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Fact-checking in Spain: perception and trust

The purpose of this article is to analyse the perceptions, social discourses and practices regarding the verification processes of the information consumed in the context of the information crisis that societies in the 21st century are experiencing. To do this, we created seven discussion groups structured around the variables age, position in the social structure and political ideology. We found that 1) there is a shared perception about how disinformation compromises one of the basic pillars of democracy; 2) this perception contradicts the few practices used to verify the information consumed; 3) macro-structural changes that generate a climate of less polarisation, more critical education and regulation of information practices are put forward as solutions to misinformation and the circulation of false information.

Audiences, fact-checkers, misinformation, discussion groups, media, fake news

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1. Introduction

Access to quality information is considered one of the basic pillars of full democracies. Well-informed citizens make better decisions and actively participate in public debate. However, we are experiencing a context that has been defined as communicative complexity (Delli Caprini & Williams 2011) where the boundaries that historically separated information producers from consumers are blurred. Social networks have shifted the element of content referentiality to the hands of users, which until recently, was the exclusive domain of the media (Flew 2019).

Disinformation, from structural (Gray, Bounegru & Venturini 2020), economic (Bakir & McStay 2018) and pragmatic (Himma-Kadakas 2017) perspectives, is the protagonist of the academic – and a large part of the public – debate (Cano-Orón et al. 2021). A number of new terms have recently emerged, and only lately have we become familiar with the terminological apparatus of this new reality. Terms such as hoax, post-truth, or fact-checking are part of the journalistic and informational language that are now frequently used in the public space. However, we do not know what discursive representations citizens have of this reality, and the specific meaning they attribute to these terms.

The objective of this research study is to evaluate and qualitatively analyse the implications of the information crisis 21st-century societies are experiencing, focusing on the citizenship's perception and discourse. We would like to explore what the public's regard for the media environment that surrounds them is, and understand the level of trust they have in it. We will also investigate the knowledge that citizens have about what a hoax is, and what the phenomenon of fact-checking is, namely, the creation of companies that verify or check the truth of messages emitted by different social actors through social networks. Ultimately, we are interested in shedding light on whether there are generalized practices of self-protection against misinformation, and what ways citizens check data when they receive false or misleading information.

2. Theoretical framework

Although verification of the information emitted by journalism also occurred before the 21st century (Amazeen 2019), the current peak in disinformation has led to the expansion of fact-checking initiatives around the world (Clayton et al. 2020; Palau-Sampio 2018). In Spain, this

practice began to accelerate in the first decade of the 21st century, with *Malaprensa* and *Miniver* (López Pan & Rodríguez Rodríguez 2020). A decade later, initiatives that had greater international reach were established: *EFE Verifica* (2019), *Maldita.es* (2018) and *Newtral* (2018).

For Amazeen (2019), this recent interest in the development of fact-checking initiatives is due to the popularisation of social networks, a crisis of trust in the media, and the existing conflictive social environment characterized by politically and emotionally polarized citizens. On this basis, verification initiatives emerged as an attempt to recover the principles of journalism (Singer 2018) and curtail the consequences of disinformation in the public sphere. This is why the public reception of the work fact-checkers carry out is one of the main focuses of this study (Dias & Sippitt 2020).

Existing research on verification has reached mixed conclusions. From very optimistic positions, certain authors have found that these initiatives can provide the public with real facts (Nyhan et al. 2020), change political perceptions (Wood and Porter 2018), improve citizens' knowledge about current affairs (Barrera et al. 2020), and even reduce the impact of false information (Ecker et al. 2020). Thus, reading a rebuttal could mitigate – at least to some extent – partisan identities and radical attitudes on particular political issues. In light of these empirical data, fact-checkers could be considered ‘an important journalistic tool to counteract the negative consequences of the current era of post-factual relativism’ (Hameleers & van der Meer 2020:247).

This optimistic view, however, has a limited scope in the academic literature, which often presents a more sceptical view of the impact of the fact-checking through, among other approaches and perspectives, the theory of selective exposure (Walter et al. 2019). As Bakir and McStay (2018:164) have argued, ‘a last, and perhaps the most intractable, problem with fact-checking [...] is that it assumes that the user base prefers accuracy over content that suits them, reinforces their beliefs, or stimulates affective responses.’

Thus, a large number of research studies have focused on the behaviour of the public when it receives false news. For example, Tompkins (2018) notes four different ways of evaluating content: 1) true positive (false information identified as false), 2) true negative (true information

identified as true), 3) false positive (true information identified as false) and 4) false negative (false information identified as true).

