

## PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF FAKE NEWS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SPAIN. FROM THE CRIMINALIZATION TO THE PROMOTION OF INFORMATION LITERACY

## PREVENCIÓN DE LA DIFUSIÓN DE *FAKE NEWS* Y BULOS DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19 EN ESPAÑA. DE LA PENALIZACIÓN AL IMPULSO DE LA ALFABETIZACIÓN INFORMACIONAL

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### ABSTRACT

The spread of fake news and hoaxes during the COVID-19 pandemic has become a serious threat to the health of citizens who, in times of health crisis such as the current one, need to have truthful and reliable information. These circumstances justify the need to adopt certain measures to prevent and combat the dissemination of false information. In this context of disinformation, the Spanish government has raised the possibility of monitoring and penalizing the dissemination of fake news and hoaxes. This article aims to perform a critical analysis of criminalization as a measure to combat the spread of fake news and hoaxes during the COVID-19 pandemic. From this perspective, and as an alternative strategy to criminalization, the importance of information literacy is highlighted as a means of training critical news consumers, well-informed and trained in the use of tools to verify the information and prevent the spread of false news. Criminalizing the production of false news is a controversial measure that entails many problems from an ethical, legal, and democratic point of view. In the current context of the health crisis, it is more effective to make citizens aware of the risks posed by false news, teaching them to identify them and avoid their dissemination. As a strategy to combat the spread of fakes and hoaxes, the promotion of information hygiene and information literacy in society requires the active participation and collaboration of governments, the media, and citizens.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19; fake news; hoax; criminalization; fact-checking; information literacy; critical spirit.

### RESUMEN

La difusión de *fake news* y bulos durante la pandemia de COVID-19 se ha convertido en una grave amenaza para la salud de los ciudadanos que, en momentos de crisis

sanitaria como el actual, necesitan disponer de información veraz y fiable. Ello justifica la necesidad de adoptar determinadas medidas al objeto de prevenir y combatir la difusión de información falsa. En este contexto de desinformación, el gobierno español ha planteado la posibilidad de monitorizar y penalizar la difusión de *fakes* y bulos. Este artículo tiene como objetivo realizar un análisis crítico de la penalización como medida para combatir la difusión de *fakes news* y bulos durante la pandemia de COVID-19. Desde esta perspectiva, y como estrategia alternativa a la penalización se destaca la importancia de la alfabetización informacional como medio de formar consumidores de noticias críticos, bien informados y formados en el empleo de herramientas para verificar información y prevenir la propagación de noticias falsas. Penalizar la elaboración y difusión de noticias falsas es una medida polémica que entraña numerosos problemas desde un punto de vista ético, legal y, sobre todo, democrático. En la situación actual de crisis sanitaria resulta más eficaz concienciar a los ciudadanos sobre los riesgos que suponen las falsas noticias, enseñándoles a identificarlas y a evitar su difusión. Como estrategia para combatir la difusión de *fakes* y bulos, el fomento de la higiene informativa y la alfabetización informacional de la sociedad requieren de la participación y colaboración activa de los gobiernos, medios de comunicación y, sobre todo, de los ciudadanos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** COVID-19, fake news, bulo, penalización, verificación de información, alfabetización informacional, espíritu crítico

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Fake news is false news deliberately disseminated to deceive, manipulate, mislead, discredit, or exalt an institution, group, or person, or obtaining some type of economic, ideological, or political benefit (García, 2019).

Related to the concept of fake news, and especially popularized in our country during the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus (SARS-CoV-2), is the term hoax, which describes “all content that is intentionally false and of truthful appearance, conceived to deceive citizens, and publicly disseminated through any platform or social media” (Salaverría et al., 2020, p. 4).

Among the characteristics that define fake news items are their falsehood and intentionality (Wardle, 2017; Bakir and McStay, 2018); their ease of propagation (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018); their persistence over time, since they continue to spread even when they have been denied; the fact of containing a high emotional charge, which awakens feelings and influences the reader's state of mind, often mobilizing them to action (Álvarez Calvo, 2020); and their ability to multiply in situations of uncertainty and crisis, in which human beings feel the urgent need to seek and obtain information (Masip et al., 2020).

