



TECHNOLOGY AND ELECTIONS

Desinformation.
Challenges in the
electoral context
in Paraguay.

Maricarmen Sequera

DISINFORMATION

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TECIC is a NGO founded in 2012, with the mission of defending and promoting human rights in the digital age. Among its main areas of interest are freedom of expression, privacy, access to knowledge and gender on the Internet.

DISINFORMATION. CHALLENGES IN THE ELECTORAL CONTEXT IN PARAGUAY

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, elections have become fertile ground for the dissemination of disinformation. Malicious actors use various tactics to influence public opinion, including the misuse of personal data, polarization, and bots. In addition, a lack of cybersecurity and digital education can increase the vulnerability of individuals towards digital manipulation and violence. In this scenario, the role of the state, civil society, technology companies and journalism is critical to ensure free and fair elections. This research will focus on the different challenges faced in terms of election-time disinformation and how these actors can work together to mitigate its impact and protect the integrity of the electoral process.

The research proposes a public debate on disinformation and political campaigns on the Internet, as a result of a literature review that covers the online political campaign in the 2023 elections. The objective is to explore viewpoints on this controversial topic to address “fake news”¹ or disinformation, which has been at the center of discussions on politics and elections in Paraguay.

Keywords: *disinformation, regulation of intermediaries, freedom of expression, elections.*

1 The author uses the terms disinformation and fake news as synonyms. However, the term disinformation will be preferred in order to better address this topic.

SUMMARY

1.	INTRODUCTION	6
2.	WHAT IS DISINFORMATION?	7
3.	ORIGIN AND BACKGROUND OF DISINFORMATION	9
4.	TYPES OF DISINFORMATION	11
5.	THE DISINFORMATION PHENOMENON ON THE INTERNET	14
5.1.	Confirmation bias	14
5.2.	Polarization	15
5.3.	Echo chambers or bubbles on the Internet	16
5.4.	Content moderation and opaque algorithms	17
5.5.	Bots	19
5.6.	Deficient electoral regulatory frameworks and personal data on the Internet.	20
5.7.	Lack of digital literacy and cybersecurity policies	21
5.8.	8. Digital gender-based violence	22
5.9.	Net neutrality: zero rating	23
5.10.	Intellectual Property	23
6.	DISINFORMATION IN ELECTIONS	25
7.	A MULTI-SECTOR APPROACH TO ADDRESS MISINFORMATION	29
7.1.	The role of the State	29
7.2.	The role of Internet companies	31
7.3.	The role of the media	32
7.4.	Fact checking in journalism and its limitations	33
7.5.	The role of civil society	34
8.	CHALLENGES FOR THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE	35
9.	CONCLUSION	37
10.	REFERENCES	39

1. INTRODUCTION

Disinformation in the context of elections has become a critical challenge in the digital age. As information flows swiftly through online platforms and social networks, malicious actors find fertile ground to manipulate and distort reality to influence election results and public opinion. However, addressing this problem poses a complex tension between the need to protect the integrity of the electoral process and preserve freedom of expression.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right that guarantees diversity of opinion and open public debate. However, when used to disseminate disinformation and fake news during elections, it can undermine confidence in the democratic system and distort the electoral process. Therefore, this raises the question of how to balance freedom of expression with protection against damaging disinformation. In that sense, we seek to identify which are the most relevant factors that allow an environment for disinformation, such as: net neutrality, confirmation bias, digital gender violence, echo chambers, deficiency in the regulation of personal data protection, intellectual property, cybersecurity, bots and content moderation, among others.

In this sense, it will be important to understand this phenomenon that is transferred to the Internet with factors that must be considered when thinking of appropriate, necessary and proportionate solutions to national, regional and global situations.

In this sense, regulation is a controversial and widely debated issue. Some argue that stricter regulatory mechanisms should be established to combat disinformation and ensure fair and transparent elections. However, others fear that excessive regulation may limit freedom of expression and open the door to government censorship or suppression of dissenting voices.

Ultimately, addressing misinformation in the electoral context requires a balanced approach that protects freedom of expression, promotes transparency and ensures free and fair elections. This entails the active participation of various actors, such as government, civil society, technology companies and the media, to develop effective digital education strategies, promote media literacy and strengthen the accountability of online platforms. We can only address the challenge of electoral disinformation without compromising the fundamental values of democracy through a multidimensional and collaborative approach.

2. WHAT IS DISINFORMATION?

The concept of “disinformation” has been defined and used by several authors and organizations over time. Currently, one of the most widely used definitions comes from the European Union and is found in the report “Action Plan Against Disinformation” (European Commission, 2018). According to this report, disinformation is defined as false, inaccurate or misleading information that is deliberately created, presented and disseminated for financial gain or to mislead the audience, and can damage confidence in democratic institutions and processes, as well as individual decision-making. However, this definition has a limitation, as it assumes that people are deceived and therefore do not trust institutions. The truth is that this relationship is more complex. There is currently a crisis of trust² that is affecting all institutions in general.

Regarding the appropriate terminology to use, the European Commission’s High Level Group of Experts on Fake News and Disinformation recommends abandoning the term “fake news” and using only “disinformation”. This is defined as: “false, inaccurate, or misleading information, presented and promoted for the purpose of obtaining revenue or intentionally causing public harm”. In other words, it is approached as a form of expression that can be harmful and also falls outside those already defined as illegal in the regulations and jurisdictions such as: defamation, incitement to hatred, incitement to violence, child pornography, etc.³

In other words, false information can be attributed to different factors: errors, interpretations, incomplete data, manipulation, scams, etc. Not all factors are necessarily equally reprehensible. Also, the degree of reproach in some cases may depend on who is providing or sharing the information. For example, it is socially reprehensible (even, in some cases, illegal) for a public official to publish false information. Specifically, during the pandemic in Paraguay, it was observed that public officials led several disinformation hoaxes about the effective use of vaccines and even promoted bills to use drugs and therapies without any evidence to mitigate cases of COVID19.⁴ This case is not the same as a person tweeting an opinion or news without considering all the aspects or data that would be available about that information (Agustina del Campo, 2020).

The protection of freedom of expression protects even those who disseminate false information, although not all factors surrounding its dissemination are equally reprehensible. None of the international conventions that recognize the right to freedom of expression establishes the obligation for information to be true in order to be protected. The Special Rapporteurship for Freedom of Expression of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Commission (OAS, 2017) and the UN Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression advocate the protection of freedom of expression without any conditions. The reasoning behind this protection suggests that if information were required to be truthful, it would create an inhibiting effect on expression that would undermine access to information, the circulation of ideas and opinions, social control over governments and, ultimately, democracy (IACHR Court, 1985). According to Catalina Botero, former OAS Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, if the need to report only the truth beforehand were imposed, it would deny the possibility of carrying out the debate needed to achieve it (IACHR, 2017).

2 Latinobarómetro Report 2021. <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latContents.jsp>

3 Concerning regulation on misinformation in times of COVID19. TEDIC. 2020 <https://www.tedic.org/preocupante-regulacion-sobre-desinformacion-en-tiempos-de-covid19/>

4 Series on disinformation in Latin America. Salud con lupa. 2021 <https://saludconlupa.com/series/desinformantes/jorge-britez/>

Likewise, among the factors that may be considered reprehensible, the Joint Declaration of the Rapporteurs on Freedom of Expression (2017) establishes that public officials have the obligation to provide citizens with truthful information. Such obligation lies in the responsibility that public officials have due to the position they hold and the right of access to public information enjoyed by the people (OAS, 2017).

Only in exceptional cases false news would not be protected by freedom of expression. Opinions, as reprehensible as they may seem, cannot be censored, unless they fall within the areas of exclusion from the protection of the right to freedom of expression: propaganda in favor of war; advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to violence; and child pornography (Al Sur, 2019).

The Paraguayan Constitution, on the other hand, puts its focus on the fundamental right in Article 26, which states: “Free expression and freedom of the press are guaranteed, as well as the dissemination of thought and opinion, without censorship of any kind, with no limitations other than those provided for in this Constitution; consequently, no law shall be enacted that makes them impossible or restricts them. There shall be no press crimes, only common crimes committed through the press” (Constituent Assembly, 1992).

The biggest concern and risk caused by disinformation is centered on the construction of symbols and meanings of a post-truth construction⁵. The idea of post-truth does not imply the denial of real facts, but rather the conviction that one’s own perspective is the true one, even if there is evidence to the contrary. This concept does not originate from a specific event or fake news, but arises from a gradual process of meaning construction. Therefore, instead of simply talking about fake news or disinformation, one should refer to processes of disinformation that foster the construction of post-truth. These processes are based on motivated reasoning, in which evidence does not change what a person believes, but what a person believes influences his or her selection of evidence (Guadalupe Nogués, 2019).

Following this line, the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (RELE) of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) remarks in its Guide to guarantee freedom of expression in the face of deliberate disinformation in electoral contexts that “while some studies suggest that some people are more likely than others to believe false information, others consider that a significant percentage of citizens maintain the ability to distinguish, autonomously, true information from false information”. On the other hand, “at the electoral level, existing research shows contradictory evidence and while some point out that there are no significant effects, others have found that disinformation has an effect on the determination of the information agenda, that the existence of disinformation is amplified in the media and may even be connected to the erosion of confidence in democratic institutions” (CIDH, 2019).

Therefore, the global situation places disinformation as one of the problems of the right to freedom of expression and access to information.

5 Post-truth is a neologism that implies the deliberate distortion of a reality in which emotions and personal beliefs take precedence over objective facts, in order to create and shape public opinion and influence social attitudes, as defined by the Real Academia Española de la Lengua (Royal Spanish Academy of Language). Post-truth is not a denial of reality, but the belief that one’s own position is the true one, beyond any evidence that proves the contrary. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-truth>

3. ORIGIN AND BACKGROUND OF DISINFORMATION

The modern term “disinformation” traces its roots to the Cold War era and Soviet propaganda. While the word “dezinformatsia” appeared in the Soviet Encyclopedia as early as 1952 to refer to the dissemination of false information with the aim of creating confusion in public opinion, it was in 1980, during the trial in Paris against the editor of a confidential newsletter, Pierre Charles Pathé, that the testimony of an agent of the Direction de Surveillance du Territoire (DST) gave wide publicity to the techniques of the KGB. Although the word is relatively contemporary, the practice of disinformation as the dissemination of false news to create confusion for the enemies is much older (Rivas Troitiño J. M., 1995).

