

“One Big Fake News”: Misinformation at the Intersection of User-Based and Legacy Media

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This article explores audiences’ online reactions to public service broadcasting content manipulations. Drawing on a case study of Israeli televised content, we discuss the role user comments play in mediated calls for media literacy and civic awareness, allowing audiences to gather and discuss the impact of misinformation and fake news on culture, civic participation, and trust in public service media and other democratic institutions. We show how online mediated spaces that are considered aggressive and counterproductive should also be understood as facilitators of calls against misuse of public resources and manipulations spread in society. We thus suggest that alongside legacy mainstream media, user comments can become part of the solution for the prevalence of disinformation in our current digital media ecosystem.

Keywords: public service broadcasting, user comments, misinformation, fake news, legacy media, user-based media

This is a teachable media text of the utmost importance—What is a documentary series and what is a reality series? What is the role of public broadcasting? What is the reliability of public broadcasting and what exactly is the worth of the watchdog of democracy? What is the function of the police? . . . What is their reliability? (User comment on the *Haaretz* online newspaper, Appendix Item 54)²

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² The full data set can be found at
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In the above quotation, a reader of *Haaretz* online grappled with the issue of content manipulation in *Jerusalem District* (Landes, 2019), an Israeli docu-reality series that followed the harsh day-to-day occurrences of police forces fighting crime and terrorism in the turbulent city of Jerusalem. Like many other audience members across the Israeli mediascape, the commenter reflected on the changing roles of public broadcasting in our current digital era, touching on the issues of reliability and documentation.

In this article, we explore the main themes underlying audiences' interpretations of content manipulations in *Jerusalem District*. To do so, we applied a qualitative-interpretive thematic analysis to public discussions about the manipulations. We analyzed more than 3,500 user comments that were featured on top Israeli news and public affairs websites during the month that followed the occurrences (August 2019). Thus, the article concentrates on two main focal points: First, we address the ongoing debate regarding misinformation in our current media ecology. Here, we focus on media users' conceptualizations of fake news, calls for trustworthy media outlets, and critical stances toward state institutions. As part of this locus, we unpack the potential of user comment sections becoming a means of countering false information and providing important outlets for expression of public sentiment and discourse hygiene. Second, we address the prominent role of public service broadcasting (PSB) institutions as warranters of trustworthy information in a contested mediascape. Here, we unpack the conflict between reliable reporting and commercial interests as a distortion of journalistic values and trustworthiness. To better understand and approach these two loci of the article, we first need to understand the case study at hand.

The series *Jerusalem District*, which debuted on Israeli public service television (KAN 11) in May 2019, earned high ratings and positive reviews from viewers and critics alike. KAN declared it its most watched series, both on regularly scheduled programs and online on KAN's digital platforms. However, the successful reception of the show quickly turned into a problematic spread of false information related to the complicated social, political, and cultural atmosphere in Israel.

On the last episode of the series' first season, officers were shown finding an M16 rifle in the basement of an Arab resident of East Jerusalem (Samar Sleiman), priceless footage in terms of both the materials the series dealt with up to that point and documentary materials related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so deeply associated with the district. Shortly after, Nir Hasson, a journalist of *Haaretz*, uncovered that the scene was staged and the rifle was, in fact, planted by the police in cooperation with the show's producers and without the knowledge of Sleiman. This, alongside speculations about additional manipulated scenes, led to the removal of the series in its entirety from the digital platforms of KAN 11. Although this series was not part of KAN's news division, it was indeed commissioned by KAN through an external production company named Koda with which KAN ceased all commercial engagements after the manipulations were uncovered. The incident raised an intense public discussion that followed a detailed journalistic coverage relating to issues such as the role of public media service in an age of fake news, trust in state institutions, and the role of disinformation in democratic civic life.

To approach this unique case study, we open the article with a literature review related to three media loci: PSB, user comments, and fake news. We then discuss the data collection and analysis employed in this study. These methodologies reveal two main themes related to users' interpretations of content manipulations in *Jerusalem District*: The first theme captures how commenters framed manipulations and fake news as the

bankruptcy of democracy. The second theme addresses the rhetorical strategies through which commenters discuss responsibility and accountability in the Israeli media field as a whole and in the context of PSB in particular. We conclude the article by reintegrating the implications of these two themes into the larger academic investigations of false information in the current digital media ecosystem, the contemporary role of PSB, and the meanings of user comments for media literacy and civic awareness.

