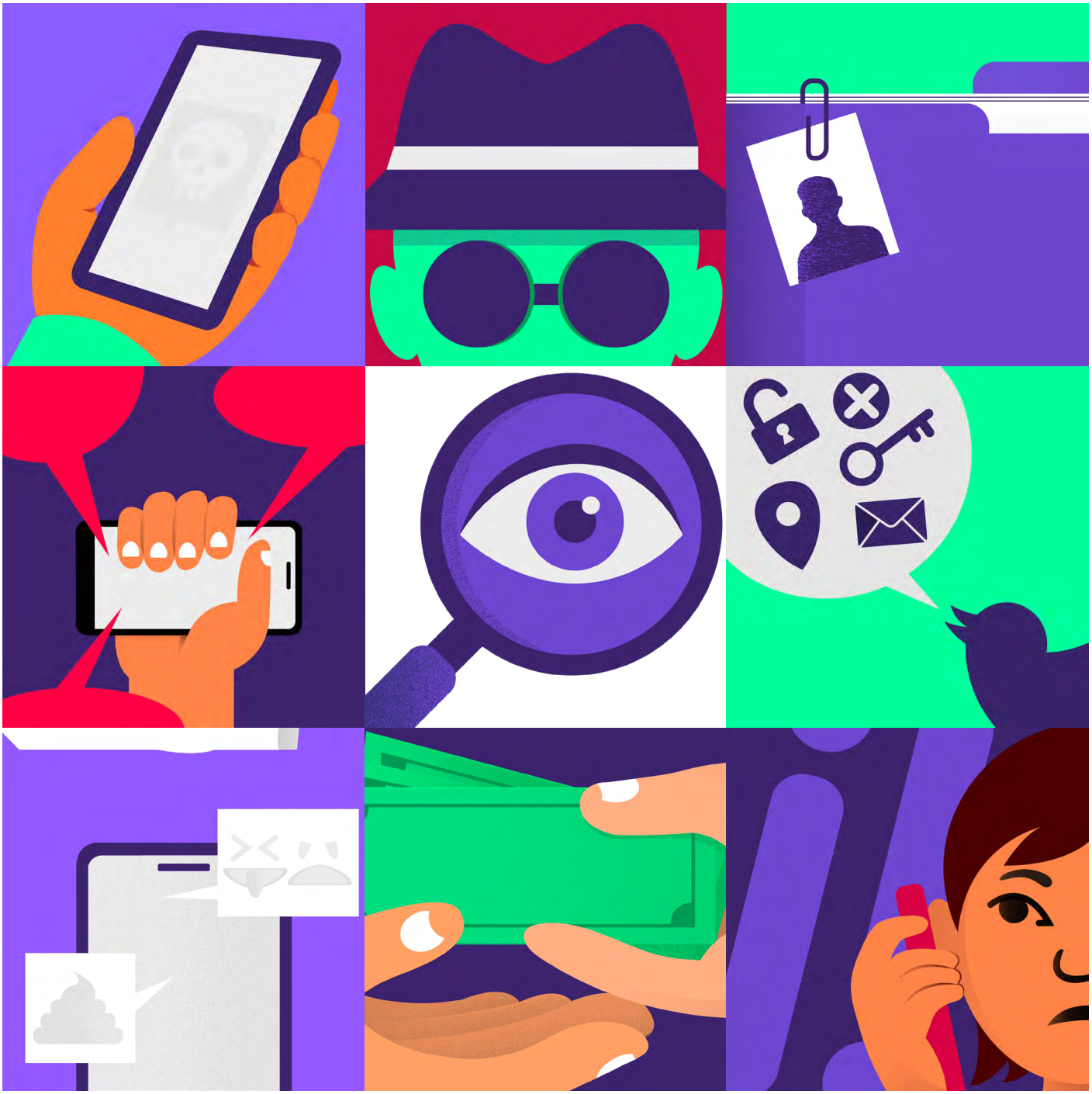
THE "DISINFORMATION NETWORK" OF SANTIAGO PEÑA'S ADMINISTRATION



BACKGROUND, DEVELOPMENTS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE FREE PRESS

Technology & Human Rights TDIC

THE "DISINFORMATION NETWORK" OF SANTIAGO PEÑA'S ADMINISTRATION

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Technology & Human Rights

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TEDIC is a nongovernmental organization founded in 2012, whose mission is to defend and promote human rights in the digital environment. Its main areas of interest include freedom of expression, privacy, access to knowledge, and gender issues on the Internet.

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ACRONYMS

ANR: National Republican Association (Paraguay).

CELE: Center for Studies on Freedom of Expression, University of Palermo (Argentina).

CGR: Office of the Comptroller General of the Republic (Paraguay).

CPJ: Committee to Protect Journalists.

CSJ: Supreme Court of Justice (Paraguay).

DNCP: National Directorate of Public Procurement (Paraguay).

EBY: Yacyretá Binational Entity.

EU EOM: European Union Election Observation Mission.

FEPALC: Federation of Journalists of Latin America and the Caribbean.

IACHR: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

IACtHR: Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

IFJ: International Federation of Journalists.

MITIC: Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies (Paraguay).

OAS: Organization of American States.

PTI-PY: Itaipú Technological Park Foundation (Paraguay).

RDN: *Resumen de Noticias* (Paraguayan digital media outlet)

RELE: Special Rapporteurship for Freedom of Expression of the OAS.

RSF: Reporters Without Borders.

SILPY: Legislative Information System of the National Congress of Paraguay.

SPP: Paraguayan Journalists' Union.

UDEA: Specialized Unit for Economic Crimes and Anti-Corruption (Public Prosecutor's Office).

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years, civil society activists, communicators, and journalists have reported constant harassment on social media. There have been numerous accounts of these operations, and in some cases, they gained public attention with widespread repercussions.

Initially, these actions appeared to be isolated incidents, except for operational "coincidences" in the timing and style of posts among certain social media accounts as part of "militant" actions between political factions. However, in 2021, the landscape began to shift as the volume and intensity of the attacks increased, coinciding with periods of election campaigns for the country's municipal elections and massive investments in digital advertising.

These operations expanded between 2022 and 2023, with the emergence of new anonymous pages that spent millions of guaraníes on ads to distort the information landscape during the general elections. The scheme, as detailed below, became a central communications pillar of the Santiago Peña's administration in Paraguay.

"La Red Desinformante" (hereinafter, The Disinformation Network), a journalistic investigation conducted over three years and published in the newspaper ABC Color, revealed the existence and operation of a centralized apparatus for digital attacks, smear campaigns, and political propaganda, allegedly financed with irregular funds linked to sectors of the Executive Branch.

Through the extraction of forensic metadata from Meta and Google's ad libraries, the allocation of approximately USD 500,000 to a web of anonymous pages and international companies was documented. This structure systematically perpetrated digital violence against investigative journalists, political dissidents, and civil society organizations.

This article analyzes the consequences of this disinformation architecture, its historical development in Paraguay, its operational links, and the serious precedent set by the instrumentalization of the judicial system to create a chilling effect on public debate, in light of the standards of the Inter-American Human Rights System.

METHODOLOGY

Over a three-year period (2023–2026), metadata was extracted and analyzed from the public ad libraries of Meta (Facebook and Instagram) and Google's Transparency Center (YouTube). In total, 7,965 ads on Meta and 65 on Google were audited, covering the period from October 2021 to May 2026, revealing a financial injection of more than USD 472,000 (G. 2,909 million) distributed among fourteen pages and pseudo-media outlets.

Data on spending, creation dates, and ownership of each page were cross-referenced with public records (government procurement records, National Congress files, and cases from the Public Prosecutor's Office) and with other documentary sources cited throughout this article.

To classify the types of attacks and the individuals targeted, a sample analysis was conducted using the page *Despierta Paraguay*, which also appeared in Google ads. The matrix characterized the type of campaign (smear campaign or pro-government propaganda) and listed the individuals mentioned in the content.

To identify relationships, we created a large network map using the Kumu.io platform, into which we uploaded the cell phone numbers, email addresses, and other metadata obtained. In addition, calls were made and direct searches for sources were conducted throughout the research, both public and anonymous, which made it possible to better describe the operations behind the structure.