An early example of the use of disinformation is found in the advice given by the Chinese writer Sun Tzu in his work “The Art of War” between the 6th and 4th centuries B.C. He stated that “the whole art of war is based on deception, and the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting”⁶. This early reference illustrates how the concept of disinformation has been used in contexts of war and conflict throughout history.

In other words, disinformation has always been present in history, even if one only looks at Western history, from ancient Greece to contemporary times, leaders and the media have used disinformation to manipulate the masses to achieve their political and military objectives⁷.

In the Middle Ages, the people in power used propaganda to convince the population that the crusades were just and necessary, and that witches should be burned at the stake⁸. According to Harvard professor Robert Darton⁹, as early as the 6th century, the Byzantine historian Procopius had written a book full of stories of dubious veracity, with the aim of ruining the reputation of Emperor Justinian. Thus, there is also Octavian’s propaganda campaign against Mark Antony in Roman times, which spread short phrases printed on coins to damage his reputation. This “fake news” tactic was effective and allowed Octavian, who became Augustus, to consolidate himself as the first Roman emperor and put an end to the republican system¹⁰. With the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1493, the dissemination of disinformation was further amplified, as demonstrated by the “Great Moon Hoax” of 1835, when the New York Sun newspaper published false articles about life on the moon, illustrated with fictitious creature¹¹. Disinformation has spread at times of conflict, regime change and catastrophe. In the 20th century, the media, such as radio and television, have also evolved, and satirical news stories are often mistaken for real news.

6 The Art of War. Sun Tzu. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Art_of_War

7 The long history of fake news. El País. 2018 https://elpais.com/cultura/2018/06/08/actualidad/1528467298_389944.html

8 Brutal violence against witches: the ancient femicide that still happens these days. BBC News. 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-56346291>

9 The true story of fake news. El País. 2017 https://elpais.com/cultura/2017/04/28/actualidad/1493389536_863123.html

10 Kaminska, I. (2017) A module in fake news from the info-wars of ancient Rome, Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/aaf-2bb08-dca2-11e6-86ac-f253db7791c6>

11 Thornton, B. (2000) The Moon Hoax: Debates About Ethics in 1835 New York Newspapers, Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 15(2).: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/S15327728JMME1502_

On the other hand, during the Cold War, the Cuban War, the Vietnam War or the First Gulf War, the superpowers accused each other of disseminating disinformation and propaganda around the world¹². Now they have simply moved to social networks. This can be seen during the Arab Spring, where authoritarian regimes used disinformation to control the population and spread propaganda in their favor¹³ as well as controversial cases such as Bell-Pottinger and Cambridge Analytica¹⁴.

At a local level, moments before the boom of the term disinformation on the Internet, the writer Damián Cabrera systematic the campaign against the newspaper ABC Color (the newspaper with the largest circulation in Paraguay) between 2010 and 2012, called “ABC Ijapu” (ABC Lies)¹⁵, which led to an important debate on the credibility of this media, how it relates the facts and from what place is this “truth” and journalistic values narrated.

Since 2012, Internet access in the country has been expanding to almost all sectors and this introduced disinformation trends circulating in the world, including the most recent conspiracy theories such as the campaign against 5G antennas¹⁶, against vaccines¹⁷ and disinformation about health in general¹⁸, against the rejection of the National Plan for Educational Transformation (PNTE) of the Ministry of Education, for promoting what they call “gender ideology”¹⁹, against the climate crisis²⁰ and the smear campaigns, hate speech and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in Paraguay, among others (Rosa Posa Guinea at. 2022).

Nowadays with the Internet, disinformation has become more accessible and effective than ever and could compromise the credibility of reliable information spaces. Now, anyone with an Internet connection can spread false or misleading information to millions of people in a matter of seconds. Disinformation has also become more difficult to detect and combat, as social media and search engine algorithms often prioritize information that confirms users’ existing beliefs.

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- 12 Wars of the disinformation era. La Vanguardia. 2018 <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20180429/443014307399/guerra-desinformacion-hibrida-fria-fake-news-ruisa.html>
 - 13 Arab Spring: the revolution that was televised, but on the Internet. El Salto. 2021. <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/ciberactivismo/primavera-arabe-revolucion-televisada-internet>
 - 14 From Cambridge Analytica’s Ashes, An Odd Pair Promises An ‘Ethical’ Startup. Forbes. 2018 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2018/08/02/from-cambridge-analyticas-ashes-an-odd-pair-promises-an-ethical-startup/?sh=4bdba88a4f2d>
 - 15 Relative lie/Abcolor.me and symbolic democracy. 2014 <https://damiancabrera.blogspot.com/2014/03/mentira-relativaabcolor-me-y-la.html>
 - 16 In Villarrica, a 5G telephone antenna was burned and firefighters were assaulted. La Nación. 2020 <https://www.lanacion.com.py/pais/2020/06/09/villarrica-quemaron-antena-de-telefonos-5g-y-agredieron-a-bomberos/>
 - 17 Antivaccine movement undermine regular measles vaccination schedule. ABC. 2022 <https://www.abc.com.py/tv/abc-noticias/2022/08/05/antivacunas-perjudican-esquema-regular/>
 - 18 Disinformation and public health in times of pandemic. Derechos Digitales. 2020 <https://www.derechosdigitales.org/14405/desinformacion-y-salud-publica-en-tiempos-de-pandemia/>
 - 19 Disinformation and anti-rights practices in an electoral context. Agencia Presentes. 2022 <https://agenciapresentes.org/2022/12/21/balance-paraguay-2022-desinformacion-y-presion-antiderechos-en-un-contexto-electoral/>
 - 20 Paraguay returns to the climate summit. Will it be a denialist again? El Surti. 2022 <https://elsurti.com/futuros/reportaje/2022/08/29/paraguay-vuelve-a-la-cumbre-del-clima-sera-negacionista-otra-vez/>

4. TYPES OF DISINFORMATION

There are several types of disinformation:

- a. **Casual or culpable disinformation:** It originates from the behavior of each person. Not all misinformation is intended to manipulate or mislead (Guadalupe Nogués, 2019). Sometimes, the information shared is simply incomplete or erroneous due to lack of knowledge or misinterpretation of facts. For example, a person might share a news story they read online without verifying the source or the accuracy of the information. If that news turns out to be false, the person did not intend to mislead anyone, but simply did not have the information necessary to discern its authenticity.

It is also possible for someone to unknowingly share incomplete information, perhaps because they have only read the headlines or seen only part of the story. In this case, the person is not trying to mislead anyone, but simply does not have all the information needed to make a complete and accurate assessment of the facts. However, even if the misinformation does not have malicious intent, it can still be damaging. When incomplete or erroneous information is shared, it can lead to wrong decisions or decisions based on false assumptions. It can also spread conspiracy theories and other types of misinformation that foster distrust in institutions and undermine public confidence in information and the media.

- b. **Malicious or intentional misinformation** which is broken down as follows²¹

- **False information:** This is the most basic form of disinformation and refers to information that is simply not true. It can be an unfounded rumor, a false claim or a fabricated fact. Strictly speaking, fake news can be economically or politically motivated, or a bit of both. In the first case, they are commercial operations that seek to generate traffic from false content and, above all, sensationalist headlines that people click on, but the linked information has no meaning or relevance whatsoever. In the second case, the news tries to appear authentic not so much to generate traffic and profits but to manipulate the public debate in favor of certain political interests. An example of this category is the aforementioned false information about Pope Francis' support to Donald Trump's candidacy in 2016²² or the case of the image of candidate Soledad Nuñez supporting the women's right to decide march²³.

False information becomes more complex when content is mixed and disseminated through instant messaging services such as Telegram or WhatsApp. In this setting, information circulates quickly and is shared as images, videos or memes, with no clear identification of the author. Ultimately, the legitimacy and authority of the content is granted by the known person sharing it, which makes it even more difficult to verify the information and increases the risk of spreading disinformation (Carlos Cortés, Luisa Isaza, 2017).

21 The classification is developed by the author.

22 The curious origin of the viral phenomenon of "fake news" that Pope Francis called a "snake tactic". BBC. 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-42804231>

23 La Precisa – El Surti. Factchecking – Image verification. 28-03-2023. <https://twitter.com/eslaprecisa/status/1640798095200997381>

- **Misleading information:** Misleading information is information that has a certain degree of truth, but is presented in a way that misleads the recipient into reaching an erroneous conclusion. For example, the manipulation of statistics to support a false claim or when some facts are presented but others are omitted; information is taken out of context; content is manipulated; theories or opinions are presented as facts; highly debatable information is given credibility; true information is withheld in order to create confusion; or a single truth is proclaimed in opposition to the ‘other’ - the strategy of nationalist movements²⁴.
- **Decontextualization:** Decontextualization involves taking information out of its original context to change its meaning or to present it in a misleading way. For example, quoting a sentence from a speech out of context to change its original meaning.
- **Image and video manipulation:** This form of disinformation involves manipulating an image or video to change its original meaning. It can range from editing a photograph to add elements that were not there, to using deepfake technology or artificial intelligence to create videos that look authentic, but are actually fake. Examples of this type of disinformation are the dissemination of an alleged BBC publication about fraud in elections in Paraguay²⁵ or the image of Pope Francis edited with artificial intelligence²⁶.
- **Fake news:** Fake news is information that is presented as news, but is completely false. It is often distributed online through social networks and websites that mimic traditional media. In such an environment, information is passed by word of mouth as images, videos or memes, with no identified or identifiable author. The legitimacy and authority of the content is ultimately given by the person who shares it. For example, television programs such as “El Repasador” of Channel 13²⁷ that seek to discredit public figures with false information, such as the case of the vice-presidential candidate Soledad Nuñez and her alleged profit through an NGO that uses funds from the Paraguayan State²⁸. And the accusation of activist and singer Rocío Robledo as an official of the Ministry of Education and responsible for the program “Educational Transformation”.²⁹

24 Propaganda is false or misleading information or ideas addressed to a mass audience by parties who thereby gain advantage. Propaganda is created and disseminated systematically and does not invite critical analysis or response”. Huckin, Thomas, “Propaganda Defined”, in: Henderson, Gae Lyn y Braun, M.J. (ed.), *Propaganda and Rhetoric in Democracy: History, Theory, Analysis*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1st ed., 2016, p. 118-136.