Public Service Broadcasting in a Changing Digital Mediascape

Research in the field of PSB has focused over the last decade on the ongoing challenges PSB organizations face in the changing mediascape. Due to several factors discussed in this passage, PSB organizations around the world have to continually prove their relevance in the digital media ecosystem and validate their legitimacy, struggling for independence even in countries where the public service media ethos is strong (Larsen, 2014). Not only do PSB organizations have to continue competing with commercial media (as they have for many decades), they also must adapt to the heavily populated digital mediascape saturated with accessible on-demand content (Keinonen & Klein Shagrir, 2017) and withstand the financial and production abilities of streaming giants such as Netflix (Goodwin, 2017). Within this challenging media ecosystem, PSB, as a legacy media outlet, is threatened by a decline of linear television viewing patterns, specifically those of young audiences (Reiter, Gonser, Grammel, & Gründl, 2017) who do not necessarily recognize the role and worth of PSB and its values (such as accountability, independence, excellence, and diversity; see Suárez Candel, 2012).

Over the last decade, PSB in Israel (Israel Broadcasting Authority [IBA], established 1948 in Jerusalem) has faced similar struggles and has gone through significant changes. Caspi and Limor (1992) suggest that from the very beginning IBA embraced the European public service ethos and the BBC as a model. In its first 20 years of broadcasting (1950s–1970s), the IBA television channel, appropriately named “The Israeli Television,” was one of only two Israeli broadcasting channels (the other was a state-operated educational channel that taught language skills, mathematics, and the like). The IBA was funded mainly by license fees (Katz, 1996; Soffer, 2014).

With the introduction of commercial television channels in Israel in the early 1990s, the public channel gradually lost most of its viewership (Caspi, 2005). IBA failed to compete with commercial channels because of corruption, weak management, and intense political pressures. In this climate, it lost its legitimacy among the Israeli public (Caspi, 2006). Eventually, in 2014, the Israeli government passed a new PSB law, announced the closure of IBA alongside the establishment of a new public media corporation, and abolished the audience license fee. According to the Landes Committee (2014) that recommended these changes, the main objectives of the new corporation (KAN) were generating relevant programming for audiences while ensuring quality and giving visibility to a broad range of opinions and local cultures. Landes, who headed the committee was, surprisingly, the creator of the manipulated show at the heart of this study—*Jerusalem District*—an issue we circulate back to later in this article.

Thus, with the recommendation of the Landes Committee, in 2015 a new Israeli public broadcasting corporation named KAN was established under political pressures and a fierce struggle for legitimacy (Klein Shagrir, 2019). KAN currently broadcasts on three main TV channels (in Hebrew and in Arabic) and operates eight radio stations alongside extensive presence online with an official website, social networking sites

platforms, and car and mobile apps (Dorot, 2020). KAN's commitment to accountability, independence, and quality content that is "not subjected to the influence of specific politicians or of commercial interests of private companies and serves only the public" (KAN, n.d., Section 3 General Information) is significant in light of the constantly voiced concerns that PSB organizations worldwide may sacrifice their values when strategic managers embrace market-based perspectives (Lowe & Palokangas, 2010).

Next to the ongoing struggles of PSB organizations in the global media market (and in Israel as part of this field), television industry trends are increasingly explored alongside issues such as editorial accountability, alternative facts, and fakery (Horowitz & Lowe, 2020). Here, scholars such as Weeks and Gil de Zúñiga (2019) stress the need to continue asking questions about the relationship among false information, legacy media, and trust.

Understanding Public Service Television in the Age of Fake News

As mentioned above, there is a traditional assumption that televised, nonfictional PSB content is trustworthy, credible, accountable, and autonomous of market-based interests (Suaréz Candel, 2012). Yet, "public trust in media has declined roughly in step with a distrust of politicians and a general diminishing faith in public institutions throughout the neoliberal era" (Mason, Krutka, & Stoddard, 2018, p. 6). Many of these attitudes, lumped together by scholars in the field under umbrella terms such as "era of post-truth" (Yadlin-Segal & Oppenheim, 2020), are tied to technological advances that permit easier and broader manipulation of media content.

As part of this trend, varying kinds of false information (mis- and disinformation, intentionally false or inaccurate, malicious or otherwise; see Weeks & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019) are brought together under the term *fake news*. These yield a diminished sense of trust and are related to both content and rhetoric of digital media users, politicians, and journalists (Bakir & McStay, 2017; Farkas & Schou, 2018). Yet, according to Weeks and Gil de Zúñiga (2019), false information is a complex phenomenon that cannot be captured with a single construct, definition, or concept. Here, they argue that although typologies are important, narrowly defining dimensions or subconcepts might not be a productive way for capturing the nature of disseminating false information within the political and media ecosystems, both online and offline.

Weeks and Gil de Zúñiga (2019) suggest that current studies should focus on where false information comes from and whether and why people believe it rather than on finely differentiating between close and often overlapping subconcepts of false information. Given that top fake news items might draw higher levels of audience attention and engagement than top mainstream news stories (Silverman, 2016), scholars such as Schwarzenegger (2020) urge us to pay more attention to how audiences understand and explain fake news in relation to both user-based and legacy media (with PSB among these).