TABLE 1. Case timeline

DATE	EVENT
2018	Creation of the page *En La Tecla* (see Table 2).
2021 (pre-election context)	Documented activation of the digital attack operation.
2022-2023	Santiago Peña's presidential campaign; expansion of the network with *Sucia Política, Despierta Paraguay*, and other pages.
April 26, 2026	ABC Color launches "The Disinformation Network" series, coinciding with Paraguayan Journalist's Day.
April-June, 2026	Requests for information in Congress, criminal complaints, the Public Prosecutor's Office refers the case to the Comptroller's Office.
July 14, 2026	The USD 7 million MITIC-UNDP agreement is revealed; Minister Villate makes disparaging remarks about the ABC investigation and its author.
July 15-16, 2026	The SPP calls for an investigation and demands the removal of Minister Villate; one day later, it accused the MITIC of pressuring Radio Cáritas to censor coverage of the complaint.
July-August, 2026	Judicial follow-up of the Chena case; indications of the network's expansion into the 2026 municipal campaign.
August 10-11, 2026	ABC Color reveals that an agency linked to the network was involved in Camilo Pérez's municipal campaign and that Duarte and Villaverde are part of his media team.
September 3-8, 2026	Bracho reaches a settlement with Chena, states that she registered the telephone lines used by *Despierta Paraguay* and *Paraguay Elige*, and hands over her cellphone for forensic analysis; payments from Azafrán to Vice Minister Duarte are revealed, along with an alleged leak of a judicial ruling, reported to the Supreme Court of Justice.

Source: author's own elaboration.

THE DISINFORMATION NETWORK

THE ORIGIN OF THE SCHEME

The background information documented by The Disinformation Network shows that the structure has been traceable since 2021, when—in the midst of the municipal election campaign—Meta (then Facebook), the owner of Facebook and Instagram, extended its controls and transparency measures for political and election ads to Paraguay through its Ad Library (Facebook, 2021).

At that time, through this tool, it was possible to identify the emergence of the anonymous page *En La Tecla* and the resources being used through it. According to this author's analysis, the page was created with the aim of damaging the reputation of the government of then-President Mario Abdo Benítez, from the Colorado Party (who was an opponent of the movement of current President Santiago Peña), and of launching systematic attacks against other political dissidents and critical social actors.

However, during the 2022 and 2023 presidential campaigns, the machinery grew stronger as pages such as *Sucia Política*, *Paraguay Elige*, and *Click Digital* joined the ecosystem. These pages operated under different but coordinated "strategies" whose faces and origins, however, remained unclear until this year.

The findings compiled by The Disinformation Network revealed that President Peña's digital campaign team—coordinated by the current Vice Minister of Communications, Alejandra Duarte Albospino, and Peña's then-head of digital communications, Juan Roberto "Jimmy" Villaverde Emategui—appears to be linked to this structure.

Villaverde, for example, was linked to the pages *Sucia Política* and *Central Noticias* (the latter being identified by a collaborator as being under his control and linked by Meta to the same cell phone number); he was present on December 2, 2022, during a campaign visit by Peña to the Comunik agency, which publicly showcased him, along with the Peña and Alliana campaign, as a success story on June 23, 2023 (ABC Color, 2026p).

Comunik, the agency that Villaverde co-founded in January 2020 with Fabio Morales in Coronel Oviedo, Caaguazú Department, served as one of the network's original hubs, leaving digital traces that made it possible to better understand the links within the structure.

Morales, now Chief of Staff of the Caaguazú Governor's Office, posted a photo on his Instagram account on December 2, 2022, of Peña's visit to the agency's office with the caption "*#SomosComunik*. *President Santiago Peña visited us at the office today*," providing evidence of an early and direct connection between the then-candidate's inner circle and the digital agency that would later operate several of the network's pages (ABC Color, 2026p).

Another Comunik sub-brand, *Somos Muã*, and the agency *Conecta Paraguay*—the latter, a partner since October 2022 and owned by real estate businessman Miguel Moray—completed the network of digital agencies that, from outside the capital, supplied content to several of the pages mentioned below.

This operation was carried out with particular prominence during the 2023 presidential campaign. Following the 2023 national elections, *En La Tecla*, *Paraguay Elige*, and the *Sucia Política* pages were all singled out in reports by international observers, civil society, and local media.

The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), for example, included the activities of these pages in its final report (EU EOM, 2023). Regarding *Sucia Política*, the EU EOM conducted an exhaustive analysis in which it noted that 73% of its content consisted of attacks directed primarily against the then-liberal candidate Efraín Alegre and his vice-presidential candidate, Soledad Núñez.

For her part, Sequera (2023, p. 28), in her publication "Disinformation: Challenges in the Paraguayan Electoral Context" (translated from the original title), edited by TEDIC, had identified *En La Tecla* as one of the accounts that disseminated unverified information, such as a report of an alleged cyberattack on the electoral infrastructure. "NGOs to control… and hackers to disrupt?" read the description of the post identified by Sequera, which also sought to stigmatize the nongovernmental organizations involved in electoral monitoring.

From the press, journalists Jazmín Acuña and Josué Congo (2023) also described *Sucia Política*, *Paraguay Elige*, *En La Tecla*, and another page referred to later, *Despierta Paraguay*, as pseudo-news accounts that sought to confuse readers by presenting themselves as a media outlet in order to generate credibility.

In the articles, published by the media outlet *El Surtidor*, both researchers noted that false claims of electoral fraud were disseminated and that some of their content resonated beyond social media, intersecting with official statements from politicians on the campaign trail and with the well-known news outlets *La Nación* and *Diario Hoy*, both of which belong to the business group owned by the family of former President of the Republic Horacio Cartes, who has also served as president of the ANR since December 2022.

It is within this context of political and corporate control of media outlets that the narrative similarities can be understood between the pseudo-media outlets of the Disinformation Network and the coverage by the Cartes group's newspapers.

That same year, the author of this article published "Contesting the Digital Space: Paraguay and the 2023 General Elections on Social Media" (Gómez Berniga, 2023), the final chapter of the book "Democracy and Elections in Paraguay," edited by International IDEA. In that work, consistent with the findings of Acuña and Congo (2023), several narrative lines identified in the electoral context were highlighted, along with the limitations of transparency on major social media platforms in addressing this phenomenon, which spread with extreme virality. That publication also anticipated several elements that persisted until 2026, as detailed below: the management of various pages from abroad, investments in YouTube channels with no revenue data but high view counts (as occurred with *Despierta Paraguay*), and investments of millions in digital advertising to influence public opinion.

A COMPLEX NETWORK

The forensic analysis and data structuring regarding digital advertising, published over a period of more than four months (up to the completion of this report) in ABC Color's special series on the case (ABC Color, 2026j), revealed a structure that pointed directly to the President's inner circle, showing that what appeared to be a scheme intended solely for the election campaign had definitively become established to operate with impunity as a means of supporting the communications of Santiago Peña's government.

Through an audit of 7,965 ads on Meta (Facebook and Instagram) and 65 on Google's Transparency Center (YouTube), the research The Disinformation Network verified a financial injection exceeding G. 2,909 million (approximately USD 472,000) (ABC Color, 2026b).

This investment was distributed across an ecosystem of platforms that operated by alternating between pseudo-media fronts and accounts openly intended to carry out what is known as a "smear campaign." The distribution of resources, identified between October 2021 and May 2026, shows that the allocation of resources and the creation of pages were focused on various "key moments" in local politics, as will be explained later (Table 2).

Additionally, funding was detected for other satellite pages such as *Somos Paraguay*, *Alto Paraná Hoy*, *Chaco Hoy*, and *Sur Noticias*, adding hundreds of millions more guaraníes to the network. One of the most pernicious tactics during this phase was brand usurpation. For example, *Central Noticias* illegally used the name of a digital media outlet with more than 15 years of independent history, appropriating its identity to gain legitimacy with the audience while spreading covert propaganda (ABC Color, 2026v).

Celso Núñez, director of the original *Central Noticias*, stripped of his digital identity by the eponymous pseudo-media outlet created on January 12, 2024, summed up the situation with a statement that illustrates the magnitude of the misappropriation of funds: "I wish we had received at least G. 50 million", referring to the more than G. 470 million that the impostor site spent on advertising (ABC Color, 2026b).

