Surveillance and misinformation in Paraguay

An exploratory research

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Technology & Human Rights TEDIC

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This material is part of the **Informed and Resilient** project, which seeks to reduce inequalities and promote human rights in Paraguay by combating misinformation and digital violence.

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TEDIC Technology & Human Rights

TEDIC is a non-governmental organization founded in 2012, whose mission is to defend and promote human rights in the digital environment. Among its main areas of interest are freedom of expression, privacy, access to knowledge, and gender on the Internet.

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JANUARY 2026

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Table of contents

1. Introduction

Contemporary misinformation refers to the design and production of news and content that imitate journalistic style, but with intentionally false or misleading content. The phenomenon of misinformation has several consequences, but it stands out for undermining established knowledge, mainly scientific knowledge, and typically influences political processes. In particular, misinformation influences electoral processes or the credibility of election results. The effects of misinformation can affect aspects as varied yet central as public health or democracy.

Misinformation and so-called "fake news" constitute both a genre of communication and a label used to discredit the credibility of actors who produce information and knowledge. The relativization of knowledge does not result from the exchange of ideas and opinions among the public, but rather from the public's rejection of information that is true and verified. This implies that misinformation is not a specific type of information in conversation with other forms of knowledge. The literature on misinformation suggests that this results in skepticism toward verified knowledge and suspicion toward established actors in knowledge generation. Its circulation responds primarily to political or economic motivations and involves a variety of actors, including, but not limited to, the State and political spheres.

The relevant background related to the information economy and the lack of information can be traced back to the 1990s in the context of the proliferation of development models based on the production, access, and circulation of information. The historical background to this process has broader roots, but it was in the post-Cold War era that it became globally established, given the social, economic, and ideological transformations that had worldwide reach.

In Paraguay, this process was characterized by the emergence of transparency-oriented discourses and policies, with the expansion of a legislative framework and related policies (Hetherington, 2011). These were based on the new National Constitution, approved after the dictatorship period, and on the establishment and development of State agendas and institutions aimed at promoting transparency within the public bureaucracy.

Misinformation as a field of knowledge is, however, more recent. Its proliferation surged around 2016 when it began to be differentiated from its closest counterpart, the lack of information, called misinformation. Misinformation presumes a kind of intentionality to not inform or to do so in a potentially harmful way (Kapantai et al., 2021). The emphasis in this field largely centers on information and misinformation circulating online. In other words, it focuses on how digital spaces are linked to the creation, recreation, and circulation of misinformation, shaping social practices and influencing politics.

Although the link between misinformation and the State is an emerging field of study, State policies that undermine individual and collective rights and their relationship with information are not new, and their historical precursors can be found in security policies for the production of information and knowledge. In the Southern Cone region in particular, a related precursor can be found in the surveillance and control policies of States during the period of dictatorships. The dictatorship of

Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay was closely linked to these policies through surveillance systems and regional collaborations. This historical background of regional surveillance and repression constitutes a fundamental backdrop for understanding and historically situating current misinformation practices, particularly in a context where it has been documented how these misinformation strategies currently function as forms of political communication (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Sequera, 2023).

Motivated by the desire to contribute to the development of critical thinking about misinformation in Paraguay, TEDIC proposes as the objective of this research an exploration of its intersection with surveillance and technology, as well as an understanding of its historical background, evolution, and impact on human rights and privacy of people.

This research contributes to the discussion on misinformation in Paraguay by placing it within its historical context and analyzing its main contemporary characteristics based on interviews with key actors. The problem of misinformation reported by these actors indicate that misinformation is linked to the normalization of social surveillance; limited knowledge about State and private surveillance capacities; limited transparency in access to public information; and the existence of increasingly common active misinformation strategies.

2. A historical context of surveillance and misinformation in Paraguay

The historical background of public policies on surveillance and misinformation dates back to the Paraguayan military dictatorship and its regional context. In this sense, the policies that structured State surveillance and repression in the Southern Cone were strongly influenced by counterinsurgency policing models with conceptual and ideological roots that can be traced back to both US security interests and non-US influences. All of these policy orientations were grounded in ideologies and political agendas that operated in alignment with local political initiatives.

The rationale of State security justified both surveillance and State repression. Police surveillance, with a counterinsurgency focus, was based on combating perceived threats to national security and was disseminated through the circulation of ideas, individuals, and political sectors both within the security forces and in civil society. Overall, regional and international cooperation on intelligence and the dissemination of its justification underpinned the spread of surveillance and the construction of a common adversary. These public policies connected local policies with those of the Southern Cone, which in turn were intertwined globally.

The relevant consequence for a contemporary analysis of misinformation is that historical practices succeeded in establishing surveillance and political repression as everyday practices, grounded in security reasons that normalized the treatment of political adversaries outside the standards of justice, due process, respect for privacy, integrity, or human rights. Over time, a political culture of social control based on misinformation emerged, as political surveillance and repression were justified through the attribution of political attitudes or intentions to social groups, regardless of whether or not these attributions were true.

