Credibility of news content in the age of fake news: the case of Madrid Community

Credibilidad de los contenidos informativos en tiempos de *fake news*: Comunidad de Madrid

Credibilidade do conteúdo da informação em tempos de fake news: caso Comunidade de Madrid

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ABSTRACT | This research explores the attitudes toward news consumption to determine the elements that constitute the credibility of news and to understand the reasons that explain the degree of trust in news from the media and online news from other sources. Four mixed discussion groups were held, with parity between men and women, with an average socioeconomic structure, residents of the Autonomous Community of Madrid, and frequent Internet users. According to the findings, trust in a media is the main factor in assessing whether a news item is credible. The participants were aware of the existence of fake news on the Internet, which they consider intentional, and which they mainly locate on social networks. It also appears that distrust of the news is fought by contrasting information in various media, which favors a diverse informational regime.

KEYWORDS: *fake news*; credibility; trust; news; social networks; verification.

RESUMEN | *Esta investigación explora las actitudes hacia el consumo de información para determinar los elementos que configuran la credibilidad de las noticias y captar los argumentos sobre el grado de confianza en los medios periodísticos y en las noticias en línea procedentes de otras fuentes. Se realizaron cuatro grupos de discusión mixtos con paridad entre hombres y mujeres, con estructura socioeconómica media, residentes en la Comunidad Autónoma de Madrid, y usuarios frecuentes de Internet. Según los hallazgos, la confianza en un medio es el principal factor para valorar si una noticia es creíble. Los participantes conocen la existencia de noticias falsas en la red, que asocian con intencionalidad expresa y que ubican fundamentalmente en las redes sociales. También se desprende que la desconfianza hacia las noticias se combate contrastando la información en varios medios, lo que favorece una dieta informativa diversa.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *fake news; credibilidad; confianza; noticias; redes sociales; verificación.*

RESUMO | Esta pesquisa explora as atitudes para o consumo de informação a fim de determinar os elementos que configuram a credibilidade das notícias e captar os argumentos sobre o grau de confiança na mídia jornalística e em notícias online provenientes de outras fontes. Foram organizados 4 grupos de discussão com paridade entre homens e mulheres, com estrutura socioeconômica média, residentes na Comunidade Autônoma de Madrid, e usuários frequentes da internet. Segundo os resultados, a confiança em um meio é o principal fator para avaliar se uma notícia é confiável. Os participantes conhecem as fake news na rede, que associam com intencionalidade e que eles localizam principalmente nas redes sociais. Também se conclui que a desconfiança das notícias é combatida contrastando informação em vários meios de comunicação, o que favorece uma dieta informativa diversificada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *fake news*; credibilidade; confiança; notícias; redes sociais; verificação.

INTRODUCTION

The term fake news gained notoriety during the political campaigns of the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. election. The then Republican candidate Donald Trump used it on numerous occasions to question the veracity of the information of some critical media (Greenberg, 2017; Gómez Ruiz, 2017; Rodríguez, 2017; Jankowski, 2018). Since then, and in relation to both political events, scientific production on the phenomenon grew exponentially (Blanco-Alfonso, García-Galera, & Tejedor Calvo, 2019), as well as online misinformation (Wardle, 2019).

Despite the recent popularity of the term fake news, as early as 1925 McKernon was concerned about the distribution of fake news intended to misinform the public. He claimed that partisan pamphleteers, courtiers, artists, and photographers took advantage of high illiteracy rates, evolving technologies, and the public's apparent interest in sensationalism to deceive audiences through the media. Nowadays, fake news is once again benefiting from technological advances, especially the speed with which information travels through social networks (Lazer et al., 2017; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) conclude that fake news spread up to twenty times faster than real news on social networks, and that the culprits are not bots, but people. This virality of false information is expected to continue to increase and there are estimates, such as that of the consulting firm Gartner (Panetta, 2017), which predicts that in 2022 Western citizens will consume more fake news than authentic news.

