











Spread of Fake News About Covid: The Ecuadorian Case

Lilian Molina¹ , Gabriel Arroba^{1,2,3} , Xavier Viteri-Guevara² ,
Sonia Tigua-Moreira³ , Arturo Clery^{1,2}  , Lilibeth Orrala¹ ,
and Ericka Figueroa-Martínez² 

¹ Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena, La Libertad, Ecuador
arturo.clerya@ug.edu.ec

² Universidad de Guayaquil, Guayaquil, Ecuador

³ Universidad Estatal de Milagro, Milagro, Ecuador

Abstract. The appearance of fake news in Ecuador, during the period of confinement generated by the pandemic related to COVID-19, evidenced the various dimensions of this phenomenon. This paper analyzes the spread of fake news about Covid in the Ecuadorian technological scene, in order to promote an understanding and subsequent debate that contributes to the generation of prevention strategies and even reduction of its impact on the Internet and social networks, for the benefit of communication and democracy. One of the serious problems caused by disinformation is the appearance of rumors, which in the context of a health emergency cause anguish and despair among the population. This is where a social environment is needed in which the State shields the production of fake news and the destruction of disinformation from official communication, through transparent and precise communication, with clear and detailed messages on the form of prevention and attention, that it arrives by truthful technological means. Much better if these are disseminated through official spokespersons from different professional branches: scientific community, authorities with responsibilities in health matters and civil society organizations with an aligned and coherent discursive line, to share certainties with the public and appease the anguish of the situation, and communication technology professionals. In the context of political information and technological strategic communication, it is worrying that social networks are the strategic field to attack the adversary by creating rumors that are spread as fake news. A similar case occurs with the false information that circulates on social networks in relation to the health emergency, and that puts people's lives at risk. As evidenced, information technology is a weapon on an unprecedented scale. This is precisely because the technological and communicational advances of the information society have facilitated the fabrication and manipulation of content that, when disseminated through social networks, dramatically amplifies the lies produced by the States, by populist politicians and by dishonest corporations, among the population, that lacks criteria to assess these technological contents.

Keywords: Fake news · Communication · Democracy

G. Arroba and A. Clery—Independent investigator, Ecuador.

1 Introduction

One of the main objectives of the Ecuadorian State, according to its Constitution, is to ensure that social communication contributes effectively and efficiently to the development of the productive, cultural, educational, social and political management of the country [1], in addition to guaranteeing that all its citizens, individually or collectively, have the right to seek, receive, exchange, produce and disseminate truthful, verified, timely, contextualized, plural information, without prior censorship on facts, events and processes of general interest, through communication systems efficient, participatory and decentralized management [2].

For this reason, institutions of the Ecuadorian State such as the Ministry of Telecommunications and the Information Society [Mintel] or the General Secretariat of Communication of the Presidency of Ecuador [SECOM], which have their objectives in the development of Information Technologies and Communication in Ecuador, work to stop other types of contagion networks, which negatively accompany the Covid issue: misinformation and the increase in fake news.

2 Methodology Followed for This Case Study

Fake electronic news is news articles that intentionally and verifiably attempt to mislead the public, and are often motivated by economic or political gains. This abundance of information and prevalence of fake news makes it difficult for citizens to filter the Internet from information that is relevant and true from information that is not. Under these conditions, societies, current countries, run the risk of making decisions based on false information [3].

From this point of view, citizens are permanently recommended to corroborate the information through official sites and reliable news, and they are invited to pay more attention to messages that look different, image, video and audio files, which could be edited to try to misrepresent the information.

For the present case study, a documentary bibliographic methodology was initially used, searching for previously published information on the subject; methodology that was accompanied by hermeneutics, that is, the interpretation that was developed on this literature.

Subsequently, an information survey was carried out from the official Internet web pages and government social networks, where they commented on the fake news published. Finally, an analysis is developed on all the content found, triangulating the information obtained.

