Information verification standards and awareness of disinformation among Polish news journalists

Katarzyna Bąkowicz

*Instytut Nauk Społecznych, SWPS University;
CEDMO Poland*

Research objectives and methodology

The research is aimed at examining the awareness of the phenomenon of disinformation and methods of verifying information in a group of professional news journalists.

The state of information chaos and the increased amount of disinformation are often associated with the condition of contemporary journalism. This contributes to the polarization of social attitudes, lowering the level of trust in the media and a decrease in the quality of information. Therefore, it is important to verify the journalists' knowledge and awareness of the phenomenon of disinformation - especially those journalists who prepare news reports, information for the front pages of newspapers or websites every day. How often journalists encounter disinformation, whether they can recognize it, and where they derive their knowledge from, allowed the researchers to learn about the journalists' approach to the analyzed phenomenon. An important aspect of this study is also the idea of the journalist community dealing with disinformation, learning about the position of people directly related to fake news and other manipulative content on this topic.

As part of the study, quantitative research was carried out based on a questionnaire consisting of questions about the perception of disinformation, key channels of its dissemination, experiences related to disinformation at work (frequency, disinformation content) as well as its causes and potential effects and remedial measures (sources of information on this subject, reaction to the possibility of publishing disinformative material and actions that may limit the scope of the phenomenon). In addition to socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, place of residence, education), the metric questions also included questions about the medium in which the respondent works, the scope of the medium's operation, as well as seniority in the profession and in the current editorial office.

The study was conducted in Poland on a sample of 300 people in total. They were news journalists, i.e. those who prepare media news in their daily work. The survey was carried out using the CATI method (telephone interview) between 31.05-20.06.2022 by Grupa Badawcza DSC Sp. Z.o.o.
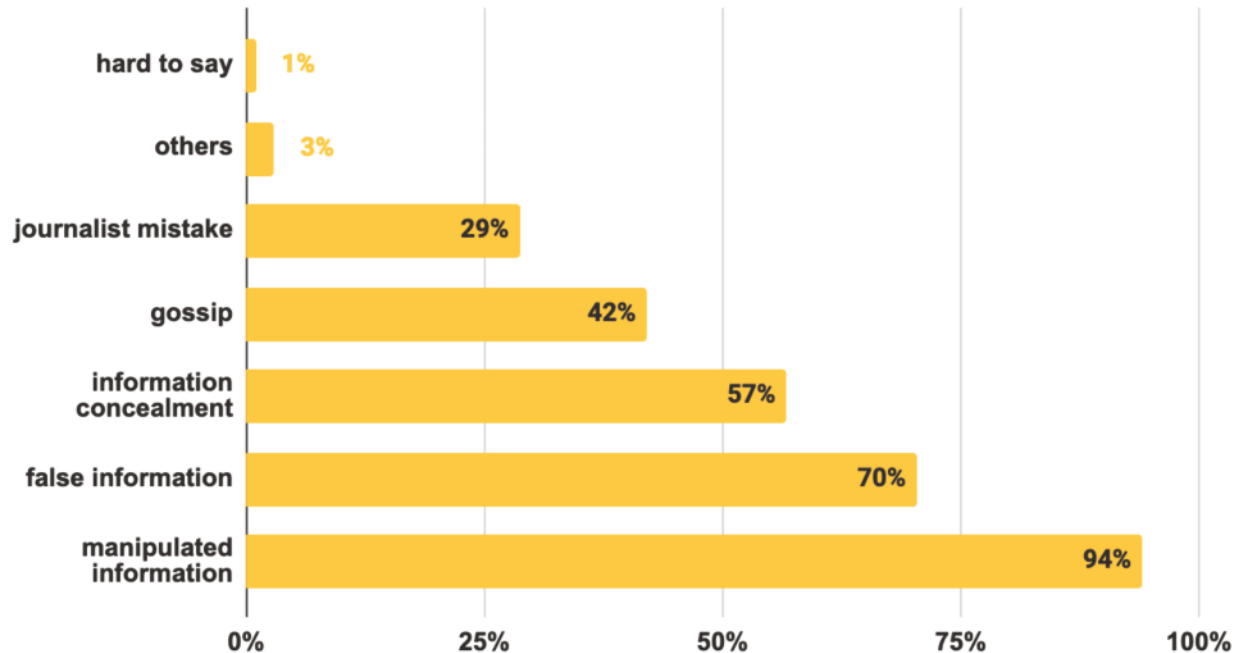
The collected empirical material was entered into the databases of the respondents (quantitative data).

Perceiving and experiencing disinformation

It was decided that part of the survey shall serve to verify what disinformation was for the surveyed journalists, where and how often they encountered it, what kind of disinformative content they encountered in their work, and whether they came across the published disinformation material. For almost all respondents, disinformation meant manipulated information (94%, n = 282). Seven out of ten respondents indicated that they considered false information to be misinformation (70%, n = 211), and for slightly more than half it may be concealing information (57%, n = 170).
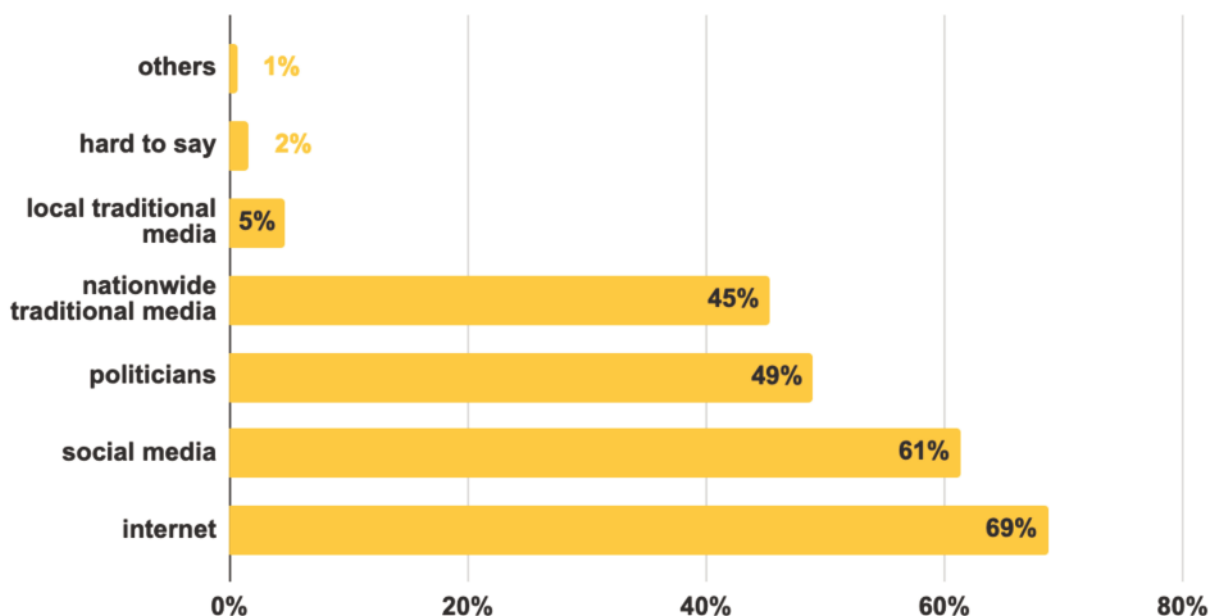
Chart 1. What is disinformation

What do you think disinformation is:

Category	Percentage
hard to say	1%
others	3%
journalist mistake	29%
gossip	42%
information concealment	57%
false information	70%
manipulated information	94%