The speed of information is one of the disruptive changes that benefits the dissemination of fake news, but not the only one: the discrediting of elites and media also explains the rise of intentional and systematic manipulation of information (Mcnair, 2017; Pérez Tornero, Samy Tayie, Tejedor, & Pulido, 2018).

The discrediting of the media is caused by the extraordinary change in the press' business model produced by the advent of the digital environment (Chulvi, 2018; Pérez Tornero et al., 2018). The need for permanently updated information has decreased the time for news production and, with it, the research and verification required for quality and error-free information, especially when unverified rumors proliferate in the public space. In addition, the pay-per-use business model, or clickbait, means that many media companies have little incentive to perform their monitoring function and opt for spectacularization (Valero & Oliveira, 2018).

This fact, according to available data, is deteriorating the public's trust in journalistic information. Aware that unreliability is a threat to their own existence, some media have launched working groups engaged in verifying information, statements or comments made by political leaders and other relevant characters (Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Mantzarlis, 2018). In this context, this research explores attitudes towards news

consumption determine the elements that shape the credibility of current information and explore the arguments about the degree of trust in traditional journalistic media and in online news from other sources in times of fake news.

DEFINING FAKE NEWS, LITERATURE REVIEW

There is consensus in academia that the phenomenon of fake news is complex and requires conceptual delimitation (Middaugh, 2019). It is an ambiguous and difficult expression to delimit, which has created great social, political, and media interest, and on which there is abundant and growing academic research (Blanco-Alfonso et al., 2019).

The first problem with the fake news label is that it is an oxymoron. News means truthful, contrasted, and public interest information, so a fake news is not news. Wardle (2016) takes issue with the use of the term fake news because it has become a convenient way for politicians to dismiss information they dislike and because it can confuse contexts, meanings, and intentions that need distinction. She also insists on the importance of terminology to avoid the concept of fake news (Wardle, 2019). To resolve this contradiction, other terms have emerged, such as false news, information disorder, or disinformation, the latter being the most accepted in the academic world. However, in the social and media sphere, fake news continues to be the most widely used. The reasons given for replacing this concept with disinformation are basically four: fake news does not cover all the dimensions of disinformation; it is an oxymoron; the political discourse has appropriated the term to discredit the work of the journalist, and the economic and ideological motivation behind the generation of this type of news (Rodríguez Pérez, 2019).

Another problem is the term's ambiguity. The absence of a stable meaning implies appealing in each case to the context to know the meaning attributed. The criteria to elaborate taxonomies of variables involved in a fake news story are also diverse, and often appear interrelated, which increases the difficulty of finding a general and univocal definition that is acceptable to the majority. The most common criteria for defining and classifying fake news are the sender, intentionality, purpose, and audience's perception (table 1).

Purpose is one of the main factors when defining a fake news. This can be to influence public opinion in favor or against a movement, person, or brand, "economic profitability based on our lack of knowledge as users of digital processes" (Magallón-Rosa, 2018, p. 4), or simply fun. Hofseth (2017) considers that they have two distinct purposes: to take advantage of the content produced and to disseminate and influence public opinion. He adds that this type of news can be created and disseminated deliberately or unintentionally, thereby introducing intentionality,

Taxonomic criteria	Types	Authors
Issuer	Press/professional media Websites Anonymous persons Political actors (political propaganda)	Rubin, Chen, & Conroy (2015) Quandt, Frischlich, Boberg, & Schatto-Eckrodt (2019)
Intentionality	Intentional Involuntary	Hofseth (2017) Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) Wardle & Derakhshan (2017)
Purpose	Drawing attention and monetizing traffic Amusement/appealing to a sense of humor Influencing public opinion for or against someone or something Moral or ideological motives	Rubin et al. (2015) Nielsen & Graves (2017) Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) Benkler, Faris, Roberts, & Zuckerman (2017) Magallón-Rosa (2018) Tandoc, Lim, & Ling (2018)
Audience's perception	Perceived as fake news Not perceived as fake news	Nielsen & Graves (2017) Allcott & Gentzkow (2017)

Table 1. Fake news classification criteria

Source: Own elaboration.

another essential element in the definition of fake news. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) emphasize intentionality as a main factor in defining that a news item is fake and propose six types. The first arises from unintentional processes, when news that is not real is disseminated. The second corresponds to rumors. The third involves conspiracy theories, which are difficult to characterize as true or false because of their nature and since the people spreading them believe them to be true. The fourth type is satire, which is unlikely to be perceived as a fact. False statements by political decision-makers would be the fifth case. The last type corresponds to news or reports that are biased or misleading, but not outright false.

