

The Portuguese paradox: high trust in the news and the perils of social media disinformation in elections

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Abstract: Portugal's political landscape is usually regarded by scholars as resilient to disinformation, largely due to its population's high trust in news. However, this resilience is increasingly challenged by rising political polarisation and a growing reliance on digital platforms for news consumption. This study examines how these dynamics interact, questioning Portugal's reputation in resisting the influence of disinformation.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, we triangulate quantitative data from the Digital News Report with a qualitative analysis of social media posts by the leader of Chega, a populist radical right. Findings reveal that individuals who primarily rely on social media for news display distinct sociodemographic characteristics—they tend to be younger, less educated, and more politically undecided—, making them more vulnerable to disinformation. As the shift toward social media coincides with declining trust in news and less worry about disinformation among these groups, populist parties, such as Chega, exploit these vulnerabilities by leveraging social media to extend their reach and legitimacy.

The analysis of Chega's social media tactics, such as the use of news-style aesthetics and polling data manipulation, reveals a recognition of news as a source of political credibility. The findings suggest that Portugal's resilience to disinformation is being eroded by structural changes in the media environment, and that high public trust in news must be matched by institutional responses and rising media literacy to prevent potential backfire effects at a societal level.

Keywords: news; trust; disinformation; polarisation; social media; political parties; elections; populism; Portugal.

ES La paradoja portuguesa: alta confianza en las noticias y el peligro de la desinformación en las redes sociales durante las elecciones

Resumen: El panorama político de Portugal ha sido considerado por los académicos como resistente a la desinformación, en gran parte debido a la elevada confianza de su población en las noticias. Sin embargo, esta resistencia se ve cada vez más cuestionada por la creciente polarización política y la mayor dependencia de las plataformas digitales para el consumo de noticias. Este estudio examina cómo interactúan estas dinámicas, poniendo en duda la reputación de Portugal de resistirse a la influencia de la desinformación.

Empleando un enfoque de métodos mixtos, triangulamos los datos cuantitativos del Digital News Report con un análisis cualitativo de las publicaciones en las redes sociales del líder de Chega, un partido de derecha radical. Los resultados revelan que las personas que recurren principalmente a las redes sociales en busca de noticias presentan características sociodemográficas distintivas—suelen ser más jóvenes, con menor nivel educativo y más indecisas políticamente—, lo que les hace más vulnerables a la desinformación. A medida que el desplazamiento hacia las redes sociales coincide con una disminución de la confianza en las noticias y con una menor preocupación por la desinformación entre estos grupos, los partidos populistas, como Chega, explotan estas vulnerabilidades, aprovechando las redes sociales para ampliar su alcance y legitimidad.

El análisis de las tácticas de Chega en las redes sociales, como el uso de la estética de las noticias y la manipulación de datos de encuestas, revela un reconocimiento de las noticias como una fuente de credibilidad política. Los resultados sugieren que la resiliencia de Portugal frente a la desinformación está siendo erosionada por cambios estructurales en el panorama mediático, y que la elevada confianza pública en las

noticias debe ir acompañada de respuestas institucionales y de un aumento de la alfabetización mediática para prevenir posibles efectos contraproducentes a nivel social.

Palabras clave: noticias; confianza; desinformación; polarización; redes sociales; partidos políticos; elecciones; populismo; Portugal.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Literature review. 3. The Portuguese case. 4. Methodology. 5. Results. 6. Discussion and conclusions. 7. Bibliography.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Europe has witnessed a trend toward political polarisation (Pausch, 2021), characterised by the rise of populist radical right parties and far-right movements, as well as identitarian ideologies. Global events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine and the intensification of conflicts in the Middle East, have intensified disinformation dynamics across Europe.

In Portugal, recent high-profile judicial cases, including the 2023 Prime Minister António Costa's resignation, further contribute to polarised media discourse. This polarisation is exacerbated among social media users in Portugal which often encounters a distorted political reality on these platforms, where social media visibility differs from visibility in parliament (Badillo-Matos et al., 2023). In this context, the rise of the populist radical right party Chega (Marchi, 2023), with its strong social media presence (Pina, 2023), is a case study, raising significant concerns, as it employs news from legacy media to legitimise populist ideas (Baptista et al., 2024) and often involve tactics of disinformation (Pardal and Narciso, 2023).

In a political environment of rising political polarisation, Portugal presents a unique case study because it exhibits a paradoxical setting regarding its citizens' relationship with news media, standing out from other southern European countries (Sierra-Iso et al., 2024). The Portuguese paradox arises from the coexistence of self-reported high trust in news (Cardoso et al., 2023), alongside significant concern about online disinformation (Cardoso et al., 2023) and a low ability to identify it (Eurobarometer, 2024).

Vulnerability to disinformation among a population refers to the tendency of certain groups to be more easily misled compared to an average or reference group within that population (Caramancion, 2021). We define vulnerability as an individual's difficulty in recognising manipulative or erroneous information, whether the manipulation is intentional or accidental (Puebla-Martínez et al., 2021). As Gelado-Marcos et al. (2022) emphasize, "finding specific audiences that are particularly vulnerable to the effects of disinformation may be key to articulating strategies to counter such outcomes" (p. 3602).