25 BBC Mundo refutes the authenticity of this fake news circulating on social networks in Paraguay. BBC Mundo is a public and unbiased media on the internet and does not have a television channel as the one shown in the image. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-43889456>

26 Pope Francis: how artificial intelligence was used to create these virtual photos of the Pontiff. Infobae. March. 2023. <https://www.infobae.com/tecnologia/2023/03/26/papa-francisco-como-usaron-inteligencia-artificial-para-crear-estas-fotos-virales-del-pontifice/>

27 El repasador. Channel 13 TV show. Facebook account: https://www.facebook.com/ElRepasadorPy/?locale=es_LA

28 “Sole Nuñez and her husband, Bruno Defelippe, are pocketing money from the State. Lucrative business of the two of them through their NGOs.” El Repasador. April 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/ElRepasadorPy/videos/1374814176628293/>

29 Educational Transformation: activist denounces the malicious use of her image. Ultima Hora. 2022. <https://www.ultimahora.com/transformacion-educativa-activista-denuncia-el-uso-malintencionado-su-imagen-n3025331.html>

- **Conspiracy theories:** Conspiracy theories are unfounded claims that suggest that one or several people or groups are hiding the truth or secretly working together to achieve a malicious goal³⁰. Some examples are conspiracy theories about “gender ideology” in educational reform policies (public policy that received the name of “Educational Transformation” by various media) in Paraguay in 2022³¹. Or the more usual ones such as the earth is flat³², anti-vaccine groups³³ and climate crisis denialists.

All of these types of misinformation can be used to influence public opinion and people’s decision making. **It is important to be alert and take a critical approach to the information you receive, and always seek reliable and verified sources before believing and sharing any information online.**

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- 30 Media Matters, “Understanding The Fake News Universe”, <https://www.mediamatters.org/fake-news/understanding-fake-news-universe> . According to Michael Barkun, conspiracy theories are defined by three principles: i) nothing happens by accident, ii) nothing is what it seems, and iii) everything is connected. Barkun, Michael, A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003, p. 3-4, available in: https://www.hugedomains.com/domain_profile.cfm?d=lapidjudaism.com
- 31 The falsehoods that seek to stop the Educational Transformation plan. El Surti. 2022. <https://elsurti.com/laprecisa/chequeo/2022/10/21/las-falsedades-que-buscan-frenar-el-plan-de-transformacion-educativa/>
- 32 You can’t convince a flat-earther and that should worry you. El País. 2019 https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/02/27/ciencia/1551266455_220666.html
- 33 Small anti-vaccine group protests against immunization of children. Hoy. 2021 <https://www.hoy.com.py/nacionales/reducido-grupo-antivacunas-protesta-contra-inmunizacion-de-ninos>.

5. THE DISINFORMATION PHENOMENON ON THE INTERNET

Disinformation has always existed. However, it has gained more visibility due to the influence of the media and Internet platforms on public opinion. As a new concept for many, the fact that disinformation spreads with unprecedented speed and breadth through digital platforms such as Google or Facebook is new and worrying³⁴.

Disinformation is not an isolated phenomenon of the social and political reality, much less an externality of technology. As the American sociologist Katherine Cross points out, people's relationship with the Internet is nowadays often spoken of in non-critical terms of computer science. Disinformation, on the other hand, has been described as a "virus" that affects users "exposed" to fake news online. However, it is important to remember that disinformation arises from and feeds on human interaction, and it is in that relationship that the dimension of the problem and the limitations of the proposed solutions must be identified (Katherine Cros, 2017).

Below are some of the factors that contribute to misinformation on the Internet:

5.1. Confirmation bias

The complexity of our beliefs is a fundamental aspect to understand post-truth. Sometimes our beliefs are supported by evidence and sometimes they are not. Experts in confirmation bias call the latter irrational beliefs, since they are held without evidence in their favor or even with evidence to the contrary. The moral compass, influenced by a person's life journey, is an example of how irrational beliefs of an identity group can manifest. While the diversity of these beliefs may seem difficult to address, denying their complexity will only lead to building more post-truth.

Despite the complexity of beliefs, facts can help navigate the territory toward objectives and measure whether they have been met. A person's values and principles are important, but one must be able to evaluate them against the facts and available evidence. For example, if one believes in equal rights and obligations between men and women, one must be able to assess whether the evidence supports this belief and, if so, act accordingly. Ultimately, the complexity of identity group beliefs is one more reason for people to be critical and careful in evaluating the information they receive and to always look for evidence and facts that support the beliefs (Guadalupe Nogués, 2019).

It is alarming that mechanisms that exploit emotions such as fear, anger or uncertainty are used to foster extreme polarization, in which populist leaders attract their most extreme followers, who rightly vote for these leaders because of their anti-scientific, denialist and conspiracy-theory-promoting views. Populist leaders spread the false idea that they can take control and strive to portray themselves as powerful individuals, as Bolsonaro and Trump have done, neglecting the importance of the collective aspects of politics. These actions fuel polarization and put at risk the stability of society and even human survival (Steven Forti, 2022).

34 Fake news: sound bites on a burning topic. UNESCO. 2017 <https://en.unesco.org/courier/july-september-2017/fake-news-sound-bites-burning-topic>

In the face of so much need and inequality of the population, people become much more receptive to conspiratorial discourses, thus hoping to gain some material or moral advantage, a fact that strengthens the position of the rulers and creates disengagement to such abstract or intangible benefits as the defense of human rights and democracy.

5.2. Polarization

Polarization contributes to the simplification of discussions, making them binary and focusing on whether one is “for” or “against,” without addressing complexity or the existence of other possible positions. This simplification facilitates the spread of post-truth, as it removes the common ground needed to debate on solid grounds.

Skepticism towards political and scientific institutions is increasing in Latin America, which has contributed to the triumph of populist and conservative leaders. The population is becoming receptive to conspiratorial discourses and the delegitimization of institutions due to the void left by the State and the lack of future prospects, generating polarizations. For example, in Paraguay, a large number of people only count on the Church or the hegemonic parties for material, moral and daily support to mitigate their concerns and anxieties regarding unemployment, income, health care and, in particular, the lack of future prospects, which weakens the position of the authorities and increases the relevance of religion in daily life.

Sociologist Saúl Feldman, in his analysis of the rise of Macrismo to power in Argentina (2015-2019), highlights the meticulous construction of a cultural shift that allowed Macri to come to power. Feldman uses the concept of common sense to understand the communicational phenomenon of right-wing populisms. According to this analysis, these groups use ideas widespread in society that should be simple, transparent in their causality and in the identification of responsibilities, such as: “the poor are lazy”. These ideas allow adherence without reflection and avoid discussion because they are “natural” and known issues, such as “boys wear light blue, girls wear pink”. They also use ideas that appeal to several generations and are effective in explaining powerful actions, such as “the economy of a country is like that of a house, you cannot spend more than you produce”, the “need for simplicity and emotional resonance” has been key in the victory of Brexit or Trump in 2016, as well as in the success of Salvini’s League in 2018. Their slogans “Take Back Control,” “Make America Great Again,” “Prima gli Italiani” (Italians First), “Gay Kit” (Bolsonaro’s slogan against the workers’ party) have succeeded in connecting with the feelings of the citizenry and displaced rational reflection on technical issues (Steven Forti, 2022).

According to Feldman, once the belief system formed by common sense is established, it is worked on politically in order to achieve the cultural change required to change politics. Common sense tends to be conservative and, therefore, working on its web of beliefs is effective to confront the progressive ideology, which supports the integration of minorities and the expansion of rights. In Latin America, this conservative ideology especially attacked the management of those who implemented successful policies to lift thousands of people out of poverty, such as Lula da Silva in Brazil and Evo Morales in Bolivia.

Feldman describes the politics of post-truth as the “politics of cynicism,” to which several right-wing leaders are akin. When this policy rules, the contract of sincerity between the political sectors and the general public is broken in the first place. Mauricio Macri’s electoral campaign in 2015 was defined, for example, by offering a series of promises that were never in his plans and that, evidently, he never fulfilled. Under the politics of cynicism, a space of perversion of meaning is generated and everything that allows obtaining personal benefits is exploited without assuming any responsibility or considering the consequences (Beatriz Busaniche, at, 2021).

Another aspect of cynical discourse is impunity, which is based on the alleged superiority of the issuer (such as the successful businessmen Macri, Trump, Cartes or Piñera). The cynical sender knows that they have the approval of those who validate them, be it economic, judicial, religious, media or political power, or even a significant base of followers. Political leaders can ignore evidence, misrepresent facts, and make statements of absolute cruelty. Each of these actions goes hand in hand with an amplification of ideas in social networks, WhatsApp groups and media, to build the collective imaginary of “that’s what people think”, which legitimizes ever more extreme ideas and expressions (Beatriz Busaniche, at, 2021).

In short, people are not deceived with false information, but are incited to cooperate in the public delegitimization of institutions and that is where identity groups are generated and generate polarizations.

Paraguay is not far from the above examples. The elected president of the 2023 elections, Santiago Peña, expressed in one of his speeches “Argentines do not want to work”³⁵ and “Those who get into office, get there thanks to the Colorado Party”. “Unfortunately, many believe that they have them because they are ‘hardworking’ or because they have a wall full of diplomas. You have to fight for it”³⁶. Meanwhile, the presidential candidate Euclides Acevedo spoke about gender equality, which is guaranteed in the National Constitution and the difference with the gender ideology, about which he is concerned³⁷.

5.3. Echo chambers or bubbles on the Internet

An echo chamber is a phenomenon where people are primarily exposed to opinions and perspectives that match their own, creating an echo of their own opinions. This term is commonly used in the context of technology and social networks, where content recommendation algorithms tend to show users information and news that reinforce their previous beliefs and opinions. As a result, users may be isolated from differing points of view and have a limited and distorted view of the world around them. The echo chamber can contribute to polarization and extremism, as people may feel validated and reinforced in their own views, and become less open to dialogue and engagement with different people and opinions (Cass R. Sunstein, 2018).

