to be true and if you would dig further into it, you would find that it's just some random numbers, some random guy saying this is news now.*"

Moderator: "*So is Facebook the channel where you can find more false information according to you?*"

ASC: "*If you're are looking for it*."

TGC: "*But even if you wouldn't, you would find 'fake news'.*"

LEC: "*Yeah, but it was used as a platform distributing fake news during the elections.*"

ASC: "*And it still is. I mean, it is a platform to share a lot of things and, therefore, news of all kinds are there. So yeah.*"

ADP: "*Yeah, something like 'nine amazing facts that will blow your mind'.*"

In the above dialogue we can see 'TGC' reference to this problem outlining that, if someone would actually make some research to discover who is behind those captivating headlines, that person would probably understand the hoax. Other participants also discussed how social media changed the way

people access information. The main problems that students illustrated were; the fact that everyone can post and comment without any filter and the use of catchy headlines to increase the engagement at the expense of the quality of the content. Furthermore, another issue that they mentioned, was the fact that now people privilege quick and concise information over in-depth reports. We can observe that in these two extracts from two different focus groups:

> DPN: "*On Facebook, we're just scrolling the newsfeed and we don't actually read the whole article, we only read the headline. So, if you have the catchy headline, I mean I don't know, '500 people died in a terrorist attack'; you don't even click on that and you think there was a terrorist attack. For example.*"
>
> AIC: "*The tendency is now switching from traditional media which gathered information in pursuit of more accurate information rather than just delivery them to the public. So, switching from traditional to social media, which is an easier way to approach and to get information. Sometimes this can be of course problematic because anybody can spread any information and everyone can reply with any sort of opinions.*"

These two students recognize that reading the news on social media can be a challenging process. In fact, you can be attracted by an impressive headline without actually going further in the reading of the news, getting only partial or inaccurate information with the wrong impression of knowing the main facts of the story. Moreover, it is hard to check where all those news come from because there is a great amount of information spread by a lot of different people and usually the posts may also contain comments from other unknown people, which share diverse point of views and create a lot of confusion in the reader. However, even though they use pronouns such as "I and we", meaning that they perceive online disinformation as a threat for everyone, including themselves; when talking about the actual impact of misleading information, most of the participants tend refer to it as someone else's problem. A clear example are these two statements made by different focus groups' members.

SDC: "*For me, Facebook is also interesting in the sense that, press before Facebook I would probably believe that. I mean, these so-called 'fake news' or articles that to me are clearly false. I mean, I would probably think that none would actually believe these articles, but after you have Facebook where you can see that isn't the case. Judging from people's comments, you actually realize the impact that fake news can actually have on the rest of the population.*"

VSE: "*Well I see it as a problem, but it depends on many factors. Like, you will get in touch with it sooner or later from somewhere and there is no way you wouldn't. Except if you would live like in a cottage in the middle of nowhere and you wouldn't have anything, but yeah.*"

As we can see, for these students the diffusion of misleading information on the net is a threat that everyone has to face soon or later. Nevertheless, when they speak about its impact, they are inclined to describe it as an issue affecting "*the rest of the population*" or a more general "*you*". Therefore, they perceive it as a potential risk more for others than for themselves. We can observe that also in another comment, where a participant explains how she can easily understand when the content of a post is false, but then she is surprised to notice that the post receives a lot of engagement. So again, she implies that she is able to detect 'fake news' but that they are a danger for somebody else. However, the confidence that youth usually have when utilizing social media, as Farmer points out, doesn't automatically translate into the right digital competencies to tackle misleading information spread on the Internet (Farmer, 2018).

CSS: "*I see so much stuff on Facebook and I am kind of like; 'What is this? That's not true!'. I see the post and then there's a lot of likes and a lot of comments, or sometimes the information is true but the way it is presented makes it a little bit distorted. So, it's not exactly the way it is; it's taken out of context. I see like a lot of videos and a lot of pictures of that kind on Facebook.*"

According to most of the participants of the four focus groups, another great obstacle that people have to deal with when they are utilizing social media as a news source are 'filter bubbles'. This expression,

conceived by Eli Pariser in his book "The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think", refers to personalization algorithms which operate in a way that, when users search something online, the algorithms use their previous researches to show them specific content in line with their interests (Chapin, 2018). In particular, on online platforms, as groups members outlined, it is common to have on your newsfeed posts and links based on your previous interactions and engagement. This means that, if you have a certain political stand, you will probably receive mostly content corresponding to that ideology.

> RIH: "*I see something I want to agree with it, like something I think I believe in and, therefore, I'm not really motivated to read into it. So, I just give the like and you know. It's interesting though; if I want to disagree with it that's when I read into it, you know. So, I think it can become very easy to keep clicking on your views that you keep getting and keep talking to the same people with the same views. Then when you disagree with something, that's when you're kind of looking more into it. When is important.*"
>
> MDC: "*You're building your own social profile by liking stuff just constructing an image of yourself on the Internet.*"
>
> LLE: "*Indeed, because of Facebook algorithm you see certain news instead of others.*"
>
> RIH: "*I think that's what happened with Brexit; people on either side didn't talk to each other. Same with Trump, I think. You know, people who disagreed, didn't even speak to each other*."

