FACT-CHECKING IN LATIN AMERICA. TYPOLOGY OF VIRAL CONTENTS DISMISSED DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

FACT-CHECKING EN LATINOAMÉRICA. TIPOLOGÍA DE CONTENIDOS VIRALES DESMENTIDOS DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DEL CORONAVIRUS

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ABSTRACT
One of the worst faces of the coronavirus pandemic in the field of communication studies was the infodemic, that is, the viral distribution of fake news. In this scenario, organizations that work with informational quality decided to start a network of information checkers in Latin America called LatamChequea. Based on the data provided by the platform, the viral and denied content is analyzed in the period between February 27th and September 25th, 2020. The analysis is carried out to problematize the latent logic of misinformation. The results indicate that there are issues that are viralized transnationally and the collaborative work of fact-checkers allows speeding up actions to warn the media and citizens against misinformation. At the level of discussion, an enormous effort is considered necessary to raise awareness about content that is shared on social networks, as well as a sincere discussion about the regulation or not of this content. It is concluded that in the context of the health crisis, political content finds high levels of expression among the content that was denied. Relevant political actors are often participants in the dissemination of false content,

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and the media also prove to be part of the same verification weakness that is observed in social networks.

KEYWORDS: *fake news*, fact-checking network, content analysis, Latin America, coronavirus; disinformation; health.

RESUMEN

Una de las peores facetas de la pandemia por el coronavirus en el ámbito de los estudios de comunicación fue la *infodemia*, esto es, la distribución viral de noticias falsas. En este marco, organizaciones que trabajan con calidad informativa, decidieron inaugurar una red de fact-checkers o chequeadores de información en América Latina denominado LatamChequea. A partir de los datos proporcionados por la plataforma, que abarca el periodo comprendido entre el 27 de febrero y el 25 de septiembre de 2020, se analizan los contenidos virales y desmentidos por esta red de verificadores con el fin de problematizar las lógicas latentes de las desinformaciones. Los resultados indican que hay temáticas que se viralizan de manera transnacional y el trabajo colaborativo de los fact-checkers permite agilizar las acciones de advertencia a los medios y a la ciudadanía frente a la desinformación. En el plano de la discusión, se considera necesario un enorme esfuerzo en la concienciación sobre contenidos que se comparten en redes sociales, así como una discusión sincera sobre la regulación o no de estos contenidos. Se concluye que en el contexto de crisis sanitaria, los contenidos de tipo político encuentran altos niveles de expresión entre los contenidos desmentidos. Los actores políticos de relevancia muchas veces son partícipes de la difusión de contenidos falsos, y los medios demuestran también ser parte de la misma debilidad de verificación que se observa en las redes sociales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *fake news*, fact-checking, red de verificación, análisis de contenido, Latinoamérica, coronavirus, desinformación, salud.

Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the issues that has caused the most debate during the pandemic is how misinformation news went viral, causing exactly the opposite of what its reason for being should be: informing the public. The public is often exposed to the trap of finding news about which they cannot check the veracity of the information to which they are exposed.

In moments of crisis, citizens seek more information than in quiet times. During this pandemic caused by Covid-19, audience levels increased and this is confirmed by a *Reuters Institute* report published in April 2020, regarding consumer habits in Germany, Argentina, South Korea, Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom (Nielsen, et al., 2020).

Faced with this great demand for information, content without scientific bases or correlation with reality also emerged and was distributed, generating more anxiety and concern among citizens. It is clear that disinformation and false news were, are, and

will be part of the fight that quality journalism has to be able to fulfill its duty to inform (Owen, 2018). The defense and protection of reliable content are no less because, in democratic systems, citizens have the right to information to make better civic and political decisions.

In the face of these problems, which have a potential impact on the political system, information verification or fact-checking organizations have been making an effort for little more than a decade to deny content that is made public through the media and social networks. The focus of this study is placed on these verification platforms and the purpose is twofold: First, the contents that went viral in Latin America were analyzed from the analysis of the information denied by the fact-checking group called LatamChequea, formally created in February 2020. Second, from these checked and denied content, we will seek to establish a typology of those (mis)information that operated during the first eight months of the health crisis to identify the profiles that characterize these viral hoaxes (Pérez-Dasilva, et al., 2020).

The research is justified by the interest and concern generated by the viralization of false information at a global level, as well as the commitment that must be had with the public so that they have access to truthful information or that, failing that, they have the tools to identify informative hoaxes.

It is considered that this exercise will allow knowing the current state of the news items that have been denied by LatamChequea, to problematize the latent logic of these misinformations. Based on the data provided by the network, which covers the period between February 27th and September 25th, 2020, a study is carried out from the content analysis method, to identify viral content typologies during the health crisis. This methodology is inspired by studies such as those by Brennen et al. (2020) and Salaverría et al. (2020).

