
RESEARCH/INVESTIGACIÓN

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MONITORING FAKE NEWS IN INSTITUTIONAL SPANISH MEDIA DURING CORONAVIRUS

El seguimiento sobre las fake news en medios institucionales durante el coronavirus en España

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of *fake news* recently impacted as a form of malicious communication; thus, they are considered a tool of the so-called hybrid threats (hostile activities that avoid an armed confrontation). The institutional media have a relevant function as news confirmers (fact-checkers) and as platforms to alert about the negative effect of *fake news*. Due to the crisis caused by the coronavirus, a surge of *fake news* has been observed. There has also been an increase in research interest in the combination of both phenomena. This research has aimed to analyze quantitatively and in parallel both the production of three information channels (press, digital press, and blogs) and the detection of cases of coronavirus in Spain. The confrontation of both dimensions has managed to detect amplification of the activity of the media in connection with the extension of the coronavirus pandemic in Spain. In this way, the potential adaptability of the media to warn about *fake news* in situations of social alarm has been indirectly confirmed.

KEYWORDS: fake news; hybrid menaces; disinformation; media; coronavirus

RESUMEN

El fenómeno de las *fake news* ha impactado recientemente como forma de comunicación malintencionada, no en vano forma parte de las llamadas amenazas híbridas (actividades hostiles que evitan una confrontación armada). Los medios de comunicación institucionales poseen una función relevante como confirmadores de las noticias (*fact-checkers*) y como plataformas para alertar sobre el efecto negativo de las *fake news*. Debido a la crisis originada por el coronavirus se ha constatado un

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repunte de *fake news* y de interés investigador sobre la conjunción ambos fenómenos. Esta investigación se ha propuesto analizar cuantitativamente y en paralelo tanto la producción de tres canales de información (prensa, prensa digital y blogs) como la detección de casos por coronavirus en España. La confrontación de ambas dimensiones ha logrado detectar una amplificación de la actividad de los medios de comunicación en sintonía con la extensión de la pandemia de coronavirus en España. De esta forma, se ha logrado constatar indirectamente la potencial adaptabilidad de los medios de comunicación para alertar sobre las *fake news* en situaciones de alarma social.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *fake news*; amenazas híbridas; desinformación; medios de comunicación; coronavirus

Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

ACOMPANHAMENTO SOBRE AS FAKE NEWS NA MÍDIA INSTITUCIONAL DURANTE O CORONAVÍRUS NA ESPANHA

RESUMO

O fenômeno das fake news tem impactado recentemente como forma de comunicação maliciosa, não em vão forma parte das chamadas ameaças híbridas (atividades hostis que evitam uma confrontação armada). A mídia institucional possui uma função relevante como confirmadores das notícias (fact-checkers) e como plataformas para alertar sobre o efeito negativo das fake news. Devido a crise originada pelo coronavírus foi verificado o aumento das fake news e de interesse investigativo sobre a conjunção de ambos fenômenos. Esta pesquisa tem como finalidade analisar quantitativamente e em paralelo tanto a produção de três canais de informação (imprensa, imprensa digital e blogs) como a detecção de casos por coronavírus na Espanha. A confrontação de ambas dimensões detectou uma amplificação da atividade na mídia em sintonia com a extensão da pandemia de coronavírus na Espanha. Desta forma, se constata indiretamente a potencial adaptabilidade da mídia para alertar sobre as fake news em situações de risco social.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: fake news; ameaças híbridas; desinformação; mídia social; coronavírus

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1. INTRODUCTION

A succinct definition of fake news² indicates that they are “fabricated information that imitates the content of the media in form but not in the organization process or its intention” (Lazer, D.M. et al., 2018, p. 1904)³. Although the concept of fake news is not new (Linkov, Roslycky, and Trump, 2019), it has been in the near present that it has gained relevance especially after the 2016 elections in the USA (McNair, 2017).

Its existence is related to less visible phenomena such as the “coordinated politicization and militarization of information, public distrust of news producers, and even the inability of information and technology platforms” to deal with disinformation (Zimdars and McLeod, 2020, p. 2). For these reasons, fake news is considered one of the tools that are part of hybrid threats (Valaskivi, 2018)⁴, considered as the set of “methods and activities that target the opponent's vulnerabilities” (Hybrid COE)⁵ hoping to achieve results without starting a real war (Valaskivi, K., 2018)⁶.

