

# Multimodal disinformation about otherness on the internet. The spread of racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic fake news in 2020\*

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## Abstract

This work studies the use of disinformation to construct an image of otherness through the internet. We applied a content analysis methodology to the 161 racist, xenophobic or Islamophobic fake news pieces that were discredited in 2020 by the four Spanish information verification media entities accredited by the International Fact-Checking Network: *Maldita.es*, *Neutral*, *Efe Verifica* and *Verificat*. The results show that the most commonly used formats were image and video, that disinformation was most often based on taking information out of context and deception, and that the source could not be identified. The most shared characteristics associated otherness with receiving aid, violence and illegal immigration. The most commonly used images were photographs, which mostly showed people in a general manner (not individually). Despite this, disinformation was

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not generated by manipulating images, but by inserting text over images. The use of supposed screenshots to create fictitious references or take truthful screenshots out of context was also notable.

**Keywords:** disinformation; social networks; otherness; racism; xenophobia; Islamophobia

**Resum.** *La desinformació multimodal sobre l'alteritat a Internet. Difusió de boles racistes, xenòfobes i islamòfobes el 2020*

Aquest treball estudia la construcció de la imatge de l'alteritat a través de la desinformació a Internet. Per fer-ho, aplica una metodologia d'anàlisi de contingut a les 161 boles de caràcter racista, xenòfob o islamòfob desmentides el 2020 pels quatre mitjans espanyols de verificació d'informació acreditats per la International Fact-Checking Network: *Maldita.es*, *Newtral*, *Efe Verifica* i *Verificat*. Els resultats evidencien que els formats més emprats van ser la imatge i el vídeo, i que les desinformacions es van basar majoritàriament en la descontextualització i l'engany, sense identificar-ne la font. Els atributs més transmesos van associar l'alteritat a la recepció d'ajudes, la violència i la immigració irregular. Les imatges més utilitzades van ser les fotografies, que majoritàriament van representar les persones de manera no individualitzada; no obstant això, la desinformació no es va produir a través de la manipulació visual, sinó de la inserció de text. També va ser notable la difusió de suposades captures de pantalla, aprofitades per crear referents ficticis o descontextualitzar-ne uns altres que existien realment.

**Paraules clau:** desinformació; xarxes socials; alteritat; racisme; xenofòbia; islamofòbia

**Resumen.** *La desinformación multimodal sobre la otredad en Internet. Difusión de bulos racistas, xenófobos e islamófobos en 2020*

Este trabajo estudia la construcción de la imagen de la otredad a través de la desinformación en Internet. Para ello, aplica una metodología de análisis de contenido a los 161 bulos de carácter racista, xenófobo o islamófobo desmentidos en 2020 por los cuatro medios españoles de verificación de información acreditados por la International Fact-Checking Network: *Maldita.es*, *Newtral*, *Efe Verifica* y *Verificat*. Los resultados evidencian que los formatos más empleados fueron la imagen y el vídeo, y que las desinformaciones se basaron mayoritariamente en la descontextualización y el engaño, sin identificar su fuente. Los atributos más transmitidos asociaron la otredad a la recepción de ayudas, la violencia y la inmigración irregular. Las imágenes más empleadas fueron las fotografías, que mayoritariamente representaron a las personas de manera no individualizada; sin embargo, la desinformación no se produjo a través de la manipulación visual, sino de la inserción de texto. También fue notable la difusión de supuestas capturas de pantalla, aprovechadas para crear referentes ficticios o descontextualizar otros realmente existentes.

**Palabras clave:** desinformación; redes sociales; otredad; racismo; xenofobia; islamofobia

## 1. Introduction

The spread of disinformation has increased with the popularisation of using social networks as a source for news and due to the growing suspicion of traditional media as intermediaries and interpreters, opening “the floodgates to

information and misinformation, truth and lies, scientific and non-scientific knowledge, facts and fiction” (Waisbord, 2018: 5). Thus, specific audiences with particular interests are reached (Mourão and Robertson, 2019: 2) in a context of confirmation bias (Wason, 1960) and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). This leads to people only looking for information that confirms their previous views, and ignoring data that question their prejudices (López-López, Castro Martínez and Oñate, 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020).

