



# **Perceiving Manipulated Information in the Internet Age. A Comparative Analysis.**

## **The Cases of Austria, Italy and the Netherlands**

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### **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the effects of individual levels of political competence and the media literacy context on spotting manipulated information in Internet news reports on unfamiliar foreign affairs issues as well as on the acceptance or rejection of the standpoint(s) such news reports promote. University students in the age category of 18-26 years old from three countries that differ in their levels of media literacy context - Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands - were the target group of participants in this experimental/quasi-experimental research (N = 736). After measuring their media habits and attitudes as well as levels of political competence, they were randomly assigned to read one of two simulated Internet news reports - either a manipulated or a non-manipulated one. Each version of the news reports was presented as being taken either from a popular 'traditional' or an 'alternative' Internet news source in each country; however, the content of both was absolutely identical. The participants then evaluated the news report they had read according to a set of characteristics. Analysis revealed that political competence appeared to have no effects at all on spotting and rejecting. Moreover, a comparison of three age categories in the Italian sample (18-26, 27-35 and 36 ≤ years old; N = 394) showed that age was not a moderator of the effects of political competence on a critical evaluation of manipulated news. However, participants from countries ranked with a higher media literacy context were more likely to spot manipulation in the Internet news reports and reject the promoted standpoint(s). In addition, a puzzling relationship was discovered between spotting and rejecting, as not everyone who spotted manipulation subsequently rejected the manipulated standpoint, but accepted it instead. Also, it transpired that, depending on the country, a certain subtype of manipulated news report - from either 'traditional' or 'alternative' Internet news sources - was regarded by participants of that country as more persuasive and trustworthy. On the whole, the findings of the thesis revealed some important aspects of the relationships between individual skills of critical assessment of news media information and a susceptibility to manipulation effects, on the one side, and political competence and media literacy context, on the other, which collectively contribute to creating a framework for further research in the area.



**Jury:** Thomas Zittel (Goethe University Frankfurt), Sven Steinmo (EUI), Vasyl Kucherenko (Candidate), Alexander H. Trechsel (EUI, Supervisor), Urs Gasser (Harvard University, by videolink).

## **Bio**

Vasyl V. Kucherenko is a former professional political journalist, political and media analyst, and communication researcher in Ukraine, where he had more than 15 years of professional non-academic experience.

He holds a M.A. in Journalism from Kiev University, Ukraine, and a M.S. in Technical Communication from Colorado State University, USA.

His most recent publication is a chapter in the forthcoming book "Changing Media, Changing Democracy" (eds. B. Dobek-Ostrowska & M. Glowacki, Peter Lang Publishing), entitled "Guarded or guardless? The role of political knowledge in spotting manipulation in news about international affairs and resisting its persuasive effects".

His research interests include media effects, persuasion, critical media literacy/news literacy, new media, political knowledge/competence, political behavior, and public opinion.