1.1. The problems of disinformation in today's media ecosystem

Fake news, false news, hoaxes, or information disorders, as Wardle (2019) calls it, represent an increasingly notable problem on a global scale. These phenomena of the circulation of false or erroneous information are not new, and the link between (mis)information, deception, conviction, strategy, and power has been going on for several centuries. Some examples are highlighted by Romero-Rodríguez (2013) in classic works. In *The Odyssey*, Homer relates a particular military strategy that was based on deception. The famous Trojan horse, which was given as an offering to the city, but with soldiers ready to battle hidden inside it and who determined the fall of the fortified city. Later in the story, you can also find another classic text of military strategy, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, which highlights the importance of convincing one's own troops based on deceptions, stories, or myths, to ensure their accompaniment in military operations.

In more recent history, the gadgets for conducting public speeches have also become relevant to political strategy. The Soviet Communist Party was one of the great political actors who carried out these actions of propaganda, deception, appeal to emotion, and the construction of a story that frequently had little contact with reality. This need to control the message with criteria that benefit power could also be observed in the

management of the Minister of Propaganda and Information of the Nazi regime (between 1933-1945), Joseph Goebbels. The recognition of the importance of the manipulation of public opinion is reflected in the "principles" left by this infamous character in world history. His strategy was based on absolute control of the media, control of all kinds of information related to the regime, and, of course, censorship (Dobb, 1950).

These processes of domination and manipulation that favor power through tricks were denounced for decades by sectors linked to Marxism, such as the referents of the Frankfurt School. Marcuse points out that power uses techniques of deception and confusion to generate greater sympathy in the population and, thus, maintain its privileged position, without dissent, thanks to the control of the media (Marcuse, 1964). The author carries out a deep analysis of the role of the media in this process of construction of a story that ends up alienating audiences, leaving them defenseless before power.

For these analysts of social events before the emergence and consolidation of the Internet, the role of the mass media was essential to maintain the *status quo* of political actors. Other more current critical studies indicate that the media stand as political actors in themselves, fully aware of their ability to influence public opinion (Schiller, 1987).

Although there is much to be said regarding the approaches that relate the circulation of false messages within the public sphere, their communication, and the power relations that constitute them, it can be summarized that the theoretical approaches that deal with these informational disorders between the 19th and the 20th century are three: the paradigm of social massification; the paradigm of propaganda manipulation, and that of spectacular mediatization (Pérez-Tornero et al., 2018).

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the processes of massification occurred in modern societies, which can be described as pre-democratic and pre-media scenarios: "Media development is incipient and depends on mechanical systems, such as printing and paper, that is, they do not have means of communication based on electricity" (Pérez Tornero et al, 2018, pp. 216-217). At this historical moment are the studies on the soul of the masses, the subordination of individuality to the logic of the mass, which causes the loss of individuality and submission to the mental unity of the latter. The capacity for suggestion and the appeal to instinct surpass the individual and reason (Le Bon, 1947). Or those of Freud (2013), who seek the psychological explanation of the psychic modification that the influence of the mass imposes on the individual. He points out that in the essence of the collective soul, there are also loving relationships that give cohesion to the mass, so that the individual encompassed in the mass abandons what is personal and allows himself to be suggested by others, and does so for feeling the need to agree with them and not in opposition to them, that is, out of love for others. This analysis period is characterized by approaches that come from psychoanalysis and sociology.

The paradigm of propaganda manipulation is situated from the beginning and until the middle of the 20th century, characterized by the interwar period and the massification of technological advances. Studies such as the one of Lasswell (1927); Bernays

(1928), or Lazarsfeld (2011) gained momentum, from where they analyzed the effects that propaganda and disinformation had on citizens in authoritarian regimes, as well as during electoral campaigns of democratic systems. In this period, Bryant (1953) focuses on propaganda and highlights the deceptive features that constitute it to persuade the public, he defines it as: "Any partially or deceptively used rhetoric, at the service of 'anti-reason' or 'pseudo-reason' techniques, such as suggestion, reiteration, imaginative substitution, verbal irrelevance, emotional and pseudo-logical harassment, exclusion of competing ideas, and the short-circuit or by-pass of informed judgment" (Bryant, 1953, p. 417).

The third paradigm is that of spectacular mediatization. It corresponds to the end of the 20th century where societies are already completely traversed by the logic of consumption and at the orders of capital, catapulted by an entrenched and globally accessible media system. Public discourse is marketed as one more product of the industry, and a strong connection with advertising and marketing is manifested, which causes these political discourses to be transformed according to the rules of the show (Debord, 1967). Television played a fundamental role in the development of this spectacularization process, which among other effects, weakens the line that separates the public from the private and information from entertainment (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2011).

Beyond the particular approaches, what characterizes these paradigms is the recognition that public discourse that appeals to emotion, affectivity, and seldom to reason or even reality, has strong roots in the sociopolitical system; in turn, its survival is configured according to the ecosystem that contains it. It should be noted that unlike what these communication ecosystems proposed, the current scenario of web 2.0 and 3.0 replaces the unidirectional communication system with a bidirectional one, where socio-digital networks appear as protagonists of the changes. There, agents go from occupying a passive-receptive role to one in which they can emit and receive, produce or consume.