TABLE 2. Details of pages that are part of The Disinformation Network on Facebook

PAGE	TYPE OF ACCOUNT	DATE OF CREATION	STATUS	AMOUNT
Despierta Paraguay	Smear campaign	20/02/2023	Deleted	G. 146,179,333
Click Digital	Pseudo-media outlet	7/03/2017 (created); 29/01/2024 (renamed)	Online	G. 210,211,908
Central Noticias	Pseudo-media outlet	12/01/2024	Online	G. 470,259,045
Sucia Política	Smear campaign	04/07/2022	Deleted	G. 294,143,691
Centrados	Pseudo-media outlet	14/11/2024	Online	G. 340,082,713
PyElige	Pseudo-media outlet	04/07/2022	Deleted	G. 383,004,273
En La Tecla	Smear campaign	08/09/2018	Deleted	G. 368,890,009
SomosParaguay	Pseudo-media outlet	15/01/2024	Online	G. 207,997,697
Alto Paraná Hoy	Pseudo-media outlet	21/02/2024	Online	G. 160,242,636
Sur Noticias	Pseudo-media outlet	28/12/2023	Online	G. 140,471,820
Norte Digital	Pseudo-media outlet	24/01/2024	Online	G. 70,050,409
Chaco Hoy	Pseudo-media outlet	15/01/2024	Online	G. 52,752,248
El punto ciego OK	Smear campaign	03/12/2025	Online	G. 34,229,576
Rugir de un gigante	Smear campaign	02/12/2025	Online	G. 31,125,282

Source: Author's own elaboration based on data from Meta's Ad Library.

The scheme operated anonymously but, at times, relied on journalists—with their own faces and voices—who generated "friendly" content for these pages, leaving traces that would later make it possible to understand how the operation worked.

For example, the investigation identified a group of journalists who were reportedly recruited from Comunik, the agency owned by Villaverde and Morales, and who appeared on at least one page within the ecosystem: journalist Alexis López, who was featured on *Click Digital* and *Norte Digital*; Diego González and his wife, Gabriela Aquino, who covered *Chaco Hoy* and *Sur Noticias*, respectively; television host Viviana Insfrán—who contributed as a freelancer and ultimately revealed Villaverde's identity—was linked to *Central Noticias*; and Carli Narváez, with 160,000 followers on TikTok, provided the voiceover for a video by *Somos Paraguay* (ABC Color, 2026l).

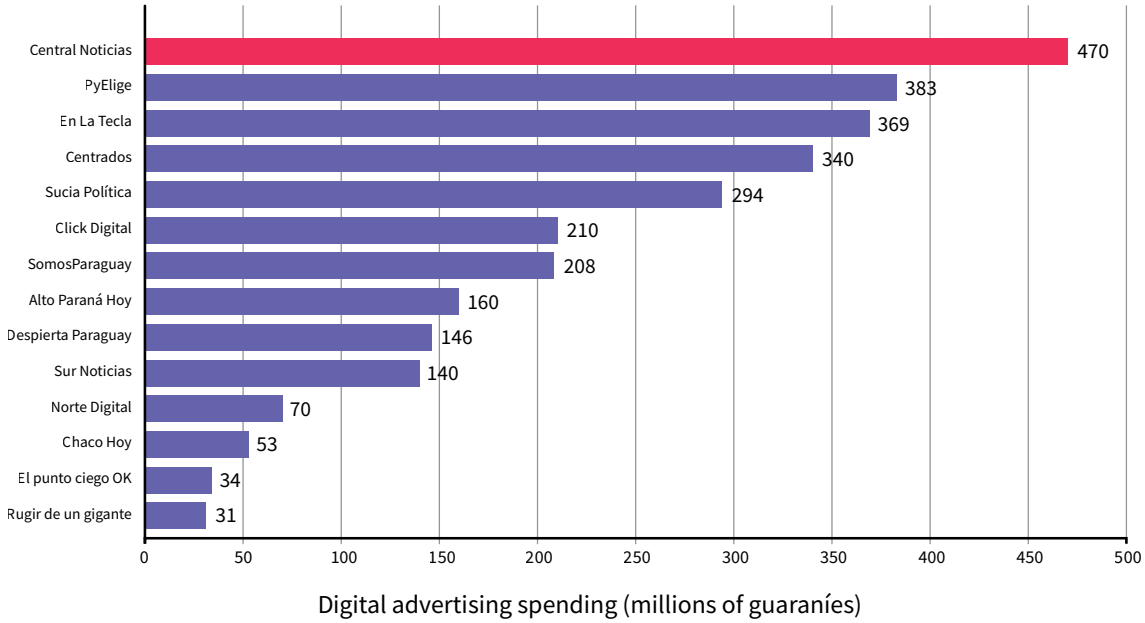

FIGURE 1. Digital advertising spending per page on the Disinformation Network (in guaraníes).
Source: Author's own elaboration based on data from Meta's Ad Library.

More than G. 1,700 million were spent on promoting pro-government content through these pages with identifiable faces. The four most aggressive pages in the ecosystem: *Despierta Paraguay*, *Sucia Política*, *En La Tecla*, and *Paraguay Elige*, remained, however, without any visible faces, which supports the hypothesis of a "friendly front," with familiar faces, and an "attack front," deliberately anonymous, operating under the same umbrella.

In addition to what was identified on Meta, one of The Disinformation Network's most significant findings was the apparent circumvention of public oversight through the outsourcing of the network's operations from abroad, using what appeared to be local resources.

The investigation confirmed that an agency called *Digimarketing SAS*, based in Bogotá, Colombia, managed digital ad campaigns targeting users in Paraguay using a "dual-track" model. A detailed analysis of each ad revealed that, on the one hand, 26% of this agency's YouTube ads consisted of official Paraguayan government propaganda promoting programs such as "Hambre Cero," "Che Róga Porã," and the "Plan SUMAR." However, the remaining 74% of the ads placed by the same Colombian agency were intended exclusively to fund the smear campaign of the page *Despierta Paraguay* (ABC Color, 2026w).