1.1 Fake news and coronavirus

Fake news represents a potential threat to public health (Waszak, Kasprzycka-Waszak, and Kubanek, 2018) and the COVID-19 pandemic that originated in China has acted as a conducive space for the spread of fake news. Studies carried out by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Nielsen et al., 2020) and the initiatives #SaludsinBulos⁷ and CoronaVirusFact Alliance (Casero-Ripollés, 2020), have corroborated an increase in both the production and the spread of fake news regarding the coronavirus. This dilemma represents a particularly pressing danger in Spanish society since, according to a study by Ipsos, it is the most permeable to fake news at the European level⁸ (Ipsos Global Advisor).

² Although the *Fundación del Español Urgente* recommends the use of the term false news or falsified news to avoid unadapted foreignness, fake news recognizes, in turn, that the English voice is commonly used in the media. <https://www.fundeu.es/recomendacion/noticia-falsa-falseada-fake-news/>

³ A broader perspective (Valaskivi, K., 2018) recognizes that it can be any form of disinformation, propaganda, controversial political perspective, and even bad journalism.

⁴ According to Treverton, Thvedt, Chen, Lee, and McCue (2018), the list of resources available to carry out hybrid threats would be, besides fake news: propaganda, strategic leaks, funding agencies, political parties, organized protest movements, technological tools, economic influence, forms of delegation in an undeclared war, and paramilitary organizations.

⁵ <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats/>

⁶ As Wither (2016) indicates, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation (2014) was labeled by Western analysts as an example of a hybrid strategy due to the diversity and combination of tools that were used (both military and civilian as a disinformation campaign).

⁷ <https://saludsinbulos.com/observatorio/teorias-conspiranoicas-falsos-remedios-covid19/>

⁸ According to a survey carried out in 26 countries, 57% of those surveyed in Spain acknowledged having considered news that was really fake news as truthful. <https://www.ipsos.com/es-es/los-espanoles-los-europeos-que-mas-caen-en-las-trampas-de-las-fake-news>

As a result of such dynamics, recent research interest has emerged focused on this object of study. In a short space of time, numerous works have appeared that have analyzed the impact of false news on Spanish society both in its conception as fake news and in its materialization as a more generic phenomenon known as a hoax (Andreu-Sánchez and Martín-Pascual, 2020; Casero-Ripollés, 2020; García, 2020; Pérez-Dasilva, Meso-Ayerdi, and Mendiguren-Galdospín, 2020).

The perspective of these researches has greatly influenced fact-checking as an antidote to neutralize the harmful effect of fake news. This approach fully coincides with the academic literature devoted to fake news in general (Brandtzaeg, Følstad, Chaparro Domínguez, 2018; Hacıyakupoglu, Hui, Suguna, Leong, and Rahman, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Pavleska, Školokay, Zankova, Ribeiro, and Bechmann, 2018; Tandoc, 2019.) and especially in that oriented towards its use as a tool for hybrid threats (Giorio, 2018; Heinrich, 2020; Haigh, Haigh, and Kozak, 2018; Hybrid COE Expert Pool Meeting On Information, 2020). The fact-checking activity was born with the will to hold the political class responsible for its promises and currently has the mission of making public errors or falsehoods regardless of the source of origin (Amazeen, 2016).

Although there is a diversity of actors dedicated to tracking and confirming the validity of the facts disseminated by the media, the inheritance "of the traditional media continues to be the dominant current in the verification of political facts" (Graves and Cherubini, 2016). As Heinrich (2020, p. 185) indicates, professional journalists continue to be a fundamental piece to provide "reliable news in the information age". Justifying this opinion, the empirical work of Casero-Ripollés (2020) confirmed that the traditional media offered their audiences greater satisfaction with the informative coverage referenced to Covid-19 compared to the consultation of news offered by social networks. This deviation is relevant for two reasons, firstly, because it should be taken into account that fake news is spread preferably through social networks and, secondly, because traditional media have a relevant informative function on public health alarms and the proliferation of fake news.

Influencing this role, the work of Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft (2019) found that news organizations in the US recognize that fake news is a social problem while taking on the challenge of exposing it to the public. This function falls within the scope of media competence since it increases the knowledge of the public about the information production process (Ferrés and Piscitelli, 2012) especially in the face of fake news (Loterio-Echeverri, Romero-Rodríguez, and Pérez-Rodríguez, 2018).

