Strengthening children's rights against fake news to reinforce democracy

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ABSTRACT: Fake news is categorized as a menace to democracy and an object of scientific research in many ways—currently about the war in Ukraine. Russian narratives and concepts of competency in media are analyzed, but little about the reach and impact of fake news on the war in Ukraine on children's rights. Therefore, this research analyzes fake news related to the war in Ukraine experienced by, or having an impact on, children in Germany and the consequences they have on children. This collective case study analyzes surveys, expert debates, EU policies against disinformation and media, and five conducted qualitative interviews. The presented study shows the need for children's participation in Fake News to strengthen democracy and is of interest to political actors, industry, NGOs, media providers, and civil society.

KEYWORDS: democracy, fake news, children's rights, EU-policies, participation, politics

INTRODUCTION[1]

"When developing legislation, policies, programs, services, and training on children's rights concerning the digital environment, state parties should involve all children, listen to their needs, and give due weight to their views. They should ensure that digital service providers actively engage with children, applying appropriate safeguards, and give their views due consideration when developing products and services (…)".

(UN-Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 25/2021)

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[1] Given the socially and educationally inclusive topic, the article was written in a narrative approach.

This article is authored by a Children´s Rights advocate with working experience in international NGOs in the Fundraising Department who graduated with a Master's in Childhood Studies and Children´s Rights from the University of Applied Sciences in Potsdam, Germany. I want to draw attention to how the socially constructed view on childhood (James & James, 2012) violates children's rights regarding the current Fake News debate. I focus on Fake News regarding the war in Ukraine and the challenges and approaches that arise for children in Germany. I aim to understand better children facing Fake News in times of war in the EU and illustrate the importance of children's participation in reinforcing democracy. The German government entitles „Fake news mislead people and threaten democracy" (deutschland.de, 2022). I made this slogan key in the assumptions presented in this article. The invasion of Ukraine is also referred to as Russia's information war against the West. Also, on TikTok, the information war is being waged (Bösch, 2022). Scientific examination of fake news about the Ukraine war focuses on media literacy. The German government sees education as the most crucial step in the fight against fake news. Social networks are the major drivers of fake news; therefore, the German government has taken it upon itself to protect democracy and the EU level against fake news. Measures such as the NetzDG, the National Network Enforcement Act, and on the level of the DSA, the Code of Conduct against Disinformation — also concerning the Ukraine war (European Commission, 2022), and the AI Act have been implemented (deutschland.de, 2022).

As citizens with internet access, we all get exposed to fake news, but we do not all experience it and its consequences in the same way, unlike children. How fake news affects children also depends on their living conditions and context. To what extent fake news about the Ukraine war affects children in Germany and their rights - also through measures against fake news and political and media practices - seems still little explored. This research, therefore, analyses, through a collective case study, how children in Germany experience fake news about the war in Ukraine, why, and what child rights-based approaches arise from the findings. Combining desk research with qualitative interviews with three adults and two children, the aim is to contribute with a participatory research approach to identifying challenges and solutions that can be considered for future measures to empower children in Germany against fake news. Currently, none of the listed policies pursue a child rights approach. I hypothesize that children become victims of Fake News because of the romanticized image of childhood (O'Sullivan, 2011) that is still attached to them instead of allowing children to participate as active democratic actors.

Viewed with an intersectional, intergenerational, adultism-critical, and individual resilience versus collective resistance point of view, the resulting challenges and approaches show the urgency to implement a child rights approach (Budde & Markowska-Manista, 2020) in the listed policies, political actions, and medial measurements.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The basis for the research is children's rights approaches of the new intergenerational childhood research focusing on children as beings, as social actors and agents, politically and socially influenced and influencing in the context of their living conditions in exchange with their environment (James, 2009; Liebel, 2017). This research also supports the awareness of adultism, the power imbalance, when adults prioritize their opinions over those of children, with the justification that adults are "(...) more intelligent, competent, simply better (...) than children and adolescents solely because of their age" (Ritz, 2008) to support more children's participation on the political level (Liebel & Meade, 2023).

Respectful cooperation and the transfer of responsibility help children to develop their abilities (Lansdown, 2005). „Children whose sense of personal agency is intact and functioning are more likely to survive adverse circumstances psychologically unscathed than are more passive children who regard themselves as victims" (Boyden, 1998, p. 13). Talking about a child-centered approach that considers „(working) children not as helpless victims but with respect and with the expectation that they are able to contribute meaningfully to initiatives designed to help them" (Boyden, 1998, p. 13). Janusz Korczak, the pioneer of the later-established UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, wrote that „adults educate children but children also educate adults" (Markowska-Manista, 2020, p. 2). Liebel analyzes that current EU politics and economics respond to crises with an individual resilience concept and contrasts this with a resilience concept where collective resistance offers an opportunity to actively address the causes of crises instead of passively subjected to them (Liebel, 2022). This author also refers to Boyden, saying that active participation and the transfer of responsibility strengthen children in dealing with and addressing crises (Liebel, 2022). The analysis also takes an intersectional perspective to make visible structural discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991) that can help identify rules, policies, institutions, and support that children need to uphold or restore their children's rights (Alanen, 2016), focusing on children as competent actors in their life worlds and examining power structures (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017).