In their definitions, Beckett (2017) and Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) also highlight intentionality. Beckett classifies seven types of fake news, from satire and parody –where the main objective is not to do any harm– to publishing and disseminating content that is one hundred percent false, with the sole intention to manipulate and do harm. They avoid the use of the term fake news and differentiate between disinformation, misinformation, and incorrect information. Disinformation is deliberate and seeks to harm a person, group, organization, or country; misinformation is false, but not intentional, and misinformation consists

of real facts, but its contexts are deliberately distorted, and it is intentionally used to harm a third party.

Nielsen and Graves (2017) add the intentionality and perception that audiences have about this type of news. This classification includes from satire –which is not seen as news by the public– to fake news with political purposes. Between these two extremes are three other types of fake news: poor journalism (superficial, inadequate, sensationalist), propaganda (partisan, politically lying, extremist), and certain advertising that surrounds the information and appears as a surreptitious component of it. Based on the level of deception, Tandoc and colleagues (2018) divide fake news into six typologies: news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda.

Zaryan (2017) points out that definitions of the concept fake news depend on the scientific field. She indicates that, in the journalistic field, fake news is defined as (1) authentic material used in the wrong context, (2) news disseminated on websites that specialize in fake news and use layouts similar to those of real media, and (3) false information and content aimed at manipulating public opinion.

Another axis of differentiation is the issuer of the news. On the one hand, it is used as a derogatory term to put media and journalism to shame, and as a general meaning to refer to different forms of erroneous or falsified information (Quandt et al., 2019). On the other hand, it is used to refer to political propaganda. Rubin and colleagues (2015) distinguish three types of fake news: those produced by the tabloid press with unproven headlines and exaggerations aimed at capturing the public's attention to monetize user traffic, large-scale hoaxes deliberately constructed to mislead the audience, and humorous fake news that are not intended to create confusion in the audience but to appeal to their sense of humor.

Among academics, the meaning of fake news as distortion rather than filtering predominates (Gentzkow, Shapiro, & Stone, 2016). Rochlin (2017) defines it as a deliberately false headline and story published on a website that wants to look like a real news site. For Himma-Kadakas (2017), fake news is news that contains false information and is spread mainly by social networks. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) describe them as news that are intentionally and verifiably fake and can mislead readers. In this study, we use the term fake news to refer to deliberately false stories that are put into circulation to influence public opinion for or against a person, political party, movement, company, or brand. As in other studies (Corner, 2017; Martínez-Cardama & Algora-Cancho, 2019), the term is associated with disinformation. We have opted for the use of fake news because, despite sharing the reasons that propose replacing it with others such as disinformation, it is the most popular, the most easily identifiable by citizens.

Impact of fake news in Spain

The Digital News Report survey by the Reuters Institute of the University of Oxford, edited in its Spanish version by researchers at the University of Navarra (Amoedo, Vara-Miguel, & Negredo, 2018), asks since 2018 about different aspects related to trust in the news. That year, 44% of Spaniards said they trusted the news in a general way, and 69% expressed concern about fake news. In the 2019 report, trust in the news drops one point (43%), which places Spain in the middle of the table of the 38 countries in which the survey is applied. Topping the trust ranking are Finland (59%), Portugal (58%), and Denmark (57%). Hungary (28%), Greece (27%), and Korea (22%) are in the last positions.

