THE FIORELLA RIVAROLA CASE, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE, AND THE DISINFORMATION NETWORK



GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION IN PARAGUAY

Technology & Human Rights
TEDIC

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CONCEPTUAL INTRODUCTION

In preparing this article, we drew on interviews with journalist Fiorella Rivarola and attorney and researcher Leonardo Gómez Berniga, author of the investigation La red desinformante (The Disinformation Network).

The case of Paraguayan journalist Fiorella Rivarola encapsulates, within a single narrative arc, two phenomena that contemporary research on political communication and press freedom has been urgently documenting: the instrumentalization of disinformation at the highest levels of government and gender-based digital violence against women journalists. This is not an isolated case; it is the local manifestation of a dynamic replicated globally, with one distinctive feature that sets it apart: the possibility that these smear campaigns are closely linked to government institutions such as the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies (MITIC) and funded with Paraguayan public funds.

Gender-based disinformation takes shape and defines the contours of this case, framing it within a context in which the persistent dichotomy—between political actors, party or civic activists, critical journalists and opponents of the current pro-government narrative on one hand, and those aligned with the government on the other—comes at a high price and is contested on a highly uneven playing field; one in which hate speech, smear campaigns using deepfakes, and armies of trolls are strategically coordinated to monopolize the digital space.

INTRODUCTION

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when Fiorella Rivarola arrived at a school in Horqueta; the students had already left. Based on a complaint she received, and after consulting with the school's principal, she produced a video report[1] exposing the state of the school's infrastructure.

What followed the publication of that report, and the impact it has on critical voices in a democracy, is the subject of this article. In light of this situation—which we will explore in detail—we will examine the swiftness with which the Ministry of Education and Science (MEC) responded to and discredited this report, as well as the subsequent revelation of a "disinformation network" whose objective was to attack public figures, activists and journalists who were openly opposed to the current government. We will examine the factors that enable the spread of these narratives of disinformation and digital violence, as well as the direct consequences we see in the weakening of diverse voices and civic actors who call for checks on those in power.

The TEDIC study Surveillance and Disinformation in Paraguay[2] (2026), conducted by Marco Castillo, explains the subtle connection between these two elements, how one leads to the other and how they can be traced back to the dictatorship the country endured between 1954 and 1989. Police surveillance, Castillo explains, was justified as a means of combating perceived threats to national security and was disseminated through the circulation of ideas, individuals and political sectors both within the national security forces and in civil society.

Currently, according to Castillo's research, we understand disinformation as the design and production of news and content that mimics journalistic style but intentionally spreads erroneous or misleading information. The author explains that one of the notable consequences of disinformation is the undermining of established knowledge, primarily scientific knowledge, and that it can influence political processes.

However, this article focuses on a specific dimension of that ecosystem: gender-based disinformation. Like many gender-related issues, this one in particular tends to be underestimated in public debate. The data speaks for itself: in the scope analyzed by the investigation The Disinformation Network, conducted by Leonardo Gómez Berniga for the news outlet ABC Color[3], the social media page "Despierta Paraguay" was identified as promoting smear campaigns against the press and critical sectors. Within that dataset, women accounted for 37.5% of the journalists and media workers mentioned, yet were the target of 60% of the attacks. Being a woman and practicing journalism in Paraguay is not a neutral variable, but rather a quantifiable risk factor.

Two questions guide this analysis. On the one hand, what specific mechanisms does disinformation activate when the target is a young woman engaged in civic journalism, exposing abuses and holding institutional power to account? On the other hand, what does this activation reveal about a State that may be reproducing and even funding disinformation platforms?

1 Video available on the Instagram account of [@fiorivarola]. Retrieved from: https://www.instagram.com/p/DVWO2_EDVot/

2 Castillo, Marco. (2026, February 3). *Launch: Surveillance and Disinformation in Paraguay – An Exploratory Study.* TEDIC. https://www.tedic.org/en/launch-surveillance-and-disinformation-in-paraguay-an-exploratory-study/

3 Retrieved from: https://www.abc.com.py/nacionales/2026/06/03/tras-criticas-designan-a-equipo-fiscal-para-investigar-campana-sucia/

According to the report La palabra en disputa: Diagnóstico y acciones frente a la violencia de género digital en Paraguay (The Word in Dispute: Diagnosis and Actions Against Digital Gender-Based Violence in Paraguay)[4], by the Network of Women Journalists and Communicators of Paraguay (RMPCPy), digital violence against women journalists stems from a structural unease that has persisted for over a century. Ramona Ferreira, the first woman to direct a Paraguayan media outlet, saw her printing press destroyed in 1902. Technology and methods have changed, but the violence has not.