The available data shows that 78% of children and adolescents between 12 and 19 in Germany are interested in the Russian-Ukraine conflict (Klicksafe, 2023). Among 67% of children and adolescents (N641) aged 14-15, TikTok is the most popular platform (Statista, 2023). A study on TikTok found that after 40 minutes of scrolling on the For You page, TikTok displays fake news about the Ukraine war without marking it as fake (The Guardian, 2022). TikTok is accused of selling data, including biometric data (including that of children) (BBC, 2021). Facebook has withheld its studies on the negative effects of its algorithm on children (Medienbildungshub, 2021). Snapchat reports that its ChatGPT chatbot, My AI, is still error-prone and can give false and harmful responses (Snapchat, 2023).

Compared to the declared UN-Children's Rights Convention, which states the right to participation but also the protection of children, especially in war and crises, this stands in a strong contrast. Therefore, looking at the educational, political, and media levels of how it handles Fake News is interesting. While there is discussion and research about Fake News regarding the war in Ukraine and how to combat it, little explored are children´s voices in how children themselves face and handle them. This research refers to studies on difficult knowledge in the form „(…) that serve as fake news and are used as slogans to intimidate the masses in the propaganda machine" (Markowska-Manista & Baranowski, 2024). This indicated the aspect of the annexation of Crimea and the hostilities in Donbas and Lugansk concerning the militarization of children (Markowska-Manista & Koshulko, 2021). In times of crisis, people are more susceptible to fake news (Babacan & Tamn, 2022). Studies have shown that young people struggle with recognizing Fake News and sharing disinformation with peers, even if they are unsure if it is accurate or false information (Zozaya-Durazo et al., 2024). Studies on disinformation suggest bringing fake news to school curriculums and working on legal measures, carefully set up so as not to reach censorship (Dumitru, 2020). UNICEF states that protection from abuse would mainly result from restrictions on internet access for children. UNICEF recommends promoting media literacy among children, slowing down the sharing of news on platforms, promoting media independence, as well as further research on the effects of fake news on children, transparency, audits, and ethical alternatives to ad-driven algorithms from tech companies (Dignu et al., 2021; Penagos, 2020). In 20 examined national AI policies, the authors of the UNICEF study criticize a lack of approaches on how children's rights to protection from discrimination, abuse, and exploitation and the right to information and freedom of opinion could be preserved. They recommend collaboration with children's rights experts to adequately involve children in the development process of AI.

This collective case-study research aligns with previous research that documents the influence of political measures and the resulting reactions on social interaction, as is currently the case due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Digidiki et al., 2024).

Paré addresses the phenomenon of Othering and the accompanying dehumanization in the treatment of people who have fled from other countries compared to the better treatment of those who have fled from Ukraine to Germany. Dehumanization arises through the separation of „Us" versus „Them". „Them" are perceived as lesser beings, denying their personhood and subjectivity. According to Paré, mass media plays a significant role by shaping and disseminating the portrayal of the „Other" through their reports (Paré, 2022).

The problem with telling a story about people is that it takes away their dignity. It makes it harder for us to see our similarities instead of our differences. Stories (and I would add measurements) are important. They can be used to weaken people or to empower and strengthen people (Adichie, 2009).

The German Youth Media Protection Act (Jugendmedienschutzgesetz) aims to "(...) enable children and adolescents to develop into responsible and socially competent personalities without disturbance"(BPjM, 2019, p. 27) and categorizes, among other things, war-glorifying, violence-depicting, discriminatory, National Socialist glorifying or denying content, as well as propaganda, as endangering to youth.

As stated, media literacy is considered essential prevention, especially for social networks, and fact-checking by organizations is also seen as an important tool against fake news (Berger et al., 2022). Likewise, the media literacy of journalists for their analyses is emphasized (Grotzky, 2023) and how Russian narratives attempt to influence public opinion in Germany and Russia (Spahn, 2022). This research aims to fill the gap in researching the challenges and approaches for and with children living in Germany experiencing fake news on the Ukrainian war to strengthen children's Rights and Democracy.

METHOD AND APPROACH

The research is based on a collective case study from December 2022 to July 2023. According to Stake (Stake, 1995), this allows for the inclusion of data from various sources: "Unlike intrinsic case studies which set to solve the specific problems of an individual case, instrumental and collective case studies may allow for the generalization of findings to a bigger population" (Zaidah, 2007, p. 4).

For the analysis, I am interested in current studies and surveys of children as experts on their lived reality, as well as adult experts on Fake News, specifically related to the war in Ukraine and assessments of EU measures against Fake News, if available. The research is supplemented by an empirical investigation in five qualitative questionnaires and one semi-structured interview with open-ended questions based on children's rights regarding experiences and challenges. It approaches with Fake News related to the war in Ukraine. I have tailored the questionnaires to each respective interviewee, as recommended for case studies: "Qualitative case study seldom proceeds as a survey with the same questions asked of each respondent; rather, each interviewee is expected to have had unique experiences, special stories to tell" (Stake, 1995, p. 65). I conducted open-ended questions in questionnaires in Germany in 2022 and 2023 with the following participants:

> Case 1: Kristina, a Ukrainian mother who fled the war in Ukraine with her 10 and 5-year-old children. She expressed concerns about the violence experienced by Ukrainian children at school and the lack of information and support for children's rights.

