

## Professional perception of the journalistic sector about the effect of disinformation and fake news in the media ecosystem

Valoración profesional del sector periodístico sobre el efecto de la desinformación y las *fake news* en el ecosistema mediático

Avaliação profissional do setor jornalístico sobre o efeito da desinformação e fake news no ecossistema midiático

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## Abstract

Disinformation and fake news are phenomena prior to the birth of social media, but with their consolidation they have become more visible and numerous, especially due to the ease of their creation and dissemination. Journalism has a fundamental mission as a shield against this problem and as a creator of truthful news and content, but for this it needs to maintain credibility among society, which is very inclined to doubt traditional media. This article investigates the perception that professional journalists have about the influence of these two phenomena —disinformation and hoaxes—, as well as content verification mechanisms —fact checking— in the performance of the journalistic profession and its future evolution. The procedure chosen for data collection consisted of 20 interviews with journalists who currently practice the profession in Spain, with the aim of offering us a panoramic view of the actions of journalism against disinformation and fake news, as well as what their relationship with the audience. The results show a positive and firm attitude of the profession to fight against false news, claiming its professionalism, valuing the verification of the contents and the role of trusted information sources, and a critical vision in which it is put the focus on the need for both the media and viewers to put more effort and interest in being well informed. It is also recognized that we are facing a phenomenon that can only be partially solved given its complexity.

**Keywords:** Communication; Journalism; Disinformation; Social media; Fake news; Fact-checking

## Resumen

La desinformación y los bulos son fenómenos comunicativos anteriores al nacimiento de las redes sociales, pero con la consolidación de estas se han hecho más visibles. El periodismo tiene una misión fundamental como escudo contra esta problemática y como creador de noticias y contenidos veraces, pero para ello necesita mantener la credibilidad entre la sociedad, muy proclive a dudar de los medios tradicionales. El presente artículo indaga en la percepción de los profesionales de la comunicación sobre la influencia de estos dos fenómenos —la desinformación y los bulos—, así como de los mecanismos de verificación de contenidos —el *fact checking*— en el desempeño de la profesión periodística y su evolución futura. El procedimiento elegido para la recolección de datos consistió en 20 entrevistas a periodistas que ejercen la profesión en España, con el objetivo de que nos ofrezcan una visión panorámica de la actuación del periodismo contra la desinformación y las *fake news*, así como su relación con la audiencia. De los resultados se desprende una actitud positiva y firme de la profesión para luchar contra las noticias falsas, reivindicando su profesionalidad, valorando la verificación de los contenidos y el papel de las fuentes de información de confianza, y una visión crítica en la que se pone el foco en la necesidad de que tanto los medios como las audiencias pongan más esfuerzo e interés en informarse de manera eficiente. Se reconoce igualmente que estamos ante un fenómeno que solo se puede solucionar de forma parcial dada su complejidad.

**Palabras clave:** Comunicación; Periodismo; Desinformación; Redes sociales; Noticias falsas; Verificación

## Resumo

A desinformação e os boatos são fenômenos anteriores ao nascimento das redes sociais, mas com sua consolidação tornaram-se mais visíveis e numerosos, principalmente pela facilidade de sua criação e disseminação. O jornalismo tem uma missão fundamental como escudo contra esse problema e como criador de notícias e conteúdos verídicos, mas para isso precisa manter a credibilidade junto à sociedade, que está muito inclinada a duvidar da mídia tradicional. Este artigo investiga a percepção que os jornalistas profissionais têm sobre a influência desses dois fenômenos —desinformação e boatos—, bem como mecanismos de verificação de conteúdo —verificação de fatos— no desempenho da profissão jornalística e sua evolução futura. O procedimento escolhido para a coleta de dados consistiu em 20 entrevistas com jornalistas que atualmente exercem a profissão na Espanha, com o objetivo de nos oferecer uma visão panorâmica das ações do jornalismo contra a desinformação e as fake news, bem como qual sua relação com o público. Os resultados evidenciam uma atitude positiva e firme da profissão no combate às notícias falsas, reivindicando o seu profissionalismo, valorizando a verificação dos conteúdos e o papel de fontes de informação fidedignas, e uma visão crítica em que se coloca o foco na necessidade de tanto a mídia quanto os telespectadores a se esforçarem mais e se interessarem em estar bem informados. Reconhece-se também que estamos perante um fenômeno que só pode ser parcialmente resolvido dada a sua complexidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Comunicação; Jornalismo; Desinformação; Redes sociais; Noticias falsas; Verificação