The credibility deficit does not affect all media in the same way. While barely 25% trust the news disseminated by social networks, and only 34% trust search engines, Spanish journalistic brands get an average approval, with variations between the best and the worst rated of just 0.8 points on a 0 to 10 trust scale. Paradoxically, those who use networks and search engines the most are those who least trust online news, but they do not necessarily turn their attention to the most reputable and credible media or brands but stop consulting sources (33%) or sharing news (45%).

In the 2019 *Digital News Report* (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Kleis Nielsen, 2019) distrust in the media and social concern about the proliferation of hoaxes increases. Only 36% of Spanish Internet users declare that they usually trust the news. This is the lowest level of news credibility since 2015 (34%), and seven points lower than in 2019.

Trust in information distributed through social networks (23%) and search engines (32%) is also reduced. Respondents who get their information from traditional media (television, radio, or printed newspapers) trust the news more (45%) than those who opt for digital editions of newspapers (39%), radios (30%), digital native media (29%), or social networks (25%). The data also show that the main Spanish news media continue to enjoy a notorious trust by Internet users, especially television and local or regional newspapers.

The *Flash Eurobarometer 464: Fake news and Disinformation Online* (2018) also describes a much higher trust in conventional media than in information distributed via social networks and messaging applications in Spain and in the ensemble of European Union countries (table 2).

The same survey points to an increased perception that false information is widespread. 53% of Spaniards say that they encounter false information or information that distorts reality every day. The majority (55%) believe they are able to distinguish between them. Of these, 13% are totally sure, and 42% are fairly sure.

España	Confianza en la información ofrecida por...	UE
65%	Periódicos impresos	63%
47%	Periódicos en línea	47%
26%	Redes sociales y aplicaciones de mensajería	26%
57%	Televisión	66%
70%	Radio	70%
27%	Webs de vídeos y podcast	27%

Table 2. Trust in conventional media

Source: Own elaboration based on Flash Eurobarometer 464 (2018) data.

Finally, a large majority believe that fake news is a problem for Spain (88%), and for democracy in general (88%). These percentages are slightly higher than those of the European sample as a whole (85% respond affirmatively to the first question and 83%, to the second).

Based on these data, we can see a growing trend towards social concern about the proliferation of hoaxes and their adverse effects on the functioning of the country and democracy. There is also an upward trend in distrust of the news, but the credibility deficit does not affect all media in the same way. News distributed through social networks generates greater distrust, even among those who report using them as a regular source of information. Traditional media, on the other hand, maintain a notable level of trust on the part of respondents, especially radio, television, and printed newspapers.

METHODOLOGY

To determine the elements that shape citizens' credibility of current affairs information in an environment of proliferation of fake news in the Spanish context, we decided to investigate the underlying reasons and motives that lead citizens to classify information as reliable. The specific objectives were the following:

1. To know the participants' information consumption of Internet and social networks.

2. To know what participants understand by fake news.

3. To explore the concerns about the fake news phenomenon.

4. To capture arguments about the degree of trust in journalistic media in relation to online news coming from other distribution channels.

5. To obtain information on the measures taken by citizens to combat fake news.

We used the focus groups qualitative methodological strategy. Krueger (1991) defines them as a conversation "designed to elicit information from a defined area of interest in a permissive, nondirective environment [...]. Group members influence each other as they respond to the ideas and comments that emerge in the discussion" (p. 24).

The qualitative approach renounces statistical representativeness in favor of in-depth, first-hand information, with high subjective validity (Huertas Barros & Vigier Moreno, 2010). Focus groups make it possible to understand discourses inaccessible through quantitative techniques: "The search for the meaning of phenomena, obtaining the words of the social action subjects, the primordial place of language, etc." (Callejo Gallego, 2002, p. 410). The focus group allows inquiring about the participants' "perceptions, feelings, and ways of thinking" (Krueger, 1991, p. 24).

