## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Benefits and risks of social media newsgathering. An exploratory study

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**Abstract:**
The postmodern society is characterized, among other things, by the consumerist paradigm. Of course, the consumerism should not be understood only in the proper sense of irrational excessive consume of goods, but rather we should pay a proper attention to how people, surrounded by an enormous amount of information, choose to select it to rely on the most dependable sources.
More than that, sorting and selecting the sources from which we get information has become an extremely important skill, especially in the context where social networks, form the point of view of their use, have a hegemony especially among young people (Olubunmi, 2015).
In this paper our aim is to highlight the extent to which young students use the most popular social networks to collect daily information about politics. Thus, the target group will be represented by students from the bachelor's and master's degree cycles of the *Alexandru Ioan Cuza* University from Iași. Equally, following the analysis of the scientific literature, but also of the opinions of the respondents, we will create an inventory with the greatest benefits, but also the most important risks that appear when we use social networks to collect information.

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**Introduction**

As social media networks have grown in popularity, they have started to integrate more and more functionalities, turning them into true "one stop shop" tools (Jamil, Gul, & M.U., 2022).  Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram and even YouTube, in addition to their main options (on the one hand to offer content and on the other to allow users to post their own content) have started to allow users to perform a number of actions such as making audio-video calls, participating in auctions for goods for sale by users through the Market Place functionality and, above all, gathering news directly from these platforms through the presence of conventional or unconventional news publications on social media networks (Khatri, 2021).

When it comes to the level of internet usage by citizens, Romania is following the global trend of an increasing number of citizens embracing the opportunities offered by being online. According to a study conducted by Data Reportal, in 10 years the percentage of Romanian citizens connected to the internet has increased from 58.7% in 2014 to 91.6% in 2024 (Kemp, 2024). The graph below is helpful in understanding how individuals' access to the internet has evolved over the last 10 years.

Table 1. Internet adoption rate over time in Romania as percent of individuals using the internet from the total population
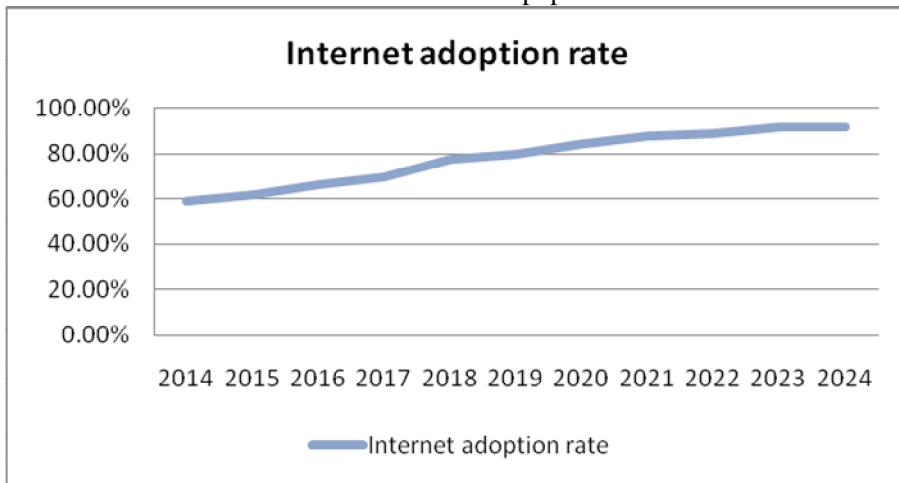


With all this in mind about citizens' access to the internet and the meteoric rise in popularity that social networks have had in recent times, it is only natural to ask the question *What role do social networks play in informing users?*. Thus, in the next part of this paper I will look in more detail at the functionalities offered by social networks and how news gathering has become a common practice for users of these platforms.

**Internet evolution and the paradigm shift in civic engagement**

The first form of political communication in the classical sense that we are referring to today was developed in the 18th-19th centuries. Citizens and those they represented often met in the town square and exchanged ideas, and later media (posters, newspapers, etc.) were used in the process (Asuman, 2018). Later, a crucial point in the evolution of meetings between voters and elected representatives was the expansion of

the railroad network, which facilitated the traveling of distances between the main meeting points. Subsequently, telephones transformed the way people communicated with each other, significantly reducing the time and transportation costs that citizens had previously incurred. This era of technologization also saw major advances in photography and television, allowing images of candidates to be broadcast, a crucial and revolutionary point in political communication. The modern era of political communication that followed the Second World War saw a rapid expansion in the role of television broadcasting in the political sphere. Somewhat later the paradigm was redefined by the advent and spread of internet access, and today political communication is identified with the increased performance achieved in the field such as the speed of information transmission and the huge amount of media content that citizens witness.