Luciano Galup (2019) argues that the great challenge presented by socio-digital networks is linked to the reconfiguration of the hegemonic model of mediation between politics and society, which since the 1980s and for almost thirty years had as its protagonist traditional media, in general, (radio, graphic press) and television in particular. "Those were the access windows of the factors and the political actors, not only to each one of the households but to each one of the citizens. Social media emerged to redefine that hegemony. That privilege, that power, today is misconfigured" (Galup, 2019, p. 64).

This change in roles modifies the public sphere, generating more diverse relationships between political actors, citizens, and the media. As Suiter (2016) points out, the current media ecosystem is dominated by reality shows, social media, and the existence of filter bubbles. In this scenario, the study of disinformation is absolutely necessary, because it represents a problem that impacts the base of democratic systems and the political actions of citizens.

From the different theoretical approaches that have addressed the subject in recent years, the diversity of terms prevails to designate that information that is misleading,

false, or erroneous and that is deliberately constituted in this way. Durandin (1995) is one of the first interested in classifying those actions that can be considered misinformative: eliminating or silencing all the information; altering information (information manipulation) and inventing events. For the author, these phenomena are basically organized sets of deceptions. Others, however, consider that information survives in any misinformation. In other words, any vague, misleading, or ambiguous content can be informative (Karlova and Lee, 2011). Disinformation has a causal relationship with the journalistic treatment of information when there is a manifest breach of the ethical standards of the profession (Murolo, 2019). As Gelfert (2018) indicates, fake news is the deliberate presentation of false or misleading claims as news, where journalism fails to verify before publication and dissemination.

Hazard-Owen (2017) considers that what characterizes the success of false news is that it is directed at emotions, has the appearance of legitimacy, has an effective publication on the Internet, and is amplified on the Internet (such as *Twitter* or *Facebook*).

Although it is a phenomenon against which journalism has been fighting for decades (Burnam, 1975; Galdón, 1994), the spread of false news, or information disorders, took on a new dimension with the consolidation of social networks. This causes the problem of fake news to rise to a transnational scale. The breadth and speed in the dissemination of this (mis)information, forced governments, third sector entities, and international organizations to take care of establishing parameters for the detection of deliberately false content, to reduce its dissemination. The digital society fosters a gathering place with almost no state regulation[3], but with a strong presence of private intervention[4], where the anonymity and opacity of the sources that generate the information constitute the ideal territory for the dissemination and viralization of all types of content.

One of the most popular ways to name these contents is to consider them fake news, following the expression popularized by Quandt et al. (2019) after the US presidential elections in 2016 that faced Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the first being the winner. To this way of calling this phenomenon of disinformation, others are added, such as "information disorder", considered this way in reports made by organizations such as the European Commission or even Unesco (Ireton and Possetii, 2018).

Calvo and Aruguete (2020) suggest addressing these disinformation phenomena according to their intentionality and distinguish false news from fake news. False news would be news that misinforms without the intention of misinforming, that is, it is the product of confusion or error. Unlike this, fake news is created to provoke and, mainly, destabilize the political system. It is there where the three most important elements of political communication meet: politicians, the media, and public opinion. If public opinion consumes false information given by the media or platforms about political actors, the system becomes corrupted (Quintana Pujalte, 2020).

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[3] Recently, the Australian Parliament intervened through a law so that both Facebook and Google compensate the advertising revenues that the media stopped receiving in favor of the platforms that, in turn, benefit from the content that these media produce.

[4] In this regard, a case to analyze is the elimination of Donald Trump's accounts after his followers' assault on the Capitol on January 6th, 2021.

Beyond the polysemy and the methodological problems caused by its lack of consensus in the denomination and how to frame the phenomenon (Alemanno, 2018), this study subscribes to consider these information disorders with the definition of hoax, understood as "all content intentionally false and with a truthful appearance, conceived to deceive citizens and publicly disseminated by any platform or media" (Salaverría et al., 2020, p. 4).

For López-Borrull et al. (2018), the best way to combat this problem in the digital society is to seek greater access to information and the possibility of content verification. The platforms made different fact-checking tools available to users during the coronavirus crisis. To mention a few cases: Google reverse, allows you to verify the approximate origin of the images that circulate on the network. With the same ease that you can search for information on the site, you can upload an image and confirm the date and place where it could have been taken. The system works through ClaimReview, a fact-checker external to the company. The Twitter platform established a notice that shows followers if the content is retweeted without having previously entered the link, as well as an alert that highlights if the information that is part of the tweet is erroneous or questionable. It also hardened its tracking of fake accounts.