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) focused on the correspondence between the interpretation of the receiver and the intention of the sender, so that decoding can be hegemonic, when the interpretation coincides with that of the sender; negotiated, when there is only a partial acceptance of the information; or oppositional, when the interpretation implies a rejection of the sender's point of view. Users carry out different actions with this information on social networks according to which interpretation they have made, include ignoring it, but also reporting it or even sharing and promoting it (Weidner et al. 2020).

Fact-checking, therefore, encounters resistance from certain public (Lyons et al. 2020) just as some media are believed to be hostile from specific political positions. Allegations of bias could undermine confidence in these initiatives (Pingree et al. 2018; Uscinski & Butler 2013), to the point of being perceived 'as partisan actors in a divided media system' (Robertson et al. 2020:234). These perspectives are essential in understanding verification practices, as dealing with more politically contentious and controversial issues requires more effort and prior work that would facilitate building a solid reputation (Brandtzaeg & Følstad 2017).

However, according to empirical evidence, reluctance to verify the facts can vary according to the previous political position. In general terms, research focused on the American political context has shown that liberals have a more favourable opinion of verification practices, while conservatives show a more resounding rejection (Shin & Thorson 2017; Walter et al. 2020).

Similarly, Dias and Sippit (2020) criticize exploring the impact of verification as a solely persuasive phenomenon, as they believe its main objective is to contribute knowledge to citizens so that their decision making can be based on a factual and truthful understanding of their environment. In fact, other research has indicated that fact-checkers have a strongly educational component, especially when factors such as media literacy can influence the ability to distinguish between the veracity of an informational piece that circulates on the internet (Hameleers & van der Meer 2020).

Even if the factors outlined above did not affect the way verifications are consumed and interpreted, fact-checkers must address other challenges emanating from the context in which

disinformation is generated and circulated. If they do not, verifiers would have to address the spreading of false information that is rapid and extensive (Vosoughi et al. 2018). In that sense, fact-checking requires more than discrediting news or statements, since these initiatives need to gain the public's attention through various strategies, such as with the publication of messages that impact on social networks (Dias & Sippitt, 2020).

Various studies have found that verifications of fake news show very limited reverberations on digital platforms compared to the fake news itself (Aird et al. 2018; Shao et al. 2018). For this reason, some authors use the term 'misinformation disorders', as it gives a broader perspective on the systemic disruptions to information flow: terms such as fake news, for example, refer to only one isolated incident (Bennett & Livingston 2018; Wardle 2018). According to them, fact-checking does not imply macro-structural changes in the contemporary context, but its rather more limited impact in light of the complexity of the current political and media system.

This is why research into fact-checking requires a new focus and different methodologies that delve into the attitudes and perceptions towards verification (Robertson et al. 2020), which would also explore contexts that are different from the Anglo-Saxon one. This study focuses on this latter issue, without neglecting other factors such as the relevance of fact-checking in the population's media consumption, the current media crisis, and the need for media literacy to properly manage contemporary disinformation flows. The objectives of this study can thus be summarized as:

O1 Understand the Spanish population's perception of – and the main discourses used regarding – the phenomenon of fact-checkers.

O2 Identify the verification practices used by the Spanish population to check information in the context of misinformation and overabundance of information.

3. Method

The study of perceptions and social discourses about information verification processes requires the use of a qualitative methodology, as that will facilitate our understanding of issues such as the interaction with the information received, motivations to verify it and the meaning that the public receiving these messages gives these practices. The most appropriate research technique we could use to capture these perceptions and motivations is the discussion group (Ibáñez, 1979). Between July and October 2021, seven discussion groups were held.

The structural sample of these groups was designed to capture a discursive universe about the information verification processes: our intention was not to create a population universe nor an aggregate of individual discourses, but a discursive organisation. This discursive organisation comprises a set of material and specific discourses, produced in an experimental situation. This set could be considered a representative corpus of the set of currently circulating social discourses and practices on information consumption and verification practices.

The corpus of discourses collected in the study therefore includes all fundamental ideological arguments (De Lucas, 1995). The design of the sample and the composition of the groups captures the different social representations about the information and verification processes of the information consumed. The most significant variables that make up the discursive universe are social position, age and political ideology: this is justified with empirical data.