35 Paraguayan presidential candidate’s controversial statement about Argentina. February 2023. <https://www.latecla.info/138242-la-polmica-frase-sobre-argentina-de-un-candidato-a-presidente-de-paraguay>

36 Peña vindicates the prebendary policy during speech. El Nacional. April 2023. <https://www.elnacional.com.py/politica/2023/04/02/pena-reivindica-la-politica-prebendaria-durante-discurso/>

37 Euclides Acevedo’s Twitter. May 2022. https://twitter.com/euclides_py/status/1530325583170772993?lang=es

In this regard, Guadalupe Nogués, author of the book “Thinking of Others”, warns about the biases presented by search engine algorithms, which influence the information presented to people. The results that are displayed are not necessarily the most informative or reliable, but those that are most popular and relevant according to the algorithm. In addition, the algorithms are designed to optimize click-bait, which means that they focus on presenting information that attracts attention and is easily accessible. This creates an illusion that the information presented on the web is a true reflection of what exists, when in reality there are biases and distortions.

The book concludes, however, that search engines are not solely responsible for the problems they present, as their business model is designed to meet the needs of users based on the analysis of their consumption and data. Rather than only blaming algorithms, it is important to acknowledge biases and actively work to seek accurate and reliable information. It is crucial to make a conscious effort to search for the truth and not settle for what is easily presented in search engines (Guadalupe Nogués, 2019).

5.4. Content moderation and opaque algorithms

Disinformation does not happen on its own, but is promoted by platforms controlled by private companies, many of which are located outside Latin America and the Caribbean, and which have design and business logics that favor its dissemination. In addition, the users who interact with these platforms are an important part of the problem. According to Cortés & Isaza (2017) it is important to understand the differences between the platforms and the uses in which disinformation is spread, as this helps to understand the proposed solutions and their limitations. On the other hand, the authors place the problem of disinformation in the orbit of the social incorporation of a technology. The use of technology - and, therefore, the questions that arise from its use - is a process mediated by people and not an isolated equation” (Carlos Cortés, Luisa Isaza, 2017).

The concentration and scope of reach of Internet intermediaries such as social networks and messaging apps is unparalleled compared to traditional media. This is due in part to the increase in Internet access. According to Hootsuite and We Are Social’s Digital 2021 Report, by July 2022, 63.1% of the world’s population, which equates to 5.03 billion people, regularly use some social network³⁸. However, usage is focused on a few platforms such as Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Meta, TikTok, Twitter, Tencent and others. This has led to a decrease in competition in the market reducing the options for users in terms of online platforms and services. This can result in less diversity of opinions and perspectives, which in turn can lead to greater polarization and fragmentation in society.

The business model of these companies often focuses on controlling a large amount of users’ personal data, which gives them disproportionate power over information and communication. Misuse or abuse of this information by these companies or third parties can have serious consequences for the privacy and security of individuals.

In addition, due to their dominant position in the market, they can decide what content is visible and what content is not, what they recommend to users through opaque algorithms, generating echo chambers where users only see one type of content, leading to polarization and misinformation. The opacity of these algorithms makes it difficult to understand how users receive information and how decisions that affect their lives are made.

38 Global Digital Environment Report. 2022. <https://www.hootsuite.com/es/resources/digital-trends-q3-update>

These opaque algorithms bring with them several problems such as lack of transparency and accountability as well as a lack of accountability of intermediaries³⁹, among others. If users do not understand how algorithms work and how decisions are made, it is difficult for them to deal with errors, biases and manipulations. It is also difficult for authorities and regulators to create regulations to comply with the law and protect people (Del Campo et al., 2021).

The concentration of power in the hands of these companies can also have an impact on the quality of information available online. As a result of their market dominance, these companies can influence the presentation of information and the way in which content is presented, which can lead to the promotion of fake news, disinformation and propaganda. In this sense, the concentration of these companies can also have a negative impact on the democratic process by limiting the diversity of opinions and perspectives (Alvarez, Del Campo, 2021).

Evgeny Morozov, a technology expert, suggests that it is important not to explain everything with the reasoning that fake news already existed before social networks. Instead, he argues that attention should be paid to the era of high technological and economic concentration and how this affects what the population consumes. Morozov argues that the fake news narrative is a superficial explanation of a more complex problem that many do not want to address. According to him, the problem is not fake news per se, but digital capitalism that makes it profitable to produce fake stories that generate economic gains. In essence, the problem is the age-old conflict that if someone has too much power, their ability to manipulate can be dangerous (Evgeny Morozov, 2012).

In addition, the growing trend of the use of artificial intelligence (AI) by some platforms to avoid different types of disinformation through, for example, automated content moderation are worrying. While platforms should look for solutions that contribute to overlap this type of phenomenon, there are enough arguments to discourage resting exclusively on this type of solutions (Al Sur, 2019).

The debate has just begun but, *a priori*, as far as electoral issues are concerned, the response ranges between two positions: on one hand, one that encourages the regulation and penalization of social networks that disseminate false news, as is the case in Brazil⁴⁰ and on the other hand, one that favors the agreements between electoral authorities and digital platforms in order to promote informed voting⁴¹.

39 Term used to refer to social networking platforms

40 Note by CDR: Democratic public regulation of platforms is fundamental, with autonomous and participative institutions. <https://intervozes.org.br/nota-da-cdr-regulacao-publica-democratica-das-plataformas-e-fundamental-com-instituicoes-autonomas-e-participativas/>

41 UNESCO consultation on the regulatory framework for digital platforms. TEDIC. 2022 <https://www.tedic.org/consulta-de-unesco-sobre-el-marco-regulatorio-de-plataformas-digitales/>

5.5. Bots

Bots are automated software that can perform specific tasks on the Internet, often in a repetitive mode and without human intervention. This software can be programmed to perform a variety of tasks, such as posting content on social networks, sending emails, performing web searches, and making online purchases. Bots are often used to perform tasks that would be too tedious or difficult for humans, and are also used to automate business processes and reduce costs⁴².

In the social media setting, bots are also used to influence public opinion and online trends. Bots can be programmed to automatically post and share content, which can make it appear that there are a large number of people agreeing or discussing a particular topic or point of view. This can be used to spread false or misleading information, and to manipulate public opinion. In some cases, bots can also be used to spread spam, malware and other types of unwanted content online.

In the context of disinformation, one refers to social robots that produce automatic content for the networks. Although they are used to inflate the number of followers on social networks, they are also an effective tool for spreading false information and news. In addition, there are “cyborgs”, i.e. real people who are paid to create dozens of fake accounts that are used to influence and manipulate public opinion on social networks. As Simona Levi points out, “the peculiarity of the current situation is that [news] biases can be generated predictively and automatically configured. This is what is known as ‘algorithmic governance’” (Simona Levi, 2019).

In Mexico⁴³ and Brazil⁴⁴, for example, operations with bots have been reported to modify people’s opinions on different electoral issues. It has been shown that bots have been used on Twitter to support candidates in the 2018 elections and in other electoral processes. Disinformation and manipulation of public opinion are some of the problems associated with the use of bots and “cyborgs” in social networks.

Along these same lines, we must be alert to possible regulations on this issue. To date, there is no consensus on the concepts, so regulating vague concepts about what are bots and what is fake news may jeopardize the right to freedom of expression.

42 Through understanding bots, journalists can more effectively fight disinformation. IJNET. 2018 <https://ijnet.org/en/story/through-understanding-bots-journalists-can-more-effectively-fight-disinformation>

43 Mexico’s elections: 7 of the most surprising fake news that “Verificado 2018” detected. BBC. 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-44476959>

44 Bot or not: who are the followers of our candidates for president? InternetLab. 2018 <https://internetlab.org.br/en/news/bot-or-not-who-are-the-followers-of-our-candidates-for-president/>

5.6. Deficient electoral regulatory frameworks and personal data on the Internet.

In the context of political advertising or electoral propaganda, targeting techniques are used to direct personalized ads to specific individuals or groups and increase their visibility. However, abuse in the use of personal data and micro-targeting pose threats to fairness, transparency and the right to receive objective information in electoral processes. Digital platforms collect users' personal data to carry out micro-segmentation, which can be used to spread disinformation and create echo chambers, negatively affecting citizens' rights, such as freedom of opinion, access to information and the ability to make political decisions.

The use of big data⁴⁵ plays a crucial role in the segmentation of electoral propaganda. Social media platforms and other digital service providers collect personal data for micro-targeting, identifying the interests and preferences of users.

With the aim of creating a safer and fairer digital environment, the European Parliament adopted the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act⁴⁶ in 2022. Following this line, the European Parliament is discussing the regulation of political advertising where it intends to prohibit targeting and amplification techniques involving the processing of sensitive personal data listed in Article 9(1) of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The use of sensitive data for targeting and ad delivery purposes would be prohibited, and non-sensitive data could only be used if the data subject has given explicit consent only for the purposes of online political advertising and subject to strict limitations (European Parliament, 2023).

In Latin America, the regulations for the integral protection of Personal Data also have limitations to avoid abuses of micro-segmentation of users. However, there have been some efforts. In Colombia, the national authority for the protection of personal data has carried out several actions aimed at guaranteeing respect for the regulation on the collection, use and processing of data in political campaigns. In Brazil, the joint work between the data protection authority and the electoral authority stands out: In 2021, a document of good practices regarding the use of data was issued, the main points of which are dedicated to the use of data that can be obtained publicly and to the phenomenon of sale, purchase or transfer of databases.⁴⁷

A study conducted by TEDIC shows that both the current regulations protecting personal data and electoral rules are insufficient for the new disinformation scenarios in Paraguay. Thus, it is denounced that the agency that regulates political campaigns, the Superior Court of Electoral Justice (TJSE), does not have the authority to sanction the illegal use of personal data in elections⁴⁸.

45 Big data analytics refers to the methods, tools and applications used to collect, process and draw conclusions from a wide variety of high-volume, high-velocity data sets.