Along the same lines, Facebook sought to clean up its image after the *Cambridge Analytica* and data traffic during the 2016 US elections scandal and established a system to prevent the viralization of fake news through its fact-checking program that is managed by third parties outside Facebook, to combat hoaxes that circulate within its platform. Furthermore, it generated a warning to users when they established interaction with false content, thanks to the development of algorithmic technology in charge of detecting false or misleading information. In turn, the WhatsApp messaging platform determined a limit to the number of messages that could be forwarded, to lower the levels of content viralization.

1.2. Fact-checking platforms

There is a notable effort from different entities to be able to fight the informative hoaxes that are propagated by the media and socio-digital networks. Some examples can be mentioned: the European Union has a surveillance action to combat fake news items that occur within its territory; the UN has an initiative called *Verified* that also seeks citizen collaboration to report false information; news agencies already have a specific information verification area, and since September 2015, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) has been created, a unit of the Poynter Institute dedicated to bringing together fact-checkers around the world. Currently, there are seventy-four organizations that are part of this network, coming from seventy countries and carrying out checks in forty languages. Its function is to verify statements of public figures, important institutions, and other wide-circulation statements of interest to society. Ufarte-Ruiz et al. (2020, p. 24) define fact-checking as "a journalistic practice based on the subsequent verification of information published by the media and on the verification of the statements or comments made by political leaders or relevant figures".

Fact-checking is essential in the current digital context, where problems of spreading false information are frequent, as mentioned in the previous section. Citizens need tools at their fingertips that allow them to quickly identify when they are exposed to false news and also be able to have enough elements to distinguish this type of misinformation from the true news.

Fact-checking is enhanced by the tools offered by technology, which allows access to data in a more accelerated way, which has an impact on the public accessing better quality information. Among the tools most used by fact-checkers is *Google image reverse*, which, as mentioned, serves to know the approximate origin of an image that circulates on the Internet. The *Bing* search tool and the *TinEye* app are also used to search for information on images.

To find out in which social network there is a greater interaction of suspected false content, *Buzzsumo* is used, which allows evaluating the most popular content. *CrowdTangle* is another frequently used tool, but its limitation is that it only allows viewing content on Facebook, since it corresponds to this platform. It offers data such as the average interaction of a publication, compared to that of other publications of the same user. Another free tool is *TweetDeck*, which corresponds to Twitter, and it also allows filtering data about publications that are shared through this platform. Those mentioned are just some of the tools that are used for fact-checking, and what is interesting is that many of them are accessible to the general public. It is also clear that these false content search and control initiatives take place on these channels because it is where many of the content that fact-checkers must deal with daily currently emerge.

The number of fact-checking platforms is increasing at an accelerated rate. The Reuters Institute highlighted this sustained growth in a study carried out during 2016, which referred to the success that they were having around the world (Graves and Cherubini, 2016). Duke University offers an annual report on these platforms and the data indicates that there are already more than 300 initiatives around the world, with new proposals appearing year after year. South America stands as the region where more fact-checking platforms have been inaugurated in the last year (*Duke University*, 2020).

Faced with the health crisis and the proliferation of misinformation, a network of fact-checkers in Latin America that collaborates with the IFCN, decided to carry out a project "to check information, collect and update verifications in Spanish about the coronavirus, besides producing a database with information about the measures taken by the governments of the region" (Estarque, 2020). The network called LatamChequea brings together twenty-eight entities that are dedicated to fact-checking based in sixteen Latin American countries and Spain. Its objective is "to help journalists and verifiers in the coverage of the coronavirus so that they can find reliable information more quickly and easily."

The network is coordinated by *Chequeado* from Argentina and the following fact-checkers participate: *AFP Factual, Salud con Lupa, Aos Fatos, Estadao Verifica*, and *Lupa* from Brazil; *Bolivia Verifica*; *Mala Espina Check* from Chile; *La Silla Vacía* and *ColombiaCheck* from Colombia; *#NoComaCuento (La Nación)* and *La Voz de*

Guanacaste from Costa Rica; *Periodismo de Barrio* and *El Toque* from Cuba; *Ecuador Chequea* and *GK* from Ecuador; *EFE Verifica, Maldita,* and *Newtral* from Spain; *Agencia Ocote* from Guatemala; *Animal Político, Spondeo Media*, and *Verificado* from Mexico; *Despacho 505* and *La Lupa* from Nicaragua; *El Surtidor* from Paraguay; *Convoca, OjoPúblico,* and *Verificador (La República)* from Peru; *Observador* and *Polígrafo* from Portugal; *PoletikaRD* from the Dominican Republic; *UyCheck* from Uruguay, and *Cotejo.info, Efecto Cocuyo*, and *EsPaja* from Venezuela. Besides offering a database with verifications and checks, they share another document with the measures taken in each country to counteract the coronavirus health crisis in the region.

It is clear that both the journalistic profile that focuses on data and verification, constitutes a space of permanent change and adaptation to combat false news (Graves, Brendan, and Reifter, 2015). The best response to the phenomenon of disinformation is not censorship, but fact-checking (Rodríguez, 2020).

