



Factchequeado: Fake News in Spanish Knows No Borders

Teresa Puente^(✉)

California State University Long Beach, Long Beach, CA, USA

Teresa.Puente@csulb.edu

Abstract. During the COVID-19 pandemic there was another type of pandemic surging, an infodemic, according to the World Health Organization. The impact of disinformation, sometimes called fake news, has been significantly researched. But there has been little research on disinformation in Spanish and how it spreads within Spanish-speaking communities in the U.S. who are especially vulnerable to disinformation as there are few fact checking sources in Spanish in the U.S. Latinos also experienced higher rates of Covid infections and deaths in the pandemic and informing this community of fake news around the vaccine and health was essential. This case study examines the efforts of a fact checking initiative called “Factchequeado,” which aims to stop the spread of disinformation in Spanish in the U.S.

Keywords: Disinformation · fake news · Spanish · Latinos · United States · fact checking

1 Introduction

According to the World Health Organization, an infodemic “is too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response.” Misinformation and disinformation are problematic as they both have inaccurate information. Misinformation happens when the information inaccuracy is unintentional, such as when journalists make fact errors, such as wrong names or dates, that are later corrected [1]. Disinformation, as defined by [2], is “intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals” This is more commonly known as “fake news.” A Pew Research Center study [3] conducted just after the 2016 election found 64% of U.S. adults believe fake news stories caused a great deal of confusion. Also, 23% said they had shared fabricated political stories themselves, sometimes by mistake and sometimes intentionally. Four-in-ten of those surveyed (39%) felt very confident that they could recognize news that is fabricated and another 45% felt somewhat confident. Overall, about a third (32%) of people in the U.S. said they often see political news stories online that are made up. This study looked at English speakers.

2 Related Work

There has been little research on disinformation in Spanish as it spreads in the U.S. However, [4] examined Spanish-language disinformation in the United States related to the 2020 election leading up to the January 6 insurrection. They looked at *nosmintieron.tv*, a Spanish-language conspiracy website. They contextualized right-wing disinformation from a cultural perspective and how it could help explain why some portion of Latina/o/x voters feel an affinity for those ideas. Around 26% of Latinos identify as Republican or Republican leaning [5]. Regardless of political party, Spanish speakers are vulnerable to fake news. Social media platforms have struggled to adjust their content moderation approach for Spanish-language disinformation [6]. The social media sites are not monitoring for fake news in Spanish and other languages as much as they are in English. According to the U.S. Census, [7], there are almost 42 million Spanish speakers in the United States, more than some Latin American countries. The danger of fake news is that it spreads faster than the truth [8]. Found that falsehoods diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information. They also found the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information.

Online ‘fake news’ is an existential threat to democracy, not because most people believe false content, but because of the damaging effect it has on trust among citizens and their faith in democratic institutions representing them, according to a new study [9, 10]. Concluded that fake news has become a weapon that some people use for their own benefit. Some Latinos believed disinformation that U.S. President Joe Biden was a radical socialist [6].

Therefore, journalism and fact-checking are now more important than ever for fighting for the truth. At the start of the pandemic Latinos also were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 in terms of infections and deaths [11]. So informing this community about fake news can impact personal health and even life or death. There are more than 74 active fact checking sites in the U.S., according to the Duke Reporters’ Lab [12]. Some of the fact checking sites that publish in English in the U.S. include Factcheck.org, Politifact and Snopes. Several news organizations and newspapers also regularly publish fact checks including CNN, National Public Radio and the New York Times. Of the 74 active fact checking sites, Duke has identified just three sources of fact checking in Spanish in the U.S. - Telemundo’s T Verifica, El Detector from Univision and Factchequeado.

Fake news knows no borders. During the pandemic the world saw fake news stories go viral largely driven by social media [13]. The spread of fake news became such a problem that government agencies across the world introduced and applied several measures to slow the spread. This included urging the public to authenticate dubious news using fact-checking websites and promoting the dangers of fake news through online media. But even though there are no borders, the Spanish-speaking population is more vulnerable because most of the fact checking sites in the U.S. publish in English. This case study focuses on Factchequeado, a unique initiative aimed at combating the spread of misinformation in Spanish in the U.S., focusing on Spanish speakers in the U.S.