TIMELINE OF THE CASE

On March 1, 2026, journalist Fiorella Rivarola, who had gained significant visibility on social media through her citizen reporting on issues related to educational infrastructure, public health and public transportation, published a video report on social media platforms in which she documented the conditions of a classroom at Basic School No. 4346 "General Elizardo Aquino," located in the city of Horqueta, Concepción Department. The piece was presented with irony, an editorial device Rivarola uses to emphasize the gravity of the situation, referring to the dilapidated state of the school's infrastructure while also highlighting it as a representative example of the conditions facing many schools in the country's interior.

Rivarola, 21, works as a freelancer and is also part of Bruno Masi's media outlet. For over a year, she has been producing reports featuring in-depth interviews and her own fact-checking, bringing the state of public services in Paraguay onto the public agenda.

The Ministry of Education and Science (MEC) reacted swiftly; on March 2, the institution posted a response on its social media accounts, claiming that what was shown in the report is actually a disused storage room that is not used for classes. The Grupo Nación media outlets, which are pro-government, also echoed the MEC's response across several of their news platforms (La Nación, HOY, Extra).

La Nación published an article in which the outlet's head of investigations, Rossana Escobar, states that the information in Rivarola's report was refuted by Education Minister Luis Ramírez. The article refers to the journalist's material in question as "an apparently malicious video."[5] The article legitimizes the institution's argument that Rivarola's report contains "manipulated information," because the space shown was shut down years ago and does not function as a classroom.

The following day, March 3, Minister Luis Ramírez reaffirmed this version in statements to RCC Radio[6]: he maintained that the space has served as a storage room since 2017, that the school currently operates with 18 students in classrooms "in optimal condition," and described what happened as a dynamic that does not represent the community of parents who worked to protect the institution. The minister went further and spoke of the use of education for "other purposes," planting the idea of a political agenda behind the complaint. It is important to note that the minister employs a rhetorical strategy that reverses or reprioritizes the elements of the narrative, shifting the focus from the school's infrastructure to undermining the complainant's credibility.

4 Red de Mujeres Periodistas y Comunicadoras del Paraguay. (2024). *La palabra en disputa: Diagnóstico y acciones frente a la violencia de género digital en Paraguay* [Contested Word: Diagnosis and Actions Against Digital Gender-Based Violence in Paraguay] [PDF report]. Retrieved from: https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1dkoMBZyQGDuBKwtExXTHK1qSfnnpJfna

5 The article is available on the website of the newspaper La Nación, Paraguay. Retrieved from: https://www.lanacion.com.py/pais/2026/03/02/horqueta-usan-deposito-en-desuso-para-difundir-noticia-falsa-sobre-escuela-publica/

6 The article is available on the website of RCC Radio, Paraguay. Retrieved from: https://rcc.com.py/educacion-2/desmienten-video-viral-sobre-escuela-en-horqueta-y-mec-ratifica-avances-en-infraestructura-escolar/

The MEC's response was not limited to the initial statement. In the following days, specifically on March 3[7] and 4[8], institutional materials were published on the ministry's social media accounts, featuring carefully produced video footage of the school that supported the claims and narrative of the initial statement. The footage included on-camera appearances by the school's principal and acting head, Mirna Salinas, who refuted everything reported in Rivarola's story. This response from the MEC was issued in record time and was subsequently covered and amplified by pro-government media outlets, which added purportedly derogatory labels to Rivarola, such as "influencer"[9] or "journalism student."

This chain of "press releases" or institutional materials produced by the MEC carries a clear semantic message: beyond the obvious reaffirmation of the government's official narrative, it is a mechanism of discrediting reproduced by the state and then amplified by pro-government media. By reducing her to a "young woman who identified herself as a communications student,"[10] it becomes difficult for institutions or the general public to consider her a legitimate source. The report ceased to meet professional journalistic standards and became a malicious accusation.

What followed is what we will explore in depth in this article: Rivarola[11], and llater her colleague Mathias Pereira[12], published a right of reply with additional evidence supporting the claims in her accusation.