From this dialogue, it emerges that, according to those students, you tend to remain in your own bubble when you are on social media; meaning that, not only you mostly get news that is in line with your beliefs, but you also actively decide to interact with content and people sharing those beliefs. As a matter of fact, as Bakshy, Messing and Adamic explain in their study on the "Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook", what really matters when reading political news online is our selection bias; or rather our decision to mostly click through to articles aligned

with our political views (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015). Consequently, you won't confront individuals holding different ideas and this will only reinforce your own ideology, increasing the chances that you will believe in any kind of news supporting that ideology.

Furthermore, even though participants tended to speak about this issue in general terms, it is interesting to notice that they made predominantly examples related to the right-wing and Eurosceptic ideology like Brexit, Trump or another participant even quoted the 'yellow vests'. Since most of the participants in the focus groups appeared to be quite pro-European, we can say that they considered this once again to be someone else's problem, or rather of those with Eurosceptic views.

> BFJ: "*You're going to focus on the information that is going in your way more than information that is opposite to the way you're thinking. For instance, that's why Emanuel Macron used during his campaign the formula 'en meme temps' which means 'at the same time'; because you will see something at the same time, not the opposite but often something different. And the idea was you're going to get the information that is going more in your way. So, there is also that. For instance, if you are far-right and Marine Le Pen spread a piece of news against immigrants, you would say: 'ok, it is good'. Because, even though it's not conscious, you believe in it because it is going in your way.*"

c. European Parliament elections are seen as 'second-order elections'

When I asked the participants what were for them the most important upcoming elections, I received different answers from those based in Brussels and those based in Aarhus. While in the two focus groups conducted in Brussels the students considered the European Parliament elections as the most

important ones; in the two focus groups conducted in Aarhus the students seemed to believe that national elections could have a greater impact in their lives than the EP elections.

Nevertheless, even among the students based in Brussels, there was a general feeling that ordinary citizens view the European Parliament elections as 'second-order elections' because it is more difficult to recognize the EU institutions' influence on our daily lives. This view is supported by the literature, in fact, as Nicola Lupo affirms, the EP elections have traditionally been labelled as 'second-order elections'; meaning that citizens' motivation to vote is lower than for the national elections and their voting behaviour depends mainly on domestic politics. However, according to him, this time it could be different due the fact that the political debate at national and European level is focused on the uncertainty regarding the future of the EU integration process; making more important than in the past going to the polls (Lupo, 2019).

> FGE: "*For me, the European elections are even more important than the national and I am in European Studies so*."
>
> Moderator: "*Why do you feel that they are important?*"
>
> FGE: "*Well, because they have an impact on all of Europe and happen only every four years or five years. Yeah. But I would say that most of my friends who study politics, they would consider the national election as the most important. European elections are a second-order election, like the regional ones I would say.*"
>
> IGB: "*Yeah, that's true. I agree with you. That's what also the polls say, so Yeah.*"

Another extract from the second focus group in Brussels outlining a similar point of view:

> AFP: "*Well I think, I know I'm biased, but I have to say European elections, but I study European politics.*"
>
> Moderator: "*Can you please elaborate a little bit? Why EP elections?*"

AFP: "*Because I think those are the most powerful ones, in the sense that it's the highest level of power that we have in Europe and, therefore, for dealing with the hottest topics like climate change or immigration, that's the only power that can effectively deal with our current issues.*"

LBE: "*I totally agree with you, but I study European Studies as well. But that's true that national and regional elections in Belgium are at the same date with the European elections. They are the most known. I would say that the debates are not about the European elections but much more about the regional and national politics. So, it is more about national issues; we will simply see them more rather than European stuff.*"

From these short dialogues, it is evident that, for those students, European Parliament elections are more important than national elections because they feel that their outcome has significant consequences both at the national and European level. Nonetheless, in both extracts we can see that participants assume that they have a bias; assuming that, for them, is easier to understand EU politics because of their studies and that the situation would be different for their peers with a different background. They outlined that this is also because each member state is more focused on spreading information regarding national issues other than European ones.

Additionally, it also pertinent to notice that there were group members studying European studies also in Aarhus, but their opinions were quite different. In fact, even though they agreed on the value of European Parliament elections, for them national elections were still the most important ones. I will discuss later on how being in Brussels appears to favour a greater engagement in European politics among the students. However, now I will present two other extracts from the focus groups conducted in Aarhus to analyse the different point of views.

MDI: "*I think it's also quite depending on the country we're discussing about. I mean, here we have what 14 seats. I think something around 14, now, after the Brexit. So, it's not that much and the people believe that the influence is marginal. So, there's no good reason to vote.*"

Moderator: "*Do you believe that people in your country do not really care?*"

MDI: "*I believe the national elections are far more important for them at least.*"

And a student from the other focus group in Aarhus expressed a similar thought:

ADP: "*There are national parliamentary elections in the spring and then the European elections.*"

Moderator: "*What are the most important for you?*"

ADP: "*Probably the parliamentary elections, because the parliamentary elections will change more than the EU elections. With the EU system, with the commission and everything, the EU Parliament is not really that powerful.*"

