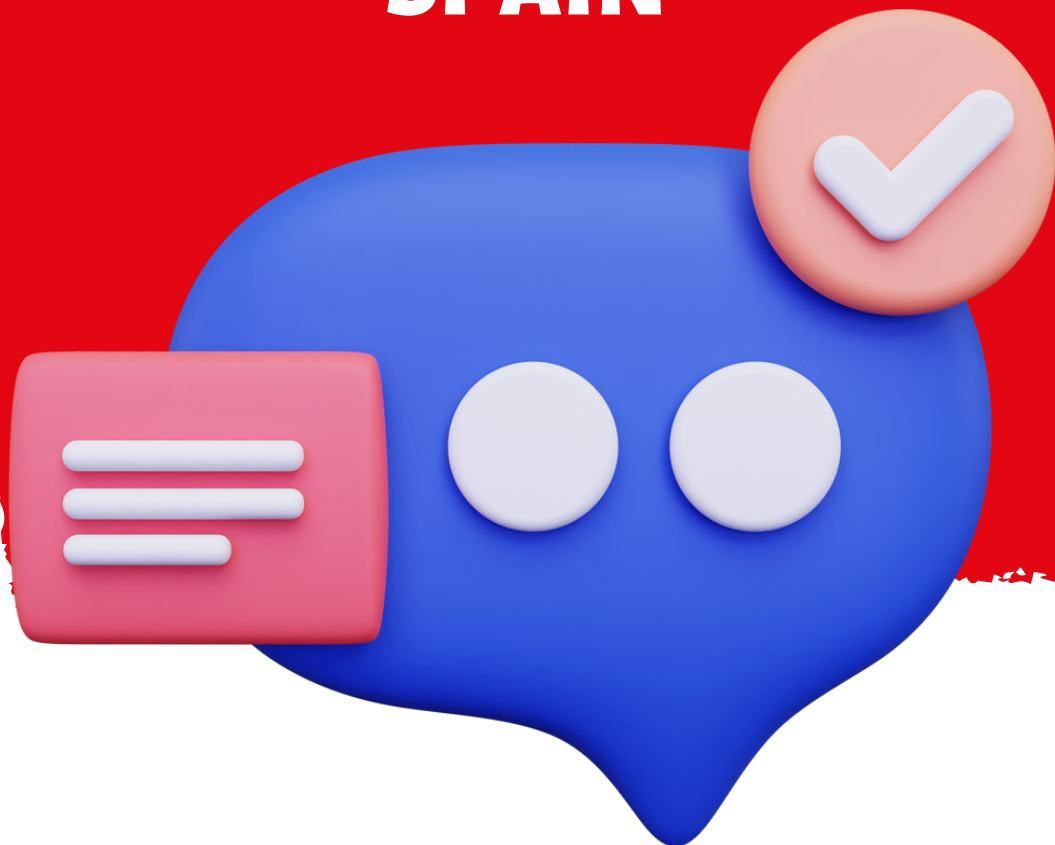


**D11. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM
THE HIGH LEVEL EXPERTS -
SPAIN**



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Introduction

Freedom of information is an essential condition for the proper functioning of democracies. Only a well-informed citizenship will be able to develop the critical-thinking necessary to freely participate in society. The emergence of Internet and the new information and communication technologies and platforms has multiplied the possibilities of accessing to the information and the number of sources. However, this paradigm shift has not necessarily meant an improvement of the way in which citizens get informed.

The [Mediawise project](#) recognizes the need to analyse this current relationship between citizens and disinformation and to provide them with the required skills to understand and operate within the highly complex media communication landscape. With this aim, CECU, together with four organizations from Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania and Greece, is participating in it.

The first activity (WP1) of the project was a survey to learn about citizens' habits and opinions around the topic, which, indeed, revealed that **fake news and disinformation are very present in daily media consumption**. Even though many of respondents are aware of the existence of disinformation and show some critical ability to identify it, **a significant amount does not know what fact checking is** or any tool to detecting or countering the phenomenon.