Based on these statements, the accusation that Rivarola had spread "fake news" was amplified by the Facebook page Centrados[13], presented as a news and media outlet, which singled her out, along with her colleague Bruno Masi. This is no minor detail: a subsequent investigation by the news outlet ABC Color identified Centrados[14] as one of the pages that are part of a "smear campaign" network financed by digital advertising.

On April 26, ABC Color published an investigation by journalist Leonardo Gómez Berniga, titled The Disinformation Network, which revealed, through 65 articles, the existence of at least 14 coordinated social media pages—including Despierta Paraguay, Sucia Política, En La Tecla and PyElige—dedicated to attacking journalists and other critics of Santiago Peña's Colorado Party government. It was confirmed that these pages were linked to the Colombian agency Digimarketing SAS, which also managed the official advertising campaigns for government programs such as "Hambre Cero," "Che Róga Porã" and the "Plan SUMAR."

The 14 pages of the network had accumulated nearly 8,000 paid ads and an identifiable investment of approximately USD 472,000 on Meta. Digimarketing SAS simultaneously ran official government ads. It also managed the advertising campaigns for this network of disinformation pages. Juan Roberto "Jimmy" Valverde, who had worked on Santiago Peña's election campaign, appears to have operational ties to the network and formal ties to MITIC.

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7 Video avaliable on the Instagram account of [@mecpy]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/DVcOOAOjSrm/

8 Video avaliable on the Instagram account of [@mecpy]. Retrieved from: https://www.instagram.com/p/DVd5h7qDQAR/

9 The article is available on the website of Digital Misiones, Paraguay. Retrieved from: https://digitalmisiones.com.py/index.php/2026/03/04/mec-desmiente-informacion-falsa-difundida-por-bruno-massi-y-influencers-sobre-escuela-en-horqueta/

10 The article is available on the website of the newspaper Última Hora, Paraguay. Retrieved from: https://www.ultimahora.com/mec-rechaza-denuncia-viral-sobre-precariedad-en-escuela-de-horqueta

11 Video avaliable on the Instagram account of [@fiorivarola]: https://www.instagram.com/p/DVhB3vDjoh3/

12 Video avaliable on the Instagram account of [@metrikpy] https://www.instagram.com/p/DVehIFKDzL2/

13 Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=122171786438616126&set=pb.61568483799747.-2207520000&type=3

14 See note 13 above.

KEY CONCEPTS

DISINFORMATION AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY

Authors such as Wardle and Derakhshan (2017)[15] distinguish between misinformation (false information disseminated without intent to cause harm), disinformation (false and deliberate) and malinformation (true, but used to cause harm). The Rivarola case falls at the intersection of the latter two categories. State-sponsored disinformation[16] has one defining element: power asymmetry. As explained in the book State-Sponsored Disinformation Around the Globe: How Politicians Deceive Their Citizens (2025), this type of disinformation is not only intentional but also strategically planned, rather than reactive, spontaneous or the result of improvisation. When a ministry issues a statement discrediting an allegation made by a journalist and provides, primarily to pro-government media, the basis for the coverage to be interpreted as a "malicious accusation," it is not simply exercising its right of reply; it is constructing an official narrative that operates with the institutional legitimacy of the State.

ASTROTURFING AND SEEMINGLY ORGANIC CAMPAIGNS

The social media pages "Despierta Paraguay," "Sucia Política," "En La Tecla" and "Py Elige" follow the model of digital astroturfing[17], as explained in the article Disinformation and manipulation of public opinion: a systematic review of astroturfing (2004-2024): a manipulation strategy promoted by an entity that artificially creates the illusion of a grassroots movement based on a hidden strategy to manipulate public opinion, serving corporate or political interests. ABC Color's investigation revealed the financial link through the Colombian agency Digimarketing SAS, which turns this into a case of apparent party political activism within a cross-border coordination scheme, with the alleged use of public funds.

This model has been documented by the Oxford Internet Institute[18] in its annual report on computational propaganda:[19] the use of automation, fake accounts and opaque funding to saturate the digital information space. According to the report, cyber troops are frequently linked to government agencies. The report found evidence of this in 62 countries where government agencies or resources are used, through computational propaganda, to shape public attitudes.

In the Paraguayan context, what sets this case apart is that the same actor (the intermediary agency) reportedly managed both official advertising for social programs and paid campaigns attacking journalists and social activists at the same time.