2. OBJECTIVES

This study aims to analyze the contents disseminated in Latin America that were denied by the fact-checking platforms that make up LatamChequea between February and September 2020, and that are available in the database available on its website. In the analysis process, the aim is to recognize the fact-checking work carried out by this team, as well as to identify the type of content that was treated by these fact-checkers. Finally, it is intended to reflect on the latent logic that constitutes these misinformation items.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research presented here is mixed, since a quantitative approach is carried out regarding the contents under analysis, and certain relevant features of these are also identified, which, when described, complement the analysis with a qualitative outlook. The object of study are those contents that have been verified by the LatamChequea platform and that appear as such on its website. The observation takes place between February 27th and September 25th, 2020. This time represents the first seven months of development of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as coincides with the inauguration of the platform that seeks to counteract false and viral content in Latin America specifically linked to the coronavirus health crisis. The database offered by the platform is made up of verifications carried out by the fact-checking agencies that are part of this network of fact-checkers, which make up the universe of analysis. Those contents that correspond to other non-Latin American countries, such as Spain and Portugal, have been excluded.

The method that guides this study is content analysis, an approach that will seek to unravel the components of these viral discourses. From this approach, four categories to identify in the contents were established: 1) Countries where the verifications were carried out; 2) denied topics (composed of the dimensions science/health, politics/government, others); 3) Presence of denied content in several countries; 4) Origin of viral content (whose dimensions are *Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter*, generic social networks, *media, Instagram, Youtube, Email, government websites, SMS,*

Telegram). Based on the analysis of these categories, the study aims to answer the following research questions: RQ1: What type of misinformation was viralized and denied by the LatamChequea platform during the first months of the pandemic? and RQ2: Where did they originate? And how do these platform-verified misinformations operate?

4. DISCUSSION

Of the total of 3108 data available on the LatamChequea website, 2353 pieces of information that went through a verification process correspond to Latin American countries, while the rest are from Spain and Portugal. As mentioned in the methodology, the data corresponding to the Iberian Peninsula as countries of origin of the disinformation has been discarded. The region then has 2353 information checked on the platform, which includes false and misleading news as well as checks that resulted in verifying the veracity of the analyzed statements. LatamChequea has verified information that was identified as false, misleading, out of context, or inconsistent in sixteen countries in the region.
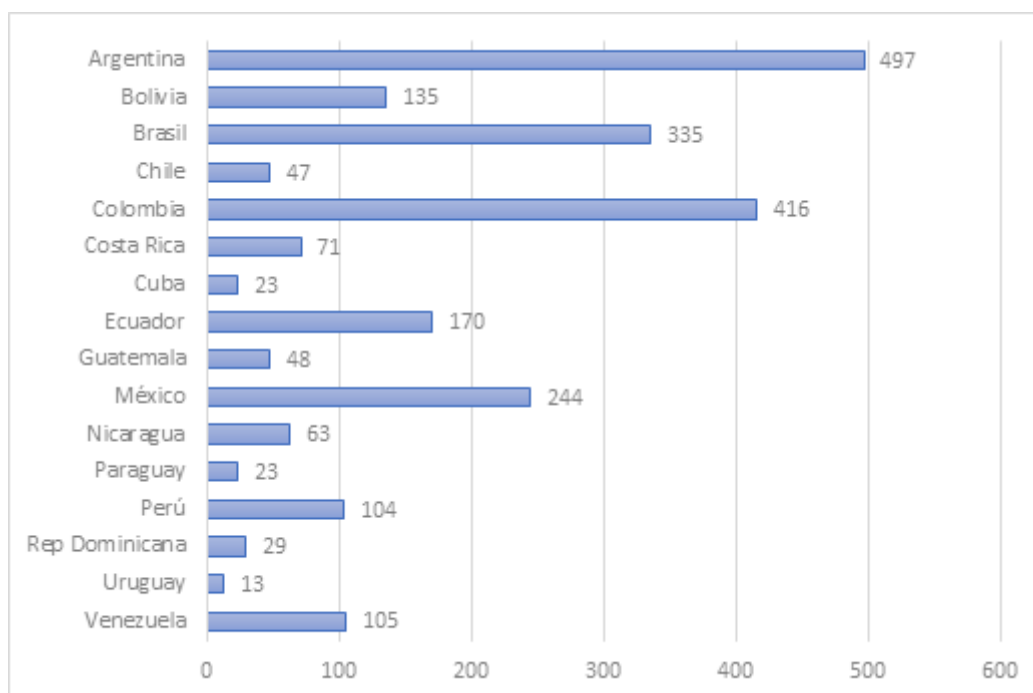

Figure 1: Information denied and checked between 27/02 and 25/09 in LatamChequea
Source: LatamChequea

As can be seen in Figure 1, Argentina and Colombia were the territories where the greatest amount of information was denied (497 and 446, respectively). Followed by Brazil and Mexico (335 and 244, respectively). It should be clarified that the data have a bias corresponding to the fact that they are information that passed through the platform's check filter, that is, that they are information that was verified.

