



# Academia and Media in *Ecuador*

## A Verification and Digital Literacy Alliance Against Disinformation

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**Abstract.** In the health crisis due to Covid-19, two coalitions to fight disinformation were born in Ecuador. This article analyzes the actions taken by the Interuniversity Observatory of Ecuadorian Media and Ecuador Verifica. Both organizations are pioneers in implementing media-academic alliances to verify political discourses, apply digital literacy strategies and do research. We gathered 98 informational pieces between the two case studies through a quantitative approach. The findings underscore peculiarities of the combative actions against disinformation in Ecuador giving priority to digital literacy. Citizens are the main audience, but both organizations created debate spaces for journalists and students, even translating content from Spanish to Kichwa, the country's indigenous language. It is evident that this intercultural component plus a multi-actor response are pertinent to face new waves of disinformation.

**Keywords:** Disinformation · Pandemic · Digital literacy · Fact – checking

## 1 Introduction

On a global scale, information disorders are phenomena that are spreading in digital spaces, for multiple and coexisting reasons: technological advances, information saturation, content trivialization, immediacy and decentralization in production and distribution [1, 2].

Among those disorders misinformation, disinformation and malicious information challenge democratic systems [3], where freedom of speech, as one of the values that were configured in the political-philosophical thought of the eighteenth century, is threatened. In addition, they constitute a risk not only for users of online information, especially those who do not have digital, communication and information skills that allow them to distinguish such contaminated content [4] but also a challenge for journalists in verifying and validating data [5].

In 2017, the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organization of American States, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted the Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and "Fake News", Disinformation and Propaganda in which the State, information technology

providers, the media, journalists and academia are identified as social actors to guarantee freedom of expression and opinion [6]. Media was suggested to expand the news service to coverage of disinformation, especially during electoral periods, while academia, as an interested actor, was invited to cooperate to understand the impact of disinformation, leaving the promotion of digital literacy as an action led by the State.

The following year and prior to the elections of the European Parliament in May 2019, the European Union recognized the need for a comprehensive response in its Action Plan against disinformation [7]. This document proposes that member states support scientific research, journalistic work and media literacy to empower citizens.

With the arrival of the type 2 coronavirus pandemic that causes the Covid-19 disease, information disorders have exceeded planning and commitments to combat them. Along with the number of infected and victims, erroneous content and/or voluntary withholding of information disseminated on social networks threatens democracy [8] and creates a health issue [9].

In Spain, for example, the intentionally false but apparently true information about the pandemic originating in China and declared as such in 2020 was of international, national and local origin on health and science, politics and governments [9]. In Ecuador's case, the organization, Ecuador Chequea, reported 250 publications about conspiracies, medical treatments or cures on social networks, pseudo-media and anonymous sources during the first six months of the pandemic [10].

This data is related to connectivity and the use of digital. The number of Internet users grew by 7.3% globally between 2020 and 2021, reaching 4.66 billion people who are digitally connected and social network users represent around 53% of the world population [11]. In Ecuadorian territory, 79.21% of the population has access to the Internet while 87.7% uses social networks [12].

Although at the end of 2020 Latin American countries updated their digital agenda to include solutions against the pandemic, they did not mention misinformation, disinformation or malicious information. Digital literacy for schools and college teachers was a topic they included, however they did not refer to any sort of cooperation between academia or the news organizations [13]. Within the framework of this planning, Ecuador structured its first digital agenda in 2021. In this work program, contaminated information or the cooperation of the media are not present either. Media literacy is considered as a component to improve basic education and ensure social inclusion in technology. Universities are considered in the promotion of digital health but there is no reference to data verification [14].

## 1.1 Digital Literacy and Data Verification Conceptualization

In media literacy studies there is a constant review of theoretical and methodological frameworks due to the appearance of new platforms [15]. That concept plus the concepts of information literacy, news literacy and data literacy continue to be present in educational research on disinformation [16]. This disorder is one of the ways contaminated information is spread intentionally as opposed to misinformation, which is false and shared without premeditation.

According to the pedagogical perspective, the spread of disinformation is due, among other reasons, to the fact that people do not know how to navigate, search and interpret content and, mainly, how to evaluate it [17].

When these activities take place around media information or content production, they are considered media literacy actions. On the other hand, if they promote the competence to obtain and express reality in an informed way, it is information literacy. Around journalistic pieces, news literacy aims to understand their role in society and to develop the ability to consume and critically evaluate them. On the other hand, data literacy implies the competence to identify, understand and use them, while digital literacy, as an integrating concept, is the ability to use digital tools and devices for, among other activities, managing information, building knowledge and communicating [18]. With multi-literacy, the aim is to empower citizens through technology and to reduce multidimensional digital gaps.

In addition to the development of critical skills in audiences, UNESCO has identified other mechanisms to combat disinformation such as monitoring, verification and investigation of information [19]. Monitoring and verification are usually implemented by independent news organizations, academia and civil society. Investigations usually go further by delving into the role of disinformation, its actors, its degree of diffusion, and its effects. But this information is also being published by alliances between non-profit organizations, media outlets and academia.