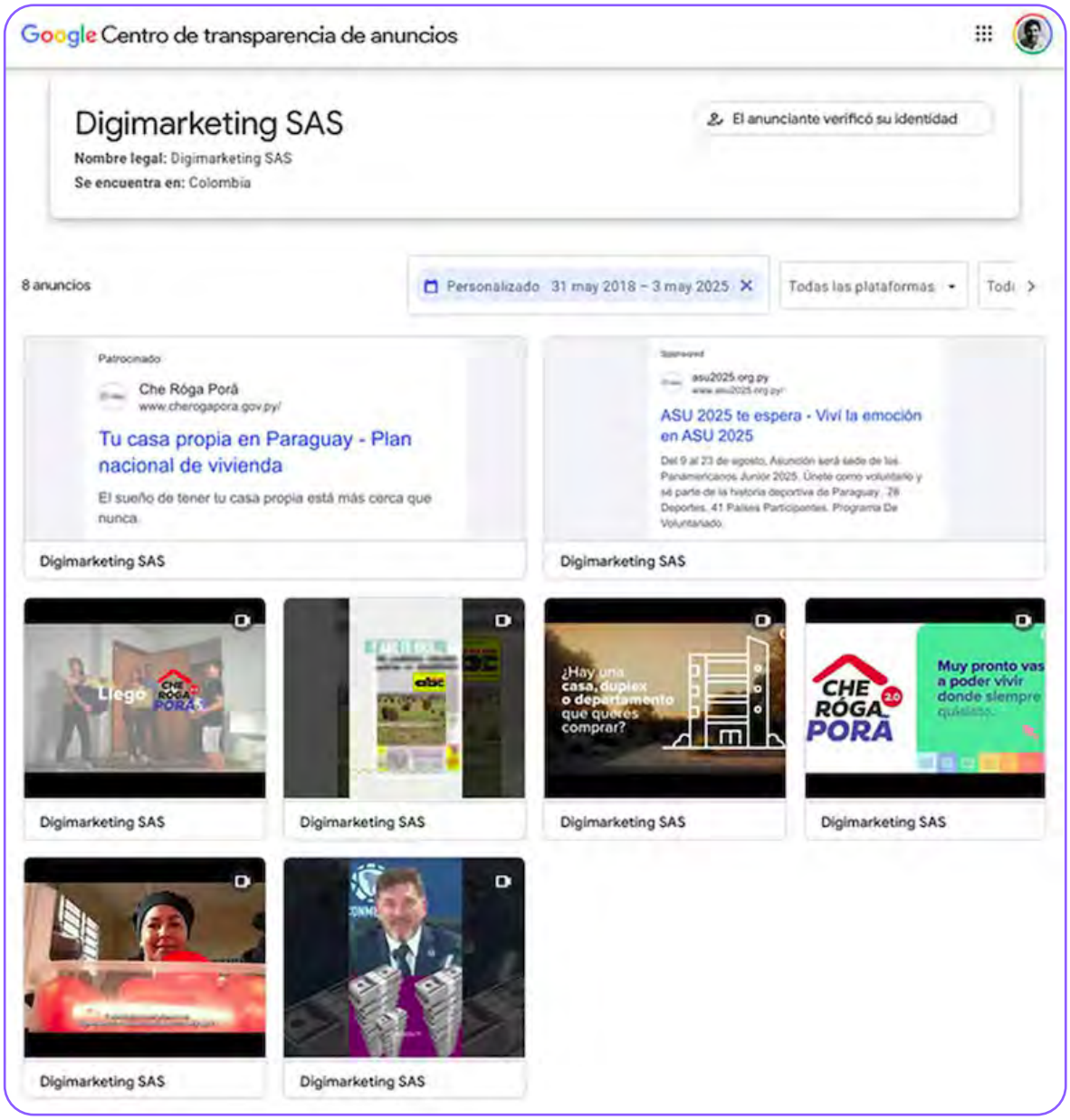

FIGURE 2. Screenshot of ads removed from the Google Transparency Center.
Source: Google Transparency Center; screenshot from The Disinformation Network (ABC Color, 2026m).

The metrics on harassment reveal that, in addition to seeking to influence the political debate, they aimed to destroy the reputations of critical voices. As a sample, the investigation found that out of the 1,086 hostile mentions directed at 81 individuals and legal entities posted on the *Despierta Paraguay* page, 47% were aimed directly at journalists and media outlets (ABC Color, 2026e).

Furthermore, as we will explain later, on this same page, the network concentrated 75.4% of its attacks on media corporations against the newspaper ABC Color. At the individual level, the director of that media outlet, Natalia Zuccolillo, was the most targeted person in the ecosystem, with 115 defamatory mentions.

Another extremely serious pattern revealed by the data is the instrumentalization of gender-based violence facilitated by technology. Although women accounted for 37.5% of the group of journalists who were harassed, they received 60% of the attacks originating from the *Despierta Paraguay* page.

Investigative journalists such as Mabel Rehnfeldt[1] and Fiona Aquino suffered attacks that included the use of artificial intelligence to generate fake audio (deepfakes, i.e., hyper-realistic audiovisual content that has been digitally falsified or altered; Chesney and Citron, 2019) and manipulated images intended to denigrate them professionally and personally.

A RESPONSE TO THE CRITICAL PRESS

The ferocity of the official response to "The Disinformation Network" cannot be understood in isolation. During the same government, ABC Color published a series of its own investigations that directly upset Peña and his inner circle, which helps explain why the ruling party treated the publication of this series not as an allegation to be investigated, but as an attack to be repelled.

The most high-profile case was that of "the envelopes of power" (ABC Color, 2025k): in September 2025, leaked internal chats between a former coordinator of the Civil Cabinet and the architect in charge of the presidential residence mentioned "collection of envelopes containing cash" arranged by the first lady to make cash payments to contractors and suppliers linked to Mburuvicha Róga.

The case led to complaints filed with the Economic Crimes and Anti-Corruption Unit (UDEA, for its Spanish acronym) of the Public Prosecutor's Office in late September 2025, brought by attorneys Guillermo Ferreiro and María Esther Roa, and forced the General Prosecutor, Emiliano Rolón Fernández, to issue statements (ABC Color, 2025h; ABC Color, 2025j). At that time, Peña avoided addressing the substance of the matter in several public appearances: he described the allegations as "media accusations" and an attack, and argued that in the "free exercise of the press," the media "had gone a bit too far" (Última Hora, 2025; ABC Color, 2025f). Months later, he claimed that the envelopes were a "fabrication" by the former employee who reported them (ABC Color, 2025g).

In January 2025, one year after the month in which a massive number of the network's pages were created (see Table 2), an investigation by ABC Color led by Mabel Rehnfeldt and journalist Juan Jara also documented that Peña's declared net worth rose from approximately G. 1,000 million in 2017—the year in which he declared he "didn't have a single guaraní"—to more than G. 23,000 million in 2023, in parallel with the construction of a summer mansion in Ciervo Cuá, San Bernardino, overlooking Lake Ypacaraí and representing an estimated investment of USD 2 million, registered in the name of a former official from the Bankruptcy Directorate rather than in the President's name (ABC Color, 2025c; ABC Color, 2025d).

In May 2025, ABC Color also confirmed that the construction was carried out without an environmental permit (ABC Color, 2025i). In response to the reports, Peña stated that he did not consider himself a "millionaire" and attributed the coverage to a dispute among powerful groups and a personal issue with the Zuccolillo Group, owner of ABC Color (La Política Online, 2025).

In late January of that year, the same media outlet also revealed, through open-source information and its own verification, the discretionary use of public aircraft at the service of the presidential entourage, as well as the use of a private businessman's plane—a businessman who had benefited from public tenders worth millions.

The first finding was that a Paraguayan Air Force helicopter made 37 trips between October 2024 and January 2025, on average, one every two days, to transport Peña to his summer mansion, a tennis club, and a soccer game, using a heliport that reportedly lacked authorization from the National Civil Aviation Directorate (Dinac) for civilian use (ABC Color, 2025e).

1 Link https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mabel_Rehnfeldt

Months later, ABC Color revealed that Peña and Vice President Pedro Alliana traveled for free on private planes owned by Chinese businessman Long Jian, whose company, Kamamya SA, subsequently secured—through Itaipú—a multimillion-dollar contract to supply school desks, with an estimated overbilling of USD 25 million (ABC Color, 2025l). By March 2025, following the series of publications, Vice President Pedro Alliana himself had publicly accused ABC Color of waging a "smear campaign" against the government.

"Let's be honest, ABC Color is waging a smear campaign against the government; they're publishing anything and everything—well, that's their game," said the Vice President (La Nación, 2025).

Finally, ABC Color has also documented—from 2025 onward and consistently to the present—how companies linked to Peña's inner circle, including *Itti Saeca*, *Discover Paraguay (Uela)*, and *Ueno Seguros*, received government contracts totaling G. 228,510 million (USD 37.9 million) between August 2023 and August 2026, often channeled through Itaipú Binacional to circumvent the controls of the National Public Procurement Directorate (DNCP), and in other cases subject to serious scrutiny due to suspicions of bid-rigging (ABC Color, 2026a).

This is precisely the same pattern: public procurement directed toward the presidential inner circle and carried out outside the usual controls. The Disinformation Network documented this pattern in the use of funds from Itaipú and the PTI-PY to apparently operate the propaganda and digital attack machinery described in this article.

THE MITIC "FILED A COMPLAINT" AND EVIDENCE WAS HIDDEN ON GOOGLE

One of the most tense episodes during the investigation occurred when government authorities attempted to publicly justify and cover up the irregularities in the advertising campaign.

Initially, The Disinformation Network investigation demonstrated that the Google ads were linked to official ".gov.py" domains, which, according to the ad platform's policy, required official authorization from the Paraguayan government. The government repeatedly denied this (ABC Color, 2026s).

Following the publications and in an attempt to distance themselves from the Colombian agency Digimarketing SAS, which they accused of "usurping" the government's official identity to run the ads, MITIC officials insisted that there was no prohibition whatsoever on running ads for State social assistance programs without official authorization. To support this version of events, Vice Minister of Communications Alejandra Duarte Albospino presented, during an interview, a document regarding Google Ads policies.

