Disinformation in Spain's Regional and Provincial Press

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Abstract. This article aims to analyze how the fight against disinformation is managed in local newsrooms. A survey was completed by those the with the greatest audience, circulation and diffusion of each Spanish province. In total, 26 responses were captured, amounting to half the total number of newspapers and heads of the State province (in addition to the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla). The questionnaire, made up of 12 questions, was completed by editors and journalists specialized in local information between May 8 and June 7, 2023, coinciding with the campaign of the municipal elections held in Spain. In conclusion, it is evident that local professionals lack the training, means and resources available to effectively check the information reported by journalists from the local and regional press.

Keywords: Political · Local Journalism · Disinformation · fakes news · verification

1 Introduction, Background, and Comparison of Different Countries

In the last decade, political communication has diversified and adapted to different situations in which the broadcast channels and social networks of new media play a relevant role. In this way, information consumption is no longer an independent activity that forms part of the continuous connection to a digital space, within which news is sometimes sought intentionally. Rather, the user happens across news content among other social and entertainment content (Serrano Puche et al., 2018).

The interactions between those in power and the general public were hierarchical in nature. Political organizations and institutions issued messages that reached the public through the media that had certain effects on the audience (López García et al., 2018).

In the modern context, relations between the media and politicians have also changed. Journalists, who also use social networks as sources of information (von Nordheim,

Boczek, & Koppers, 2018), have gone from being the "watchdog" to the "watched dog", reinforcing the need to maintain high journalistic standards and take into account new strategies to verify content, especially on social networks.

Regarding the study of disinformation at the local level during the electoral period, there are hardly any references. Nonetheless, there are a handful of studies, such as the one carried out by Jerónimo and Sánchez-Esparza (2022), that highlight how countries like Russia and China attempt to interfere in foreign elections and manipulate public opinion. This is a more common strategy than is believed, and it has become a threat to democracy. Resources and reliable sources of local information are scarce and increasingly consumed on social media, a space where disinformation spreads more easily.

In recent years, research on the relationship between fake news and social media has grown substantially. For example, there is now an extensive academic literature on the influence and behavior of the media, the political class and the audience in Italy, Germany and the United States.

In the case of Italy, Giglietto, F. et al. (2020), conducted an unprecedented examination of data on Facebook using the CrowdTangle app. They also examined two datasets of political news published in the run-up to the 2018 Italian general election and the 2019 European election. They identify multiple networks of verified public pages, groups, and profiles that shared the same political news articles on Facebook within a very short time, concluding that some of these entities were misrepresenting themselves as entertainment venues. This affects the scope of the media sources that they share, hinting at different strategies and possible motivations.

In Germany, Zimmermann & Kohring's study (2020) analyzed the influence of the spread of false news in an electoral campaign. Furthermore, they illustrated the direct impact of the alignment between voters of the main party in government, and right-wing populists, something that came about due to general distrust in the media and in politics.

Social media is also a major source of news and information in the United States and, in the 2016 US presidential election, these platforms became breeding grounds for influencer campaigns, conspiracy, and alternative media. Bradshaw et al. (2019) provided a typology of fake news based on what users actually shared. Rigorous coding and content analysis is applied in order to define this phenomenon and the concept of "garbage news", which refers to sources that either deliberately publish misleading information, or that package such content as real news. These kinds of stories are first professionally produced and then promoted. As such, the abundance of fake news on different digital platforms has led some experts to believe strongly in the theory of a Russia's campaign against the United States between 2015 and 2017 (Xia et al., 2019).

Academics have been studying the concept of fake news for some time, though the amount of research has increased considerably. The power of fake news to deceive and misinform is evident, and as a result, there is more and more investigation into the phenomenon.

Fletcher & Nielsen (2018) argue that the majority of people browsing the news on social networks do so based on "general skepticism", meaning that people question all types of selection. Based on focus groups and surveys, they compare how people navigate social networks and how they perceive different types of news in Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. They arrive at the following conclusions: Firstly,

that despite the different political systems and media of each country, most people do not understand exactly how the information that they receive through algorithms is filtered. Secondly, that people are usually skeptical of all forms of selection, including that carried out by editors and journalists. And thirdly, that approval for algorithmic selection is strongest among younger people.

Schwarzenegger (2020) identifies the consequences of fake news and the post-era narrative of truth. By conducting 49 in-depth interviews, he outlines different dimensions: selective criticism, pragmatic trust, and competence-trust, which can be applied to other scenarios to investigate how people navigate their media repertoires and interact with news in general.