Consequently, disinformation is used to rally and unify people with related worldviews (us), and through appealing to negative emotions to polarise others (them) (Fernández, Revilla and Andaluz, 2020). It distorts images that people use to construct their opinion on issues about which they have no knowledge, and which they view as dangerous and threatening to their personal and collective safety (Engesser et al., 2017a). Populist ideology, which usually finds greater support in polarised contexts, uses these emotions to construct an otherness based on characteristics that define immigrants and ethnic, religious and sexual minorities as enemies of the people (Reinemann et al., 2017: 2), resulting in hate speech (Sanguinetti et al., 2018).

Academic research on disinformation has grown in recent years and has found that false content on immigration and racism is one of the most frequently studied categories, along with those related to politics (Guallar et al., 2020). However, this growing popularity has not resulted in an abundance of bibliography on the subject, in which the recent studies by Fernández et al. (2020), Molina-Cañabate and Magallón-Rosa (2019) and Vorobyeva et al. (2020) are noteworthy.

There has, however, been a variety of studies exploring how the Spanish press and television have represented and covered immigration and ethnic minorities (Igartua et al., 2005, 2007, 2011, 2012; Muñoz et al., 2006; 2008). Their conclusions indicate that the image the media issues of migrants and ethnic minorities is intertwined with socioeconomic threats, cultural dangers, aberrations, violence and crime (Marcos Ramos et al., 2014). In addition, studies that analysed the representation of immigration in Spanish fiction television programmes also associated immigrants with negative characteristics – aggressive, conflictive, disloyal, intolerant, illiterate, unemployed and unstable (Marcos Ramos et al., 2014; Lacalle, 2008; Ruiz-Collantes et al., 2006). These studies found that those stereotyped and skewed characteristics were used as attributes to construct an image of immigrants and ethnic minorities and contributed to the growth of xenophobia in Spain (Igartua et al., 2008, 2009).

This article uses a multimodal design to study the formal and discursive mechanisms used on the internet to construct an image of otherness. Its objective is to analyse the manipulation strategies used in fake news pieces that contain racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic data, as we believe disinformation plays a fundamental role in the construction of the image of migrants and persons belonging to ethnic or religious minorities.

## 2. Multimodal cheapfakes

The definition of disinformation is content that can lead to an incorrect view of the political world and that serves to deceive or “intentionally alter the perception of large groups of people or societies and influence their behaviour (political, economic, ideological, etc.)” (Del-Fresno-García, 2019: 3). This includes false content – originating from websites, consisting of unreal stories and attributing authority to the sources that are issuing the deceptive information (Salaverría et al., 2020) – but also rumours and incorrect or hyper-partisan information (Tucker et al., 2018: 3).

Information disorders (Del-Fresno-García, 2019) pollute the truth (Corner, 2017: 1105) and their objective is to “cause harm, obtain benefits and influence people’s behaviour, although some ends are usually hidden and remain invisible” (Guallar et al., 2020: 597). Their level of deception may be influenced by bias or sensationalism, which can strain the truth without directly including the disinformation (Mourão and Robertson, 2019: 2). Populist messages and hate speech often adopt these tactics (Engesser et al., 2017a; Engesser et al., 2017b).

Salaverría et al. (2020) use the term ‘fake news pieces’ to refer to content that seems true but whose intention is to deceive the public, and content that is shared by any means of communication or digital platform (p. 4) – a definition that we will use for this study. Likewise, they produced a scale of severity, measured according to two categories: deceit and intention. On this basis, the higher the level of deceit and intention to spread the fake news pieces, the more serious it was (Salaverría et al., 2020).