The position in the social structure is measured with economic and cultural capitals. The social position not only conditions how media is consumed, but also the ability to read the messages emitted and to position oneself differently in relation to those messages (Hall, 1997). In the proposed sample, this dimension has been measured from participants' socioeconomic condition and employment status. For the Spanish case, study No. 3263 by the Sociological Research Centre (CIS) in 2019 found that there was a strong statistical association between an individual's socioeconomic status and their preferred television channel from which to get information about the 2019 electoral campaign (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Association between preferred television channel to follow the campaign and socioeconomic status (corrected typified remainders).

[Figure 1 near here]

****Corrected typified remainders** are the standardized differences between the observed and expected frequencies in the assumption of independence of both variables (that is, when they are not associated). Thus, when the remainder values are higher than the critical value 1.96 or lower than -1.96, it means that there is a 95% probability of an association between variables. Source: Prepared by the authors with data from CIS study No. 3263.

While people with occupations that require higher education (directors, managers, technicians and professionals) were more inclined to follow the campaign through TVE 1 or La Sexta,

people with occupations that do not require university studies did not have a special preference, except for elementary occupations, who showed a predilection for informing themselves about the campaigns through Telecinco.

In the configuration of the information verification processes, the social position, the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1988), intersects with political ideology. There is a consensus in the literature that political ideology conditions not only media consumption (Gunther, Montero & Wert 2000; Martín & Berganza 2001; Humanes 2014) but also the verification and credibility processes of the information consumed. The aforementioned CIS study also empirically concurred with this relationship. Figure 2 on the left shows how the intention to vote and favouring a political party have a clear association with the preferred channel to follow the electoral campaigns. People who voted for PP, Ciudadanos and Vox preferred to watch the campaign on Antena 3, while supporters and voters of PSOE and Podemos preferred La Sexta.

Figure 2. Association between preferred television channels to follow the campaign, voting for/favouring a political party and preferred media for information (corrected typified remainders).

[Figure 2 near here]

Source: Prepared by the authors with data from CIS study No. 3263.

This favouring of different parties is also associated with the preferred media to follow the campaigns (Figure 2, right). Supporters of traditional parties preferred to inform themselves through television while those who favoured Vox and Podemos obtained information through social networks. This association has age as a shadow variable.

In fact, age is configured as a basic variable in the type of media consumption. While young people prefer to inform themselves through social networks, adults prefer using traditional media. The aforementioned CIS study empirically corroborates this difference in the choice of media according to age. The purpose of the sample is to capture the dominant discourses as well as the extremes. Which is why, in regard to the variable age, this sample will include young profiles and those over 65 years of age.

Figure 3 Association between preferred media to follow the campaign and age (corrected typified remainders).

[Figure 3 near here]

Source: Prepared by the authors with data from CIS study No. 3263.

Thus, and concurring with that explained above, the variables that have guided the construction of the structural sample are socioeconomic status, employment status, voting preference, and age. In addition, there was parity in the variable sex in all the groups. Figure 4 shows the composition of the groups made from their relationship with the main variables

Figure 4 Technical design.

[Figure 4 near here]

Source: Prepared by the authors.

4. Results

The findings are the result of an analysis of the system of discourses given by the participants of seven discussion groups. The validity of the analyses rests on the principle of saturation, so that the interpretations will be accompanied by *verbatim* quotes that justify them. The results are presented in relation to the two research objectives: 1) understanding the Spanish population's perception of the phenomenon of fact-checkers and 2) identifying the verification practices used by citizens in the context of misinformation and overabundance of information.

4.1. Social networks, misinformation and trust

There is a unanimous perception among participants that social networks are the main ways they receive false news and various forms of misinformation. Despite the fact that the original sender is never known, people share these messages abundantly among their contacts. The role of WhatsApp is particularly noteworthy in this regard ('The message Aunt Loli sends your mother' GD1), but Instagram and Facebook are also often mentioned.

I think that, speaking of false news, what most contaminates it are the WhatsApp chains, that is, you actually believe it, so you pass it on to ten other groups, and then those ten groups pass it on to another ten (GD 2).

If I see something, it's on Facebook, Facebook is the king of fake news (GD 5)

- And where do you receive hoaxes from, I mean, through which media?

- M: WhatsApp.
- M: That's right, WhatsApp.
- M: The message Aunt Loli sends your mother.
- M: Yes, yes, yes.
- M: They'll start charging for WhatsApp (GD 1).

And on Instagram too, there is heaps of fake news, that is, maybe you are looking at stories and you see that someone has posted, like, two headlines and you say Wow, that's true! And you keep scrolling but it sticks, and then you read something and you say 'oh wow it wasn't true' but there it was (GD 2).

