



Disinformation in Venezuela: Media Ecosystem and Government Controls

Mariela Torrealba
Ysabel Vilorio

Introduction: Outlook, Purposes, and Country Outlook

In a scenario of sustained humanitarian emergency with a severe political, social, and economic crisis, disinformation is found cross-sectionally in Venezuela's communications. The country faces disinformation and misinformation: The former, in which the term is understood as a deliberate and orchestrated process of proliferation and saturation of false news content, and the latter, linked to the lack or absence of information.

We propose, then, at first, to present an outlook of Venezuela's context; then we will describe the changes that have occurred in the media ecosystem to explain how disinformation is disseminated across the country under the classic form of the term, misinformation, i.e., gaps

and lack of information. We will then elaborate on how disinformation and hoaxes have developed in the country, how disinformation operations and hoaxes are conducted, and also how the national conversation is curbed on social media by government action.

Writing about Venezuela months before closing deadline for publication becomes a challenge given the staggering decline in a country that seems to be moving backwards. The reduction in the life expectancy of the population, the fall in practically all macroeconomic and social indicators, the reduction in the supply and scope of utilities (e.g., water, power, gas), the flight of at least a quarter of the country's population, the increase in maternal and infant mortality and malnutrition, the chronic shortage of gasoline in a country that was once a producer are facts that partly explain the complex humanitarian emergency in which this South American nation is immersed.

The complex humanitarian emergency has not been overcome even though, in early 2022, the country experienced a slight economic growth after seven uninterrupted years of declining gross domestic product (GDP). Hyperinflation seemed to be slowing down. However, its specter haunts an economy that has not been able to overcome its problems and, as reported by the Venezuelan Observatory of Finance (Observatorio Venezolano de Finanzas, OVF) in July 2023, is once again in recession. The country does not have permanent access to drinking water and power outages are frequent. Amid the lack of official information, studies conducted by the Venezuelan Utilities Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Servicios Públicos, OVSP) reveal that over 60% of the population surveyed in 12 cities has an unfavorable opinion on their quality in reason of supply disruptions, which sometimes span over 45 days or more without piped water supply. *Apagones* (i.e., blackouts, unscheduled power outages) increased in 2022 by 22% with at least 233,298 interruptions. Telecommunications have improved due to the incursion of private internet service providers (ISPs) with costs unaffordable for an impoverished population whose income is not paid in hard currency.

The study on *Living Conditions of Venezuelans: between Humanitarian Emergency and Pandemic* (*Condiciones de Vida de los Venezolanos: entre Emergencia Humanitaria y Pandemia*, UCAB, 2022), conducted by the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello (UCAB), the Universidad Central

de Venezuela (UCV), and the Universidad Simón Bolívar (USB) does not bring good news. This study, making up for the lack of official information in the country, details how Venezuela lost the growth-driving demographic (children, teens, and young adults) in reason of the exodus experienced amid the complex humanitarian emergency and thereby abruptly changed the demographic structure due to the loss of its young population. This has altered aging and demographic burden indexes. They also reveal a statistical outlook in which eight out of ten Venezuelans are poor.

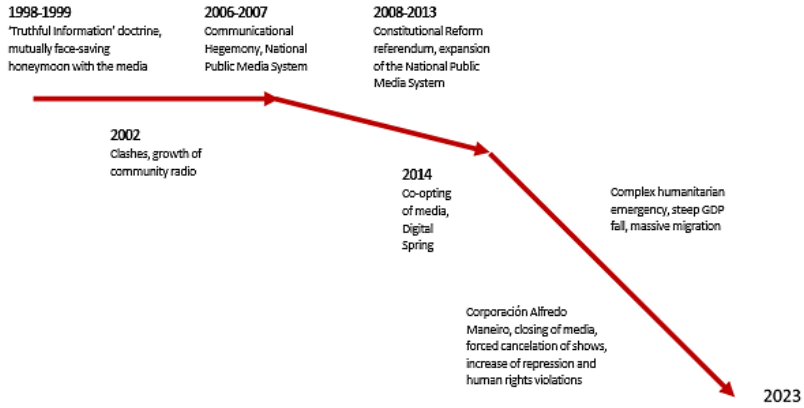
Against this backdrop, we should not ignore the impact of the migration experienced by the country in the last decade. As of March 2023, the Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants (R4V) estimates that there are more than 7.3 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela worldwide, of which over 6.14 million are in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to the Living Conditions Survey (Encuesta de Condiciones de Vida [Encovi]), UCAB, 2022), the age of 50.5% of those emigrating from Venezuela between 2017 and 2022 is between 15 and 29. The last census conducted in the country in 2011 estimated the total population at 29,096,159 inhabitants.