We argue that if people trust the news but lack the ability to discern disinformation from reliable and trustworthy information, they may be increasingly vulnerable to fabricated or manipulated content, particularly on social media platforms. In this paradoxical setting, it might be easier for populist actors to take advantage of a communication space where structurally high trust in news, journalism, and information may foster the generalised belief that all content can be trusted.

Our research explores the Portuguese case to examine how fringe parties may capitalize on the platformisation of information to attain legitimacy.

The following questions guide the research design:

- 1) How does the platformisation of information environments affect the vulnerability of Portuguese news consumers to disinformation?
 - 1.1) Does the preference for specific news sources influence the levels of trust in news and the concern about disinformation?
 - 1.2) Do Chega disinformative social media posts exploit the vulnerability of Portuguese news consumers to disinformation?

2. Literature review

The platformisation of society centralises communication and social interactions around a limited number of digital private platforms, such as major social media networks, which act not only as mediators, but also as active agents in shaping social and political dynamics (van Dijck et al., 2018). The implication of this complex process transforms political communication flows, practices and agents (Klinger et al., 2023) both globally and locally.

Political parties use social media platforms not just for direct contact with potential voters to disseminate political ideas and set agendas, that increase support for their proposals in an electoral context, but mainly to mobilise their members to spread their political views (Stromer-Galley, 2019).

Platformisation and political communication intersect in complex ways, with algorithms on major platforms determining which content gains visibility, often prioritising engagement over accuracy (Bossetta, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Instant feedback mechanisms, such as likes, shares, and comments, emotionally reward controversial content, further exacerbating polarisation as a barrier for building peaceful

political coexistence (Esau et al, 2024). Exposure to divergent viewpoints on social media can paradoxically increase affective polarisation due to the frequent incivility and hostility in these interactions (Suhay et al., 2018).

This scenario results in the current interplay of public, semi-public, and private spaces (Boccia Artieri et al., 2021) and in growing destabilisation of the public sphere, increasing the visibility of radical and extremist political movements, especially on fringe platforms that create alternative media ecosystems, challenging traditional democratic norms and values, often associated with hate speech and disinformation (Schulze et al., 2022; Urman and Katz, 2022; Marwick and Lewis, 2017).

Disinformation can be defined as totally or partially false information, whose main features are demonstrably misleading, intentional, being moved by financial, political and/or socio-economic motivations and as having the potential to disrupt social, cultural or political structures in the public sphere (Wardle, 2020).

At the political level, disinformation manifests itself in elections through various means. Common forms are the dissemination of conspiracy theories, fake images, videos or sounds, or the spread of lies combined with truth, to discredit opponents or to influence the voting process (Landon-Murray et al., 2019; Obreja, 2022). Another way is to use the aesthetic features of the news genre (Murphy, 2023; Billard and Moran, 2022) or the manipulation of polling data to create false narratives or political perceptions (Murphy et al., 2021). These tactics, aimed at misleading voters and shaping public opinion, are used by a combination of social and technological actors, including trolls, bots, fake news websites, media outlets, and politicians (Tucker et al., 2018).

With the decline of journalism's control over distribution channels and the rise of indirect online access to news, citizens increasingly rely on digital intermediaries, such as search engines and social media platforms, to get informed. Consequently, news diets have become more individualised and fragmented, contributing to a widening gap in how different demographics consume information (Cardoso et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2023). The fragmented media landscape, where audiences construct their political perceptions through a multitude of channels and rapidly disseminate countless unverified messages, makes it easier for disinformation campaigns to target individuals based on specific demographics, interests or geographic location.

In particular, disinformation undermines trust in traditional media, leading individuals to seek alternative sources that reinforce existing beliefs (Hameleers et al., 2022), often with consequences for elections (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). When linked to the issues of credibility, trust is a focal point in conjunction with accuracy, lack of bias and balance (Fletcher and Park, 2017; West, 1994; Thorson et al., 2010). Additionally, institutional trust significantly influences susceptibility to disinformation (van Zoonen et al., 2024). Fletcher and Park (2017) point out a contemporary shift where the reputation of news organisations is increasingly pivotal in determining news credibility. Therefore, while trust in credible sources can act as a safeguard against disinformation risk, excessive confidence in personal judgments about source credibility and low trust in institutions can limit openness to diverse perspectives and create a conducive environment for disinformation to flourish.

Interestingly, although people of different ages recognise being misled, the susceptibility to disinformation involves cognitive biases, such as the "nobody-fools-me" effect, where individuals overestimate their ability to identify falsehoods (Martínez-Costa et al., 2022). This overconfidence is then associated with greater individual permeability to disinformation (Lyons et al., 2021).

In the expanding online news landscape, rising concerns about news credibility and quality have implications for democratic processes, making trust in news a critical area of study. Trust in news has been associated with variables such as political interest, trust in others and exposure to news content (Tsfati and Ariely, 2014). Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) identify age, education, income, ideological strength, interest in news, number of news sources and primary news platform as potential inductors for trust.