The fear that messages of dubious origin and truth value could subvert the "proper" functioning of democracy (however that concept is understood) has motivated governments, citizens and academics to try to understand and combat the phenomenon (Freelon, & Welles, 2020).

Fake news is not a new phenomenon, but has always existed, since the printed press was first created and began to rise to prominence. Today, fake news has a global scope and impact, as the media outlets that promote these stories have greater reach, and operate much faster, than was possible before (Burkhardt, 2017). Online disinformation is considered a great challenge for modern democracies (Shao et al., 2017; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019) and in recent years the social impact of disinformation in the network society, together with the damaging effects of fake news, have become causes for alarm.

Technological advances mean that more and more messages circulate that, based on different strategies, have a significant reach and even have notable consequences on social behavior. This poses a threat to the credibility of journalism and also makes it more difficult for those that seek out truthful information. Changes in the way people consume news, and the emergence of digital and distributed news sources, make essential a re-examination of the relationship between news use and news trust (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019).

However, there are studies arguing that some countries are more resistant to online disinformation than others. Some academics (Humprecht, 2020) differentiate between three groups of countries, a group with high resistance to online disinformation (those of Northern Europe, for example) and two groups of countries with low resistance (including polarized countries in the South of Europe and the United States).

Online disinformation is not only a technology-driven phenomenon but is also shaped by national information environments. This is reflected in the agenda of issues and stories (Humprecht, 2019), which explains the difference between the countries, as can be seen from the study that compares online disinformation republished by fact-checkers from four Western democracies (United States United States, United Kingdom, Germany and Austria). Here, significant differences between English and German-speaking countries are identified. The United States and the United Kingdom display the highest proportions of partisan disinformation, while in Germany and Austria sensationalist stories prevail. Furthermore, in English-speaking countries, political actors are frequently targets of disinformation, while in German-speaking countries, immigrants are the most frequent victims.

Similarly, Harcup and O'Neill (2017) examined the values of the news in conventional journalism and the changes these values produced. In their study, based on an analysis of news content published in the United Kingdom in the last fifteen years, the influence of social networks on the values of contemporary news was evident.

Based on the intentions and motivations of the people who share fake news, Wardle (2016) explains the concepts of disinformation as the following: intentionally false content designed to cause harm, basically motivated to earn money or have political influence, whether foreign or domestic. That information, when shared (sometimes without malicious intent), becomes misinformation. This also describes false content, even though the person sharing it doesn't realize it's false or misleading. For this reason, Wardle (2018) distinguishes between fabricated content, manipulated content, imposter content, false context, miscellaneous content, false connections, and parody.

Rodríguez Fernández (2019) classifies hoaxes and misinformation in the identification of facilities unrelated to companies, false job offers, identity theft, product/service gift and false promotions, the search for influencers by the brand, false accidents, and publication of misinformation and false coverage in the general media.

From theoretical perspectives on trust, based on user surveys, Torres and colleagues (2018) confirmed the existence of different perceptions of the network of people who share news (perceived cognitive homogeneity, variety of social ties and trust), as well as varying perceptions of news authors (fake news awareness and perceived media credibility). They also investigated community members' innate desires to share fact-checking protocols.

After reviewing 34 academic articles that used the term "fake news" between 2003 and 2017, Tandoc and colleagues (2018) defined the concept based on two criteria. Firstly, factuality and deception must be measured. Secondly, they established a typology of fake news, distinguishing between satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising and propaganda.

Along the same lines, but contrasting the concept of fake news with real news, Molina et al. (2021) identify fake news as polarizing content, satire, misreporting, commentary, persuasive information, and citizen journalism; that oppose to the inspired messages a structure dominated by the message, the source, the structure and the network, which contribute to breaking with the ambiguity of the news.

There are different studies that focus on scientific production and the methodological techniques applied in the study of disinformation and fake news (Blanco et al., 2019).

Weeks & Gil de Zúñiga (2021) described six lines of research on political disinformation while pointing out some of the most relevant problems. Firstly, they found the ongoing debate about fake news to be a distraction. Secondly, they asked questions regarding the importance of fake political news and who is exposed to it, on what channels, and to what effect. Next, they suggested that these effects depend on the social connections of the audience as receptors. They also believe that important sources of false information should be further studied, citing politicians and government officials. Finally, they highlighted the need for further investigation on how to combat and stop fake news.