In addition to contributing to the normalization of surveillance and repression practices, the abusive use of State security rationales had an impact on individuals and groups that were not part of the assumed enemy. According to current knowledge based on human rights reports and regional truth commissions, the effects of repression and rights violations indirectly affected a greater number of people than their direct victims (Truth and Justice Commission, 2008a, 2008b). Both surveillance and repression disproportionately affected vulnerable, socially devalued, and discriminated groups. As an exercise of misinformation, this is how "images of control" emerged, as Patricia Hill Collins calls them, which are stereotypical references or images that devalue specific social groups over which social control is exercised or sought (Hill Collins, 2000). Examples include organized labor sectors, unionized students, disparagingly called "communists" or considered "subversive," and sexual diversity groups[1].

1 "108" is a gender-based stereotype in Paraguay originally used as an insult to refer to gay men in Paraguay, which originated in a wave of repression against the gay community in Asunción in 1959, during the military dictatorship. Over time, it has become a reference point for the LGBTQ+ movement, which has reincorporated its use as an image and symbol of resistance. For more information on its historical origins and role in regulating sexuality in Paraguay, see (Castillo & Mereles, 2023; Szokol, 2013).

In all these cases—and many others—surveillance and repression, justified on the basis of the symbolic images attributed to them, were carried out through what today would be called misinformation. Representations and narratives of security regarding political enemies, as well as images of control, functioned as a communication strategy aimed at justifying or normalizing state violence[2].

2 Communication was also directly affected in the form of journalistic censorship, media outlet closures, and persecution of journalists (Costa et al., 2022). The effects of information censorship included, at the social level, the establishment of self-censorship practices. (Tamayo-Belda, 2025).

3. The reason for anti-communism and its regional dissemination

Repression and surveillance were structured over several decades of policies and legislation during the Paraguayan dictatorship. One of the main characteristics of these policies was to subordinate civil liberties and democracy to the demands of counterinsurgency and anti-communism.

Anti-communism was not a new doctrine, but the context of the beginning of the military dictatorship in Paraguay in 1954 provided an opportunity to renew and consolidate it. At the regional level, the constellation of authoritarian regimes that consolidated particularly from the 1960s onwards created what could be described as a structure of political opportunity that implemented new control strategies with anti-communism as public ideology. This is how the dictatorships of the Southern Cone deployed a series of political control practices that justified the construction of the State security apparatus based on the perceived threat of communism.

Starting in the 1970s, the regionalization of intelligence, security, and State surveillance operations took a qualitative leap through the implementation of international collaborations. One specific innovation was Operation Condor, which represented a regional security strategy based on intelligence cooperation. Its explicit goal was to combat communism, and it was conceived as a program independent from other forms of international security collaborations, such as the INTERPOL police network[3]. As an interstate security network, Operation Condor reached its operational peak when all participating governments in the Southern Cone were under military dictatorships.

The anti-communist rationale that catapulted different iterations of surveillance policies did not arise in isolation; on the contrary, it spread through local, regional, and international networks influenced by the global dynamics of the Cold War. Through interstate networks and the circulation of individuals and their ideas, it consolidated and expanded its applications in different geographical areas. Although anti-communist legislation had local precedents dating back to the 1930s, such as the Civil Defense Law, it was the Cold War order and the US-sponsored national security doctrine that drove the development of political policing, surveillance, and counterinsurgency policies[4]. With the onset of the dictatorship in Paraguay, repressive legislation in the country was updated, first through Law 294/55 "For the Defense of Democracy" and then with Law 209/77 "For the Defense of Public Peace and Individual Freedom." Both laws were considered the cornerstone of repression through legislation and were only abolished with the advent of democracy (Truth and Justice Commission, 2008a; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 1987).

3 See the founding documents of Operation Cóndor, available in the Archive of Terror (CDyA, 1975). For an analysis of the historical and legal context, see (Lessa, 2022; McSherry, 1999).

4 Counterinsurgency, as a tactic, was part of a broader political doctrine, the theory of revolutionary warfare, developed mainly by the French colonial war in Algeria and influenced by its former colonial adversary in Indochina and its ideology, communism. The French experience subsequently influenced military collaboration with Argentina, turning Algeria into a kind of testing ground for Latin America. See (Lazreg, 2008; Marie-Monique Robin, 2008).

The securitization of the political left and the normalization of extralegal techniques for its surveillance prevailed not only in the Americas, but also in Europe, where a doctrine was adopted that considered local security forces as the first line of defense against communist subversion (Morgan, 2019). Herbert Marcuse, a contemporary observer of the West in the early 1970s, argued that the counterrevolutionary spirit—in theory defensive—constituted a preventive defense unleashed against any communist or subversive initiative organized against governments subordinate to imperialist countries (Marcuse, 1972). The fear of revolution created a link that connected surveillance and repressive repertoires across a spectrum that ranged from democratic regimes to dictatorial ones such as Paraguay's.

