

The contents, actors and interests behind fake news. An analysis of hoaxes verified in Spain and Colombia¹

Los contenidos, los actores y los intereses detrás de las noticias falsas. Un análisis de los bulos verificados en España y Colombia

Os conteúdos, atores e interesses por trás das notícias falsas. Uma análise das fraudes verificadas na Espanha e na Colômbia

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This research analyzes the content of 416 fake news items identified during the first half of 2021 by Maldita.es and Newtral.es, from Spain, and Colombiacheck and La Silla Vacía, from Colombia. The results show that the majority of the authors of fake news are anonymous, and that this especially harms the current governments and other public officials. The interests of the promoting actors are political-governmental, political-institutional and reputational. The study also asked about the topics, formats and distribution channels of fake news.

KEYWORDS: Misinformation, interests, fake news, political, actors.

Esta investigación analiza el contenido de 416 noticias falsas identificadas durante el primer semestre de 2021 por Maldita.es y Newtral.es, de España, y Colombiacheck y La Silla Vacía, de Colombia. Los resultados muestran que la mayoría de los autores de las noticias falsas son anónimos y que esta perjudica especialmente a los gobiernos en turno y a otros funcionarios públicos. Los intereses de los actores promotores son político-gubernamentales, político-institucionales y reputacionales. El estudio también da cuenta de las temáticas, formatos y canales de distribución de las noticias falsas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Desinformación, intereses, noticias falsas, política, actores.

Esta pesquisa analisa o conteúdo de 416 notícias falsas identificadas durante o primeiro semestre de 2021 por Maldita.es e Newtral.es, da Espanha, e Colombiacheck e La Silla Vacía, da Colômbia. Os resultados mostram que a maioria dos autores das notícias falsas são anônimos e que isso prejudica especialmente os governos da época e outros funcionários públicos. Os interesses dos atores promotores são político-governamentais, político-institucionais e reputacionais. O estudo também dá conta dos temas, formatos e canais de distribuição das notícias falsas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Desinformação, interesses, notícias falsas, política, atores.

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INTRODUCTION

Disinformation, specifically fake news, constitutes a risk for democracy and for the value of truth in order to understand facts at the global level (McIntyre, 2018). As several pieces of research have attested, the massive spread of fake news and their accelerated diffusion can have effects on the perception, the attitudes, and the behavior of citizens thereby affecting the functioning of the political (Lee, 2020) and economic (Lutz & Padilla, 2012; Kogan et. al., 2021) systems, as well as any other domain of social life.

This research pretends, within the extensive range of studies on the phenomenon of disinformation and unlike other approaches, to amplify the typology of those who promote or are affected by fake news, as well as the type of interests or motivations that stimulate different actors to spread false contents. This will enable an improvement in the understanding of informative disorders (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018) in order to ground more accurate alternatives to counter this phenomenon.

The analysis of the aforementioned aspects was made regarding the spreading of fake news in two countries in Ibero America: Spain and Colombia. Both countries suffer from deep political and social division. The former faces the emergence of new movements, such as Unidas Podemos and Vox, located at the extreme ends of the ideological spectrum and struggling for power against the traditional parties (PP and PSOE); there is also an increasing social polarization leading to hate speeches in the framework of the tensions that the Mediterranean countries are currently going through (Castillo-de-Mesa et. al. 2021). On the other hand, in Colombia the internal armed conflict persists in spite of the Peace Treaty reached in 2016 between the National Government and the extinct FARC guerrillas. The Treaty has caused deep divisions between different political groups that still endure. In such conflicting contexts the spreading of fake news has damaging effects for democracy because, as academic research shows, they fuel the polarization between groups of public opinion thereby increasing radicalization and political extremism (Johnson, 2018) and eroding democracy itself (Tucker et. al., 2018).

Within this social and political environment, citizens in both countries are also exposed to social media. The consolidation of such exposition is critical if it is taken into account that most pieces of disinformation are spread online and, concretely, in social media (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Blanco-Herrero & Arcila-Calderón, 2019). According to We are Social and Hootsuite, Spaniards spend almost two hours daily in virtual media, whereas Colombians do it for three hours and forty five minutes, which makes them the second country whose citizens spend most time on such platforms - only behind the Philippines (Kemp, 2021).