In Ecuador, combative actions against disinformation are practically recent. In 2016, the first means of verification of public discourse and misleading content appeared on the Internet and in 2020, in the health crisis due to Covid-19, two academic-media alliances emerged: the Interuniversity Observatory of Ecuadorian Media (OIME) and Ecuador Verifica.

In this scenario of diversification of response spaces to contaminated information, three questions arose: (1) What is the purpose of each alliance that emerged in the pandemic? (2) What kind of actions are you working on and how are you doing it? and (3) What particularities do these combative responses have in the face of the current wave of disinformation and future waves?

In June 2016, the OIME was born with the purpose of systematically studying “national media production to contribute to the formation of critical audiences and a culture of verification based on scientific journalism, data and solutions” [20]. It is part of a project with international funds in which four universities, two media outlets and an international technical cooperation agency participate.

In September 2020, 18 media outlets, nine civil society organizations and seven universities created Ecuador Verifica. It is an initiative for “the detection of networks that spread misleading content, the verification of public discourse, digital literacy as a way to contribute to the integrity of the electoral process for president and vice president, and to develop tools that allow citizens to decide based on accurate information” [21]. Ecuador Verifica has the support of international cooperation as well and is coordinated by Ecuador Chequea.

Thus, new coalitions are strengthening fact-checking as well as engaging in investigative and literate responses to disinformation. Hence, the objective of this research is to analyze the characteristics of the responses to disinformation of the two media-academia

alliances in Ecuador. Based on this purpose, the specific objectives are: Identify similarities and differences in work methodologies and evaluate these experiences in the face of future waves of disinformation.

## 2 Materials and Methods

This research utilizes quantitative methodology and analyses two case studies because it wants to identify detailed knowledge, characteristics and specific processes [22]. This type of study is pertinent because OIME and Ecuador Verifica are new initiatives that respond to misinformation and disinformation in a pandemic scenario.

The publications from both organizations were classified between data verification, research and multi-literacy. Digital literacy was considered as an integrating concept.

The information was organized in two phases: First, there was an analysis of the missions and the methodologies of both organizations. Then, their content was compiled in an Excel matrix.

Until the end of February 2022, 36 verification publications of public and political discourses, 7 research publications and 55 multi-literacy publications were observed, including texts, graphic and audiovisual material. The total of these observation units was organized in a matrix that considered as common variables the types of response to misinformation: the date and the subtopic of misinformation treated.

On their verification process, this study looked for: the channel where the content was transmitted (social network, official television channel, media outlet), the author of the speech verified and resources to show the contaminated information (text, videos, graphics).

On multiliteracy, the following variables were considered: the type of literacy, the subject of literacy, and the resources of literacy. Finally, in the investigative response, the following were considered: the subject studied and the informative resource used to reveal information disorders.

## 3 Discussion of Results

In Ecuador, both new experiences of combative alliances against disinformation include responses that, due to their intentionality, their disinformation theme and their work methodology, categorize themselves into three big groups: fact-checking, academic research and digital literacy. These actions are summarized in Table 1.

Around the empowerment of citizens through technology, OIME and Ecuador Verifica have focused part of their work on literacy actions. As shown in Fig. 1, 56% of the analyzed content falls into this category.

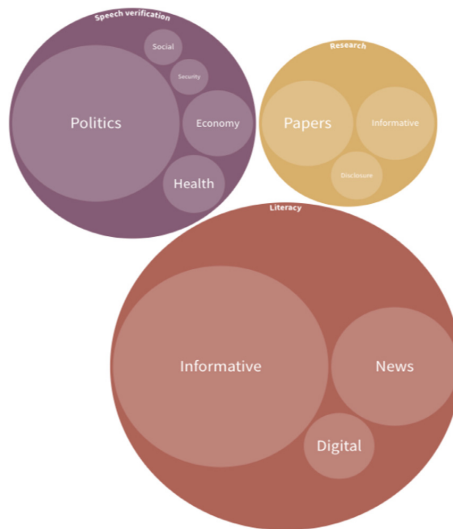
In terms of fact-checking, Ecuador Verifica worked on verifying 36 speeches by politicians and representatives for public entities, using the fact-checking methodology of the International Information Verification Network. On the other hand, OIME's academic research published four papers and three scientific divulgation notes.

Regarding information literacy, OIME had 15 actions and Ecuador Verifica added 22. In this type of literacy, the OIME's #EnPrimeraLínea del Covid forums and Ecuador Verifica Live broadcasts were organized. These spaces created a bridge between specialists,

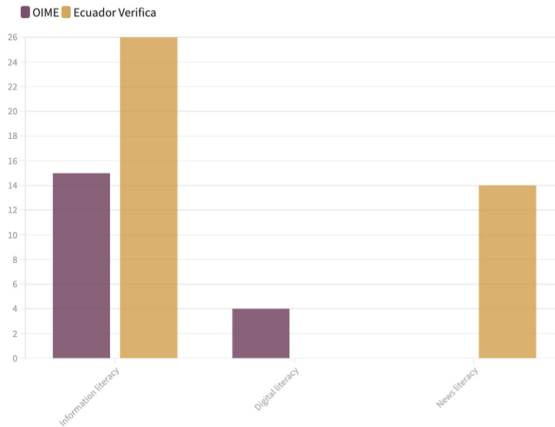
**Table 1.** Responses to disinformation in OIME and Ecuador Verifica