The respondents indicated the Internet and social media as the main channels of spreading disinformation - such answers were given by 69% (n = 206) and 61% (184) of the respondents, respectively. The local traditional media (television, radio, press) were the least frequently indicated by the respondents - this answer was indicated by only 5% of the respondents (n = 14).
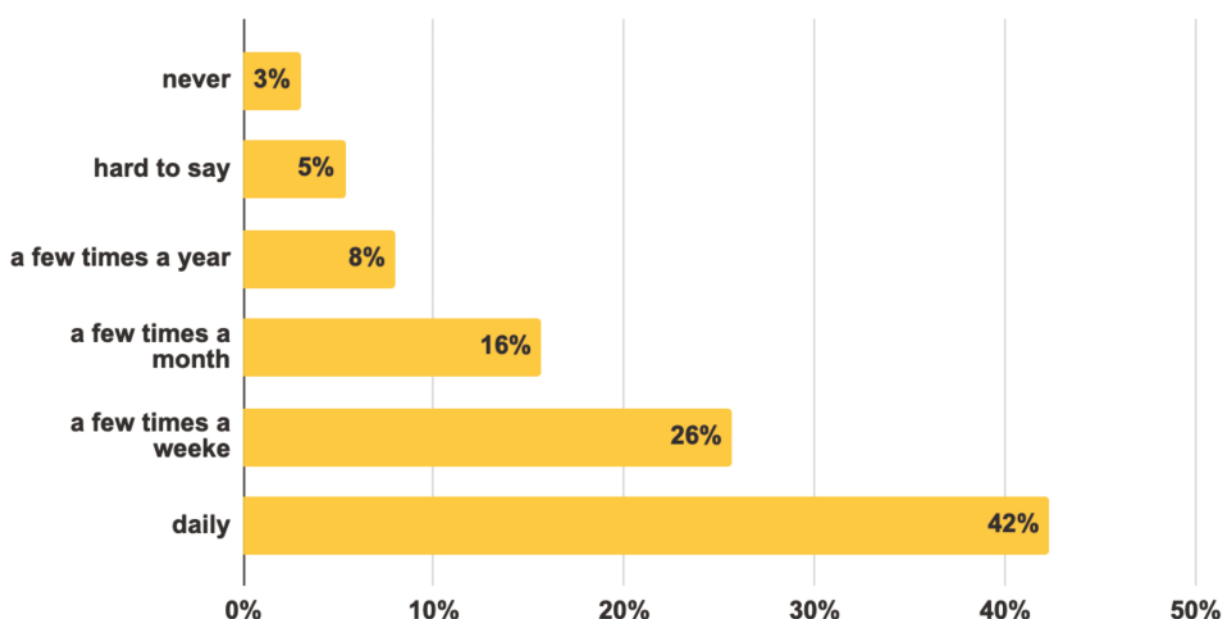
Chart 2. Main channel of disinformation distribution

What or who, in your opinion, is the main channel for the distribution of disinformation?

Category	Percentage
others	1%
hard to say	2%
local traditional media	5%
nationwide traditional media	45%
politicians	49%
social media	61%
internet	69%

When it comes to the frequency of encountering disinformation content in the media - when it comes to the work of the respondents - 42% of the respondents (n = 127) declared that it was an everyday experience. The answer "several times a week" was given by 26% of the respondents (n=77). The least frequently given answer was "not at all" - it was indicated by only 3% of the respondents (n = 9).

Chart 3. Frequency of encountering disinformation content in the media

How often do you encounter disinformation content conveyed in the media in your work:

Category	Percentage
never	3%
hard to say	5%
a few times a year	8%
a few times a month	16%
a few times a weeke	26%
daily	42%

In response to the question of what kind of disinformation content the respondents meet in their work - both in their own editorial office and in the media in general - the respondents most often indicated manipulated information and false information that seemed true. Such answers were given by 72% (n = 216) and 70% (n = 211) of the respondents. For more than the respondents, it is also clickbait (58%, n = 173), true information in a false context (57%, n = 172) and hate speech (54%, n = 161). The lowest number of the respondents encountered deepfake disinformation (37%, n = 110).

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Chart 4. Disinformation content that respondents encounter in their work
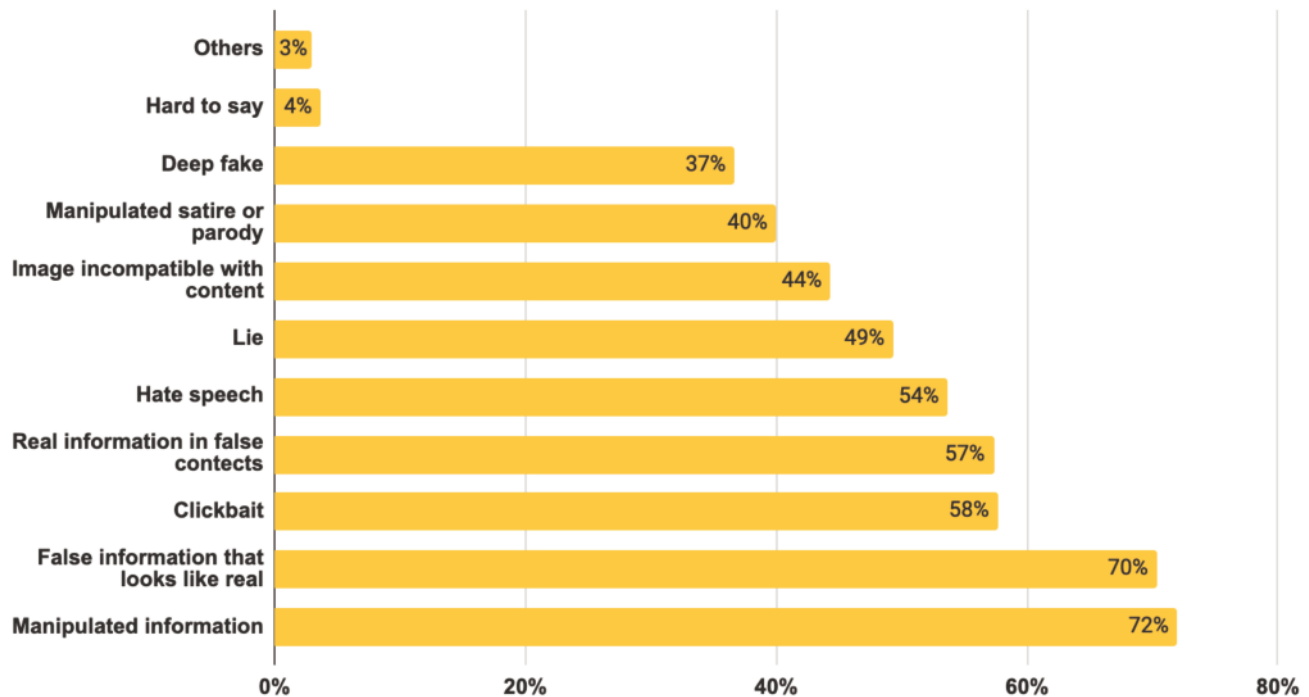
The vast majority of the respondents also had to personally deal with the situation of publications of a disinformative nature in any editorial office. The answer that they knew of such a case was given by 81% of the respondents (n = 244). Less than 10% of the respondents (n = 28) were of the opposite opinion. A similar number indicated that they did not know whether such a situation took place (9%, n = 26).

Chart 5. The case of disinformation publications

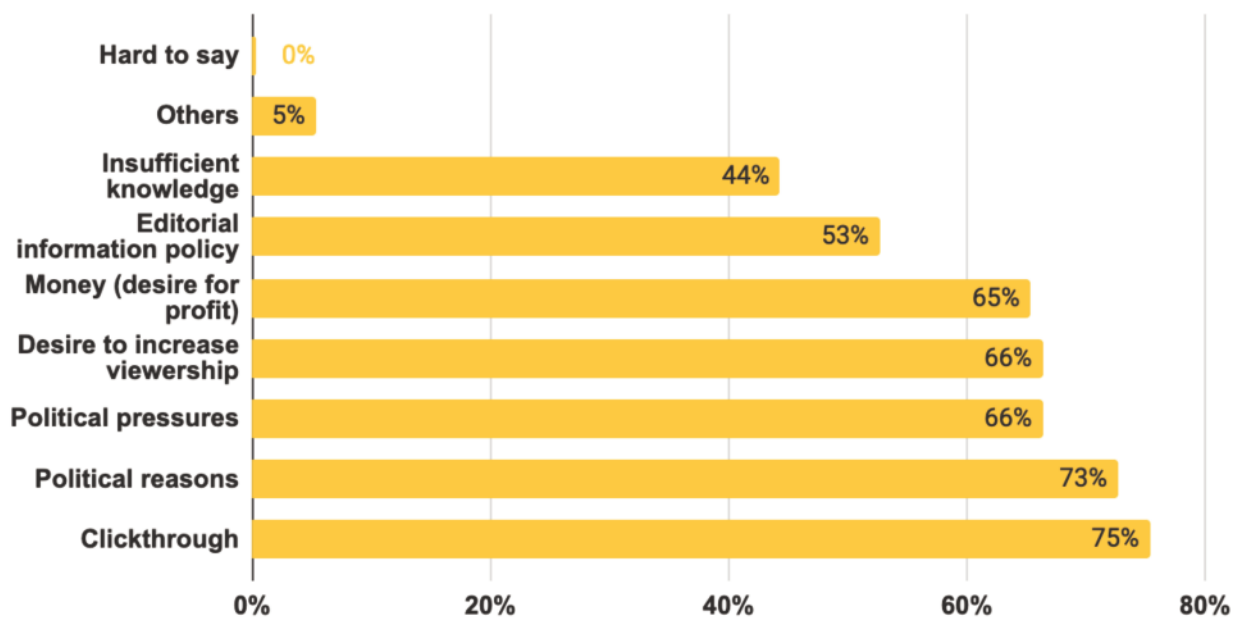Are you aware of any publications of a disinformation nature in any editorial office?
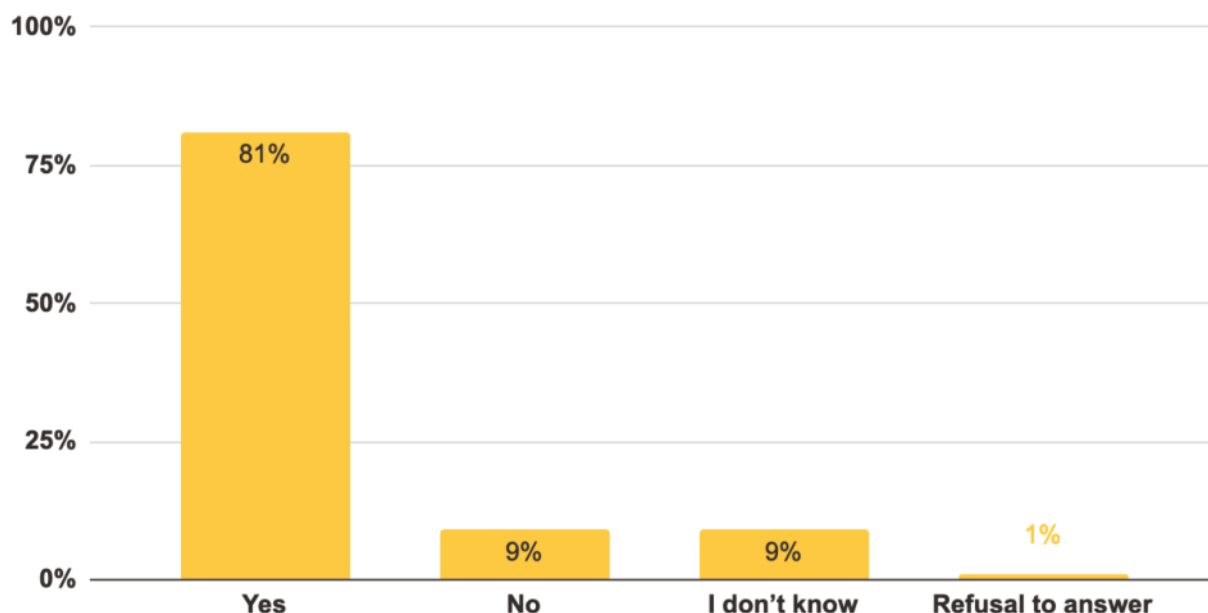
Consequently, respondents who indicated that this was the case were asked what the disinformation material they encountered was about. Of these, nearly one third (32%, n = 95) indicated that they would prefer not to discuss it.