In what follows, an approach to the state of the research on fake news is presented, as well as a definition of the conceptual and theoretical focus of this study. Secondly, a description of the methodological approach and the process carried out in the analysis of the content of 416 pieces of fake news identified by some of the main fact-checkers is shown. Thirdly, the main results of the analysis are presented. Finally, some considerations about the reach of the obtained results and their importance, and about the need for going deeper into this field of study are proposed.

ON FAKE NEWS AND OTHER VARIETIES

Informational disorder/noise in the current public ecosystem is associated, among other things, to three phenomena. Firstly, the misinformation or that kind of fake content that is shared with no intention of doing any harm. Secondly, the disinformation, namely the fake content deliberately created to cause harm to a person or an organization. And, thirdly, the malinformation that has true content but is used with the purpose of causing damage (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018).

Within the disinformation that seeks to deceive and harm, one can find popular fake news (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018). Some by-products and examples of the former are satire or parody, fake connections, and deceiving content; regarding the latter, the examples are fake context, deceptive, manipulated and manufactured contents (Wardle, 2017). On the other hand, there is malicious information expressed in filtrations, harassment acts, or

hate speeches. Irrespective of the conceptual and epistemic debate, throughout this text the terms fake news, hoaxes, and fake contents are used interchangeably to describe the same phenomenon, namely the production, distribution, and broadcasting of fake information with no factual base through any medium, intending to deceive their audience by imitating the form or the structure of (real) news (Salaverría et al., 2020; Tandoc et al., 2018).

Although the growth of informational disorder is unconventional, the existence and replication of fake news is not unknown and much less exclusive of this century (Lomeli Ponce, 2019; Waisbord, 2018). The novelty of these times can be found in the celerity and massiveness with which fake news is distributed and consumed in the current digital environment (Vafeiadis & Xiao, 2021; Waisbord, 2018), where lies can be echoed in the infinite offer of communication channels, websites, emails, and, especially, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp (Aguado-Guadalupe & Bernaola-Serrano, 2020; Al-Zaman, 2021; Atehortua & Patino, 2021).

The crisis of truth is, ultimately, a trust crisis. Citizens do not perceive many institutions, particularly journalism, as they did before, that is, as legitimate sources of information (Sánchez-de-la-Nieta & Fuente-Cobo, 2020). The most recent work of Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2021a) informed that trust in religious and political leaders, in journalists, and even in scientists had fallen between two and five percentage points. The state of trustability in journalists is only 45% in contrast with 73% for scientists. More than a half of the surveyed respondents (59%) think that journalists lie to people by communicating fake or exaggerated events.

There is a global concern for disinformation. Nevertheless, this research focuses on the situation of fake news in Spain and Colombia. Regarding the European country, the most recent account of Reuters Institute points out that 67% of the surveyed respondents are reportedly concerned about the spreading of hoaxes, a “percentage slightly higher than that of previous years and one of the highest among the analyzed countries (46), whose average is around 58%” (Amoedo et al., 2021, para. 40); furthermore, 50% of people are especially worried

about the spreading of fake news through social media and instant messaging apps. On the other hand, in the South American country, according to Edelman's report (2021b), 73% of respondents considers that "journalists and reporters attempt to deceive people on purpose, knowingly saying false things or clamorous exaggerations" (p. 21), and 72% of them think that news organizations are biased towards ideological or political interests.

ACTORS AND THEIR INTERESTS

Discussion about fake news usually leads to the fact that they are intentionally manufactured. They are multiple and come from various groups who are the actors interested in lying. For those surveyed by the Reuters Institute, people who bring fake or wrong content about are politicians (40%); activists (14%); journalists (13%); commoners (10%); and foreign governments (10%) (Newman et al., 2020).

According to the literature, the first actors in the list of those who promote false information are political parties, movements or leaders. These are people interested in manipulating electors or public opinion in order to attain, keep, or extend their political power (Lutz & Padilla, 2012). Secondly, companies or natural persons are mentioned among the economic actors who promote the consumption of their products (Tandoc et al., 2018), by means of misleading advertising or by promising false profit. Thirdly, there are common people or audiences who, thanks to the advantages offered by the web 2.0., create or replicate contents echoing information that coincide with their beliefs and preexisting actions -that is what is known as cognitive biases-, regardless of whether there is a sensible ground in facts for that (Chadwick et al., 2018; Pascual, 2020; Rossini et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2019). According to Vosoughi et al. (2018), people spread a similar number of fake news as robots. Fourthly, journalists and mass media are also included in the list; some of them resort to practices such as clickbait, that distort a report by giving it an exaggerated or inaccurate title with the purpose of attracting the users and make them open the content, which means an increase in web traffic and, consequently, a higher income for

publicity purposes (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Gutiérrez-Coba et al., 2020; Posetti, 2018). The latter are also singled out because, since they do not verify their direct (primary) sources for the information that circulates around the web, they fall in the trap of reproducing inaccuracies or lies.