> Case 2: Tatjana, a staff member at a family center, mentioned being aware of fake news in rural areas and provided several points for supportive actions from the family center.

> Case 3: Ana, a Ukrainian researcher specializing in migration and gender, worked in West Germany with people who fled from Ukraine. She described her findings of Ukrainian mothers consuming and implementing fake news in their children, with 80% of the Ukrainian refugees speaking the Russian language in Germany.

> Case 4 and 5: The siblings Yoda (aged 11) and Kazuha (aged 13) in 2022 in East Germany. Yoda expressed a desire for a personal interview, which subsequently took place in the form of a semi-structured Interview via a Zoom audio conference with their mother present. The children mentioned peers, teachers, and parents as supporters of recognizing and addressing fake news. They also expressed being frightened by fake news, and their solution was to stay away from their phones (Yoda) and the news in general (Kazuha).

To understand how children are affected by Fake News, it seems important to analyze how children receive them with a participatory research approach. Then, in the next step, why children experience fake news in the way they do has to be analyzed, looking at the bigger picture of social and educational politics, economic policies, and media. This seems of high importance to the UN-Children's Rights which states in its articles that children should be protected from harm but also have a right to participation. Also, it is necessary in regard to the rapidly growing AI developments. How algorithms are and will be set up will influence us further -including children. Working on ethical values now might prevent more significant future challenges with fake news for children. The analysis is inductive concerning the qualitatively conducted interviews for this research and deductive in applying and confirming the existing presented theories on intersectionality, intergenerationally, adultism, and individual resilience versus collective resistance. The analysis focuses on the case study's typical how and why questions (Yin, 2003). How do children in Germany experience Fake News about the Ukraine War, why, and what approaches for action arise from this?

This research represents my subjective interpretation of socially structured power relations analysis and does not claim general validity. Instead, the aim is to strengthen children's rights against fake news by highlighting challenges and solutions emerging from this research and focusing on concrete, current phenomena for the target groups under investigation.

LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL REFLECTION ON THE RESEARCH METHOD

Child rights activist Judith Ennew criticized childhood research for handing out questionnaires to children without first exploring the context in which the children live (Beazley et al., 2014, p. 120). „Being a social researcher investigating sensitive topics in a sensitive field is also walking an untrodden path (...) These include, for example, incom-

plete knowledge of topography and context" (Markowska-Manista & Gorak-Sosnowska, 2022, p. 10). To compensate for the lack of accompanying information in the context of the children, I combine questionnaires with extensive internet research on fake news and studies on the influence of fake news on children in Germany – as far as possible regarding the war in Ukraine. I focus on the challenges and solutions.

Since I could not personally accompany the context of children who had to flee from the war in Ukraine to Germany or those children in Germany experiencing Fake News about the war in Ukraine and questioning children as experts on war or migration could potentially trigger re-traumatization (Markowska-Manista, 2023), I hope to gain a closer insight into the context of children and the research question by interviewing selected adults and two children who are not directly affected by the war in Ukraine. I anonymized the names. I asked the two children about their superpower against Fake News. It attempts to apply the transformation from victim to active agent, as Judith Ennew envisioned the paradigm shift in childhood research (Beazley et al., 2014). Additionally, I aim to approach the idea of researching with children on an equal footing. However, this is never entirely possible (Markowska-Manista & Liebel, 2023), and to follow UNICEF's research recommendations to examine how Fake News affects children's well-being and which policies balance the protection of children and their participation (Dignum et al., 2021).

Research should not merely serve the purpose of research but should provide added value for those affected by the research – in this case, children concerning Fake News about the Ukraine War. Therefore, the aim is to highlight solutions that help children affected differently by Fake News in Germany. Hence, solutions for children who had to flee from Ukraine to Germany are also considered in my research. Taking a participatory research approach „(…) provides a space to see children as capable of acting, empowered to speak about their matters and to evaluate how they are treated and what is offered to them" (Markowska-Manista, 2024, p. 33).

As my research with children involves a different power dynamic between myself as an adult researcher and the interviewed children, the Lundy Participation Model (Lundy, 2007) forms the basis for this research. The Lundy model is divided into Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. Space represents a secure environment where children can express themselves. Voice signifies the opportunity for every child to participate, for example, through various forms of engagement, education about the content, and voluntary participation in research. The audience aims to ensure that the research reaches individuals who influence the respective topic being studied and that participating children are informed about the significance of the research. Influence indicates that children's contributions also influence the research and receive responses (Lundy, 2007).

Applied to this research, Space means that participants were informed in advance with Informed Consent and various response options about the study and their voluntary

participation. Voice, a voice, is given to the children through the analyzed studies and directly conducted interviews with the two children, reports from a Ukrainian mother, a researcher, and the search for children's voices on Fake News about the Ukraine War. The Audience includes my supervisors, the interview participants, and the readers of this article. The influence is given to the children because their voices, experiences, and opinions on fake news are at the forefront of this research. Ideally, the results influence the actions of decision-makers. "In order to decolonize knowledge and ways of knowing, the relations between knowledge and power must also be envisaged as the colonial structure frames these relations producing; as a result knowledge and research that is neither 'neutral' nor 'pure'. The solution is to integrate political, economic, and social aspects at all stages of research" (Markowska-Manista & Liebel, 2023, p. 29). This collective case study analyzes economic, political, and social structures and their connection to my research question to „contribute to policy interventions that lead to greater equality and social justice" (ibid., p. 30). The research also follows a child rights approach: the questions in my questionnaires are based on children's rights (rights-based approach) rather than solely on needs (needs-based approach) (Maywald, 2012). Experienced children's rights or violations of children's rights are queried, referring to how the respondents experience Fake News about the Ukraine War online and offline in their daily lives to analyze possible connections, challenges, and solutions that the participants themselves have.