Fake news has now become a serious threat to democracy and freedom of expression (Bennett and Livingston, 2018), as the results of the latest Eurobarometer testify, according to which 83% of Europeans perceive fake news as a problem for

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democracy, in general (European Commission, 2018). Fake news misinforms and polarizes public opinion, affecting the proper democratic functioning of society and altering the coexistence of the country (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Bakir and McStay, 2018).

In situations of crisis and uncertainty such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, fake news items often generate alarm and confusion, putting citizens' lives at risk, who take them for certain and even ignore information from proven and/or official sources. In this sense, the spread of fake news also constitutes a serious threat to official communication channels, especially those of public administrations (Bennett and Livingston, 2018).

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

Starting from this situation and considering the multiple consequences and adverse effects of fake news, this work aims to expose different strategies and measures to prevent and combat the development and dissemination of fake news and hoaxes. With this objective, a critical analysis of criminalization as a possible strategy promoted by the Spanish Government to combat the production and uncontrolled dissemination of fake news and hoaxes about the coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic in our country is carried out.

In contrast to the criminalization strategy, we highlight the role of information literacy as a means of promoting critical thinking in the population to provide it with an effective instrument to verify the information it consumes. From this perspective and as a possible solution to the problem of the spread of false information, we present a series of measures and steps that make it easier for citizens to identify the false information that circulates on digital platforms and social networks, to prevent and, thus, combat its spread.

## **3. FAKE NEWS AND COVID-19**

In recent years, we have witnessed a remarkable proliferation of hoaxes and false news related to health, wellness, and disease (Elsevier Connect, 2020). In this way, the current pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has become a real breeding ground for the proliferation of fake news and hoaxes, due to several factors.

In the first place, we highlight the human need to be informed in situations of crisis and uncertainty, in which emotional aspects prevail over rational ones. From this perspective, the great uncertainty and the strong emotional burden related to the health, economic, and social crisis that accompanies the COVID-19 pandemic, produces an accentuated need for information as a strategy to adapt and behave appropriately in the face of an unusual and unexpected situation (Montesi, 2020).

Another factor to consider is the absence of reliable official information about the disease and the irresponsible attitude of some authorities and politicians, who have often acted as mere propagators of disinformation (Pérez-Dasilva, Meso-Ayerdi, and Mendiguren-Galdospín, 2020). The role played by the media, which a large part of the public currently perceives as sensationalists and conditioned by their editorial line

when reporting on the pandemic, has done little to improve the situation, thereby generating social alarm and the loss of citizens' trust (Masip et al., 2020).

Finally, we point out that, during the confinement decreed by most countries to try to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, social networks have become an essential source for information and, therefore, for disinformation (Ortega, 2020). After losing trust in politicians, the media, and authorities when it comes to obtaining reliable information about the virus and the disease it causes, a large part of the public has turned to social networks in search of that information that allows them to understand and adapt to the new situation.

In this context of misinformation conformed by the above circumstances, today we are witnessing what is called an “infodemic”, defined as an excess of information - some accurate and some not- that makes it difficult for people to find truthful and reliable sources when they need them (World Health Organization, 2020).

Such has been the proliferation of false news during the COVID-19 pandemic in our country, that the Ministry of the Interior published a report on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020 in which more than 50 hoaxes and fake news were collected about the issue (Intelligence Center against Terrorism and Organized Crime, CITCO, 2020). Along the same lines, both nationally and internationally, several organizations and fact-checkers have drawn up extensive and detailed lists of fake news and hoaxes spread since the epidemic began in China.<sup>1</sup>

Most of these fake news and hoaxes seek to generate alarm and confusion among the population. This has been reflected in news that has spread false information about the contagion and death by COVID-19 of personalities and authorities, such as Pope Francis, the almost entire Royal Family, and several members of the Government, including President Pedro Sánchez or the former president Pablo Iglesias.

It is important to note that a large group of widespread hoaxes refer to the health management of the pandemic, and clinical and medical aspects such as contagion, prevention, or treatment of the disease (Maldito Bulo, 2021). The confusion that these fake news and hoaxes induce increases in the absence of truthful and verified official information and as some of them come from supposed professionals or experts in the field who spread their messages through social networks (Peña, Bermejo, and Zanni, 2021).