Different experts on the subject (Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, 2018) identify in fake news the intention of deceiving in order to obtain an ideological, political, economic, or social benefit.

With respect to the ideological intention, the reports from Freedom House have warned about the way in which the governments around the globe are increasingly spending more resources to spy on online conversations (Kelly et al., 2017). Different pieces of research have singled out the spreading of hoaxes and rumors as a (systematic) political strategy used by the government in Russia, China, England, and the United States (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018). Regarding the financial motivations, Kalsnes (2018) points out that “there are various prior cases going from teenagers in Macedonia, emerging companies in the Philippines, a 38 year old man from Arizona, and armies of Russian trolls, just to mention some cases” (p. 9). In the list of pretended social benefits there are the search for recognition and the establishment of status (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), which are biological demands for human beings, as well as the desire to fit in some social group (Kalsnes, 2018) at the expense of reproducing fake content.

Studies such as those of Gutiérrez et al. (2020) have addressed the issue in detail in order to identify the motivations behind hoaxes. For example, there are criminal actions (fake news that promise profit for low investment rates aimed at stealing financial and private information) and the destabilization or promotion of panic among citizens (disheartening misinformation that creates uncertainty). Other studies have identified more purposes such as exciting passions and provoking instinctive reactions (Wardle, 2017), defamation against some person’s image, deviation of people’s attention towards trivial issues and entertainment (Narwal, 2018).

DATA AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to characterize fake news spread in Spain and Colombia during the first semester of 2021, as well as to delve into the actors who promote fake news and into those who are affected by them, along with the motivations to spread the various hoaxes. With that end in mind, the following research questions were raised:

- Q1. What are the main multimedia formats used in the manufacturing and spreading of Fake News?
- Q2. What are the main media channels used to spread Fake News?
- Q3. What are these false pieces of information identified and checked by Spaniard and Colombian websites about?
- Q4. Who are the actors who promote false information and who are those who are affected by it?
- Q5. What are the motivations or purposes of the actors who generate and promote false information?
- Q6. Are there any statistical associations between the actors promoting fake news and the motivations they have had to spread false information?

The analyzed units were the hoaxes fact-checked by four media specialized in this work. Hoaxes were taken from Maldita.es and Newtral.es, from Spain, and La Silla Vacía and Colombiacheck, from Colombia; these are some of the main fact-checking media in Ibero America (Rodríguez Pérez, 2020), belonging to the International Factual Checking Network (IFCN) created in 2015 by the American Institute Poynter (2021).

The content of the fact-checked hoaxes was scrutinized by a technique of content analysis that enabled systematic and objective inferences of communication that begin with the features of textual registries by using quantitative procedures (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009; Neuendorf, 2016). In the first stage, all cross-checked hoaxes from the aforementioned media published during the first semester of 2021 - from January the 1st to June 30th - were collected, leaving out hoaxes related to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to avoid informational

biases that characterized that global event and to delve into the description of other topics. According to this criterion, a total universe of $N = 796$ fact-checked hoaxes was collected from Colombiacheck (112), La Silla Vacía (73), Maldita.es (485), and Newtral.es (126). Given the number of fact-checked hoaxes by Maldita.es (60.9% of the total number of hoaxes), a random representative sample of $N = 105$ hoaxes from this medium (21.6%) was taken in order to avoid a mismeasure that led to biases in the analysis, taking into account the average of fact-checked hoaxes by the other media ($M = 103.7$), in order to construct a total sample of $N = 416$ analyzed fact-checked hoaxes, which represents a 52.3% of the total universe ($N = 796$) with an error margin of 3.3% and a trust interval of 95%. It is possible that, in some cases, two fact-checking websites verified the same event: researchers did not rule out these verifications in spite of their information being repeated.