We conducted four focus groups, with five participants each, selected according to sociodemographic segmentation variables (age, gender, and socioeconomic status), geographic variables, and variables related to the use of digital technologies. Four age ranges were established, one for each group: 16-18, 19-24, 25-44, and 45-65. This segmentation allows us to understand generational positions and vital moments that affect the uses, evaluations, and opinions of the participants. Regarding gender, socioeconomic status, geographic area, and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), we sought homogeneity (Krueger, 1991; Morgan, 1996), given the size of the sample (n=20). Mixed groups were organized with parity between men and women by age, with a middle-class socioeconomic status, the one that concentrates the greatest population weight in Spain. The participants belonged to the Autonomous Community of Madrid and used the Internet and one or more social networks at least once a week (table 3).

The fieldwork took place between October 23 and 27, 2017, when the phenomenon of disinformation began to gain greater importance in the field of communication research. In 2016, post-truth was named word of the year according to the Oxford Dictionary; it was a year full of controversies, surprises, and unexpected events attributed to the effect of falsehoods spread virally on social networks such as the Brexit referendum (June), the plebiscite that rejected the peace agreements with the FARC in Colombia (October), or the November presidential elections in the United States.

Participants were recruited through a market research company, using a confirmatory recruitment questionnaire with previously defined inclusion criteria, and their suitability was contrasted through the ANEIMO Recruitment Quality System, SACC (by its Spanish acronym). The focus groups were held online through the Idea Solutions (runtheidea) platform and were moderated by an expert from the contracted company and the project's lead investigator.

	Age	Gender	Social class
G1	16-18	Mixed	Middle (widen)
G2	19 -24	Mixed	Middle (widen)
G3	25-44	Mixed	Middle (widen)
G4	45-65	Mixed	Media amplia

Table 3. Profiles of the focus groups

Source: Own elaboration.

The research team prepared a semi-structured discussion guide in three blocks, based on the results of available questionnaires. Initially, the aim was to understand how the study participants perceive and use the Internet and social networks; we then addressed the informative use of the network. The last block included users' trust in the different online and offline information sources, the reasons underlying the levels of trust expressed, and the influence of this perception on the way they get information.

To analyze the data, the information was segmented into grammatical units (sentences or paragraphs) based on the thematic nodes proposed, according to the participants' characteristics. Subsequently, we established the categories. Porto Pedrosa and Ruiz San Román (2014) identify three ways of doing so:

> Defining them a priori, relying on a previous conceptual framework; conducting an open categorization through which we elaborate categories as we go along during the group analysis, understanding them in a provisional sense, without limiting the participants' answers to our closed concepts, in such a way that they are consolidated as our analysis progresses; or, a third way could be the one that starts from broad categories a priori, but which are adapted throughout the discourse (p. 269).

In this case, we conducted a categorization of the third type. Finally, the text was color-coded, it was read in depth, assigning to each unit the code of the corresponding category, and identifying each participant. Finally, we elaborated the interpretation of the information collected.

RESEARCH RESULTS
Internet as a source of information

Network uses can be grouped into three main blocks: information, entertainment, and communication. The main function of the Internet, according to the subjects investigated, is communication. It allows them to connect with people close to them, friends, acquaintances, and family, to keep abreast of what is happening with

those around them, and to interact quickly and fluidly. However, there are also participants who point out that social networks have offered them the possibility of meeting new people. On the other hand, it has been emphasized that the Internet provides a channel for expression and communication of one's interests, activities, and thoughts, mainly through the networks, described as an open and free space.

When it comes to entertainment, watching videos and listening to music are two of the most frequently mentioned activities. The most mentioned applications were YouTube and Spotify. In both cases, there is a daily and very frequent use. Spotify has replaced downloading music online for many participants. The most mentioned platform for watching movies and series was Netflix, followed by HBO. When referring to the Internet as a source of information, this is done in two senses: as a place to locate information of any kind and as a source of news. Regarding the first aspect, the most mentioned site was Google.

Regarding news on the Internet, most of the participants value the availability and updating of content and state that they have a high level of trust in online information when the sources are journalistic, despite fake news.

Fake news and their effect on trust in journalistic information

The participants are aware of the existence of fake news on the web, although the majority perception is that they are mainly found on social networks and blogs, or smaller sites. In this regard, Facebook has been mentioned on several occasions as the medium that generates the greatest distrust in terms of hoaxes and fake news.