With the development of the Internet, social media networks have become part of a major trend in online communication, especially among younger generations, but also among communication and marketing experts who have realized the growing role of information correctly transmitted on these new networks. The above-mentioned paradigm shift in political communication has various implications: while in the early days of this phenomenon the main actors disseminating information to the public were journalists and politicians, today, thanks to mass access to social networks, any citizen can identify himself as a tool for transmitting information and, implicitly, as an opinion-former.

In specialized studies, online political communication is divided into 4 major stages (Tănase, 2014), which we will present below.

The Web 1.0 model, which was specific to the early days of the Internet, provided a one-way way of transmitting information, in the sense that news or information of interest to the citizen was transmitted by the relevant authority, but the feedback loop of feedback from citizens was often absent or, in the fortunate cases, delayed. Moreover, whoever published the information on online platforms had total control over it, with the reader of the information, like the traditional media audience, unable to comment on or challenge the veracity of the messages conveyed (Bolman, 2015). Web 1.0 has subsequently evolved through technological progress, this time incorporating the essential feature of giving feedback on the information transmitted.

Although it remains an important means of transmitting information today, television has started to lose ground to the tools offered by Web 2.0. Philip Seib observes in this respect that "television broadcasts information that could be disseminated to an audience of millions of people, it reaches viewers individually and there is no communication back and, further, no real connection" (Seib, 2012).

Continuing with our approach, the Web 3.0 phase is characterized by the progress of artificial intelligence which, together with human intelligence, provides audiences using the various social interaction platforms with information that is more relevant and more suited to the interests of each user, while at the same time being more accessible. "It's a more powerful language derived from neural networks and genetic algorithms, with a strong focus on analytics, processing power and is about generating new ideas based on user-generated information. Web 3.0 is a neologism used to describe the transformation of the Web into a database, a way of making content more accessible through more non-browser applications, artificial intelligence technologies, semantic Web, geospatial Web and 3Dweb" (Benito-Osoria, 2013).

Web 4.0 is the fourth stage in the evolution of the Internet. It is essential to state at the outset that we have not yet reached this stage and, in my opinion, it will be quite a

long time before we reach this stage. The dream behind the symbiotic web, as this stage is still called, is precisely to make the interaction between individuals and machines symbiotic. Thus, one of the Web 4.0 challenges that is believed to be a key part of this model is that of operating machine-made interfaces with the mind. This would increase what is meant by the speed of information transmission, it would almost completely change the paradigm of how we use technology and the Internet. However, the model in question also attracts critical masses based on arguments such as the protection of personal data and even the manipulation of free will.

Of course, the existence of such an online network would imply a parallelism with the functioning of the human brain and a massive network of highly intelligent interactions between the brain and the network (Farber, 2007). However, there is as yet no concrete strategy to reach this stage, only that the internet and the tools that the vast global network entails are moving towards the increasing use of artificial intelligence.

### Why Social Media?

We live in an era in which, as we saw at the beginning of this paper, more and more individuals are drawn to social media, and more and more of them are choosing to get their information almost exclusively from these platforms. The question that arises, however, is what motivates most individuals to be on social media. And also, what are the advantages, but also the weaknesses, of using these platforms to excess?

In 2010, after extensive attempts to explain the phenomena of civic participation raised by the new social networks, Social Media was defined as "a group of online applications that grow on the technological and ideological foundations proposed by Web 2.0 and allow the creation and sharing of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). From this definition, which has been taken up and certainly enriched since then, we can deduce the essential characteristic of this new type of communication: contrary to the so-called 'old media', social media not only provides information for users to assimilate, but the latter become

poles of information transmission and dissemination. Also, through social media, information, messages, video or audio material can go viral much more easily and quickly, thanks to the extremely high speed at which it can spread.

A very important point here is also that information or, generally speaking, content that has been disseminated on a social media network is disseminated much faster because it is transmitted by exponentially growing algorithms. In short, if an insider with 500 people in their Facebook network picks up and distributes the content of a post, it will reach most of those 500. In turn, some of those reached will also share the content with their network of "friends". In this sense, the speed at which information can spread and the ease with which it can go viral has broken down barriers that traditional media had failed to overcome.