2.1 History of Factchequeado

An initiative called Factchequeado was founded in 2022 to address the spread of disinformation in Spanish in the U.S. Their goal is to form networks, train journalists and counter disinformation in Spanish within the U.S. Factchequeado is an initiative of Maldita.es, a nonprofit fact checking site founded in Spain in 2014 by Clara Jiménez Cruz, and Chequeado, based in Argentina, the first fact checking site in South America founded in 2010 by Laura Zommer. Factchequeado's funders include the Google News Initiative and the ABIM Foundation. Their goal is to verify disinformation that spreads on social networks such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp and Telegram as well as in mass media news and newspapers. The goal is to help the Spanish-speaking public in the U.S. identify what is true or false, based on evidence or false context. "We see that this information has no borders, this misinformation fabricated in the U.S. comes to Spain and to Latin America, and misinformation fabricated in Spain and Latin America is probably reaching the U.S. as well," Jiménez said [14].

They have more than 40 partners, including news media in Spanish and English in the U.S., and universities. Among the partners are Conecta Arizona, El Nuevo Día, El Tiempo Latino, FactCheck.org, Politifact and more. They send the partners two to three emails per week with some of the top disinformation highlights.

2.2 Ranking Verification

Factchequeado identifies disinformation that appears in times of crisis such as attacks, natural disasters, war, election fraud as well as what impacts public health. Factchequeado decides what to verify based on two main factors, virality and danger. They look for disinformation that may surge more than 10 times in an hour, that has hundreds of shares on social media or that has been shared by a public figure or in a mass media outlet with a large public. They do not publish disinformation that has not had a large impact unless it is considered a dangerous situation.

They also have a ranking system of verification:

False

The shared content is demonstrably false and has been independently verified.

Needs Context

Part of the shared information may coincide with certain facts but intentionally or not it has been manipulated to generate a specific message.

True

The shared information is proven true and can be confirmed with dated sources that are real and confirmed. They only verify truths when there are questions of doubt within the community.

There is no proof

It is impossible to verify the information

Factchequeado selects articles, audio, video and more from social media networks and through private messages sent by members of the public.

3 Methodology

This case study used coding to quantify and complete a content analysis of headlines of stories published by Factchequeado from January 2022 through April 2023. It examined three questions:

Q1: What were the most common categories of disinformation in Spanish identified by Factchequeado?

Q2: What were the specific subjects of disinformation in Spanish debunked by Factchequeado?

Q3: Was the disinformation in Spanish they identified about general news topics, or more specifically about the Latino community?

The analysis coded one data set of more than 650 articles published by Factchequeado between January 2022 and April 2023. This data set, provided by Factchequeado, grouped the articles they published into two categories “Verificaciones” or “Verificaciones” and explainers “Te Explicamos” or “We Explain.” The stories were tagged in Spanish by topic including health (salud), politics (política), science (ciencia), war (guerra), social media (social), consumer alerts (consumo), scams (scam), personalities (personajes), environmental disasters (desastres ambientales), gender (género), legislation (legislación), food (alimentación), terrorism (terrorismo), migration (migración) and animals (animales).

4 Findings and Discussion

Q1: What were the most common categories of disinformation in Spanish identified by Factchequeado?

The author coded and tabulated the headlines and found the most common categories of disinformation that Factchequeado identified during this 16-month period were about health, science, politics and social media (Table 1).

4.1 Health

Around 20% of articles published by Factchequeado were coded as health stories. Some of the headlines were: *¿Qué sabemos sobre los supuestos beneficios para la salud de la hierba ashwagandha? Falta evidencia científica sólida que los respalde* or “What do we know about the supposed health benefits of the herb ashwagandha? There’s a lack of scientific evidence to back it up.” Other headlines were: “No, no tienes que apagar tu celular ‘hoy en la noche’ por la radiación o los rayos cósmicos” or “No you don’t have to turn off your cell ‘tonight’ due to radiation or cosmic rays;” and “No, beber agua antes de irse a dormir no evita un derrame cerebral o ataque al corazón” or “No, drinking water before going to bed won’t prevent a brain hemorrhage or a heart attack (Table 2).”