RESULTS

Referring back to the research question: How and why do children experience Fake News about the Ukraine War, and what approaches arise from this? In this section, I present the study's results in two parts. The following are the first six categories of Fake News about the Ukraine War and the second research on why children receive this Fake News in the way they do, derived from my desk research and my interviewees through qualitative questionnaires and a semi-structured interview.

SIX CATEGORIES OF FAKE NEWS ABOUT THE WAR IN UKRAINE WHICH VIOLATES CHILDRE'S RIGHTS

1. Fake News that instrumentalists children for the Russian narrative Russia spreads various Fake News to justify the war in Ukraine, or it also disseminates them through influencers and bots (cf. Klug, 2023), including the Fake News that Nazis occupy Ukraine and needs to be liberated (Kraft, 2022). A video from a climate demonstration in Germany with members from the youth organization Fridays for Future laying in body bags was instrumentalized in claiming videos from the Ukraine with body bags were Fake and not dead (Wolf, 2022).

2. Fake News about the war events

Alleged scenes from the war events are shown, cut from other material, e.g., a video game. These videos can show flight fighters exploding in the sky. Paying good attention to the sound or unclear images, one can recognize that these videos are fake (Bait Media, 2023).

3. Fake News about Migration Policy on Social Networks

On TikTok, over a million people saw the false claim that job centers would remain closed for a day so that Ukraine refugees could collect a €250 bonus (Thom, 2023). CDU/CSU politician Friedrich Merz picked up a message on Telegram claiming that Ukrainians were commuting between Germany and Ukraine by Flixbus to receive social benefits. Merz further spread the claim, debunked as Fake News, using the term „social tourism" (Kordes & Straatmann, 2023). Several fake news reports spread on TikTok claiming that Ukrainian students would be admitted to university without a degree. Fact-checkers clarified that Syrians and Ukrainians require the exact prerequisites to access universities (Thust, 2023). Also, a form of Fake News appears through one-sighted reports about the more positive reception of refugees from Ukraine compared to refugees from other countries. My interviewee, a mother who had to flee from Ukraine with her two children, reports:

> We arrived in Germany on 31/05/2022. My children are Sofia (f), 10 years old, and Danylo (m), 5 years (…). No, nobody ever told me about the rights of my children. From other Ukrainians, I know about fines when my children didn't go to school and about money for kids from Familienkasse. That's all. (Interviewee Kristina, F1, Response to Question 3)

> At the start, the immigration office decided to separate us from our cousin. They wanted to send us far away from our relatives. My cousin wrote letters, called, and asked to change their opinion and give permission to stay near Dresden. Finally—they said, „okay," but it was a terrible time. (Interviewee Kristina, F1, Response to Question 10)

> The worst for Ukrainian mothers is to let their children go, even to school. There are many cases of violence by children or of other nationalities in relation to Ukraine. Russian influence is very noticeable. And when girls or boys are beaten at school because he or she is Ukrainian, it causes a feeling of constant anxiety. Unfortunately, such situations are repeated again and again. Personally, we receive threats in the mailbox, stickers with the Russian flag in the mail. Stickers on cars against Ukraine and our president. We do not live under bombs in Germany, but in constant fear. (Kristina, 2023, Questionnaire 1, Response to Question 12)

To avoid fake news, my interview participant from a family center supporting also Ukrainian refugees reports on the need for leisure activities and German courses for children who have fled from Ukraine to Germany:

Extracurricular activities in Ukrainian for children & teenagers (…)

More German lessons for children (the offering in schools is inadequate) (…) ,

Increased personnel needs in municipal facilities for 8…) a bilingual background

Increased need for people with a bilingual and trauma-sensitive background (…). (Interviewee Tatjana, F2, Responses to Questions 1 and 3)

4. Fake News as donation fraud on TikTok

These kind of Fake News appear: "(…) in the form of monetized stickers that can be converted into real money by the streaming person (…) The streams often show footage from a window, are shaky, and accompanied by sirens, gunshot sounds, calls for help, and cries or screams, including those of children (…) Sometimes macabre ,contests' are held, in which users donate stickers either for Ukraine or Russia, thus ,deciding' who wins the war" (Jugendschutz, 2022). Also, my interviewee Yoda, 11 years reported about Clickbaiting being a challenge for him and his peers, where they already lost money:

(…) in 2022, I was in a summer camp in the fall (...) They talked about it [Clickbaiting] there too and to be honest, it also happened a few times. (....) I think some fell victim to that. It happened to me once too (....) (Yoda, transcript, lines 28-46). "(…) Then I didn't feel like using TikTok anymore because I was completely overwhelmed by Fake News for some reason (…) I couldn't find a way out" (Yoda, 11 years old, 2023, Transcript, Line 181-202). „TikTok life is a place ,that feels like a fever dream. Kind of a weird thing in itself. Where strange figures beg for money. (Yoda, Transcript, Note under Line 29)