In the high-level experts meeting (WP6) we went into some of these aspects in more detail. In particular, the event organized by CECU focused, in the first place, on the **impact of disinformation on social and legal advances**, especially on those related to women's, LGTBI and migrants' rights. Migration policies were identified by respondents as the area more harmed by disinformation and fake news, especially through hate speeches spread against people from these groups and public defenders. In Spain, we also identified a dangerous speech against feminist and LGBT movement, as well as the current Equality Ministry, which has brought forward important legislative development in the last years. This is why we decided to include this analysis into the discussion with the experts.

On the other hand, the survey data on trust in media were striking. Even though traditional media are most reliable for respondents than the new ones, there is a **widespread attitude of suspicion and mistrust towards all the media**: there is none that people trust more fully. To go further on this issue, we wanted to raise the debate whether disinformation and fake news are phenomena linked to the emergence of Internet and technologies or whether it is something that has always existed and still exists in the traditional media. In relation to this, there was discussion as to whether young people are more exposed to disinformation, due to their higher level of Internet and social network use, or whether this is a myth or, at least, something much more complex that requires in-depth analysis.

In order to discuss all these issues, experts for the academic field, the journalistic realm and the civil society were invited:

- **Virginia Álvarez**: Head of the Human Rights and Justice and Home Affairs Research Area of Amnesty International Spain.
- **Raúl Magallón**: Professor of Journalism and Audiovisual Communication and researcher at Carlos III University of Madrid.
- **Pablo H. Escayola**: Academic Research Coordinator of Maldita.es.
- **Deva Mar Escobedo**: Contributing journalist at El Salto and student representative at the Complutense University of Madrid.

This document contains the main conclusions reached after the debate, as well as the recommendations that emanated from it, addressed to governments, journalists and citizens in general.

Disinformation against social rights

Hoaxes against advances in feminist and LGTBI rights

Disinformation is one of the most powerful tools the extreme right has been using to rise across Europe, and such is the case also in Spain. Once they reach the institutions, extreme right parties manage to legitimize fake news and boost their narrative among the public. An important example from Spain is the reaction to the legislation adopted during the last legislature on equality and LGTBI rights.

For example, one of the most viralized hoaxes about the new '[Sexual Freedom Law](#)' on social networks, especially on TikTok, is the alleged "consent contract" that participants in a sexual act must bring and sign. What the text actually states is that there must be express consent, that is, that the person "has freely manifested" the will to desire such a sexual act. In other words, it places this concept as the key to defining a sexual assault.

Other example is a widely spread hoax around the recently approved '[Trans Law](#)' is that it will allow men to change sex to avoid a conviction for gender-based violence. This is false: the law establishes that the crime will be judge according to the legal sex the person had when they committed the aggression. However, despite having been denied, this false information not only travels through social networks, but is also used by political representatives to discredit the norm, instill hatred and condition the public opinion of the Spanish electorate.

Precisely, the danger of these political trends being spread through Internet and the media is that their discourse permeates society. This reactionary wave has been sustained and reinforced by disinformers through different channels, which have facilitated the assumption of their hate speeches by a greater part, which is also reflected in the educative field. Some recent data illustrate that: according to [COGAM](#) (2021), 65% of students in Spain is respectful of LGBT diversity, according to the organization's criteria, 20% less than in 2019. Moreover, 21% say they would not come out, compared to 16% in the previous study.

Racist disinformation against migration

Migration policies is perceived as the issue more harmed by disinformation, according to our survey. In fact, there are many **digital contents** circulating on the Internet, such as videos or photos, which are **false, manipulated or decontextualized to criminalize racialized people**, infuse hatred and **justify racist migration policies**.

Beyond the digital realm, traditional media participate in this criminalization of migrants too. With the choice of certain words and narrative strategies, they contribute to build a story based on stereotypes that turn those people into dehumanized subjects, with whom the Western viewer who consumes the news does not empathize. This is seen in the Spanish context, for example, when there are accidents in the attempts of large groups of people to enter Spain trough the Melilla fence.