Table 1. Articles on health

Total Number of Articles	Health/Salud
652	129

Table 2. Articles on Science

Total Number of Articles	Science/Ciencia
652	112

Table 3. Articles on Politics

Total Number of Articles	Politics/Política
652	155

4.2 Science

Around 17% of the articles were coded as science stories. Here were some of the headlines: “Qué dice la ciencia sobre las supuestas propiedades del vinagre de sidra de manzana para adelgazar” or “What does science say about the supposed properties of apple vinegar to help lose weight”; and “Es falso que el 5G causa ‘falta de oxígeno’ y ‘envenenamiento por radiación’” or “It’s false that 5G causes a ‘lack of oxygen’ and ‘radiation poisoning;” and “No, la viruela del mono no es un efecto secundario de las vacunas COVID-19” or “No the monkeypox virus is not a secondary effect of the COVID-19 vaccine.” Additionally, 23 articles were tagged both as science and health (Table 3).

4.3 Politics

Around 24% of the stories were about politics. The political topics mentioned included abortion, gun violence, Jan. 6 Capitol attack, the war in Ukraine and the U.S. Supreme Court. Here are some of the headlines: “Actualizada: 5 desinformaciones y datos sobre el asalto al Congreso, la Presidencia y el Tribunal Supremo de Brasil” or “Update: Five fake stories about the assault on Congress, the presidency and the Supreme Court of Brazil;” “No, este video de Zelenski no muestra drogas sobre su mesa ni fue borrado” or “No, this video of Zelenski doesn’t show drugs on his table, nor was it erased;” and “No, Biden no confundió al Papa con el jugador de béisbol afroamericano Satchel Paige,” or “No, Biden did not confuse the Pope with the African American baseball player Satchel Paige (Table 4).”

4.4 Social Media

Around 12% of the headlines focused on stories about social media. Some of the headlines were: “7 desinformaciones que circulan en Telegram sobre la “Agenda 2030” de la

Table 4. Articles on Social Media

Total Number of Articles	Social Media/Social
652	81

Table 5. Articles on Vaccines

Total Number of Articles	Vaccine
100	6

ONU” or “7 fake stories circulating on Telegram about the Agenda 2030 of the United Nations;” “No, estas personas no son ingenieros de Twitter despedidos por Elon Musk” or “No, these people are not Twitter engineers fired by Elon Musk;” and “No, Los Simpsons no predijeron la caída de Silicon Valley Bank: es un montaje” or “No, the Simpsons did not predict the fall of the Silicon Valley Bank: it’s a montage.”

Q2: What were the specific subjects of disinformation in Spanish debunked by Factchequeado?

A second set of data coded by the author looked more closely at 100 articles published from Jan. 1, 2023 to April 11, 2023. The data set was compiled using headlines from the Factchequeado website published under the tab “Verificaciones” or “Verifications.” This author created more specific subject categories including COVID, world leaders, countries, Latinos and oddities. The second content analysis was meant to identify more specific people, places and things that Factchequeado published articles about (Table 5).

4.5 Vaccine

Of the smaller data set of 100 articles, 6% of the articles mentioned the COVID-19 vaccine. Some of the headlines were: “No, las transfusiones de sangre no transfieren la vacuna contra el COVID-19,” or “No, blood transfusion do not transfer the COVID-19 vaccine;” “La muerte de un cantante de country no tuvo relación con la vacuna contra el COVID-19” or “The death of a country star had nothing to do with the COVID-19 vaccine;” and “No, Magic Johnson no contrajo el VIH por una vacuna, como se afirma en un video que circula en redes sociales” or “No, Magic Johnson did not contract HIV from a vaccine, as a video circulating on social media claims (Table 5).”

4.6 World Leaders

From this smaller data set of 100 articles, U.S. President Joe Biden was mentioned in 10% of the articles. Other world leaders or figures mentioned included Former President Donald Trump, Pope Francis, the Dalai Lama, Bill Gates, Texas Gov. Greg Abbot, Florida Sen. Ted Cruz, Mexico President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and the late Che Guevara (Table 6).