Although disinformation was present before the popularisation of social networks as sources of information (Newman et al., 2020), its spread – and the proliferation of characteristics consistent with previous prejudices – has grown exponentially, encouraging the creation of communities of similar opinions (López-López et al., 2020). Previous studies have found that messages with disinformative content are shared more quickly than those with true content (Tarullo and Amado, 2020) and that there is less delay in sharing messages that fit individual preferences (Calvo and Aruguete, 2018).

The circulation of multimodal content (information in visual and text format) through social networks has become more complex for several reasons (Zhou, Wu and Zafarani, 2020). First, the methods used to detect disinformation identify textual information and the combination of text and image (Zafarani et al., 2019), but they have been unable to examine the relationship between the two (Jin et al., 2017), despite the fact that the inclusion of text is a form of image manipulation (Zhukova, 2019). Moreover, the combination of image and text is significant in political communication due to the fact that it is purposefully used to draw the attention by appealing to emotions (Corner, 2017). In addition, digital technologies facilitate the manipulation of visual content by offering tools that can completely transform material, creating disinformation narratives (Tandoc, Lim and Ling,

2018). In this respect, although deepfakes – that require quite advanced technological skills to falsify content – are seen as a principal problem in the intricate network of information disorders (Del-Fresno-García, 2019), recent studies have found that cheapfakes actually cause the most concern as they have gained the most ground in disinformative digital flows (Paris and Donovan, 2019). A cheapfake is “a media news piece that has been crudely manipulated, edited, mislabeled, or taken out of context to spread disinformation” (Schick, 2020) and does not require complex technological skills to produce or spread.

This makes the work carried out by verification platforms identifying disinformation absolutely crucial (Molina-Cañabate and Magallón-Rosa, 2019). Based on the above, and inspired by a recent article by Salaverría et al. (2020), this methodologically designed study has used the following research questions as a reference:

- RQ1. What formats were used for the dissemination of fake news pieces containing racist, xenophobic or Islamophobic information in Spain during 2020?
- RQ2. What sources did these fake news pieces use and to what degree of deception?
- RQ3. What characteristics did they transmit and with what frequency?
- RQ4. What format did the shared images have and what role did the text contained in them play?
- RQ5. In the case of fake news pieces that used photographs, what was their content?
- RQ6. In the case of fake news pieces that used other types of images, what was their reference and to what degree of truth were they reproduced?

### 3. Method

This study was limited to 2020 and used a content analysis methodology (Krippendorff, 1990).

#### 3.1. Corpus

The research corpus consisted of fake news pieces that contained racist, xenophobic or Islamophobic information discredited in 2020 by the four Spanish information verification media accredited by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), a network that in January 2021 included 75 media entities from all over the world specialised in verifying information. Specifically:

- *Maldita.es*. Digital media company founded by journalists Clara Jiménez and Julio Montes and edited by the non-profit organisation Maldita Contra la Desinformación.

- *Newtral*. Digital media company that has been edited by the Newtral Media Audiovisual production company since 2018, owned by the journalist Ana Pastor.
- *Efe Verifca*. The Efe Agency fact-checking department, since 2019.
- *Verificat*. Digital media company founded in 2019 by journalists Lorenzo Marini and Alba Tobell and edited by the non-profit organisation Associació Verificat.

One of the group's researchers collected and added the fake news pieces and refutations published by these media between 1 January and 31 December 2020 to a database. The total sample collected was 2,997 texts, of which 8.4% (n=253) referred to fake news pieces that construct otherness through hatred for ethnic, origin or religious reasons, a condition for inclusion that was observed by two of the author researchers collecting the samples, who resolved any differences jointly. After discarding the publications that contained compilations or repeatedly alluded to the same fake news piece, the final corpus comprised 161 units of analysis.