2. OBJECTIVES

The work of this research aims to explore whether the media, especially in its digital aspect (online press and blogs) exercise a dissemination function on fake news

⁹ <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Hybrid-CoE-Trend-Report-4.pdf>

that is quantitatively intensified in the face of a critical situation such as the coronavirus pandemic in Spain. In this way, it hopes to empirically verify whether the media with an institutional and journalistic basis could represent a deterrent tool against disinformation, but not through a specific link between a pandemic and a warning about fake news related to it, but rather as a general and generic exercise increased during the pandemic.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research has proposed the observation of the informative work of the traditional media (printed press and digital press) and part of the content generated by users (blogs) on the phenomenon of fake news during the Covid pandemic that left Spain in a state of alarm at the beginning of the year 2020. This scrutiny has been confronted with the data on the expansion of the pandemic, hoping to detect correlations between the increase in diagnosed cases and the commitment of the traditional media, confirming the nature of fake news, a situation exacerbated during those dates as has been argued above. On the other hand, the analysis limited to the contents on coronavirus and fake news was consciously avoided since an increase in cases in the epidemic would implicitly lead to an increase in news about coronavirus, generating a misleading bond between fake news (in general) and fake news related to the coronavirus.

The choice is justified by the following premises. The academic literature coincides in granting the traditional media a specific relevance against the dissemination of false information, this function can be considered, on the one hand, with the fact-checking activity and, on the other, with the exposure to its audiences of the phenomenon of fake news. As an alternative to traditional media is the generation of content in blogs (many of them managed by news channels) that, despite being products generated individually by users, has not been a channel indicated as the main source in the distribution of fake news.

The universe accepted in the research included all the written press of the Spanish state, 2,951 news portals, and 9,537 blogs. Access to this database was obtained thanks to access to the database of the REBOLD company, a leader in the analysis of communication through data. The time frame began on February 24th, 2020, the date on which the Minister of Health, Mr. Illa, announced that he would meet with those responsible for the health of the autonomous communities to prepare for a possible health crisis due to Covid10. The date to close the framework of the research was June 21st, the day when the Government of Spain declared the end of the state of alarm.

The information retrieval was carried out using the term "fake news" which, as mentioned above, is a generalized expression among the Spanish media.

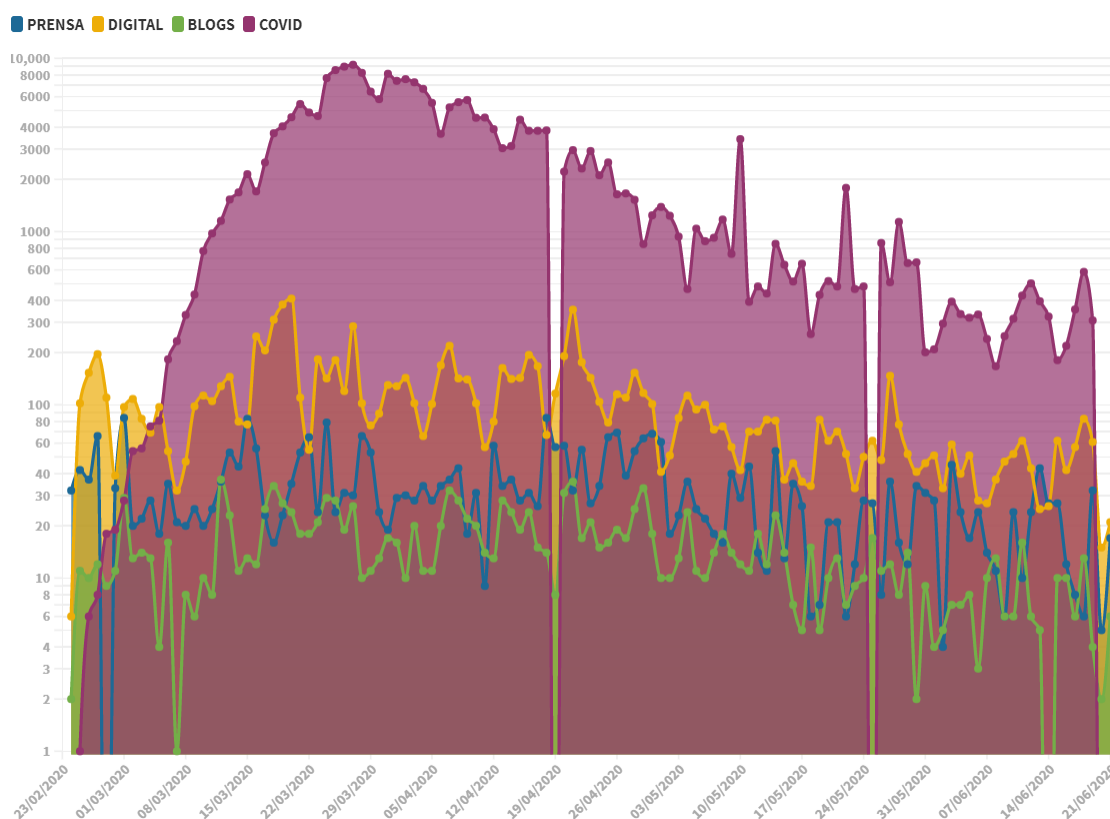
¹⁰ https://cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2020/02/23/economia/1582461654_270631.html

