

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GEORGIAN STUDENTS AND DISINFORMATION

## Abstract

In the global sphere, the spread of fake news has become a challenging force to go against. Fake information is particularly dangerous in countries that have polarizing media landscapes and not enough research or data to study the topic, like Georgia. This research examines the relationship between the level of political critical thinking of first-year university students and the political narratives they form when receiving political information. The study is based on a structured questionnaire administered to 41 students from different academic backgrounds and reveals trends in the ways they verify information, interpret political content and formulate opinions. The theoretical framework is based on Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshans's "Information Disorder" model, which academically categorizes different types of false information and the operative elements within it. Although the narrow scope of the study does not allow for broad conclusions, the results show that students with high political critical thinking skills display more thoughtful, democratic and civically responsible narratives, while students with low political critical thinking skills are often more passive with less concrete ideas or narratives attached to them. This paper aims to understand how young Georgian students perceive political information and emphasizes the importance of developing critical political thinking skills. By demonstrating insight into how young Georgian first-year students perceive and process political information, this study will deepen the social recognition and importance of political critical thinking skills, providing important foundation for educators, policymakers and civil society.

**Key words:** Disinformation, Political Critical Thinking, Political Narratives, First-year Georgian Students.

## Introduction

The circulation of fake information is not a new phenomenon but one with deep historical roots. Before such widespread use of the term "fake information", news was regarded as ordinary information. The expeditious increase in the spread of false information is directly tied to developments in communication technology, particularly in terms of its speed and scale. The first major leap transpired with the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg (Soll 2016). Today, however, almost all aspects of fake information have been transformed by the expansion and widespread adoption of social platforms. The entire life cycle of false information, from creation to dissemination, has become readily accessible. Virtually any individual with sufficient time, imagination and intent can create fake information.

Geographical boundaries are no longer an obstacle for false information. In the digital age, disinformation not only spreads online, but also penetrates people's offline existence at the same pace (Bradd n.d). Because

the creation and spread of false information has become increasingly effortless, detection and debunking remain serious challenges. False information takes multiple forms and definitions, and confusion between them further complicates countermeasures. Most false information today circulates through social networks, where the majority of individuals seek their news. This dynamic directly links the spread of disinformation, public awareness and the development of political critical thinking skills (Youngs 2025).

Beyond the global context, the dangers of disinformation are particularly severe in Georgia, where a polarized media landscape and a high percentage of reliance on social media make citizens, especially young people, especially vulnerable to informational manipulation. First-year university students, since they are utterly impressionable, are at a critical stage of forming political opinions. However little research has examined how their ability to think critically about political information shapes the narratives they eventually form. This research addresses not only how political critical thinking skills manifest among first-year students, but also how it connects to general political narratives that students construct, thereby shedding light on how disinformation affects democratic resilience in Georgia.

## **Methodology**

Disinformation is a global phenomenon, with significant implications for political environments, including those in Georgia. In this research, the focus is placed on disinformation rather than the broad notion of “fake news”, as the former refers to intentionally false or manipulative content with particular relevance to politics. A more detailed definition of the term will be provided later in the paper. The central aim of this research is to examine how first-year university students in Georgia engage with disinformation through their political critical thinking skills and narratives they develop as a result. The theoretical framework is based on Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshans’s “Information Disorder” model, which academically categorizes different types of false information and the operative elements within it. Here, political critical thinking is understood as the ability to evaluate, question and verify political information prior to committing to certain perspectives. The primary objective of this research is to identify: “What connections can be found between Georgian first year students’ critical thinking skills towards political news and their political narratives?”

The central purpose is to employ intermediate indicators to explore what types of connections or correlations may be identified between the degrees of students’ political critical thinking skills and, accordingly, the specific political narratives they form. The political narratives discussed in this study do not indicate any particular political affiliation. Rather, they represent the range of ideas and beliefs held by the participants.

The methodology and the research design is based on correlation analysis and quantitative research type. The quantitative survey is split into three main themed blocks, subsequently representing the general information, critical thinking tendencies towards political information and lastly, political narratives and beliefs. The method used for the analysis and coding of the responses is conducted in MS Excel form. While all participants remained anonymous, conclusions were drawn from individual string of answers as well as taking into account general themes from each block. It is worth mentioning that because this is small-scale research the number of participants included 41 people. Research on how young people critically engage with political information in Georgia remains limited. This study provides new insights into how first-year university students interpret political news and form narratives, providing valuable material with the potential to later expand with future research.

## Fake Information in the form of disinformation

The global prevalence of fake news has made it increasingly challenging to define and systematically interpret its various forms and manifestations. The Collins Dictionary defines fake news as a phenomenon of false and sensationalized information, which is presented as a real journalistic report (Collins 2017). Given the range of the term, it is essential to break it down into categories to provide context for the various forms it takes. Such categorization facilitates both governmental and individual efforts to identify, mitigate and prevent the spread of false information. Fake news affects individuals, organizations and governments alike. Conceptually, it can be divided into general and elementary terms and analyzed through three primary dimensions. General terms category includes broad terms that describe general false information. While elementary terms try to identify more specific definitions of all kinds of fake news. Because of their nature, elementary terms are regularly encountered within general terms (Aïmeur, Amri & Brassard 2023:4,6-7).