Studies on vulnerability to mis- and disinformation incorporate similar factors, including demographic and socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., education, and income) as well as psychological and contextual factors, such as perceptions of content regulation and environmental influences (Anspach and Carlson, 2024; Caramancion, 2021; Gelado-Marcos et al., 2022; Puebla-Martínez et al., 2021; Serrano-Puche, 2021). However, further research is needed on the effect of Internet usage patterns, ideological orientation, and respondents' self-assessed level of informedness (Gelado-Marcos et al., 2022).

3. The Portuguese case

Portugal's media ecosystem is often classified according to the Polarized Pluralist model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), alongside countries such as Spain, Greece, and Italy. Despite their geographical and cultural proximity, and being relatively young democracies within the European context, recent evidence suggests that Portugal's media system may no longer align with the model, due to its historical evolution (Santana-Pereira, 2016; Hallin and Mancini, 2016; Sierra Iso et al., 2024).

In a global outlook where trust in news media is declining due to a wide range of factors (Fawzi et al., 2021) Portugal exhibits consistently high levels of trust in news media. The country also displays consecutively high rates of concern about online disinformation (Cardoso et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2023), whereas other equally trusting countries such as Finland, Norway, and Denmark display considerably lower concern about online disinformation.

While past contributions have focused on the influence of high trust on the perception of electoral disinformation (Quintanilha et al., 2021) and the connection between trust and news literacy (Paisana et al., 2020),

further research is needed on the reasons for and implications of having a simultaneous widespread concern about online disinformation.

The high concern about online disinformation in Portugal is parallel with remarkably low self-evaluation when it comes to the ability to identify it. According to 2024 Eurobarometer data, Portugal is the EU country where fewer people find it easy to identify disinformation (44% compared to 61% EU average). Also, Portugal's political landscape, traditionally considered at low risk for disinformation in political campaigns (Baptista and Gradim, 2020; Cardoso et al., 2020), faces new challenges such as the domination of social networks by "smaller and more radicalised" parties (Pardal and Narciso, 2023: 3).

The political turmoil in Portugal at the end of 2023, marked by the socialist prime minister's sudden resignation over a corruption scandal, has intensified political tensions in the country. This polarisation is exacerbated among social media users in Portugal, who often encounter a distorted political reality on these platforms (Badillo-Matos et al., 2023). Smaller, more radicalised parties, with a pronounced online presence, are adept at using social media for disinformation campaigns (Pardal and Narciso, 2023).

This environment fuelled the rise of the populist radical right party Chega (Marchi, 2023), which achieved a historic result in the 2024 national election, securing over 18% of the votes and 50 seats out of 230 in parliament (in the 2019 General Election the party won parliamentary representation for the first time, electing just one single member). The 2024 electoral outcome made Chega the third-largest political force in the country, and the party claimed it signalled the end of the long-standing bipartisanship dominated by the Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD). Chega, led by André Ventura, benefits from extensive coverage in legacy media and leverages the opportunity to occupy a previously unrepresented right-wing political space, attracting voters discontented with the political system (Mendes & Dennison, 2020; Joaquim, 2023).

The rise of Chega occurred in parallel with growing saturation with successive centre-left governments led by PS (with support from other left-wing parties from 2015 to 2019). Chega exploited this saturation, shifting the centre of gravity of Portuguese politics to the right as the style of populist politics became very appealing to left-wing voters. In particular, the proximity of Chega to new unionised structures and the strong presence of the party's message in street protests were crucial to occupy a civic and political space traditionally dominated by the left.

In this regard, the use of social media as an alternative to mainstream media is considered a strategic element in the ascension of populist parties (Acampa and Nunziata, 2024; Flew and Iosifidis, 2020), who also exploit the features of recent platforms, such as Tik Tok (González-Aguilar et al., 2023). An analysis of Chega's social media posts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter amid the 2022 national election (Pina, 2023) shows that the messages align with populist contents (Mude, 2019), emphasising nationalism, law and order, anti-immigration, anti-corruption, and anti-elite discourses. In terms of disinformation tactics, Chega resorts to decontextualization of news content on social media, frequently using screenshots instead of direct links to diminish access to counter-arguments (Baptista et al., 2024).

Therefore, the paradoxical relationship of Portuguese citizens with news and disinformation represents a critical opportunity to explore the potential pitfalls of having a generalised confidence in journalism and news and a low self-perceived ability to recognise disinformation.

4. Methodology

Aiming to answer the main research question regarding how platformisation might affect the vulnerability of Portuguese news consumers to disinformation, our study adopts a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis and further triangulation with qualitative data.

As a baseline, statistical analysis of 2023 Digital News Report data was conducted based on a representative sample of about 2000 Portuguese internet users (88% in the country¹). Our quantitative approach employs a structured three-step analysis to examine the relationship between trust in news and concerns about disinformation.