### 3.2. *Analysis variables*

The content analysis was carried out by applying a coding manual, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, which considers the study of six variables common to the entire corpus (n=161) and nine that are specific: three for fake news pieces spread through images (n=76), four for the cases in which these images were photographs (n=37) and two when they were screenshots of documents, posters, social network posts or media websites (n=27). The analysis considered both the headline and the text contained in the refutation and the fake news piece as well as the multimedia materials included in the disinformation material – links, audio files, images and videos – thus ensuring that the study carried out was fully multimodal.

The common variables of source and type of fake news piece are inspired by the recent research carried out by Salaverría et al. (2020) on disinformation linked to the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain. The former categorises the source as anonymous when it is not reflected in the fake news piece; fictitious, when it has been invented by the fake news piece itself; an impersonated entity when the entity exists, but has not delivered the message; and a real entity, when the entity exists and has issued the message. The latter distinguishes between: 1) joke, spreading false information with mocking or satirical intent; 2) exaggeration, a message that exaggerates a certain aspect of reality to the point that it crosses into deceit; 3) taken out of context, fake news piece that distorts the conditions in which information was produced; and 4) deceptive, disinformation that completely falsifies reality to give the wrong idea or impression (Salaverría et al., 2020: 10). The other variables and categories were created by the authors.

**Table 1.** Common variables and categories of analysis

Variables	Categories	Reliability
1. Format	1) Simple text. 2) Link. 3) Audio file. 4) Image. 5) Video.	$\alpha k = 0.857$
2. Addition	[only if v1≠1] 1) Text. 2) No addition.	agreement = 100%
3. Source	1) Anonymous. 2) Fictitious. 3) Impersonated political/institutional entity. 4) Impersonated media entity. 5) Real political/institutional entity. 6) Real media entity. 7) Real citizen.	$\alpha k = 0.854$
4. Type	1) Joke. 2) Exaggeration. 3) Taken out of context. 4) Deceptive.	$\alpha k = 0.747$
5. Characterisation	1) Illegal immigration. 2) Benefits and favourable treatment. 3) Lack of Western values and/or civility. 4) Transmission of diseases. 5) Vandalism / crime / violence. 6) Terrorism. 7) Intention of territorial expansion. 8) Others / Does not apply.	$\alpha k = 0.821$
6. Recurrence	1) Frequent. 2) Infrequent.	agreement = 90%

Source: Authors' elaboration.

**Table 2.** Specific variables and categories of analysis

Variables	Categories	Reliability
7. Type of image	[only if v1=4] 1) Photograph. 2) Screenshot of a document, poster, social network post or media website. 3) Image-text composition.	$\alpha k = 1$
8. Text on the fake news piece	[only if v7=1 or 3] 1) Yes. 2) No.	agreement = 100%
9. Function of the text	[only if v8 =1] 1) Locate the image. 2) Put the image into context. 3) Verbatim quote.	$\alpha k = 0.899$
10. Number of photographs	[only if v7=1] 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.	$\alpha k = 1$
11. Function of the variety	[only if v10>1] 1) Comparison. 2) Reinforcement.	agreement = 100%
12. Content of the photograph	[only if v7=1] 1) Contains people. 2) Does not contain people.	agreement = 100%
13. Main characters in the photograph	[only if v12=1] 1) One person. 2) A group of people. 3) Crowd.	$\alpha k = 0.856$
14. Type of screenshot	[only if v7=2] 1) Document. 2) A social network post. 3) Media entity website. 4) Poster.	$\alpha k = 0.871$
15. Truthfulness of the screenshot	[only if v7=2] 1) Exists. 2) Does not exist.	agreement = 85.2%

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The coding of the common variables was carried out by one researcher. To validate its reliability, a test was performed in which that researcher and an author researcher separately analysed a sample made up of 12.5% of the fake news pieces (n=20). In the case of the specific variables, the entire corpus

was coded by two researchers, also separately from each other. In both cases, the agreement percentages obtained in the dichotomous variables and Krippendorff's alpha coefficients obtained in the categorical variables, shown in Tables 1 and 2, allowed us to validate the reliability of the research (Igartua, 2006).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Format of the fake news pieces