These two extracts give a clear picture of what was the general opinion of the students participating in the focus groups in Aarhus. In all the four focus groups a lot of the participants tended to say that, since the national elections had already taken place in their home countries, the next most important elections were the European ones. Here, we have two examples of the opposite case; since both the European and National elections hadn't happened yet in Denmark, these students claimed that national elections have a more crucial role. They described national parliament as more influential and powerful than the EU parliament, a circumstance that makes less relevant to them voting in the EP elections. The idea that their voice doesn't really count at the EU level or that the EU institutions haven't the capability to really change the current situation was present in all the focus groups. Here there are two examples of this conception from two participants of different focus groups:

KNH: "*Something like that, or you often feel like your voice isn't really heard or there's not a very good reason to vote. Obviously, I would like to vote but that's kind of my take on it. I think sometimes, even if you do want to vote, there's this kind of fear if it is really worth it going*

through the registration and voting procedures. If you kind of feel like, at the end of the day, it's not really going to make much of a difference."

FPI: "*I can understand why people wouldn't vote for either election like I don't agree, but I could understand. Because, why would I vote for European elections anyway if this happens at home anyway? What are they going to do back in the European Parliament besides embarrassing us? So, I can also understand that it's also dependent on the political scenario that you have at home because you obviously projects to what it's going to be in the EU and how much power we are actually going to have.*"

These two students formulate an opinion that summarizes well the general concern regarding the European Union; or rather its incapability to tackle the challenges that are now present at the national and supranational level. Therefore, some of the students felt discouraged from going to the polls, especially in Aarhus, where they reported a difficult voting procedure for the internationals such as the fact that they had to travel till Copenhagen to vote. The tendencies I found in the dialogues were both; a detachment from European politics because the EU is perceived as a bureaucratic institution not really close to the needs of its citizens, or a desire to see a change in how the EU main bodies currently function. If we can see the first tendency in the extracts above, an example of the latter can be found in the statement of this student:

FGE: "*I said to myself that I don't want to vote strategically but I want to vote for a party that doesn't want to keep the status quo, but it wants to drastically change the European Union. So, I am considering voting for the Greens. I will closely watch what the S&D will do and there are also smaller parties like Volt for example and I will get more informed about these parties and see what they do*."

As we can see this student was willing to vote and support the European Union project, but he wasn't satisfied with the way of working of the European Union and wanted to change that. This point of

view was quite widespread among those participants who were interested and engaged in European politics; showing that, at least for this group of students, being pro-European doesn't necessarily mean being uncritical towards the EU. These considerations are quite similar to the findings of the studies debated in the previous chapter on youth engagement in EU politics. For instance, the one conducted by Carrer et al; which demonstrated that young people are generally positive about the EU project but, at the same time, they are unhappy with some aspects of the current way in which the EU institutions work (Carrer et al., 2018). However, despite the aforementioned critiques, in all the four focus groups most of the participants seemed to be inclined to vote; overall, (excluding the participant from Serbia who wasn't allowed to vote), only two of them clearly stated they won't do it.

d. Political engagement is necessary to be informed about the EU

Being informed was generally considered as directly correlated to people's decision to participate in this year's European Parliament elections. Nevertheless, most of the students mentioned several obstacles that prevented them from receiving adequate knowledge on the issue during the beginning of the electoral campaign. Firstly, the amount of information wasn't enough or anyway, it wasn't so immediate to understand where to look for them. Secondly, national media and parties' websites were mostly focused on national issues, providing none or very little news regarding the European Parliament elections. Lastly, most of the information concerning the European Union lacked clarity and were too complex to be comprehended by someone without any political background. Moreover, this whole system appeared to facilitate the dissemination of misleading information, which are usually much simpler and catchy.

> BFJ: "*I think that in normal times people are not so concerned by the European elections and even in those times where there is something like Brexit and you're based in France and you see a lot of traditional conservative movements in Europe. People are really more focused on what is going on in their countries than what is happening in Europe.*"

ABP: "*Yeah, that's true. There's a lack of visibility of European politics. And so, people cannot be concerned if they don't know what's going on.*"

MGG: "*Yes, and I think it takes people much more effort to look at the agendas of the different European parties and many of them are not willing to do the effort. Because when you're in Germany and you lived in Germany then you know what the parties stand for. You have some experience, but for the European parties it is as you said; they are not visible enough. So, people have to really look them up and see what they stand for. But none want to really do that.*"

According to these students, only the people who are willing to vote and have a particular interest in European politics will look for specific information on the elections. Indeed, national newspapers cover mostly domestic issues because that's what ordinary citizens care about; even when there is a crisis in another member state their main interest will still remain national politics. Moreover, participants believed that people generally have already some knowledge on the government of their countries and this isn't the case for the European institutions and the EU political groups. The result is that journalists or politicians, as another student suggests, would have to make a double effort if they want to report a piece of news concerning the EU because they would have to provide some background on what the European Union actually is and what's its role. In the end, ordinary citizens would be more exposed to online disinformation:

CSS: "*Well, I guess, if you really want to get the information, you can always go on official websites. I'm not sure, but I guess on the EU websites you will find the information you need. On the European Parliament website, you will find something or even on each national party's website. I just feel like maybe a lot of people don't do that. They just read about it somewhere else, maybe on social media and then the information cannot be trusted.*"