One of the great advantages of being present on social media platforms is the accumulation of psychological factors that fall under the conceptual umbrella of the expression *fear of missing out*. FoMO is defined as "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Fioravanti, Casale, & Bocci Benucci, 2021). So, in the postmodern era, social media presence becomes impetuously necessary precisely for fear of missing out on participating in a medium or set of events that other people have access to. Of course, the very active participation on these online platforms, the frequent engagement with other virtual users

and, above all, the collection of information directly from these platforms share an important set of risks to which users expose themselves.

In this respect, a first disadvantage of the new communication networks is, paradoxically, the very advantage they bring: they place each citizen at the center of his or her network. We are witnessing an interesting phenomenon: every user can post and share almost any information. Of course, this is good for specialists who want to share the latest results of their research. But, at the other extreme, social networks also promote so-called "pseudo-science", i.e. encouraging the spread of uninformed and unverified opinions on various topics of interest (Petrovcic, 2012). Today we are seeing a greater wave than ever before of users spreading and embracing theories conspiracy theorists, precisely because anyone has access to post whatever they want. And, as we know from neuroscientists' theories, the human brain has a sense of attraction to anything that is outsider - in this case, those false theories that are rejected and disproved by the scientific community, but find support in ordinary people who formulate uninformed opinions on topics of interest.

Closely related to the promotion of pseudoscience, another sensitive point of the new social networks is the substantial increase in the wave of fake news. Fake news did not, however, appear when people moved a large part of their own activities to social networks. They have been around for a long time, their main "use" being to stir waves of distrust, popularize allies and undermine opponents. However, social media has taken the spread of fake news to a new level: the flow of information circulating on social networks right now is huge. Users thus receive information directly, without having the time and often the interest to check it before taking it for granted (Niklewics, 2017).

There is no point in listing all the strengths and weaknesses of users' social media presence. But, starting from the theoretical landmarks presented up to this point of the article, I propose to highlight the result of a study conducted on students on the degree of significance of social networks when it comes to young people's information gathering directly from social media sources.

**Social media newsgathering. A growing phenomenon**

As we have seen in the pages above, the Internet, seen from its inception to the present day as a system that brings some form of dangers to the users, has succeeded in achieving the main purpose of its creation, namely to offer a range of opportunities and solutions to make everyday activities easier and to increase the quality of life of users. Subsequently, the emergence and development of social networks has only reinforced this idea. Bringing individuals together in a common virtual space was a desideratum which, once a reality, allowed social network developers to start offering all sorts of other functionalities to social networks in order to keep users as loyal as possible (Farkas, 2018).

It wasn't long before the traditional media understood the opportunities created by these new one-stop-shop social networks and started to duplicate their work online. In small steps, users began to abandon traditional news-reading tools, bringing this practice to the top of the reasons why social networks are used today. If in the early days of social media there was little to no news on social media, today's disadvantage is just the opposite, as Arkaitz Zubiaga tells us: „When social media is used for newsgathering, however, it presents the challenge that the stream of updates flows much faster than a human can follow, with hundreds or even thousands of posts per minute, which makes it impossible for a human to keep track of everything that is being said" (Zubiaga, 2019).

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Nowadays, using social media for newsgathering has become one of the main activities for which users spend time on social platforms. According to an annual study conducted by *Data Reportal*, in 2024 *reading news directly from social media* would rank third on the list of users' favorites activities, after *keeping in thouch with friends and family* and *filling spare time*. I will attach a table below with the data obtained from the statistical analysis performed by *Data Reportal* (Data Reportal, 2024).

Table 2. Primary reasons why social media users aged 16+ use social media platforms

| Reason for using social-media | Percent of population |
|---|---|
| Keeping in touch with friends and family | 50.3% |
| Filling spare time | 37.8% |
| **Reading news stories** | **34.5%** |
| Finding content (e.g. articles, videos) | 30.0% |
| Seeing what`s being talked about | 28.6% |
| Finding products to purchase | 27.0% |
| Finding inspiration for things to do and buy | 26.9% |
| Watching live streams | 23.0% |
| Watching or following sports | 22.9% |
| Sharing and discussing opinions with others | 22.4% |
| Making new contacts | 22.3% |
| Seeing content from your favourite brands | 22.1% |
| Work-related networking or research | 21.8% |
| Following celebrities or influencers | 19.7% |
| Posing about your life | 19.5% |

As we can see from the table above, social media users are nowadays attracted to using these networks on a recurring basis thanks to the fact that they can keep in touch with their loved ones or find in these networks a way to spend their free time. However, in third place in the ranking of these preferences is the dimension of gathering news directly from social media networks. We are therefore witnessing an extremely interesting phenomenon: according to the sample on the basis of which the above data were collected and analyzed, more than a third of social media users say that, through their presence on these platforms, they are able to get news and information from social media networks.