> B (G2): I trust the digital newspapers I know, I do not trust, for example, the news published on Facebook because many times they turn out to be hoaxes, fake news without any veracity.

> D (G3): I am especially wary of Facebook, where many things are posted that are false.

> D (G4): Facebook seems to me to be the network that tends to give the most information without contrasting it correctly.

> M (G2): The apps I am most suspicious of are Twitter and Facebook.

One of the clearest conclusions drawn from the research is that the main factor that influences whether a news item is credible is the medium through which it arrives, with the traditional media being a guarantee of the veracity of the information, acting as reliable sources for the research participants.

> M (G3): For me, reliable sources are all those that come from the media such as *El Mundo, El País, 20 Minutos*, etc..... They will tell the news in one way or another based on their political ideology, but they are still reliable sources.

M (G1): I usually go to the official website of a newspaper or a magazine to look at some news, since I don't trust other sites very much. Above all, I usually use the newspaper *El Mundo* or *El País,* and magazines like *Meltyfan*. I use these sources because I know they are reliable since they are official newspapers, and the news are real.

E (G4): The level of trust I have in news depends on the website I read them on. If they are trustworthy or prestigious newspapers, I usually gave them total trust, while I do not usually trust the news I read on other sites, such as forums or blogs. For example, *El Mundo*, *El Economista*, *Expansión*, I have a lot of confidence in them.

A (G4): When I must search for a news item, I rely mainly on *Europa Press*, *El Mundo,* or if it is an economic news item, I usually look at *Expansión*, mostly out of habit and because I usually like the way they frame the news.

E (G2): The ones I usually visit I trust more, such as *El Mundo*, *El País*, *El Confidencial*, blogs I visit regularly. I know that others try to increase visits and their content is less reliable, such as Forocoches, Sport, YouTube.

D (G3): I look at the sources of the news or the article to be surer. When they are from newspapers like *La Razón*, *El Mundo*, official pages of guitarists, etc., I trust them more precisely because they are pages that are controlled by the people who work there or by the people who hold that webpage.

The source is the fundamental factor in determining the credibility of an information piece. This is true for all age groups. Most of the participants believe that it is frequent to have to contrast a piece of news through different media to corroborate its veracity, which implies a diverse information diet. This fact nuances the high level of general confidence initially mentioned, but does not negate it, because the sources they use to verify the information are still journalistic brands.

A (G1): I always try to compare the same news in different sites to know to what extent it is true or not.

P (G2): I pay a lot of attention to the source, for me it is something important not only because of the rigor, but also because of the approach they give to the same news.

J (G3): I don't usually look for news on the Internet, what I do is look at the online versions of newspapers and I always look for information in two different newspapers to contrast.

M (G3): They won't tell you the same story in *Público*, for example, as in *La Gaceta*, because there are politics behind it... That's why I personally like to

read all kinds of newspapers, in different media, and compare them.

A (G4): I give the same credibility to the news whether I read it in the written press or on the Internet, but things must be verified.

Even though a large majority claim to contrast information by reading the same news in different media and name newspapers with opposing editorial lines, some participants recognize a selective exposure (Klapper, 1960) to the media with which they identify, and exclude those with which they do not share values or points of view.

D (G3): As for the places that I do not trust, they are those that, already just with their presentation, make you not enter and not follow them... or, simply because you do not have the same values as certain newspapers, or writers, or people who share articles that believe things opposite to my values and beliefs, such as *El País*, etc.

A (RG4): For example, I never read *El País* because I do not like it, not because I distrust it, it is not distrust, it is simply that I do not agree with its ideas.

In accordance with the above, most of the participants indicate that the level of trust they have in news on the Internet depends on the medium. They point out as sources of their trust newspapers with a long history, such as *El Mundo*, *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *Expansión* or *Marca*. The digital press also enjoys wide credibility, and there are no significant differences between the level of trust declared in the digital media and the traditional press, so we can conclude that journalism is considered an antidote to fake news. Only a minority of participants express having a low level of trust in the journalistic media, but this has nothing to do with the veracity of the information –an element that defines fake news for the participants in the research– but with the politicized framing of the media.