## 1. Introduction

Disinformation and fake news have been around since before the Internet appeared, and thus should not be seen as phenomena linked to the appearance and consolidation of social media. Scientific literature has never shied away from this issue, as shown by studies prior to the boom of the social media, such as the work of Fetzer (2004) or Karlova & Lee (2011). What has changed is the way in which it is propagated, with considerable dependence on technology and speed of diffusion, taking mere seconds to jump to the devices of thousands of users over a wide area. That is why it is seen as a new phenomenon (Burkhardt, 2017; Mayoral *et al.*, 2019). The combination of the creation of false content on social platforms, and its later propagation, also on digital media, is key to its reach being greater than before and that it even gets to people who are not users of such networks (Herrero-Diz *et al.*, 2020).

From this premise journalists have projected the evidence that the social media have had a major impact on their way of working and on how the public perceives their work (Campos-Freire *et al.*, 2016). Active listening (monitorisation) is seen as being vital for facing this change and dealing with the enormous quantity of maliciously misleading information being disseminated in society with no apparent control (Martín-García *et al.*, 2022). It is here that journalism has to deal with that content that has either been misinterpreted, or is directly false (Neuberger *et al.*, 2019; Vázquez-Almendros & Paniagua-Rojano, 2022), as to not do this would run the risk of the audience seeking their information via alternative -unprofessional- channels, which leads to error.

Should trust and credibility be lost, the audience will look for more reliable information in the myriad sources currently available. Models of traditional journalism cannot survive in such a competitive ecosystem unless they provide the added value of information depth (Rodrigo-Alsina & Cerqueira, 2019, p. 234).

A decisive factor to be underlined —affecting the media’s credibility— is the fact that their role is complicated by the need to generate web traffic, sometimes devaluing content in order to favour advertising (Aronczyk, 2020), political, economic or ideological interests. Clickbait and the lack of really attractive headlines to introduce news hardly help to make the quality-seeking audience identify with it (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020).

Before proceeding further, we should point out the difference between the concepts of disinformation and fake news. They are sometimes used as synonyms, although there are some differences between the two.

The term disinformation alludes to those intentional falsehoods disseminated as simulations of news or documents in order to achieve political ends, while the term fake news has become a popular reference in the media to frame the problem as isolated incidents of falsehood and confusion (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, in Salvat, 2021). To complete the definition that clarifies the limits of the two concepts, the European Commission (2018, p. 10) defines disinformation as “false, inexact or misleading information, designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public damage or for financial ends”. However, some authors, propose the unification of this complex phenomenon in a single term, that of misinformation, which covers the different existing types (Magallón, 2020; Rodríguez-Pérez, 2019).

## **1.1. Users’ and journalists’ responsibility against disinformation processes**

So-called citizen journalism cannot become a substitute for professional journalism — there is no comparison—. And, although it may be more eye-catching over the short term, the real professionals have to be the ones transmitting credibility. However, there needs

to be a real interest among the audience in knowing the truth, and that requires an effort and the dedication of time to choose adequate sources. In a polarised environment, people tend to share content without bothering to check if it is true or false, when such content reaffirms their beliefs (Preston *et al.*, 2021).

Although social bots, those false profiles that act as apparently truthful accounts, are a fundamental element of the propagation of deliberately malicious content, and have great influence and capacity to change minds, it is still real users who share and virtualize most fake news (Weedon *et al.*, 2017). The receptor is an essential pillar in the battle against fake news, and “it is necessary to facilitate the acquisition of the media competences that allow them to access, understand, analyse, evaluate and distinguish between real and false information” (Alonso-González, 2019, p. 49). That is, it means the audience differentiating between reliable and unreliable broadcasters and instilling in them a sense of their responsibility in the communication process, which goes beyond being a mere recipient of news content. However, despite the numerous analyses that stress the need for media literacy, news professionals themselves perceive that this is not taking place, and that its application among the population is not currently sufficient (Dornaletche *et al.*, 2015; Martín-García, 2021).