Also relevant is the work of Gray et al. (2020) that proposes different methodological tactics to explore the linked economy and content ranking, the like economy

and metrification of engagement, and the tracking economy and commodification of attention.

Berduygina et al. (2019) looked into how we can better recognize and control fake news, proposing a classification of the predominant topics according to their popularity while at the same time questioning the reliability of media outlets as a source of information. In this sense, they illustrate the positive and negative effects of publishing this type of information, which is usually effective when received in a personalized way as it triggers an emotional response from the target audience.

Another approach is that offered by Valenzuela et al. (2019), who conclude that political commitment is an important consequence of the use of social networks and represents a key precedent when it comes to sharing fake news.

To understand the spread of fake news, it is essential to develop reading methods on when, where and how manipulators take advantage of metadata on different platforms, as well as to comprehend the influence of algorithms.

In this sense, in a study based on the analysis of 14 million messages propagated in 400,000 tweets, Shao et al. (2018) found evidence of the fact that the so-called social robots play a disproportionate role in the dissemination of low-credibility sources before news goes viral. Likewise, they affirm that these messages are aimed at users with many followers, through responses and mentions. For this reason, they state that humans can be manipulated into sharing content published by bots. Successful low credibility sources are heavily supported by social bots. These results suggest that stopping social bots could be an effective strategy to mitigate the spread of misinformation on social media.

After an exhaustive study based on a survey of news users in 35 countries, Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) found that social networks were the main source of information for audiences who had already lost trust in the news.

It is sometimes that case that, on social networks, news is not always searched for intentionally. Rather, it often occurs that the user comes across news by chance. The same happens with regards to other types of social and entertainment content. This is what for Serrano Puche et al. (2018) call the phenomenon of incidental exposure, also explained by Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2018), through the theory of perception. They state that the news finding the audience has become an increasingly frequent trend in political communication. In Spain, this phenomenon is shaped by variables such as age, ideological orientation and the degree of interest in the news.

There are various studies on news consumption that analyze how people navigate the news on social networks. They focus on their perception of the different types of news selection (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Swart & Broersma, 2019) and the effects of these selections (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Gil de Zúñiga, 2018; Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019). There are also studies that have measured the effort required to effectively persuade other users on a social network such as Twitter (Moya-Sánchez and Herrera-Damas, 2016), and the consequences this can have on democratic society (Vraga, 2019).

There are also studies that analyze whether or not citizens accept journalists' verification of fake news (Nyhan et al., 2019), channels and audience engagement (Feezell & Ortiz, 2021; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018), those that analyze the credibility of information

sources (Johnson & John, 2019), audience perception (Walter et al., 2019; Winster-sieck, 2017), format and interest, message and tone (Young et al., 2018), as well as the audience's response to external attacks (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2017).

Nyhan et al. (2019) questioned whether citizens are willing to accept journalistic verification of misleading claims made by candidates that they support, and if uncovering this forces people to change their opinions regarding such candidates. Drawing from two experiments conducted during the 2016 campaign, they examined the effects of the journalistic fact checking of claims made by Donald Trump during his convention speech and during a general election debate. It was concluded that fact-finding can reduce misperceptions, though it often has little effect on how candidates are viewed or on the choice of the voters. This implies that a selective perception already exists, since the facts stated are usually based on the beliefs and ideas of the audience (Walter et al., 2019).

The way political knowledge is accessed influences political behavior, and the abundance of media options threatens to widen the gap between the politically well-informed and the less-informed by decreasing chance encounters with incidental political information. Through two controlled longitudinal experiments conducted on Facebook, Feezell & Ortiz (2021) found no statistical differences in the levels of political knowledge between participants exposed to political information, compared to those who were not. However, it was noted that people with low political interest were more likely to make incorrect assumptions. This means that exposure to incidental political information through social networks can make some people more knowledgeable.

Regarding sources, there are also studies that analyze the effects of stories published on Facebook by supposed news organizations (Johnson & St. John, 2019), arguing that the audiences relate credibility to the source and barely distinguishing between traditional media (that are more credible even on social networks) from organizations that appear to be media.

Fletcher & Nielsen (2018) compared incidental exposure to news on social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) in four countries (Italy, Australia, United Kingdom, United States), finding that accidentally exposed users use significantly more sources of online news than non-users. In addition, they find that the effect of accidental exposure is stronger for younger people and those with little interest in news. This effect is even truer of YouTube and Twitter users than those of Facebook.