Initially, we explore the statistical correlation between these two variables, establishing a baseline understanding of general attitudes towards trust and disinformation among the Portuguese. Secondly, we cross tabulate various sociodemographic and behavioural factors on this relationship. This step includes an examination of how a set of variables influences the degree of trust in news and the concern about disinformation. Finally, the third step specifically addresses the key characteristics of individuals who predominantly use social media as their main news source, a key aspect given the rising prominence of social media in news consumption (Fawzi et al., 2021; Flamino et al., 2023).

The main variables were operationalised as follows:

- Trust in news: the proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I think you can trust most news most of the time".
- Concern about disinformation: the proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Thinking about online news, I am concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet".
- Sociodemographic variables and behavioural factors: age, income, education, interest in news, political orientation, and primary news sources.

¹ Source: Internet World Stats (<http://www.internetworldstats.com>).

These variables were selected because of their significance in the existing literature (Kalogeropoulos, 2019) and their pertinence in exploratory analysis.

Research on information disorders requires analysing how audiences interact with such content, as well as examining the characteristics of the messages themselves (Gelado-Marcos et al., 2022). Therefore, to enhance the validity and relevance of the findings, we triangulate quantitative data with the examination of real-world disinformation examples (Creswell, 2003) that are illustrative of disinformation risks in Portugal amid the 2024 electoral General and European elections, enriching the discussion of results.

The chosen cases, two social media posts, were selected based on their relevance in illustrating the disinformation landscape in Portugal (Pardal and Narciso, 2023) and their fitting nature within the context of information disorder typologies, as defined by Wardle (2020) as imposter content and misleading content.

These contents were selected and collected from the social media profiles of Chega's leader André Ventura. The two social media posts (Figures 2 and 3), although not representing the entirety of Chega's social media approach (Paisana et al., 2025), were chosen because these are prime examples of discursive, imagetic, and narrative structures used by Chega for disinformation purposes. This selection is supported by evidence published in a report from the Portuguese Observatory of Communication (Casquinho et al., 2024) on political parties' social media campaigns, which flagged opinion polls shared by Chega as disinformation, as well as by Baptista et al.'s (2024) analysis of André Ventura's populist strategy of sharing news to legitimise his political discourse. Furthermore, it should also be noted that the Chega party has been consistently identified as a significant node in the political disinformation framework. For example, during the 2025 General Election, it has been estimated that disinformation content totalled about 7.7 million views on social media, with André Ventura being author of 86% of identified cases (Canavilhas et al., 2025).

5. Results

The intersection of trust in news with concerns about online disinformation in Portugal reveals a compelling dynamic. In Portugal, concern about disinformation grows alongside trust in news: 82% of respondents who trust news affirm being concerned about disinformation, while only 65% of those who do not trust news express this concern.

Table 1. Portuguese who affirm to be concerned about disinformation, by levels of trust in news

	n	Concern about disinformation
Portuguese who trust in news	1162	81.5%
Portuguese who don't trust in news	399	64.7%
General sample	2010	71.4%

N=2010. Source: Author's own analysis of Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 data.

A weak but positive correlation between variables (Spearman's rho = 0.189, $p < 0.01$) suggests that individuals who trust more in news are also more worried about the spread of disinformation. However, the correlation is relatively weak, indicating that other factors could influence both variables, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Trust in news and concern about disinformation by age, income and education levels of Portuguese citizens

		n	Trust in news	Concern about disinformation
Age	Under 35	450	49.6%	64.7%
	35 or more	1560	60.1%	73.3%
Education	Low	927	53.3%	66.2%
	Medium	561	59.9%	70.9%
	High	523	63.3%	81.1%
Income	Low	432	50.0%	66.0%
	Medium	940	60.2%	71.8%
	High	417	66.9%	79.1%
Interest in news	Not interested	201	26.9%	51.2%
	Somewhat interested	727	55.2%	70.8%
	Interested (Extremely/very)	1047	66.8%	77.2%
Political Orientation	Left	448	66.3%	75.0%
	Centre	823	62.5%	76.4%
	Right	273	59.0%	74.7%
	Don't know	466	40.8%	57.1%
Main source of news	Social media	363	43.5%	66.4%
	Online (excluded social media)	367	54.5%	68.1%
	Traditional (TV, radio and print)	1204	65.4%	76.1%