In especially conflictive situations disinformation grows exponentially, and therefore the swift action of journalists becomes imperative. This means not only belief in a partially or totally false news item, but the consequences it may have. The unrest in Catalonia on October first (Pérez-Curiel & Velasco-Molpeceres, 2020), the prodigious number of messages concerning the Covid-19 pandemic (Almansa-Martínez *et al.*, 2022; Moscadelli *et al.*, 2020), or the 2020 elections in the USA and the Capitol assault (Calvillo *et al.*, 2021; Rossini *et al.*, 2021), are recent examples which, due to their repercussion and as they took place in misleading contexts, demonstrate the need for credible journalism which is turned to as the exclusive news solution.

## 1.2. Proposal for multi-disciplinary solutions

We are faced by a complex issue, covering so many areas that it generates a great number of proposed solutions from different sources, although it can be observed that these are currently insufficient and require the combination of a large amount of technology with a traditionalist perspective that puts old journalistic values into practice (García-Marín, 2021). Using only technology and artificial intelligence could dehumanise an issue that has a human origin.

We should underline the fact that that professional journalists reacted swiftly when the number of cases of disinformation began to damage their image, creating the figure of the fact-checker. That the sector itself has the capacity to mitigate the damage caused by the phenomenon is a responsibility which cannot be shirked. “The incorporation of the latest

technology to news verification processes has meant a step forward in the improvement of news quality and public debate” (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2019, p. 10).

Various solutions have been proposed to try to fight this global ‘enemy’ which affects institutions and people (López-Borrull *et al.*, 2018). These include: 1) Initiatives from the EU in cooperation with the media, by means of codes of Best Practices (Martens *et al.*, 2018); 2) legislation in many EU countries, such as France and Germany; 3) proposals for using AI and algorithms created by the platforms where the fake news appears, such as Facebook (Meta), Twitter, or Google; 4) limiting the number of messages re-sent; 5) giving greater weight to digital literacy, something supported by UNESCO, media such as BBC Reality Checks in the UK, Les Décodeurs in France, EFE Verifica, Newtral and Maldito Bulo in Spain, of whom much has been written in recent years (Almansa-Martínez *et al.*, 2022; Pozo-Montes & León-Manovel, 2020), or 6) granting greater authority to librarians and documentalists. Some authors continue to question whether a definitive formula can be found to control the phenomenon (Rodríguez-Pérez, 2019). Even TikTok, a social platform popular amongst the young (IAB, 2021), is being utilised by fact-checkers and public organs all over the world to unmask fake news. Nevertheless, one should nuance that feedback from the public has hardly been prolific, which suggests that such content is not connecting with its target audience (Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.*, 2021).

The difficulty in striking a balance between introducing obligatory measures concerning vigilance of the Internet, whilst respecting privacy and freedom of speech, cannot be ignored. Despite the many well-intentioned initiatives for fighting disinformation and fake news, certain legislative aspects which may clash with the measures have to be taken into consideration (Seijas, 2020). Voices have been raised that insist that no technology can deal with the problem and that the only way forward is to handle it on a daily basis and answer it with solid arguments, not algorithms, with journalists as the main actors (Andersen & Obelitz, 2020).

## 2. Material & methods

This study has been designed with a qualitative focus based on Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Gibson & Brown, 2009). We have opted for semi-structured in-depth interviews as the data-gathering method. With the objective of learning professional journalists’ opinions about disinformation, we drew up an interview script of eleven main questions and two secondary ones. The telephone interviews of 11 participants were later transcribed. The other 9 interviewees were contacted online utilising a Google form. The contents of all the interviews were passed through the ATLAS.ti 8.4.3 qualitative analysis tool. The answers have been categorised by the three available hermeneutic units: categories, codes and citations.