4. A variety of actors

Although the international dissemination of police repertoires has been studied as a recent phenomenon—as in the case of the militarization of police surveillance of social protests (Wood, 2014)—this same notion can help us understand the spread of police surveillance during the Cold War. The relevance for understanding contemporary misinformation processes lies in the fact that throughout recent history, surveillance, as well as the production of information and misinformation created by the State have had elements of transnational dissemination through collaboration between state and non-state actors. Historically, the dissemination of police experience and repertoires was conceived as a transnational counterinsurgency project based on reciprocal feedback between national and international police practices (Go, 2022; Schrader, 2019). US cooperation permeated the agendas and strategic interests of Latin American security forces with its internal security concerns, focused on the repression of communism and the establishment of a preventive counterinsurgency police force as its main strategy, which expanded during the 1950s and especially the 1960s (Huggins, 1998). In the early 1960s, US police cooperation transitioned into civilian cooperation when USAID hosted the Office of Public Safety (OPS), which focused on counterinsurgency training as its primary policing model (Schrader, 2019; Weld, 2014).

Thanks to archival information available in the Archive of Terror[5], it can now be confirmed that in the mid-1950s, as Cold War tensions rose, the Paraguayan government actively sought US assistance to strengthen its internal security apparatus and combat perceived communist threats. This course of action marked the beginning of a significant expansion of the Paraguayan State's security mechanisms, reinforcing the dictatorship's ability to monitor, repress, and eliminate political opposition under the pretext of anti-communism, which by then had become a public ideology[6].

However, although the dissemination of practices and ideologies was based on US influence, it was not limited to it. According to archival documents, it is possible to confirm that, on the contrary, anti-communism spread through a wide range of interests and actors that converged and formed transnational networks that articulated the global right. Among other networks, the World Anti-Communist League (WACL) and its regional counterpart in Latin America, the Latin American Anti-Communist Conference (CAL)[7], stand out. These networks established solid international coordination and provided ideological and material support to their members, in a form of cooperation in which the Paraguayan state played a key role in organizing international meetings and conferences[8].

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5 The so-called Archive of Terror is a public archive containing files and documents produced by the Paraguayan police mainly during the dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989). The archives were discovered in 1992 and have since been organized, microfilmed, digitized, and opened to the public through the Museum of Justice - Documentation and Archive Center in the Palace of Justice in Asunción. The police archives went from being instruments of surveillance and repression to tools for democratization and transitional justice. For an overview of their discovery, content, and collections, see, among others (Barreto, 2016; Boccia Paz et al., 2006; Zoglin, 2001).

6 The initial impetus came from the implementation of an anti-communist and counterinsurgency training program called the "Special Information Course," implemented by the National Directorate of Technical Affairs, or simply "La Técnica," under the influence of Lieutenant Colonel Robert K. Thierry and with the support of the US Embassy (CDyA, 1956b, 1956a). For an extensive reference to Colonel Thierry's presence in Paraguay, see (Gonzalez, 2013).

7 Created in South Korea in 1966 as a spin-off of the Anti-Communist People's Conference of Asia (APAC), the WACL held its first conference in 1967 in Taiwan, bringing together anti-communist groups from five continents. (Bohoslavsky, 2020).

8 See related documentation (CDyA, 1972, 1973).

Finally, the evolution of a transnational surveillance architecture connected local and regional actors with global counterinsurgency efforts in countries such as Taiwan and South Africa, expanding the infrastructure of anti-communist repression. This structured and ideologically driven system of political violence and surveillance became a complex genealogical system of knowledge production that linked the local, regional, and global Cold War interests, such as the WACL and CAL. These networks established strong coordination and provided ideological and material support to their members, evading US oversight. Operation Condor was a coordinated effort that represented a qualitative leap in regional and local anti-communist struggles and must be understood in the context of these networks. Moreover, through these networks, countries also developed civil society coalitions that supported local regimes, demonstrating the deep social roots of surveillance and expressions of political violence.

5. The transition to democracy and access to information

The fall of General Alfredo Stroessner's 35-year dictatorship in 1989 was a local manifestation of the global transformations brought about by the end of the Cold War and marked the beginning of Paraguay's political transition toward democracy. Like other regional processes during the 1990s, Paraguay's transition also led to a new constitution that implemented free and democratic elections and granted new individual rights and constitutional guarantees. One of its innovations was the right of Habeas Data, which in Paraguay is a constitutional guarantee that gives individuals the ability to access, correct, and update their personal information stored in public or private databases, and to know how that information is used. It is a legal remedy used to protect against the misuse of personal data. The first time the constitutional right of Habeas Data was invoked was to request information about the imprisonment and torture of a former political prisoner at the hands of the police, which led to the discovery of what was called the "Archive of Terror" (Almada, 2009; Benítez, 1997).

The former secret police archive, discovered in 1992, was the first police archive to be made public during the post-Cold War period in South America and is a representation of how global technologies of surveillance and repression manifested themselves locally. With its discovery during the democratic transition, it became a site of contention and social struggle over how to document and interrogate past State violence in order to establish reparations and historical memory.