The causes and effects of disinformation

The respondents were also asked about the motives behind spreading disinformation and about its potential consequences. The most frequently mentioned reasons for publishing disinformation content by the media were clickability (75%, n = 226) and political reasons (73%, n = 218). Nearly two-thirds of the respondents also indicated political pressure (66%, n = 199), a desire to increase viewership (66%, n = 199) and a desire for profit (65%, n = 196).

Chart 6. The most common reasons for publishing disinformation content
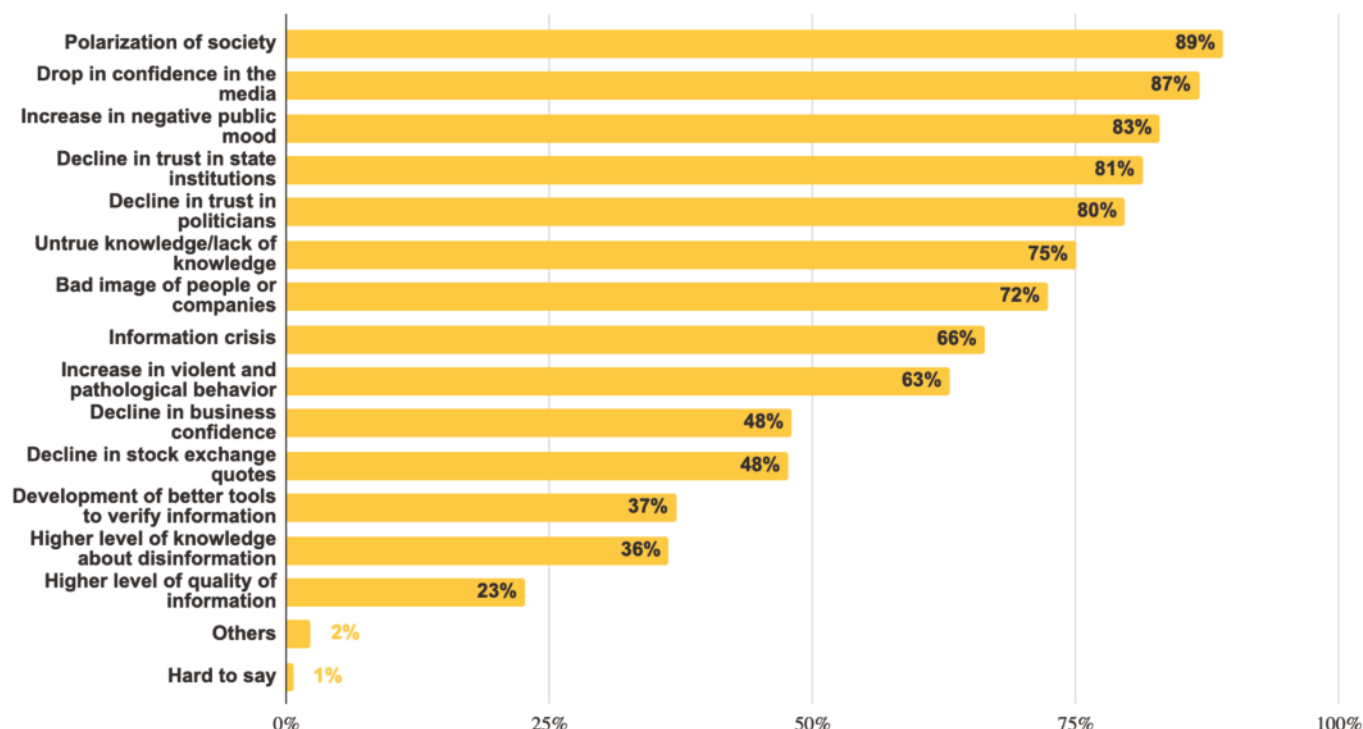
In your opinion, what are the most common reasons for the media publishing disinformation content?

Category	Percentage
Hard to say	0%
Others	5%
Insufficient knowledge	44%
Editorial information policy	53%
Money (desire for profit)	65%
Desire to increase viewership	66%
Political pressures	66%
Political reasons	73%
Clickthrough	75%

As potential effects of disinformation, 80% and more of the respondents mentioned: the polarization of the society (89%, n = 267), a decrease in trust in the media (87%, n = 260), an increase in negative public mood (83%, n = 249), a decrease in trust towards state institutions (81%, n = 244) and a decline in confidence in politicians (80%, n = 239).

Chart 7. Possible effects of disinformation

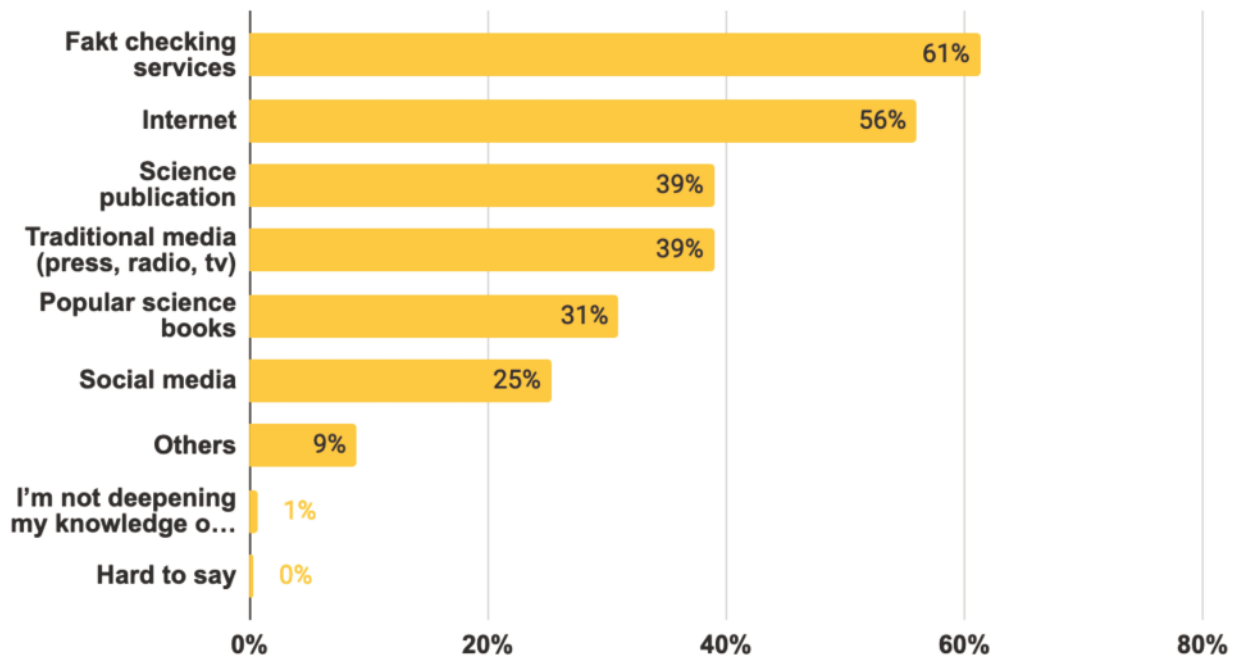What do you think disinformation can result in?