3 Results Obtained

Studies on Covid and misinformation reveal that, to corroborate information, people often compare news from social networks with traditional media [4]. However, this strategy of finding out if a piece of news is false or not may be wrong, since it cannot be guaranteed that what is broadcast in traditional media is true. Sánchez-Tarragó [5] maintains that the technological context, the increase in the volume of people with

Internet connection availability and access to mobile phones, favors the proliferation of fake news; likewise, the availability of sophisticated yet simple applications for editing and publishing images, text and audio; social network platforms that, on the one hand, open private information to the public space, but also allow the circulation of information in real time between networks of supposed trust, such as friends or family, with less chance of being refuted or denied, is reason of the increase in fake news [6].

The World Health Organization [WHO] made a selection of technological falsehoods spread internationally about Covid. The study is credited with creating the phrase “misinformation infodemic” as fake news about the coronavirus on the Internet is said to spread faster and stronger than the disease itself [7].

4 Discussion/Opinions

This manipulation of technological information has also become a growing problem in the Republic of Ecuador; and in this scenario, the Internet and social networks are flooded with news about Covid, which often turns out to be false. However, a high percentage of these fake news posts spread farther, faster, and more widely than true news [8].

Fake news is spread using tricks and traps to get users to read and share it. To increase their diffusion and effects, they use sensationalist approaches in the news, generating immediate reactions in the user, according to their political orientation or beliefs. Added to this is the fact that actions to mitigate its progress, such as disseminating truthful technological information, have not been effective against this phenomenon of disinformation [9].

And although trustworthy news sites or web pages differ markedly from social networks, real news is also shared through social networks [10]. This feature is what makes social networks a means of amplifying information, information that can be real or false [11]. Thus, currently, with the appearance of Covid, the use of social networks has increased, generating the appearance of an enormous amount of data that passes from user to user [12]. However, the availability of information does not correlate with a greater knowledge of consumers, since most of the information is not reliable, which translates into the dissemination and excessive use of technological fake news [13].

According to the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses of Ecuador [INEC], in this country, the main channels for disseminating false technological news are Facebook and WhatsApp. It should be noted that in relation to fake news and social networks, for example, the most popular story rated as fake news was widely shared more on Facebook than the true facts with greater acceptance. These facts must be understood as a challenge, to the extent that it is difficult to differentiate what is false from what is true, since this generation of false information is a constant in digital media [14].

A study carried out by the University of Oxford includes the Republic of Ecuador among the 70 nations where “cybertroops” operate to carry out propaganda through the computer and the Internet, that is, groups of political actors who tend to manipulate public opinion in line; and through the use of deceptive technological strategies, which induce chaos [15].

In this sense, the Ecuadorian National Government has worked to counteract this fake news that circulates through the networks, always thinking about the security of

information, and that Ecuadorians are informed with the truth. These rules are intended to create confidence in the use of electronic means, guarantee the security of electronic systems, data, communications and services, in such a way that they allow the exercise of rights and the fulfillment of duties through these means. In addition, at present, all the autonomous communities have internal procedures to control compliance with the laws and policies established by the National Security Scheme [16].

In this regard, the Secretary of Communication of the Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador of the date, Gabriel Arroba [17] expressed that fake news generates chaos and nervousness in the population; and the appearance of this type of news does not help during the health emergency.

And it is that on the subject, a set of virtual news that surpassed common sense, but which, however, were even picked up by the international press, who believed it to be true, spread throughout this country. Among these, one of the most extreme can be named: that corpses resulting from the pandemic have been thrown and burned in the streets of the city of Guayaquil [18].

Of the two reported cases, it was later clarified that the first was a protest with burned tires to demand the prompt removal of the bodies of the people who had died in their homes [19]; in the second case it was the burning of a piece of furniture belonging to a man who would have died from the virus [20].

5 Conclusion

Presumably, the Ecuadorian government has already identified the origin of most of the fake news, whose diffusion took place from neighboring countries in the geographical area of Latin America, such as Venezuela, Mexico and Cuba; information that in his opinion only seeks to create chaos. The effect of fake news in democracies is worrying, but it can be even more damaging in regimes like the Ecuadorian one, in political, social and economic crisis, under attack by an international lying propaganda machine [21].

The Ecuadorian Secretary of Communication added that the authorities specialized in the technological issue have identified political groups, which are dedicated to creating a feeling of uncertainty, he also said that these groups seek a negative image of the government in power, to delay political processes. The battle of ideas is waged on several fronts, it has been a mechanism to manipulate public opinion, using technology, communicational hegemony and censorship. Activists, infocitizens, journalists, advanced users and neophytes of the electronic subject coexist in the digital ecosystem, automated accounts created in laboratories to position memes, labels and ideas, which sometimes pose as true radical opponents [22].