The hoaxes about ways of contagion and alleged measures to prevent contagion and treat the disease have been particularly widespread (Sánchez-Duarte and Magallón, 2020; Moreno-Castro, Vengut-Climent, Cano-Orón, and Mendoza-Poudereux, 2021). Regarding the ways of contagion, we cite “the coronavirus is not transmitted through the air”, “asymptomatic patients do not infect”, “beard and mustache increase contagion”, “Fernando Simón has said that it is best to become infected now because later there will not be enough hospital beds for everyone”, or that the World Health

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<sup>1</sup> As an example of this, as of July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the fact-checker *Maldita.es* had identified more than 1,100 false news, lies, and hoaxes about COVID-19 (Maldito Bulo, 2021).

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Organization (WHO) "has asked to avoid having unprotected sex with animals to avoid contagion" (Maldito Buló, 2021).

On the other hand, and based on the fact that respiratory distress is one of the serious symptoms of the coronavirus, a hoax warned that "we can know if we are infected with coronavirus if we can hold our breath for more than ten seconds." Another hoax that spread and generalized in practically all the communities is that planes or helicopters were going to spray urban centers to prevent contagion.

Besides the above, other alleged measures disseminated to prevent the spread of coronavirus have been to have sex at least every two days, smoke, consume cocaine, smear the skin with sesame oil, ingest large amounts of water or rinse the throat with hot water and salt or vinegar, disinfect with baby wipes or wash hands with child urine. According to other hoaxes, the intake of products such as wine, coffee, vitamin C, or omega fatty acids would also prevent contagion.

Regarding face masks as a measure to prevent contagion, several false information pieces have been published about their ineffectiveness and possible adverse effects of their use, including hypoxia, neurodegenerative diseases, or the increased risk of suffering from cancer (Lorenzo, 2020).

There have also been numerous hoaxes about the treatment of the disease with alleged cures and remedies such as drinking hot water, drinking sodium chlorite, lemon, and bicarbonate, eating bananas, or exposing oneself to the light of ultraviolet lamps. In this line, the information that claimed that ibuprofen aggravated COVID-19 infections caused such controversy and confusion that the Ministry of Health had to officially deny it (Spanish Agency for Medicines and Health Products, 2020).

Finally, we can cite those hoaxes that are based on irrational and conspiracy beliefs and theories, for example about the origin of the virus. According to some of these hoaxes, the coronavirus was intentionally created as a biological weapon to reduce the world's population, mainly that of the elderly, and activated by 5G technology. The development of the vaccine has also been the subject of multiple hoaxes by supporters of conspiracy theories and anti-vaccines, including the alleged death of clinical trials' volunteers, that the vaccine causes infertility, or "is made from cells of aborted fetuses" (Furlan, 2021).

From conspiracy theories, it has even been possible to deny the existence of the virus and the pandemic and reject preventive measures such as the use of face masks, social distancing, and getting the vaccine. Consequently, the numerous damages and negative effects generated by fake news and hoaxes, both in the democratic coexistence of society and the physical and psychological health of its citizens, lead to the need to identify, combat, and neutralize them.

Among the measures proposed to fight against the spread of fake news and hoaxes on the internet and social networks, we can mention: a) promote truthful and quality journalism available to all; b) modify the algorithms of internet search engines; c) strengthen fact-checkers; d) monitor and block certain web portals, profiles, and accounts on social networks; e) penalize the dissemination of false news constituting

crimes; and f) inform and train citizens so that they learn to distinguish between true and false information.

#### **4. THE CRIMINALIZATION APPROACH**

In managing the COVID-19 crisis, the Spanish government seems to have opted for the route of monitoring and controlling social networks to detect and report fake news, as well as for the promotion of its possible criminalization, both measures that have caused great controversy. From this perspective, the need to establish greater and more severe control mechanisms against fake news, and even new legislation to fight against disinformation, has been defended (Maldonado, 2020).

Thus, on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020, during a press conference held at the Palacio de La Moncloa, Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska pointed out that “we are monitoring social networks and all those hoaxes and fake news that may have criminal content, and we inform the prosecutor or judicial authority” (Pool Moncloa / Villar y del Monte, 2020).