Effect	%
Polarization of society	89%
Drop in confidence in the media	87%
Increase in negative public mood	83%
Decline in trust in state institutions	81%
Decline in trust in politicians	80%
Untrue knowledge/lack of knowledge	75%
Bad image of people or companies	72%
Information crisis	66%
Increase in violent and pathological behavior	63%
Decline in business confidence	48%
Decline in stock exchange quotes	48%
Development of better tools to verify information	37%
Higher level of knowledge about disinformation	36%
Higher level of quality of information	23%
Others	2%
Hard to say	1%

Ways of dealing with disinformation

The respondents were also asked about the ways of dealing with disinformation - both in terms of searching for knowledge on this topic and reacting in the event of the likelihood of publishing disinformation material, as well as steps to be taken in order to reduce disinformation.

Expert websites (fact-checking) appeared among the most popular sources of knowledge - they were indicated by 61% of the respondents (n = 184). More than half of the respondents declared that they learned about disinformation from the Internet (56%, n = 168). About 40 percent (n = 177) used scientific publications or traditional media. Among the additional answers, the most frequent were self-verification of information (n = 8) as well as workshops, courses and conferences (n = 6).

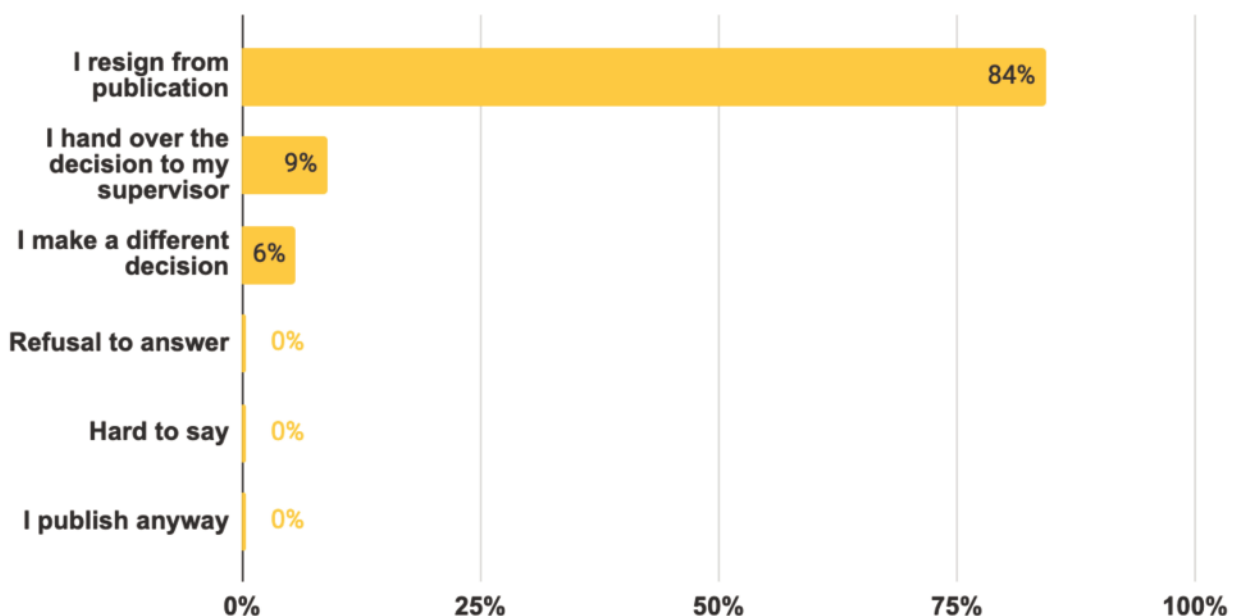**Chart 8. Sources of knowledge about disinformation**

Where do you get your knowledge of disinformation from:

Source	Percentage
Fakt checking services	61%
Internet	56%
Science publication	39%
Traditional media (press, radio, tv)	39%
Popular science books	31%
Social media	25%
Others	9%
I'm not deepening my knowledge o…	1%
Hard to say	0%

The main reaction to the information about the possible publication of a false text among the respondents is the resignation from publication - such a declaration was made by 84% (n = 252). Every tenth respondent would refer the decision to his superiors (10%, n = 29). Among the alternative solutions, there was mainly the introduction of corrections after verification of information and the publication of reliable material (n = 13).

Chart 9. Reaction to information about the possible publication of a false text

What would you do if it turned out before publication that the text you had prepared was false:

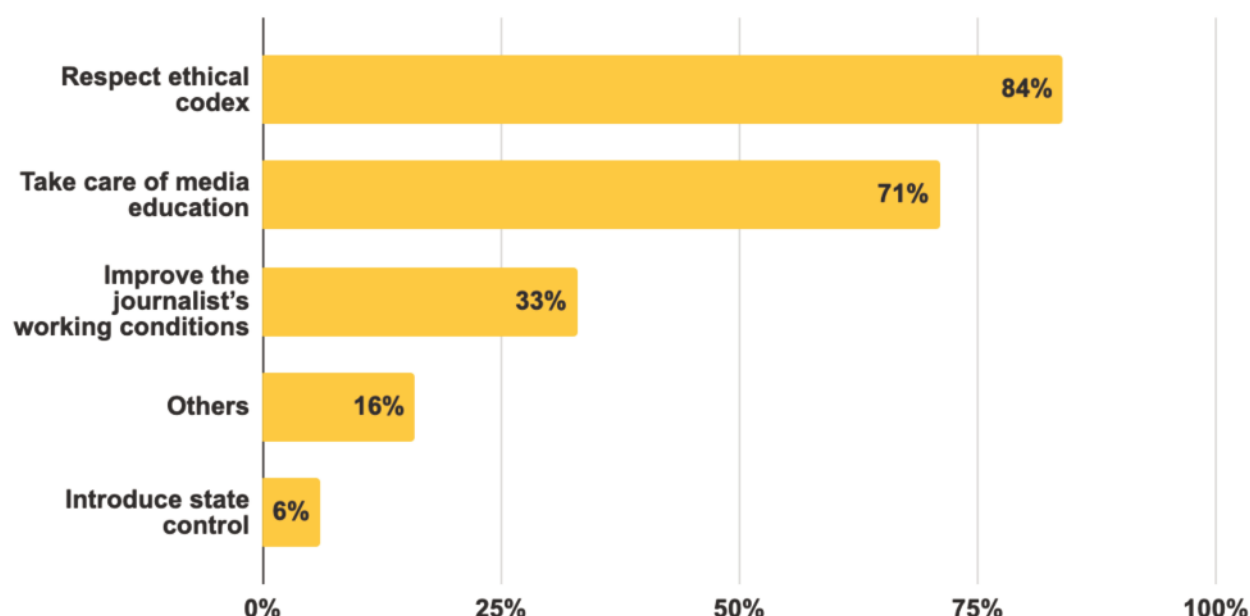| Reaction	Percentage
I resign from publication	84%
I hand over the decision to my supervisor	9%
I make a different decision	6%
Refusal to answer	0%
Hard to say	0%
I publish anyway	0%

According to the respondents, in order to reduce the phenomenon of disinformation in the media, codes of ethics should be followed (84%, n = 253). Taking action in the field of media education came second (71%, n = 213). One third of the respondents considered that it would help to improve the working conditions of journalists and (33%, n = 100).

Chart 10. Proposed steps to reduce disinformation

What steps do you think should be taken to reduce disinformation:

Step	Percentage
Respect ethical codex	84%
Take care of media education	71%
Improve the journalist's working conditions	33%
Others	16%
Introduce state control	6%

Summary

For the respondents, disinformation primarily meant manipulated (94%) or false information (70%), which is mainly disseminated via the Internet (69%) or social media (61%). More than two-thirds of the respondents encounter disinformation content at least several times a week (68% in total) - most often every day (42%) - mainly in the form of manipulated information (72%) or information that seems to be real, even though it is not (70%). For more than half of the respondents, the disinformation they came into contact with came in the form of clickbaits (58%), real information placed in a false context (57%) or even hate speech (54%). Eight out of ten respondents (81%) had to deal with the situation of misinformative publications in any editorial office. Of these, 39% do not want to reveal what this material was about.