15 Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making* [PDF report]. Council of Europe. Retrieved from: https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-november-2017/1680764666

16 See note 15 above.

17 Academic article published in Revista de Comunicación (SciELO). Retrieved from: https://www.scielo.org.pe/pdf/rcudep/v24n2/2227-1465-rcudep-24-02-159.pdf

18 Official website of the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. Retrieved from: https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/

19 See note 18 above.

GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION

Gender-based disinformation, a concept Nina Jankowicz introduced in 2017 under the term "gendered disinformation," refers to sexist attitudes that, rooted in the anonymity and reach of social media, seek to destroy women's reputations and exclude them from public life (Jankowicz, 2017, cited in Míguez González and Piñeiro Otero, 2026)[20]. The author identifies three defining elements of the phenomenon: falsity, malign intent and coordination.

According to Míguez González and Piñeiro Otero (2026), gender-based disinformation should be understood as a manifestation of gendertrolling, a type of digital harassment that, unlike conventional trolling, is characterized by its misogynistic nature, the participation of a large number of people—often organized—,its duration over time and its harmful impact.

Sarah Sobieraj, in Credible Threat (2020), describes three overlapping strategies that aggressors employ to silence women or limit their influence: intimidation, shaming and discrediting. Discrediting—the act of questioning a woman's professional credibility, competence or right to occupy a public space—is the strategy most clearly at work in this case.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN JOURNALISTS: GLOBAL EVIDENCE

A 2022 study by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists[21], found that 73% of the women journalists surveyed in 125 countries had experienced online violence while on the job. Among those surveyed, 30% indicated that they had resorted to self-censorship on social media in response to the digital violence they experienced. Twenty percent of them revealed that they withdrew from all digital social interaction, and 18% avoided online interactions.

A paradigmatic case documented by this report is that of Brazilian journalist Patrícia Campos Mello[22], who was harassed by allies and supporters of then-President Jair Bolsonaro following her 2018 reports on electoral disinformation[23] during Jair Bolsonaro's presidential campaign—a direct parallel to the Rivarola/MEC dynamic: the journalist investigating the disinformation machine becomes, in turn, a target of it. This case was also widely discussed in the book Siempre fue sobre nosotras (It Was Always About Us)[24] (2022), a collection of testimonies from Brazilian women politicians edited by politician and journalist Manuela D'Ávila, in which several of the authors cite the case of journalist Campos Mello as a significant milestone in digital violence originating from the highest echelons of power.

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20 Magallón Rosa, R. (2024). *Comprometidos con la verdad: Respuestas para combatir la desinformación* [Committed to the Truth: Responses to Combat Disinformation]. ResearchGate. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385128605_COMPROMETIDOS_CON_LA_VERDAD_Respuestas_para_combatir_la_desinformacion

21 Posetti, J., Aboulez, N., Bontcheva, K., Harrison, J., & Waisbord, S. (2021). *The Chilling: Global study on online violence against women journalists.* International Center for Journalists (ICFJ). Retrieved from: https://www.icfj.org/our-work/chilling-global-study-online-violence-against-women-journalists

22 International Federation of Journalists. (2022, December 16). *Brasil: Fallo jurídico condena a Jair Bolsonaro a indemnizar a la periodista Patrícia Campos Mello por ofensas misóginas* [Brazil: Legal ruling orders Jair Bolsonaro to compensate journalist Patrícia Campos Mello for misogynistic insults]. IFJ. Retrieved from: https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/brasil-fallo-juridico-condena-a-jair-bolsonaro-a-indemnizar-a-la-periodista-patricia-campos-mello-por-ofensas-misoginas

23 LatAm Journalism Review. (2020). *Ataques machistas a periodista brasileña que denunció uso ilegal de redes sociales en elecciones de 2018 generan indignación* [Misogynistic attacks against Brazilian journalist who exposed illegal use of social media in 2018 elections spark outrage]. LatAm Journalism Review. Retrieved from: https://latamjournalismreview.org/es/articles/ataques-machistas-a-periodista-brasilena-que-denuncio-uso-ilegal-de-redes-sociales-en-elecciones-de-2018-generan-indignacion/

24 D'Ávila, M. (Coord.). (2022). *Siempre fue sobre nosotras: Relatos de la violencia política de género en Brasil* [It was always about us: Accounts of political gender-based violence in Brazil] [PDF report]. CLACSO. Retrieved from: https://www.clacso.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Siempre-fue-sobre-nosotras.pdf

The report also highlights the news topics most frequently identified in connection with the increase in attacks: gender (47%), followed by politics and elections (44%) and human rights and social policies (31%). This data is directly relevant to the Rivarola case, whose complaint lies at the intersection of educational infrastructure (social policy) and government accountability and transparency.