A few days later and at the request of the Government, the State Attorney General, Dolores Delgado, ordered the Attorney General's Office to prepare a report on the impact of fake news items on public opinion and their possible fit as new crimes or crimes associated with others already existing in the current Criminal Code. This measure was due to an attempt by the Government to put an end to the fake news stories spread by VOX since “some experts” considered that those responsible for the propaganda apparatus of this party could be committing a kind of “new crime of *informative terrorism*, sabotage, or creation of social alarm” (Antequera, 2020).

According to the subsequent study carried out by the Technical Secretariat of the State Attorney General's Office, depending on their form, dissemination, and significance, fake news and hoaxes disseminated during the coronavirus crisis could incur up to a dozen criminal offenses, including those of hatred, discovery and disclosure of secrets, crime against moral integrity, public disorder, insults and slander, crimes against public health (Garea, 2020).

But the controversy jumped to the media on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020, when the then Chief of Staff of the Civil Guard, General José Manuel Santiago, declared during the press conference of the monitoring committee of the coronavirus crisis that the armed institute worked in the fight against hoaxes disseminated through social networks, to minimize “the climate contrary” to the Government for its management against the crisis (Terradillos, 2020).

As a result of the controversy raised by General Santiago's statements, on April 21<sup>st</sup>, the then Minister of Education and Vocational Training, María Isabel Celaá, declared that the Government should “protect citizens from false messages” and that it could not accept “negative messages, ultimately fake messages” that went against scientific criteria and “the integrity of public institutions” (Radiotelevisión Española, 2020).

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However, the possible criminalization of fake news and hoaxes raises numerous problems related to conceptual, legal, and ethical aspects.

First, the absence of a precise and consensual definition of fake news (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling, 2018), which is related to the need to distinguish between the intentional dissemination of false information knowing that it is (disinformation) and the spreading of false or erroneous information involuntarily or unconsciously, due to unawareness, ignorance, or a simple desire to gain popularity (misinformation) (Wardle, 2017; Bakir and McStay, 2018). The lack of a precise definition of fake news often makes it difficult to identify these items with certainty and prevents governments from legislating against disinformation (Encabo, 2020).

Related to the above, the lack of neutrality of the fact-checkers in charge of deciding what is and what is not fake news in our country, fundamentally Maldita.es and Newtral, has been pointed out, due to their lack of impartiality and ideological neutrality (Encabo, 2020; González, 2019; Pérez Rodríguez, 2020).

On the other hand, from a legal point of view, the dissemination of fake news seems to have *a priori* a complicated fit in the current Criminal Code, since as the State Attorney General, Dolores Delgado, finally recognized, the preparation and/or dissemination of fake news and hoaxes is not, in itself, a crime (Urreiztieta, 2020). The dissemination of fake news and hoaxes could only be criminalized if they are used as a means to commit certain crimes, such as insults and slander or to promote hatred, hostility, discrimination, or violence towards certain groups due to their members belonging to an ethnic group, race, or nation (article 510 CC).

Prohibiting the dissemination of fake news could also represent an attack on the fundamental rights contained in the Spanish Constitution since it would limit the right to freedom of expression and truthful information (Mejías and López, 2020), granting the Government the power to control the information that society receives based on its own ideological interests (Encabo, 2020).

Finally, and from an ethical and moral point of view, the Government would hardly be legitimized to promote the criminalization of fake news and hoaxes when President Pedro Sánchez himself has been singled out, on several occasions, for having spread news and information classified as false during the pandemic by various media outlets and by the fact-checkers Maldita.es and Newtral (Maldito Dato, 2020; Larraz, 2020; Trillo, 2020; McLean and Pérez Maestro, 2020; CNN, 2020).



Figure 1: Dissemination of false information by official sources.

Source: <https://www.newtral.es/sanchez-espana-es-de-los-paises-del-mundo-que-mas-test-realiza-a-su-poblacion/20200425/>



Figure 2: Dissemination of false information by official sources.