Although the status of nonfiction genres as conveyors of objective and impartial documentation has been made precarious (Harindranath, 2018), it is still argued that PSB organizations, by producing and providing reliable knowledge, are often deemed as holding an important part in combating misinformation in our current digital moment (Horowitz & Lowe, 2020). But what happens when PSB organizations are

themselves the source of misinformation? How do audience members explain such cases, and what is their understanding of misinformation?

Thus far, Schwarzenegger (2020) argues, academic attention has been predominantly given to contents of fake news and circulation of misinformation, creating a lacuna in our knowledge about media consumption and audience expectations and perceptions of our current digital mediascape. With the above assertions in mind, we suggest that the case study of public reactions to content manipulations in *Jerusalem District* provides a unique opportunity to unpack the meanings of trust in the media at the intersection of user-based media and legacy media.

Contextualizing Online User Comments

Online user comments, often dubbed “comments section” or “reader comment boards,” are public, computer-mediated, asynchronous contents, usually submitted using a form or a plugin located at the bottom of an online article on news websites (Santana, 2014). Situated under the broad umbrella of user-generated content, online user comments are among the most popular forms of audience interaction online. They essentially constitute a public and immediate citizen forum for expressing views about specific news events as they unfold, offering users the immediate satisfaction of being published in a relatively public arena (Ben David & Soffer, 2018).

In this context, comments sections have been portrayed, on the one hand, as means for pursuing positive civic engagement, by offering bottom-up alternatives and counter-sources to conventional top-down journalism (Ziegele & Quiring, 2013). On the other hand, some scholars question comments sections’ definition as democratic and as promoting civil discussions. First, given that many comments sections on news websites are managed, monitored, and censored (whether by professional news editors, by administrative workers, or by computer algorithms before and after submission; see J. A. Braun, 2015; Reich, 2011), they are not deemed open for full and free participation.

Second, anonymity and immediacy of publication tend to reduce the civility, deliberative nature, and freedom of speech associated with this platform (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). The aggressive and abusive language often used by commenters narrows the democratic and civic definition of this mediated space (J. A. Braun, 2015; Coe et al., 2014). Nevertheless, user comments are considered an “engrained part of the digital news sphere across the globe” (Ben David & Soffer, 2018, p. 2). And although this interactive form is considered inseparable from our current digital media ecosystem, less attention has been given to user comments sections as a space and a tool for understanding fakery, mistrust, and disinformation, social phenomena that are highly associated with user-based content.

Thus, in this review, we have identified two gaps in scholarly knowledge about our current digital mediascape. First, more knowledge is needed about the intersection of legacy media (with emphasis on PSB and its unique roles in the current mediascape) and online media content in the context of post-truth narratives (Harindranath, 2018) and trust (Tsfati, 2003). In this context, “abundant documentation indicates trust in the media is low and falling, though there is little agreement on exactly what people mean when

they say they do not trust the media" (Milhorance & Singer, 2018, p. 56). In this article, we address this lacuna by understanding audiences' perceptions through user comments.

Second, emphasis should be given to the standpoint of audience members regarding articulation and definition of the term *fake news* (Schwarzenegger, 2020), where particular attention needs to be given to the popular (yet less studied) user comments sections on news websites (Ben David & Soffer, 2018). In this article, we fill this lacuna by understanding how users craft comments to address and understand fakery and content manipulation in PSB, specifically on the docu-reality series *Jerusalem District*. To do so, we must first unpack the data collection and analysis methods.

Method

In this study, we sought to understand the main themes that identify users' interpretations of content manipulations in *Jerusalem District*. To do so, we applied a qualitative-interpretive thematic analysis to public discussions about the manipulation. We analyzed more than 3,500 user comments that were featured on top Israeli news websites over the month that followed the revelation of manipulations by Nir Hasson (August 2019).

Data Sampling

News items were systematically sampled from five leading online Israeli news and current affairs websites: *Haaretz*, *Israel Hayom*, *Ynet*, *Mako*, and *Walla*. These websites were selected based on their popularity. They were identified as the five leading sources in the 2019 Israeli online and offline media field by Alexa Traffic Rank measurement, SimilarWeb analytics services, and the Israeli TGI survey.

Not only representative of the most popular sources, these outlets also give a broad and holistic cross-section sense of the Israeli media field online, established under a wide array of media and news corporations offline and directed at varying audience targets. Sampling included *Haaretz* online, which was established by the *Haaretz* newspaper, considered a highbrow and left-wing broadsheet based on paid subscriptions (Handley & Ismail, 2013), and *Ynet* (the online version of *Yedioth Ahronoth*), which is considered a lowbrow outlet with some free and some subscription-based content online, the most commercialized news outlets in Israel (Balint, 2015). In addition to these, *Israel Hayom* is a right-wing free newspaper, considered to be established to narrowly support Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the Israeli media ecosystem (Balmas, Rahat, Sheafer, & Shenhav, 2014). To broaden the body of data items, the corpus also included two popular "soft" current affairs sources: *Mako* (the online venue of Keshet Broadcasting) and *Walla!News* (or simply *Walla*, of the larger Bezeq group).