However, a fact-checking exercise revealed that MITIC deliberately altered and misrepresented the interpretation of the platform's policies (ABC Color, 2026ag). Government authorities were reading Google's policies regarding exceptions for the collection of "public road access tolls" in force in Colombia and attempted to misleadingly present them as if they constituted a global permission to advertise "social programs", a strictly sensitive category that requires prior government authorization for promotion.

In fact, during a live radio debate on ABC Cardinal, MITIC Minister Gustavo Villate went so far as to call the investigative journalist a "liar" for questioning the validity of that documentation, and claimed that "ABC is lying" and that Google's policy "does not apply exactly as ABC or Leonardo Gómez described" (ABC Color, 2026af). The pattern repeated and intensified weeks later.

FIGURE 3. Interview in which Alejandra Duarte presented a manipulated document on Google's advertising policy for governments. Source: MITIC's official YouTube channel (MITIC, 2026).

On July 14, 2026, following the publication of the USD 7 million agreement between MITIC and the UNDP—which the ministry had failed to report to Congress (ABC Color, 2026t)—Villate again avoided addressing the substance of the finding and, instead, repeatedly questioned the political affiliation of the journalist who authored the investigation, during a radio interview on ABC 730 AM's "La Primera Mañana" program, labeling him a "political activist," claiming he had "ties to the left," and calling him a "communist," while acknowledging that he had not read the report he was questioning ("I didn't read the article […] I don't read articles") (ABC 730 AM, La Primera Mañana, 2026).

The Paraguayan Journalists' Union itself reacted to this incident (see "Statement by the Journalists' Union"), independently confirming that the minister had described the journalist as an "activist" and a "communist."

Despite the clear evidence of this serious alteration of a document by a governement institution, and the overwhelming suspicions of misuse of State advertising services, repeated attempts by ABC Color to obtain a statement regarding this violation were met with prolonged institutional silence from the technology platform Google.

This author, in his capacity as a journalist, requested an institutional response on multiple occasions: on April 22, 2026, through the official press channel (press@google.com) and the Malazan agency, Google's representative in the region; and again, on May 11, 2026, through an additional press contact, without receiving a response on the matter.

THE PRESS AND POLITICAL DISSIDENTS IN THE CROSSHAIRS

The systematic harassment associated with The Disinformation Network operated in tandem with legislative efforts to restrict civic space, such as the promotion of Law No. 7363/2024 on the regulation of civil society organizations (Base Legal Paraguay, 2024), dubbed the "Garrote Law" by organizations such as CIVICUS Monitor and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), which warned that the law opens the door to State interference and intimidation against NGOs (CIVICUS Monitor, 2025; CPJ, 2024b).

During the legislative process for this law, the disinformation network viciously attacked female journalists who were conducting transparency training in collaboration with various NGOs, seeking to criminalize the work of civil society and spread narratives aimed at destabilizing institutions (Despierta Paraguay, 2026c).

The establishment of troll farms and government disinformation machinery is not unique to Paraguay but is part of a growing phenomenon across Latin America. The manipulation of the digital ecosystem through State or parastatal resources aims to artificially distort public debate.

In Venezuela, for example, a network of fake news channels on YouTube promoted propaganda in favor of Venezuela's acting president, Delcy Rodríguez, by advertising the videos on Google, using at least 30 channels and accumulating more than 47 million views. The ad campaign was executed through an Argentine agency, according to the website *Cazadores de Fake News* (Cazadores de Fake News, 2026).

In Hungary, Fidesz—the party of former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—and its representatives spent nearly 2 million euros in 2024 to disseminate content containing hostile narratives, including disinformation (EDMO, 2024). In recent years, Meta has also identified similar operations carried out around the world by government actors in Poland, China, Russia, Iran, India, Moldova, and Azerbaijan, though the amounts spent on ads were much lower than those detected in Paraguay (Meta, 2026).

Furthermore, the organization Artículo 19 recently reported that freedom of expression in countries such as Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras has recently been subject to similar practices (Article 19, 2026).

Regarding the use of stigmatizing language, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) published a report in 2024 as part of the regional thematic hearing titled "Impacts on the Right to Freedom of Expression by State Censorship Measures in the Americas," led by 25 civil society organizations during the 190th Regular Session of the IACHR (CPJ, 2024a). Although Paraguay was not included in the report at that time, the details align with practices identified by The Disinformation Network. One of the trends the report highlights as on the rise in the region is the systematic use of stigmatizing language.

The report, which highlights how regional leaders such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Gustavo Petro, and Javier Milei used language as a "weapon" against the press, echoes what was noted in 2011 by the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (RELE) of the Organization of American States (OAS) in the country-specific assessment of Ecuador in its annual report, during the administration of Rafael Correa, when, after official disparaging remarks were made against journalists and media outlets ("corrupt press," "ink-stained hitmen," "sensationalists," "manipulators," "conspirators"), the Special Rapporteur reiterated that public officials have a duty to ensure that their statements do not infringe upon the rights of those who contribute to public discourse and to foster a climate of tolerance in which people can express themselves without fear of being stigmatized (RELE, 2012, paras. 202–206).

The similarity between the belligerent language used by networks identified in other countries and that disseminated through The Disinformation Network points to a common phenomenon. This can be seen in the texts and images, as illustrated below:

> "The role of journalism should be to inform (and they don't)" (Sucia Política, 2026a).

> "This is Óscar Acosta, a journalist who works for the highest bidder, a fabricator of lies, and a snake charmer. He claims to tell it like it is, but the only thing that matters is his bulging bank account, which grows day by day as he spews paid-for 'truths' (...)" (Sucia Política, 2026b).

> "Another journalist once respected, who sells his honesty and principles. And sadly, in a very obvious way... it's the turn of the *planillero* #PowerOnTrial (...)" (Sucia Política, 2026c).

> "Because it is the fourth estate (of a fourth-rate power). Because it deceives the people with its 'truths' (which have nothing to do with the truth). Because it has everything (but can't justify anything). Because it claims to sell newspapers (but what it really sells is news to the highest bidder). For all this and much more… we find it GUILTY" (Sucia Política, 2026d).

> "You already know: if it's good for us, it's not good for them. The media elite works to ensure that any benefit coming out of business owners' pockets gets no support. #WakeUpParaguay, the time has come for them to listen to us instead of us reading them" (Despierta Paraguay, 2026a).

> "Politicians with little crowns? No, when the media elite looks the other way, it's to divert attention from their shady deals. #WakeUpParaguay, it's time to go after the complicit press and their protégés" (Despierta Paraguay, 2026b).

> "The champions of the independent press remain silent while the world denounces the intimidation of journalists through NGOs. #WakeUpParaguay, have mice eaten our journalists' tongues? Or have their bosses gagged them?" (Despierta Paraguay, 2026c).

> "Fiorela Rivarola and Bruno Masi have taken it upon themselves to lie to the people, and the public must know who they are. Let this be known throughout the country—don't be fooled by their words" (Rugir de Un Gigante, 2026).

> "And now, what will the usual liars say? (...)" (referring to Mabel Rehnfeldt of ABC Color, pictured) (Click Digital, 2026).

SERIOUS VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

On repeated occasions, the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (RELE) of the Organization of American States (OAS) has issued warnings regarding the direct or indirect participation of States in stigmatization campaigns. According to inter-American standards, public officials are guardians of human rights and must not make, endorse, or finance statements that constitute disinformation or that show blatant disregard for verifiable information (IACHR, 2020).

In its annual reports, RELE documented a regional pattern of "moral erosion" of the press, in line with Principle 9 of the Declaration on Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which states that: "[t]he murder, kidnapping, intimidation, and threats against media professionals, as well as the physical destruction of media outlets, violate people's fundamental rights and severely curtail freedom of expression. It is the duty of States to prevent and investigate these acts, punish their perpetrators, and ensure that victims receive adequate redress" (RELE, 2012, para. 156).

This occurs when public authorities disseminate narratives designed to discredit journalists and co-opt audiences through digital strategies funded with State resources or by sectors of the established power structure, thereby evading scrutiny by the free press. The ultimate goal of these mechanisms is not to convince, but to silence through the chilling effect, defined by inter-American standards as the intimidating effect that leads to the silencing and self-censorship of journalists (RELE, UNESCO, and CIMA, 2017).