Source: <https://twitter.com/cnn/status/1259336128634720256>

## **5. FAKE NEWS AND COVID-19 AGAINST FAKE NEWS, INFORMATION LITERACY, AND CRITICAL SPIRIT**

Regardless of the monitoring and criminalization of the dissemination of certain false news and hoaxes that could contain criminal content or intent, their prevention and control involve making citizens aware of the importance of avoiding being victims of manipulation and not participating in these channels of disinformation (Encabo, 2020).

Whether due to a lack of critical thinking or a childish and naive attitude, many people become "necessary collaborators" in the propagation of malicious messages that provoke hatred, fear, confusion, and lack of solidarity. In this sense, citizens must be aware that they should not share information whose veracity has not been verified, and that they should always demand verified and authentic news since only truthful information guarantees their freedom (Álvarez Calvo, 2020).

The most effective measure to identify and combat fake news is to train critical, well-trained and informed news consumers (Parra-Valero and Oliveira, 2018). This is achieved, fundamentally, through the so-called information literacy, defined as "the ability to think critically and make balanced judgments about any information that we find and use" (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, CILIP, 2018, p. 3).

Information literacy's main objectives are to boost critical thinking among readers and encourage them to consume information from various sources so that they can distinguish sources of reliable information from those that are not (Finley, McGowan, & Kluever, 2017), as well as fight against their own ideological biases (Aparici, García-Marín, and Rincón-Manzano, 2019). Therefore, critical thinking is a necessary skill to detect and combat fake news (International Federation of Libraries Association, IFLA, 2021; Montesi, 2020).

### **5.1. Critical spirit and fact-checking**

Exercising critical thinking to contrast the veracity or falsity of information implies starting a verification process composed of several steps (Graghani, 2018; IFLA, 2021; Llorca, 2017; Newtral, 2019). These steps are very useful to identify and combat the spread of fake news and hoaxes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Faced with the slightest doubt about the veracity of a news item, the first rule is not to share it without having previously verified it (Graghani, 2018). Hoaxes and fake news seek to manipulate our emotions, create outrage, alarm, or influence our mood so that we share them on social networks without thinking (Newtral, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to contrast and verify the news item before giving credit and disseminating it, which requires an exercise of prudence, reflection, and impulse control so as not to fall into the trap of automatic retweets (IFeel, 2020).
2. When assessing the truth or falsity of a news item, we must be aware of the possibility of being victims of certain cognitive biases, which affect both

the search for information that we carry out, and the selection, processing, and analysis that we make of it. Cognitive biases are misinterpretations of information that affect our ability to perceive the world around us, elaborate our thoughts and judgments, make decisions, and act accordingly.

Our personal, cultural, religious, political, and ideological interests and beliefs can condition how we behave in the face of fake news, leading us to accept as true those fake news and hoaxes that contain information related to our interests and beliefs. This process constitutes the essence of the so-called confirmation bias<sup>2</sup>, which leads us to give greater veracity to news and information that fit with our ideas and prejudices, even if they are false (Aparici, García-Marín, and Rincón-Manzano, 2019).

3. Distrust the headlines. Fake news items are often shared only because the headline arouses the reader's attention and mobilizes their emotions, such as fear or outrage (Bakir and McStay, 2018). In this regard, news headlines can provide us with useful information about whether they are true or untrue.

It may happen that, even if the headline contains false, exaggerated, or sensationalist statements, the body or content of the news item expresses the opposite, tinges, or even contradicts what the headline says. For this reason, it is important not to stay in the headline but to read the entire news story (Gragnani, 2018).

Another way to confirm the veracity of the news is to track the headline in internet search engines. If it is true, likely, other media have already reproduced it; On the contrary, if it is false, some fact-checkers may have verified that it is a hoax or false rumor (Gragnani, 2018; Newtral, 2019).