From another (albeit complementary) perspective, there are studies that analyze the role of the information format and tone in the configuration of the message, as well as the correction of inaccuracies in the context in which political facts are verified (Young et al., 2018). In this sense, it is suggested that video content, whether humorous or not, is an effective way to reduce audience misperceptions by increasing message attention and reducing confusion.

Observations of the electoral debates are unique in that they provide insight into a moment in which the interest and attentiveness of the audience is very high. Studies indicate that the presence of a fact checker that confirms the accuracy of a candidate's statement improves how his/her performance in electoral debates is seen by the public. Conversely, if the fact checker exposes that a candidate is being dishonest, they are less likely to be perceived favorably. This implies that the public are more willing to vote for

a candidate when verification of the facts indicates that they are being honest. Consequently, these findings suggest that fact-checking can influence people's evaluations of political events (Wintersieck, 2017).

2 Method

The newspapers with the highest audience, circulation and diffusion, of each Spanish province, were surveyed. 26 interviews were carried out, amounting to half the total number of newspapers and heads of the state province (that being 50 provinces, in addition to the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla).

Specifically, the newspapers that responded to the survey were the following: *Diario de Navarra, El Heraldo de Aragón, El Diario Montañés (Santander), Las Provincias (Valencia), La Verdad (Murcia), Ideal (Granada), Última Hora (Mallorca), Diario de Ávila, Huelva Información, La Provincia-Diario de Las Palmas (Canarias), La Voz de Almería, Diario de Burgos, Diario de León, La Voz de Galicia, Faro de Vigo, El Norte de Castilla (Valladolid), El Progreso (Lugo), La Tribuna de Toledo, La Nueva España (Asturias), La Gaceta de Salamanca, La Opinión de Zamora, Las Noticias de Cuenca, Diario Palentino, La Crónica de Guadalajara, Diario Sur* (Málaga) *y Diario de Sevilla.*

The questionnaire, consisting of 12 questions, was completed by editors and journalists specialized in local information. The dates of the field work were from May 8th–June 7th 2023, coinciding with the campaign of the municipal elections held in Spain.

Telephone interviews (CATI) and online interviews (CAWI) were used to collect the information, the latter in instances where the interviewees requested the sending of an email with a link to access the questionnaire.

The survey was carried out by Sigma Dos, a Spanish company that was founded in 1982 that conducts market and public opinion research. Since 2018, it has been part of the Gallup International network, the global organization for market studies and social research, and is a member of the Spanish Association of Market Studies, Marketing and Opinion.

Of the total number of editors of the 26 newspapers surveyed, 60% are men and 40% women. As a whole, they hold extensive professional experience, with an average of almost 20 years (19.47) of practical experience. The majority (80%) have a degree in Journalism. The remaining 20% are graduates in Audiovisual Communication (5%), holders of master's degrees (5%) and doctorates (5%) in Communication. 5% have other degrees.

3 Results

First of all, the lack of training, and the lack of means and resources available to engage in practices that challenge the information reported by journalists from the Spanish provincial press, is particularly striking.

In terms of training, 60% of those surveyed state that they have not received, in the last three years, any training on verification of information, whether from their employer or elsewhere. Of the remaining 40%, 30% indicate that they received specific courses

lasting less than 30 h, and only 10% of journalists stated that they received expert courses lasting between 30 and 60 h.

Similarly, it is also clear that local and regional newspapers as a whole lack the means and resources in the fight against disinformation. 65% of the journalists surveyed said that their newspaper does not develop fact-checking tasks, compared to 35% who said that theirs does.

When asked if they have a specific section in their newspaper, a protocol of actions to verify news and/or resources and tools available for it, 70% of journalists surveyed say they do not, compared to 30% who say they do.

Local media journalists state that they continue to seek direct, in-person contact with the sources, an average of 7.9 out of 10), compared to those who put that they travel increasingly less to events and tend to follow them online, instead streaming events from newsrooms (4 out of 10, on average). In this sense, it is worth highlighting the fact that the majority of the editors of the surveyed provincial newspapers assure that they do not particularly trust the information on the internet because of the prevalence of misinformation (7 out of 10).

However, more than half of the journalists surveyed say that the internet has not changed their work routines (5.8 out of 10). There are even more who say that they frequently consult the web pages of local organizations and institutions as a source of information (7.5) or their social networks (7.2), or who regularly complete the information from their own sources by consulting to the web pages of local organizations and institutions (7.5) (Table 1).