## 2.1. Objectives

The principal objective of this study is to learn the vision that Spanish professional journalists have of the context of disinformation and fake news in the news and media ecosystem. Though there are numerous studies into the question from perspectives of sociology, communication, advertising, fact-checkers, etc., the authors consider that there is considerable room for improvement as regards testing the assessment of one of the key actors in the news process. Given that this is a constantly mutating phenomenon as digital platforms evolve, giving a voice to journalists requires ongoing updating in a context where new platforms and means of communication are appearing, readjusting the way in which the audience demands to be informed, as may happen with TikTok, tending, apart from mere entertainment, towards the dissemination of knowledge on different matters, including that which concerns us in this paper (Martínez-Sanz et al., 2023).

As an initial premise, this study starts from the following Research Questions:

RQ1: How does a journalist assess an environment in which his/her work is questioned, and other, unprofessional sources are valued?

RQ2: What solutions can journalists imagine to reduce disinformation and society's assimilation of fake news?

RQ3: Is fact-checking being accepted as a fundamental element which favours professional journalism?

## 2.2. Selection criteria of journalists and media

The choice of the sample of journalists —and their respective organs and media— was designed to satisfy a series of objective criteria:

- a) Include representation from the three most important types of journalistic media according to the EGM: television, radio and the press.
- b) Include media from different geographical areas. The sample is made up of national, regional and local media, including both generalist and specialist media (sport, music, finance, fashion...), with a maximum of two journalists per medium.
- c) Select entities with active social repercussion which may suffer from or act against the effects of disinformation. News media and other entities of media impact were chosen providing they have a press office or media department staffed by graduates of Communication Science.
- d) Try to find an ideological balance among editorial lines.

Following direct contact with numerous journalists and entities —and adaptation to the established selection criteria—, the sample was as appears below:

Table 1. Journalists participating in this study and the medium or entity they work for

Journalist	Medium
Adrián Angulo	Marca
Alberto Rivas	TVE
Andrea Aguado	OK Diario
Arturo Puente	eldiario.es
Belén Rodrigo	ABC
Carla Sanz	La Sexta
Carlos Llamas	Sporting de Gijón (DIRCOM)
Carmen Aguado	El Norte de Castilla (Palencia)
Dani Martínez	Kiss FM
Emilio Domenech	Newtral
Francisco Egido	014Media
Gabriel González	TVE
Gonzalo Ayuso	El Adelantado de Segovia
Laura Solla	Vogue
Manuel Pacheco	Onda Cero
María Fernández	UNICEF (DIRCOM)
Nacho Barrio	Osoigo
Nacho Sáez	El Día de Segovia
Quique Yuste	Norte de Castilla
Víctor Martín	Expansión

Source: created by the authors

### 2.3. Interview script

In order to meet the objectives cited in section 2.1, design of the interview was predefined along four axes: of a general type to contextualise users' behaviour and topics, fact-checking, social media and any solutions proposed.

**General: Q1.** Which current news items generate most fake news on the social media? **Q2** and **Q2.1.** Does a false story have greater repercussion on the social media than the facts? If so, do you perceive that Internet users are interested in learning the truth or do they tend more towards reaffirming their beliefs without wondering if their media consumption is trustworthy? **Q3.** Do you consider that the fact that the main Internet news media require payment has diminished or increased disinformation levels in society?

**Fact-checking: Q4.** As a journalist, how do you rate fact-checkers' work? Do you feel they are effective in the struggle against fake news? **Q5.** One of the problems a journalist often has is the obligation to quickly publish news as it comes out. What tools do you use



beforehand to check content and guarantee its credibility? **Q6.** Where does your medium find itself in the fight against disinformation and fake news? Do you think it could do more?

**Social media: Q7.** The social platforms have become a source of news for journalists. Do you feel they are a reliable source and really useful for journalists, or on the contrary that they are used too much? **Q8.** Do you perceive more criticism and attacks on journalism on social media when there are cases of disinformation in stories of great repercussion? **Q9** and **Q9.1.** How does professional journalism suffer from the existence of alternative channels of supposed information, such as WhatsApp threads or unchecked content blogs without clearly identified sources? Do you believe that real journalism has lost part of its credibility relative to so-called 'citizen journalism'?

**Solutions: Q10.** Do you see a solution to the disinformation and fake news generated on social media? **Q11.** From a readers'/viewers' point of view, how do you feel they could be persuaded that they should dedicate time to learning the truth and not just believe the first thing they hear? Who should be giving media education?