Case	What topic on disinformation does it cover?	What is the type of response?	How is the response executed?	Target audience
OIME	Covid - 19 in public opinion, media, citizenship and scientific discourse	Research	Study a topic for academic divulgation	Citizenship
		Multi-literacy	Creation of resources and spaces	Citizenship, journalists and journalism students
Ecuador Verifica	Political discourse in sectional elections	Monitoring	Detection of potential misleading information	Citizens and media
	public speech	Verification	Identifying misinformation and disinformation	
		Multi-literacy	Creation of resources and spaces	

Source: oime.com.ec y ecuadorverifica.org



**Fig. 1.** Types of responses to disinformation between OIME and Ecuador Verifica



**Fig. 2.** Classification of literacy actions, by case studied

government authorities, directors of public and private institutions, and the audience, who had interaction options.

On OIME's website there were four records of digital literacy in its Tool Box section, which is a journalistic coverage. They published two infographics about informative memes, one in Spanish and another in Kichwa. On the page we also found a glossary of terms related to the space for advice and tools for pandemic, and a timeline of forums OIME offered on social media.

Ecuador Verifica recorded 14 news literacy publications. This organization published blogs that were related to the national situation; for example, in the note *Infoxication in the electoral campaign: How does it affect us?* they explained the impact of this term during the elections. Ecuador Verifies took advantage of its live broadcasts by anchoring the videos and using the quotes from the experts.

In total, five types of formats were identified, as pedagogical resources, for three literacy actions: live broadcasts, infographics, texts, blogs and interviews. This information is summarized in Fig. 2.

Ecuador Verifica published 37 verifications, between May 17, 2021 and February 24, 2022. The number of such actions varied between one and four per day; For example, on February 16, 2022, there were three verifications of the president's speech by Guillermo Lasso and one more was about the seizure of drugs.

This coalition gave priority to political discourse with 67.6% compared to verifications on the economy, social, security and health (Fig. 3). This strategy is common in organizations that are dedicated to fact checking since political actors are likely to use data or information in their statements. Ecuador Verifica has also opted for the incorporation of Kichwa in this type of response.

The latter is understood as a peculiarity of the responses to disinformation from Ecuador. Of all the units observed nonrecorded feedback from the public for whom the actions to combat disinformation and other disorders are directed.

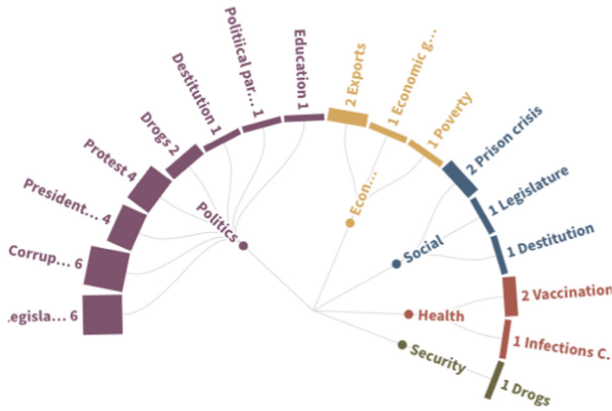


Fig. 3. Sub-themes of the political and public discourses checked in Ecuador Verifica

## 4 Conclusion

Throughout this article, information disorders are assumed as complex phenomena due to their presence in accelerated growth and, especially, due to their implications for democracy, in general, citizenship and journalism. Hence, the responses to combat them must be multiple and multi-stakeholder, even though in territories such as Ecuador, planning still does not explicitly include the academy and the media in the work of citizen empowerment through technology.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic the OIME and Ecuador Verifica emerge as spaces to respond to disinformation that have opted for a media-academia alliance, as part of their combative strategy, which confirms that they are pioneering experiences for diversification of actions from which local responses to disinformation can be characterized. Of the four groups of actions against disinformation recognized by UNESCO, both Ecuadorian cases are working on the identification of contaminated information and in support of the consumer audiences of this type of content, that is, their work revolves around the message and the and citizens, as direct beneficiaries, although the media and journalism students are included to a lesser extent.

Multi-literacy is the focal action for both OIME and Ecuador Verifica. By the largest number of partners and the application of an internationally endorsed methodology, Ecuador Verifica is working, in a sustained manner, in the verification of speeches from which the Kichwa language has been included, as a seal of this type of combative response. That language is used by OIME but in literacy resources, with scientific evidence.

In this scenario, both cases show particularities in their collaborative responses to disinformation, confirming that the confluence of actors is relevant, as well as the diversification of themes and combat responses in multiple media and spaces is relevant in this and future waves of disinformation, in a nearby scenario of elections of local authorities. The challenge, then, will be not only the strengthening of an intercultural approach but also the incorporation of new associations, both citizens and from the public and private sectors, and, in particular, the registration and visibility of the impacts of their work as

a way of measuring the contribution to the improvement of the exercise of freedom of expression and opinion.

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This text is endorsed by OIME.

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