Regarding these data, it is also relevant to know the issues that went viral. The platform has its own classification in which it calls the "content-type"; however, in many cases,

these contents can be included in a simpler typology. For this study, three dimensions have been established that have been finally codified in the category of denied topics in the content analysis, among them (A) science/health; (B) politics/government, and (C) others (Salaverría et al., 2020).
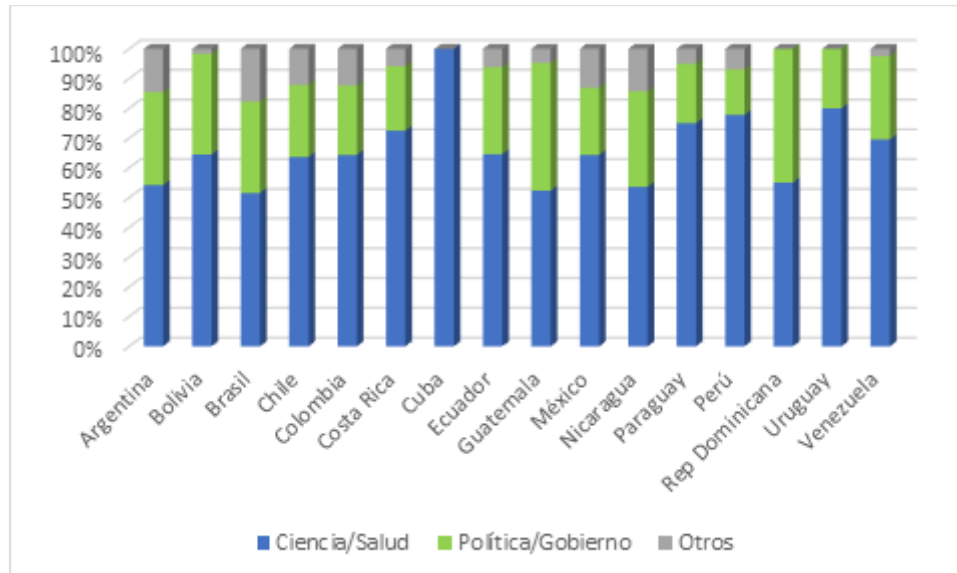

Figure 2: Topics of verified and denied information
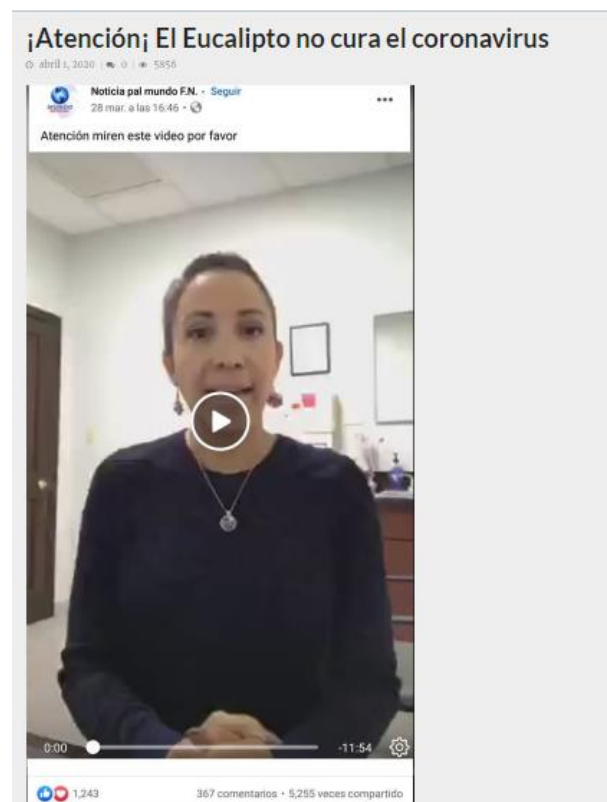**Source**: LatamChequea

Figure 3: Screenshot of denial by Bolivia Verifica, from Bolivia
Source: LatamChequea

As expected in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, issues related to health and science had a high role in the viralization of false or misleading content, out of a total of 1795 information items that were marked as false or misleading after being analyzed on the LatamChequea platform. Figure 3 shows a check by Bolivia Verifica. The platform indicates that this video was published on March 28th, 2020 at 4:46 p.m. on the Facebook page "Noticia pal mundo N.F." from the Dominican Republic, it was shared more than 5,500 times in different Facebook groups, it also has more than 350 comments and more than 1,300 interactions. This same content was also denied from Colombia, Mexico, and Costa Rica[5].

