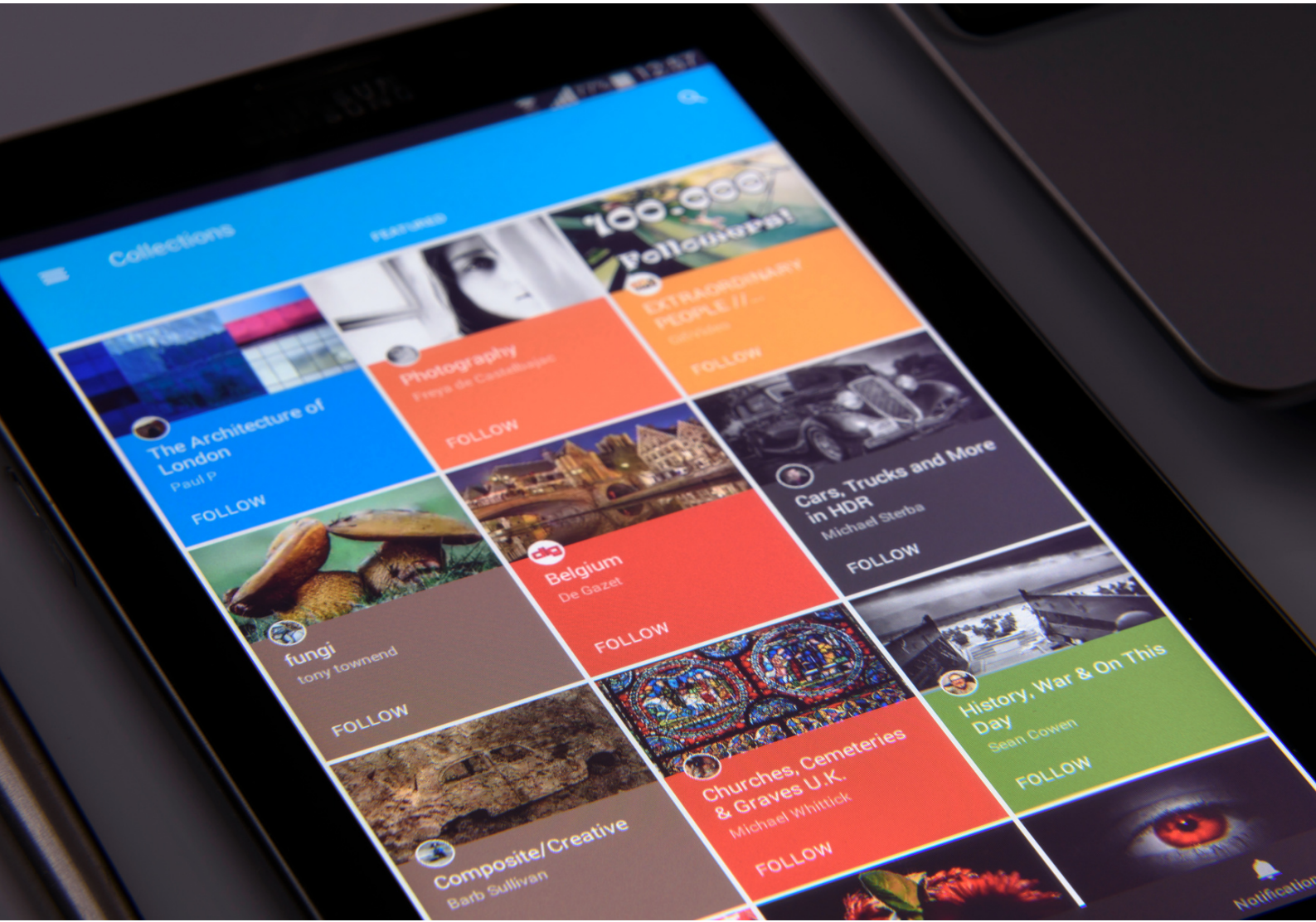
EXPERT FORUM

FACT-CHECKING AND DISINFORMATION

An Exploration of Methodologies, Tools, Challenges, and Opportunities in Romania



Abstract

This report delves into the intricate landscape of fact-checking and disinformation monitoring within the Black Sea Area, with a particular focus on Romania. Utilizing advanced social media listening tools such as CrowdTangle, Pulsar, Microsoft Power BI, Influencity, Exolyt, and Brand24, the study aims to unravel the complexities associated with online disinformation dynamics.