They often use negative terms to describe the facts, as “assault”, “invasion”, “avalanche” or “massive influx”, and they tell the story without giving context as to why this is happening to have reached this situation or what is the situation of these people. This media treatment contributes to shape hate speeches.

A now or ever phenomenon

Disinformation in digital and traditional media

About the question of disinformation being a new or even phenomenon, there are different opinions among the experts. On the one hand, there is the thesis that **the emergence of Internet, information and communication technologies and social platforms has brought many specific elements** that have led to the emergence of disinformation as a **new and specific phenomenon**. They point out some of those new elements:

- **Anonymity.** Social networks allow citizens to attack directly other people anonymously and, therefore, with impunity. It has become a form of venting where anything goes. The targeted people are often the visible faces of social movements or institutional representatives who have been committed to social progress, who receive a huge amount of digital violence from people hidden behind nicknames. The result is that a space originally designed for debate ends up being colonized by hate speeches.
- **Sense of community.** Internet and social platforms allow to find people with similar opinions and generate feelings of belonging to a social group in a virtual way. Without social networks, it was difficult to find references to reinforce one's thoughts and encourage the expression of them. This has had both positive and negative effects, because both social justice discourses and hate speeches have found their supporters there. One of the risks here is that, in the digital realm, everything is maximized and an amount of people relatively small can produce a great impact and seem that there are many more.
- **Ways of organizing in the virtual sphere.** Within digital platforms, there are public but also private or semi-private spaces, such as Telegram channels and groups. Through the latter, some groups organize themselves to react to certain information that they want to deny, attack and counteract with a disinforming discourse. This was most notable, for example, during the COVID pandemic, when anti-vaccine groups organized to respond with hoaxes to reports of vaccine advances and procedures.
- **Normalization of the disinformation processes.** As noted by survey respondents, citizens take for granted that we consume false and manipulated information on a daily basis. Disinformation is, somehow, accepted as an inevitable part of electoral processes and campaigns, for example. Under this normalization, it was extended to other social aspects too, as migration or feminism, as discussed above.
- **Global narratives adapted to local contexts.** The COVID pandemic brought also a new phenomenon: there was a clear transfer of hoaxes and fake news between places around the world. According to the experts, one in five pandemic-related hoaxes circulating in Spain came from Latin American countries and vice versa. This would not have been possible in a context prior to the new information and communication technologies.

- **Gamification.** Internet and social networks allow users to actively participate in audiovisual phenomena, such as TV series. The many theories about the series *Lost*, for example, which users commented on via blogs on the internet, are surely one of the first examples of this paradigm shift. Viewers went from passively receiving this content to collectively and virtually creating parallel stories and endings.
- **Searching for shortcuts** in the face of the large amount of information, both rational and emotional. The convenience for citizens of finding quick information channels to bypass the abundance of sources and "cut to the chase" increases the risks of accessing information that is neither reliable nor adequately checked and documented.

On the other hand, even though social networks have multiplied the quantity of sources of information, the ways to access to them and, therefore, the channels through which false information can be spread and its impact on society, it is a phenomenon that cannot be only linked to these new digital tools. **Traditional media disinform too**, and they do so **in the guise of a greater neutrality**, because citizens, generally, give greater credibility to them, as it was noted in the survey.

In short, it is important to analyse the disinformation disseminated through Internet and social networks as a **specific phenomenon that requires a specific answer and regulation**. Nevertheless, it is equally important to **raise awareness** among citizens of the dangers of disinformation and the necessity of having a **critical thinking** in order to **identify possible fake news through any kind of source**.

Youth in the face of disinformation

In relation to that association between disinformation and new technologies and platforms, there is also the belief that young people are more exposed to disinformation and fake news, because they use digital devices more. It is not possible to reach a conclusion on this without a specific data-supported study, but it can be said that reality is more complex than that assumption and there are certain reflections that can be made in this regard.