The respondents saw the reasons for disseminating disinformation materials in the desire to increase the range of publications, the so-called "Click rates" (75%) or viewership (66%) and linked them to political reasons (73%) or even political pressure (66%). Two thirds of the respondents directly indicated that it resulted from the desire for profit (65%). More than half of them pointed out

that disinformation might be related to the information policy of a given editorial office (53%). Among the potential consequences, they mainly mentioned the polarization of society (89%), an increase in negative social moods (83%) and a decrease in trust in the media (87%), the state (81%) and towards politicians (80%). In the event of the potential possibility of publishing disinformative material, the majority of respondents indicated that their reaction would be to give up the publication (84%). Only one person indicated that they would publish the material anyway.

As remedial measures, journalists called for compliance with codes of ethics (84%) and media education (71%). The respondents obtained information about disinformation mainly from expert fact-checking websites (61%) and the Internet (56%). Only 2 people indicated that they did not deepen their knowledge about disinformation.

Conclusions

The main conclusions of the study can be summarized as follows:

- Journalists understand the definition space of disinformation, are aware of the complex and dynamic nature of the phenomenon, and know that they need to constantly expand their knowledge in this area.
- There are no significant differences in the perception of the phenomenon of disinformation depending on the journalist's place of residence, the type of medium in which they work or their seniority in the editorial office. This may have to do with perceiving yourself only as a journalist and not as a specific person or editorial staff.
- News journalists point to the Internet as the main channel where they encounter disinformation content on a daily basis, while at the same time it is a place for more than half of them to learn about disinformation.
- Most journalists know the situation of publishing disinformation content and the same number of respondents claim that they would not publish fake news if the information they prepared turned out to be it.
- The human factor is of the greatest importance in the creation and publication of disinformation content, therefore journalists also indicate social media as a source, and the type of disinformation they most often encounter is manipulated information.
- The reasons indicated as conducive to disinformation are the generally understood power apparatus and insufficient freedom of journalists and media as institutions. In responses to the question about the reasons for publishing disinformation content, there is click-through, which is directly related to the economy of media functioning as enterprises, and political reasons and pressures as an image of the influence exerted by the authorities.
- Journalists know very well what social damage is caused by disinformation, they know that their social image is deteriorating, but do not feel directly responsible for it. They also do not specify what actions they could take in this area, they are more likely to indicate systemic actions that should be initiated top-down. They place particular emphasis on media and ethical education.

- The consequences of disinformation that news journalists see are mainly negative ones related to the social and political area. Few of them see disinformation as an opportunity to raise the level of journalism.
- Few journalists see a correlation between disinformation and business, although the media constitute an important part of the business community.
- The freedom and independence of the media is, according to journalists, one of the basic conditions for better-quality journalism and the reduction of disinformation.

Appendix

Metric data

300 people (180 men and 120 women) participated in the study. More than half of the respondents were people between 35 and 54 years of age (56%). The youngest respondents - journalists and journalists aged between 18 and 24 (7%) had the lowest representation among the respondents. The majority of the respondents had higher education (89%) with a humanistic or social profile. Secondary or basic vocational education was declared by slightly more than a tenth of journalists and journalists (11%). The sample was dominated by people living in the Macroregion Mazowieckie Voivodeship - it was a total of 30% of the respondents. The smallest proportion of respondents lived in the Central Macroregion (7%).

As for the type of employment - more than six out of ten respondents are employed in editorial offices (62%), slightly more than one third are journalists and online journalists (37%). The third place in terms of employment was taken by the radio, where 24% of respondents declared work. The last one was television - only 9% of respondents were employed. The sample was dominated by people with long professional experience - over 20 years (42%), and also long - also over 20 years - in the editorial office, which is their main employer (29%). The newspapers employing the respondents are nationwide (44%) or local (29%) and regional (22%). Online platforms for which the respondents write reach recipients all over Poland (46%) and around the world (20%). Radio broadcasts and television had mainly regional or national coverage.
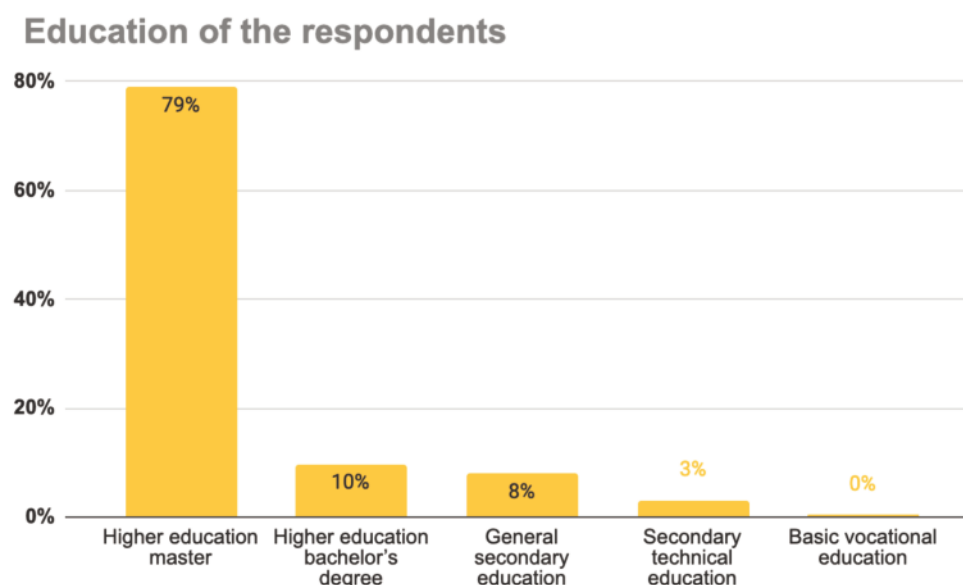
Chart 1. Gender of the respondents
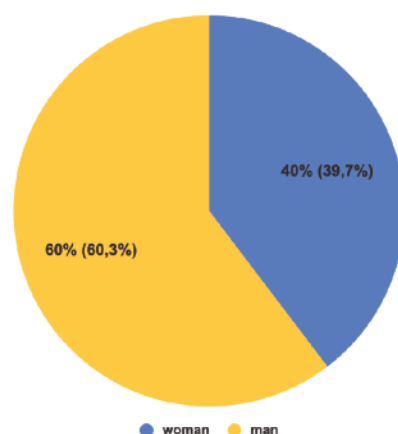
The dominant age categories of the respondents were 45-54 (29% n = 87) and 35-44 (27%, n = 80). Together, these groups accounted for over half of the respondents (56%). The youngest respondents constituted the smallest group - the sample included only 7 people aged between 18 and 24 (2%).

Chart 2. Age of respondents in categories

Age of respondents in categories

Age category	Percentage
18–24	2%
25–34	19%
35–44	27%
45–54	29%
55–64	14%
65 i więcej	10%
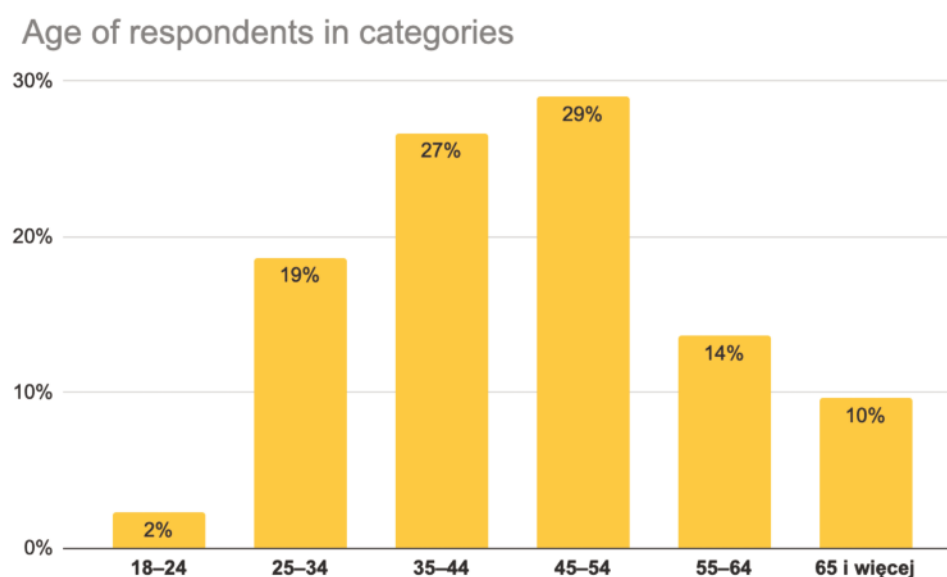
As far as the education of the respondents is concerned - more than three-quarters had higher education at the master's or higher level (79%, n = 237). Every tenth respondent had a bachelor's or engineer's degree (10%, n = 29). 8% of respondents (n = 24) declared secondary general education.

Chart 3. Education of the respondents

Education of the respondents

Education	Percentage
Higher education master	79%
Higher education bachelor's degree	10%
General secondary education	8%
Secondary technical education	3%
Basic vocational education	0%

Among people with higher education, the largest group indicated that they had obtained it in the field of humanities (62%, n = 165). Second in line was education in the field of social sciences.