From these five outlets, we sampled all news items (news reports, feature articles, editorial columns, and opinion pieces) published about content manipulation in the series *Jerusalem District* over a month starting with the uncovering of the manipulation on August 6, 2019 ($N = 57$ news items; using the Buzzila Web crawler; see Table 1; see Yadlin-Segal & Oppenheim, 2020).

Table 1. Sources and Items From Data Collection.

Source	News items (<i>n</i>)	User comments (<i>n</i>)
<i>Haaretz</i>	19	1,245
<i>Israel Hayom</i>	5	102
<i>Ynet</i>	12	1,029
<i>Mako</i>	12	167
<i>Walla</i>	9	994
<i>Total</i>	57	3,537

These news items were followed by a total of 3,537 user comments (posted in Hebrew, translated into English for this article). Given the fluid nature of user comments and the wish to ensure anonymization of any identifiable information (Yadlin-Segal, Tsuria, & Bellar, 2020), we assigned appendix numbers to the news item rather than to the single user comment unit.

Thematic Analysis

All user comments were analyzed thematically as a single corpus using an open-coding scheme (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Each of us individually analyzed all 3,537 comments to generate initial codes, focusing on patterns that organically existed in the data rather than assigned a priori. These codes were then assembled by us into two overarching themes as presented below. Thus, the open-coding scheme was used for a thematic analysis aimed at identifying and interpreting patterns of collective or shared meanings found inductively in collected data (V. Braun & Clarke, 2012).

From Manipulations and Fake News to the Bankruptcy of Democracy

The first theme identified in the comments sections pertained to the connection between content manipulation and mistrust in state institutions, where fake news becomes a central framework for commenters. Research in the field tends to separate the academic-definitional aspect of fake news from the experienced one—the phenomenon as a lived engagement in the digital media environment (Schwarzenegger, 2020). Given that audiences tend to lump news and documentaries together as most highly associated with factuality and with public broadcasting services (Hill, 2007), reactions to *Jerusalem District* provided a unique realm for understanding how audiences explain fake news.

In this context, user comments blurred the lines between the online and the offline and between user-based and legacy content. “It is truly frightening how fake-news spreads from Facebook pages into the so-called ‘investigative journalism’” argued a commenter on *Haaretz*. The commenter continued, “The public already gets so much mis-information and dis-information . . . now these go into investigative journalism as well” (Appendix Item 8). In a similar manner, it seems that many users classified the *Jerusalem District* content manipulation as fake news. Here, a reader of *Haaretz* suggested that “apart from the injustice done to the Sleiman family (and they were definitely wronged when the police raided their home just for a dramatic fake-news effect in a falsified documentary),” the producers “also took this series, which was fascinating, and turned it into one big fake news [event]. . . . This series is nothing more than fake news. All of the show’s credibility has vanished” (Appendix Item 5).

A similar sentiment appeared in user comments on *Mako*:

The funny thing is that the institutionalized media channels and people involved with creating their content do not understand that fake news is a term being used to describe them, and not for describing the mess that is happening online. When people go online they know they'll find a lot of rubbish. But when people watch the news on television or read it in the newspaper, they expect to see the truth. Instead they get fake news. How fake? Almost everything is fake. A. The choice of topics is entirely subjected to the agenda of the editor. B. The reporting is partial, emphasizing what they wanted to convey rather than the truth and includes operating instructions [for the audience]—now be angry, now bark. C. Important things that happen are pushed aside, where nonsense and cheap ratings are favored. Fake news is you [legacy media], not the Internet. (Appendix Item 54)

In the comments described above, and in many other responses featured on comments sections analyzed here, users addressed the blurring lines between online spaces and offline spaces through the concept of fake news. It seems that in users' interpretations of content manipulation, a phenomenon of fakery commonly associated with online spaces (fake news) was expanded into offline ones. Other users applied the prism of fake news to additional types of media manipulations, illustrations, fabrications, and bluffs. A commenter on *Ynet* claimed that "there is nothing real in the ugly world of reality-TV culture. The masses are being trained to consume a new kind of truth which is a complete and utter lie." This user added,

The public that sheds a tear in the right place and applauds in the right spot is being sold products and services adhering to the same deceptive code (that is, commercials) and then it is also being sold to politicians. (Appendix Item 34)

The user concluded, "Welcome to the world of fake news. It suits you all very well" (Appendix Item 34).