Furthermore, local journalists blame, above all else, deadline pressure for them not having enough time to check the information (7.2). They are also asked if they try to include words that are trending on search engines and social networks in the headlines and lead paragraph of the news they produce. Less than half answer yes (4.8) (Table 1).

These journalists were also asked to identify the origin of disinformation in the local sphere and the proportion, from highest to lowest, was the following: audiences on social networks (70%), lobbies on social networks (60%), the communications departments of political institutions (45%), specialized associations and pressure groups (30%) and, lastly, the communications departments of companies (30%) that they argue generate the least misinformation (Table 2).

In comparison, when asked, on a scale of 1 to 10 how often they receive some type of pressure when trying to do fact-finding journalism, the results were the following. The most popular answer was pressure from companies and advertisers (5.7 on average), followed by political pressure (5.6), pressure from the audience (5.5), social pressure (4.5) and that from the management of their media outlet (3.5) (Table 3).

Table 1. Level of agreement with the following affirmations (scale 1 to 10)

Level of agreement with the following affirmations (scale 1 to 10)	Average
I frequently consult the websites of local organizations and institutions as an information source.	7,5
I frequently consult the social networks of organizations and institutions as an information source.	7,2
I travel increasingly less to events. Instead, I usually follow them via streaming from the newsroom.	4,0
I am still seeking direct, in-person contact with the sources.	7,9
I usually complete the information from the sources with documentation on the web page of organizations and institutions.	7,5
There is more deadline pressure, meaning I have less time to check the information.	7,2
I try to include trending words in the headlines and lead paragraph of the news that I write.	4,8
I don't trust information found on the internet because there is so much disinformation.	7,0
My routines haven't changed.	5,8

Table 2. If you had to point out the origin of disinformation at the local level, which sources are the most prevalent?

If you had to point out the origin of disinformation at the local level, which sources are the most prevalent?	
	%
Social media audiences.	70,0
Social media lobbies.	60,0
The communications departments of political institutions.	45,0
Specialized associations and pressure groups.	30,0
The communications departments of companies.	15,0

Lastly, journalists from local and regional media were asked about the news sections in which they believe that disinformation occurs most frequently at the local level. Over half said that it occurs in sections of national politics (55%) and half local politics (50%). 40% believe that disinformation is prevalent in stories on international politics, and the same for news on society in general. This was followed by sections on sports (20%), health and well-being (15%), economy (10%) science and technology (5%) and finally, education (5%) (Table 4).

Table 3. How often do you receive some kind of pressure from the following areas when you carry out fact-finding journalism? (scale from 1 to 10)

How often do you receive some kind of pressure from the following areas when you carry out fact-finding journalism? (scale from 1 to 10)	MEDIA
Political pressure	5,6
Social pressure	4,5
Pressure from the audience	5,5
Pressure from companies and advertisers	5,7
Pressure from the management of your media outlet	3,5

Table 4. Which news sections do cases of disinformation frequently occur at the local level? (multiple answers accepted)

Which news sections do cases of disinformation frequently occur at the local level? (multiple answers accepted)	%
National politics	55,0
Local politics	50,0
International politics	40,0
Society	40,0
Sports	20,0
Health and well-being	15,0
Economics	10,0
Science and technology	5,0
Education	5,0

4   Conclusions

Firstly, the results of this survey clearly indicate that majority newspaper journalists at the provincial, local and regional levels lack of training needed in the fight against disinformation. The results also highlight that these media companies, for the most part, haven't provided their journalists with the necessary resources and verification tools to combat disinformation.

Furthermore, though almost half of these journalists state that the rise of the internet did not drastically change their work routines, with even more stating that they continue to go, in person, to primary sources, many also admit that the pressure for immediacy means that they go to digital resources to get extra information. This shows a progressive and

pronounced trend towards media hybridization, in which traditional media increasingly turn to the internet and social networks as sources of information.

However, it is also on the internet and social networks where these journalists believe that disinformation is most prominent, occurring both in the institutional and political sphere, as well as in the political sections (national, local and international). All of this is linked to the pressure exerted on these journalists by political forces, well as by private sector companies, advertisers. This pressure also comes from audience themselves, to whom local journalists, having close links to and operating within their communities, are likely to feel particularly connected to.

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