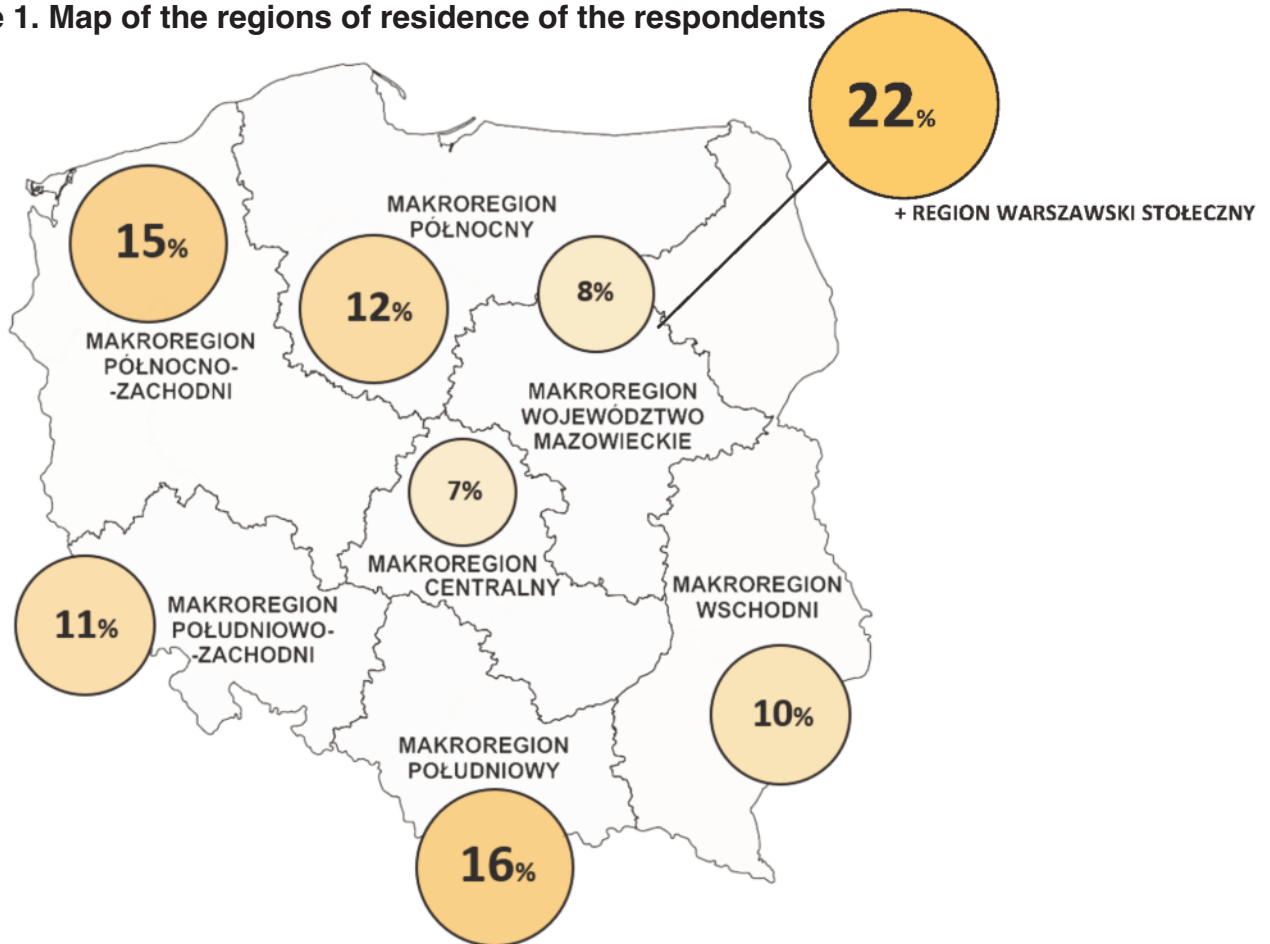**Chart 4. Fields of higher education of the respondents**

Fields of higher education of the respondents

| Field	Percentage
Human Sciences	62%
Social Sciences	23%
Technical Sciences	8%
Exact and natural Sciences	6%
Refusal to answer	2%
Theological Sciences	2%
Medical and health Science	2%
Art Sciences	1%
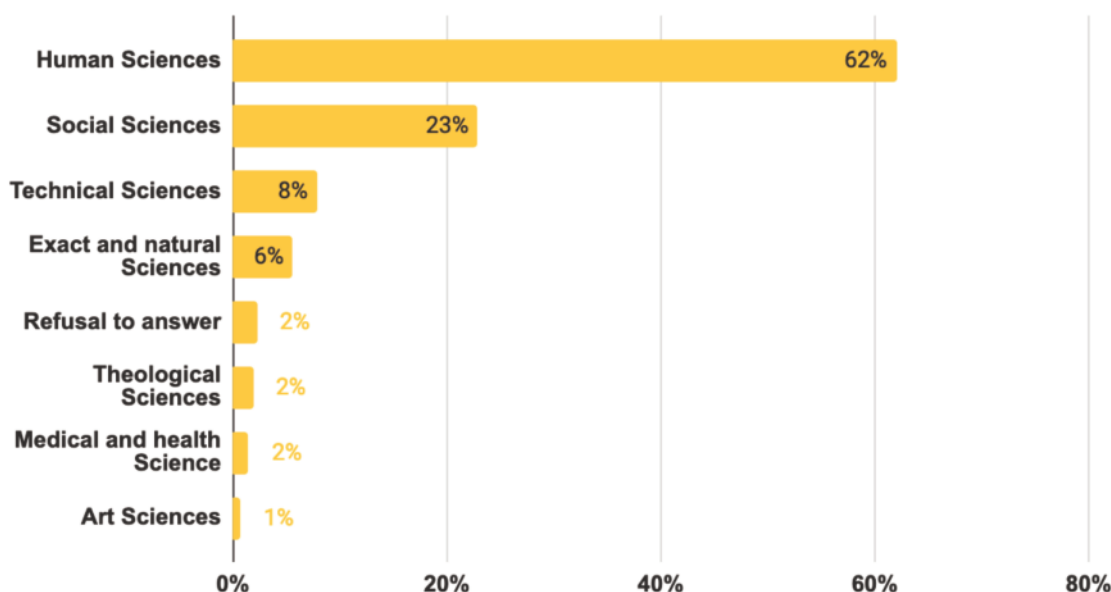
Domicile

Slightly more than one fifth of the respondents (22%, n = 65) indicated the place of residence of the Warsaw Capital Region (the Capital City of Warsaw together with the following poviats: Grodzisk, Legionowski, Minsk, Nowodworski, Otwock. 16% declared that they lived in the Southern Macroregion (Małopolskie , Śląskie), 15% - North-West Macroregion (Wielkopolskie, Zachodniopomorskie, Lubuskie). The lowest percentages of respondents (7%, n = 21 and 8% n = 23) indicated the Central Macroregion (Łódzkie, Świętokrzyskie) and the Region of Mazowiecki Regionalny (covering the rest of the Mazowieckie voivodship) The map below shows the percentage of respondents from individual regions and macroregions of Poland.

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Picture 1. Map of the regions of residence of the respondents

+ REGION WARSZAWSKI STOŁECZNY

15% MAKROREGION PÓŁNOCNO--ZACHODNI

MAKROREGION PÓŁNOCNY 12%

8% MAKROREGION WOJEWÓDZTWO MAZOWIECKIE

22%

7% MAKROREGION CENTRALNY

11% MAKROREGION POŁUDNIOWO--ZACHODNI

MAKROREGION WSCHODNI

10%

MAKROREGION POŁUDNIOWY

16%

The surveyed journalists, when asked about the type of medium in which they work, could indicate more than one answer. Nearly two thirds of them declared to work in the press (63%, n = 188). A bit over one third (37%, n = 110) indicated the Internet, and almost a quarter (24%, n = 73) indicated radio. Only 9% (n = 26) of the respondents indicated that they work on television.