Kazuha, 13 years old, responds to my question about her superpower against fake news:

Don't watch any news. (Interviewee Kazuha, F4, Response to Question 6)

Media can amplify this since it uses clickbait for economic reasons to receive more clicks and risk misunderstanding and shortcomings of stories they report. "Financial pressure has, among other things, led to trends such as click baiting (…) If the expectation for these spectacular contents is not met and errors accumulate, this makes the reader doubt the reliability and truthfulness of the news offerings. (Klicksafe, 2021, p. 21)

Although children face challenges with fake news, they have ideas to combat fake new. My eleven-year-old interviewee, Yoda sees mutual education as a factor against fake news:

A: (…) As a superpower to inform other children, you mentioned clickbait, and your experience with thumbnails. Yoda: Yes. (…) I would have warned them.

They should think logically. (…) It could all be faked, for example. You can't tell. You can't avoid it. (…) Maybe ask someone who has experience with it, and then you can pass it on to your friend. (Transcript, Lines 72-102)

Elementary school student Matti has the idea of introducing a speak-up subject:

(…) Because there are children who watch TikTok. In my class, there are a lot— and also Instagram. And there is also fake news. In this lesson, children could ask, Is that true? Is that correct? (Vodafone Stiftung, Dec. 2022, p. 59-60)

5. Fake News from human traffickers on online platforms

Searches for abuse have increased by up to 600% since the Ukraine War (OEZD, 2023). Less than 1% of offenders are identified (cf. ibid.). The German Child Protection Association points out in its position paper on cyber-grooming that digital violence deprives users of the right to information and freedom of expression since victims withdraw from the network instead of seeking help (Kinderschutzbund, 2023).

6. Fake news received by Russian media consumption

The Amadeu Antonio Foundation describes how Russian propaganda still finds its way through Media (Amadeu Antonio Stifung, 2022) which is also reported my interviewee Ana, a Ukrainian researcher, reports: For example, some of them [Ukrainian refugees] could continue to watch Russia's propaganda channels even if they are Ukrainian war refugees. (Ana, F3, Response to Question 1).

The above categories of fake news enlighten that there is not one childhood but different childhoods (James & James, 2012). While all children with internet access might see fake news from video games instead of real scenes from the Ukraine war and therefore already in sum came to get violated their right to protection from media that might impair their well-being (UNICEF, 1989), they also experience fake news divers. Children not affected by the war directly trying to support Ukraine with money can get hatched by donation frauds. Children affected by the war living now in Germany face the danger of human traffickers online and being exposed to violence in school from fake news concerning the alleged better treatment of refugees from Ukraine. This possible fake news violates Article 22, the children's rights of refugee children (UNICEF, 1989). They also can experience fake news from the media through their Ukrainian moms watching Russian media or through their TikTok Channels from consuming revenue-dependent media providers using Clickbait or private users that spread fake news, not knowing it is fake news. It further shows that children, while experiencing limitations of competencies with fake news, choose active agency (James, 2009), albeit it is to withdraw from their right to information and participation, Art. 13 and 12 (UNICEF, 1989) by not accessing their phones or news anymore. Besides both children's experience with fake news and the decision to withdraw, they have ideas to combat fake news. As authors of the new view on Childhood studies point out (Liebel, 2014) children have capacities and capabil-

ities that they can and would like to apply with the support of adults.

Why do children experience fake news in the presented manner?

After presenting the results on how children experience fake news about the Ukraine War and which fake news affects children, the question is now addressed as to why children are affected by the presented fake news.

CATEGORIES OF CHALLENGES IN CHILDREN'S FAKE NEWS EXPERIENCES

Educational PolicyDragging Digital Schooling & Integration in Education

The longstanding exclusion of digital technology in classrooms makes it difficult to comply with the UN Child Right to Education, Article 28, and General Comment 25. Over one-third of young people aged 14-24 are unsure about identifying disinformation, especially those with lower educational backgrounds (Vodafone Stiftung, 2020). Thus, they unwittingly promote the spread of fake news, thereby endangering democracy. As early as 2018, three-quarters of students responded that they wished for more class education on recognizing and combating fake news (Vodafone, 2018).

Further, schools lack promised financial resources and more teaching staff to provide the capacity for integrating Ukrainian children (Himmelrath, 2023, Tausche, 2023). In an interview, 11-year-old Yoda talks about the lack of integration of Ukrainian children:

> A: (…) Do you talk about the children from Ukraine who have come here to school? Y: Somehow, no one does it (…). His sister Kazuha doesn't know if Ukrainian children are even at her school: „Yes, or maybe not anymore" (Kazuha, F4, Response to Question 1).