What the participants expressed in the focus groups is that, as described in the extract above, there is the possibility to read reliable information on what's happening at the European level, such as by

visiting the official websites of the European institutions, but this isn't the most accessible way. As a matter of fact, even though there you could find everything you need, only the people who are already motivated to learn more about the European Union would visit those websites. All the others would act more as passive readers; waiting for the links to appear on their social media newsfeed; which can be problematic for the factors that have been previously presented. Nevertheless, the situation may differ if you are based in Brussels:

> EIE: "*I don't know. For me, maybe because I'm in Brussels and I'm like in all these events and so on. So now my Facebook page is only about this all the time. The problem is that I think if a person, a young person, is not in Brussels, EU and European elections are really far from his/her everyday reality. So, yeah. I would say that probably they should work also to get people, young people, participating in local events, because here, for example, this week I will go to two events just to listen people talking. But in my country, I don't think I would*."

> Jack: "*I think it's really hard to dissect what is actually happening in general and what is happening here in Brussels. Because here you can only think of like 'oh yeah, it's going to be big'. You know, more voters are going to turn out, because you see it every day. But when I talk to my friends in my hometown, they don't really care.*"

So, students in Brussels, felt closer to the European Union because of their physical proximity to EU institutions and because the social media algorithm exposed them to a great amount of news concerning European politics. This appeared to affect their behaviour, making them more involved in the participation in workshops and conferences related to the European Parliament elections and in following the electoral campaign. Something that, according to them, wouldn't happen in their countries, where most young people have little knowledge on the topic. This was noted also by another student who lived in Brussels but then moved back to Aarhus:

> XGE: "*I think it's really interesting because for me the European elections campaign has just changed because I lived in Brussels for the last few months. So suddenly I'm super aware of like all the debates and it seems way bigger to me now than before. I mean, of course, also timing probably matters. And also, my Facebook page changed because I get the campaign advertisements all day.*"

Living in Brussels seems to increase students' engagement with the European Parliament elections. However, this is the case of those who had a previous interest in the subject and held a positive view of the European Union. In fact, all of the students in the examples above were studying politics or European studies and were quite pro-European. As Brake outlines, Facebook algorithm isn't only based on location but also on the information that users provide when browsing their news feed (Brake, 2017, p.29). Therefore, if you see a lot of EU related content, it probably means you liked and followed specific pages concerning that topic.

For instance, another participant studying medicine in Brussels affirmed that she mostly visited websites related to her field and she wasn't really informed about EU politics. In the end, the students who were really eager to follow the European Parliament elections were thus those actively looking for information on the topic and with a quite positive image of the EU. A result comparable to that of the Eurobarometer on "Democracy and elections", where respondents who were more positive about the EU were also the ones more likely to follow or participate in online political debates during the election periods (European Commission, 2018).

e. The future of the European Union is at stake

There was a widespread perception in all the focus groups that these elections would have been crucial in determining the future of our continent. On the one hand, the growing influence of populist parties and the many challenges threatening Europe's cohesion were viewed as factors that could have increased voter turnout. On the other hand, there was a general fear that greater participation in the

elections could have resulted in more votes for the far-right parties. The stability of the European Union was thus considered at stake and voting in the elections to counter the growth of Eurosceptic parties as a duty.

> LLE: "*I have just read a survey from Bloomberg and they think that one-third of the MEPs will actually be from right-wing parties.*"
>
> Moderator: "*So, is that like an issue because there is the possibility of right-wing parties gaining power?*"
>
> LLE: "*Yeah. So, then we have like less pro-European parties governing the EU and that isn't a good thing.*"
>
> XGE: "*Yeah, definitely.*"
>
> Moderator: "*Do you guys agree or disagree?*"
>
> MDI: "*Well, I believe it will be interesting because, I think it was just yesterday, a report was published stating that, for the first time in Danish history, the topic that people worry the most about is climate change over immigration. Personally, I hope that's going to reflect the European Parliamentary elections' result. But we'll see, it can be even more populists.*"

Another interesting statement on that regard was made by a participant of a different focus group:

> FGI: "*I feel like that might be a bit of a change in the next European elections just because there's a lot going on right now and with the Brexit referendum, with these school strikes against climate change and with the fear of having even more Eurosceptic parties, those are all issues that are very relevant to our generation, might be true more motivations to actually go and vote.*"

In these two extracts, we can clearly observe these two tendencies; the concern of a new European Parliament led by the populists and the hope that people's rising interest for topical issues such as

climate change would increase the elections' participation. Moreover, according to most of the groups' members, this would affect in particular the voter turnout of the younger generations, who appeared to be more and more involved in the fight for these causes. Nevertheless, there wasn't a general agreement regarding a possible increase in youth participation in these elections with respect to those of 2014. The majority of participants believed in their relevance, but the fact that other young people would have considered them in the same way was more an expectation other than a certainty. Overall, participants' decision to vote was driven more by a desire for change or to oppose the far-right parties, other than a profound ideological affinity with current EU political groups.