Chart 5. Type of medium in which the tested person works

	press	Internet	radio	tv
	63%	37%	24%	9%

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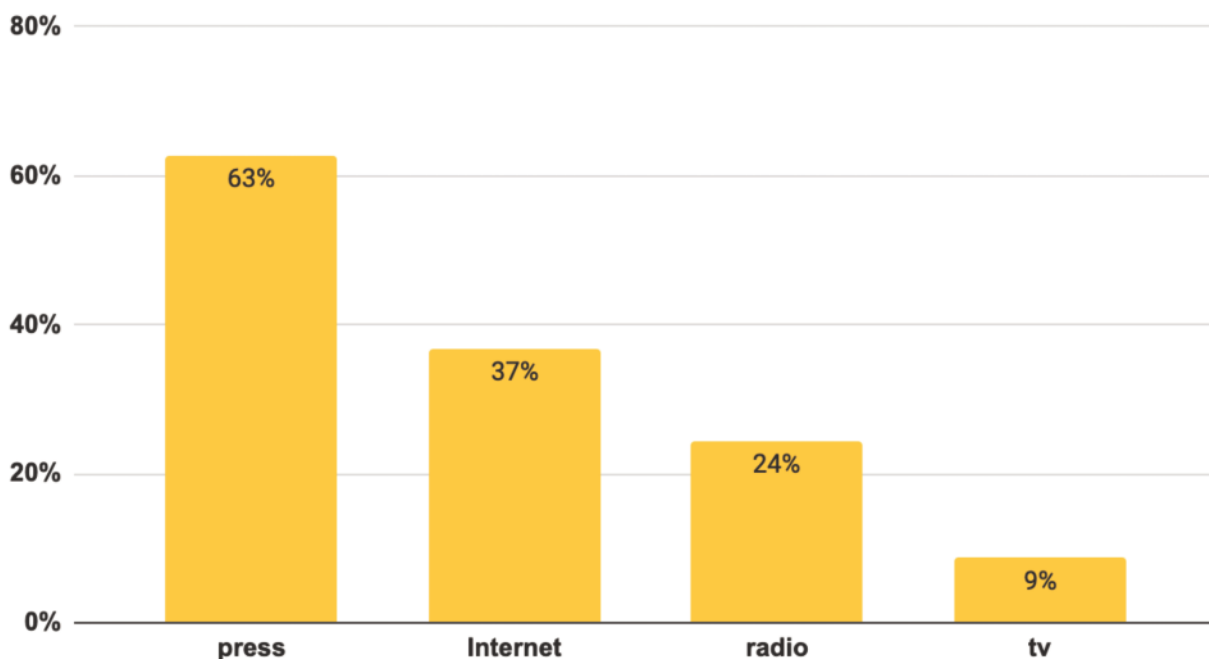
Depending on the indicated medium in which the respondents work, they were asked about its scope. The charts below present the percentage distributions of the answers to this question, broken down into the medium indicated by the respondents.

**Chart 6. The reach of the newspaper in which the respondent works**
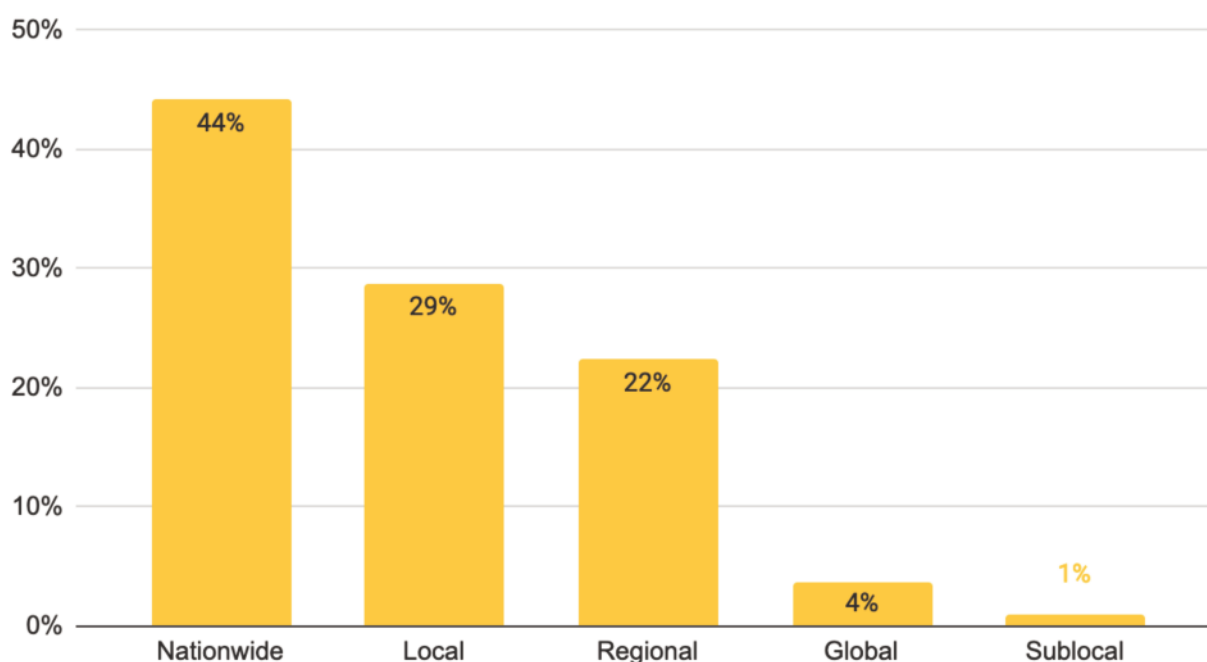
Among the respondents working in press editorial offices, these were mostly national media (44%, n = 83, secondly - local (29%, n = 54).

Chart 7. The reach of the portal / internet platform in which the respondent works
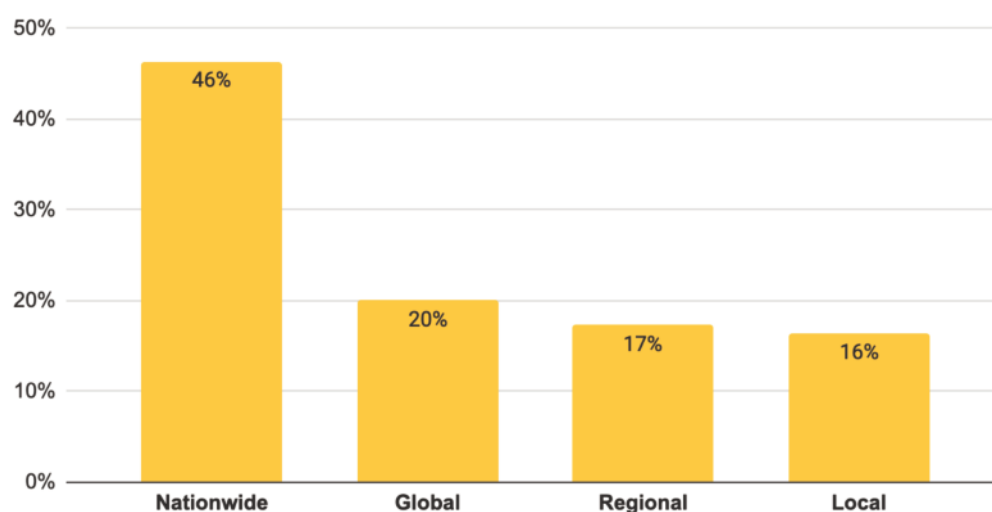
It was similar in the case of the internet platforms in which the respondents worked. These were mainly national media (46%, n = 51). The second place - in terms of the Internet - was taken by the global media (20%, n = 22).

Chart 8. The range of the radio station in which the respondent works
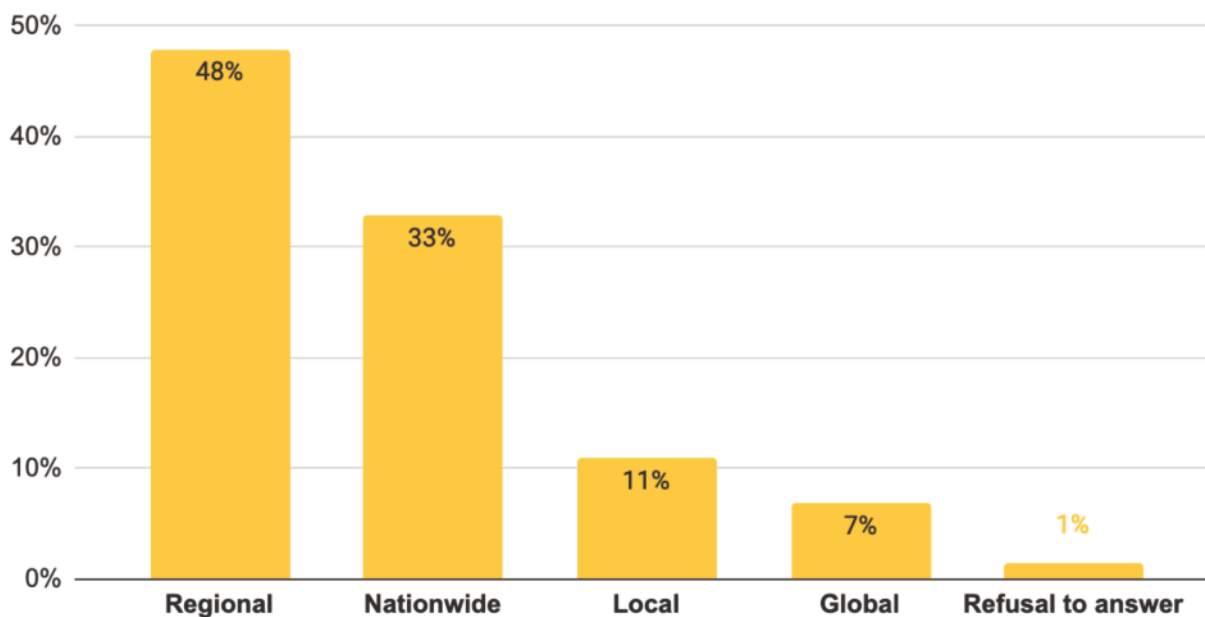
The radio stations in which the respondents work have mainly regional coverage (48%, n = 35), followed by nationwide radio stations (33%, n = 24).