The book of codes was elaborated by taking into consideration previous literature (Aguado-Guadalupe & Bernaola-Serrano, 2020; Al-Zaman, 2020; Baptista & Gradim, 2020; Gutiérrez-Coba et al., 2020; Kalsnes, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2021; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018; Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020) and by adding or increasing the categories that the authors deemed relevant. The book therefore included four nominal polychotomous variables:

- a. Subject matter of the fact-checked information ($\alpha_k = 0.87$): 1 = government/politics; 2 = crime/terrorism/public order; 3 = science/health/tech; 4 = sports/entertainment/culture; 5 = accidents/disasters; 6 = economy/business; 7 = religion; 8 = environment; 9 = law; or 10 = other.
- b. Actor that promotes false information ($\alpha_k = 0.91$): 1 = government in charge; 2 = other public servants; 3 = political parties members; 4 = entrepreneurs; 5 = activists; 6 = journalists or media; 7 = influencers; 8 = commoners; 9 = anonymous; 10 = public relations companies; 11 = minorities; or 12 = others.
- c. Actor that is affected by false information ($\alpha_k = 0.92$): 1 = government in charge; 2 = other public servant; 3 = political parties members; 4 = entrepreneurs; 5 = activists; 6 = journalists or media;

7 = influencers; 8 = commoners; 9 = unidentified; 10 = public relations companies; 11 = minorities; or 12 = others.

- d. Type of motivation ($\alpha k = 0.94$): 1 = economic revenue; 2 = political-governmental; 3 = political-partisan; 4 = political-institutional; 5 = ideological; 6 = clickbait; 7 = computer fraud; 8 = disruption or creation of panic; 9 = entertainment; or 10 = reputation.⁴

Additionally, nominal dichotomous variables were included (0 = No or 1 = Yes) in order to identify the format of the hoaxes such as text ($\alpha k = 0.88$), audio ($\alpha k = 1$); video ($\alpha k = 1$); or image ($\alpha k = 0.84$), as well as the kind of broadcasting channel, including Facebook ($\alpha k = 0.82$), Twitter ($\alpha k = 0.81$); Instagram ($\alpha k = 1$); TikTok ($\alpha k = 1$); WhatsApp ($\alpha k = 0.84$); email ($\alpha k = 1$); SMS ($\alpha k = 0.85$); journalist websites ($\alpha k = 0.89$); other websites ($\alpha k = 0.88$); other channels different from the aforementioned ($\alpha k = 1$) or unknown ($\alpha k = 0.89$). Moreover, all variables correspond to the name of the medium, the headline of the fact-checked hoax, the link to the website of the medium and the date of verification.

A team of four codifiers was put together in order to collect data

⁴ As mentioned before, one of the contributions of this research is to widen conceptually the variable “type of motivation”. Indicators were thus defined: economic revenue = to sell or to promote a product or a company; political-governmental = to support or discredit a political leader or a political party or collectivity; political-institutional = to support or discredit institutions of public power different from the government; ideological = to support or discredit an idea, thought or belief about a determined topic before public opinion; clickbait = simplifying, exaggeration, or decontextualization of the facts presented in order to gain attention and clicks; computer fraud = through persuasive tactics, they want to access financial private information or they promise alleged short-term revenues with minimal investment in order to rob people; disruption or creation of panic = to upset or produce uncertainty in the audience by leaving discouraging messages; entertainment = use of humor or satire about some issue, object, individual or group of any nature; reputation = to support or discredit the brand, reputation, and the good name of a natural or legal person.

and to carry out the process of codification; they made the proof of fidelity from a random subsample of 10% of the total cases, by using as statistic method the Krippendorff's alpha through the "macro Kalpha" (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007) for SPSS 26th edition. In order to reach an adequate level of trust among codifiers, two tests were made, adjusting the definitions of the codifying book, particularly the conceptualizations associated to the categories of the format (image, text, video, etc.). The trust reached for the total variables, indicated besides the presentation of each one of them in the previous sections can be found among the accepted parameters for this kind of tests. For the process of analysis, an exercise of descriptive statistics and some tests of inferential statistics are proposed, taking into account the categorical nature of the studied variables.