> EIE: "*I think that now some socialist parties are kind of warning people from populist movements but, at the same time, I don't think it's good to vote for the socialist or similar parties just out of fear; because at the end if we're in this situation it's also because many socialist parties at the national level did big mistakes. So of course, I mean in my case I would probably vote not for a right-wing, populist, nationalist party let's say. But still, it would be more out of fear than really to award the work that the Socialist Party did.*"
>
> IGB: "*I agree, this is my first time voting in the EU elections and If, on the one hand, I am happy to vote. On the other hand, I am scared that the far-right parties could gain too many seats in these elections and thus I will vote to prevent the populists to gain too much power.*"

In this short dialogue, we can clearly observe this attitude towards voting in the European Parliament elections, which these participants recognize as being not for ideological reasons but to prevent Eurosceptic parties to gain too many seats in the EU Parliament. In another focus groups the participants described the EP elections as the only occasion for people to express their discontent towards the national governments because the national elections had already taken place. However, none mentioned that they will vote for a certain party because they strongly support their program and their vision of Europe. Furthermore, in all the four focus groups there was a widespread belief

that people supporting Eurosceptic parties were those most vulnerable to online disinformation and also those with less knowledge on the topic.

> IIP: "*It's also true that the people that vote for the European elections, they are probably more shift towards the traditional parties. So, more maybe socialist or popular parties or the green left. So, there are two forces that apply in this case and we really have to see which one will prevail. So if the fact that the populist wave will take over the European Party, which of course I hope it doesn't happen, or if the fact that fewer people are going to vote and only then more informed people are going to vote for the European Parliament and this will favour the traditional parties.*"

For instance, this student associates an informed vote with pro-European parties; implying that a greater turnout in the EP elections might result in more votes for the populist parties because their support would come from uninformed people that don't usually vote in the European Parliament elections. Nevertheless, making this assumption means that this participant believes that people could be more interested in these elections than the previous ones, viewing them as a turning point for the future of Europe.

It is possible to notice a similar tendency among the general population in the surveys conducted before the elections, such as the Parlemeter 2018; which shows a growing awareness and interest among EU citizens in the 2019 European Parliament elections, but also a widespread belief that the things in the European Union aren't going in the right direction. Furthermore, the percentage of people believing that also in their own country the situation was rather negative was even higher (Schulmeister et al., 2018). As we have previously seen, according to Eichhorn, youth have a greater interest in politics when they feel that the future of the country is at stake (Eichhorn, 2014).

f. Assumptions about education and its hypothetical key role in tackling online disinformation

Another predominant topic during discussions in the different focus groups has been the importance of education to have a transparent and unbiased elections' outcome. Education was intended in two different ways; firstly, media education to be able to tackle online disinformation and choosing the right sources from where to follow the electoral campaign. Secondly, a European civic education to know what the EU does, how its institutions work and what are the different EU political groups. Some students described the lack of these type of courses in schools' curriculum as a factor that could have implications in the diffusion of misleading information.

> Moderator: "*So do you feel that young people are sort of immune to fake news because they know much more about Internet and social media with respect to older people?*"
>
> TSL: "*I think in this case it doesn't really depend on the age but more on the education.*"
>
> RRE: "*Yeah, me too.*"
>
> TSL: "*I mean; ok, it does depend on age because if you don't grow up with the technology. But I mean, to just ask what's the source of information, like either if it's online or not online. I mean, you should ask for the credibility of it. In any age, there are people that do it and people that don't.*"
>
> MCM: "*Well I would expand on the notion of education because that's true but I think it needs to be understood in a broader way than a conventional sort of schooling. I mean, education in terms of information literacy and education in terms of if you grow up with Facebook or you are used to working with these things, make you much more likely to be digital literate.*"

An additional example from a different focus group underlining the same aspects of the issue:

FGE: "*I wouldn't be surprised if you would have told us that young people are inclined to think as older people. Me personally, in my school, we didn't learn that much about how to look for trustworthy sources. We haven't had that much education on that. I think it's up to everybody after school to learn it. That is so. I wouldn't automatically say that young people know a lot about the topic; they are definitely not immune to fake news.*"

Here we can see that, for these students, having media literacy classes at school would have been an asset afterwards. Indeed, as they explain, it is not general education that makes you aware of the dangers of online disinformation, because it doesn't teach you the specific skills you need to become a media literate citizen. Without that specialized knowledge, you have to learn by yourself how to distinguish trustworthy sources from unreliable sources; making harder for any age group to assess and critically evaluate the content people find on online platforms. As we have discussed previously, possessing digital competences is crucial to become an active EU citizen (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017). Moreover, as Kasra pointed out, having a better understanding of how the new technologies work could reduce the chances of falling for misleading information (Kasra, 2019).

However, even though participants describe the lack of proper digital skills as a general problem, they tend to see it more as an issue for other people. For instance, in the second extract above, we can notice that the participant firstly utilized the pronoun "we" to illustrate the lack media education in schools and then he shifted to "young people" when talking about the lack of knowledge on the topic. Therefore, FGE excludes himself from those youth who doesn't know much about online disinformation. Another clear example of that can be found in the statement reported below; where the participant directly affirmed that she knew how to distinguish misleading information better than other young people.

MGG: "*But I also think that we, especially here in this group, are in a certain bubble as well because we are all educated. So, I think we know even better how to distinguish between 'fake*

news' and not 'fake news'. I can see if there is a bias within a news article better than other young people who are not trained to do that."

Apart from media education, some students reasoned about the difficulties of understanding the European Parliament elections without any background on EU politics. A fact that contributes to make everyone more vulnerable to misleading information.