First of all, teenagers spend more hours on social networks than in high school (1400 hours per year versus 1050). Moreover, according to the last [Digital News Report](#), a worrying percentage of young people does not trust at all in the media, and they prefer to be informed through social networks and concrete influencers they follow. This necessarily forces us to pay attention to the content that these people are consuming for so long and which is contributing greatly to shape their imaginary and their thought precisely in a period of identity construction. The danger behind this is that, through social networks such as TikTok, Youtube or Twitch, teenagers can be assuming right-wing, antidemocratic and hate speeches with no control.

However, as digital natives, young people may be also more aware and sceptical than older people, which are more used to receive the information in a more passive way and may lack the tools to check it. Even though older people may receive less misinformation, they may be more likely to believe it.

Recommendations

As a result of the above reflections and conclusions, the following are some recommendations for citizens, journalists and governments to combat disinformation and protect freedom of information in our democracies.

For civil society

In order to identify hoaxes, it is important for citizens to know the "recipe" for creating them. In a context with a huge quantity of information and sources, for something to attract special attention, it must be increasingly eye-catching and emotional. The latter is, in fact, one of the main aims of the hoaxes: provoke afraid, angry or hateful. This emotional reaction is sought to get people to share that content, make it viral and reinforce its narrative.

Other technique used by disinformers is exploiting information gaps. When there is confusion about a new phenomenon or event, such as the corona virus, it is easy to invent and spread hoaxes in the absence of official information.

Lastly, it is also very common for disinformers to take a small and decontextualized portion of reality, often in a shareable audiovisual format, and build on it a discourse that has nothing to do with the content itself. This happens, for example, when a video of a black person committing a robbery goes viral, which is exploited by racists and advocates of anti-immigration policies to instil fear and hatred in the population.

To deal with these disinformation techniques, experts give the following advice to citizens:

- **Resisting emotional reaction.** When a piece of content or news provokes a strong emotional reaction, it should make us suspect that it may be something designed. In this case, we should not rush and share, but reflect and go deeper into the information.
- **Contrasting sources.** People not only should be aware of the quantity of disinformation they are exposed to, but they also should do something about it. They can check the information by searching it in several sources or by going to the official one, for example. Moreover, it is important for them to know some fact-checking websites and tools, which it is not usual, according to the results of our survey. In Spain, [Maldito Bulo](#) and [Newtral](#) specialise in verifying information and debunking hoaxes. [Salud sin bulos](#) to the same in the health realm Google has also its [Fact Check Explorer](#).
- **Taking an interest in media funding** and the bonds between media leaders and politicians, businessmen or other influential people. By discovering and understanding these relationships it becomes easier to identify possible interests behind some messages we receive from the media and, therefore, to distinguish information and propaganda.
- **Reporting fake or suspected fake contents** by using the buttons provided on most social networks, to prevent it from spreading further.

For journalists

Journalists and media have to face a **credibility crisis** that goes back a long way, which necessarily means to review the journalistic procedures that nowadays dominate the newsrooms. In a digitalized and rapid world, immediacy is prioritized over in-depth analysis. As a result, citizens nowadays feel they are less well informed despite having more options for information. What can journalists and media managers do to change this belief?