46 EU Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act explained. Updated May 2023. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/digital-transformation/20211209STO19124/eu-digital-markets-act-and-digital-services-act-explained>

47 The Civil Society Forum of the Ibero-American Data Protection Network (FSC) held the webinar "Data Protection and Elections". FSC. September 2022. <https://sociedadcivilripd.org/el-fsc-realizo-un-webinario-sobre-uso-de-datos-personales-en-elecciones%E-F%BF%BC/>

48 Habeas Data and fraudulent affiliations due to misuse of personal data in the electoral registry of Paraguay. TEDIC. 2022 <https://www.tedic.org/habeas-data-y-afiliaciones-fraudulentas-por-uso-indebido-de-datos-personales-en-el-padron-electoral-de-paraguay-estudio-exploratorio/>

Paraguay still does not have a comprehensive law for the protection of personal data, which leaves an important legal void, since it allows the use of data obtained from public access sources without the consent of the owner⁴⁹. On the other hand, the Paraguayan electoral code does not contemplate the current phenomenon of interaction, aggregation and profiling in social networks for political purposes in elections. Although the law does have provisions that favor control over the provision of advertising agency services in general, there are also gaps in the regulation of electoral advertising in digital media. This hides the expenses made by political groups and creates the need to update and reconcile the regulations on electoral reform, protection of personal data and access to public information with those that refer to the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns.

5.7. Lack of digital literacy and cybersecurity policies

In times of elections, cybersecurity is critical to ensure the transparency and integrity of democratic processes. Online misinformation and cyber threats can seriously affect the ability of citizens to make informed decisions in elections.

UNESCO made a contribution to this discussion with the publication of its 5 laws on Media and Information Literacy (MAI)⁵⁰, where media literacy is considered one of the most important requirements to foster equitable access to information and knowledge, and to promote free, independent and pluralistic media and information systems. In other words, “against false information, a critical spirit”.

Lack of digital literacy can result in people not knowing how to protect their devices or detect potential threats. Lack of digital literacy and lack of knowledge of propaganda and disinformation techniques are important factors contributing to the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns. That is, voters who do not have the ability to detect fake news or online manipulations are more susceptible to being influenced by these campaigns⁵¹.

In Paraguay, there is an important initiative by State institutions to mitigate disinformation with more information, in addition to highlighting the effects of information manipulation⁵². However, such an approach is not enough if it is not addressed from the educational plans of primary, secondary and tertiary level and on how to develop critical thinking to identify disinformation and its effects on information of public interest in democratic societies. Without evidence-based public policies on digital literacy and cybersecurity, polarization and confirmation bias will continue to be reproduced and violence will increase⁵³.

49 Campaign concerning the need for a data protection law in Paraguay. TEDIC. 2022 <https://www.tedic.org/campana-mis-datos-mis-derechos/>

50 Developing a critical mind against fake news. UNESCO. 2017 <https://en.unesco.org/courier/july-september-2017/developing-critical-mind-against-fake-news>

51 One of the examples circulated on Telegram about the coup plot in Brazil at the beginning of 2023: <https://desinformante.com.br/atos-antidemocraticos-redes-sociais/>

52 MITIC Campaign <https://www.mitic.gov.py/noticias/mitic-y-pnud-presentan-iniciativa-chaque-fake-news>

53 Positive and negative aspects of the Cybersecurity Plan in Paraguay. TEDIC. 2017 <https://www.tedic.org/aspecto-positivos-y-negativos-del-plan-de-ciberseguridad-en-paraguay/>

Cybersecurity plans can be effective allies to mitigate disinformation by establishing measures and controls to protect the integrity of information of public interest, detect disinformation early to implement awareness campaigns, protect people's privacy and prevent their data from being used maliciously in the production and distribution of disinformation, as well as to carry out inclusive digital literacy plans for all users and organizations with a gender perspective⁵⁴.

5.8. 8. Digital gender-based violence

Technology is not neutral, because it is created, designed and developed by human beings who have their own perspectives and biases. Technology is a tool that can be used for both good and evil, but its impact on misinformation depends largely on how it is used and designed. Most of the applications that are used, content that is read or viewed on the Internet are made by white, straight, cisgender, mostly English-speaking men from the global north. They generally dominate the spaces where decisions about the future of this technology are made, and this has a major impact on the lives of women and minorities.

That is, technology is not neutral as it reproduces systemic violences associated with a conservative, capitalist model of the world. Systemic biases of gender, race, class, language, as well as other intersectionalities and the funding of large technology industries emerge in the global north and are replicated in the global south. As a result, a portion of the population is affected by misinformation due to their gender role in society and inequality in access, use and development of technology (Sequera, 2017).

To address the problem of misinformation, inclusive public policies that reduce the gender digital divide, gender-sensitive cybersecurity plans, and inclusive digital literacy are necessary. Without these approaches, misinformation will remain a difficult problem to solve and will continue to affect those who are already disadvantaged in society.

On the other hand, gender-based violence such as online harassment, extortion, dissemination of non-consensual intimate images and hate speech especially affects women and minorities⁵⁵. This directly impacts their ability to fully exercise their rights in the online spaces. In particular, women in politics are victims of disinformation and hate campaigns that undermine democratic institutions and hinder the advancement of women's rights. To solve this problem, governments, civil society, philanthropy and international cooperation are needed to hold digital platforms accountable and support coordinated solutions that focus on the experiences of women leaders in the struggle for democracy and human rights. Digital platforms must be regulated and resources must be allocated to address the harmful impact of their products. Failure to act urgently will put democracy and human rights at risk (Lucina Di Meco, 2023).

54 Searching for Women in the National Cybersecurity Plan. TEDIC. 2017 <https://www.tedic.org/buscando-a-las-mujeres-en-el-plan-nacional-de-ciberseguridad/>

55 Campaign against digital and gender-based violence. TEDIC <https://violenciadigital.tedic.org/en/>

5.9. Net neutrality: zero rating

One of the factors that contribute to misinformation and that at first glance seems to have good intentions is the zero rating of Internet providers.

Zero-rating practices are those used by telephone and Internet providers to offer services free of charge. Free access to Facebook or WhatsApp platforms that predominate in the market can be considered unfair competition practices, monopolistic and contrary to net neutrality in Paraguay⁵⁶ and many Latin American countries⁵⁷.

In 2016, TEDIC together with other organizations in the region led by the Karisma Foundation, launched an investigation on Internet access. And among the findings was that all cell phone service providers apply a zero-rating modality favoring certain apps on the market (Fundación Karisma, 2016).

The obstacles women and vulnerable groups face in accessing the Internet are many, including limitations in terms of both time and financial resources. Many do not have the means to pay for full Internet rate plans and only connect through zero-rating promotions. This limits the development of technological and access skills (Fundación Karisma, 2016).

In other words, in the analysis of disinformation campaigns it is important to take into account factors such as zero-rating services and the lack of Internet access outside the most popular applications, factors that contribute to the “echo chambers” through which disinformation is distributed and consumed and limit the possibility of choosing which applications or web pages the user chooses to inform themselves.

5.10. Intellectual Property

Intellectual property can affect the fight against disinformation on the Internet because it can limit people’s ability to access accurate and verifiable information. Intellectual property laws, such as copyrights and patents, can be used by people who own information to restrict access to it or to demand payment for its use. This can make it more difficult to access information that people need to verify the veracity of news stories or to find alternative sources that may offer different perspectives. In addition, intellectual property can be used to protect false and misleading content, making the task of fighting misinformation even more difficult. (Nicola Lucchi et al., 2021)

On the other hand, the lack of local and relevant content in Latin American countries may make users more prone to disinformation and propaganda, as they do not have access to reliable sources of information. Therefore, it is important to find a balance between protecting intellectual property and promoting access to accurate and verifiable information to fight disinformation on the Internet.

56 Zero rating is a way of making the Internet more precarious. TEDIC. 2018 <https://www.tedic.org/zero-rating-es-una-forma-de-precarizar-internet/>

57 WhatsApp: The Widespread Use of WhatsApp in Political Campaigning in the Global South. Tactical Tech Collective. 2016 <https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/whatsapp>

Social networks often use content moderation tools to remove posts that infringe the intellectual property of third parties, such as the unauthorized use of music, images or copyrighted content. While this may be necessary to protect intellectual property rights, it can also have a limiting effect on the free flow of truthful information and diversity of opinion online, leading to misinformation.

In addition, the inconsistent application of EU corporate intellectual property rules has serious problems in the application of due process principles and impacts unevenly on access to information in different regions of the world. (Marina Pita, 2022)

One of the most current controversial cases related to intellectual property that may have serious consequences for freedom of expression, access to legitimate information and public interest is the Eliminalia case.

This company is focused on removing information and online content from the Internet, and has been involved in several controversies related to its methodology and practices. The company has been accused of using questionable techniques to remove information, including the use of false identities and misleading requests to have information removed, for its practice of using the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to request the removal of information it deems harmful to its customers, and used intellectual property claims to remove information from its internet customers. The company submitted alleged copyright infringements to delete inconvenient content for its customers, using a loophole in intellectual property law that allows for the immediate removal of allegedly infringing content without the need for a thorough investigation to have been carried out⁵⁸.

In the context of the reputation of public figures, the removal of relevant information can have serious consequences for freedom of expression and the public's right to be informed. That is to say, removing information of public and legitimate interest has consequences such as disinformation, historical memory and can also affect reliability in the electoral process and democracy.

58 Eliminalia: the name says it all. Armando.Info 2023 <https://armando.info/eliminalia-su-nombre-lo-dice-todo/>

6. DISINFORMATION IN ELECTIONS

Although by now we already have an idea of how disinformation has developed on the Internet, it is important to add certain contextual elements to the analysis, in order to understand why this phenomenon has become popular in electoral periods in the Western world.

Throughout history, disinformation and propaganda during elections have always relied on the dissemination of false, biased or distorted information, which has been instrumental in the rise of populism and sensationalist media. With the rise of technology, these effects have spread on a global scale and social networks have allowed anyone to participate in the dissemination of information. However, their impact is not limited to manipulation; instead, social networks contribute to creating a climate of broad suspicion. Although misinformation and trolls have decreased as platforms have purged their accounts and verifiers have reviewed more public discourse, institutional trust has not improved and fanatical groups have evaded restrictions and reinforced their extremism. But not only they have resistance to review their positions, but it is also observed among informed groups (Adriana Amado, 2021).