This confirms that when digital violence, harassment, and the exposure of personal data occur under a cloak of State or parastatal impunity, the personal cost of practicing journalism rises dramatically. This intimidating effect fosters self-censorship, restricting the free flow of ideas and creating complex "zones of informational silence" on issues of high public interest, such as public corruption.

THE JUDICIALIZATION OF CENSORSHIP

In Paraguay, the chilling effect generated by digital violence was exacerbated by the judicialization of censorship. Actors linked to those in power began to distort and exploit protective regulations—such as Law No. 5777/16 (On Comprehensive Protection for Women Against All Forms of Violence)—to silence the press.

The case of Christian Chena (a shareholder of RDN, a Paraguayan digital media outlet) and Gisele Mousques is paradigmatic in this regard. Mousques, the wife of Darío Filártiga—former private secretary to Sabino Augusto Montanaro, the right-hand man of dictator Alfredo Stroessner[2]—filed a complaint with the justice of the peace court under Law No. 5777/16, alleging "psychological and online violence" stemming from news articles that mentioned her. As a result of a questionable legal interpretation, the court issued a prior censorship order prohibiting Chena and his media outlet from mentioning Mousques on digital platforms.

Faced with the imminent risk that this ruling would become a tool of censorship, civil society organizations such as TEDIC, together with the Center for Studies on Freedom of Expression (CELE, for its Spanish acronym) and the Wikimedia Foundation, filed an amicus curiae brief before the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ, for its Spanish acronym) (TEDIC, 2026).

2 Alfredo Stroessner was a Paraguayan dictator who ruled for 35 years with absolute control over public power under a system comprising the government, the armed forces, and the National Republican Association (ANR, for its Spanish acronym). Darío Filártiga, for his part, currently serves as the ANR's political secretary and as ambassador for the government of Santiago Peña to the Republic of China (Taiwan). In June 2026, victims of the dictatorship asked the Attorney General's Office to investigate him for his alleged role in the chain of command of the Ministry of the Interior in the 1980 Caaguazú case. (RDN, 2026).

In parallel with that censorship-driven lawsuit, and after becoming a direct victim of the smear campaign by the Disinformation Network through the page *Despierta Paraguay*, which promoted posts falsely accusing him of labor offenses and assaults, Chena filed an Independent Criminal Complaint for Slander (Art. 150 of the Criminal Code). This action, which seeks 800 million guaraníes in compensation for emotional distress, required the issuance of international letters rogatory to corporations such as Meta and X Corp in order to obtain IP addresses and lift the anonymity of the network's operators (Judiciales.net, 2026).

The investigation conducted as part of The Disinformation Network revealed another striking detail. The office of lawyer Margarita Heralesky, who represents Mousques in the Chena case, is located at *966 O'Leary Street* in Asunción, the same address provided by Venezuelan Yecika Magle Bracho Atacho, the owner of the cell phone number used to disseminate paid attacks through the *Despierta Paraguay* page (ABC Color, 2026i).

FIGURE 4. Matching address at 966 O'Leary Street, Asunción.
Source: photograph from The Disinformation Network (ABC Color, 2026i).

It was also found that the Paraguayan headquarters of the company Azafrán, an Argentine digital agency with which Alejandra Duarte, the current vice minister of communications, worked until she joined the government, was established and operated at the same address (ABC Color, 2026g).

The investigation into the Christian Chena case has since progressed: in July 2026, Yecika Bracho, identified as the head of *Despierta Paraguay* (ABC Color, 2026z), failed to appear at the mediation hearing after charges were formally filed against her (ABC Color, 2026ab), while Chena and his attorney, Alejandra Peralta, who had also been the target of attacks by the same website, filed a formal complaint for defamation that includes the complete file of this investigation as evidence (ABC Color, 2026h).

Developments in September 2026 took the case in a new direction. On September 3, shortly before this document was finalized, at a conciliation hearing held before a notary public, Bracho signed an agreement with Chena and her attorney in which she committed to cooperating with the case. In that context, she stated that in July 2022, in the midst of the presidential campaign, José Ignacio García, a partner at Azafrán SA, persuaded her to purchase prepaid SIM cards on the grounds that they would be used for "marketing campaigns," in exchange for a USD 50 incentive.

Bracho registered two phone lines in her name; one of them became the account linked to *Despierta Paraguay* on Facebook and Instagram, from which the smear ads were managed, and the other was used by the *Paraguay Elige* page. Bracho, who was then an employee of lawyer Gabriel Boero, a local advisor to Azafrán SA, also submitted her cell phone for forensic analysis, along with WhatsApp conversations, call logs, and accounting documents (ABC Color, 2026q; ABC Color, 2026y).

Three days later, the chats submitted for forensic analysis revealed that, between November 2021 and November 2023, Alejandra Duarte Albospino made multiple cash withdrawals from Azafrán SA: the first, in the amount of USD 7,420 (nearly G. 51 million) on November 17, 2021; another of USD 6,700 in March 2023, and the last, of USD 1,300 on November 24, 2023, withdrawn by Rita González—now Chief of Staff at MITIC—just three months after her appointment to the ministry. In other words, the payments continued while both women were already holding government positions.

The same chats also revealed operational ties between Azafrán and the agency Prana SA, where Duarte worked as digital director before taking office as Vice Minister, even though the agency's director, Laura Leguizamón, publicly denied having "anything to do" with Azafrán's local operations (ABC Color, 2026q).

Prana SA, headed by Vice Minister Duarte, was responsible for the digital campaign of Santiago Peña between 2022 and 2023, according to the current President's own declaration of responsibility submitted to Meta and in the election accountability reports.

The investigation also uncovered an incident that compromises judicial confidentiality. On June 17, 2026, attorney Gustavo Aníbal Leguizamón Acha—appointed by Azafrán SA to represent Bracho, although he did not formally register as her defense attorney until July 12–13—wrote to her that the following day he would have "a meeting with someone" who would give him "a better picture" of the appeals.

On June 23, at 5:44 p.m., he sent her another message: "I have confidential information that the Court of Appeals' ruling will be issued soon, rejecting Chena's claims." That same day, the First Chamber of the Criminal Court of Appeals issued Interlocutory Order No. 206, which, by a majority vote, rejected Chena's appeals and limited the investigation solely to the identification of Bracho; the ruling was electronically notified to the parties at 1:44 p.m. (ABC Color, 2026o).

Bracho subsequently revoked Leguizamón's power of attorney during a hearing, appointed a new attorney, and handed over her phone, which revealed the scheme. On September 8, 2026, Chena's lawyer, Alejandra Peralta Merlo, filed a disciplinary complaint with the Supervisory Council of the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) regarding the alleged leak of confidential judicial information in the case "Despierta Py Redes Sociales v. Defamation" (ABC Color, 2026aa).

ABC COLOR'S OWN PRECEDENT BEFORE THE INTER-AMERICAN SYSTEM

The use of criminal law to silence the press is not a new phenomenon for ABC Color, as the media outlet itself has a pending case before the inter-American system. In the case of Zuccolillo Moscarda v. Paraguay, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights is reviewing the criminal conviction handed down in 1998 against the then director of ABC Color, Aldo Zuccolillo, after the former Senator Juan Carlos Galaverna sued him over publications regarding alleged corruption; the Paraguayan Supreme Court of Justice convicted him criminally.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights accepted the complaint in 2009 and referred the case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2024, citing violations of freedom of expression, the principle of legality, and judicial guarantees; it recommended overturning the conviction, providing reparations to the Zuccolillo family, and urging Paraguay to decriminalize defamation when it involves public officials (IACHR, 2024). The public hearing was held on August 19, 2025 (ABC Color, 2025b); as of the date of this publication, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has not yet issued a ruling in the case.

WHERE DID THE MONEY COME FROM?

The publication of the findings on April 26, 2026—coinciding with Paraguayan Journalists' Day—prompted legislators in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies to submit requests for reports from the MITIC in the days that followed. To date, the institution denies any connection to The Disinformation Network and has withheld from the National Congress the contracts, purchase orders, and agreements executed outside the oversight of the National Public Procurement Directorate (DNCP, for its Spanish acronym) for these purposes.