Another striking aspect of these hoaxes is their ability to cross borders. As can be seen below, the same type of false or misleading content went viral in several countries.
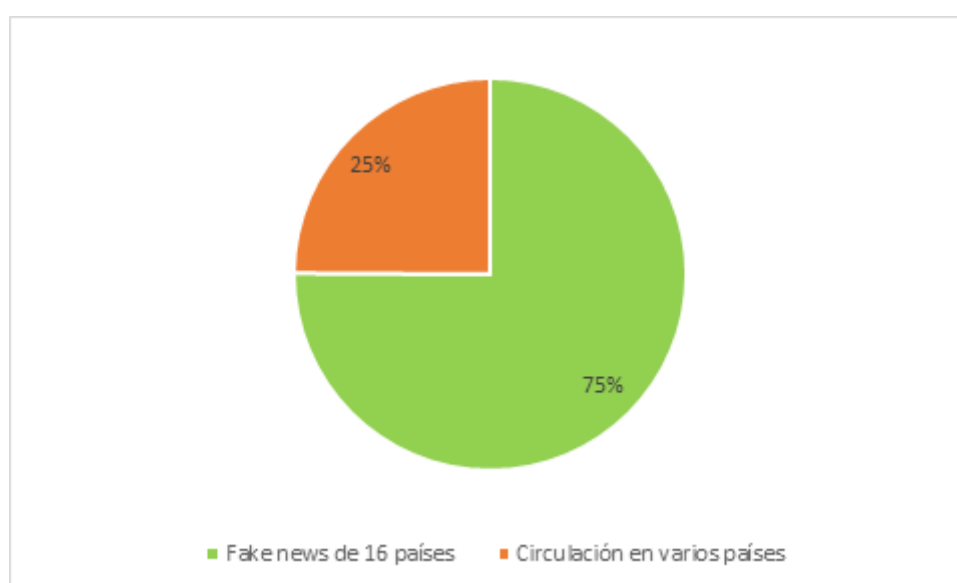

Figure 4: Same content viralized in several countries
Source: LatamChequea

Specifically, 25% of the total false or misleading news items disseminated in these 16 countries and that has passed through the filter of a check on this platform, have also become viral in other countries. A unique case has been the link between 5G technology and the spread of the virus, this is particularly striking since the technology is not yet operational in most Latin American countries (De la Torre, 2020).

The false news that relates the presence of 5G technology with the transmission of the Covid-19 virus and indicates it as the cause of flu symptoms circulated on WhatsApp, and the post on Facebook (according to data from *Chequeado* Argentina) was shared more than 1000 times in a checkup posted on April 21st. Already in early April, YouTube

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[5] Denial of Bolivia Verifica about the alleged properties of eucalyptus to combat the coronavirus at https://bit.ly/3tPljGJ; Animal político also did the same, https://bit.ly/3vYZJBQ, La Silla Vacía, from Colombia https://bit.ly/3vPcFKe, and, also, No coma cuento, from Costa Rica: https://bit.ly/3tUtJfZ

banned videos that make false claims about the relationship between 5G and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another identified example has been the dissemination and viralization in several countries of an alleged virus containment measure carried out by Vladimir Putin's administration in Russia, in which it was stated that for people to stay at home, lions were thrown into the Russian streets[6]. This information was denied by the fact-checking entities of at least Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina. In this case, the information emerged in a generator of memes that simulate news called *The Breaking News Generator*, however, many users did not understand the joke and shared this content as if it were a real measure to contain the virus.

The origin of the content that goes viral is another feature that allows us to know how this information operates to reach a greater number of people. In this sense, social networks function as a great breeding ground for the dissemination of low-rigor information and even lies that are disseminated on purpose to destabilize or question scientific truths such as the role of vaccination or how viruses and bacteria are transmitted.
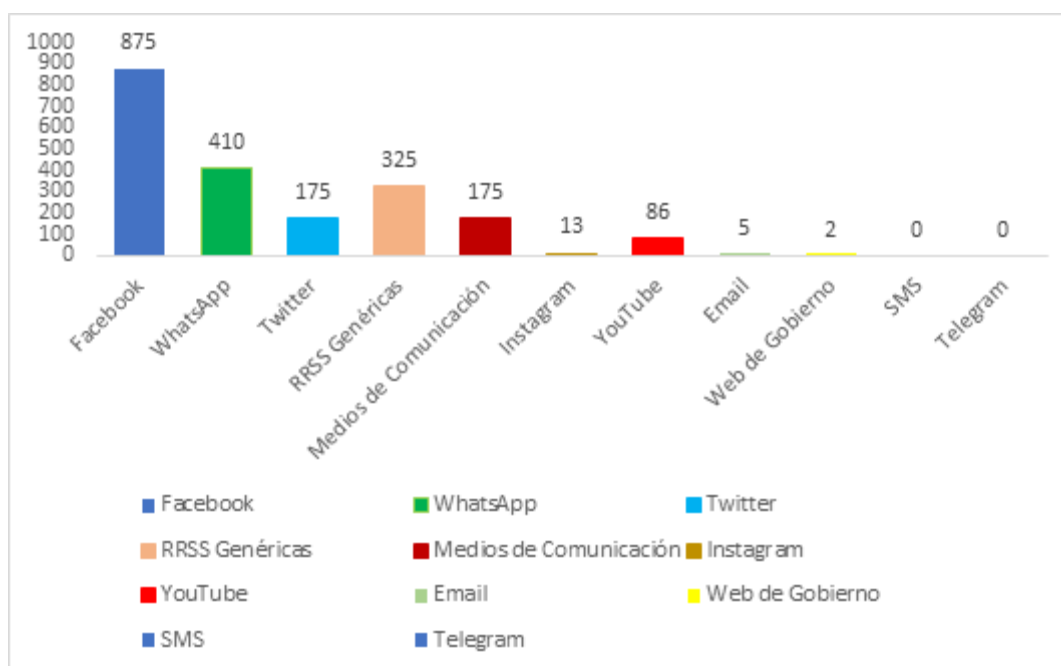