Analysis of fake news is most effectively conducted by examining these three core dimensions, which are intent, knowledge content and authenticity. These dimensions encompass categories such as disinformation, misinformation and malinformation. Disinformation and misinformation are primarily distinguished by the degree of intent. Concerning knowledge content and the way media can convey falsehood two main scenarios can be identified. On one hand, the informational content could be a personal subjective opinion that is mistakenly treated as factual truths. On the other hand, an objectively true fact may still be presented in a way that leads to false interpretation. Finally, when information can be fact-checked according to its nature, the authenticity of the news can be determined (Aïmeur, Amri & Brassard 2023:7-8). Establishing these core criteria enables a clearer and more systematic definition of the different categories of fake news.

Among these categories, disinformation is one of the most frequently encountered and constitutes the primary focus of this study. Disinformation, as defined within fake news terminology criteria, refers to a type of false information which is designed to be spread and cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017:5). For disinformation to be its most effective self it has to contain some semblance of truth. Disinformation, in the realm of politics, can be used for political disturbance, discreditation of the political opponents, to influence voters, to amplify already heated global or domestic conflict or to create a general information paralysis, which will confuse the masses (The Disinformation Age 2021:3).

## Disinformation and Georgia

Georgia is classified as a “partly free” democracy with a polarized media landscape that remains highly vulnerable to various forms of fake news, particularly disinformation. Despite the country’s geopolitical importance, research on this issue is limited, with one of only comprehensive studies published in 2020. Civil groups have long raised concerns about oligarchic influence in media, particularly after allies of Georgian Dream leadership were appointed to key positions in the public broadcaster. By 2020 state control and politicization of public broadcasting outlets such as *Rustavi 2* had further intensified doubts about media independence (Bradshaw et al. 2020:141-144). At the same time, the fact that about 60% of Georgia’s population uses already not-so trustworthy social media outlets, like Facebook, for foreign and domestic news, adds another layer of informational confusion (Bradshaw et al. 2020:141-144, 331-332).

The main actors in spreading false content remain Russian-linked entities, but local outlets also participate in the coordinated disinformation campaigns, which are more often than not tied to Georgian dream party and advertising firm Panda (Bradshaw et al. 2020:141-144). The blurred line between Russian narratives and locally

generated disinformation further complicates the informational landscape in Georgia. In addition, nationalist groups also actively exploit social media to legitimize polarizing messages under the guise of democratic principles, thereby deepening polarization and threatening democratic development (Gozalishvili 2021:4).

Experiments and platform takedowns demonstrate how easily false stories spread and gain traction in Georgian digital space (Topuria 2020). Meanwhile, civil society organizations and journalists face targeted harassment, a trend now exacerbated by restrictive “foreign agents” legislation that undermines their role in countering disinformation (Light 2025). In a reality where the role of non-governmental organizations and civil society in the fight against disinformation is paramount, this can be considered not only a failure for Georgia, but also a strengthening of a harmful global trend that contradicts the search for accurate information and all the important principles derived from it.

## **The research**

After designing a questionnaire comprising 17 questions divided into three principal blocks, it became possible to systematically identify important links between responses and detect recurring narratives that revealed broader trends in students’ engagement with political information. The first block is aimed to position students on a spectrum according to their levels of political activism. This is achieved by assessing how they describe their political engagement and how frequently they follow political news. Drawing on these indicators, participants were categorized into three categories: students with high, medium and low political activism tendencies. Students in the high-activity category demonstrated consistent engagement with political events and frequently consulted multiple sources, whereas medium-activity students engaged occasionally and relied on more limited or accessible sources. Low-activity students showed minimal engagement, often relying on passive consumption or social interactions rather than direct information seeking.

However, awareness alone does not fully capture the depth of political critical thinking. To address this, the second block examines the methods students use to access and verify information, allowing for a differentiation between varying levels of analytical effort. Three categories emerged: high-effort method, which is indicative of more advanced political critical thinking skills, including checking official government sources, reading peer reviewed articles and extensively using fact-checkers. Medium-effort method representing medium political critical thinking skills, involves using online sources like Google and Youtube, reflecting moderate engagement with source evaluation. Low-effort method is characterized by reliance on social media comments, the uncritical sharing of others’ opinions or a complete lack of verification, revealing limited critical engagement.

Categorization not only provides insight into students’ cognitive approaches to information evaluation but also enables a nuanced understanding of how political critical thinking manifests in practical information gathering behaviors. Finally, the third block focuses on getting open-ended responses from students to capture students’ perspectives in their own words. This qualitative component offered participants greater freedom to express their understanding of political information and to articulate their political narratives. By analyzing these responses alongside the quantitative data, it was possible to observe how individual strategies for consuming and evaluating information shape the broader narratives students construct, providing a more comprehensive picture of the interplay between political critical thinking and narrative formation.

## Conclusion

In summary, the 41 participating students, despite the small sample size, revealed meaningful trends in the relationship between political critical thinking and formation of political narratives. Higher political critical thinking students, who actively verified information through multiple steps and reliable resources, demonstrated deeper reflection and engagement with complex themes. They often had specific set ideas for development of Georgia and displayed attitudes of moving away from old Russian ties, and towards the European future. Students who had medium political critical thinking skills were not absolutely certain about Georgia's development path. They had general sentiments about what they wanted Georgia's future to look like but generally had no tangible ideas of achieving it.

Finally, students with lower critical thinking levels either did not respond or produced very general, sometimes populist or even joking statements. This pattern indicates not only differences in narrative depth but also the potential influence of political critical thinking on how students internalize and engage with political ideas. Importantly, the study found no radical divides between groups in terms of ideology, suggesting that political perspectives among first-year students still remain relatively fluid. Despite its limited scale, this research provides a valuable starting point for understanding how critical evaluation of political news shapes beliefs and narratives, highlighting opportunities for future, large-scale studies to explore these dynamics even more in depth.

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