Table 6. Articles on World Leaders

Total	Joe Biden	Donald Trump	Bill Gates	Pope Francis	Dalai Lama	Greg Abbot	Ted Cruz	Che Guevara	AMLO
100	10	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	2

Table 7. Articles about Countries

Total Articles	EE.UU.	Ukraine	China	Canada	Turkey	Brasil	Mexico
100	6	3	3	3	4	2	1

Table 8. Articles about Social Media

Total Articles	Twitter	WhatsApp	TikTok	Instagram	AI
100	3	3	2	1	1

Table 9. Articles about Oddities

Total Articles	UFOs	Earthquakes	meteorites	lightning
100	6	3	1	

4.7 Countries

The country mentioned the most was the United States at 6%. Also mentioned were the Ukraine (Ucrania), China, Canada, Turkey, Brazil and Mexico (Table 7).

4.8 Social Media Platforms/Technology

Among the social media platforms mentioned were Twitter at 3%, WhatsApp, TikTok and Instagram. The technology mentioned included AI (inteligencia artificial), deep fakes, video and photos (Table 8).

4.9 Oddities

There also were mentions of UFOs (ovnis, objetos voladores) at 6% and other topics such as meteorites, earthquakes and lightning (rayo) (Table 9).

Q3: Was the disinformation in Spanish they identified about general news topics, or more specifically about the Latino community?

This final question examines whether the articles published by Factchequeado specifically mentioned migration or immigration and or Latinos. Most Latinos in the U.S. are U.S. citizens [15] but immigration is a topic of specific interest to this community with more than half agreeing the immigration system in the U.S. needs an overhaul [16] (Table 10).

4.10 Immigration

Less than 5% of the articles from the larger data set of more than 650 articles were about immigration or migration. One headline “No, DACA no ha sido cancelado: una cuenta

Table 10. Articles about Immigration

Total Number of Articles	Migration/Migración
652	27

Table 11. Articles about Latinos

Total Number of Articles	Latinos/Hispanics
652	2

falsa de TikTok que se hace pasar por una abogada de inmigración publica video de 2021” explained that a so-called attorney claimed on TikTok that DACA was canceled. Another story “No, los inmigrantes con más de 3 meses en EE. UU. no “cumplen” los requisitos para recibir los cupones de alimentos” explained that immigrants with more than three months in the U.S. did not meet the requirements for food stamps. A story “No, Biden no “regala” miles de smartphones a migrantes, como titula un portal conservador” explained that President Biden did not give thousands of smart phones to migrants as claimed by a conservative website (Table 11).

4.11 Latinos

Even though Factchequeado combats disinformation in Spanish, few of their articles specifically mention Latinos or Hispanic. Only two of the articles from the larger data set of more than 650 articles mentioned Latinos or hispanos in the headlines. One story headline “Necesita contexto la frase del candidato republicano de Nevada, Adam Laxalt, “creo que las buenas noticias son que los negocios hispanos nunca reabrieron”: se refería a que ahora pueden culpar a los demócratas por eso” was about a reported statement by Nevada Republican Adam Laxalt, that he claimed it is good news is that Hispanic businesses never reopened during the pandemic. This was used by the campaign of Latina U.S. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto (D-Nevada). But it lacked the context that Laxalt blamed Democrats for Hispanic businesses closing during the pandemic. The other story “Cómo está afectando el COVID-19 a los latinos: cifras de vacunación, hospitalizaciones y muertes” was specific to Latinos was in the category of “Te Explicamos” or “We Explain.” It was about how Latinos are impacted by COVID-19, including deaths, hospitalizations and vaccine rates.

5 Conclusion

The majority of fake news debunked by Factchequeado focused on health, science, politics and social media. Even though this initiative targets the 42 million Spanish speakers in the U.S. less than 5% of the fake news stories focused on Latinos and or immigration. Still, Factchequeado plays a vital role in debunking fake news that

circulates in Spanish and impacts Latinos overall. They tackled a range of topics that are of interest to Latinos such as health, immigration and politics. However, most of the articles they published don't focus on the Latino community specifically but still Latinos are susceptible to fake news stories on any topic. This Factchequeado initiative is unique in that it identifies and disseminates the disinformation in Spanish in the U.S., where Spanish is the most spoken language after English, and there is a need for more fact checking in Spanish. Disinformation has been defined by Arthur Gregg Sulzberger, the chairman of The New York Times Company, as an “existential threat” that undermines pluralism [17]. “The undermining of pluralism is probably the most dangerous thing that can happen in a democracy,” Sulzberger said at Davos’ World Economic Forum in January 2023. More efforts should be made to stop and study the impact of fake news specifically in Spanish.

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