The social network Twitter is seen as the most reliable of the digital platforms to obtain truthful news, not so much because it does not circulate hoaxes or false or doubtful information, but because of the zeal and speed that its users show when disproving messages on that platform, which somehow limits the scope of their spread: 'They say that Twitter is the most reliable because if someone says something that is a lie, there is as a whole a thread of people immediately saying 'hey no, the truth is this or that'' (GD2).

Social networks are therefore seen as the quintessential disinformation spaces. However, fake news is also associated with little-known websites or digital newspapers that cannot be trusted and do not have a journalistic reputation that supports them.

[...] But it is true that there are things that stand out and people, I don't know how, or they just read the headline and have already drawn conclusions [...] with things that if you really think about, you'd say: that? where does that come from? Very strange newspapers, and of course, when you read that you say: is this newspaper new or something? But people believe it (GD5).

Along with this perspective of social networks and, to a lesser extent, of websites as spaces that spread hoaxes, disinformation is also associated with the overabundance of information resulting from its digitisation, i.e. the existence of a plethora of media news that produces a huge volume of information and that is impossible to assimilate, much less to check: 'Everything started with the internet, because before there were four news items, and that's it,

but now the volume that is available through the internet makes it impossible, there is too much information, too much' (GD6).

Thus, given the little confidence that social networks inspire, as anyone can post untrue content and spread it easily, traditional media are perceived as more reliable sources of information. It is believed the traditional media and their preparation and checking of news is filtered by certain professional standards, i.e. there are certain journalistic routines that underlie the production of informative content.

It is very difficult for the press, or television or even the radio, to publish false news, simply because, I mean, okay, there may be bias and trends and such, but news is news and if someone catches you giving fake news, as its written, or spoken and recorded, you are going to be hung out to dry (GD5).

It is much easier to spread a hoax on the internet than in the written press, in a magazine or whatever (GD6).

However, this perception of the media compared to social networks does not mean that the media is seen as neutral or objective informants of reality, nor does it mean that they arouse total credibility or trust in the population. On the contrary, there is a general awareness that the Spanish media are highly politicized (the press, radio and television) and that, as such, they offer biased views of reality. This politicisation means that the media provide distorted journalistic accounts, influenced by ideological values and specific political convictions.

There is no objectivity, correct, there is no objectivity (GD5).

Well, not all channels are so, how to say, biased to one side, because it is very noticeable to which side they swing (GD2).

You also see a lot of hoaxes on television and on social networks, because, it's true that we have the television a bit [...] on the issue that 'no, they can't lie on television, they can add a little something, and hide something else', but there is news on television that is very distorted to the point that it seems somewhat ridiculous, made up (GD1).

4.2. (Dis)knowledge and perception of fact-checking

Regarding the first research objective, the results found that there is a general lack of knowledge that fact-checking companies have begun to operate in the Spanish public space in recent years, such as *EFE Verifica* (2019), *Maldita.es* (2018) and *Newtral* (2018). The vast majority of participants are unaware that these companies exist. While some acknowledge having heard that the phenomenon exists, in general they are not able to specifically identify or name any particular initiative.

- You said verification [...] That your daughter told you that there were companies that verified, that they told you whether something was true, or if it was false. Have you ever used this kind of service?

- H: No, I haven't.

- H: Not me. (GD4).

- Are you aware there are companies that offer services to verify hoaxes, have you heard of them?

- M: No.

- They are called fact checkers.

- H: No.

- M: Oh no, I haven't heard of them. (GD6).

Specific references to any of these companies only occurred on two occasions. The first is *Newtral*, which is not identified by its commercial name, but is clearly associated with the television journalist who founded it: Ana Pastor Garcia, *Ferreras' wife*, in reference to the journalist who has been presenter of 'Al Rojo Vivo' on the *La Sexta* channel for several years

- Do you know what they do, has anyone told you?

- H: Ferreras' wife and Ferreras.

- Tell us.

- H: That's it, there is no more, it is their company.

- M: Wife? I didn't hear you.

- H: Ferreras', Ferreras', they guy from La Sexta.

- H: The one from La Sexta.

-M: Ah, yes (GD4).

The association of a fact-checking company with *La Sexta* is probably because several of its programmes have certain spaces to verify things said by political candidates. The most obvious case is ‘El Objetivo de Ana Pastor’, led by the founder of Newtral. The reference to this case came from a spontaneous discourse among a group of retirees, who exhibit patterns of media consumption more oriented to traditional media.