In a broader sense, a responder to an *Israel Hayom* article argued that

one can only imagine how many lies are brought onto air every day by this group of crooks called Israeli media and are not exposed the conclusion [*sic*] is looking for alternative information channels and cut off from the sick media. (Appendix Item 24)

Here, users added on *Walla* that they "thought it was a documentary/reality series. Apparently it is a bluff" (Appendix Item 37) and that "television personnel . . . will fabricate stories as long as they are permitted to work in this industry" (Appendix Item 37). Comments here reflect the understanding that documentaries and reality television formats are not mere representations of reality, but are rather selective, dramatized, and edited versions of a specific reality. Although this lack of objective representation already feeds into the narrative presented by commenters, the main fallacy in these comments is about fake information, events that are created out of thin air without the knowledge of real documented people (rather than participants recruited for competition formats such as in *Big Brother* or *Survivor*, for example). Thus, these commenters

were criticizing the spread of intentionally fake and false information through manipulation rather than only selective or edited representations.

Reflecting on this audience interpretation in the larger context of mistrust in media, it seems that content manipulation went through a circular motion: from mistrust toward mainstream offline and legacy news media due to lack of objectivity or partial reporting (Tsfati, 2003), to online fakery through social media and user-generated content (Weeks & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019), and all the way back to offline legacy media through journalistic-adjacent formats such as docu-reality shows. This process, as one of the commenters above suggested, requires audiences to rethink their media literacy in the digital age in which both legacy and user-based content needs to be met with critical evaluations on the viewer/reader/users' side.

But the attention to fakery as a whole, and fake news in particular, did not end with the call for renewed literacy skills toward the digital mediascape, as described above. Users also addressed the prism of fake news to decode and approach broader fakery and issues of mistrust in society. "Both the Israeli broadcasting corporation and the police, they are all: fake news, fake people. Disgusting and nothing more" (Appendix Item 52), commented a user on *Mako*. In the same vein, users on *Ynet* addressed the "Fake police. A waste of taxpayers' money" (Appendix Item 27), where the collaboration between the IBC (a state organization) and the police was expressed with reference to a blending of the term fake news with police. Here, users argued that "it seems like this whole series [concerned with the police] is about planting and fake news" (Appendix Item 27). In this manner, users bound frustration about, and mistrust in, fake news to overall mistrust in state institutions.

A commenter on *Haaretz* rhetorically asked in this context, "The series *Jerusalem District* in its entirety is fake news, propaganda typical of dictatorships. Where do you think you are living?" (Appendix Item 5). Another reader claimed that "this culture of lying and deception is inspired by the top of the pyramid. If the prime minister and his ministers are accused (subjected to a hearing) of corruption, what will stop those at the bottom of the pyramid?" This commenter asked, "Everything turned into a reality show. . . . What has become of this country?" (Appendix Item 13).

A commenter on *Walla* similarly associated the series' fraud with larger concerns of distrust in the Israeli government: "Sad. Corruption and cheating are all over the place, starting with the purple-haired one and all the way to the last one wearing blue uniforms" (Appendix Item 43)—that is, from Prime Minister Netanyahu, who recently had been ridiculed in Israeli popular culture for the purplish tone of his gray hair, to the most junior police officer wearing blue uniforms. Related to this sentiment, another *Walla* reader described the show as a "fabrication for police propaganda" (Appendix Item 37), a term that became prevalent in user comments describing mistrust yielding from the problematic relationship between public broadcasting. This was summarized by users as "violation of public trust" and the "bankruptcy of state institutions" (Appendix Item 44).

As a whole, the tying of fake news with mistrust in state institutions becomes an interesting locus for exploring the meeting place of user-based media and legacy media alongside the concept of civic literacy. First, in line with past research (Hill, 2007), it was found that commenters experience and understand factual genres (news, documentaries, and reality television) as part of one chaotic, interrelated mix of factuality.

When one aspect of this mix is under question, in this case labeled "fake," users easily transfer their concerns and labels to other aspects, while simultaneously and freely associating political and media domains as if they are part of the same system or governed by the same obligations.

On the one hand, commenters' sweeping generalizations about fake news (e.g., lumping together varying manifestations of false information) could be approached as a misunderstanding, on the commenters' end, of different entities and texts in our current digital media ecology. On the other hand, we suggest that this overall call against fakery, on multiple levels in both the media and the state system, becomes an important indicator of a critical stance, albeit said clustering.

In the wake of fakery, users call for renewed civic awareness, renewed skills allowing citizens to become informed and active community members. Lo and Adams (2018) suggest that in our current digital era, in which new media and digital technologies challenge what it means to be literate, we should look at civic literacy as the tools and spaces required to critically assess and raise awareness of democratic concepts and values. A critical, impatient stance toward fakery in both media and state systems possibly reflects such awareness.