In this sense, the question that arose after the emergence of this idea is whether the practice of gathering news from social networks is also common in the Romanian university environment, and if we place ourselves in the same paradigm, what are the dangers that young people observe in the use of this practice. Thus, in the next part of the article I intend to present the results of the questionnaire that I applied among the students of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iasi.

**Research methodology and results**
In order to understand the general phenomenon of news-gathering of young users from Alexandru Ioan Cuza University directly from social networks, it is valuable that the collected data represent, as much as possible, a part of reality. Therefore, the best tool through which we can understand a series of general trends starting from a sample that respects the socio-demographic characteristics of the analyzed population is

the questionnaire. As Septimiu Chelcea tells us „the questionnaire is a technique and, accordingly, an investigation tool consisting of a set of written questions and possibly images, graphics, ordered logically and psychologically, which, through the administration by the investigation operators or by self-administration, determines a set of answers from the investigated persons which should be recorded in writing" (Chelcea, 2004).

Therefore, the proposed research tool is a questionnaire addressed to university students between the ages of 18 and 35. All the questions were closed questions, being some through which we pursued the exploration and understanding of the phenomenon of gathering news directly from social media, but also, towards the end, the understanding of the main dangers that this practice implies.

To begin the part of highlighting the results obtained, it is important to point that the questionnaire was applied to 214 respondents, bachelor's and master's degree students from all 15 faculties of the university. The average age of the respondents was 24.6 years, and the gender distribution was 53.6% female respondents and 46.4% male respondents.

When it comes to the question regarding the main reasons why students use social media, the answers obtained from the targeted students were as follows: 185 respondents - keeping in touch with family and friends, 164 - reading news, 122 - finding content, 94 - making contacts, 92 - watching live streams. The results can be understood more easily from the following graph:

Table 3. The main reasons why the students from *UAIC* are using social-media
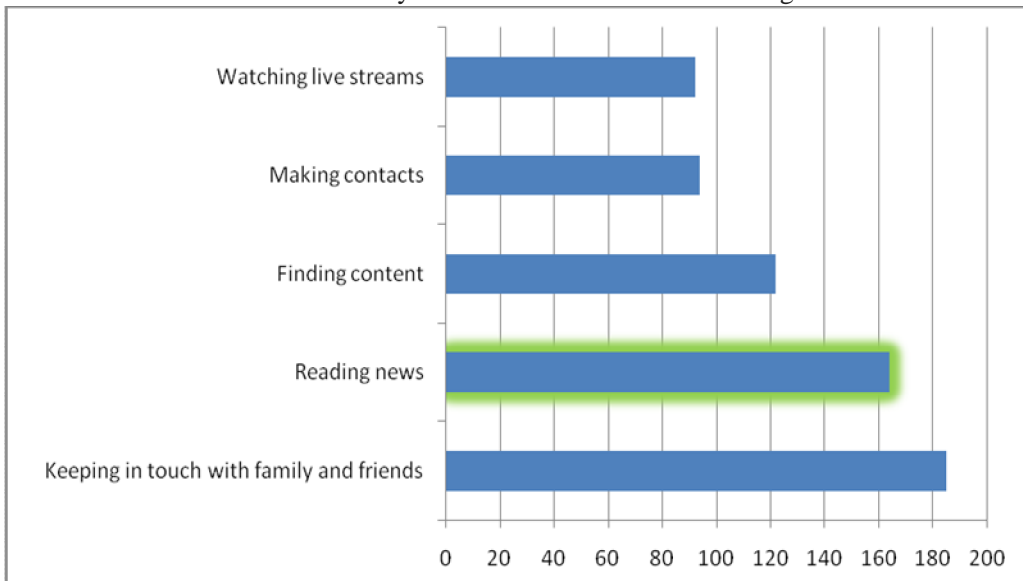


As we can see from the graph above, from the list of 5 possible activities for which users spend their free time on social media, reading the news is in the 2nd position, 164 out of the total of 214 respondents identifying with this dimension. We can understand, therefore, that more than three quarters of the respondents to the questionnaire (76.6%) frequently use social media to read news. This detail is extremely curious, since, comparing with the global data obtained by those from Data Reportal, we

observe a substantial increase in this trend when it comes to university students. This aspect can be explained through the prism of the fact that there is a greater tendency among users with higher education to devote moments of their free time to reading about the things happening around them.