The RMPCPy's report The Word in Dispute (2026) also includes two additional regional comparisons beyond the one involving Campos Mello, which help strengthen the comparative section:

Argentina (Javier Milei's administration): A study by The Forum for Argentine Journalism (FOPEA, 2026) found that, between December 2023 and September 2025, 15.2% of President Javier Milei's posts on X contained offensive remarks directed at a range of targets, amid a climate of systematic harassment toward feminist journalists (Soledad Barruti, Julia Mengolini, Luciana Peker).

United States (Donald Trump administration): The framing of the critical press as the "enemy of the people" led to waves of digital violence that targeted women journalists with particular viciousness, especially black women[25] (Yamiche Alcindor, April Ryan, Abby Phillip), which introduces the intersectional dimension (gender and race) as an aggravating factor documented internationally.

These three cases (Brazil, Argentina, and the United States) help demonstrate that the dynamic of "government/ruling party vs. investigative women journalist" is not unique to Paraguay but rather a pattern of the Executive Branch's instrumentalization of disinformation, observable across various political regimes.

Returning to Paraguay, Gómez Berniga's investigation for ABC Color helps reveal the network's functional purpose: it focused not only on discrediting specific individuals but also on creating a structural deterrent effect. As the researcher points out in the interview, "what is indisputable and wrong no matter how you look at it is that public resources were used to attack the press and promote what, in terms of freedom of expression, would be considered a chilling effect," a deterrent to participation and free speech, as we mentioned above. The main objective was "to silence voices, remove them from the public sphere and instill a fear that you might be 'put in the firing line,' metaphorically speaking," adds Gómez Berniga.

The guarantee of impunity operated on multiple levels: the coordinated removal of pages and ads as soon as the investigation exposed them; financial triangulation through the Itaipú Technology Park (PTI) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to circumvent procurement laws and evade oversight; and the MITIC's repeated refusal to respond to requests for access to public information.

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (TFGBV) IN THE PARAGUAYAN CONTEXT

TEDIC's research, Technology-facilitated gender-based violence against female politicians in Paraguay[26] (2024), is significant because it documents the same ecosystem of actors—organized digital campaigns, ties to political power—as the Rivarola case, although it focuses on women politicians. TEDIC identified eight types of digital violence that occur most frequently in the Paraguayan context, including: online harassment involving offensive comments about women's image and ability; doxxing; disinformation, defined as the dissemination of rumors and the distortion of statements to delegitimize women; coordinated harassment by groups with political interests; and defamation through the spreading of lies that damage their reputation.

25 Statement published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). Retrieved from: https://rsf.org/en/us-rsf-condemns-president-trump-s-treatment-black-female-journalists

26 TEDIC. (2023). *Technology-Gender Based Violence: Analysis of political violence against women politicians in Paraguay.* TEDIC. Retrieved from: https://www.tedic.org/en/tgbv_politicianwomen/

TEDIC, through the research conducted by authors Maricarmen Sequera and Mariela Cuevas, also points out that the lack of institutional responses not only affects women who are already in power but also discourages other women from participating in public life, thereby weakening democracy as a whole; illustrating the chilling effect in the specific context of Paraguay.

This scenario is complemented by data from the RMPCPy report (2026), which documents direct empirical evidence on the impact of digital violence on Paraguayan women journalists. The survey Situación de las periodistas y comunicadoras de la Red (Situation of Women Journalists and Communicators in the Network) (2022) revealed that eight out of ten women communicators experienced sexual harassment, and that seven out of ten cases were perpetrated by direct or indirect supervisors. Even more relevant to this analysis: the 2024 study on journalist safety (Imbrogiano Pereira, 2024, cited in The Word in Dispute, 2026) indicates that 69.3% of the women journalists surveyed reported having suffered some form of work-related violence, with digital violence being one of the most frequent forms.

To gain a slightly broader perspective on this issue, and given that this phenomenon is present across the region, we draw a comparison with a case from Argentina involving journalist Julia Mengolini, founder of the independent outlet Futurock. In her book Las caras del monstruo (The Faces of the Monster, 2024), she wrote about her experience being targeted by various forms of digital violence, including pornographic deepfakes, death threats, criminal complaints, and around 93 posts by Javier Milei on the social media platform X in just 48 hours[27]. In it, she explains the following: "Asymmetry is the main problem. The battle has generally been unequal, it always has been, and now it is on social media as well. My case is just one example because I, like so many others, have been getting banned for quite some time, ever since the fascist traps became unbearable and we either left or toned down the intensity of our public discourse."