Conversely, the second reference occurred among the younger participants, who stated that they were aware of and frequently used the initiatives offered by *Maldito bulo* (from the company Maldita) and Stop bulos on various social networks.

And regarding hoaxes, there is Maldito Bulto and Stop Bulos, and such, and they are like profiles that check super controversial news, they corroborate whether it is true or not, and then I think they are amazing because they spread the results on WhatsApp, you always get it through WhatsApp (GD1).

On Instagram, for example, as a result of all these pages that emerged from Twitter, they have posted a link to an application to corroborate information, standard things like ‘Did you know that elephants smile when they see humans?’ (GD1).

Some digital information verification initiatives are also mentioned, such as the National Police and the Civil Guard pages. In general, knowledge of these initiatives are fragmented and scattered, derived in many cases from talks about misinformation that participants’ relatives have attended, that is, obtained indirectly, which does not facilitate their use:

They mentioned three or four websites, two were National Police and Civil Guard, but the rest, I don't know if they were private or not, or maybe they were at the regional government level (GD5).

The National Police has a webpage where you enter what you are seeing and it tells you immediately whether it is false or not (GD5).

Well, there are a couple of webpages that disprove fake news, but I can't remember their names, I will send you the link if you want; when I use them I realize that some news that I have read is fake news (GD2).

It is striking that, despite the limited knowledge of fact-checking initiatives, the perception seems to be that these companies are a politicized tool, serving the interests of the great ideological spheres. This perception is more popular in left-leaning groups, probably as a result of the association that exists between verification companies and *La Sexta*, the television channel most consumed by those who declare themselves left-wing and vote for Unidos Podemos or PSOE (Valera & Humanes, 2022).

- And it offers verification services..., it is one of the companies that offers that service, right?
- H: I think so
- M: I didn't know that.
- M: It offers what service?
- M: Verification service.
- H: It verifies facts. They are verification websites.
- DO YOU KNOW HOW THEY WORK? WHAT THEIR METHOD IS?
- H: Yes, more or less.
- Tell us.
- H: Well, in my opinion, it's positive news for the left-wingers, as they are from the left, well, they make it big; and if they see that they lose votes from it, then they do the opposite, and that's it (GD4).

Regarding this perception of fact-checking being a tool at the service of the partisan struggle, a discussion emerged spontaneously in the groups about the individuals' willingness to check information. It is believed that they are more willing to fact-check information that challenges pre-existing ideological prejudices, and significantly less so when messages concur with political ideological and beliefs.

- H: You check the information that... that you don't like ... that is, do you check the information that you like?
- M: Yes

- M: It is totally true (GD1).

[...] if it is news that you like, you think it is good; but if it is something or a text that you don't like, it doesn't fit your ideas, into your way of thinking, you say this is a lie.

- M: Yes.

- H: And you don't even stop to check; you're not interested, so you move on from it. And maybe it's true, mind you, maybe it's true, but since it doesn't politically fit, you put it aside, you ignore it (GD4)

The act of checking information is especially done with information that contradicts or questions the individual's political beliefs and not so much because of a general attitude towards a certain type of content. That is, the willingness to verify information is not a critical act carried out on messages that circulate in the public space: it is politically motivated behaviour whose purpose is the search for cognitive consonance, driven by the desire to reaffirm existing convictions.

4.3. Verification practices

Regarding the second research objective, our results show that people carry out information verification practices despite most of them being unaware there are fact-checking companies and do not use those resources to check their data.

These strategies include using Google and other search engines to verify questionable information; verify the information they receive on the traditional media they consume, especially newspapers, which are seen to be the most reliable sources of information; and consulting people they believe to be trustworthy sources, such as friends and family.

Googling the whole time, using Google a lot (GD5).

I use Google to verify, which is wonderful (GD4).

I'd look for it before, in national newspapers (GD2).

You often find those webpages saying 'that popular hoax' bla bla (GD1).

[...] They sent it to me on WhatsApp, and I looked for it and said... if it's true, a newspaper must have written about it, but didn't find it, so it must be false [...] it can't be true (GD1).

I post it and make it bigger and I have a friend who always says, 'That's fake news from two years ago' [...] I make the snowball bigger, because that is absolute commie stuff, and then he tells me 'That's a lie, don't believe everything you read' (GD4).