Once made public, the old police files became a publicly accessible collection to support reparation policies. The digitization of these files became a key element of transitional justice, democracy, and transparency, both in Paraguay and globally, reshaping the relationship between the public and private spheres. However, given that democratization in several countries in the region focused on negotiated transitions rather than ruptures with the preceding authoritarian regimes, the use of the information contained in the archives did not contribute to implementing structural transformations, but rather focused on individualized forms of reparations[9]. Undoubtedly, this represented an important step forward, given that the uncovered archives had the capacity to prove the abuses committed during the dictatorship and, at the same time, offered the possibility of establishing democratic governance based on knowledge produced from transparent information. Symbolically, access to information that had previously been kept secret represented the opposite of the dictatorship, which had been characterized by hermetic secrecy and a complete absence of transparency. That turning point was the basis for the development of the policies of transparency and access to public information in Paraguay.

9 The clearest contrast in terms of the use of security file information to implement more structural public policies can be seen in the use of old police files in Eastern European countries, where they were used to prevent former officials linked to surveillance and repression from running for elected office. For examples of lustration policies in Romania using old police files, see, among others (Verdery, 2018).

Like the post-Cold War political transitions in the region, Paraguay's transition was also largely based on transparency policies and gradual access to public information. This process established a political rationality that reformulated the State, public policies, and society, implementing reforms based on free access to information and transparency policies that Wendy Brown called "neoliberal normative reason" (Brown, 2017). The political and ideological shift that took place with the democratic transition is important because it formed the basis on which we think of access to public information as a legal right and a right that is primarily individual. While the aim of this analysis and other previous efforts by TEDIC has been to reposition discussions on transparency, information, and access to information based on the collective and the social effects they have, Paraguayan democratic reforms had a specific focus on the private aspect. And while the effects of surveillance, limited access to public information, and misinformation undoubtedly have an inalienable individual component, their cumulative impact at the social level is of crucial importance.

6. Results

The following section details the main findings emerging from the empirical data collected in this study. Most of the information came from archival sources and in-depth interviews with qualified informants. In both cases, the information presented here is based on the categories emerging from the analysis.

The interviews with qualified informants for the study came from a purposive sample whose common characteristics focused on the fact that the interviewees live and work in urban areas of Paraguay, have higher education and in some cases postgraduate degrees, hold positions of relative cultural or administrative power, and are mostly Spanish speakers. The sample was mostly composed of individuals of male gender. However, variability was introduced into the sample, which, as mentioned, is not representative but intentional, by interviewing people from the non-state and state sectors, with a range of ages, thematic areas, and professional experiences. This strategy contributed to achieving a diversity of opinions based on varied experiences that broadened the spectrum of opinions.

The findings from interviews with qualified informants reveal that, in the view of the participants, misinformation and surveillance operate as mutually constitutive phenomena. Overall, the findings suggest that both categories are perceived not as separate phenomena but as interconnected dimensions of relations of power, control, and resistance.

The sections discussed below arise from categories derived from the interviews and are structured around four analytical axes related to:

- The dynamics of lack of awareness of State and private surveillance technologies and capabilities.
- Restricted access to public information.
- The social disciplining of surveillance and its normalization.
- Active misinformation strategies.

These four axes denote an analysis that recognizes surveillance and misinformation as technologies of power operating simultaneously at the technical, institutional, social, and political levels. And, at least in part, both surveillance and misinformation are recognized as governance devices constructed by the State and also by the private sector, which pose risks and limitations to democratic space.

The dynamics of lack of knowledge

This section addresses the extent of knowledge—and lack of knowledge—regarding the actual surveillance capabilities of the State and the private sector. While the State's capacity to conduct surveillance has historically been predominant, there is a perception that the State's ability to conduct surveillance is limited due to its limited access to technology. In contrast, the private sector, represented by certain local financial sectors and transnational corporations, is considered to possess disproportionate technological and economic capabilities.

One interviewee mentioned that "State surveillance is rudimentary and cannot intercept communications on encrypted channels, but only phone calls on the GSM network and plain text messages, but SMS is not widely used today. Nowadays, the GSM network is no longer widely used, unlike other encrypted channels such as WhatsApp. The State's capabilities are very limited; in particular, the Paraguayan State does not have the same capacity as these private companies to see, hear, and feel" (12).

The interviewee's observation about the State's surveillance capacity was shared by other interviewees who corroborated the rudimentary nature of the information gathered through surveillance based on their experiences in court proceedings. From the perspective of another interviewee, there is a difference between actively gathering surveillance information and producing data. "While the State is the largest generator of data, private companies are the only ones that can analyze that volume of data." (10) This capacity makes the private sector a larger and potentially more powerful surveillance agent than the State: "although States are the ones that have the capacity to violate human rights, today it is companies that conduct surveillance (...) as a business model. Information extraction is the model of value extraction that operates outside the notion of rights" (10). These references clarify the implicit logic of what Zuboff called "surveillance capitalism," which generates a new expression of power and creates unexpected and often illegible mechanisms of extraction, commodification, and control, while also producing new markets that predict and modify behavior (Zuboff, 2015). Like Zuboff, the interviews warn that this surveillance capitalism challenges democratic norms.