RESULTS

The first research question inquired about the formats used to manufacture and broadcast fake news. It must be taken into account that the same article or deceiving piece of communication can use one or many communication codes at the same time. Having established this, 54.6% of fact-checked cases by Colombian and Spanish websites used text to misinform; 31% used images; 2.6% used video; and 2.2% used audio. When reviewing the data by country, there are two things worth remarking: first, the use of text in fake news was more established in Spain (63.2%) than in Colombia (43.7%); second, the contrary occurs with images: its use was more extended in the Latin American country (38.9%) than in the European nation (24.7%). These data are corroborated when a significant association between the country and the format variable is found (χ^2 (N = 416) = 40.978, $p < .01$). A remarkable association was also found between the kind of format and the distribution channels such as Facebook (χ^2 (N = 416) = 34.266, $p < .01$), Twitter (χ^2 (N = 416) = 15.367, $p < .05$), and WhatsApp (χ^2 (N = 416) = 31.700, $p < .01$). In the case of Facebook, most of the shared Fake News in this channel are in image format (43.6%), whereas in Twitter and WhatsApp the text format was predominant (67.5% y 60%, respectively).

The second question inquired about the channels used to broadcast Fake News. Again, in this case, a content can be published on more than one platform at the same time. In this respect, the results reveal that the most used channels were Facebook (39.7%), Twitter (28.8%), WhatsApp (10.8%) and other websites not related to journalism (7.5%). Official news websites have a low percentage of participation (3.8%), email and text messaging (each with 2.4%), Instagram (1.4%) and TikTok (0.2%). It was not possible to identify the broadcasting channel for fake news in at least 22.6% of the cases. The results of each country show some particularities: in Colombia, according to analyzed fact-checkers, 73.9% of fake news was spread on Facebook and 38.6% on Twitter. In Spain, 39% of the contents have no initial broadcasting platform singled out; 21.2% of fake news was broadcast on Twitter and only 12.1% on Facebook. These findings come along with a remarkable association of the variable “country” with Facebook (χ^2 (N = 416)=164.650, $p < .01$), and with Twitter (χ^2 (N = 416)= 14.749, $p < .01$); this association does not come up with other types of social media or instant messaging platforms.

The third question inquires about the topics that framed fake news spread in Spain and Colombia. The results show that the main issues were: Government/Politics (36.3%) and Crime/Terrorism/Public order (25.5%); followed by Science/Health/Tech (6.3%); Law (4.1%); Economy/Business (3.6%); and Sports/Entertainment/Culture (2.2%). The least recurring topics were Religion (1.2%); Environment (0.5%); and Accidents/Natural disasters (0.2%). The category “others” reached 20.2%. In Colombia, the topic Government/Politics led by far the survey with 43.5%; it was followed by Crime/Terrorism/Public order with 26.1%; in the third group, there appeared Science/Health/Tech and Economy/Business with 6% each, and Law with 3%. In Spain, misinformation was led by Government/Politics (30.7%) and Crime/Terrorism/Public order (25.1%); the topics Science/Health/Tech (6.5%) and Law also appear (4.3%); and Sports/Entertainment/Culture are included (3.5%).

The fourth question inquired about the actors who promoted and actors who were affected by fake news. On the one hand, half of the actors (53.8%) who generate fake news are not identified. 15.4%

were common people, 9.4% were journalists or mass media, 3.8% were other public servants; and 2.2% were members of political parties. The identification of misinformation from the Government in charge (1.4%), digital influencers (1.2%), entrepreneurs (0.7%), and activists (0.5%) was scarce. 11.5% were “other” promoting actors. On the other hand, the main affected actors by misinformation were: the Government in charge (21.9%) and other public servants (20.9%). The members of political parties come thereafter (11.8%) as well as entrepreneurs (10.8%). A third group of affected individuals with low rate of participation is composed of minorities (5.8%), activists (4.1%), journalists and mass media (3.1%) and common people (2.4%). 15.1% corresponded to “other” actors, and 3.8% were not identified.

The differentiated results by country show that in Colombia, three out of ten fake news were promoted by common people (31%) and the other three came from unidentified actors (29.3%). In this country it is also remarkable that one in ten fake contents is caused by journalists and mass media (12%). In Spain, on the other hand, seven out of ten fake news stories came from anonymous authors (73.6%). Regarding the actors affected by fake news, in Colombia those who were most affected were other public servants (31.5%), followed by the government in charge (23.9%). In the second stage, there are members of political parties (8.7%), activists (7.1%), and entrepreneurs (6.0%). In the case of Spain, the results are more equally distributed: in the first place, there is the Government in charge (20.3%), and then there is a similar percentage of entrepreneurs (14.7%), members of political parties (14.3%), and other public servants (12.1%). The presence of minorities is also to be highlighted (7.8%). There was a remarkable association of the country with the kind of promoting actor (χ^2 (N = 416) = 116.866, $p < .01$) as well as with the kind of affected actor (χ^2 (N = 416) = 48.211, $p < .01$).