International IDEA's regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean, political scientist and jurist Daniel Zovatto, attempts to explain the current phenomenon. Around the world, there is a profound crisis of representation, leading important sectors of society to feel that their leaders do not adequately represent or protect them. As a result, political parties are in crisis and credibility and trust in governments are in decline. Indignation towards politics and local elites is spreading, creating the perfect environment for the proliferation of fake news, which in turn favors anti-establishment candidates. Therefore, the problem does not lie in social networks, but in the structural causes that generate this environment for misinformation and manipulation (Laura Serra, 2018).

Meanwhile, journalist Applebaum, in an interview with *The Atlantic*⁵⁹, shared her concern about conspiracy theories affecting the legitimacy of institutions and the public interest. In 2011, 30% of the US population believed in the conspiracy theory about then US President Barack Obama that he was born in Kenya⁶⁰, which aimed to undermine his legitimacy to serve in office. That meant to that part of the population that the White House, Congress, the FBI, the CIA and the media were lying to them all and committing illegitimate acts. Applebaum also states that the worrying thing about these kinds of conspiracy theories is that when it connects with and is accepted by the population by echoing their concerns, then people's confidence in democracy can be undermined.

Some of these scenarios were observed during the 2016 US election, a fake news story spread through Facebook claiming that Pope Francis had publicly endorsed Donald Trump, which generated a lot of attention. The fake news received a total of 960,000 engagements on the platform, making it the most popular news story in terms of comments, reactions and shares, surpassing any other real news story about the election⁶¹.

59 Anne Applebaum: Social Media Made Spreading Disinformation Easy. *The Atlantic*. 2022 <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/russian-disinformation-social-media-propaganda/629497/>

60 Trump rectifies: "Barack Obama was born in the United States. Period." *El País*, 2016 https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/09/16/actualidad/1474013911_339138.html

61 Obama Reckons With a Trump Presidency, *The New Yorker*. 2016 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/28/obama-reckons-with-a-trump-presidency>

The same year, false information circulated about a pizza restaurant called Comet Ping Pong that was run by Hillary Clinton and used for child abuse. This news led one man to investigate the ring and ultimately fire an assault rifle inside the restaurant⁶². In addition, Facebook revealed that an operation, possibly based in Russia, spent \$100,000 on thousands of ads in the U.S. over two years that included the election⁶³. According to an investigation by The New York Times and cybersecurity firm FireEye, Russian operators created fake Facebook and Twitter profiles of “Americans” and used Twitter bots to post “anti-Clinton” messages⁶⁴.

In March 2018, a whistleblower leaked information to The Observer, The New York Times and Channel 4 News⁶⁵ about the use of a massive collection of Facebook user data by Cambridge Analytica, a company specializing in psychological profiling and micro-targeted political messaging, and a psychology academic at Cambridge University. The company used this data to target specific groups of voters ahead of the 2016 presidential election in the U.S. According to Channel 4 reports, company executives bragged about using their data for propaganda and disinformation. Steve Bannon was the company’s vice president until he stepped down to lead Donald Trump’s 2016 election campaign. According to the Cambridge Analytica whistleblower, the company also “cheated” on the Brexit vote in 2017 and the company allegedly worked on more than 200 international elections, including Argentina, Nigeria, Kenya, India and the Czech Republic⁶⁶. The company was shut down after these facts were revealed.

In 2016, Andrés Sepúlveda, a hacker from Colombia, claimed in an interview with Bloomberg that he had interfered in several electoral processes in Latin America. According to Sepúlveda, he was hired to disrupt and manipulate the results of presidential elections in nine countries, including Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Venezuela between 2006 and 2014. Sepúlveda also admitted to leading a team of hackers that “stole campaign strategies, manipulated social networks to create false feelings of enthusiasm and ridicule, and installed spyware in opposition offices” during the 2012 presidential elections in Mexico. Sepúlveda is currently serving a 10-year sentence for similar charges during the 2014 elections in Colombia⁶⁷.

In Mexico in 2018, a group of more than 80 media outlets assembled a joint initiative called Verificado 2018⁶⁸ to debunk memes and viral stories containing potentially damaging misinformation. This is the largest collaborative initiative of its kind in Latin America, with financial partners representing foundations, academia and civil society.

62 N.C. man told police he went to D.C. pizzeria with gun to investigate conspiracy theory, The Washington Post. 2016 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2016/12/04/d-c-police-respond-to-report-of-a-man-with-a-gun-at-comet-ping-pong-restaurant/>

63 Facebook says likely Russian-based operation funded U.S. ads with political message. Reuters. 2017 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-propaganda/facebook-says-likely-russian-based-operation-funded-u-s-ads-with-political-message-idUSKCN1BH2VX>

64 The Fake Americans Russia Created to Influence the Election, The New York. 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/us/politics/russia-facebook-twitter-election.html>

65 Q&A on Cambridge Analytica: The allegations so far, explained, FactCheck, Channel 4 News. 2018 <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/cambridge-analytica-the-allegations-so-far>

66 Cambridge Analytica Whistleblower claims that cheating swung the Brexit vote, The New Yorker. 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/a-cambridge-analytica-whistleblower-claims-that-cheating-swung-the-brex-it-vot>

67 How to Hack an Election. Bloomberg. 2016 <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2016-how-to-hack-an-election/>

68 <https://verificado.mx/>

Also, during the 2021 elections in Mexico, Artículo 19 published about a set of pages with paid advertising, disguised as news portals, the public relations firm Wish & Win propped up misleading and editorialized information on the internet, in order to influence the elections for governorships, mayorships and federal deputies (Juan Gómez, 2022).

Along the same lines, there was a similar situation in the 2018 elections in Colombia, where many chains circulated on WhatsApp with false information, during election days, where voters could request a card for the anti-corruption consultation or to vote against animal abuse⁶⁹.

On the other hand, researcher Carles Pont believes that it is a mistake to believe that citizens are only guided by information on social networks when voting. Experts suggest that there is a fusion and diversification in the way information is accessed, which diminishes the influence of disinformation in the networks. Mostly, people inform themselves through television, using social networks as a complement, and give more credibility to traditional media as the focal point of discussions in the network⁷⁰. As an example, the usability survey of electronic voting machines, developed by TEDIC in the 2021 municipal elections, shows that 58.7% of voters in Asuncion were informed about voting with electronic voting machines through television and 47.4% via social networks (Carrillo et al, 2022).

Along the same lines, InternetLab Brazil's research on disinformation on WhatsApp during the elections concludes that a direct relationship between the reception of disinformation messages through the messaging app and the manipulation of people's vote has not yet been confirmed (Francisco Brito Cruz et al., 2020).

In Paraguay's 2023 elections, a large amount of false and misleading information was widely spread, especially through messaging groups with anonymous authors, such as tampered messages or photos with violent speech targeting female candidates⁷¹ or even acquiring domain names similar to national newspapers, as was the case of Abc Color⁷².

69 These are the false ballots that circulated on Election Day. El Tiempo. 2018. <https://www.eltiempo.com/elecciones-colombia-2018/presidenciales/falsos-tarjetones-que-han-circulado-en-las-jornadas-electorales-222370>

70 Wars in the age of disinformation. La Vanguardia. 2018 <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20180429/443014307399/guerra-desinformacion-hibrida-fria-fake-news-ruisa.html>

71 The main victims of hate speech are women running for elected office. Verification of the Precisa - El Surti. April 2023 <https://twitter.com/eslaprecisa/status/1651698009007173632>

72 Crearon un dominio "impersonificando" (suplantacion o copia) a @ABCDigital para distribuir desinformación. Marcelo Elizeche. April 2023. <https://twitter.com/melizeche/status/1652027022497988608>

The participation of the media in the dissemination of this type of content in a misleading and false way was also evident. Such was the case of the “sudden” prohibition of the publications of the ballot boxes published by the digital news media GEN and confirmed as false by the digital news media El Surti⁷³. In the same line, it is noted that the media La Nación published that Infobae supported the presidential candidate Santiago Peña, however this was denied by El Surti⁷⁴. Also, El Surti showed how the media of the Cartes group advertised to discredit candidates opposing the Colorado party⁷⁵.

The dissemination of unverified information was also identified, for example, the case of the “En la Tecla Py” platform, which reports an alleged plan of computer sabotage of voting machines by foreign hackers who entered the country weeks before the elections⁷⁶.

Likewise, disinformation campaigns on electoral fraud through voting machines were also highlighted. Although the absolute lack of transparency of the electronic voting systems allows the construction of plausible hypotheses of fraud, it is important to address it at other times in order to achieve a genuine electoral reform⁷⁷ and avoid the violent protests that took place in May 2023⁷⁸. Finally, there were doubts about the veracity of the video of the former presidential candidate Payo Cubas who was supposedly forced to record a video from the Specialized Group of the National Police to stop the street demonstrations and that certain public figures attributed as fake videos made by artificial intelligence⁷⁹.

73 The Cartes media GEN described as “sudden” the prohibition of the TSJE to publish ballot boxes during voting hours. It argues that it happened “now”. Verified by La Precisa – El Surti. April 2023 <https://twitter.com/eslaprecisa/status/1652715094734778372?cxt=H-HwWiMC9iennz-8tAAAA>

74 La Nación publishes about Infobae’s support to Santiago Peña’s candidacy. Verified by La Precisa – El Surti. April 2023 <https://twitter.com/eslaprecisa/status/1638985893213253633>

75 Campaign in favor of Santiago Peña advertised electoral disinformation on Facebook. El Surti. April 2023 <https://elsurti.com/chequeo/2023/04/27/campana-a-favor-de-santiago-pena-pauto-desinformacion-electoral-en-facebook/>

76 In the Tecla Py. Text: NGOs to control... and hackers to disrupt?. 2023 <https://twitter.com/EnlaTeclaPY/status/1645791630467956736>

77 More transparency and citizen participation in response to electoral fraud allegations. TEDIC. May 2023 <https://www.tedic.org/ante-denuncias-de-fraude-electoral-mas-transparencia-y-participacion-ciudadana/>

78 80 people arrested after protests by Payo’s supporters. Página 12. May 2023. <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/545555-paraguay-80-detenido-tras-las-protestas-de-seguidores-de-pa>

79 Doubts about Payo’s video. El Nacional. May 2023. <https://www.elnacional.com.py/politica/2023/05/16/dudas-sobre-video-de-payo-obligado-a-grabar-o-hecho-por-inteligencia-artificial/>

7. A MULTI-SECTOR APPROACH TO ADDRESS MISINFORMATION

7.1. The role of the State

Firstly, it is important that the State takes responsibility for guaranteeing the transparency and veracity of the information shared during electoral processes. For this, it must establish clear rules and regulations that promote transparency in political advertising and the protection of citizens' personal data. This implies, for example, the obligation of political parties and candidates to clearly identify themselves in their advertisements and online posts, and to provide accurate and truthful information about their programs and proposals.