J (G1): It is evident that what we see is because they want us to see it, but that is another thing, I believe that many truths are subdued by the hands of the editors to make them seem more than what they really are.

M (G3): We must be careful because sometimes even national newspapers try to manipulate certain types of information. Why do they do it? Because of political ideology. We are simple puppets who believe what we consume, what we read, that's why always the same news will be told differently depending on the media where you read it on.

Even though journalism is implicitly considered by the participants as the way to combat fake news, the vast majority are against the possibility of paying for access to online sources of information. The main argument is that there is

an abundance of free and reliable information if you know where to look for it, so they do not consider it necessary to pay for it.

> A (G4): I don't find it necessary nowadays to pay to subscribe to any online newspaper/magazine. I think that with the amount of information that circulates today through the networks, it is more than enough for regular people. We live in the age of information, very extensive and varied. There is information for all tastes and colors.

> E (G2): I do not currently consider paying for access to news even if I were offered reliable sources. I believe that the catalog of access to these is very varied and can be done from numerous free platforms, in addition to television news.

Only a small minority say they are open to paying for access to certain information in the future. They refer to specialized information, for example, sports or economic, without advertisements. In all cases, it was the youngest people who considered this possibility.

> G (G1): If I had to pay for some type of information, it would be for information such as interviews of important and influential people, and without any type of sponsorship. Simply that they are supported by the price of the magazine or the subscription. Thus, the sponsors cannot demand anything regarding the information provided.

> A (G2): I would consider paying for specific news that deeply interested me, for example, a communication or photography magazine, but for news in general I would not pay, because I consider that there are many possibilities to access information for free without having to pay.

Although the vast majority said they favored traditional or digital media, Twitter was also mentioned on several occasions as a source of information on current affairs by those under 45 years. One reason they say they use this social network is that it links to the press and other news sources. In other words, it is another way of accessing more traditional newspaper headlines. They argue that on this network they find analysts, experts, and other opinion leaders who help them form their opinions on current affairs.

> G (G1): I usually get my information from *El Mundo*, several Twitter accounts that usually narrate the news correctly, and *El País*.

> E (G2): If it is for current affairs, I use Twitter, which has a wide variety of sources and links to the press.

> M (G3): I also use Twitter to keep up with current events, because besides having access to information sources, I find opinions and comments from readers, and it is a good place to debate or share thoughts and ideas.

Television is also considered a reliable source of information in the face of the predominance of fake news. Although for the participants it is a predominantly entertainment medium, a minority indicate that among their most watched programs are news, investigative, and political debate programs. Even so, when asked specifically about TV as a source of news, they all express a broadly positive opinion of the medium. There is a favorable perception of television news programs as a way of knowing and understanding what is happening in the country and in the world. No critical opinions were registered towards this type of programs, and they showed a higher credibility, even higher than that of the most highly rated newspapers.

> M (G1): Currently, I don't pay to watch news on the Internet, although I wouldn't be willing to pay to watch it either, because I prefer to watch it on TV or on the radio.

> L (G4): The level of trust I have is high, of course, depending on the websites, but if what we are talking about is news, I prefer to watch them on TV.

In addition to news, political debate and investigative journalism programs also have very positive ratings among their viewers. They mention *El Objetivo*, *Al Rojo Vivo*, *Equipo de Investigación* and *La Sexta Noche*.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the main factor that influences participants to value a news item as true is the trust they have in the medium, with the traditional media being the most trustworthy. It can then be affirmed that the news' credibility is based on the credibility of the medium that disseminates it. Well-known and recognized newspapers as a source of journalistic authority, which enjoy prestige, are a guarantee of the information veracity for citizens. They regularly turn to these media for information on current affairs and use them to contrast information that reaches them through other channels that they consider less reliable, such as social networks. These data coincide with those of García-Avilés, Navarro-Maillo, and Arias-Robles (2014), who conclude that when it comes to obtaining reliable information, journalistic companies still play a predominant role, even though social platforms share a large part of Internet traffic.