The data was grouped quantitatively and represented graphically with both timeline and grouped columns. The grouping was carried out using a day as a minimum unit of measurement to be able to compare with the advance of the pandemic in the number of cases detected, which were also grouped into 24-hour bands. This information was obtained through the Open Data Portal of the European Union¹¹.

The objective of this research is that the comparison of the evolution in the number of coronavirus cases with the publication of news from official media and blogs allows us to obtain conclusions and potential correlations between both dynamics.

4. RESULTS

Applying the criteria mentioned above, a total of 17,445 contents were recovered, distributed as follows: Press 3,764, Digital Press 11,976, Blogs: 1,705. All these news and blog posts contained the expression "fake news" within the previously announced timeframe (February 24th - June 21st). In the generation of results by timeline, the total number of coronavirus cases detected daily obtained in the Open Data Portal of the European Union was incorporated.



¹¹ <https://data.europa.eu/euodp/es/data/dataset/covid-19-coronavirus-data/resource/55e8f966-d5c8-438e-85bc-c7a5a26f4863>

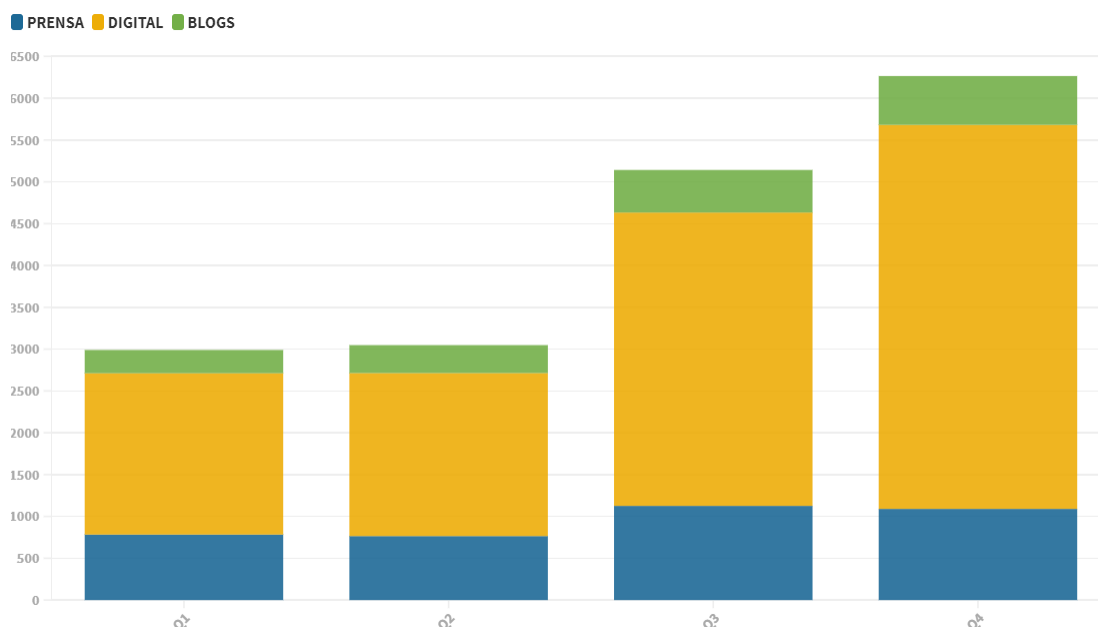
Figure 1. Timeline graph with accumulated data on coronavirus in Spain, press, digital press, and blogs accumulated daily.

Source: Self-made.

As can be seen in the graphical representation by timeline (Figure 1), although there is a more pronounced dynamic in the detection of Covid cases, the produced growth potentially fits with the movement in the publication of news and blogs in which fake news is mentioned. Obviously, the alert about fake news is an informative task continuously carried out by the media, so the elasticity is conditioned to the fact that this is a non-seasonal issue. A situation that does not occur in the coronavirus pandemic, as can also be seen in the graph.