In addition, the State must invest in digital literacy programs and citizen education to tackle disinformation. Many people are vulnerable to disinformation because they lack the skills to distinguish between true and false information online. This is partly due to a lack of digital literacy and a lack of awareness of the risks and threats of the digital age. Therefore, it is important for the state to promote digital literacy starting from primary, secondary and tertiary education, and to provide training and awareness programs for people of all ages.

Another key aspect of the state's role in the fight against disinformation is the partnership with companies and civil society organizations. Social networking companies and online service providers have an important role to play in preventing and removing false and misleading content. It is therefore essential that the state works with these companies to establish clear regulations and standards, and to ensure that social networks, messaging apps and online service providers implement effective measures to combat misinformation. Collaboration with civil society organizations, such as fact-checking groups and social media monitoring initiatives, can also be important to improve transparency and accuracy of information during electoral processes.

In this sense, public electoral institutions and institutions are making a great effort to mitigate disinformation during elections. Some of the institutional responses on disinformation in elections were:

The European Union is seeking to regulate political advertising, based on the Digital Services Act. The proposal would impose obligations on providers of political advertising services. Political ads would have to be labeled as such to differentiate them from editorial content and be accompanied by specific information and a transparency disclaimer, containing references to the identity and contact details of the sponsor, the time of publication, and the amount spent and its sources. The report foresees the setup of a European repository of online political advertisements, managed by the Commission, including all online political advertisements and the information provided in their transparency notices (Parlamento Europeo, 2023).

Lack of transparency in the source of political advertisements can lead to people receiving incorrect information or not knowing who is behind the content. This can allow foreign entities to influence elections under the guise of neutrality. In addition, the lack of common rules and cross-border reach in political advertising can create disadvantages, undermining fairness and equal opportunities, especially during electoral processes. Traditional rules are ineffective in the online setting, where these technologies and tools provide opportunities to influence and target voters, making enforcement and compliance difficult. The manipulation of micro-segmentation of personal data aggravates these disadvantaged situations and affects equal opportunities.

On the other hand, during the 2019 elections in Argentina, the National Electoral Chamber played a leading role in the fight against disinformation. For this, alliances with 13 companies and media outlets were established and measures were adopted to increase transparency in the official accounts of candidates and parties, as well as in the advertising and financing of the electoral campaign⁸⁰.

In the 2022 elections in Brazil, the Superior Electoral Court created the National Front to Confront Disinformation (FRENTE), which voluntarily includes electoral officials in the implementation of actions against the spread of false information; and the creation of the Disinformation Alert System against Elections. (TSE, 2021) And as a second step, it allies with large Internet platforms to curb the spread of fake news. For example, with the Meta group, strategies were developed exclusively for Facebook and Instagram. According to Meta's public policy manager in Brazil: "The company removes fake news that discourages or interferes with voting or could harm people in the offline world. But our approach to misinformation is to flag content as false and reduce its circulation. We understand that we should not be arbiters of truth."⁸¹

The company disclosed that since the Brazilian election campaign began and up until the assault - almost five months - they removed one million pieces of content from Facebook and almost as much from Instagram for inciting violence, including calls for military intervention.⁸²

They also cooperated with four verification agencies that analyzed suspicious posts, reported by users, electoral authorities or detected through artificial intelligence. If the verifiers determined that the content was false, Meta limited its reach, preventing the chance of paying for it to be promoted. It also added a filter to warn about its falsehood.

With regard to messaging apps, Whatsapp successfully prevented the delivery of mass messages. With Telegram, channels of super groups such as "B38 official", which with 67,000 members introduces itself as "the largest Bolsonaro support group in Brazil" were suspended. While comments on Lula's Telegram channel were suspended because someone had posted pornography.⁸³

In contrast, the Brazilian bill also stands out: Law 2.630 of 2020 (PL 2623), which establishes the Brazilian law on freedoms, responsibilities and transparency on the Internet. This regulation is considered by defenders of freedom of expression and digital rights organizations as dangerous and controversial if we continue to think of a state regulation that will define what is disinformation or what is truth.⁸⁴

In order to mitigate disinformation, some States focus mainly on punishing the perpetrators of disinformation and attributing responsibility to those who facilitate its dissemination. In this sense, they also focus on the responsibility of intermediaries, seeking that they implement various techniques, measures and instruments to address this phenomenon.

80 Agreement to "combat disinformation on social networks" in the elections. TELAM. 2019 <https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/201905/362445-acuerdo-para-combatir-la-desinformacion-en-las-redes-sociales-durante-las-elecciones.html>

81 The tough battle against electoral disinformation in Brazil hooked on the Internet. El País. 2022 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-06-02/la-ardua-batalla-contra-la-desinformacion-electoral-en-un-brasil-enganchado-a-internet.html>

82 Brazil: a laboratory for the global fight against disinformation. El País. March 2023. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-03-06/brasil-laboratorio-del-combate-global-contra-la-desinformacion.html>

83 Idem 61.

84 Platform regulation in Brazil: the need, risks and contradictions. CELE. May 2023. <https://observatoriolegislativocele.com/regulacion-de-plataformas-en-brasil-necesidad-peligros-y-contradicciones/>

A research by Al Sur, adds a new focus not yet addressed in the ecosystem of disinformation on the Internet: the special responsibilities of public officials and candidates for public office. The conclusion drawn is that these people have an obligation to tell the truth in their public discourse and expressions, and that this logic could be useful in finding new solutions to the spread of disinformation and its negative effects on public debate (Al Sur, 2022).

The establishment of specific responsibilities and obligations for certain individuals for their roles does not necessarily constitute an illegitimate restriction on the right to freedom of expression. It also suggests that political parties and other political actors should work to improve the quality of the information ecosystem and increase trust in democratic institutions, as well as refrain from using disinformation tactics in political campaigns, including the use of covert tools to manipulate public opinion (OAS, UN, OSCE, ACHPR, 2021).

For example, during the 2023 presidential elections in Paraguay, public officials such as Congressman Derlis Maidana disseminated questionable information about 20 alleged Brazilian computer hackers who entered the country as “electoral hackers” to sabotage the country’s elections⁸⁵.

It is therefore essential that regulation establishes international standards and guidelines, without being tied to specific platforms or technologies, but that it can be adapted to new forms of intervention. The task of regulating these issues implies a joint effort to find solutions that respect users’ rights and promote transparency and accountability of intermediaries. The complexity of these issues also requires a multidisciplinary approach, including experts in technology, law, gender and human rights, among other areas, to find effective and fair solutions.

7.2. The role of Internet companies

The advance of technology has had a great impact on the discussion about the responsibility of intermediaries, relating it to the consequences of moderating content for the rights of users. Today, platforms have much more advanced internal content monitoring abilities than a decade ago. The development of increasingly complex and obscure algorithms to classify and disseminate content in the community brings new challenges.

The growth and centralization of power in a small number of stakeholders worldwide has generated the need to reconsider the social function and the individual and collective public impact of intermediaries, and not only their functions or the layers in which they operate (Del Campo et al., 2021).

First, technology companies should not be liable for the content of users. The legal principle known as the “digital good Samaritan” states that technology companies are not liable for content posted by users, as long as these companies are making a reasonable effort to remove illegal or harmful content when they are made aware of it. This principle is important because it protects freedom of expression and prevents companies from having excessive control over what people can say online (The Santa Clara Principles, 2022).

⁸⁵ Congressman denounces irregular entry of “electoral hackers”. ADNdigital. April 2023. <https://www.adndigital.com.py/diputado-denuncia-ingreso-irregular-de-piratas-electorales/>

Technological advances in recent years have led to a deeper examination of the responsibility and role of intermediaries, not only for the content of third parties, but also for their own actions. The development of algorithms, content prioritization, compliance with non-discrimination and fair trial criteria, are some of the aspects that are considered when assessing their liability. In addition, the increasing complexity of these actions makes regulation a challenge, which requires the participation of various stakeholders and experts in the regulatory debate.

In this sense, technology companies should work closely with authorities and civil society organizations to fight disinformation. This may include promoting awareness and educational campaigns on how to detect disinformation and how to avoid sharing it. They can also work with and financially support organizations that specialize in fact-checking to ensure that content shared on their platforms is accurate and backed by verifiable evidence.

A global discussion on transparency, accountability and content moderation is currently underway at UNESCO and is aimed at producing a guide for States. Regulation, self-regulation and co-regulation are the three ways to be explored in this guide that seeks to mitigate the risks of misinformation, digital violence, polarization of public debate as well as to promote the obligations of equality and non-discrimination towards both individuals and content⁸⁶.

7.3. The role of the media

Today, journalism is driven to provide headlines and save resources, but has little motivation to avoid mistakes, which leads some media and journalists to spread false information, either intentionally or accidentally, and even without retracting it.

In a world full of information, bias and identity groups, it is essential for journalism to be credible, reliable and consistent. According to Professor Ivor Gaber⁸⁷, false information has transformed journalism by posing a serious challenge to the extent that it is not always obvious to distinguish what is true from what is false. At the same time, however, hoaxes and fabricated information contribute considerably to strengthening the role of journalism. If anyone is capable of denouncing false information, it is the journalists, the responsible journalists of course. Gaber believes that in the short term, false information is a kind of thorn in the side of professionals, but in the longer term it will reinforce the legitimacy of their profession and give them greater weight in society.

One of the major challenges that journalism faces today is to maintain the professional journalistic rigor of the news. However, with the emergence of citizen journalism and influencers⁸⁸ that have increased in popularity, journalistic values and rigor are in danger and can contribute to the spread of misinformation.