In this regard, the authorities consider that 50% of fake news about Covid in Ecuador is generated in Mexico, and that in the first 12 days of the health emergency, fake news had 40 million impacts in Ecuador. The phenomenon of fake news ends up undermining the spaces of diversity of discourse and the very concept of plurality. From the classification of the different sectors of society, to the deliberate concealment of information according to particular interests, society suffers a continuous loss of access to spaces for public discussion and exposure to the expression of cultural and thought diversity, which prefigures an atomized world, in which conflicts are exacerbated that end up favoring radical and intolerant discourses [23].

Through a virtual press conference, the official explained that a team from the Communication Secretariat of the Presidency [SECOM] is dedicated to monitoring and clarifying the fake news that has been generated during the health emergency due to the coronavirus. The Information Manipulation Theory makes it possible to approach fake news as a way of manufacturing disinformation that is produced intentionally in an artificial way and that, although it may be based on real situations or experiences, differs in content and quality from truthful information [24].

About the 40 million hits in Ecuador, it does not mean that there was that amount of fake news, but that it was observed that number of times. To do this, SECOM identifies this fake news and tries to clarify it through official communications or interviews with officials in the media, which distracts them from other obligations. As a result of the emergency declarations and the failures in crisis management, a perception of democracy on pause was generated that allowed the communities to move from an individual vision of the problem to a collective one [25].

Another symbolic example of fake news in Ecuador was the capture of a chat that the then Minister of Government published on her Twitter. This shows how an apparent political group is organized to spread the rumor of a false food shortage. According to Arroba, these political groups create false rumors and based on these they record false audios that are spread through Facebook, WhatsApp and other social networks, including traditional media, which have also echoed different fake news that have circulated, during the pandemic with an ideological bias, not only in its approach and treatment, but also in its ideological content [26].

According to the first police intelligence reports at the start of the pandemic, 50% of fake news originated in Mexico, 30% in Ecuador, and the rest in other countries, including Venezuela and Cuba. Regarding the possible interference of political parties in the generation of fake news, Arroba clarified that he does not point to any specific group, but that evidence is being collected to locate those responsible [27].

Acknowledgements. To the Universidad de Guayaquil, Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena and Universidad de Milagro, for the resources provided, in the development of the projects called “Systematization and digitization of the records of the archives of the Council of the Faculty of Jurisprudence” and “Study on the impact of communication 4.0”.

References

1. Clery, A., Molina, L., Linzán, S., Zambrano-Maridueña, R., Córdova, A.: University communication in times of Covid-19: the ecuadorian case. In: Antipova, T. (ed.) ICCS 2020. Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems, vol. 186, pp. 165–174. Springer, Cham (2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66093-2_16
2. Jervis-Bone, N.: Estudio de la comunicación externa de la SECOM durante el inicio de la pandemia del COVID-19 en Guayaquil–Ecuador en el año 2020 (2021)
3. Galarza-Molina, R.: ¿Quién cree las fake news? Análisis de la relación entre consumo de medios y la percepción de veracidad de noticias falsas sobre la enfermedad COVID-19 en Nuevo León, México (2021)