The main format taken by the disinformation was static image (47.2%,  $n=76$ ), audiovisual (31.1%,  $n=50$ ), plain text (10.6%,  $n=17$ ), link to media stories (6.2%,  $n=10$ ) and audio files (5%,  $n=8$ ). Among the fake news pieces that did not use exclusively text ( $n=144$ ), only 18.7% ( $n=27$ ) were shared in their original format (images, videos, links and audio files), while 81.3% ( $n=117$ ) were shared with additional texts written on them or shared by the users themselves.

The cross-analysis of both variables (Table 3) showed that 96% of the videos ( $n=48$ ), 78.9% of the images ( $n=60$ ) and 60% of the links ( $n=6$ ) were shared with additional text; the proportion is only inverse in the case of audio files, with which text anchoring was associated in 37.5% of the cases ( $n=3$ ).

**Table 3.** Formats of the fake news pieces and text additions

Format / additional text	With text	No text	Total	
			Number of fake news pieces	Percentage
Simple text	Not applicable	Not applicable	17	10.6%
Link	6	4	10	6.2%
Audio	3	5	8	5.0%
Image	60	16	76	47.2%
Video	48	2	50	31.1%
<b>Total</b>	117 (81.3%)	27 (18.7%)	161	100%

Source: Authors' elaboration.

### 4.2. Fake news sources and types

Some 50.3% of the disinformation pieces did not mention a source ( $n=81$ ), 20.4% impersonated the source ( $n=36$ ) and another 20.4% used real sources ( $n=36$ ). In both these last two cases, the source came mainly from a political-institutional scope. Only 5% of fake news pieces invented the source ( $n=8$ ). The most popular types of fake news pieces were deceptive (41.8%,  $n=77$ ) and taken out of context (41.6%,  $n=67$ ), while exaggerations (7.5%,  $n=12$ ) and jokes (3.1%,  $n=5$ ) were a minority.

The cross-analysis of both variables (Table 4) confirmed that the fake news pieces that did not identify a source and those that used real sources, mostly used a method of taking the information out of context, and those that impersonated sources opted for the deceptive method.

**Table 4.** Fake news sources and types

Source / type of fake news	Joke	Exaggeration	Taken out of context	Deceptive	Total	
					Number of fake news pieces	Percentage
Anonymous	2	7	43	29	81	50.3%
Fictional	0	0	0	8	8	5.0%
Impersonated political entity	2	0	4	27	33	20.5%
Impersonated media entity	0	0	0	3	3	1.9%
Real political entity	0	2	13	4	19	11.8%
Real media entity	0	3	3	5	11	6.8%
Real citizen	1	0	4	1	6	3.7%
<b>Total</b>	5 (3.1%)	12 (7.5%)	67 (41.6%)	77 (41.8%)	161	100%

Source: Authors' elaboration.

### 4.3. Characteristics and frequency of the fake news pieces

The characteristics most associated with otherness were a supposed favourable treatment and receiving aid (35.4%, n=57), vandalism and crime (21.1%, n=34) and illegal immigration (12.4%, n=20). The least present characteristics were a lack of Western values (7.5%, n=12), disease transmission (6.2%, n=10), terrorism (5.6%, n=9) and intention of territorial expansion (4.3%, n=7).

46.6% of the fake news pieces analysed were frequent (n=75), compared to 53.4% that were not (n=86). This condition was established with the refutations published by the four media entities that the sample comprised, and a repeated presence of the fake news piece in one or more media platforms on different dates.

As shown by Table 5, the characteristics that were more frequent than the average of 46.6% were those that characterised people of different origin, ethnicity or religion with a lack of Western values (75% frequency, n=9) and those that associated them with terrorism (66%, n=6).