The fifth question inquired about the various motivations that the actors have to create and promote false information. The first group of interests is composed of: political-governmental (21.4%); political-institutional (19%); and reputational (19%). The second group include: destabilization and panic creation (14.2%); political-partisans (12.7%); and computer criminals (8.4%). The third group is composed of

ideological motivations (3.1%); clickbait (1.2%) and entertainment (1.0%). Results are significantly different in each country. In the case of Colombia, the first motivation is political-institutional (31%), followed by political-governmental (23.4%). These are followed by disrepute (16.8%), destabilization or panic creation (13.6%) and political-partisan interest (10.3%). In the Spanish context, the main motivation is disrepute (20.8%), followed by political-governmental (19.9%). These are followed by political-partisan interests and destabilization or panic creation, each with 14.7%, and computer crime with 14.3%. Finally, the political-institutional motivation is highlighted with 9.1%. There is a remarkable association between the type of motivation and the country ($\chi^2 (N = 416) = 54.368, p < .01$).

In order to analyze the association between the actor who promotes the fake news and the type of motivation that this actor has had for the spreading of false information (P6), a statistic test of crossed tables and Pearson Chi-Squared test was made; a remarkable association between those variables was found ($\chi^2 (N = 416) = 109.696, p < .01$). Results show that most of the anonymous promoters had a political-governmental motivation –10.3% (N = 43)– much more frequently than other actors such as common users –2.6% (N = 11)– and journalists/media –2.4% (N = 10)–. A similar behavior presents the association between anonymous promoters and the purpose of the consolidation or disrepute –10.8% (N = 45)–, which is registered in higher proportion contrasted with common people –2.2% (N = 9)– and journalists/media –1.9% (N = 8)–. On the contrary, almost the same percentage of common people –6.3% (N = 26)– and anonymous actors –6.0% (N = 25)– had the political-institutional motivation in contrast with actors such as journalists/media –2.9% (N = 12)–.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research ratifies the dangerous and predominant role that virtual social media play in the contemporary misinformation environment above personal channels of communication such as email and SMS. In Spain and Colombia, Facebook (39.7%), Twitter (28.8%), and WhatsApp (10.8%) are the main broadcasting platforms for fake

news, which agrees with what has been found in other places around the world by Atehortua and Patino (2021), Al-Zaman (2021), and Aguado-Guadalupe and Bernaola-Serrano (2020). This phenomenon is conspicuous in the case of Colombia, perhaps due to the fact that the use of such social media to read the news, particularly Facebook and Twitter, is more extended than in Spain, according to the report from Reuters group (García-Perdomo, 2021; Negredo et al., 2021).

In the same vein of the process of manufacturing and broadcasting fake news, the widespread use of text (54.6%) and images (31%) is to be highlighted. This is also consistent with the findings of other academics (Aguado-Guadalupe & Bernaola-Serrano, 2020; Al-Zaman, 2020; Sued & Kedikian, 2020) and can be easily explained by the ease with which those media formats can be copied, altered, and distributed, compared with the old video and audio formats that demand certain specialized editing skills in order to falsify their respective contents (Salaverría et al., 2020).

Peña-Ascacibar et al. (2021) remarked that political and governmental issues are the ones with the most fake information reiterated. This agrees with what was found in Spain and Colombia (36.3%). This finding is very concerning because the empirical studies have shown that fake news about these topics are spread more deeply and more widely, reach a higher audience, and are more viral than fake news about terrorism, science or economy (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The prevalence of political misinformation is particularly present in Colombia (43.5%), where fact-checking websites repeatedly debunk alleged declarations or actions attributed to three of the most important political figures in the country: Ivan Duque (president by the time of the publication), Álvaro Uribe (former president), and Gustavo Petro (former senator and then candidate to the presidency).⁵

⁵ These debunkings illustrate the situation: “Petro did not tweet ‘I will continue with the legacy of Chavez’” (<https://bit.ly/3SsGyu1>); “Uribe did not tweet that his party ‘asked Duque to renounce and give way to new elections’” (<https://bit.ly/3sjyd17>); “Duque did not tweet that if misinformation about the National Strike continues, he is going to ‘cancel Facebook’” (<https://bit.ly/3gykbpN>).