## Chart 9. The coverage of the TV station in which the respondent works
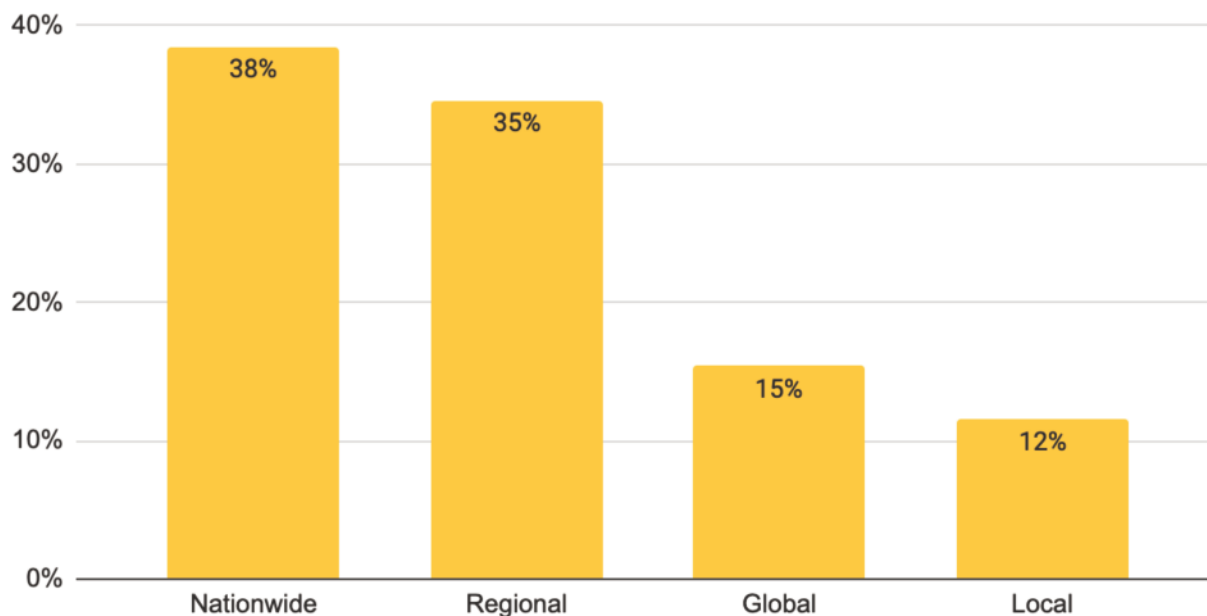
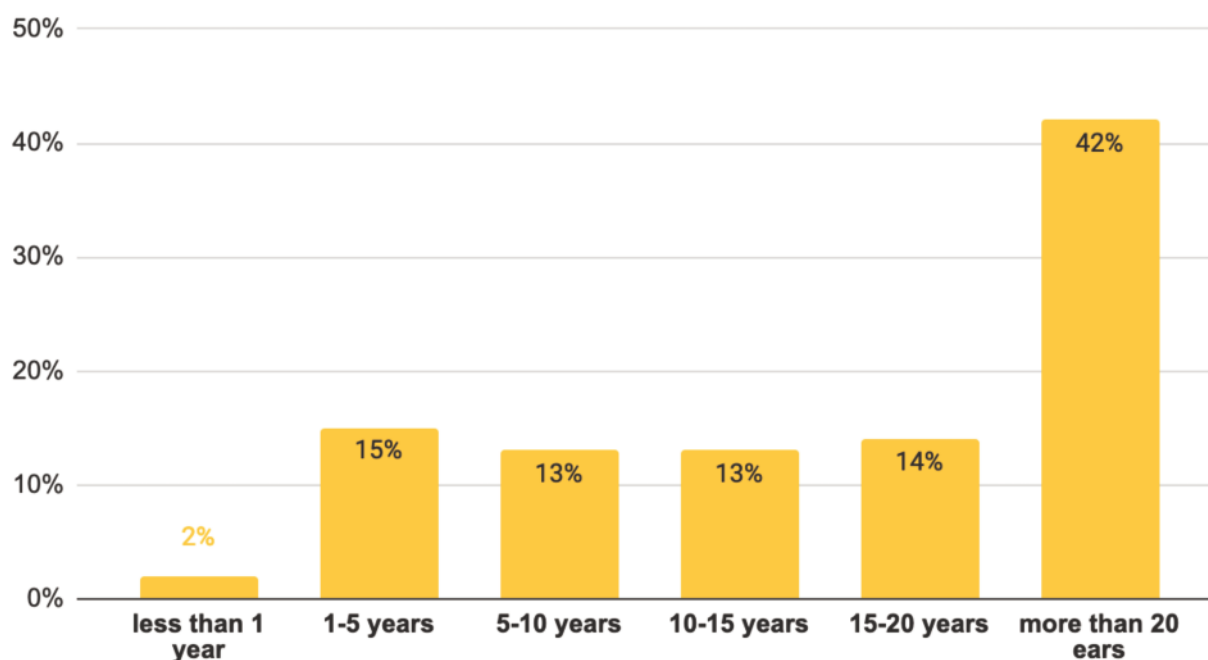As for TV stations, these were mainly national media (38%, n = 10, and secondly - local (35%, n = 9).

Journalists were also asked about the length of work in the editorial office, which is their main employer. The largest group are people with the longest - over twenty years - experience (29%, n = 88). The second largest group are people working for one to five years - they constitute slightly more than one fifth of the surveyed sample (22%, n = 67). The smallest percentage are people with less than one year of service (6%, n = 17).

Chart 10. Length of internship in the editorial office which is the main employer
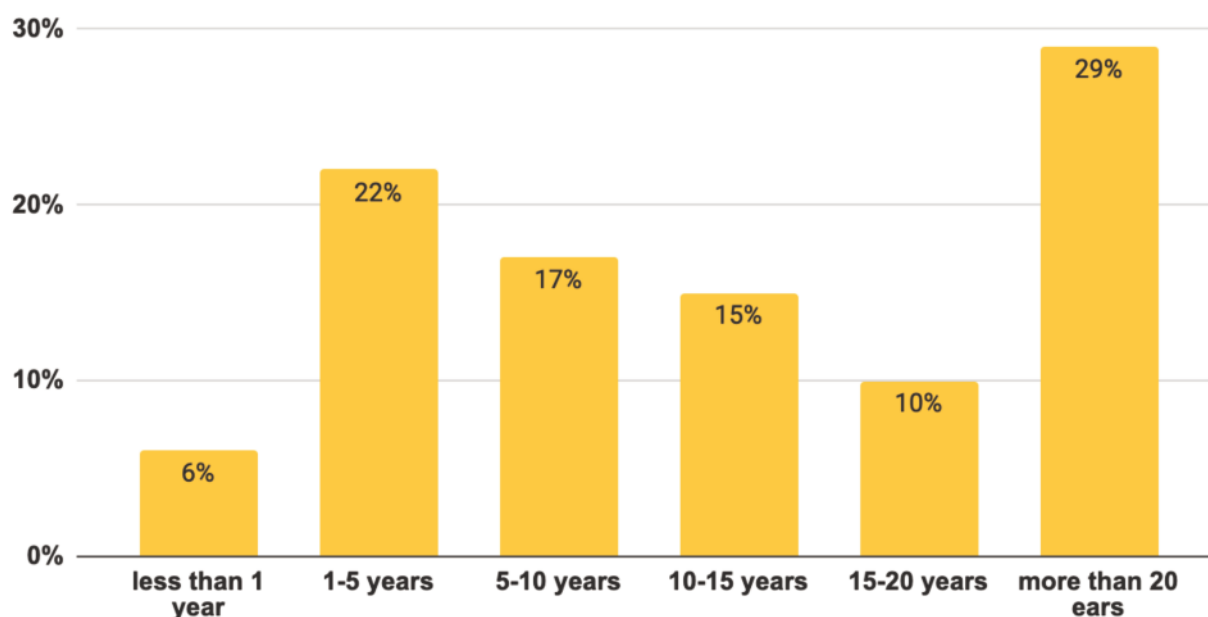
When it comes to seniority as a journalist / journalist - 42% (n = 127) of the respondents are people with the longest seniority. As in the case of the previous question - the fewest are newcomers who have just started working and have not worked yet a year (2%, n = 6). The other categories of work experience are evenly distributed (between 13 and 15% - from 39 to 45 people).

Chart 11. Work experience as a journalist

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