

Introduction

The disinformation society: The impact of fake news on the public sphere

Guest-edited special issue:

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Technological communications processes have undergone major changes, which has given rise to a wide, diverse and open media system. News cycles have got faster, the media's importance has reduced, communicators have been transformed and new broadcasters have emerged, significantly increasing the audience's ability to select what it wants. In this context, the concept of disinformation has acquired a particular relevance, since the non-stop stream of messages with such diverse sources, objectives and routes give rise to erroneous, biased or false information; occasionally these errors are involuntary (misinformation), but often the explicit purpose is to confuse the receiving public (disinformation) and transmit false messages – fake news – to achieve a specific result, such as guiding and shaping public opinion.

Disinformation is now one of the main problems that accompanies any major conflict or news event. Electoral processes, wars, COVID-19 and the fight against climate change are all events that travel around the public sphere nowadays surrounded by many messages of all types from diverse sources – often unidentifiable – that the public have access to by various means. This process, where the importance of the media continues to fall, is part of a recomposition of the communicative ecosystem that gives rise to new ways of influencing the public, new forms of social interaction and, finally, a perception of reality that is no longer as exploited by the media as is once was. Which does not mean that the influence of new media and means of communication gives rise to a public sphere that is necessarily more plural and diverse; in fact, it is the opposite judging by the conclusions of the studies being carried out in this regard, and also in this single-topic issue.

The prevailing disinformation generates noise and informative distortion, and is easily filtered in a scenario where the public sphere is split and divided into multiple smaller, uniform and polarised public spheres. The formal pluralism that the media fostered is at least being replaced by a multitude of discussion spaces characterised by uniformity and opacity, either because the dissonant messages do not reach the public or – in most cases – because, even if they do arrive, the public rejects them.

'Comunicar 72', edited with the support of the Generalitat Valenciana R&D project AICO2020/224, seeks to investigate the different representations of disinformation and its effects on the media, sources and the public. It contains five research articles that address disinformation from different geographical areas and perspectives that help to understand the role of the three classic communications actors – citizens, politicians and the media – in the disinformation society.

The first two articles that open this issue focus on citizenship and try, on one hand, to study the effects of Spanish users as creators and viewers in the face of online information disorder and, on the other, citizen discourses on disinformation. Gabriela Taddeo, Belinda de Frutos-Torres and María Cruz Alvarado look at the effects of digital content production on information skills to determine whether an active role on social media influences information skills.

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They conclude by suggesting that the creative citizen profile is the variable that contributes the most to reporting false news on social networks.

With the focus on citizens as communicative actors, Lidia Valera-Ordaz, Marina Requena-i-Mora, Dafne Calvo and Guillermo López-García scrutinise the notions and discourses of the Spanish population on disinformation. Based on the discussion groups as a method, the authors investigate how the discourses show a landscape of decline in journalism and the public sphere and how citizens perceive disinformation as a multidimensional phenomenon associated with issues of greater democratic importance than hoaxes being sent over the internet.



Outside the Spanish context, the third text approaches the media role of disinformation and, focusing on the study of Russian disinformation in Eastern Europe, Andreea-Alina Mogoş, Teodora-Elena Grapă, and Teodora-Felicia Şandru focus on media framing of vaccination on the Romanian-language news site Sputnik. Their research shows that specific discursive formulas are associated with the news value of negativity: death, side effects (blood clots, thrombosis, coagulation), restrictions and bans or warnings (serious, risk, panic), while the news value of conflict is associated with the vocabulary of war (defence, battle, gunpowder) and with elitism, well-known actors (state leaders, famous "conspirators") and countries (powerful international actors, significant neighbours).

In this issue's fourth text, Eva Campos-Domínguez, Marc Esteve-Del-Valle and Cristina Renedo-Farpón inspect the "parliamentary disinformation rhetoric on Twitter" using Spanish parliamentarians as political agents of disinformation to delve into the disinformation generated by political elites, who are key subjects in incubating polarising narratives. The authors conclude by pointing out that – despite the volume of disinformation messages on Twitter by parliamentarians being relatively low – both the topic (COVID-19, sex-based violence, migrants or the LGBTI collective) and the tone and lines of discourse they convey in their tweets create guidelines that contribute to information disorder, generating distrust in the institutions and among the parliamentarians themselves.

The issue concludes with a study that attempts to envisage future disinformation patterns based on "Recognition of quality as a prescriber against disinformation". In this article, Dolors Palau-Sampio, Adolfo Carratalá, Raquel Tarullo and Paz Crisóstomo seek knowledge on the skills and abilities to detect low-quality content linked to misinformation by Journalism and Communications students from Argentina, Chile and Spain. In their study, they show that most students find it difficult to accurately identify quality and that this ability is greater in higher-level groups. Similarly, they identify that future journalists overestimate their ability to detect disinformation, whose media consumption mainly comes from digital media and networks.