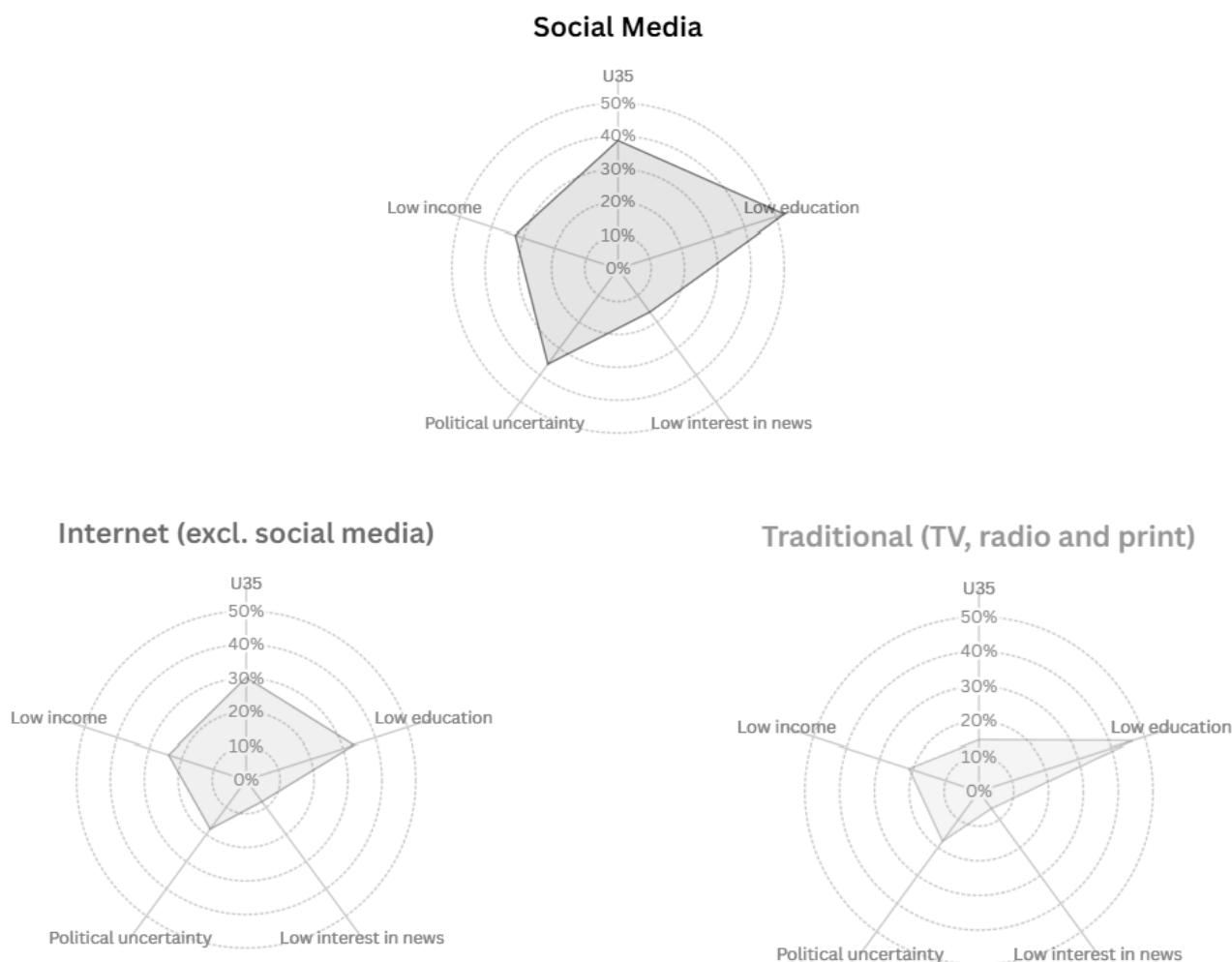
N=2010. Source: Author's own analysis of Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 data. Note: Education: Low = up to 3rd cycle of basic education; Medium = Secondary or vocational education; High = Academic degree. Income: Low = €4999/year; Medium=between €5000 and €24999/year; High=over €25000/year. The table excludes respondents who don't know or would rather not state their income (n=222).

Data analysis reveals consistent sociodemographic gradients in both trust in news and concern about disinformation. Younger respondents (under 35) exhibit lower trust in news (49.6%) and somewhat weaker concern about disinformation (64.7%) compared to those aged 35 or above (60.1% and 73.3%, respectively). Educational attainment and income follow parallel trajectories: trust rises from 53.3% among those with low education to 63.3% among the highly educated, while concern about disinformation increases from 66.2% to 81.1%. Similarly, higher income is associated with greater trust (from 50.0% to 66.9%) and increased concern (from 66.0% to 79.1%).

Interest in news reinforces these patterns further, with trust ranging from 26.9% among the uninterested to 66.8% among the most engaged, and concern about disinformation ranging from 51.2% to 77.2%. Political orientation introduces additional granularity: trust is highest among left-leaning respondents (66.3%), followed by centrists (62.5%) and right-leaning individuals (59.0%), while concern about disinformation remains comparatively stable across these groups at approximately 75%. Respondents uncertain about their political orientation stand out as a distinct outlier, reporting substantially lower trust (40.8%) and concern (57.1%), suggesting that political disengagement and media scepticism may be mutually reinforcing.

The main source of news emerges as one of the most impactful variables in this analysis. Respondents who rely primarily on social media report the lowest levels of trust in news (43.5%) and concern about disinformation (66.4%), while those using online sources excluding social media score moderately higher (54.5% and 68.1%, respectively). Those who turn to legacy media —television, radio, and print— exhibit the highest levels of both trust (65.4%) and concern (76.1%). It should be noted that the sociodemographic profile of social media-reliant news consumers maps closely onto the groups identified above as exhibiting weaker trust and concern: 39% are under 35, 53% have low educational attainment, 33% report low income, and 36% express uncertainty about their political affiliation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Characteristics of news consumers by main news source



N=2010. Source: Author's own analysis of Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 data.