SFP: "*A lot of people don't know about the Spitzenkadidaten.*"

IIP: "*Exactly. They don't even know what a Spitzenkadidaten is, probably.*"

LBE: "*That's true because at school we don't even learn what is the European Union or the BRICS and so on. I remember this from secondary school, in our history classes we only learned the history of our country, but we don't learn about the EU institutions, at least for my experience.*"

And a similar argument was made in another focus group:

ASC: "*It seems that there is a lot of like misunderstanding about what the EU elections actually are and who you're voting for and who votes.*"

SDC: "*Yeah, I agree.*"

ADP: "*And then also when the election is over, everything about the EU system with the Council of Ministers and the Commission and... I mean, I've had a course of EU institutions and I'm not sure I get all of it. And the news, national journalists in my country, I think they are not terrible, but they are not really good at explaining it either.*"

ASC: "*I think that might be where the fake news gets a lot of its attraction because you know it's so much simpler than actual stuff that delves into a problem.*"

In these paragraphs, it is visible that these students perceive European politics far from being straightforward. Even when you have studied it, as one of them specifies, it might be complex to understand how European institutions work due to their intricate tangle of rules and laws; which make the whole EU project more bureaucratic than close to EU citizens' needs. For most participants, the complexity of the EU system together with the lack of any European civic education courses in schools, favour the spread of confusion on the subject. The result is a greater exposure to misleading information, seen by most of the people as fast, catchy and easy to read.

As it is possible to notice from the extracts, some participants admitted to not be fully prepared about the European Parliament elections, utilizing also the pronouns "I" and "we" when describing the issue. This differs from the results presented by the Eurobarometer concerning the subjective knowledge of EU citizens about the European Union; in fact, 72% of respondents among those with higher education stated to understand how the EU works, whereas only 39% of the overall group of respondents affirmed the opposite (European Commission, 2017, pp-117-121).

g. News is mainly obtained from online sources

Regarding which channels students prefer to use to stay informed on what's happening around them, they largely agreed that it's mostly online newspapers and social media. This is what was expected; in fact, according to the literature analysed in the previous chapters, youth are those who mainly use online platforms on a daily basis. For instance, Eurostat data revealed that 96% of highly educated young people in the EU-28 used the internet on a daily basis in 2016 and being active on social media was among their most common online activity in the 3-month period prior to the report (Ec.europa.eu, 2017).

Some participants affirmed they prefer combined usage of different channels and others that they utilize only one channel. Participants cited both national and international online newspapers; pointing out in some cases the challenge of finding good quality free information. Few European

news organizations, such as Politico, Euractive and Euronews, were also mentioned. Printed newspapers were not so popular among the participants, who, anyway, affirmed to read them only when they weren't abroad. Even though most of the focus groups participants were using social media as a news source, not everyone admitted it from the beginning but only after a probing question.

> Moderator: "*Yeah. Does anyone use social media to get informed?*"
>
> JDG: "*That's where we are getting info. I don't think we're accepting it but using it, yeah. That's what we talked about disinformation.*"
>
> LLE: "*But that's one thing. Like for social media, I use the newspapers on them. Yeah, but then it's like online magazine.*"
>
> Moderator: "*Yeah. But I think it's a bit different how the content is shared on social media than when you directly visit newspapers website. So, for you, when you mean like an online newspaper, do you actually mean like Facebook pages or?* "
>
> LLE: "*No, no. Like online. When you get them through your newsfeed; because you liked certain Facebook pages of online newspapers you see some articles there*."

In this case, the participant firstly said she used online and printed newspapers without saying anything about social media and only after she revealed that she was also using them to read the news. However, it is interesting noticing that she doesn't really want to fully admit this till the end; claiming that following Facebook pages of various newspapers is like reading articles directly on the websites of those newspapers. Moreover, it is quite relevant to observe that, even if the great majority of the students perceived disinformation as a global threat especially on social media, at the end this didn't prevent them to keep reading news on those platforms. As reported by the Eurobarometer on "Fake news and disinformation online", youth and highly educated people are those who tend to trust more what they read on the Internet, especially in online newspapers (European Commission, 2018).

Indeed, as we can see in these extracts, participants are quite confident about their capability to detect misleading information.

> ASB: "*I have one newspaper where I actively go on the website and look for articles. I subscribed to a few newspapers on Facebook, which obviously doesn't cover the whole range. And then the newsletters.*"
>
> LBE: "*For me, it is mainly the online media, like an online newspaper, different newspapers that I follow on Facebook and the television.*"
>
> EIE: "*I use Facebook but because I liked many newspapers' pages and so, this way, I don't have to go individually on the website of each newspaper, but I have them all there. At the same time some of the newspaper, I mean, some of the articles on Facebook, of course, are the ones that will get more likes and sometimes you don't get the most interesting articles.*"
>
> KNH: "*I do that on Instagram, where you can also follow the official pages. The algorithm makes sure that the most liked news is always at the top of the page. So sometimes I do find that I miss some things just because that's the article with most likes and it has a lot of views. So, even then it's difficult to get on your newsfeed the news that you are actually looking for.*"

However, misleading information isn't the only issue that students might face when surfing in the net to look for articles. In these extracts, participants clearly affirm that they rely on social media to follow and read the news, illustrating some other possible challenges of doing that. For example, two participants mentioned social media algorithm as a potential obstacle to an adequate and diverse range of news. In fact, it can happen that you might miss relevant information because they are not among the content with the most engagement and they won't thus appear on your newsfeed. Nevertheless, this doesn't seem to be, for the larger number of participants, a sufficient reason to stop accessing information through social media; whose features make the reading process much more rapid and direct.