There are no differences between the level of trust in the best-known and most popular newspaper companies and the digital native press, although in the

spontaneous discourse there is a clear preference for digital media with analog versions. *El Mundo*, *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *Expansión* and *Marca* were the most mentioned. It can be concluded that journalism is considered an antidote to fake news, which is mostly confined to social networks, blogs, or small information portals. The consequence of this perception is a great distrust in the news distributed by social networks, although not all of them are valued in the same way. Facebook is the least trusted social network for the participants in the study, while Twitter is used as a channel for information on current affairs.

Trust in journalistic companies is high, despite the concern of citizens about information manipulation, clearly expressed in the focus groups, in line with the international surveys analyzed in this paper. In their discourse, there is a broad awareness of the influence of the media's editorial line in the selection of news and its informative treatment. However, they perceive this practice as consubstantial to journalistic companies. Participants associate fake news with deliberately false stories (Nielsen & Graves, 2017) or rumors (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), and not with manipulation, misrepresentation, or poor journalism (Nielsen & Graves, 2017), although they are also concerned about it and take steps to be able to form informed opinions.

Television is also positively valued as a source of information. As we have seen, its credibility is even higher than that of the highest-rated newspapers.

Another finding is that the accessibility to sources, their gratuity, and the suspicions produced by fake news have favored a diversified information diet. Information from unknown sources and viralized through social networks generates distrust. The citizens who participated in the study affirm that in these circumstances it is common for them to contrast the information with different sources, but the most remarkable thing is that it is common for them to do so, even when it comes from traditional journalistic media they trust. In this case, and as previously explained, they do not compare information because they doubt the veracity of the facts, but to compare different frames. They are very aware of the influence of editorial lines in journalistic stories and, what is more striking, it is perceived that they uncritically assume ideological journalism. They combat it by contrasting the news, but they do not censor it.

Not all participants contrast information, which partially nuances the previous conclusion. Some recognize that they exercise selective exposure by excluding media with which they do not share an ideological approach, which would place them in what has been called the filter bubble (Sunstein, 2002; Pariser, 2011), the information bubble (Suiter, 2016), or what Carr (2014) has called the glass cage. The international study by Ipsos (2018) quantifies those who live in the

media bubble: according to it, more than half of the world's population (65%) is convinced that the citizens of their country live in their own information bubble, which leads them to be connected and mostly follow people who think similarly to them, in search of opinions with which they already agree, although far fewer acknowledge only seeking information from those who think similarly. In Spain, 62% of the population says that citizens only seek information from those who think alike, but only one in three admits to being part of this bubble. This is an example of Davison's (1983) theory of the third-person effect (TPE), which states that we tend to perceive others as more influenced by different media messages than we or the members of our group.

Even though journalism is considered by the participants as one of the ways to combat fake news, most of them are against the possibility of paying for access to online sources of information. They consider that free and reliable information is very abundant nowadays if one knows how to look for it, so they do not see the need to pay. This is one of the few aspects explored in this work in which an age bias is noted. Younger people are more willing to pay for information, which coincides with the *Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2019), according to which the profile of the Spanish Internet user who pays for news is under 35 years of age. The other two age differences are found in using Wikipedia as a source of academic information (only those under 24) and Twitter as an information source (only those under 45). The generation gap observed in the Reuters Institute survey (Newman et al., 2019) on trust in news and media is not observed in this research. In the four focus groups, they claim to be aware of the existence of fake news, identify them with intentionally falsified news, are aware of the ideologization of the media, and assume that editorial lines determine the construction of news. Likewise, in general, they say they have more confidence in journalistic companies than in social networks, although younger people use them more despite their disbelief about their contents.

We believe that it is necessary to continue working along these lines, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies, to better understand a phenomenon that has proven to be a serious threat to democracy (Lee, 2019; Richards, 2021).

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