Figure 5: The origin of viral content
Source: LatamChequea

The data shows that Facebook is the platform from which content that has been verified and denied by the LatamChequea platform is most frequently shared and viralized. It can also be observed that the presence of WhatsApp is significant for the viralization of these contents. This has already been detected by the platforms, which have sought

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[6] Colombia check denied this information, referring to the fact that it was disseminated in other countries, https://bit.ly/2OWKIzM, so did Animal Político from México https://bit.ly/3d23g9N, and Bolivia verifica: https://bit.ly/3w6nPKW

to regulate the presence of false content in their apps. Since April 2020, WhatsApp, for example, has limited the number of times that content can be forwarded to contacts (the message "forwarded many times" even appears accompanying the text and/or image), and Facebook also inaugurated an external fact-checker that allows it not only to control the contents but also to block accounts or delete them (Rosen, 2020).

Another interesting fact that the results of the study shows is that the role of traditional media as the source of information that has been verified and later denied is relatively high. It is equated with those denied information items that originated from Twitter, a platform that still does not have consolidated verification strategies, unlike the mass media. The quality of information has guided the commitment of journalism with its role in society and with these negative indicators, a certain crisis is reflected in the journalistic routines of information verification (Alonso-González, 2019).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The current status of the information that was considered false or misleading in LatamChequea shows that four countries have the highest rates of denied or verified information: Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico. During the months of analysis, 62% of the denied information in Latin America had to do with science and health issues, 27% with politics and government, and 11% with other issues. This suggests that the political content found considerable expression among the viral false information. Including relevant political actors, and these same actors even being the generators of false or misleading information. To mention a unique case, that of the president of Argentina, Alberto Fernández, who in an interview said that the WHO recommends drinking hot drinks because heat kills the virus. This central political actor in the public sphere was one more diffuser of false content, which according to LatamChequea data, circulated in Spain, Hong Kong, and Colombia. Another case was a false content that implicated the president of Colombia, Ivan Duque. A senator from the Democratic Center, Carlos Felipe Mejía, shared information that ensured that Duque was the third president in the world to take better containment measures against Covid-19. The false information had more than 700 interactions only on Twitter and was replicated by Colombian media.

It also shows that many contents find space for expression and viralization in different countries, which shows the transversality of viral content. Facebook continues to be the platform where fake news items are generated and viralized to a greater extent. However, traditional media often fall for the same weak check logic typical of social networks.

Regulatory experiences, as can be found in Asia, call for the need to look at how individual freedoms are not restricted. In Brazil, there are recent initiatives that seek to enter the field of discussion on the subject, but they lack a concrete definition of what can be considered fake news or not. In Argentina, the government is building an autarkic entity called Nodio, to combat fake news and hate speech. Even researchers from Conicet (Argentina's main national Science and Technology Agency) created a project called "Anti-Fake News Covid-19 Science", where they denied more than 100 pieces of false news. Some Latin American national news agencies (in Mexico and Argentina) have created, within the official government agency, a sector dedicated to

the issue of disinformation. The point is, when looking at the checks, there are few or none on government issues. So, the debate on regulation can be a path, but it is clear that it requires a deep debate on freedom of expression. The strengthening of organizations that are dedicated to checking information must be a transnational commitment because they are tools that allow the generation of pedagogy in the audiences, which contributes to a better expression of informed citizens.

As developed in the introduction to this article, the communicative context is conditioned by misinformation. This scenario requires the collaboration of these organizations in the verification of information to dismantle false news strategies, and, thus, facilitate access to truthful information, both for citizens and the media. This must go hand in hand with a strong commitment to indicate how this (mis)information operates, both for citizens and those responsible for the media. Likewise, requiring the opening of data, which can be freely accessed to counter speeches, would provide more tools to combat the traps of fake news. Although the consolidation of fact-checking platforms at a global level is encouraging, there is still a long way to go to achieve greater awareness of how to combat these information disorder phenomena.

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