Detailed knowledge about the State's surveillance capabilities is limited among those interviewed, but there is a collective perception of lack of knowledge regarding the scope and magnitude of State surveillance and misinformation. The lack of State transparency is summed up in what one interviewee defined as "We don't know what we don't know" (14). In particular, there are significant gaps in knowledge on what surveillance technologies the State actually possesses, how it uses them, and to what effect. The unconfirmed suspicion that the State may have surveillance software such as Pegasus[10], or that State officials may make discretionary use of such technologies, or that each change of government entails an undeclared loss of surveillance infrastructure, adds to institutional opacity.

10 The Pegasus system is digital surveillance software for Android and iOS devices developed by Israel's NSO Group. The software is marketed for the stated purpose of serving national security, but its use has been questioned globally due to its potential for unethical use, violating cybersecurity, legitimizing cyber surveillance, and infringing on privacy rights and personal data protection. (see for example A Comprehensive Analysis of Pegasus Spyware and Its Implications for Digital Privacy and Security - Publicly Available Content Database - ProQuest, n.d.; "Pegasus and the Law.," 2021; Chourasiya et al., 2023; Kotliar & Carmi, 2024; Rojszczak, 2021).

Restricted access to public information and surveillance

Access to public information, gradually implemented during the democratic transition, reached new heights with the implementation of access to information policies that disseminated within State bodies. However, this development became increasingly restrictive and even risky in different instances.

Those who participated in the interview illustrated how mechanisms of public information request require personal identification for institutional requests. As unsuccessful requests accumulate, the ability to effectively make use of public information is reduced.

> "I believe that there is a kind of control exercised by State or institutional bodies that have blended in as part of modernity, of a certain renewal of the State [which implements] a renewal with very modern mechanisms and goes unnoticed in terms of its surveillance role" (7).

This reflection from one interviewee refers to how the implementation of electronic identity became a double-edged modernization, given that access to public information became dependent on the individual identity registration of the request. Public information requests via digital channels require that they be accompanied by the requester's electronic identity registration, regardless of whether the request is institutional. This creates new forms of surveillance over those who request information, given that the personal identification of the individual requesting the information is a sine qua non step in order to move forward in the process and there are no alternatives for making institutionally signed requests. "I had to sign with my name or I couldn't complete the request" (14), said one interviewee, implying that the requirement links their personal identity to a work-related request. This procedure carries potential sources of individual vulnerability, both due to possible exposure, misuse of data, and to the ability to establish a documentary trail of potentially sensitive requests, which can be cross-referenced with other personal data of the requester. The insistence on not accepting institutional requests, but only those signed by individuals, became common practice, blurring the line between the personal and professional lives of those requesting public information.

However, access to information is restricted not only by the requirement described above. There is a perception that negative responses have also become entrenched. "It seems that the ministry's legal teams specialize in rejecting requests. They even have a ready-made argument that they copy and paste into denied requests," (7) commented one interviewee. This person refers to how the legal departments of public institutions seem to have reversed the spirit of the obligation to make public information available and instead found legal regimes whereby restricting access becomes the norm[11]. In other words, a refusal to disclose public information today comes with a legal explanation as to why the request must be rejected. Legal departments are dedicated to finding justifications to limit the disclosure of information, typically relying on legal language to argue that requests fall outside the scope of public information and are therefore not subject to disclosure.

11 A document rejecting a request for public information from the National Taxation Office, shared by an interviewee, states as justification for the rejection that the request was not covered by the laws governing the institution and that the statistical information that the institution decides to publish must be accessible to all in order not to create unfair advantages.

Social disciplining of surveillance and its normalization

> "There is little understanding of why it is not good for us to be controlled or disinformed, or when and why the limits of rights are breached. The limits of freedom and privacy are not established, and the idea that 'those who have nothing to hide have nothing to fear' ends up not questioning surveillance (...) people are unaware of the effects of misinformation, and [in] the lack of knowledge they feel protected" (13).

This common-sense discourse, frequently mentioned by interviewees, reveals how control mechanisms are internalized, leading to self-censorship and social disciplining. The idea that expanded surveillance is not a problem for those who "have nothing to hide" reflects a permissive perspective that accepts the sacrifice of privacy without questioning its consequences.

This notion reverses the burden of proof and, instead of requiring the State to justify its intrusion into private life, shifts the responsibility to individual citizens based on their adherence to rules, good behavior, and passivity. The result is a moral discourse of social control that accepts the expansion of surveillance systems without requiring them to be justified by the State, normalizing intrusive practices under seemingly reasonable premises. One interviewee mentioned that "digital ignorance is important for sustaining this State" (17), which is certainly a recurring perception, but one that is determined by the material conditions of everyday life. In the words of another interviewee, "it is more important to make ends meet than to devote oneself to analyzing the violation of rights" (9).