As Mason and colleagues (2018) observe, "Democracies rely on informed citizens. The media forms from which citizens learn about political happenings have shifted and mingled over time from pamphlets and newspapers to radio and television to cable news and social media" (p. 1). In this context, Banda (2006) suggests that "framing audiences as 'citizens' places a responsibility on the PSB operator to see people as actively involved in their destinies," adding that the technological apparatus of PSB organizations should be "reconfigured to invite more participation from the people" (p. 12). However, fake news circulated in our current digital media ecosystem, by media users and legacy media alike, threatens our abilities to become informed citizens (Mason et al., 2018). One such way, we claim, based on the case study explored in this article, is through understanding the spaces and manners in which audiences ask to condemn false information in various contexts.

When users in their discussion blend mistrust in media with mistrust in state institutions, they highlight the need to pay more attention to the fact that fake news is not only a media-related phenomenon, but rather an indication for a larger moment in society that jeopardizes democratic values. And thus, just as the word "factual" became a general term for nonscripted materials in the pre-social-media era, the term fake news has become an umbrella term for unethical manipulations, illustrations, fabrications, and bluffs in the digital media ecosystem by media producers and state institutions alike. Commenters using the term not only challenge the acceptable understanding of both fakery and news, but also challenge the functioning and reliability of state institutions. This critical stance, as professed through digital media platforms, allows us a cautious, yet positive, observation about user comments being a common space for critical civic awareness to grow and critical thoughts about state systems to be argued.

Between Responsible Public Service Media and Commercial Interest

The first theme identified in the analyzed data touched on issues of content, fakery, and manipulation in our current global-digital moment. Users displayed mistrust and the expectations of ethics

across society, in media and state institutions alike. In the second theme, Israeli commenters addressed manipulated scenes in *Jerusalem District* through questions about the role of public service media and their commitment to viewers. Here, the discussion turns from civic awareness into media literacy.

Many comments we analyzed raised issues of accountability, responsibility, and potential conflicts of interest related to the production and broadcasting of *Jerusalem District*. Commenters who focused on these issues suggested that the quest for ratings and monetary gain incentivized the manipulation at the center of the controversy. These motivations, according to commenters, should not be leading factors in PSB organizations' decision-making processes. Comments such as "the question is why KAN 11 is trying to do public relations tasks [for the police] with a scripted series. . . . Ratings should not be a factor for them, this is the reason they get public funding" (Appendix Item 4) and "I thought everything was real . . . [but] everybody wants ratings. Why don't they just broadcast porn and get 100% ratings[?]" (Appendix Item 1) stress that the issue occupies commenters' understanding of the show. Given that "the issue of ratings versus quality continues to haunt public broadcasting as an unresolved dilemma" (Meijer, 2005, p. 27), the public's expectations of the public service media corporation are important to unpack.

Generally, commenters found ratings as the leading cause for producing and broadcasting manipulated (yet compelling) content. "Disgraceful, the show is distilled garbage," suggested a commenter on *Israel Hayom*, asking, "What won't you do for ratings?" (Appendix Item 21). A commenter on *Walla* added, "Those who are familiar with reality series, [know that] to add a little bit of 'sexiness' into the routine, they add some edited or fabricated segments to arouse the interest of the viewer." This commenter continued, "This is not a new thing. Unfortunately, the bloodthirsty 'yellow' media is interested in ratings and does not objectively cover the issue. Unfortunately, people are stupid and fall into this trap" (Appendix Item 41). On *Ynet*, a reader shared a similar sentiment, suggesting,

There is no reality show that is not fabricated. All the programs on television that supposedly present reality are fabricated, all the participants in these programs mistreat by inventing content, and all for the sake of the ratings. It is time audiences wake up and stop watching this shallow tier [of content] called reality [television]. (Appendix Item 31)

It appears that many commenters addressed ratings as related to genre. That is, that "reality television," an unreliable genre that despite its name does not in fact represent reality, also usually entails manipulation of reality to boost ratings. In addition to issues of content and genre, some commenters addressed structure or production models in the television industry, pointing to the improper association of PSB organizations with private commercial companies. This relationship, commenters argued, resulted in the illegitimate and irresponsible manipulation featured in *Jerusalem District*. The fact that the manipulation itself was not produced by KAN's employees and news division, but rather by a commissioned private company, was of high importance in the context of responsibility. The issue of ratings, as raised by commenters, was further tied with the pursuit of accountability and responsibility in the current mediascape through reflections on the relationship between KAN 11 (PSB) and Koda (the private production company).