**Table 5.** Characteristics associated with otherness in fake news pieces and their frequency

Characteristic / frequency	Frequent	Infrequent	Total	
			Number of fake news pieces	Percentage
Illegal immigration	9	11	20	12.4%
Supposedly favourable treatment	26	31	57	35.4%
Lack of Western values	9	3	12	7.5%
Transmission of diseases	3	7	10	6.2%
Vandalism and crime	12	22	34	21.1%
Terrorism	6	3	9	5.6%
Intention of territorial expansion	3	4	7	4.3%
Other / Not applicable	7	5	12	7.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>75 (46.6%)</b>	<b>86 (53.4%)</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: Authors' elaboration.

#### 4.4. Format of the images

Photographs made up 48.7% of the images (n=37); 35.5% were screenshots of documents, posters or social network posts / media entity websites (n=27); and 15.8% were image-text compositions created for social networks (n=12). This category includes both the layout of text on a coloured background and the combination of text and photography as long as the image covers less than half of the composition.

In turn, the study of the presence of text over the images that allow this anchoring (photographs and compositions, n=49) shows that it was only present in 42.9% of them (n=21). This analysis excluded screenshots, as their function is to produce or reproduce references to text, which we will explore in section 4.6.

The cross-analysis of both variables (Table 6) shows that only 24.3% of the photographs were shared with text printed over them. Among the functions of the text printed over the photographs and in the image-text compositions, the addition of contextual explanations stands out (66%, n=14), while adding verbatim quotes (23.8%, n=5) and locating the images (9.5%, n=2) were a minority.

**Table 6.** Format of images and presence of text in the fake news piece itself

Format of images / text included in the fake news piece itself	No text	Text			Total	
		Place	Context	Quote	Number of fake news pieces	Percentage
Photograph	28	2	7	0	37	48.7%
Screenshot	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	27	35.5%
Image-text composition	0	0	7	5	12	15.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: Authors' elaboration.

#### 4.5. Content and elements of manipulation of the photographs

Regarding the content of the photographs (n=37), 73% showed people in different situations (n=27), compared to 27% that reproduced objects or interior or exterior spaces (n=10). Of the photographs that included people, only 18.6% (n=5) showed a single person; in most cases it was impossible to make out who was carrying out the action, as they mostly showed a group of people (40.7%, n=11) or a crowd (40.7%, n=11).

In turn, 67.6% of the fake news pieces that reproduced photographs showed a single image (n=25), compared to 32.4% that contained two or more images (n=12). When it occurred, this diversity was more oriented to reinforcing the message (n=10) than to comparison (n=2).

Finally, 86.5% of the fake news pieces that included photographs reproduced the images in those photographs without any editing (n=32), compared to 13.5% that did edit the images (n=5) using resources such as reframing, substitutions or highlighting.

#### 4.6. Content and truth of the screenshots

Regarding the content of the screenshots (n=27), 51.9% referenced an official document or communication (n=14), 22.2% showed a social network post (n=6), 18.5% showed a poster (n=5) and only 7.4% referenced a news item. This type of publication included a true reference 59.3% of the time (n=16), while in 40.7% of cases it had a reference that did not exist (n=11).

The cross-analysis of both variables (Table 7) shows that the screenshots of documents or posters mostly included true references, while the screenshots of news items were always false. In screenshots of social network posts, there was a balance between true and false references.

**Table 7.** Format of the screenshot and truth of the reference

Format of the screenshot/ truth of the reference	True	False	Total	
			Number of fake news pieces	Percentage
Document	10	4	14	51.9%
Screenshot of social network posts	3	3	6	22.2%
Screenshot of news item	0	2	2	7.4%
Poster	3	2	5	18.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>16 (59.3%)</b>	<b>11 (40.7%)</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: Authors' elaboration.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

This analysis of the racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic fake news pieces shared in Spain throughout 2020 has allowed us to draw conclusions on the

multimodal manipulations used to construct disinformation and a deceptive representation of otherness on the internet.