## 2.4. Codebook

In order to achieve an optimum level of validity and reliability, we have designed an experimental process divided into four phases: 1) Reading and understanding of the interviews in their transcribed version utilising a text processor; 2) In ATLAS.ti, insertion of notes (memos) in those fragments where we detected methodological interest concerning the objectives of the study; 3) annotation and coding, again in ATLAS.ti, we selected citations and the classification of the codes that make up the experimental axis of the study. Finally, 4) a review of both citations and of the codes assigned (18), which led to a recalibration based on the merging of certain codes and in the double coding of certain citations, as their content alluded to two or more of the codes in the study.

Although the names of the members of the sample were not concealed (see table 1), in order to avoid bias in the responses, we guaranteed the interviewees anonymity in the results section. Nonetheless, in the following section we established a basic category to orientate the reader as to the origin of the opinions by each professional's type of media (PRE= digital or printed press; TV= Television; RAD= Radio, OTR= director of communication or fact-checker), and we assigned them a number corresponding to the order of the interviews.

### 3. Results & discussion

Having finished the transcription process and the analysis of the interviews, we broke down the fundamental aspects that their opinions and experience left us, revealing their perception of how disinformation and fake news affect their profession.

#### 3.1. Politics, health, polarisation, and the search for ideas which reaffirm individual beliefs

Immediacy culture is seen by the professionals interviewed as an issue that is difficult to remedy, as made apparent in previous studies such as those of León-Valle & Vélez-Bermello (2021) and Usher (2018). The fact that the consumption of information is rapid, added to the need for the news to be shared with others in that moment, denies the spectator any chance of calm or of questioning whether the source and content are misleading.

The Covid-19 pandemic created a before and after, in that more disinformation and fake news was generated in health matters, as well as in those regarding politics, coinciding with the vision offered by Pozo-Montes & León-Manovel (2020). At times of fear and uncertainty, malicious messages seeking chaos and confusion multiply, making society doubt and choose to listen, on many occasions, to the most spectacular message. The effects and origin of the virus, vaccines, the social and geographical limits that appeared, especially in 2020 and 2021, their relationship with politics... these became subjects where misleading content and half-truths predominated on the social media.

Politics and the search for messages which reaffirm the individual's beliefs are seen as a cause favouring the phenomenon under examination, leading to an absence of debate and criticism. We highlight two of the journalists' responses which represent this tendency.

**PRE/8:** It's political questions because of the enormous polarisation currently and the clear interest in putting down one side or the other. What's more, it's the news where there is most confirmation: the reader just wants to read things that confirm his ideas, without question, and disbelieves everything that goes against them, even if it's true.

**TV/3:** The split into two tribes is really strong in Spain. In the middle of this context is a clearly positioned and polarised audience, receptive to the consumption of fake news without questioning it.

Far from turning to the Internet as a medium full of possibilities regarding access to information, polarisation is a constantly repeated word, one which they live with every day at work, and which is identified as one of the causes of disinformation, as stated by Gallardo-Paúls & Enguix-Oliver (2016), although it is not the only factor. Viewers accept

content if it favours their interests or goes against that which they do not agree with, reaffirming a position over which they do not admit but.

**PRE/9:** Yes, the truth is that there are a lot of radicalised people who don't care about reality, top level politicians, party members, ordinary citizens. They want echoes of their own thoughts. Like they say, don't let the truth ruin your headline.

Other matters that form part of the disinformation landscape are armed conflicts, environmental questions and climate change, immigration, and sport.

### **3.2. The role of journalists and fact-checkers in the struggle against disinformation, and the support they need**

The reach, in terms of numbers of people viewing, of malicious or erroneous content is greater than the later rectification. Under this premise, certified by professional journalists, and in order to minimise the damage caused, the figure of the fact-checker becomes even more necessary, these professionals are in a position to guarantee that a news item is true or false. We asked if they consider such work to be useful and what is their assessment of this now established figure.

**TV/2:** They're effective, but the problem is that there are people who, even after reading verified news, still don't believe it if it doesn't suit them.

They are highly valued among members of the profession, who do not feel they should bear sole responsibility. Support by the media, greater investment, education from a young age and real social interest in learning the truth are vital aspects by means of which the positive effects of fact-checkers would be greater.