4. It is also important to check that the news is not a joke. There are certain satirical newspapers and portals that, humorously, disseminate news and fictitious/false information both through their digital platforms and websites and through social networks, so that sometimes it can be difficult to differentiate fake news from humor or satire.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Cognitive Psychology, confirmation bias is defined as the tendency to seek, favor, interpret, and remember information that confirms one's beliefs, ideas, or hypotheses; and ignore or underestimate the disconfirming information (Plous, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> In Spain, we can cite the cases of *El Mundo Today* ([www.elmundotoday.com](http://www.elmundotoday.com)) and *Hay Noticias* ([www.haynoticias.es](http://www.haynoticias.es)). In September 2010, the news of the TV channel Cuatro took as true and reproduced a story published by *El Mundo Today* with the headline "The new iPod models will not have shitty music." On another occasion, it was the newspaper *20 Minutos*, who echoed a fake news story from this media outlet according to which a client of the *El Bulli* restaurant had eaten the bill "thinking it was another dish" (Bravo, 2010).

In the case of *Hay Noticias*, famous was the news story according to which two Galician altar boys had been arrested for introducing marijuana into the *botafumeiro* (smoke expeller), a news item seen by more than two million people and which received more than 250,000 interactions on social networks. Or their "invention" about the woman who had been pretending to be blind for 28 years so as not to greet people, which was published in 23 countries and translated into 13 languages, being picked up by serious media such as *Marca*, *Catalunya Press*, *Cadena Dial*, or *Diario de Navarra* (Gosálvez, 2018).

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Similarly, it must be taken into account that certain advertising campaigns (infomercials, sponsored content) make use of fake news to attract potential customers. For the same reason, we must question the information disseminated by *bloggers*, *YouTubers*, and *influencers* on social networks since they are frequently financially sponsored by certain brands and pursue commercial interests (Llorca, 2017).

5. We must also distrust information that is apparently disseminated as "exclusive news" or "breaking news." In the technological and globalized world in which we live, it is very difficult for an individual to anticipate a media outlet when communicating true breaking news. Therefore, we must be cautious when faced with alleged exclusive news from unknown sources and that reach us through social networks.
6. Another necessary measure is to verify the origin or authorship of the news and the reliability of its sources, making sure that these are known and/or trusted. Oftentimes, fake news and hoaxes come from web pages or portals that try to impersonate trustworthy media, using URLs (Uniform Resource Locator) that are very similar to theirs. A false URL that tries to imitate a real one or that corresponds to a non-existent domain is an indication that we are facing fake news (Álvarez Calvo, 2020).

Carrying out an internet search, entering the name of the media or the author of the news, will allow us to know the professional profile of the author. Likewise, we must pay attention to possible political and ideological biases of the author and the media outlet that publishes the news (Gragnani, 2018). For this, we can view other news inserted in the web page where the information to be verified is included, and analyze if they are just as striking or surprising; or check if the page has a section such as "Who we are" or "About us", in which we can obtain information about the media outlet (Newtral, 2019).

We must be especially careful with the news we receive in social networks, email, or instant messaging apps since, although they usually come from contacts and acquaintances, they usually refer to other supposed relatives or close friends, so that the real source is anonymous or not identifiable. We can ask the person who forwarded the news to us who they received it from, if they trust that person, and if they have verified its content in any way (Gragnani, 2018).

We must also be wary of anonymous profiles or accounts on Facebook or Twitter, since they usually have some kind of hidden motivation, generally political or ideological, or they are bots at the service of some cause.

7. The way how the news is written, its structure or format, and the language used can provide us with some clues as to its veracity. It is common for fake news to include unnecessary adjectives and/or abuse colloquial language and the use of personal pronouns, opinions, and first persons of the singular (Llorca, 2017). Similarly, the presence of inappropriate expressions, misspellings, or inappropriate features of journalistic writing constitutes another warning sign (Álvarez Calvo, 2020).

8. When a news item is true, it is more likely to cite sources, include links to other content or external sources, or mention official documents (Gragnani, 2018). On the contrary, fake news items usually present the content without citing any link, person, statistic, or official source that endorses it (Newtral, 2019). Therefore, we must distrust the veracity of the news that mentions studies, reports, or expert opinions without including the link to said sources. If the news includes such links, we will go to the original sources to confirm the information (Llorca, 2017).
9. Another requirement is to verify the context of the news, checking if it is dated. Taking a story out of its original context and disclosing it on a different date is another clear example of misinformation to take into account (Gragnani, 2018).

The images, photographs, and infographics that accompany the news or information can also be revealing of its truth or falsehood. These images may have been manipulated or retouched by computer programs, or be authentic but taken out of context to make believe the lies they accompany.