Introduction - The increasing prevalence of online disinformation in the Black Sea Area, specifically in Romania, sets the stage for the imperative of advanced fact-checking methodologies. This introduction emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of disinformation within the specific context of Romania.

CrowdTangle is a social media analytics tool that was owned by Meta, formerly known as Facebook. Purpose:

CrowdTangle was designed to help users monitor and analyze social media content. It focused primarily on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit.

The tool allows users to track and analyze the performance of public content, including posts, shares, likes, and comments. It provided insights into engagement metrics and trends. Also, CrowdTangle enabled users to compare the performance of different accounts, pages, or groups on various social media platforms. One of the most used functions by researchers and fact-checkers is the list function. CrowdTangle allows users to create customized lists to monitor specific accounts, pages, or hashtags. This feature facilitated targeted monitoring of relevant content and discussions.

Pulsar is a complex tool with countless use cases: from audience insights to social listening, brand reputation, trends, and campaign analysis. Their audience insight function is highly popular with unfiltered audience signals, segmenting audiences by affinity to understand behavior.

Brand24 offers access to online mentions on different channels like Telegram, TikTok, and websites. Its functions include brand monitoring, and sentiment analysis to segment positive, negative, or neutral mentions (with a decent accuracy level, but still needs to be reviewed manually), and it creates reports automatically based on your custom filters.

4. Limitations and Challenges of Social Media Listening Tools:

a. Incomplete Data Representation:

- Social media listening tools may offer a snapshot of online discourse, but they often fail to capture the entire landscape. Certain platforms, forums, or user groups may remain outside their purview, leading to potential blind spots and gaps in data representation.
- Incomplete data may result from privacy settings, restricted access to certain content, or the tools' inability to scrape data from closed or private online communities.

b. Algorithmic Bias:

- The algorithms underpinning social media listening tools are susceptible to biases, both overt and subtle. This can manifest in skewed sentiment analysis, where certain voices or sentiments are overrepresented or underrepresented, impacting the overall accuracy of the analysis.
- Bias may arise from pre-existing stereotypes embedded in the algorithms, leading to misclassification of content or an unintentional skew in the interpretation of narratives.

. Rapid Platform Changes:

- Social media platforms undergo frequent updates and modifications to their algorithms, features, and user interfaces. Social media listening tools may struggle to keep pace with these rapid changes, leading to a lag in their effectiveness.
- Changes in platform policies, APIs, or user behaviors can result in outdated or inaccurate information being processed by the tools. This can compromise data reliability and hinder the ability to provide real-time insights.

5. Recommendations for Fact-Checkers:

1. **Continuous Training:**
   - Fact-checkers should prioritize ongoing training programs to stay abreast of the latest features and updates in social media listening tools. This ensures that the team remains proficient in utilizing the tools and can adapt to the evolving landscape of online platforms.
   - Training should encompass not only the technical aspects of the tools but also an understanding of emerging trends, algorithmic changes, and potential biases associated with the tools.

b. Diversify Tool Usage:
   - To mitigate the limitations of individual tools, fact-checkers are encouraged to employ a diverse set of social media listening tools. This approach allows cross-verification of results and provides a more comprehensive view of online conversations.
   - Using multiple tools with complementary strengths can enhance the robustness of fact-checking efforts and reduce the impact of blind spots or biases inherent in any single tool.

c. Critical Evaluation:
   - Fact-checkers must approach the results obtained from social media listening tools with a critical lens. Understanding the potential biases and limitations of algorithms is essential for accurate interpretation.
   - Regularly reviewing and refining the filtering criteria, as well as incorporating human judgment into the analysis, ensures a nuanced and contextually aware approach to disinformation monitoring.

These detailed recommendations aim to empower fact-checkers to navigate the challenges posed by social media listening tools effectively, fostering a more informed and accurate disinformation monitoring process.

Conclusion and Future Directions:

The report concludes by briefly summarizing key findings and emphasizing the importance of collaborative endeavors in combating online disinformation. Recommendations for future research and tool development are provided, acknowledging the dynamic nature of the field and the persistent need for adaptive strategies.

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