One of the most remarkable aspects of this study is that the topics of terrorism, crime, and public order emerge in order to follow the “Fake agenda”. Tandoc et al. (2021) had noticed a similar but less frequent result regarding the topics studied for the case of fake news in the United States. In Spain, for example, the website Maldita.es has had to debunk repeatedly a false piece of information about an alleged police warning on a band that, posing as members of an NGO called “Manos Limpias,” drugged and robbed people by offering a product for people to smell (Maldita.es, 2021). In the same checking it is explained that this kind of information is successful because it appeals to fear (of a possible aggression) and because people believe that by sharing such information they help to save the integrity of their neighbors. In Colombia, the increasing discontentment against the public force has led people to share false information where the National Police is accused of beating people (Rodríguez Salamanca, 2021) or of witnessing sexual assaults and doing nothing about it (Rodríguez Salamanca, 2021).

One of the main characteristics of fake news is now empirically corroborated: half of the analyzed news (53.8%) remains anonymous (Cabo Isasi & García Juanatey, 2016; Gutiérrez-Coba et al., 2020), and the problem is even more serious in the Spanish case (73.6%). That makes it even more difficult to fight and stop the spreading of misinformation in various platforms, because, for example, fact-checking organizations and affected actors are utterly incapable of asking for a retraction to the people who tell lies or inaccurate facts.

Now, on the phenomenon of anonymity, it is worth mentioning two elucidations. First, the frequency can be overstated by fact-checking websites that sometimes do not identify the source that introduced the lie due to its not being a publicly relevant figure. Secondly, in case the fact-checkers are not able to identify the promoting actor, anonymity can be covering the veiled actions of actors such as governments, other public servants, and members of political parties that have a low percentage in the present research but that have been included by the studies quoted at the beginning of this article as the main promoters of misinformation (Lutz & Padilla, 2012; Newman et al., 2020).

In fact, the cross-checking of variables show that anonymous actors had as their main purposes to support or discredit a government and to erode the good name or reputation of a person or organization.

In Colombia, common people are the main (identified) promoters of fake news (31%). This makes sense in view of the scientific literature that states that in contexts of high polarization, lies are established and replicated more easily among public opinion (Rodríguez Pérez et al., 2021). As this article pointed out at the beginning, cognitive biases, such as the confirmation bias, increase the possibility that people share information that is similar to their previous beliefs regardless of whether it is true or not (Pascual, 2020). However, in defense of common people, it must be highlighted that there are empirical proofs that suggest that their lack of attention, due to the quantity and the speed of content spreading on social media, can motivate the exchange of Fake News (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Half of the analyzed fake news (54.6%) affect governments, other public servants, and members of political parties.⁶ Academics such as Hutchings (2017) agree with these findings and point out that, at the core of contemporary misinformation, anti-establishment or anti-system discourses can be found. This all works as evidence to support the theoretical claim stated at the beginning: fake news is related to the crisis of trust that affects democratic institutions because citizens are constantly suspicious about those institutions and their actions (Sánchez-de-la-Nieta & Fuente-Cobo, 2020). Another area that is traditionally included as part of the establishment is the corporate sector, which is particularly affected in Spain by fake news that use the

⁶ These case can be used as examples: “Picture of Duque and the Colombian National team with a flag and the message ‘Petro will never be a president’ is a hoax” (<https://bit.ly/3MSYahA>); “Again, video of police members inhaling an alleged drug is not from Colombia but from Chile” (<https://bit.ly/3z3Vxnl>); “No, Pablo Iglesias has not tweeted that “he would enjoy seeing as they shoot to death the leaders of PP” (<https://bit.ly/3DjrhaE>); “The PP has not published a tweet that says ‘Love whoever you want, whether you are homosexual or normal’” (<https://bit.ly/3gvRrxX>).

name of different banks such as Caixabank, BBVA, and Santander to carry out computer fraud.⁷

Furthermore, two findings about the actors affected are completely articulated with the social contexts of the studied countries. On the one hand, minorities, among them migrants and refugees, are victims of fake news in Spain (7.8%). These populations were conceptualized in this study as one of the actors affected by Fake News. This can be explained by the fact that in recent years Spain has become a receiver of people from Sub Saharan Africa, and from countries such as Morocco, Romania, and Syria. In Spain, as well as in other European countries, strong cases of xenophobia have taken root, and this has been fomented by hate speeches spread on social media (Cabo Isasi & García Juanatey, 2016). Although the percentage of minorities affected by fake news is higher compared to Colombia (3.2%), it is not so high in view of other studies (Castillo-de-Mesa et al., 2021), which makes necessary to investigate whether the frequency of this phenomenon corresponds to the absence of a scenario where this has resonance in the public opinion during the time of the research. On the other hand, in Colombia fake news have been targeted against activists (7.1%), who are falsely linked with violence, criminality, and vandalism, for example, in the context of social protests (Rodríguez Pérez et al., 2021).