These findings are consistent with those of previous research. Vulnerability to disinformation changes with age: young people are more prone to use disinformation to validate previous misconceptions and older

individuals have their minds changed by disinformation (Anspach and Carlson, 2024; Caramancion, 2021). As for education, although there is a general trend indicating lower vulnerability among individuals with both higher education and higher information literacy (Anspach & Carlson, 2024), this impact may not be statistically significant (Gelado-Marcos et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, socioeconomic status emerges as a clearer determinant of vulnerability, with economically stable individuals generally less impacted by information disorders (Gelado-Marcos et al., 2022). Finally, political orientation has been linked to changes in the degree of vulnerability, with multivariate analyses demonstrating that ideological leaning can intersect with other demographic factors to create distinct vulnerability profiles. Taken together, these findings delineate a coherent vulnerability profile that manifests most clearly among social media users, a cohort that disproportionately concentrates demographic segments least inclined to trust news or to recognise disinformation as a concern.

The literature highlights the growing prevalence of social media as a primary news source, highlighting higher scepticism on traditional news sources among younger individuals (Edgerly et al., 2018). This is also a relevant trend due to the unregulated nature of these platforms and their proneness to misinformation and bias (Landon-Murray et al., 2019), the threats to informed public opinion, and the possibility of inorganic influence on electoral outcomes (Landon-Murray et al., 2019; Obreja, 2022). This contribution underlines the structural socio-economic factors (Paisana et al., 2020; Gelado-Marcos et al., 2022) behind social media usage as directly associated with lower trust in news and concern about disinformation.

These trends are particularly relevant when analysed in parallel with the communication strategies of populist parties on social media across Europe.

Focusing on two examples of posts published on social media profiles of Chega's leader André Ventura, we develop how populist communication strategies may leverage high trust in news and susceptibility to disinformation to increase the amplification of the message.

As shown in Figure 2, the posts appropriate and mimic the design and layout of two Portuguese legacy news media –Renascença radio and Público newspaper– thereby lending credibility to its content. This tactic of closely imitating the aesthetic of trustworthy news outlets is a common tactic in the dissemination of false information (Murphy, 2023; Billard & Moran, 2022), as it exploits the public's trust in established media institutions and, in this specific case, the Portuguese overall high trust in news.

The Twitter/X post on the left replicates the graphic aesthetics of the legacy broadcaster Renascença radio to claim that thousands of people from Africa and the Middle East used World Youth Day to enter Portugal and Europe illegally. The post on the right models Público's newspaper design to link forest fires to arson and criminality. This type of imposter content (Wardle, 2020) that impersonates genuine sources, in the case of legacy media brands, can distort public perceptions, inciting xenophobic, rabid and aggressive sentiments that align with a specific political agenda.

Figure 2. Posts by Chega party leader André Ventura on his personal Twitter/X account, emulating the layout and appearance of Renascença radio and Público newspaper, on 6 August and 11 August 2023



Sources: <https://twitter.com/AndreCVentura/status/1688226985938415616>
and <https://x.com/AndreCVentura/status/1689904739448651776>

Following the publication of the posts, the fact-checking organisation Polígrafo reviewed the content, flagging the posts as false. Both Renascença and Público officially denied ever publishing such content and Portuguese media regulator ERC produced a ruling stating that such actions “may constitute an act of disinformation” (ERC/2023/317), highlighting the illegitimacy and the ethical implications of appropriating news media imagery.

When confronted in a TV interview in 2023, André Ventura downplayed the importance of the situation, attributing it to design interpretation and stating that the colour schemes were visual identity components of Chega's newspaper and digital outlet (Folha Nacional), a claim which was also flagged as false by

fact-checkers². In that same interview, Ventura resorted to a common strategy of victimisation, stating that “If there is fake news, it’s against us, not ours. There was no manipulation”.³

Despite the effectiveness of fact-checking as a tool to fight disinformation (Porter and Wood, 2021), evidence shows that fact-checked information spreads online slower than the original false content, reaching more people and at a faster pace (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

The second case of disinformation dissemination through social media (Figure 3) happened before the 2024 General elections and involved the misleading representation of polling data. The social media post by Ventura showed the Social Democratic Party (PSD) trailing Chega in pre-electoral polls (PSD received 28% of the vote, Chega 18%).

Figure 3. Posts by Chega party leader André Ventura on his personal Facebook account on 23 November 2023



Source: Facebook post:
<https://www.facebook.com/AndreAmaralVentura/posts/905385117609687>

Rapidly disseminated by other Chega party members, this post was based on data from Intrapolls a self-described “amateur project” that is not registered in the Portuguese media regulator ERC and therefore does not comply with Portuguese law⁴. Ventura’s post, shared on both Facebook and Twitter, claimed to represent “an aggregator model, with 5607 demographically adjusted responses”, suggesting that 25.8% of electors would vote for Chega, outstripping the 23.2% for PSD. Ventura asserted to conclude that “the change is possible: we will make it happen”. However, these data were based on a highly selective sample, composed mainly of Twitter users and limited to respondents who had already definitively decided their vote, thereby presenting a non-representative picture of the broader electorate. This limitation was acknowledged by Intrapolls itself, which requested the removal of the post following public backlash⁵.