Moreover, most of the participants have been exposed to disinformation. Indeed, in all the focus groups students reported several examples of misleading information that they encountered online and offline. A lot of this false content was related to immigration and the vast majority was on social media.

> TFC: "*I remember when I was not really arguing but disputing something online with some biologists, who claimed that homosexuality was strange and, at some point, someone actually put another news that was totally unrelated. Like, they published this link under the post, which was something about Germany banning pork from all schools and kindergartens because the Muslims have won or something like that. I read it, I googled this news afterwards and obviously, it was a fake.*"
>
> VBM: "*I have some friends that sometimes share something on Facebook. I'm not very active there. Sometimes, I open my newsfeed, I see the posts and I'm like 'OK, that's fake'. Now, if you go and read through a story, you kind of discover that the story is fake, but they still share it because they think that's actually true. So, Facebook is often misused for fake news.*"
>
> ABP: "*I have a quite similar example. It was a communication coming from the NVA, which is a right-wing political party here in Belgium. They made up some stuff like that on the immigration and they shared it on their official accounts. It was not lying, but… How do you say that in English? I'm sorry, I'm not perfectly sure. Exaggerating something.*"

Here there are three examples of participants who found news on social media and, after further researches on the source, they discovered it was false information. It might be relevant to reason about the fact that you are always exposed to any kind of content on social media. Even when you are scrolling through your newsfeed without the precise intention of actually reading the news, you might still end up being attracted by a particular post of an article related to you interests or anyway catching your attention. Indeed, as Monti explains, social media are able to reach unilaterally certain users and

have the capacity to amplify the scope of specific content making it viral (Monti, 2017). Therefore, even if you don't primarily use those platforms to stay informed, it is possible that you will read the news that is published or shared there, as in the example above.

Furthermore, these students specified that only after double-checking the story, they found out it wasn't trustworthy. This implies that if they wouldn't have done that, they could have believed in it; demonstrating once again the high risks of misleading information on social media. However, none of the participants directly affirmed to have fallen for a false story; it was always somebody else's problem. This confirms once again that highly educated people tend to trust in their ability to identify misleading information (European Commission, 2018, p.16).

h. Assumptions about existing generational differences in the understanding of the modern information system

In all the focus groups the vast majority of participants claimed that youth are more digital literate than the older people. According to them, since their generation was born during the age of digital technologies, it is natural that they understand better the functions of these tools than those who acquired familiarity with them later in life. In fact, they surf the net daily for several reasons from reading the news to communicating with our peers and we do that even at the same time. They are thus used to the different systems of online interaction and able to tackle the various forms of Internet advertising. For most of the participants, these aspects would make their generation less vulnerable to online disinformation than older generations. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the literature, being digital native doesn't automatically means being media literate. For instance, according to EAVI analysis, more than 70 % of the respondents aged between 16-24 held a poor or middling critical understanding of information present in the media (European Association for Viewers' Interests, 2011).

CFD: "*The thing is that the younger generation, we have grown up with these tools already. Sure, they have developed an advanced model but for most of my life, I've had the internet, for instance. Whereas, for the older generation, it is something that they've encountered later in life. These communications revolutions are at such a fast pace that they are struggling to keep up with. So, they haven't learned how to use the filters, which we have slowly had to learn to use for the sake of our education.*"

ASC: "*Younger people are just better at ignoring the noise on social media because I think that's the key. Well, from what I've noticed from for example my family members, who have just discovered you know at 50 or something Facebook or other social media or you know online news altogether; they tend to be like: 'Oh my God, look at this'. And, you know, for me it's just noise as for most young people. We see it as just one of these million things that come from everywhere, but for them it's like the new discovery. You know, it's huge.*"

Even though, as we have previously remarked, some participants pointed out the absence of media education in schools as a factor influencing youth ability to tackle online disinformation; when the comparison of digital literacy level is between younger people and older people, this aspect appears being less relevant. The fact that their generation has always used the Internet, should make them more capable to avoid being attracted by the numerous sensationalized messages present on the net and to filter reliable content from more unreliable content. As we can see from the two extracts above, when talking about youth as naturally technologically savvy, most of the students tended to use personal pronouns such as "I or we"; including thus themselves in that group of people. Nevertheless, this was not the case, for instance, when discussing young people being challenged by misleading information.

MDC: "*Maybe they are set in their ways in that sense. That's what they think of the Internet*."

MCM: "*I mean their way of thinking I believe has to do with carrying forward the sort of way of working with information from before the Internet*."

MDC: "*Exactly*."

MCM: "*Because if you have spent the first 50 years of your life, 60/70 years of your life, without the internet, you sort of have trust in the written word. Right?*"

MDC: "*Yeah and you don't need any sign of the validity of what you're reading. It's not a question of whether or not you look for it, because you don't need that. They don't need that*."