This shows that with their living situation, children lack their right to education, information, and participation (UNICEF, 1989). Children want to contribute to approaching fake news, but their voices are silenced. Here, the problem of speaking for others appears (Alcoff, 1992). There is no structure to listen and implement their contributions because others are speaking for them, in this case, educators

2. Economic and AI Policy - Data Economy on Children's (Rights) Costs

The economy lacks a children's rights approach to policies. Currently, EU policies are too closely aligned with economic interests (Dachwitz, 2022). Facebook prioritizes hate and fake news for profit reasons, violating the UN CRC-Article 2, protection from discrimination. Because excited users stay online longer (ibid, Min. 40). Social platforms earn money for every minute users spend on their networks: Facebook earns about €200 per user per year, TikTok €66, Twitter €54, and Youtube €29 (Ceccio, 2022). The platforms currently set the algorithms and metrics against which they measure themselves according to their specifications (DisinfoLab, 2022), which not only disadvantages minorities

but also the climate (Sustain, 2020). The DSA is weakly formulated regarding deceptive design, transparency in online advertising, and reporting procedures for illegal content, especially concerning live experiences in the metaverse, which cannot be reported as quickly as a post with a link afterward (Jaursch, 2022). Suppose social media platforms receive more financial pressure from companies and children's rights-compliant policies. In that case, they are likely to strive for better guidelines not only because of sanctions but also due to economic losses. NGOs can file class-action lawsuits for (un)classified fake news to involve courts (Dachwitz, 2022). Law enforcement agencies need to be sensitized that fake news constitutes a form of violence (cf. ibid) and thus violates Article 19 of the CRC.

Euro-Child points out that Children must not be exploited through data profiling, especially with emerging AI systems, and higher risk assessments must take place (Euro-Child, 2023) to preserve CRC Article 16, the right to privacy. Violations must be easy to report, prosecute, and suspend (Dachwitz, 2022). So far, efforts are missing to ensure that especially children do not receive violent or fraudulent war videos for economic or private interests, as in the case of my interviewee Yoda with the donation fraud. The CRC Article 12, participation, and Article 13, the right to information, and thus democracy is violated, and children withdraw instead of participating.

The lack of a children's rights-based approach in economic policies shows that although over 40 years ago the academic shift from viewing children as immature objects to subjective actors, as well as the nearly united ratified UN-Childrens Rights Convention, children are still not taken seriously into account. As Mayall pointed out, „In the first place, childhood is a political issue (…) in defining children as inferior, as objects essentially of adult socialisation – we depersonalise children. In proposing that we know best the best interests of the child, we deny children's rights. We deny children the right to participate in structuring their childhoods" (Mayall, 2000, pp. 244-245).

3. Asylum Policy follows Charity-instead of Rights-based Approaches

Asylum and migration policies lack a children's rights approach and do not act in the best interests of children (UNCRC, 1989, Art. 3) by differential treatment based on origin, which also violates CRC Art. 2, thereby forcing further societal division, as evidenced by fake news about the alleged benefits of refugees from Ukraine. Additionally, the needs of children are not assessed to create child-friendly solutions.

It is particularly noteworthy to revise the current practice for distributing arriving people from Ukraine (and all nationalities) as it poses a greater risk for children and their mothers to fall victim to fake news from human traffickers. The CRC states in Article 35 that states need to ensure measurements against child trafficking (UNICEF, 1989). Therefore, the relocation rule should also apply to places where relatives, acquaintances, and friends live or where job opportunities arise. At the moment, Asylum policies are implemented in an attempt to omit children's Rights, using its power imbalance over children, named

adultism (Liebel & Meade, 2023).

4. Media prioritize Profit over Children's Rights

Media often depends on advertisement revenue by using also clickbait and spreading fake news. Required financial alternatives, such as funding media-News through tax revenue (Faßler, 2018), are missing in most media providers. A children's rights approach that could report more on contexts—including which children's rights have been achieved or not regarding the Ukraine war is missing. Although the CRC states the duty to inform society about children's rights and let children participate, there is a lack of integration in showing how children contribute (want to) and report on their everyday lives, letting them speak for themselves. Migration researcher Ana identifies as a challenge that 80% of people fleeing from Ukraine speak Russian (cf. Ana, F3, response to question 6). This shows the power of telling a story to weaken or empower people; in this case, children suffer from being weakened (Adichie, 2009).

DISCUSSION

The opening quote among the results, which suggests that children are not inherently weak but are made weak through social practices (Woodhead, Montgomery, & Burr, 2003), the analysis of the results regarding the challenges and solutions for strengthening children's rights against fake news regarding the Ukraine War reveals two key aspects: The need of child rights approaches including children's participation, also political and the need of using ethical AI to strengthen children's rights.

Demanding children's rights approaches and children's political participation

The lack of participation of children and youth is missed by focusing on media literacy in the fake news debates and research. The results show that children experience fake news about the Ukraine War differently. The children's rights-based approaches posed at the beginning are applied here to highlight the challenges and solutions for strengthening children's rights against fake news to save democracy, analyzed by fake news about the Ukraine War.

Intersectionality approach shows silenced voices

Children fleeing from Ukraine become children out of place, experiencing discrimination on two levels. Firstly, by favoring economic rather than child rights-oriented algorithms, fake news in timelines promotes refugees of other origins against them, such as through fake news about alleged preferential access to education or extra social benefits. This could be a reason why Ukrainian children experience violence in schools, as reported by Kristina, a Ukrainian mother who had to flee Ukraine (cf. Kristina, response to question 12). Also, the predominant influence of Russian propaganda on the population should not be underestimated (cf. ibid.). Secondly, othering also applies to refugees

from Ukraine, such as Ukrainian children experiencing violence in German schools but not being heard, as media reports focus on political actors and the widespread support for Ukrainians. Providing multilingual media in Germany could prevent filter bubbles and counteract the widespread consumption of Russian state media (Amadeu Antonio Foundation, 2022), including from the Russian-speaking community, since this would represent an alternative to Russian state media.