This misleading content by Ventura uses publicly available information (Wardle, 2020) to falsely support the argument that Chega is a leading political force. This selective and fallacious data presentation, lacking proper context or explanation, leads to a misrepresentation of the actual political scenario, manipulating the perception of polling data, as mentioned by Murphy et al. (2021).

The example of André Ventura’s misleading poll, which was later replicated by Chega and ADN (National Democratic Alternative), another right-wing populist party, during the 2024 European Elections campaign (Canavilhas et al., 2024), serves as a pivotal case in understanding the evolving landscape of political polarisation on social networks in Portugal as a ground for disinformation spreading.

Social media platforms tend to amplify non-mainstream, radical, or populist voices, which may not have substantial representation in formal political institutions or mainstream media (Pina, 2023). This amplification can create a skewed perception of the political landscape among social media users, leading them to believe that certain fringe or extremist viewpoints are more widely accepted or prevalent than they actually

² <https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/fact-check/ventura-nega-copia-de-grafismo-da-renascenca-e-diz-que-e-novo-design-do-folha-nacional-confirma-se/>

³ <https://sicnoticias.pt/pais/2023-08-22-Direcao-do-Chega-sem-legitimidade--Ventura-vai-levar-caso-ao-tribunal-europeu-71d10dd6>

⁴ By the law n.º 10/2000, de 21 de junho, all pollsters must be registered with ERC and submit all polls ahead of their publication. All polls are then added to a publicly available library along with corresponding methodology.

⁵ Fact-check: <https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/fact-check/membros-do-chega-distorcem-resultados-de-sondagem-nas-redes-sociais>

are (Simchon et al., 2022). When such individuals encounter online poll results that align with their views, they reinforce their perspectives.

The reinforcement of distorted political perceptions is particularly concerning, given the demographic profile of social media users in Portugal, who are typically younger, have lower income and education levels, and exhibit less interest in news and more political indecision.

The less vigilant stance of these social media users towards disinformation, combined with their lower education levels, might impede their ability to critically assess the credibility of the information they encounter. Moreover, scepticism towards established news sources, often fuelled by the populist rhetoric prevalent on social networks, further diminishes their capacity to discern factual information from disinformation (Hameleers et al. 2022).

The cases of Ventura's social media posts illustrate how easily disinformation can be disguised and disseminated by exploiting the high level of trust Portuguese citizens generally place in the news. They also reinforce the vulnerabilities observed among a specific group of individuals who are less equipped to challenge or question the authenticity of such, namely, those who rely on social media as their primary source of news.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This study explored the role of the platformisation process in the Portuguese paradox, where a self-reported high trust in news coexists with a high concern about disinformation and a low ability to identify it. Given the growing political polarisation in Portugal, we set out to answer one main question (RQ 1): How does the platformisation of the public sphere affect the susceptibility of Portuguese news consumers to disinformation?

Our research suggests that the platformisation of the public sphere affects the susceptibility of Portuguese news consumers to disinformation in two main ways. Firstly, by altering the media environment with a growing importance of social media for news consumption, which increases exposure to false information in a way that is skewed toward more vulnerable groups. Secondly, by reducing the effectiveness of traditional safeguards like journalistic gatekeeping, as fringe political parties gain prominence on social media. These parties position themselves against mainstream media while leveraging the particularly high trust in news to disguise their political content as credible news.

The transition towards social media as a primary news source, which is a core aspect of platformisation (van Dijck et al., 2018; Klinger et al., 2023), has reshaped Portugal's media landscape, leading to fragmented and individualised news consumption patterns (Cardoso et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2023). The rise of Chega as a fringe movement gaining prominence within the political system (Mendes and Dennison, 2020) exemplifies how platformisation can destabilise the public sphere (Boccia Artieri et al., 2021; Klinger et al., 2023), increasing the visibility of radical political parties with a populist agenda (Pina, 2023) that uses news features to legitimise their positions (Baptista et al., 2024) via disinformation (Tucker et al., 2018).

In this sense, in Portugal, the strategic exploitation of social media by fringe political movements and the societal discourse around the issue enhanced by public institutions, coupled with high-profile international disinformation events (e.g., Brexit Referendum, 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, or COVID-19 pandemic), might be important factors explaining the overall high concern among the Portuguese about disinformation.

Our findings identify a distinct demographic profile among individuals who predominantly rely on social media for news consumption, revealing that the preferred source of news influences the levels of trust in news and the concern about disinformation among citizens in Portugal (RQ 1.1).