In this dialogue, we can notice how these students related a poor level of digital literacy with an outdated way of understanding the information environment, or rather it is claimed that older people access and reflect on what they read online the same way they used to do with printed articles. According to most of the students, older generation is much less aware of the risks of the Internet and thus they tend to trust more online content without really looking at the sources. In one of the focus groups, some participants have even claimed that older people have more time to spend surfing the net and this increase the chances they share or fall for some false stories. However, when the discussion is about being informed and interested in European politics the roles seem to be reversed. For nearly all the participants, older generations have a better awareness of the history of our continent and the relevance of the rights of EU citizens than younger generations.

VBM: "*I mean, I'm thinking about my family and like they kind of grew up with it. So, they have maybe more information about what the EU means, while for us it was there, for example. We take it for granted and they don't. Like you know, they have maybe this urge to go and vote.*"

JNE: "*It's also like young people have only seen the democratic system, they haven't seen examples of how it was before, for example, the fall of the Berlin wall. While I think the older*

generation has seen much more than the younger generation. So, they don't really see the importance of it yet, but perhaps when the wisdom age comes then they will."

Since older generations experienced how it was the before the European Union as we know it today, they can appreciate better than younger generations the benefits of being part of it. This is the main message expressed in the two extracts above. Youth didn't experience almost any wars; they don't know how it was living under an authoritarian regime and thus they value EU citizenship less than those who can make a comparison with the past. Therefore, for the participants, on the one hand, young people are more technologically savvy, on the other hand, they are less aware of European politics than older people.

This situation could be a possible explanation of a greater voter turnout among the older age groups, as one of the participants stated, older people perceive voting as an urgency because their understanding of the past makes them more conscious about the role of the European institutions in national politics. Nevertheless, this is in discordance with the literature, such as the report on "Political Participation and EU Citizenship: Perceptions and Behaviours of Young People"; which reveals that not only youth generally know more about their rights as EU citizens than older people, but they are also more willing to acquire additional information on the issue (Horvath and Paolini, 2013, p. 15).

Conclusion

The purpose of my thesis was to examine the way EU university students talk over the use of social media and the issue of online disinformation in view of the 2019 European Parliament elections. The results of my thematic analysis were quite homogeneous among the different focus groups; presenting only occasionally some differences between the perceptions of those based in Aarhus and those based in Brussels on specific topics such as the exposure to news related to EU politics. There was a general

understanding of the problem of online disinformation, described by most as a hindrance to a transparent and informed vote. However, even if the large majority of students outlined potential obstacles of accessing and reading a piece of information on the Internet, especially on social media, this was rarely understood as something directly affecting them. Indeed, on the one hand, they described misleading news as a threat to the younger generations or even to the whole population; on the other hand, they tended to exclude themselves from that group because of their confidence in their ability to detect unreliable web content.

In this sense, it is relevant to mention the fact that most of the participants appeared to believe in the stereotype of youth being more technologically savvy than older people. This is even more interesting if we consider that they tended to describe older generations as more aware than younger generations of the importance of the European Union in our lives. Furthermore, almost everyone recognized education as a key factor to be able to distinguish false information from trustworthy information; showing contrasting opinions in the generational differences related to the understanding of online disinformation. In fact, from one side, youth were viewed as better in tackling misleading information because of their digital skills; from the other side, they were seen as more vulnerable to false news on European politics because their lack of knowledge on the subject. In the end, participants recognized that online disinformation can have a strong impact in our society during a period of elections campaign, especially if it is European Parliament elections; which are for them much less popular than national elections and thus surrounded by a more fragmented and unclear information environment.

Another crucial aspect reported by most of the students was the peculiarity of these elections with respect to the previous ones due to the different crisis questioning the stability of our continent. Nevertheless, if voting was seen as more essential in determining the future of Europe than in the past; a great number of participants was critical of the current functioning of the European institutions and viewed these elections as an opportunity to change the status quo. In order to achieve that, being

informed about the different EU political groups before going to the polls was recognized as fundamental. However, besides online disinformation, most of the students illustrated several challenges in gathering information regarding the European Union online; among which the difficulty in finding consistent and comprehensible news. This was partially correlated to the use of social media and their algorithm, which makes harder to follow something that is outside your filter bubble.

As expected, even though the vast majority of the students pointed out the aforementioned problem when using social media, as well as the high risk of finding unreliable content in their newsfeed; none declared to have stopped reading the news on those platforms. On the contrary, a lot of them affirmed to utilize social media as the only source or as a complementary source of news. Moreover, they reported both examples of false information that they personally encountered or that their friends shared on social media, especially on Facebook. Some of the students even mentioned the fact that they didn't have any media literacy course at school, demonstrating that being young doesn't necessarily mean being digitally literate. Therefore, online disinformation is a threat also to them, even though very few participants directly acknowledged this.

As I previously stated, my research presents some limitations and it is thus not possible to generalize my findings to the entire student population of the European Union. Nevertheless, I think the presented results can be helpful for further analysis of the relation between online disinformation and EU university students. Therefore, I believe it would be beneficial to conduct more extensive researches on this subject and in particular investigating how online disinformation actually affected this group's voting behaviour in the 2019 EP elections.

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