Unlike what was found in previous studies, which concluded that fake news pieces operated mainly textually (Salaverría et al., 2020), this research study confirms the predominance of visual and audiovisual formats. Moreover, we saw that disinformation is not generated through the manipulation of these resources, with image editing techniques, but through the addition of texts, which shows the importance of multimodality when constructing deceptive content. Similarly, fake news pieces are not only constructed through exaggeration – which contributes to a stereotyped representation of others, as has already been confirmed by previous studies on the image of immigrants in Spanish press and television (Igartua et al, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2012; Lacalle, 2008; Marcos Ramos et al., 2014; Muñiz et al., 2006, 2008; Ruiz-Collantes et al., 2006) – but often by taking the image out of context and showing it in a deceptive manner. Thus, fake news pieces not only contribute to multimodal disinformation about otherness, but also facilitate the generation of hate speech (Fernández et al., 2020; Sanguinetti et al., 2018) by being shared on social networks, resulting in the formation of communities with like-minded opinions, through an appeal to negative emotions towards the unknown, which is presented as dangerous (Engesser et al., 2017a; López-López et al., 2020).

This study confirms the representation of otherness as an entity that receives state aid and allegedly favourable treatment, but also one that vandalises, commits crime and is violent, accentuated by showing minorities as a group and not as individuals. Moreover, the fake news pieces that transmit characteristics representing an otherness that is contrary to Western values (us) and supports terrorist acts (them), that is, an enemy of the people (Reinemann et al., 2017: 2), are frequent.

Although previous studies have found that fake news pieces need credible sources to appear plausible (Salaverría et al., 2020), this study did not find that these fake news pieces used known sources to provide credibility, at least not in a generalised manner. Although most of the sources identified came from a political/institutional scope, the sources that were most predominant were anonymous and, by making the sources anonymous, the authors of the fake news pieces avoided being penalised for committing hate crimes. The credibility authors sought to give the pieces was found in the format of the images. Screenshots mostly include documents and posters that were originally true, with additional text that takes the image out of context or deceives, objectives that the research by Salaverría et al. (2020) classified as very serious if they are also accompanied by the negative intentions of whoever creates and shares them.

To this effect, there is a mechanism that we could call “fake news personalisation”: users add text to images to take them out of context or deceive, thus creating multimodal disinformation about otherness. Although digital technologies provide tools for content manipulation (Tandoc et al., 2018),

this study finds that those who create and share multimodal disinformation about otherness are extremely unprofessional. Far from intending to provide credibility and bring opinions together, their unprofessional manner reveals their intention to embolden similar positions, providing deceptive reasons to communities whose opinions are already formed (us) in an environment where confirmation bias (Wason, 1960) and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) act to reaffirm previous opinions and prejudices (López-López et al., 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020). Therefore, this study shows that you do not have to have a subtle design to deceive – as you do with deepfakes, which require advanced technological skills (Paris and Donovan, 2019) – as proven by the popularity of cheapfakes, which are used to generate coarse and crude disinformation multimodal content to promote hate speech (Sanguinetti et al., 2018).

This study has some limitations. The first is that only the fake news pieces discredited by the four Spanish media entities accredited by the International Fact-Checking Network have been included in the sample. Despite this, we believe that the various criteria for collecting disinformation on these platforms, as well as the numerous analysis units studied, have provided the sample with sufficient representativeness. Second, the texts included in the disinformation materials have been analysed, serving as an anchor, but – given the impossibility of compiling them – none of the accompanying texts posted by users has been analysed. However, we believe that the present study – which has analysed both the texts contained in the disinformation materials and the multimedia materials associated with them, especially the images, and the relationships between both elements – has taken a fully multimodal approach. A more in-depth analysis of the discursive construction of the additional texts (Fernández et al., 2020) remains for future research, as well as an analysis of the audiovisual manipulation elements used in videos.

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