MITIC itself acknowledged, albeit partially, the existence of this structure: in response to Congress's requests for information, the institution admitted to having filed criminal complaints against only 2 of the 14 pages that made up the network (*Despierta Paraguay* and *Sucia Política*), leaving the remaining 12 (ABC Color, 2026r) out of the institutional complaint, a selective approach that fueled suspicions about the ministry's own role in sustaining the operation.

TABLE 3. Requests for reports made by the National Congress

FILE	DATE	STATUS	CHAMBER	LINK
D-2692874	27/04/2026	Partially answered	Deputies	https://silpy.congreso.gov.py/web/expediente/153833
S-2603416	29/04/2026	Partially answered	Senators	https://silpy.congreso.gov.py/web/expediente/153931
D-2693103	12/05/2026	Rejected	Deputies	https://silpy.congreso.gov.py/web/expediente/154381
D-2693313	19/05/2026	Partially answered	Deputies	https://silpy.congreso.gov.py/web/expediente/154672
S-2603748	20/07/2026	Ongoing	Senators	https://silpy.congreso.gov.py/web/expediente/156825

The most recent of these requests, File S-2603748, was submitted by Senator Rafael Filizzola on July 20, 2026, and, according to the legislative tracking system SILPY, was still pending at the time of this update, with MITIC having yet to provide a formal response. An analysis of the responses provided by MITIC to date confirms a deliberate attempt to conceal information that, moreover, conflicts with the established practice of executing funds through binational entities.

For example, Agreement No. 4500073749/2023 (a document obtained by the investigative team through confidential sources), signed between MITIC and the Itaipú Technology Park Foundation (PTI-PY, for its Spanish acronym), authorized the international subcontracting of agencies for the "positioning of public policies." However, MITIC did not respond to this point. Other agreements were also identified between 2023 and 2025, including a subsequent one—not reported to Congress—with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP): Agreement No. 4500076699/2024, between MITIC and the UNDP, for the "strengthening of State media" and "support for the communications strategy," which confirms the same pattern of agreements not reported to Congress (ABC Color, 2026u)—from which funds were disbursed for digital advertising.

Furthermore, MITIC did not respond to reports regarding the additional G. 9,747,620,030 (approximately USD 1.5 million) from Itaipú Binacional, channeled through the Itaipú Technology Park Foundation (PTI-PY), to fund propaganda campaigns to be disseminated on official social media accounts, via text messages, at events and fairs, and through private influencer accounts, just a few months before the municipal elections (ABC Color, 2026x).

OBSTRUCTION OF EVIDENCE AND THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE

The journalistic revelation of a scheme involving digital manipulation and embezzlement of public funds triggered a series of institutional reactions that appeared to be an open attempt to "destroy evidence." Within just 48 hours of the first publications, more than 60 ads managed by the agency Digimarketing SAS on Google disappeared, and days later, violent profiles such as *Despierta Paraguay* and *Sucia Política* were removed from Meta (ABC Color, 2026m).

Following this, two criminal complaints were filed. The first was initiated by a group of legislators (Última Hora, 2026a), and the second was filed by journalist Hugo Portillo, with legal representation provided by Ezequiel Santagada, a lawyer specializing in freedom of expression, and former Minister of Justice Cecilia Pérez (ABC Color, 2026d). Both complaints emphasized the "danger in delay" and the urgent need for precautionary measures to preserve digital evidence, given the imminent destruction of evidence which are critical to clarifying the facts.

Despite these complaints, the Public Prosecutor's Office response was marked by a striking delay (ABC Color, 2026n). Based on a brief and questionable ruling of "insufficient grounds," the Public Prosecutor, Emiliano Rolón Fernández, initially refused to investigate the facts and referred the case to the Comptroller General of the Republic (ABC Color, 2026ac), through a controversial and expired agreement between the two institutions and under the pretext that they lacked sufficient experts to conduct the forensic analyses (ABC Color, 2026f).

Following criticism, the Public Prosecutor revised his approach and appointed prosecutors Marlene Concepción González and Laura Giacummo, from the Unit for Economic Crimes and Anti-Corruption (UDEA), along with prosecutor Ruth Benítez, from the Unit for Cybercrimes, and under the coordination of Deputy Prosecutor Nancy Salomón (Ministerio Público del Paraguay, 2026).

STATEMENT BY THE JOURNALISTS' UNION

In response to the discovery of the Disinformation Network, the inaction of judicial bodies in the face of evidence destruction, and the overwhelming evidence of systematic harassment, the historic Journalists' Union of Paraguay (SPP, for its Spanish acronym) issued an institutional statement setting forth its position (SPP, 2026a):

> "The SPP expresses its deep concern over the evidence linking sectors of the Executive Branch to a network of digital attacks directed against media workers. The investigative journalism project The Disinformation Network has revealed indications of a systematic effort aimed at harassing, discrediting, and intimidating journalists through coordinated campaigns in digital environments. Furthermore, there are strong suspicions that these operations were financed through the improper use of public funds, which makes the matter even more serious.
>
> These practices constitute a serious attack on freedom of expression, the right to information, and the safeguards necessary for the free and safe practice of journalism. The use of the State apparatus or public funds to persecute or intimidate those who fulfill a democratic oversight role is incompatible with the basic principles of the Rule of law.
>
> Therefore, we demand that the Public Prosecutor's Office conduct a prompt and effective investigation to identify and punish all those directly and indirectly responsible for these attacks. Impunity for acts of this nature not only violates the rights of journalists and media outlets but also undermines democracy and the obligations assumed by the Paraguayan State regarding the protection of freedom of expression and of the press.
>
> The SPP reaffirms its commitment to defending the rights of journalists and will remain vigilant against any attempt to use political power or public resources to silence critical voices or restrict democratic debate."

On July 14, 2026, the same day as the radio interview in which Minister Gustavo Villate questioned the political affiliation of the investigative journalist who authored this report, the SPP Executive Committee issued a new statement demanding the minister's dismissal, in which it directly named ABC journalist Leonardo Gómez and noted that Villate "attacked and attempted to discredit" their colleague "by labeling him an 'activist' and a 'communist.'" The statement also urges the media outlet to take the necessary measures to protect Gómez from any potential reprisals, whether physical or legal, and, at the same time, demanded that the Public Prosecutor's Office conduct a serious and independent investigation into the link between the minister and the network responsible for attacks against the press (SPP, 2026b):

> "Minister Villate must be removed from office. Recent journalistic investigations into the government's involvement—and, in particular, that of the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies (MITIC)—with a network dedicated to attacking and discrediting media workers and media outlets, allegedly financed with public funds, constitute an extremely serious matter and sufficient grounds to demand the dismissal of Minister Gustavo Villate.
>
> The use of State resources to promote harassment campaigns against journalists constitutes a violation of the obligations assumed by the Paraguayan State regarding freedom of expression, access to information, and the protection of journalistic practice.
>
> Far from offering explanations regarding the allegations against his administration and the lack of transparency in the MITIC's operations, Minister Villate attempted to divert public attention by

attacking and attempting to discredit our colleague Leonardo Gómez, a journalist with ABC, by labeling him an "activist" and a "communist."

We, the Paraguayan Journalists' Union, warn that these types of practices, promoted from the highest levels of power, contribute to creating a climate of hostility toward those who practice journalism and can lead to reprisals and attacks.

We demand that the Public Prosecutor's Office conduct a serious and independent investigation into the so-called "Disinformation Network" and the involvement of State actors in the persecution and harassment of journalists and media outlets.

Furthermore, we urge the media organization to take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of our colleague Leonardo Gómez against any potential reprisals—whether physical or legal—arising from the exercise of his profession.

The defense of freedom of expression and of free and independent journalism is an indispensable condition for the functioning of democracy.

Executive Committee. 14/07/26"

Notably, on July 15, one day after the statement was issued, the SPP received a complaint regarding a "maneuver by the Santiago Peña administration" in which the MITIC pressured Radio Cáritas executives by phone to remove from their social media accounts the post containing the interview in which Villate's resignation was demanded, and raised suspicions that the management of official advertising was used as a tool to coerce the station (ABC Color, 2026ad).

The SPP's firm stance throughout the entire process has been remarkable and has led the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the Federation of Journalists of Latin America and the Caribbean (FEPALC, for its Spanish acronym) to also speak out on the matter, endorsing the SPP's statement (ABC Color, 2026k; IFJ, 2026).