Determining the falseness of the images requires the use of specialized software, as well as certain technical training that is not always available to every user (Aparici, García-Marín, and Rincón-Manzano, 2019), which requires the promotion and development of image-verification mechanisms (Cea-Esteruelas, 2018). When suspecting that an image has been taken out of its original context, it is advisable to carry out a “reverse search” (Gragnani, 2018), to obtain all the available information about that image.<sup>4</sup>

Fake news and hoaxes can also take the form of audio or video recordings made by people apparently without bad intentions or political or ideological motivations. These recordings usually try to create alarm and confusion by spreading some kind of immediate or imminent danger, convince us of something without evidence, or incite hatred against a specific group or collective (Newtral, 2019). An internet search by entering in a search engine the keywords that summarize the news and the name of the social network in which it has been disseminated can help confirm its veracity (Gragnani, 2018).

10. Finally, we must bear in mind that technology itself offers us several tools to automatically perform some of the previous steps. This is the case of *BS Detector* and *Fake News Detector*, plug-ins for Internet browsers that analyze the content of the web pages we visit and allow us to detect the existence of fake news. In the same way, we can go to fact-checkers such as FactCheck.org or PolitiFact.com in the United States; or Maldita.es and Newtral in Spain.

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<sup>4</sup> The “reverse search” is a technique that allows you to obtain information about an image, locate its source and when it was taken or edited, identify the web pages where it appears, or even find the person who created it. There are computer apps to carry out this type of search, for example: <https://images.google.com/>, <https://reverse.photos/>, or <https://yandex.com/images/>

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The production and dissemination of fake news and hoaxes is a communicative process that acquires great importance in situations of crisis and uncertainty. Fake news and hoaxes pose a threat to the democracy of countries and the coexistence and health of their citizens. Furthermore, in times of health crisis such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, the intentional dissemination of false information creates confusion and alarm, spreads fear, and contributes to the politicization and polarization of society.

It is in times of uncertainty and crisis like the current one when citizens need up-to-date, immediate, and, above all, truthful and accurate information. This requires the adoption of various measures to combat the production and dissemination of false news, including promoting quality journalism; enhancing fact-checking mechanisms; monitor and, if necessary, block certain web portals, profiles, and accounts on social networks; and criminalize certain conducts that may constitute criminal offenses.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying health and information crisis, the Spanish Government has raised the possibility of criminalizing the production and dissemination of fake news and hoaxes, either by creating new criminal offenses that include the so-called *informative terrorism*, or by including these behaviors in criminal offenses currently included in the Criminal Code, such as crimes of incitement to hatred, insults, or slander. However, the possible criminalization of fake news and hoaxes entails numerous problems that are difficult to solve and that include formal, ethical, moral, and legal issues.

In any case, preventing and combating disinformation during the current pandemic involves promoting information literacy and information hygiene in society, so that citizens are aware of the risks posed by fake news and hoaxes and learn to use strategies and tools to identify them and prevent their uncontrolled spread.

Information literacy implies promoting greater knowledge among the population of fake news and hoaxes, their characteristics, their production and dissemination mechanisms, and, above all, their consequences for society. In this sense, and as pointed out by various authors (Costa-Sánchez and López-García, 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020) we highlight the need to promote research on the subject and to transfer and transmit the results to the population.

As a strategy, information literacy requires the media to have an active role, which must become quality informational references for citizens, abandoning the ideological biases that largely characterize their editorial lines for the sake of greater objectivity and political neutrality.

Information literacy aims to teach citizens to act in a reflective, critical, and responsible way, so that they verify the veracity of the information they receive before sharing or disseminating it. This will enable the implementation of informative and communicative mechanisms and channels that facilitate the verification of news by creating, for example, lists and virtual communities of users and readers on social

networks. In this way, and in an exercise of shared responsibility, citizens will be able to verify the veracity of the information they receive and, if it is not true, alert the person who sent it of its falsehood (Editorial Nobbot, 2020).

Therefore, information literacy stands as one of the main tools to fight against the misinformation that causes fake news and hoaxes. Let us not forget that there is no greater enemy to disinformation than well-trained and informed citizens.

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