Mengolini's case is significant because, following a complaint she filed in July 2025 after being subjected to episodes of harassment involving digital violence, an investigation was launched[28] that led to three men being formally charged. The Argentine federal judiciary, through Judge Sebastián Casanello, charged them with the offense of coercive threats without ordering pretrial detention and imposed restrictive measures while the investigation continues. Futurock has referred to this as a historic ruling[29].

PROFESSIONAL LEGITIMACY UNDER SIEGE

This is not the first time Rivarola has faced intimidation and attempts to delegitimize her journalistic work. In March 2025, a year before the Horqueta case, after she published a video critical of the then-mayor of Asunción, Óscar "Nenecho" Rodríguez, he responded to a media outlet by casting doubt on Rivarola's credentials, saying, "If she's a journalist, then I'm a thermonuclear engineer."[30]

This same smear tactic was documented by the Network of Women Journalists and Communicators of Paraguay (RMPCPy) in its 2026 report, The Word in Dispute, which devotes a specific chapter to the online attacks faced by journalists Fiona Aquino and Mabel Rehnfeldt over the past year. Both cases stemmed directly from their reporting that shed light on highly powerful sectors of the State.

The case of journalist Fiona Aquino is particularly relevant here because of its parallels with Rivarola's case. The trigger: her reporting on the "nepo babies" in the civil service, that is, the irregular hiring of relatives of officials, and the privileges they enjoyed.

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27 See note 25 above.

28 Article available on Letra P. Retrieved from: https://www.letrap.com.ar/procesan-tres-hombres-campana-intimidacion-contra-la-periodista-julia-mengolini-n5426374

29 Reel available on Facebook. Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/reel/1789588749058207

30 Article published in the newspaper Extra. Retrieved from: https://www.extra.com.py/fama/denunciame-si-queres-no-te-tengo-miedo-le-dijo-joven-periodista-a-nenecho

There was a coordinated campaign with misogynistic elements: According to the 2024 annual report on the human rights situation in Paraguay by the Coordinadora de Derechos Humanos del Paraguay (Codehupy), Aquino was the target of a gender-biased smear campaign that spread rumors about her private life, primarily on X.

THE DISINFORMATION REGIME IN PARAGUAY: INSIGHTS FROM RUIDO (LA PRECISA, 2023)

The book Ruido: El régimen de la desinformación en las elecciones 2023 de Paraguay (Ruido: The Disinformation Regime in Paraguay's 2023 Elections) produced by La Precisa, the fact-checking section of El Surtidor, is the most direct and methodologically sound research reference for understanding the ecosystem in which the Rivarola case occurred.

The book introduces the concept of a "regime of disinformation": not a collection of isolated false claims, but a configuration of power that evolves into a system that persistently distorts the public sphere. Drawing on the work of political scientist Wendy Brown and philosopher Byung-Chul Han, the authors argue that this regime produces "a growing atomization that renders us deaf to the voice of the other, leads to the expulsion of what is different and fragments reality."

Chapter 4, by investigative journalist Juliana Quintana Pavlicich, titled La trama de la desinformación de género y el discurso de odio de las elecciones (The Web of Gender-Based Disinformation and Hate Speech in Elections), focuses on gender-based disinformation as a distinct category of analysis within the electoral information ecosystem; it points out that "gender-based disinformation and hate speech often merge and can evade verification mechanisms." This point is key: attacks on women journalists are often invisible to conventional disinformation monitoring systems, precisely because they are articulated through narratives presented as "opinion," "criticism" or "freedom of expression."

Ruido also documents the role of "digital militias" as organized actors who operate according to the logic of ideological combat to defend political interests. This category is analytically more precise than "trolls" for describing the type of aggressors identified in "The Disinformation Network": they are not spontaneously outraged users, but rather operators who act in a coordinated manner, with funding and specific objectives.