Journalism is always centre-stage and gets accused of serving economic and political interests. Journalists, with the fact-checkers among them, are not unaware of this and that their work is questioned by a part of their audience. The hostility hurled at them on platforms such as Twitter, when a news item is disproved and that goes against an individual's beliefs, demonstrates that.

**OTR/13:** I think it's an essential job, although it is true that contrary voices have done a grand job of discrediting the task and it's getting harder to get recognition for the validity of fact checking. **RAD/16:** We have to go a little further, there's still a lot to do [...] There's still a lot of fake news out there and many checkers have been smeared.

Although our focus is on journalists, they work for media which must be called out for responsibility and initiatives against disinformation. Greater resources should be dedicated to fact-checking, both in terms of professionals exclusively dedicated to it and to providing

editorial teams with the tools they need. They suffer as entities, and the lack of credibility leads to a search for answers in other media, often non-journalistic, bringing audience figures down.

**PRE/6:** They're effective, but they should be present in all media. It beggars belief that a lot of national media, especially with big audiences like TV programmes, lack something so elementary.

Each of the journalists interviewed was questioned about the importance attached to the reduction of disinformation in the medium or entity they work for, a variety of results can be observed suggesting there is no single position, but they do share a premise: they could all do more or invest greater resources.

**RAD/16:** You always could and should do more. Anyway, I think this phenomenon is far commoner on the social media than in the traditional media. I'm concerned that a reader sees a headline and gives it credence without caring that it's signed off by a supposed medium that he's never heard of. That happens more and more.

Certain pessimism seems to be setting in, in that, despite the clear progress, a solution still seems to be a long way off.

**PRE/6:** I think the current situation is bad, but that it was worse a few years ago because, luckily, there are some independent media that call out fake news more and more, but more should be done. Even by regulating sanctions of some kind, though with guarantees and caution to prevent witch hunts all over the place.

To finish this section, we should mention that journalism's efforts against disinformation are perceived as useful among the professionals interviewed if society really wants to learn about reality (Thomson *et al.*, 2022). Their opinions continually refer to this issue only being reduced with the population's effort to check facts, look at several sources and not accept just any information as truthful.

**PRE/8:** I prefer an informed reader with some context, a consumer of several media, who goes to reliable sources and is able to differentiate what's true from what clearly isn't. Even then they could be taken in by a false story, but it's far harder to fool them.

### **3.3. Social media as the cause of and solution to the increase in disinformation and falsehoods in the digital setting**

Journalism also feeds off content originally emerging on the social platforms. This brings with it an amplification greater than if the story had stayed only on digital platforms. The proliferation of content has positive elements, such as being aware of an event

and its development in real time. But it may generate confusion at the same time, with doubts about the broadcaster and its truthfulness, as well as a loss of context, which is a consequence of disinformation. The aforementioned swiftness with which events take place does not allow the journalist on occasions to correctly separate news from mere anecdotes, the real from the false, meaning a one-off error can lead to the accusation that the journalist is not doing his/her job properly. Checking facts and selecting trustworthy sources are routines that have to predominate over the 'prize' of being the first to break a story.

**RAD/10:** It's absolutely essential to confirm an item with a source, see if there's an official statement... You can't just believe what appears in another medium without checking it for yourself. It's surprising the mistakes you can make when you repeat what others say without checking. **RAD/16:** It's true that nowadays it's more important to be the first in posting a story than its quality. To guarantee the credibility of an item, the best thing is to get to where it's happening, or, if not, to check it with your sources.

We should make a point of saying that it is not a case of demonising the social media as a source of information for journalists. Reflection by the news professionals suggests advantages and disadvantages, showing that the problem is the misuse of networks or their utilisation as a primary source. The two opinions we have gathered, one positive, the other negative, are representative of this position.

**TV/3:** They are a reliable source provided the right profiles are used. Official accounts utilise the networks as another channel for communication, which can be taken perfectly well as a source of news. A journalist must know what sources to use for work. **PRE/5:** They're really abused. Everything appears first on Twitter now and you often hear about things because they come out there first. I think that can help a journalist, but you have to go further than what's said or seen on Twitter.