An alternative approach to individual responsibility is the existence of social control through information management and what many interviewees recognize as fear, self-censorship, and a very visible political hegemony. Currently, "there is an accumulation of symbolic power and a moment of significant control. It feels like there is a hegemonic power" (11), and within this circuit of centralized power, the interviewees perceive that political power has control over State resources in terms of surveillance, the establishment of information agendas, and also misinformation.

One similarity with the past is the normalization of surveillance practices. However, unlike in the past, interviewees identified a multiplicity of actors exercising surveillance practices. In other words, political and economic powers use information from both private and public sources. Since it is the State that guarantees rights, rather than the companies that intermediate surveillance, their central role tends to be overlooked. This role is manifested in the use of private technologies for data collection and surveillance, such as financial data, but also through private facial recognition software, surveillance of private semi-public spaces such as sports stadiums, the collection of biometric data to access services, or the analysis of consumption and sales capacity for product offerings through data mining, in violation of privacy rights.

The people interviewed emphasized that, while there may be a certain degree of precariousness in public surveillance, it is highly privatized through companies that provide or maintain its infrastructure. In all these cases, private capital is recognized as playing an important role in maintaining the surveillance infrastructure from which it profits.

In addition to local actors who conduct surveillance, either in conjunction with or independently from the State, there are also transnational companies with unprecedented capacity for monitoring and segmenting information for the sale of services. One interviewee framed it in the following terms:

> "When it comes to today's [State] surveillance capabilities, it doesn't even come close to the minimum amount of data that we accept that devices collect. We give them access to aspects of everyday life. The information these companies collect is increasingly invasive and encroaches on our privacy. We give them all our information to train their artificial intelligence. (...) The information they receive comes not only from what we give them, but from everything around us. It is not just a continuation but an indiscriminate advance in surveillance and espionage of citizens by the private sector" (12).

Access to certain services, such as banking services, currently requires authentication and identity validation processes involving photographing documents, facial recognition, biometric data collection, and QR code scanning. The companies responsible for these operations manage information of millions of Paraguayan users.

In this context, interviewees note the absence of a legal framework that precisely regulates the collection, processing, and protection of this personal data. This regulatory gap is perceived as increasing the risk of leaks (the disclosure of private information in Paraguay) and highlights the need to establish sanctions for companies that collect or use information without the proper legal and ethical safeguards. The private sector expands its databases with each hacking of government data. Although there is no consensus on systematic political espionage practices—some see it clearly while others do not—there is a perceived process of labeling and profiling users for commercial purposes, aimed at maximizing economic benefits through consumer segmentation.

Consequently, the notion of individual privacy has undergone a radical transformation. The level of access and availability of personal information today redefines the traditional boundaries between public and private. The process of effective surveillance that is consolidating is, in many cases, more intrusive from the private sector than from the State, due to the evolution in the use of technological tools, the application of algorithms, and increased computing power. According to one interviewee, a relevant aspect in this context is Paraguay's demographic characteristic: the size of its population means that the computational infrastructure needed to perform the calculations is relatively small. However, the expansion in the use of data occurs in a legal vacuum, which the next interviewee points out as a risk, given the lack of information about the process by those who provide their data without knowing it.

> "Algorithmically, it can be done, and many companies have started doing so to improve price analysis, to know when to put a product on sale or take it off sale, and in what context. Banks do this for risks calculation. These are legal algorithms, using data that one has. But the lack of personal data laws means that people are not informed about the collection of information about them, and ultimately, that data is sold between companies. The commercial ecosystem uses that data for sales. And no one knows who has data about them" (17).

Active misinformation strategies

Misinformation as a deliberate strategy is recognized as a recent phenomenon, or at least one with greater importance and visibility. In many cases, interviewees recognize the production and circulation of misinformation as a strategy for manipulating information. With increasing visibility, it is used as a strategy by specific political sectors with the logistical capacity to do so. Moreover, and with increasing certainty according to interviewees, it can be affirmed that misinformation responds to specific attempts to exert political influence; whether in legislative projects for the implementation of public policies, the strategic use of misinformation is identified as a means to obtain political results.

In general, there is consensus among those interviewed about the deliberate nature of misinformation campaigns, given their visibility. But as in the case of surveillance, which is normalized because there is a perception that there is not much to lose or nothing to hide, in the case of misinformation, the public does not fully understand its risks. One interviewee believes that "[It is important] to understand that will can be manipulated. There is a certain awakening, but we must understand that the algorithm is powerful because it can destroy the law and democracy itself" (17).

One example that was highlighted, among several, refers to the vulnerability of the electoral process with electronic voting machines. This issue has been studied in previous TEDIC policy briefs (Carrillo & Alcaraz, 2024), but it was mentioned in this context because the introduction of electronic voting machines in 2016 was accompanied by a discourse about the "unhackability" of the voting machines and a notion of modernization of the electoral process. However, interviewees pointed out that the electoral authorities themselves were unaware of how vulnerable the infrastructure actually was. According to one interviewee, the democratic vulnerability that was not discussed or was silenced refers to how only a small portion of the vote needs to be manipulated to affect electoral results. In addition, technical services of the machines were outsourced to private companies.