Proof of this is that the data of detected cases indicate days with 0 cases¹² at the beginning and the end of the analyzed period, while in the publication of content there is only one day without blog posts with the keyword *fake news* (channel, on the other hand, with the lowest production of the three analyzed).

To corroborate this point, an organization into quartiles was applied taking as a reference the total number of cases detected. The quartile distribution represents the division of a set of numerically ordered data into four equal parts. The four parts obtained allowed us to observe the total of the press, digital press, and blog content generated quantified in those days, which represent 25% of fewer cases detected by the pandemic. In the same way, the rest of the bands are organized from less to more cases of coronavirus.



¹² There is the situation of the existence of negative records due to the updating of data by the Spanish Government.

Figure 2. Bar graph with accumulated data from the press, digital press, and blogs ordered according to quartiles of coronavirus data in Spain.

Source: Self-made.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the representation by quartiles indicates a positive correlation between the number of cases detected and content generated by the media referring to fake news. That is, although this research has not focused on the generation of content about fake news and coronavirus (content that explicitly refers to fake news about the pandemic), it is evident from a quantitative perspective that the quartiles of coronavirus cases lead to the same organization of volume of content on fake news. The first quartile with fewer cases of coronavirus is in turn the block with the least content generated with mention of fake news. This same situation corresponds to the second quartile and is especially accentuated with the third and fourth quartiles showing an organization that fully corresponds to the growth of cases in the Spanish state.

It should be noted, however, that, specifically in the press, the fourth quartile of coronavirus cases in this medium indicates a slightly lower result compared to the third quartile, partially breaching the general dynamics according to which, the more cases of coronavirus detected, the more media content about fake news is generated. In other words, between the third and fourth quartiles of coronavirus cases, the total number of press publications on fake news decreases slightly while it increases and corroborates the trend in digital press and blogs.

The in-depth analysis of this dissonance allowed us to notice that it is due to a set of coincidences that occurred on April 18th. On that date, there was an unusual spike in publications due to the replication of national content in the regional headlines of *El País* (3 replicas), *El Mundo* (27 replicas), and due to the same phenomenon in the headlines of the Joly publishing group (9 replicas in their Andalusian press headlines). Due to this coincidence, a total of 27 identical impacts were generated but counted as unique, which partially distort the results but which, taken into account, reaffirm the general trend: more cases of coronavirus, more content in the media about fake news.

On the other hand, as can be seen in the graph by timeline (figure 1), there were two days with negative data regarding the number of cases detected. This situation occurred due to the updating of incomplete data by the Government of Spain. The organization by quartiles was carried out recognizing these data as valid by verifying that their treatment as outliers and their elimination from the calculation of quartiles did not offer significant changes in the final results¹³.

In short, the result through the organization of quartiles indirectly indicates that the media amplified their informative role regarding fake news based on the advance

¹³Specifically, the organization of quartiles with or without outliers offered these results: Q1 326.5/332, Q2 859/880, Q3 3541.5/3667.

of the pandemic in Spain. This same indication is also observed, although less markedly, in the graphical representation by timeline (Figure 1).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Previous academic literature positions the institutional media as the first interested in preventing the spread of fake news. On the other hand, the crisis experienced in Spain by the coronavirus represents a suitable space to research whether situations with this level of social concern are, besides a vein for fake news (as several works have certified), an incentive for the media to take on a warning mechanism role to avoid falling into such malicious maneuvers.

The quantification of news and posts published in Spain during the time of maximum impact of the pandemic indicates a rebound in the generation of content in which the phenomenon of fake news is mentioned. This increase is especially significant if one takes into account that the recovery of information was not limited to the relationship between coronavirus and fake news, since it is self-evident that an increase in news about coronavirus implicitly carries an increase in news about coronavirus and fake news, taking into account that concern about fake news is not seasonal or cyclical.

In this way, it can be affirmed that, regardless of the origin of the false information about the coronavirus, the institutional media and blogs assumed, in a broad sense, the responsibility of informing and alerting about fake news during the phase of greatest impact of the pandemic. A result of this nature empirically reaffirms the self-assigned mission of the media as a tool to increase the alertness of citizens. A mission, on the other hand, which had already been argued in previous works (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Graves and Cherubini, 2016; Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft, 2019).

Besides this, it indicates that the alert exercised by the media is a dynamic resource regarding threatening situations or crises to counteract misinformation beyond its fact-checking function. As mentioned above, the public, and specifically the Spanish, is especially receptive to the misinformation of fake news, which is a vulnerability that can be exploited within the context of hybrid threats.

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