THE ECOSYSTEM OF THE DISINFORMATION NETWORK: A SYSTEMIC DIMENSION

The case of Fiorella Rivarola cannot be analyzed as an isolated incident. The ABC Color investigation, launched on April 26, 2026—Paraguayan Journalists' Day—documents an ecosystem of 14 social media pages that accumulated 8,000 posts over a three-year period, with an investment that nearly reached USD 500,000 on Meta alone. In this regard, journalist Leonardo Gómez explains, "The investigation does not account for the operating costs of what might constitute a communications staff. Nor does it account for intermediary costs or digital platform fees." Bruno Masi's team, using its own calculations, estimated more than USD 100,000 in YouTube ads, a platform that does not disclose its advertising spend.

THE NETWORK'S ARCHITECTURE: ACTORS, SOCIAL MEDIA PAGES AND THE COLOMBIAN NODE

The network operated through an external node: the Colombian agency Digimarketing SAS, a legitimate agency with experience in programmatic advertising. In Paraguay, the company worked exclusively with two clients: the Paraguayan government, with ads for the programs Hambre Cero, Che Róga Porã and Plan Sumar; and "Despierta Paraguay," the smear campaign social media page. Of the 65 ads placed by this agency in Paraguay, 26% were government ads, and the remaining 74% were smear campaign content from "Despierta Paraguay."

Gómez Berniga noted that there was also operational synchrony; the pages published identical content simultaneously, timed to coincide with specific political moments. In this regard, the researcher comments that during the teachers' pension reform[31], the attacks were focused on the teachers' union leader, Silvio Piris. During the proceedings to remove former Senator Kattya González[32], the attacks were directed at her. Similarly, during the debate over the Anti-NGO Law, or "Gag Law,"[33] civil society organizations were the targets. The objective, the fabrication of an internal enemy, was tailored to the context and according to the needs of the moment.

"The repository of publications allows you to see that there was a synchrony among the pages; it allows you to see how they were targeted according to the political moment. We're talking about a strategy of monitoring and persecution. It's not an isolated incident; it's a synchronized, orchestrated and planned structure designed to silence voices," adds Leonardo.

THE GENDER DIMENSION IN THE DATA

One of the most important quantitative findings from Gómez Berniga's investigation for the gender analysis is the following: within the Despierta Paraguay dataset, women accounted for 37.5% of the journalists and media workers mentioned, yet they were the targets of 60% of the attacks. These findings quantify what the theoretical framework describes qualitatively: it is not that women are attacked because they engage in more critical journalism, but rather that they are attacked with greater intensity simply because they are women.

A LEGAL REFERRAL AND THE GENDER COMPONENT

On May 6, Hugo Portillo, represented by attorneys Ezequiel Santagada and Cecilia Pérez, filed a criminal complaint with the Specialized Unit for Economic Crimes and Anti-Corruption regarding the triangulation of public funds to finance the digital harassment network, as revealed by the ABC Color investigation.

Ezequiel Santagada, in a conversation with ABC Color, explicitly stated that the complaint includes a component of gender-based violence, noting that the network's defamatory posts showed a clear preference for targeting women journalists and public figures, which, according to him, would constitute a violation of Law No. 5,777/2016. This is the first time that the gender dimension of the case has moved from the journalistic/analytical realm to the strictly legal realm.

31 Article published in ABC Color. Retrieved from: https://www.abc.com.py/economia/2026/02/04/docentes-rechazan-cambios-a-ciegas-en-la-caja-fiscal-y-ratifican-movilizacion/

32 Article available on Agencia Presentes. Retrieved from: https://agenciapresentes.org/2024/02/15/violencia-politica-senadores-cartistas-destituyeron-a-kattya-gonzalez-una-de-las-senadoras-mas-votadas-de-la-oposicion-en-paraguay/

33 Article available on Agencia Presentes. Retrieved from: https://agenciapresentes.org/2024/10/10/que-busca-la-ley-anti-ong-que-sanciono-el-senado-de-paraguay-y-pone-en-riesgo-derechos-humanos/

In the following weeks, between May and June 2026, several of the network's pages (PyElige, En La Tecla, Sucia Política, Despierta Paraguay) were taken offline, while the Public Prosecutor's Office and agencies such as the Secretariat for the Prevention of Money or Asset Laundering (Seprelad) and the Central Bank of Paraguay were called upon to trace the flow of funds, including any potential diversions from the binational power plants Itaipú and Yacyretá.

THE VOICE OF FIORELLA RIVAROLA

In an interview with journalist Fiorella Rivarola, we gain a detailed account of the journalistic process that preceded the publication of the report: initial contact with the institution's director through a colleague, a preliminary interview and the process of obtaining informed consent prior to publication.