If the media adopted a children's rights approach and let children speak for themselves about their challenges and ideas, as well as how they want to contribute, rather than just portraying them as needy victims, othering and the resulting dehumanization could be prevented. This could also promote children's interest in news. Likewise, fake news in the form of a dehumanized view of „social tourism," resulting from a charity approach, could be countered, which currently leads to violence and violations of children's rights. Children are part of society and have a right to participate (CRC, Art. 12). Asking for their perspectives helps to implement and secure children's rights and promote democracy.

However, the basis for the spread of social tourism fake news lies not only in the economic interests of platforms, media providers, and Russian propaganda but also in the current asylum policy, which found much faster support for refugees from Ukraine than for those of Arab origin, thereby favoring the spread of fake news about further unequal treatment of asylum seekers.

Silenced are also voices of children in surveys on fake news Questionnaires without the option for them to report about forms of fake news they experienced themselves. Children under the age of 13, like my interviewee Yoda (11) are silenced who might not report fake news because of being aware they should not use the platform under 13 years. Children over 13, legally on these platforms are also silenced by complicated reporting processes, like on TikTok, leading them to abandon their complaints or, if submitted, often receive no response. Children entering Germany without registration due to German asylum policy can quickly become targets for human traffickers if they seek shelter in hiding at short notice.

The new view of Children as active actors lacks implementation in daily life

As Liebel (2017) pointed out, the participation of children nowadays is regimented only in matters of Play and human capital, which is also reflected in this research. Children are not integrated as active agents in educational or economic policies or media when dealing with fake news. Despite existing solutions on how to protect and empower children against fake news, which have been mentioned even before existing policies, these are again not implemented. This is compounded by the possible failure to comply with promised financial resources for the education pact and the lack of attention to the problem of teacher shortages in the Startchancen program. The school system needs to be reconsidered since informed citizens, crucial for democracy, are best protected and

strengthened by education before crises occur. Fake news and AI should be included in school curricula from elementary school onwards, as children are already thinking or being confronted about fake news. Just like children, educators need training, too. The DSA is designed from an economic rather than a human rights or children's rights perspective. A children's rights approach could prevent children from being disadvantaged in measures against fake news, thus violating their UN Child Right, Art. 2, protection from discrimination. Given their strong negotiating position, EU policies must take on a leadership role in this regard, as they can also exert pressure on social platforms. Companies and organizations need education about the platforms' algorithms and children's rights-oriented policies to whom they assign contracts for marketing purposes, making it difficult for platforms to implement something contrary. Laws are needed to require platforms to program their algorithms and AI first from human rights and children's rights perspectives and to prevent human trafficking.

A demand for strengthening children's right

From the argumentation listed, the CRC should be incorporated into the Basic Law so that our social order systems include children in their thinking. The CRC should expand Article 12 to include the political participation of children. The current right to participation without political participation appears insufficient. Instead, it is exploited, allowing companies to use AI on TikTok with algorithms programmed for hate and incitement. These promote fake news and propaganda to maximize scrolling time on TikTok, sell more advertising, and thus make more profit. It also allows children to be made into guinea pigs for a fake news-prone AI (chat) experiment, the outcome of which we do not know - but the test subjects themselves, the children, do not even have a say in it. Children have no lobby, so they should at least be able to vote themselves.

The results support the resilience approach in the form of collective resistance

The argument that resilience in the form of resistance should be understood and applied as a response to crises (Liebel, 2022) is strengthened by the example of primary school student Matti proposing a speech lesson as a subject, my primary school student interviewee Yoda's idea of telling other children about his experiences with fake news, and the needs for leisure activities with like-minded people, as reported from my interviewees by Ukrainian mothers for their children. It confirms that children seek a community of children and adults to cope with crises. Instead of being exposed to fake news alone, which children can be with media literacy online, collective resistance offers a solution to deal with the crisis of fake news about the Ukraine War together as active actors in the group and to take action against fake news. NGOs could play an active and important role, especially children's (rights) NGOs, in educating children about fake news in their programs. Therefore, they need knowledge about fake news, algorithms, AI, and how to file class-action lawsuits for (un)classified fake news to involve courts. This should be encouraged and supported. Perhaps this even offers a chance to end the war in Ukraine if,

instead of fake news, children engage with adults about their different perspectives and daily lives, thus countering dehumanization and societal division. So far, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is not listed in the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG), the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Strengthening Code of Practice on Disinformation, or the AI Act. This should change to strengthen children's rights.

Call for using AI to strengthen children's rights against fake new

Nowadays, children spend more time in places reserved for adults than in the past, especially in electronic communication technologies (Liebel, 2017). The identified dangers for children resulting from fake news about the Ukraine War in the form of violent, discriminatory, and fraudulent experiences online highlight the importance of a children's rights approach for programming algorithms and AI - whether for social media platforms or the metaverse. To recall: Yoda describes his TikTok experience as a nightmare. Based on the presented results on challenges and solutions, the following areas of AI application emerge to empower children's rights against fake news about the Ukraine War and respect General Comment no 25 on Children's rights (UN-Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, pp. 2-4).