The other aspect of misinformation highlighted by the interviewees concerns the dispute over public opinion. In this regard, they pointed to the concentration of media outlets in a couple of business groups that, in addition to news, also engage in "disseminating premises that have no empirical basis in order to create subjectivities, with a political intention of manipulating populations" (11). Information in the media is considered "polarized" and closely related to the interests of business groups, which is why interviewees believe that "it is necessary to understand the interests of these groups in order to understand the degrees of truth and interest in transmitting versions of reality" (12). In essence, these statements refer to the informational bias that characterizes the press in Paraguay.

Misinformation, or as one interviewee suggests calling it, "the lack of integrity of information" (10), has significant political and social impacts. There is an understanding of the deliberate efforts to generate a flow of information, particularly through a structure of "trolls" and political actors who spread misinformation. The strategy of taking an element of reality to generate a flood of information with uncertain or false content is part of a new reality that the interviewees recognize very clearly. On the one hand, the most visible strategies refer to the systematic discrediting of individuals. The example of the removal of legislator Kattya González was cited as an important example, but the disciplining of certain opinions operates in a similar manner[12]. The interviewees mentioned examples

12 Kattya González is a Paraguayan opposition senator who was removed from her seat in 2024 through a parliamentary vote of dubious legitimacy and legality. In addition to being the fourth most voted senator, she was a spokesperson for criticism of state nepotism and denounced the links between political power and organized crime. Her removal was preceded by an intense smear campaign in both traditional media outlets and social media. See (2024 Paraguay Human Rights Report, 2024).

of how different opinion leaders are systematically confronted—such as Senator Kattya González—by visible smear campaigns based on misinformation organized by political sectors.

Another related aspect concerns the creation of social panic with the aim of implementing surveillance measures or restrictions on civil liberties. References were made to how perceptions of insecurity are exacerbated, resulting in the expansion of camera surveillance networks in public spaces or the deployment of specialized police forces such as LINCE, a specialized riot squad of the National Police. The perception of insecurity at sporting events was also mentioned as an example of social panic that has justified the installation of video surveillance for the collection of biometric data. The measure, implemented by law, was considered to prevent violence in soccer stadiums, but poses a serious threat to the right to privacy, freedom of expression, and the presumption of innocence[13]. Other mentions related to the use of social panic and misinformation campaigns, referred to by the interviewees, included attacks on public funding for research related to sexual and reproductive rights and the social sciences.

13 For an extensive report related to Law 7269/24, see https://www.tedic.org/conmicarano/

7. Conclusions

A review of the four analytical axes, based on interviews with qualified informants, reveals how surveillance and misinformation operate as interconnected technologies of power that are transforming Paraguay's democratic space. The asymmetry between the limited technical capabilities of the State and the expansive power of the private sector—especially transnational corporations and local financial sectors—has the capacity to reshape the dynamics of social control. While the State maintains surveillance mechanisms that are considered rudimentary, the mode of production of "surveillance capitalism" extracts, commodifies, and uses personal data in a legal vacuum that exposes large sectors of the population to unprecedented risks of profiling, manipulation, and violation of their privacy.

Institutional opacity and systematic restrictions on access to public information exacerbate this situation. Paradoxically, the modernization of the State has resulted in the implementation of new control mechanisms: the requirement for personal identification to request public information turns citizens' rights into an act of self-surveillance. Since requesting public information involves the identification of the individuals requesting it, the request for information becomes a means of regulation and control[14].

At the same time, institutional legal departments have specialized in rejecting requests, reversing the spirit of democratic transparency. This combination of expanded surveillance and information restriction creates conditions conducive to social discipline and what some interviewees consider self-censorship.

The normalized discourse of "if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear" and the incipient knowledge about the limits of fundamental rights contribute to generating uncritical acceptance of intrusive practices, which are poorly understood in their entirety. This normalization is reinforced by deliberate misinformation campaigns, which manipulate public opinion, create social panic, and justify the expansion of control systems. Media concentration and the proliferation of coordinated misinformation actors, coupled with the vulnerability of electoral processes, demonstrate how these strategies have concrete political impacts, from the removal of legislators to the restriction of rights-based agendas. Taken together, these phenomena shape a social reality in which democratic foundations are undermined, and interviewees suggest that urgent responses are needed through legal frameworks, civic education, and the strengthening of accountability mechanisms.

14 La cuestión de cómo la exposición a la vigilancia genera una normalización y disciplinamiento del comportamiento bajo regímenes disciplinarios resultando en controles eficientes y autovigilancia sin recurrir a la fuerza o la violencia fue discutida extensivamente por Foucault. Foucault denominó "gubermentalidad" al proceso por el que la autovigilancia opera dentro de regímenes disciplinarios de gobierno. Ver (Foucault, 1990, 1980, 2009).