In order to better understand this phenomenon, we deepened the research through a set of questions regarding the reasons why young people choose to gather their news directly from social networks. We obtained three answers whose results can be extracted from the questionnaire. Thus, 142 respondents said that *news from social media are more accessible*, 128 – *I can reply in real-time to the news sources* and 76 – *Social media helps me find easier the news I am most interested in.*

As we can see, most young readers of news directly from social media motivate this behavior by the argument of accessibility: it is much easier to use a single platform from which to get informed, than to have to frequently access several sites from which to collect your information. Secondly, the possibility to interact with the media entity that publishes the news is equally an advantage: it is appreciated by the users that, thanks to the interaction with the web page and, at the same time, with those behind it, they can influence in a smaller or larger way the subsequent news. Thirdly, we also observe a form of what in psychology we encounter under the name of *the echo chamber syndrome*: users choose to read news directly from social media because, thanks to the algorithm behind the search engines on these platforms, they reach with them only the news from the fields of interest.
We will see in the next part that each of these possible advantages has a counterpart, details that we will emphasize in the following lines.

Last but not least, we were interested in the current research to cover the main risks identified by the young people from UAIC regarding the exclusive use of social networks as a means of information. Regarding the weak points of this practice, from the analyzed data, we notice that we have four potential risks identified by the young people questioned as follows: 159 respondents - *spreading of false news*, 102 respondents - *the "news find me" perception,* 87 respondents - *biased articles*, 33 respondents - *news containing disturbing image or video content*.

We note that the biggest risk explained by the research participants was the one related to the dissemination of fake news. Social networks, even if they are used as a main search engine for news, remain little regulated when it comes to the veracity of posted news. Adding to these the argument of the relatively easy way in which a news can become viral, social media networks can still be seen as real catalysts of fake news.

Secondly, we note that what was an advantage above can also be understood in terms of reciprocity: social media, thanks to the algorithms behind the friendly interface, places (wittingly or not) the users who read the news in a bubble where ideological news are frequently pumped with which the user empathizes. Or this is a major danger because this practice does nothing but radicalize the groups present on social media, creating environments for the propagation of false or strongly ideological news.

Thirdly, we can also understand the situation of biased articles: contrary to the traditional media, social media networks do not assume the existence of a great filter to separate fake or ideological news from the real ones. To the same extent, social networks are real catalysts for the appearance and growth of opinion leaders who, often, also use ideological speeches, on topics as different as possible, in order to gather as many supporters as possible.

### Limitations of the research

Even if the current research only targeted young people from the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iasi, it is important to recognize its weaknesses. This study is an exploratory one, through which we wanted to understand how the young students of the University of Iasi relate to reading news directly from social networks. Or, in order to be able to generalize the results on a somewhat more general level, it is important that the research instrument be refined and applied to larger and more representative masses of respondents. Equally, it should be mentioned that the data collected for this study were done online. There is a possibility that they reflect the opinions of young students who are interested in the phenomenon and who had access to the Internet. In order for a larger future research to be as representative as possible, it is recommended that the answers be collected physically.

### Conclusions and future perspectives

Access to the Internet is, in equal measure, a blessing and a curse: a blessing for those who have understood the way in which they can make healthy use of the elements that the Internet presupposes and promotes; curse for those who are still caught in the nets of these networks that can keep you captive for hours on a daily basis. We tried to emphasize exactly this idea in this article, referring in particular to the practice of gathering news by users directly from social media.

We saw in the first part of the article how the internet and social media evolved to their current form and we understood the important transformations these networks went through. In the second part of the study, we sought to understand the behavior of young people who repeatedly use social media.

Thanks to a questionnaire, we saw that the young people of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iasi mostly use social networks to get information about current news. Equally, even if among the new generation of students this is a very common practice, they are aware of the potential risks that gathering news from social media has.

This article comes as a complement to the body of knowledge already existing in the field of social media research, and the findings of this study want to inform the general public about the galloping dynamics of the dangers that the unconscious use of new technologies entails.

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