While the ministry labeled the publication "disinformation" Rivarola's account describes the opposite: a rigorous, ethical journalistic practice, consistent throughout and committed to the country's social reality. Among the institutional materials and press releases issued by the MEC, one element stands out: the school principal's on-camera testimony, in which she discredits Rivarola's report.

Here, Fiorella's analysis takes into account a broader context, particularly in terms of class and power relations. "What can I offer a teacher who has to hold down two jobs to make ends meet? What can I offer her in exchange for telling the truth? The ministry, on the other hand, can, and has power over her," Rivarola states in the interview.

Discrediting based on age and gender is a recurring feature of the attacks the journalist has faced. She began her career at just 19, and these attacks have relied on narratives suggesting that, because she is a woman and/or young, she lacks the analytical capacity to substantiate her journalistic work. They often disregard the content of her investigations and instead focus on her physical appearance or question her personal motives.

THE ABSENCE OF SUPPORT NETWORKS

Following the exposure she faced as a result of the report and the subsequent reaction from the MEC, Rivarola recounts feeling the silence of her colleagues and journalism unions. "I really didn't feel much support from my colleagues," she says, but does not frame this as an accusation. Rather, she understands it as part of a broader structural context.

"Unfortunately, in Paraguay there are fewer and fewer independent media outlets seeking to reveal the truth. Power no longer lies solely with the Executive Branch; it also lies with the largest media outlets and media conglomerates," she comments. Rivarola understands that her colleagues' silence does not always stem from individual apathy; rather, it is the logical result of a media ecosystem in which economic dependence makes it prohibitively difficult to show solidarity with anyone who makes the government uncomfortable.

THE TEACHERS' PROTEST: AN ANTIDOTE TO THE CHILLING EFFECT

Fiorella describes her encounter with teachers following the outcome of her report as a major milestone in her career. "A few days later, I went to a teachers' protest against the reform of the Caja Fiscal[34] [Paraguay's public sector pension system], and for me, that day made it all worth it—everything I've done in my career, with my mistakes and successes," she adds. In the Plaza de las Armas, with more than 10,000 teachers gathered, she says she received thanks from numerous teachers for reporting on and speaking out about something they themselves cannot speak about.

34 Article published in Última Hora. Retrieved from: https://www.ultimahora.com/caja-fiscal-masiva-congregacion-de-maestros-en-asuncion-en-primer-dia-de-movilizaciones

Here we see how the much-studied and feared chilling effect can be combated and neutralized. “Bring on ten more statements, because as long as I know I’m telling the truth, I can handle all the hate.” Gender-based disinformation strategies are not infallible when the journalist has a community that reaffirms the meaning of her work. While protection did not come from institutions, nor from journalists’ unions or associations, it did come from the social fabric to which Rivarola’s journalism gives visibility and a voice.

These findings demonstrate that gender-based disinformation not only seeks to damage individual reputations but also functions as a disciplinary machine that exploits institutional power and the sector’s precarious labor conditions to attempt to expel new voices from public debate.

CONCLUSIONS

- **Institutionalization of disinformation:** Gómez Berniga's (2026) investigation documented with evidence that the central political operator of the disinformation network had a formal link to the State; that the agency that orchestrated the attacks also placed official advertisements; and that the financial triangulation through the Itaipú Technology Park (PTI) and the UNDP was explicitly designed to circumvent the controls of the public procurement law. In this regard, the MEC's response is consistent with the behavior of this network, which operates to discredit and delegitimize social and political actors who act as critics and watchdogs of public services.

- **Gender Selectivity:** The data shared, in addition to that related to Despierta Paraguay, is sufficiently clear: women journalists are not attacked more often because they are more visible or critical. They are attacked more frequently because it carries a lower political cost and has a greater deterrent effect. This is clearly illustrated by Brazilian politician Áurea Carolina in It Was Always About Us (2022), a book on gender-based political violence in Brazil: "It matters less who I am as a subject and more what I represent within the common-sense imaginary."

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS

In compliance with academic transparency standards, the use of the artificial intelligence tools Gemini Notebook (Google), Claude (Anthropic), and Pinpoint is hereby disclosed. These tools were used to organize and analyze bibliographic sources; transcribe interviews with sources; correct spelling; convert bibliographic data to APA style; cross-check data; and assist in the verification and implementation of the theoretical framework. All analytical content, normative interpretation, and argumentative development are the result of the author's direct intellectual work.

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