8. Recommendations

Surveillance and misinformation are social phenomena rooted in a complex history that connects Paraguay with global processes. The results of this study suggest that these phenomena are recognized, but are immersed in a state of lack of awareness, particularly regarding their ubiquity and everyday effects. There has also been a change in terms of which actors currently engage in surveillance and misinformation. While historically this was centered on State actors with an emphasis on security, this capacity now extends to private actors who profit from it. Although these processes of change take a long time, a series of recommendations for short- and medium-term action are listed here.

- Increase the level of awareness and knowledge about surveillance and misinformation processes in the country and region and their relationship to human rights, individual rights, civil liberties, and democracy.

- Create "toolkits" for social, non-governmental, and academic organizations on how to identify and combat the main forms and strategies of misinformation and surveillance, including resources for social mobilization, political and legal tools, monitoring tools, and security strategies.

- Strengthen capacities to request public information securely without violating individuals' right to privacy. Contribute to strengthening requests for information from non-governmental sectors, academic research, and journalism.

- Create a pool of legal and political resources to address the practice of denying requests for information, providing the necessary legal language to prevent rejections or document violations of the transparency and access to public information law.

- Collaborate with public institutions to standardize their procedures for providing public information, including methodological suggestions on how to increase the chances of successful requests from the public.

- Design advocacy campaigns that include a feasibility analysis for strategic class action lawsuits, to change behaviors that undermine transparency in order to set legal precedents.

9. Methodological appendix

To analyze this issue of surveillance and misinformation in Paraguay, information was gathered to understand the intersections between technology, security, misinformation, and human rights, in order to grasp their implications for current practices of surveillance, information, and misinformation.

The methodology was based on three pillars of relevant information gathering, conducted in two stages. First, the work involved a critical review of the literature, followed by the collection of information from interviews with key actors and the analysis of archival information. The final stage focused on incorporating empirical information into the study.

Theoretically, the study began from the assumption that this case study in Paraguay serves to understand a social phenomenon rooted in a broader social, economic, and political context. This involved understanding everyday and locally situated phenomena as informed by structural processes, which are also affected. This theoretical and methodological approach is largely based on the theory known as the "extended case study" proposed by Michael Burawoy (2009). The extended case study aims to understand local social phenomena in connection with global processes and microsocial relationships within macrosocial structures.

a. Literature review

The literature review sought to delve deeper into the interconnected nature of security and surveillance policies in Latin America (McSherry, 1999; Zoglin, 2001) and broaden understanding of the interdependence of political transformations that included security as public policy. The review explores global processes that have been partly understood through the lens of so-called surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) in the information age (Castells, 2010) as well as governance through State censorship and the "information war" (Webster & Tumber, 2006).

b. Interviews with qualified informants

The online interviews focused on understanding perceptions of surveillance and misinformation practices, as well as their background and consequences, from qualified informants. The interviews were conducted online, in a digital format (Hampton, 2017). The interviews sought to understand, at least partially, how past State repression has been transformed to produce a current body of knowledge. This formulation follows a theoretical approach that questions, following Stuart Hall (2001), the possibility of creating new meanings from and in relation to the past, in a dialectical relationship. This exploration is also based on recognizing how historical knowledge is intimately shaped by power dynamics that produce not only narratives but also silences (Trouillot, 1995). This results in seeking to interview and incorporate voices and narratives that have historically been silenced.

Interviews were conducted with leaders, activists, and experts in a variety of fields, including security, surveillance, technology, and social movements.

Operational questions

The following is a list of questions that were implemented, aimed at fostering an open dialogue around the research objectives in order to capture emerging categories.

- Is misinformation an element used by State agents to justify surveillance acquisitions?
- How does misinformation fuel the security discourse in Paraguay, and how is this discourse used to justify State surveillance that violates people's privacy?
- How has the use of misinformation evolved from the Stroessner dictatorship to the present day, and what impact does it have on public perception regarding the need for security and surveillance measures?
- To what extent do security policies influenced by misinformation affect human rights, especially privacy, and what strategies can be employed to counteract these trends?

c. Archival sources

The second source of empirical information consisted of primary archival sources. In Paraguay, the unique collection of the Documentation and Archive Center for the Defense of Human Rights, commonly known as the Archive of Terror, contains original and unique documentation on surveillance processes and their structuring during the Paraguayan dictatorship. It also includes primary information on international surveillance networks and their operation. These archival materials served to illustrate the background of current surveillance and information creation practices.

In addition, documents from the Library and Archives of the National Congress and the Archives of the Diplomatic Academy of Paraguay were consulted as supplementary sources.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study that should be noted. The chosen method offers a partial understanding of the research questions from the perspective of the organizations and individuals who participated in the study. Due to its qualitative nature, the study does not provide information that can be generalized outside of its context. All descriptions are based exclusively on the testimonies of the participants interviewed and on the available secondary data.

Likewise, the differences among the people interviewed—in terms of age, background, and length of participation in their respective organizations—mean that the events that marked their involvement may correspond to different moments in time, which has a differential impact on their perceptions. The events recounted may be at different distances from the present and are likely to be affected, to different degrees, by memory biases.

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Funded by
the European Union

With the support of
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