However, there is a general perception that verifying the information that circulates on social networks is not always possible. First, there is the lack of knowledge necessary to properly verify fake news is mentioned:

There is certain news that no matter how much you inform yourself about... H: of course, for example if I read something about the economy that is absolute baloney, I might believe it because I have no idea about that (GD7).

There is no strategy, because, how can you know? (GD5).

Second, there is 'the lack of time [that] prevents you from being able to research everything' (GD2) and third, there is a simple the lack of interest when checking news: 'Nor do I bother to check [...] I don't check elsewhere to see if they say something different, I just remember the first thing I have heard and unless it is something very important, I don't really bother to see what really happened' (GD2). The conversations also highlighted that 'you don't even stop to check [...] what doesn't interest you politically, because you put it aside, you ignore it' (GD4).

4.4. Solutions to the spreading of fake news: educate or punish

All the groups noted the need to find solutions to the spreading of hoaxes as 'the responsibility is not always on the receiver' (GD1). Education is mentioned, both in the family environment and at school, as a key factor in the correct interpretation and verification of possible false news.

- If you leave high school and the only thing you know is maths, biology, okay, great, but I have no idea, for example, how banks work, I have no idea that they are thieves, I have no idea of anything, I believe it all. So I think they should also train us on that [...] that the news must be checked

- M: Yes, education (GD1)

Furthermore, mention is made of the need to ‘regulate’ (GD5), ‘censor’ (GD1, GD7) and even ‘punish’ and fine (GD1) or send to jail (GD1) the spreading of false news. In the conversations, we found many people mentioned regulations often. The use of tools to punish (explicit violence), or to censor, fine, monitor, or inspect (implicit violence) is mentioned (Foucault 2002).

- As they did with Trump and the bleach thing, they censored his Twitter account... [...]

- M: It was pretty shocking, but really those things, that is, they can’t go unpunished, that is, they should be fined, if it is something big that can cause harm, you go to jail, man, that is, you can't go around saying... (GD1).

Who stops that? Instead of answering me, there should be a means that cleans it from the entire publication (GD4).

- M: Well, I’ll tell you something so that you can relax a bit, from reliable sources, the Civil Guard has a section that is for online crimes and all this is now being very persecuted; very, very persecuted [...]

- M: Of course, they are crimes, so the policing body is there (GD5).

5. Discussion

The results of this research study highlight the complexity of the current media scenario (Delli Caprini & Williams 2011); citizens are aware of this context and that is manifested in their distrust of the media system and in the demand for better quality information. The group discussions have revealed that there is a shared perception of how disinformation compromises one of the basic pillars of democracy – the public sphere. Citizens see this sphere as emotional and polarized, and acknowledge the influence of their political thought on their media consumption and their willingness to check the information they receive. On this basis, and regarding the first research objective, it is significant that participants indicate they are not aware of the fact-checking phenomenon, and that some consider it to be a biased and politicized tool used by certain political powers.

This awareness of their own partially contradictory behaviour is key to complementing previous research that has described the phenomenon of misinformation and verification from more optimistic (Nyhan et al. 2020) and pessimistic (Bakir & McStay 2018) positions. The groups that participated in this research study imagined an ideal democratic scenario that goes beyond the simple doing away with hoaxes. That is, in order to address ‘disinformation disorders’ (Bennett & Livingston 2018; Wardle 2018), they suggest macrostructural changes to generate a climate of less polarisation that would prevent the positioning of the media and its presentation of social facts from a politicized and partisan perspective.

Central to this issue is the potential of the media and fact-checkers to educate. And not only because these journalistic initiatives can serve as channels that deliver quality information in a confusing scenario, but also because of their ability to generate more critical citizens (Hameleers & van der Meer 2020). Faced with a scenario of multiple moral authorities (Flew 2019), the participants of this study used primary methods to verify information (search engines, traditional media, family, friends, etc.). Regarding the second research objective, the study shed light on the complexity of filtering and analysing content in a public sphere characterized by the continuous circulation of information flows. Thus, there is still room for more media literacy and for educating people in more advanced verification practices.

The educational component is also key to understanding the options available to ordering the existing communicative confusion. Participants demand freedom of their media consumption, but also highlight that other solutions such as punishment and surveillance are also viable. The discussion brought up the question of transcendence for democracies and freedom of expression, since they explain the support that certain strategies proposed by the public powers could receive from the population, as was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Spanish population’s willingness to support a restriction on freedom of expression (Valera & Doménech-Beltrán 2020). This last reflection shows how important this debate and the need to understand citizens’ opinions are to political systems.

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