86 UNESCO consultation on the regulatory framework for digital platforms. TEDIC. 2022 <https://www.tedic.org/consulta-de-unesco-sobre-el-marco-regulatorio-de-plataformas-digitales/>

87 Fake news: sound bites on a burning topic. UNESCO. 2017 <https://en.unesco.org/courier/july-september-2017/fake-news-sound-bites-burning-topic>

88 The World's Dream Job: The Careers People are Searching for the Most. Remitly. 2023. <https://www.remitly.com/gb/en/landing/dream-jobs-around-the-world>

Another concern is that in Paraguay and other countries in the region, there is a high concentration of media outlets, which has a serious and direct impact on the quality of information that citizens receive, as well as on the increase of misinformation. The lack of diversity in media ownership means that there is very little variety in the voices and perspectives presented in the media. This can lead to the exclusion of certain topics, especially those that are not of interest to media owners or are of conflict of interest to them⁸⁹. In this context, misinformation can thrive. When there is little variety in news sources, people may be exposed to a single perspective or even to fake or misleading news that is disseminated through privately owned media outlets. Lack of diversity also means that there is less room for independent investigative journalism that can expose corruption and other forms of abuse of power. In that sense, several challenges arise: who watches the watchdogs of truth? What happens if the media used to verify disinformation are occupied by the same generators of disinformation and become tools of censorship? How can citizens identify adulterated information?

7.4. Fact checking in journalism and its limitations

Fact-checking is a process used to confirm or disprove the veracity of a claim or news item based on proof and evidence. It consists of verifying the data, sources and evidence presented in a claim and comparing them with other available sources and evidence to determine whether they are accurate and reliable. The objective of fact-checking is to provide accurate and reliable information to the audience, and to help prevent the spread of fake or misleading news (Vázquez-Herrero, J., Vizoso, A & López-García., 2019).

Although fact-checking is a useful tool for detecting some fake news, it is not a complete solution for combating their spread on social networks. Not all fake news can be identified, and it is often spread faster than fact-checking.

Professional research is needed to find and evaluate evidence to support claims. Professional journalism is also crucial, as it is responsible for properly communicating verified news. However, there is also a need for greater involvement of the public in the selection of reliable information. Scientific methodology, which is used in many areas of knowledge to answer questions, can be a useful tool to achieve this.

However, media verification has several limitations such as the subjectivity and interpretations of the stories. The case of *Chequeado* and *Primereando las Noticias* in Argentina highlights some of the questions raised by the role of fact-checkers in today's journalism, such as the definition of the limits of verification, the amplification of fact-checking results and the measures to be considered in the event of a negative or fake news check. Moreover, the visibility of fact-checks depends on partnerships with powerful media, and they do not always spread as much as fake news (Agustina del Campo, 2020).

Accordingly, policies or regulations that suggest marking fake news with verification tools and warnings should take into account that such actions do not necessarily change the user's perception, and that, even if a user sees stories with warnings of possible falsehood, they may conclude that all those without warnings are true, which is a mistaken generalization. Although we do not seek to disqualify actions such as fact-checking or warnings, we identify that these tools have limitations and may even affect the

89 Paraguay's most powerful media owners. Plus Magazine. 2018 <https://www.revistaplus.com.py/2018/08/25/los-propietarios-de-medios-de-comunicacion-mas-poderosos-de-paraguay/>

user's right to freedom of expression because they may be restrictive or arbitrary measures that will worsen the problem (Carlos Cortés, Luisa Isaza, 2017).

7.5. The role of civil society

How should people act in the face of the information they receive in the era of disinformation? The author of the book "Thinking with others" shares some ideas to mitigate disinformation from citizenship. First of all, ideally, one should block the spread of fake news and support the spread of true information. However, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether information is reliable or not, and there may be situations in which one does not know enough or does not have the necessary resources to verify its veracity. In such cases, it is advisable to be humble, control emotions and analyze both the risk of sharing false information and the risk of not sharing true information (Guadalupe Nogués, 2019).

Civil society has an important role to play in the fight against disinformation. First, it is important for people to be critical and verify information before sharing it on social networks or other media. It is also important that media and digital literacy education is encouraged so that people can identify fake news and misleading content.

In addition, civil society can pressure governments and companies to take action to combat disinformation. For example, it can demand that online platforms do more to identify and eliminate false information and promote verified information. It can also advocate for the regulation of media and social networks to ensure transparency and honesty in the information that is disseminated.

Finally, civil society can work in partnership with the media and non-profit organizations to promote education and awareness of misinformation. This can include creating awareness campaigns, organizing public events and promoting fact-checking. In short, civil society can play a key role in combating disinformation through education, lobbying and collaboration.

8. CHALLENGES FOR THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

First, there is no strong evidence to suggest that disinformation campaigns are the primary factor in altering election results in a particular context. Instead, there are economic and political factors to be considered. Therefore, any attempt at legislative or public policy modification that seeks to “fight disinformation” without solid evidence should be questioned, as the responsibility for clarifying the discussion should not be attributed to the state or to private platforms. While propaganda and the dissemination of false information are detrimental to the democratic process, it is even more harmful to attribute to these entities the responsibility of regulating public discussion. In short, there are no simple solutions to such a social and political problem (Al Sur, 2019).

Some of the challenges include the following:

- **Modernizing controls in electoral processes to face the challenge of disinformation campaigns in the Latin American and Caribbean region.** The problem is complex in different dimensions and to face it, the creation of a regional, democratic, transparent and participatory group is proposed, one that involves all interested parties to observe and issue recommendations and proposals to both platforms and countries. The regional instances would be a space for public and private cooperation to work together in issuing recommendations and proposals before political campaigns in electoral periods (Al Sur, 2019).
- **There is an urgent need for Paraguay to have a comprehensive personal data protection law;** it is the only country in South America that still does not have one. In the context of disinformation campaigns in elections, the systems of personal data protection in Latin America must be modernized and include attributions to both the protection agency and the electoral systems in the protection of personal data⁹⁰.
- **Promoting a pluralistic discourse and avoiding censorship:** it will be key to include access, inclusion and literacy policies for the population. Effective access to a diverse information ecosystem is key to mitigate disinformation and to express oneself on the Internet, as well as to reduce echo chambers, confirmation bias, polarization and digital gender violence.
- **Regulating and ensuring compliance with net neutrality.** The concentration of the digital ecosystem in the region is also a problem, as it can allow the promotion of disinformation campaigns through practices such as zero-rating. This practice not only breaches the principle of net neutrality, but also restricts users’ access to alternative sources of information, which can allow disinformation to spread.
- **Strengthening the diversity of voices in investigative journalism and news media.** Media concentration, like the concentration of technology companies and their business models, facilitates the proliferation of misleading or false information.

⁹⁰ Urgent consideration of the project that protects personal data. Paraguay Data Coalition. 2021 <https://www.datospersonales.org.py/urgen-tratamiento-de-proyecto-que-protege-datos-personales/>

- **To conduct a legal reform process after a broad debate with stakeholders** (media, business, academia, State) and experts, in order to provide adequate and effective tools to the Electoral Justice to fight disinformation in accordance with constitutional principles and inter-American human rights standards.
- **Continue strengthening measures to fight disinformation and communication management by the Electoral Justice**, from a comprehensive and multisectoral perspective, and increase the human and financial resources necessary to fulfill this task.

9. CONCLUSION

In summary, disinformation has been a tool used by leaders and the media for centuries to influence public opinion and achieve political and military objectives. With the rise of the Internet, social media, and messaging apps, disinformation has become more accessible and effective than ever before, presenting a challenge to advocates of truth and accuracy. However, there is no conclusive evidence that disinformation campaigns on the Internet do or do not play a decisive role in elections.

Disinformation can also be used to undermine voter confidence in the electoral process and in democratic institutions in general. If people do not trust the electoral system, they may feel that their vote does not count and not participate in the elections, which in turn affects the legitimacy of the process.

Regarding the role of digital platforms and messaging apps during elections, it is highlighted that several platforms have announced measures to ensure a more secure digital space and provide reliable information about the electoral process in the countries. However, despite these efforts, they continue to be used to magnify the spread of disinformation. This shows that the measures taken by the companies have been insufficient and should continue a review process with a view to achieving the objectives for which they were designed.

Regarding freedom of expression and electoral justice, the Inter-American system attributes a key role to freedom of expression for the preservation of democracy and the enjoyment of all other human rights. However, this does not imply that misinformation in the context of political and electoral discourse cannot be subject to restrictions and sanctions. The Inter-American system recognizes that electoral law can develop specific responses to address disinformation in this context, emphasizing that any regulation affecting freedom of expression must comply with legal requirements, need and proportionality, and take into account the high level of protection granted to public interest speech and political debate. A clear and solid legal framework against disinformation in electoral matters guarantees legal certainty and strengthens the effectiveness of the responses of all parties involved.

Nowadays, traditional media, social networks, government social communication teams and politicians' social networks are some of the means used to transmit information. Consequently, the population is facing a different scenario, in which large amounts of information are produced and consumed. This increase in the number and diversity of communication channels has changed the way in which information is propagated and received. As a result, the problem of misinformation has become more complex and difficult to combat. In addition, people are increasingly prone to consume information that confirms their pre-existing prejudices and opinions, making the fight against misinformation even more difficult. In this regard, the public has a responsibility to be critical of the information that is received and shared, and to do their part to prevent the spread of disinformation.

Bubble filters and echo chambers are phenomena that are closely related to selective and confirmation bias. These phenomena foster online gregariousness and generate ideological and structural polarization in online engagements. People's preference for simplicity and speed over complexity and depth also affects what is presented in search engines. Algorithms learn from people's clicks and present them with what they think they are interested in. Therefore, it is not always easy to find accurate and reliable information, and it is important to be aware of the possibility of bias in the information that is presented to us. The business of voter profiling and micro-segmentation is booming and polarization is increasing as users perceive that the relationship between individuals and campaigns infringes on privacy.

Likewise, the consolidation of technology companies and social networks has significant impacts on people's virtual lives. This trend can have serious consequences for privacy, security and online democracy, from the reduction of competition and the reduction of diversity of opinions to the control of users' personal data and the impact on the quality of the information available.

It is not the role of legislators or private companies - content platforms - to define what is "true" and what is "false". The challenge is to generate preventive measures, focused on the development of people's critical thinking, to be able to analyze and decide in the midst of so much over-information that exists in the networks. In other words, education on how we construct our thoughts and based on what evidence, is key to face disinformation and to be able to fully exercise rights, such as freedom of expression online.

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