Finally, we wanted to test journalists' opinions about the damage the social media can do to the image of the sector. We found a common position which indicates that, from the digital platforms, especially Twitter, there is a contribution to a notable increase in the attacks on and scorn for a profession which is fundamental for society, and that previous research, such as that by Alcalá-Santaella *et al.* (2021), is confirmed by our study.

**PRE/1:** The networks facilitate criticism and its virality. It's easier to organise campaigns of disparagement against media and journalists because they're made for that. **PRE/7:** Journalism is a poorly valued trade both in and outside the profession. There's a perception that anyone can be a journalist, and that's the chief weapon used against our work.

Part of this discredit can be explained by so-called 'citizen journalism' which the interviewees were unwilling to term as such, as they do not consider it to be journalism, contradicting the social value ascribed to it in papers such as those of Salvat (2021) and

Swart *et al.* (2018). The inability to discern between credible news and the opposite, or who deserves credibility, as well as the show-businessing and absence of calm reflexion on the social platforms, are elements that work against professional journalism.

**TV/2:** We're loudspeakers who live alongside many other loudspeakers. The existence of alternative channels is a good thing, the way they're used and what's shared by the different channels is the problem. Not everything goes. **TV/3:** A large part of society can't tell the difference, for different reasons, about where news comes from, so they think that all communication channels are the same.

This paper has tried to offer the current vision held by journalists about their profession, disinformation and fake news. We are aware of the limitations of the study: the sample size does not fully represent the whole of Spanish journalism. However, the selection of media, their prestige and the large audiences they accumulate together, do make the results and the conclusions we offer reliable.

We propose a periodical updating of this vision and its extension to other media as future lines of research, as the speed with which the sector is evolving calls for permanent alert, setting the issue on the table and listening to the real protagonists: the journalists. Moreover, their assessment could be contrasted with that of their audience, to thus offer solutions to a knotty problem.

## 4. Conclusions

The issue we are dealing with has to be handled from a multiple perspective involving journalists and media, citizens and the platforms that take on content that is untrue and which seeks to sow confusion. The professionals who have taken part in this study are aware that users of social media demand immediacy and news that is explained as clearly possible, something which does not favour considered assimilation and rounded knowledge. The ease with which the propagators of false content function—especially towards audiences with corresponding opinions or ideology— is an enemy which cannot be completely defeated but mitigated by means of credible journalism which transmits assurance to society.

The journalists interviewed also focus on the audience, seeing them as responsible for correctly choosing which sources of information offer veracity. Polarisation, the algorithms that show content appealing to the user, and the search for news that reaffirms existing beliefs, and which is shared and assimilated even when it has been officially denied, present us with a landscape that is difficult to deal with, where journalism has to bring its tools into play in order to become one of the preferred broadcasters of information.

Fact-checking by professionals exclusively dedicated to the task is a highly valued responsibility in the profession and should be adopted by the media to avoid making mistakes which put their reputations at risk. Politics, health, sports, immigration... are among the areas producing most hoaxes and disinformation. On occasions, not even a swift rebuttal eliminates them, which leads us to think they are not going to disappear, although all possible resources are used against them.

Social media are thought to be something positive when used efficiently. They should not be demonised, but one should be aware that they are the channels by which fake news travels fastest. Therefore, they cannot be the only source of information for journalism, due to the difficulty in obtaining sufficient data concerning a newsworthy item. Looking to a second source, taking the time needed to verify it, and to communicate it to the audience without just seeking a click or engagement, is a formula which will help professional journalists to impose themselves as a quality and reliable news reference.

Turning again to the research questions, we consider that we have achieved our goal of showing, from the point of view of professional journalists, the information panorama around disinformation. Learning their assessment, their criticism and their proposed solutions were the priorities of this study. We find ourselves facing a media landscape in which there are hardly any publications that focus their content on the most important actors in the news and media process: the journalists. Listening to them in the first person, and not only through global analyses, has allowed us to look more deeply into the state of the question.

## Authors' contribution

**Alberto Martín-García:** Conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, resources, writing-original draft and writing-review and editing. **Álex Buitrago:** Conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing-original draft and writing-review and editing. All authors have read and accepted the published version of the manuscript. Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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