While there is a general trend of high trust in news and concern about disinformation in Portugal, this evidence is not consistent across all demographics. People who use social media as their main news source are typically younger, have lower levels of education and income, and exhibit diminished interest in news and greater political uncertainty. These social media users, who demonstrate reduced levels of trust in news and lower concern about disinformation, might be particularly vulnerable to false information (Gelado-Marcos et al., 2023; Hameleers et al., 2022). Given their demographic attributes, this lower level of trust in news might be linked to lower levels of trust in political institutions, which may lead individuals to be more sceptical of official information and more receptive to alternative narratives presented on social media (van Zoonen et al., 2024).

The demographic profile of people who use social media as their main news source also suggests that they are more likely to lack the skills to critically assess the veracity of content encountered on social media platforms. In this sense, there is a vulnerability that is exacerbated by cognitive biases, such as overconfidence in personal judgment (Martínez-Costa et al., 2022; Lyons et al., 2021).

Considering the nature of social media posts from Chega and its leader André Ventura, illustrated here in the mimicking of legacy press outlets and false polling results, we highlight how political actors strategically exploit the vulnerability of Portuguese news consumers to disinformation (RQ 1.2). Chega uses social media affordances to disseminate disinformation (Tucker et al., 2018), employing practices that align with tactics such as the use of aesthetic features of the news genre (Murphy, 2023; Billard, 2002) or the manipulation of polling data (Murphy et al., 2021).

The pre-electoral political communication strategy of Chega for the 2024 General election reveals new and increased risks of disinformation during elections that were not observed, or at least not documented, in previous campaigns. Therefore, Chega leverages two main features of the Portuguese media landscape—the overall high trust in news and the major vulnerability to disinformation on social media users—to produce online content that resonates disinformation messages with a political purpose.

The Portuguese paradox highlights the complexity of the modern media environment in which trust in news may not necessarily translate into protection against the effects of disinformation. Comparisons with other European countries are important future steps to develop, particularly given that several Nordic nations also record high levels of trust in news. However, Portugal's profile remains distinctive, as no other European country combines similarly elevated trust in news with equally high concern about disinformation, suggesting that the paradox identified here may not be directly exportable. In most high-trust media environments, confidence in journalism tends to correlate with lower perceived vulnerability to disinformation; Portugal's simultaneous elevation of both metrics constitutes, in this sense, a genuinely anomalous configuration that warrants a country-specific explanation.

Additionally, characteristics of Nordic countries, absent in Portugal, such as high rates of payment for digital news (Newman et al., 2023) and structurally high media literacy (Lessenski, 2026), may in turn create a media epistemic ecosystem in which trust in news gives citizens more safety about the dangers of disinformation.

If we consider that, in Portugal, media literacy is not as well developed across different demographics as in Nordic Countries, it is possible to hypothesise that sustained and historically rooted trust in news media may have cultivated a degree of complacency among Portuguese audiences, leading individuals to lower their critical guard precisely because they regard the broader information environment as reliable. Rather than exercising media literacy competencies such as critical thinking, sources verification, or engagement with fact-checking, high trust in news may paradoxically reduce the perceived urgency of individual vigilance.

Contributions from organisational sociology and social psychology are meaningful to understand this phenomena, either by the suggestion of trust as a "leap of faith" aiming to suspend doubt (Möllerling, 2006), or of trust as a much wider cognitive mechanism of complexity reduction, that reduces the cognitive labour of evaluation, creating efficiency and comfort but also increasing vulnerability (Luhmann, 1979). In this reading, trust is a vulnerability, more than a shield, and can have a "backfire effect" where individuals are more likely to stick to a misconception when their own beliefs are reinforced by journalistic or authoritative framings (adapted from Nyhan, 2021 which presents a different conceptualisation), exemplified by the analysed Andre Ventura's social media posts.

It is equally plausible to think of elevated concern about disinformation generating more trust in news. In an environment increasingly perceived as polluted by disinformation, audiences in Portugal may actively reaffirm their confidence in professional journalism as a reliable anchor, perhaps a more appropriate hypothesis to understand the difference to the Nordic countries discussed above. Trust, under this interpretation, is less a residue of complacency than a preference for credible information sources. In social media platforms, the over-representation of more vulnerable groups with lower levels of trust in news, creates the conditions under which disinformation promoted by populist actors, such as André Ventura and Chega, can circulate with diminished friction.

It should also be noted that recent research has highlighted the absence of an integrated institutional response to disinformation in Portugal, with highly fragmented frameworks limiting networked approaches and hindering the integration of key actors such as fact-checkers (Badillo-Matos et al., 2023). Resolving this institutional deficit and improving media literacy levels may be essential if the country's comparatively high media trust is to function as a genuine –rather than illusory– democratic resource.

While we recognise that group beliefs and political affiliations are fundamental to the individual acceptance of political disinformation online, identifying specific user profiles that may be more vulnerable to such content is relevant. However, this study does not examine the role of non-Internet media in influencing vulnerability to disinformation, a limitation that represents a promising direction for future research.

Our study contributes to the understanding of the interplay between platformisation and disinformation, particularly regarding the actions of political actors in electoral contexts. We encourage future research to build upon our research design and address the practical consequences of specific indicators surrounding the platformisation process.

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