This research also shows the importance of delving in and differentiating the types of motivations in the production or spreading of false information. The centrality of political-institutional (31%) motivations is to be highlighted in the case of Colombia, which is consistent with the literature that identifies the existence of a perception of weak legitimacy in democratic institutions among the citizens (Rojas, 2006)⁸. It is also worth mentioning the remarkable interest both

⁷ These are some cases: “Beware of this email [...]: it is a case of ‘phishing’ and is not sent by Santander bank” (<https://bit.ly/3glop3Q>); “Beware of this alleged SMS from BBVA that says [...]: it’s phishing” (<https://bit.ly/3TxZSaM>); “Beware this email signing as CaixaBank [...]:it is a case of “phishing”” (<https://bit.ly/3Dlu5Ux>).

⁸ For instance: “It’s false that the jep had declared the fare ‘innocent of all charges’” (<https://bit.ly/3sNDluM>); “The education council of Murcia have

in Spain (20.8%) and in Colombia (16.8%) of affecting the reputation of other people or organizations.⁹ Moreover, in this environment of public uncertainty there is an explicit purpose of destabilizing or creating panic among the people both in the Iberian country (14.7%) and in the Latin American nation (13.6%).¹⁰ The result of all of this is the erosion of institutional trust and of the public, respectful and plural dialogue as constituent elements of democracy. On the contrary, there is a validation of symbolic violence (Han, 2014).

In sum, this research has been useful to ground, from Spain and Colombia, affirmations about Fake News that had been stated in other areas of the world. Furthermore, it also puts forward some serious issues that have been rarely studied: 1) fake news has spread out to various fields beyond politics; 2) apart from unidentified actors, common people and media journalists also contribute to the spreading of hoaxes; and 3) fake information is starting to harass minority groups (such as migrants), and activists. It is expected that this research has contributed to a better understanding of the types of motivations behind fake news and shed some light on them, highlighting that discrediting organizations, destabilizing, creating panic, and committing computer theft are becoming increasingly relevant goals of misinformation, second only to traditional political motives.

not said that it will be mandatory to pray in the classroom” (<https://bit.ly/3fmMAih>).

- ⁹ These are some instances: “No, the Pope has not been detained during a power outage in the Vatican” (<https://bit.ly/3h3ayiU>); “No, Spanish media are not the least trustable in Europe according to Oxford University” (<https://bit.ly/3gNsMF5>); “Former cti director did not say that Santos invented the Sepúlveda affair in order to affect Zuluaga” (<https://bit.ly/3h3aIa0>); “False: Valle de Lili foundation in Cali did not refuse to attend hurt members of the Indigenous Guard last Sunday” (<https://bit.ly/3FxnRr3>).
- ¹⁰ These pieces of misinformation illustrate the point: “Foral Police of Navarra has not asked the population to avoid going out at night because of a ‘serial killer’” (<https://bit.ly/3Ueszt3>); “Communication from the strike committee that announces blockins in 1080 cities beginning on may 31 is false” (<https://bit.ly/3FzLQ46>).

However, there are some limitations to this study that could be overcome by future theoretical and empirical endeavors. Analyzed contents were those verified by fact-checking websites that do not cover other topics or types of content. Thus, other sample frameworks should be considered. Regarding the websites, two media outlets from Spain, and two fact-checking media from Colombia were selected. Thus, in order to obtain an enriched picture of disinformation in Ibero America it would be required, for instance, to extend the same analysis to other countries in the region. A valuable exercise could be the study of paradigmatic cases of fake news that, using different research techniques on digital social networks, can be analyzed over time in order to have a detailed account of how lies emerge, who spreads it, what are their motivations, and what are the impacts of all of this in the public sphere. This should be based on the categories proposed in the present research.

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