4. Molina, S., Parrales, G., Linzán, S., Clery, A.: Information society: access to public information. In: Rocha, Á., Reis, J., Peter, M., Bogdanović, Z. (eds.) *Marketing and Smart Technologies. Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies*, vol. 167, pp. 350–362. Springer, Singapore (2020). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1564-4_33
5. Sánchez-Tarragó, N.: Desinformación en tiempos de COVID-19: ¿Qué podemos hacer para enfrentarla? *Revista Cubana de Información en Ciencias de la Salud*, **31**(2), e1584. Epub 01 de junio de 2020. Recuperado en 26 de noviembre de 2021, de (2020) http://scielo.sld.cu/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2307-21132020000200001&lng=es&tlng=es
6. Cuenca, J., Mendoza, C.: Fake news o Covid-19 ¿Qué es más peligroso? [2021]
7. Catalán-Matamoras, D.: Las fake news y desinformación en el ámbito de la salud (2021)
8. Seminario-Córdova, R.: Noticias falsas y su impacto en la sociedad en épocas de pandemia. *Soc. Innova Sci.* **2**(2), 6–17 (2021)
9. Appel, G., Grewal, L., Hadi, R., Stephen, A.: The future of social media in marketing. *J. Acad. Mark. Sci.* **48**(1), 79–95 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-00695-1>
10. Islam, A., Laato, S., Talukder, S., Sutinen, E.: Misinformation sharing and social media fatigue during COVID-19: an affordance and cognitive load perspective. *Technol. Forecast. Soc. Change* **159**(May), 120201 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120201>
11. Allcott, H., Gentzkow, M.: Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *J. Econ. Perspect.* **31**(2), 211–236 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>
12. Sheth, J.: Impact of Covid-19 on consumer behavior: will the old habits return or die? *J. Bus. Res.* **117**, 280–283 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.05.059>
13. Román-San-Miguel, A., Sánchez-Gey, V., Zambrano, R.: Las fake news durante el Estado de Alarma por COVID-19. Análisis desde el punto de vista político en la prensa española *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* **78**, 359–391 (2020)
14. Castillo, E.: Las fake news: descripción e impacto de la desinformación en medios digitales ecuatorianos. *MLS Commun.* **1**(1), 7–24 (2021)
15. Asanza, O., María G., Valeria, M.: Fake News en tiempos de crisis: aproximación a su reconocimiento y percepción durante el confinamiento por COVID-19 en Ecuador [2020]
16. Clery, A.: El acceso a la información pública: análisis de la experiencia europea y española y bases para su regulación en la República del Ecuador [2015]
17. Antena Uno Homepage. <https://www.antenauno.com/Detail/Article/3101/New/Lcdo--Gabriel-Arroba--Secretario-General-de-Comunicacion-de-la-Presidencia->. Accessed 01 Jan 2022
18. Cortez, P., Aaron, A., Ruth M.: Guayaquil y pandemia covid, situación y demanda. Unidad efímera de atención y habitación ante situaciones emergentes. BS thesis. Universidad de Guayaquil: Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo (2021)
19. Martillo, V.: Vulneración de Derechos Constitucionales en la manipulación de cadáveres con presunción de Covid-19 en Guayaquil. BS thesis. Universidad de Guayaquil, Facultad de Jurisprudencia Ciencias Sociales y Políticas (2021)
20. Moreno, K.: Vulneración del estado ecuatoriano al derecho de la salud ya la integridad personal, por el mal manejo de los cadáveres a consecuencia del Covid-19, en la ciudad de Guayaquil (2021)
21. Hernández, L.: Venezuela en fakecracia: Guion oficial de mentiras y fake news como parte de la propaganda. *Comunicación: estudios venezolanos de comunicación* **186**, 19–29 (2019)
22. Gutiérrez, J.: Asociación Civil Medianálisis: Fake news en Venezuela: laboratorios, abuso de poder y propaganda en pasticho. *Comunicación: estudios venezolanos de comunicación* **182**, 94–101 (2018)
23. Calle, L., María, I., Roberto, S., Carlos, V.: Distanciamiento social, infodemia, desinformación y noticias falsas: Invitados invisibles en pandemia. *URU, Revista de Comunicación y Cultura* **4**, 133–145 (2021)

24. Gutiérrez-Coba, L., Coba-Gutiérrez, P., Gómez-Díaz, J.: Las Noticiasfalsas y desinformación sobre el Covid-19: análisis comparativo de seis países iberoamericanos. *Rev. Lat. Comun. Soc.* **78**, 237–264 (2020)
25. Menéndez-Villacreces, M., et al.: Reflexiones en torno a la gestión de la comunicación de riesgos a propósito de la COVID-19. *Alcance***9**(24), 128–148 (2020)
26. Alonso-Gómez, M.: Fake news: desinformación en la era de la sociedad de la información. *Ámbitos. Revista Internacional de Comunicación* **45**, 29–52 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.12795/Ambitos.2019.i45.03>
27. Primicias.ec Homepage. <https://preview.primicias.ec/noticias/politica/noticias-falsas-corona-virus-generan-mexico/>. Accessed 01 Jan 2022