- **Moving away from clickbait.** There is an increasing tendency to headline the news with attention-grabbing messages that do not really correspond to the informative content. This works especially in the social media sphere, due to the high level of media competition, which forces companies to choose messages that are as eye-catching as possible for users to click through to their website. They usually exaggerate an irrelevant but striking aspect of the news item that do not represent what is explained in it. Being responsible as a journalist must mean not succumbing to advertising models and prioritize journalistic criteria to hierarchize the information within a news item.
- **Contextualizing information.** Journalists must be responsible and aware of the effects that their job have on society and offer the proper context and explanations to allow citizens to understand why some events happen. They have also to provide the relevant data on what, when, how, where and why and not give those that are irrelevant to the news. For example, the nationality of the perpetrator of a sexist aggression is not relevant and reinforces racist stereotypes, yet it is very common to highlight it in the news. By contrast, some Spanish conservative media sometimes publish pieces about trans women committing sexual assaults, which fuels the Trans Law hoaxes mentioned above, without specifying in the headline or in the first paragraph that they happened in a foreign country, like [in this case](#).
- **Explaining and clarifying the functioning of the public administration.** In Spain, as probably in other countries, there is a certain degree of confusion about which are the competences of central, regional and local government. This confusion is used as an outbreak of disinformation, to blame other policy makers of some political actions and to condition electoral decisions. These hoaxes are not only spreading around social networks, but also assumed by traditional media with given political interests. It is the job of journalists explaining the functioning of public administration and disproving these hoaxes.
- **Not simply replicating institutional or political discourses.** This could be useful at a time when there was a lack of information and there were not as many channels as there are today. In this new paradigm, the media should do more in-depth work by contextualizing, qualifying or correcting these discourses and function as a critical complement to them, not as a loudspeaker.
- **Adapting to new ways of getting information** to make the truth “more attractive”. It is recommended that journalist and traditional media are also in new social networks, like TikTok, and adapt their work to those new ways of communicating. Transmitting contrasted and quality information through these platforms and their languages would contribute to counteract the disinformation that circulates in them and that young people are consuming.

- **Use artificial intelligence for journalistic purposes.** Although we have not yet seen, at the journalistic level, anything created by artificial intelligence that has had significant effects in terms of manipulating, we are beginning to see the possibilities it has. Potentially, it can generate a huge quantity of disinformation under the guise of truth, because the content they create is increasingly plausible, and it may add to the crisis of confidence that already exists. However, it can also be used to identify disinformation that without such a tool we may not detect, and a journalist could neutralize by responding more quickly and effectively. It is the responsibility of journalists to use artificial intelligence to their advantage to improve verification and create more trusted spaces for digital communication.

For governments

Finally, governments have the responsibility of implementing measures to curb the effects of disinformation on citizens and, consequently, on our democracies. Experts warn about the difficulty of legislating in this sense, because it cannot result in limiting or condemning freedom of expression, which is also basic and defining of democracy. These are some of the ideas expressed by them:

- **Guaranteeing the existence of independent media** to guarantee the possibility of being properly informed. Moreover, a minimum level of guarantees should be established for a website, social network account, podcast or blog to be considered a media.
- **Countering disinformation** by pointing out and publicly denying false information. Acting as an official source to deny certain false information.
- **Media literacy.** Spain is going very late in this regard compared with other countries. In a completely digitalized world in which communication in society has come to be done through all kinds of devices and technologies, people must learn to use them appropriately and respectfully. It is important to raise awareness among young people in schools of the existence of disinformation and provide them with tools to identify it. In addition, it would be important to carry out the same digital literacy exercise for non-digital natives, who are even less familiarized with fact-checking tools and, as a result, they may be less sceptical of the content they receive than digital natives.
- **Transparency mechanisms.** There must be effective mechanisms that control transparency of media, of sponsored contents or of the labelling of those contents, among other issues. The rules of free enterprise in the field of communication and journalism are too opaque. For example, behind a hoax spread by a given media on the risk of second home occupations in Spain, there may be funding from an alarm company to that media. In this regard, ensuring transparency in institutional advertising could also help to restore public confidence in the media.
- Improving the **protection of user data** to prevent them from being used for propaganda purposes. The promotional content we receive through social media and the Internet is selected based on our network activity. This means that the disinformation we receive in this way is also "personalised" and linked to our beliefs, making it easier for us not to detect it as such and to share it.
- Adopting a law that **holds technology companies**, not just media companies, **accountable for the content** they publish and disseminate. They are the main source of information nowadays in a transnational level, which requires an international regulation.