"I don't exactly understand: What exactly is the responsibility of the corporation [KAN]?" asked a commenter on *Haaretz*, and continued, "Afterall, an independent producer produced the series, he provides

the product to the public corporation that approves it. They [KAN] cannot imagine that the production company would do something like that. What are they supposed to do?" (Appendix Item 13). A fellow commenter on *Haaretz* addressed this concern:

To think that the corporation is not liable for this is naïve or stupid or both. . . . The corporation is at fault exactly like the police and the production company. (There are referents there who get a lot of money to be involved and to know exactly what happens in a commissioned production.) (Appendix Item 15)

Given that accountability is one of the core values of public service media (Van den Bulk, 2015), commenters' reactions to the required accountability of PSB are reassuring for media scholars. In fact, it seems that comments analyzed in this study teach us that user comments are not just microtexts of aggression and vulgar language, but rather hold a potential for revealing the importance of reliable, trustworthy content for audiences as a whole and in the context of PSB in particular. "All of the public's eyes are focused on (this issue): Who owns the public service media?" (Appendix Item 22), asked a commenter on *Israel Hayom*, accurately summarizing what is revealed through reading the comments: an impatient audience that is informed, literate, and clear about its expectations from a publicly funded media outlet.

"A public company must be accountable for its choices and for malpractice and has to be responsible before the fact. We demand that the whole process and the people involved will be exposed" (Appendix Item 15), petitioned a commenter on *Haaretz*. Other commenters on *Walla* demanded that KAN take the series off the air, and expressed an appreciation for the critical reports about the manipulation on the series that appeared in KAN's main news program (Appendix Item 40). Awareness of the accountability of KAN was accompanied with reservations regarding its funding: "This is what we pay one billion shekels for?" asked a reader of *Mako* (Appendix Item 54), stressing the plural "we," the public, as the funding source of PSB. Similarly, a commenter on *Haaretz* critically concluded the issue: "Receiving public funding to sell us lies" (Appendix Item 4).

The question of using public funding for private companies, that is, outsourcing programs' production by PSB organizations to commercial companies, is part of a wider debate around the commercialization of public service media organizations and its risks. Public television in Israel outsources almost all productions (excluding news and sports) to independent production companies. In the KAN corporation's 2020 budget, more than 40% of the funds were directed to the purchase of outsourced television productions (KAN Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation, 2020), whereas in the past, other public service media in Europe outsourced only around 10% of their programs (Fernández-Quijada, 2012). Hence, commenters' questioning of the responsibility of the production company (Koda) versus the responsibility of the KAN was extremely crucial.

In their criticism of the Sleiman affair, commenters exhibited media literacy in relation to structure (the media industry and production process) while also expressing their expectations of KAN in its role as a publicly funded organization. The online platform (user comments) served as an outlet and a stage for elaborate and rich discussions on the legacy medium of broadcast television and the need for reliable content and accountable outlets in our current mediated moment. This is an important finding given existing

literature about media literacy in Israel. In Israel, media literacy has been presented as an issue of media texts and contents, discussed in terms of awareness of political biases, objectivity, fairness in representation, and understanding of messages embedded in mass media texts (televised and otherwise; see, e.g., Lemish & Lemish, 1997; Turin & Friedman, 2019). What is apparent in commenters' reactions is an understanding of, and critical thinking about, the systems that stand behind what the public receives.

Past studies have shown that users tend to primarily express discontent with the impartiality and accuracy of news media (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2016) for which subjects such as law and order, as in the case of *Jerusalem District*, generate more adverse reactions (Coe et al., 2014). On the one hand, it is possible to argue, as we have shown by using examples drawn from the data corpus, that users' meaning-making about false information and manipulations is indicative of civic and media literacy. On the other hand, users' reflections might be evidence of an overall mistrust in public institutions, indicative of our current post-truth era. These reactions can be viewed as perhaps a growing popular trend of provocative sociopolitical discourse rather than actual in-depth criticism. In this context, criticism might not reflect only literacy, but rather a popular trend of hostility toward the media, specifically when users' criticism is frequently directed at the journalistic piece itself (Naab, Heinbach, Ziegele, & Grasberger, 2020).

Hence, we must ask whether we can rely on the positive potential of user comments for tackling disinformation when we cannot assess the extent to which the comments under scrutiny were framed, primed, or inspired by the articles they commented on. Our argument here is that users' critical discussions about false information and trustworthiness of media content can be a crucial resource for media literacy initiatives. The relationship between articles and their comments is indeed important, and when criticism is expressed toward journalists themselves, the content of a news item becomes crucial in understanding said criticism. However, in this study, we discuss users' critical views on media texts that are external to the news item and the journalistic work presented in it. To this extent, it is safe to argue that critical views toward false information as presented by users in the case of *Jerusalem District* do reflect some levels of literacy. Yet, it is imperative to highlight the possible ambivalent role user comments play in varying cases. To some extent, user comments might become a part of the solution to the spread of false information and to some extent simply a space for uninformed discussions.