Currently, the SPP is actively promoting before the National Congress the bill "On the Protection of Journalists and Human Rights Defenders" (Congreso Nacional de Paraguay, 2026; La Nación, 2022), seeking to establish a robust inter-institutional mechanism to prevent assaults, investigate attacks (including those in the digital sphere), and combat the structural impunity that prevails in the country.

The bill faces opposition mainly from pro-government legislators, who have already announced their intention to dismantle the initiative and introduce an alternative bill that even excludes human rights defenders (ABC Color, 2025a). The SPP considers this an affront and rejects it (Última Hora, 2026b).

This is not a pattern exclusive to the cases documented here. Reporters Without Borders reported that, between August and October 2025 alone, four Paraguayan investigative journalists: Aníbal Benítez, Carlos Benítez, Aníbal Gómez, and Mabel Portillo, were subjected to a range of attacks, from Molotov cocktails and gunfire directed at their homes to death threats and defamation lawsuits, while the bill to protect journalists and human rights defenders remains pending in the National Congress (RSF, 2025).

EXTENSION OF THE SCHEME TO THE 2026 MUNICIPAL CAMPAIGN

The structure was not limited to the 2022–2023 electoral cycle. In August 2026, ABC Color identified that an agency linked to the Disinformation Network also operated in the campaign of a candidate for that year's municipal elections, Camilo Pérez, who won the municipal primaries on June 7, 2026, indicating that the funding and dissemination scheme remains active beyond the period documented in the rest of this article. The ad campaign, carried out between May 21 and 26, 2026, by the Argentine agency Oranget Digital SAS, run by the same executives, José Ignacio García and Mariela Laura Sayago, who operate Azafrán SA from the address O'Leary 966 (see "The Judicialization of Censorship"), confirms that the same network of foreign agencies remains available to new political clients (ABC Color, 2026c).

The following day, the same media outlet reported that the WhatsApp group "Camilo Pérez - Press," created by the candidate's campaign team and comprising 212 members—mostly journalists—included government officials: Vice Minister Alejandra Duarte Albospino; Héctor Riveros, national director of State Media; Carlos Sánchez, former director of presidential communications, now working in the Yacyretá Binational Entity (EBY); and Jimmy Villaverde himself, Santiago Peña's former social media manager. Riveros and Sánchez responded that their participation was passive or in their capacity as journalists; Duarte and Villaverde did not respond to the media outlet's inquiries (ABC Color, 2026ae).

CONCLUSIONS

At a time when public trust is threatened by technological changes and the rise of authoritarian tendencies, the scheme described in this report illustrates, to some extent, the impact these operations can have on the fabric of democracy when used to silence critical voices and, in some cases, minority voices in public discourse.

These operations aimed at influencing the information ecosystem, apparently carried out with public funds or, at the very least, by actors aligned with the Santiago Peña administration, also lead us to a necessary discussion about transparency in the management of public resources and the impact of digital campaigns on vital sectors of democracy. They further compel an investigation into the links between these structures, which operate "behind the back" of public oversight, and government actors, as well as the murky way in which technology companies interact with governments.

What is beyond doubt is that the Executive branch deliberately used a funding mechanism for State-sponsored digital advertising that bypassed the audit procedures established by the National Public Procurement Directorate (DNCP). To this end, entities such as the Itaipú Technology Park Foundation, Itaipú Binacional itself, and the Yacyretá Binational Entity were used. Suspicions even raised the need to audit funds disbursed through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and allocated to the government's digital advertising.

It remains to be seen whether these expenditures contributed to the funding of the controversial Disinformation Network. What is certain is that within this structure—which consists of advertising content openly aligned with the Peña administration's narrative—more than USD 472,000 was allocated to 7,965 ads on Meta through fourteen pages and pseudo-media outlets, in addition to a Google campaign estimated at more than USD 100,000, according to sources consulted. Since this calculation does not include technical, logistical, or intermediary costs, the total would be even higher. That is why the question remains unanswered: Where did the money come from?

While that answer is still pending, what cannot be overlooked is that, on the *Despierta Paraguay* page alone, nearly half of the hostile mentions targeted journalists and media outlets. The virulence of the attacks originating from that platform was particularly vicious toward female journalists, who accounted for just over a third of those harassed, and yet received 60% of the attacks.

That viciousness did not come out of nowhere. As for ties to the government, a connection was demonstrated with those responsible for President Santiago Peña's digital campaign and with the current cabinet of the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies (MITIC). The cell phone number registered with Meta by *Sucia Política*—one of the most aggressive pages in the network—was the same as the one provided by Villaverde, Peña's former social media manager, while the phone numbers for *Despierta Paraguay* and *Paraguay Elige* were registered by an employee of the local representative of Azafrán, the agency that made cash payments to current Vice Minister Duarte until November 2023.

Faced with these findings, and in an apparent act of desperation, MITIC officials misrepresented fragments of Google's policies to justify the ad campaign, failed to inform Congress about the agreements with the PTI-PY and the UNDP, and reported only 2 of the 14 pages. In fact, in the weeks that followed, Minister Villate chose to discredit the person who conducted the investigation by calling him an "activist" and a "communist" rather than addressing the substance of the matter, and was accused by the SPP of pressuring the media to censor coverage of the scandal.

In the judicial sphere, the situation was no better. Despite complaints filed by lawmakers and those affected, the Prosecutor's Office delayed its investigation while ads and profiles disappeared, and to date, there have been no public updates on the investigation nor have any individuals been charged. In the private lawsuit filed by Chena, an apparent leak of judicial information benefiting the scheme was exposed.

None of this can be viewed in isolation from the growing gender-based violence facilitated by technology and the judicial harassment of media outlets and journalists that has been occurring in the country in recent years. Through misinterpreted regulations, such as Law No. 5777/16 and the "Garrote Law" targeting nongovernmental organizations, actors linked to the government have been eroding civic space and aiming to produce the "chilling effect" described in inter-American standards. Thus, the fear of legal reprisals and ongoing reputational damage fosters self-censorship and threatens investigative journalism.

In fact, the Paraguayan Journalists' Union itself has already requested such protection for a journalist involved in this investigation. In its July 14, 2026, statement, it urged the media outlet to "take all necessary measures to ensure the protection" of Leonardo Gómez "against potential reprisals, both physical and legal." This is a concrete, not hypothetical, example of why protection must extend to investigative journalists and not just to media organizations.

Given this state of vulnerability, it is imperative that the Paraguayan government address the demands of the SPP and establish robust public policies and inter-institutional mechanisms to guarantee the safety of journalists and human rights defenders. Similarly, judicial delays in the face of the disappearance of digital evidence and the systematic harassment of journalists and media outlets can no longer be tolerated by the judicial system. It is also necessary to bring the case before regional human rights forums and integrate it into the agendas on freedom of expression, involving the OAS Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (RELE), to document and sanction these stigmatization practices driven by government leadership.

It should be acknowledged that, despite their limitations, Meta's ad libraries and Google's Transparency Center were the tools that made this investigation possible, and their existence demonstrates the value of advertising transparency as a mechanism for accountability. However, Google's prolonged silence in the face of the manipulation of its policies and the misuse of its infrastructure also highlights the urgency of discussing self-regulation among major platforms. Without a clear framework requiring them to exercise due diligence, accountability, and greater openness in situations like these, the region's digital environment runs the risk of becoming a free-for-all for manipulation and the erosion of democratic safeguards.

Finally, as of the date of this publication (September 10, 2026), the case remains open. The forensic analysis of the phone handed over by Bracho, the complaint filed with the Supreme Court of Justice regarding the leak of judicial information, the Public Prosecutor's Office investigation into the alleged embezzlement of public funds, and the pending requests for reports in the National Congress are all still ongoing. It is therefore likely that new aspects of the case, yet to be published, will emerge and will need to be incorporated into future updates to this article.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

In compliance with academic transparency standards, we hereby declare the use of the artificial intelligence tools Claude (Anthropic) and Gemini Notebook (Google) exclusively for: style review and correction; systematization and organization of bibliographic information; and assistance in identifying relevant sources during literature reviews. All analytical content, normative interpretation, and argumentative development are the direct intellectual work of the authors.

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