Areas of AI application to empower children's rights against fake news about the war in Ukraine

AI can be a great help in making the online and offline world more friendly to children's rights, protecting them from fake news, and empowering them by being set up not only automatically but according to a human and children's rights approach with adults and children, and with small datasets to save energy.

AI respects children's rights to privacy, participation, and protection from violence AI must not use personal and copyrighted information without permission and must actively ensure that unexpected violations do not occur. AI could quickly, easily, and comprehensibly process the wealth of information collected so that children (with their parents) can easily set their privacy settings.

AI that diverts attention from fake news instead of rewarding it with reach AI should assist in creating algorithms that detect and punish fake news in various languages instead of rewarding them with more reach.

AI on platforms to disseminate every day reports from children AI should be used to set up algorithms that reward every day reports from children on the topic of the Ukraine War so that their various life realities also reach a targeted audience and thus prevent fake news.

AI for the creation of educational formats

Training students, parents, teachers, and political decision-makers on digital developments and fake news - thanks to AI adapted to different needs and formats for the target

groups.

Expansion of AI to recognize social bots

AI should be used to address fake news originating from social bots.

AI for surveys and participation formats for children

Studies on fake news from age 6 adapted to current situations and for different age groups.

Using AI to identify content harmful to minors on platforms like TikTok

Platform operators, instead of victims, should be held accountable if they play fake news or other harmful content to children and adolescents.

However, AI alone cannot strengthen children's rights. Policies must also consider quality standards and independent audits by which companies, media providers, and governments can be better measured. Instead of pure AI automation, people who regularly observe, evaluate, and adapt how deployed AI can be optimized are needed.

My hypothesis that children become victims of fake news because of the romanticized image of childhood that is still attached to them instead of allowing children to participate as active democratic actors is reflected by the presented results of the analyzed challenges and solutions to strengthen children against fake news. Children need participation to overcome adultism (Liebel & Meade, 2023). On the one hand, through child-rights-based policies in politics and media, and on the other hand, through their implementation in everyday life. Further research is necessary on how AI can be set up for children not only in the educational sector but in all areas so that it can act in the child's best interests, according to UNCRC-Article 3. Since higher education supports recognizing fake news, form(s) of schooling that could replace the German (three-tiered) school system should be further researched to implement children's educational rights better. It should also be analyzed if social networks retroactively have to or should have to pay compensation for the use of algorithms harmful to children's rights. Last but not least, researching ways to support NGOs, especially those advocating for children's rights, to strengthen themselves, their audience, and especially the children in their projects against fake news content.

CONCLUSION

This research presents that children in Germany receive fake news about the war in Ukraine in a variety of different ways, for their childhoods in Germany differ from their context. It further illustrates, through examples, how the Western view on children and childhood violates Children´s Rights in terms of fake news, including measurements against fake news. The aim is to strengthen children's rights against fake news to reinforce democracy. To address this, I conducted online research to gather insights from scholars,

politicians, experts from organizations, and children. Subsequently, I approached two children and three adults through qualitative questionnaires and one semi-structured phone interview to inquire about their experience and knowledge. The fake news varies from the misuse of videos with children to spread lies about Ukraine, Ukraine donation requests from scammers, fake news about the privileged treatment of Ukrainian refugees, and video games instead of reality. EU policies attempting to curb fake news lack a children's rights approach, making them economically rather than child-friendly. Platforms like Facebook and TikTok have programmed their algorithms to show more hate speech and incitement for economic reasons. This also leads to more fake news being shown and spread.

AI used this way is harmful, compromising privacy. Fake news is a type of digital violence and needs to be easy to report. To strengthen children('s rights) in Germany against fake news about the Ukraine War, education about fake news should start in primary school with own contributions from the pupils to enlighten the variety of received fake news, depending on their context. Children from Ukraine should be included in the regular classes for better integration. Money must be provided for its achievements. Migration policies should be adjusted so that refugees in Germany can be placed near family, friends, or job opportunities, or they might be taken in Fake News online from human and child traffickers. Children and parents from Ukraine in Germany also need more activities and information on children's rights. Artificial intelligence should be used to help empower children to recognize and combat fake news. Media should avoid relying on advertising revenue, as it contributes to the spread of fake news. Further, the media should increase education about UN Children's Rights and conduct more interviews with children and report on their daily lives to reduce the spread of fake news and improve children's interest in news, best in multiple languages to lower fake news passed on to children by Ukrainian mothers who watch fake news on media in Russian language. This would support empowering children instead of their victimization and show children in their experienced childhoods as rights holders.

Children want to participate in their challenges and approaches. According to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights, Children have a right to participate. Still, their voices are often silenced. Although solutions against fake news - even by children have been presented for years, they remain unimplemented. Fostering Children's participation through a children's rights-based approach and political involvement can strengthen children's against fake news and reinforce democracy. Further participatory action research with children in the form of workshop processes might support the development of the given research findings. "Conversations with children, questions, and discussions are the key to many solutions that many adults are still unable to discover because it is "difficult knowledge" that is still "untamed" by them" (Markowska-Manista, 2023, p. 240).

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