Given that media literacy is strongly tied with civic literacy and awareness (e.g., taking part in democratic debates online and critically evaluating the government through media messages; Livingstone, 2004), we wish to further unpack our reflections by focusing on online platforms as spaces for debating and fighting disinformation and fake news.

Conclusions

Through a qualitative thematic textual analysis of user comments on five leading Israeli news and current affairs sources, the case study of *Jerusalem District's* content manipulations reveals two main themes. First, users connected content manipulation with mistrust in state institutions, where fake news became a central interpretive locus. In this context, we found that users introduced factual genres as interrelated in a mixture of factuality, where criticism was expressed toward the blurring lines between

"fake" and "factual" information. These user-sourced interpretations joined the need for reliable media content with trustworthy state institutions under the broader concern of civic awareness.

Second, the manipulation was uniquely explored by users through the prism of motivations and business models in the broader field of Israeli media. Users addressed the scope of trustworthiness and accountability required from a PSB organization toward its audiences (representing truth, promoting public interests) versus the commercial motivations of privately owned companies (such as the one that produced the manipulated content for KAN 11) and specifically their struggle for ratings. Commenters' responses negatively framed the Israeli PSB by focusing on the show's use of disinformation and stressed media literacy that is required in our digital era.

Before discussing the meanings of these themes and the article's main contributions, we wish to highlight the potential limitations of the study. First, we focused on user comments. Although this allowed an in-depth reading of audiences' reactions, we cannot assess the amount, or type, of comments that were managed, monitored, or censored by the studied news websites. And yet, the data gathered by us were organized in the comments section similarly to how they were consumed by other users. Although it is possible to argue that the data's reliability and validity might be partial because of the websites' management, it is safe to say that the phenomenon was analyzed as it organically occurred online and as Internet users engaged with it. Second, given that we analyzed user comments, the data reflect only users' perspectives on the topic of content manipulation in PSB. Future research, hopefully even our own research, should also focus on the direct relationship among arguments, stance, or positions reflected in the journalistic item and those being made by commenters. This will perhaps allow us to better understand how ideas and arguments are being carried across these two distinct yet related spaces and in turn the impact and role of journalistic framing.

With these limitations in mind, this study also presents a novel way of thinking about user comments, the role of public service media, and the importance of literacy. We found that user comments become a space for raising important social questions about the functioning of legacy media (public service media in particular) and mistrust in public institutions. In this context, we show how users focused on fake news as an umbrella term for unethical manipulations, illustrations, fabrications, and bluffs. This important finding fills a scholarly lacuna related to how audiences understand and explain our current digital moment.

As Schwarzenegger (2020) argues, academic attention has been thus far primarily given to fake news as content, that is, texts that contain fake news, their characteristics and impact. This attention, although important, creates a gap in our knowledge about media audience perceptions of the phenomena. By focusing on what audiences say about false information, we conclude that fake news is perceived in popular public perception as an identifier of an overall loss of trust in traditional civic gatekeepers such as offline legacy media institutions and democratic state institutions. This conclusion helps draw a panoramic view on our current media ecosystem, where we now know that not only politicians, journalists, and scholars use the term as a discursive signifier of mistrust experienced in political struggles (Farkas & Schou, 2018), but also audience members, lay media users, partaking in the sociopolitical meaning-making process.

This conclusion should be further unpacked in the context of PSB, which stands at the heart of this study. PSB, by producing and providing reliable knowledge, is ideally considered crucial in solving the circulation of misinformation in the digital age (Horowitz & Lowe, 2020). In this article, we have examined a case study positioned in the opposite direction of this information highway on two levels: First, the false information at the center of this article originated on television, a legacy medium. Here, a PSB that is expected to be the solution to fakery-related content became the disseminator of false information. Second, an online platform such as user comments in online news sites, which might commonly be assumed to be a catalyst for more misinformation (Weeks & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019), served as a channel for viewers' criticism, mistrust, and condemnation of the PSB corporation. The corpus we examined highlights the significance of comments sections as a platform for media consumers to express the levels of accountability and trust they expect from PSB organizations. Through these user comments, it becomes clear that contemporary media consumers not only hold literacy and awareness of the roles of PSB in society.

Therefore, based on our analysis in this article, we suggest that not only offline, legacy, mainstream media, but also online outlets such as user comments, can become part of the solution for the prevalence of disinformation and fake news through highlighting the need for awareness. Although many identify the aggressive, offensive, and abusive nature of user comments as counterproductive for civic culture (J. A. Braun, 2015; Coe et al., 2014), we found in our analysis that many comments stress the need for civic and media awareness in combating false information. Thus, we suggest that user comments can and should be approached by the public, scholars, and decision makers as an important space for understanding civic calls—in the form of protests, national conflicts, and public opinion of the state of democracy worldwide nowadays.

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