Along with an abrupt impoverishment of the population, Venezuela has experienced an institutional and political decline as reported by international organizations and multilateral entities concerned about the country's situation. Amid restrictions on public and citizen freedoms, those compromising freedom of expression and the right to information process have been particularly serious.

Changes across the Media Landscape

Over the past two decades, changes in Venezuela have impacted the way we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived as a country. They have been particularly significant in the media ecosystem, which has been transformed amid the creation and expansion of a government media system and the methodical attack on independent outlets. This has practically caused the destruction of the landscape we knew by the turn of the century.

Any attempts at summarizing the events that explain how we got to the current situation in almost a quarter of a century is a complex task of exclusion and selection. To accomplish it, we will give priority focus to few essential milestones and, for the sake of conciseness, we will rule out many others.



Graph 1. Milestones in Venezuela's changing media landscape

In 1998, the Venezuelan media ecosystem consisted of 124 daily newspapers and 375 AM or FM radio stations. In 1999, there was a total of 14 broadcast TV media operating on VHF (four national networks, three superstations, and two TV stations serving their home state markets) and 20 UHF broadcasting outlets (three superstations and 17 TV stations serving their home state markets). In addition, by that time, 16 pay TV companies provided services across the country. Despite the almost constant economic crisis in Venezuela, private media reached significant advertising revenues totaling USD 6.14 billion between 1991 and 1998. In the last years of the 20th century, the media increased their reach and coverage by continuously introducing technological upgrades.

An essential fact to understand the transformation undergone by the national media ecosystem is the change in communications and journalism from the government's perspective. Before *Chavismo*, successive economic crises – the one erupting in 1983, the debt crisis, and the so-called 'lost decade' – had eroded the government's media infrastructure, with a few outlets in precarious conditions. Towards

the end of 1998, the Venezuelan government had a VHF broadcast network (Venezolana de Televisión, VTV, channel 8), with increasingly outdated technology. In a move questioned at the time, the property of the then state-owned Televisora Nacional (channel 5) was transferred over to the Archbishopric of Caracas in early December 1998, shortly after the first election won by Hugo Chávez. Broadcast radio network Radio Nacional de Venezuela had only four stations. In addition, overall, state-owned media were technologically outdated, and government funding for media did not reach a single percentage digit. A proposal by Venezuela's Commission for State Reform (Comisión para la Reforma del Estado, Copre), sponsored by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), states: "In general, the allocations by the Venezuelan government for its own broadcast media are low – not reaching 0.05%, including the budget earmarks from the government to VTV and Radio Nacional [...]" The proposal also indicates that state-owned outlets (particularly TV) "have lost ground among the audience, quality and technical infrastructure for transmission and production" (Copre, 1998, 33).

Despite the Venezuelan public sector's communicational vulnerabilities at the time, government relationships with the media could be described as a *cordiale entente*. On that understanding, the media acted as a conduit for whistleblowing, including that contributing to erode the credibility of political parties, the government, and the entire political system.

During the first decade of the 20th century, Chávez prioritized communications as a whole, with himself front and center stage. Since he took the presidential office in February 1999, he would focus on "re-founding the Republic", by means of a Constituent Assembly (nicknamed *La Constituyente*) and would enjoy a brief, mutually face-saving honeymoon with the media.

From this first decade of the 20th century, we will only refer to one landmark event: The closing of the longest operating private broadcast network in Venezuela, RCTV, concurrently with new rules of the game for granting broadcast licenses under the doctrine of Communicational Hegemony and with the consequent creation of the originally-named National Public Media System (Sistema Nacional de Medios Públicos)

between 2008 and 2013. From that moment on, a new phase began. Worthy of mention is the dissident stance of the media during the era of the Coordinadora Democrática (CD) opposition coalition and the coup d'état of April 2002. For conciseness, we shall omit the (almost frantic) whirlwind in the field of communications, which for Chávez was a top priority as an avenue to connect politically with society, amid his permanent incitement against the media and journalists, as well as new rules that began to change the communications landscape.

Chávez, who was at center stage and wanted to be the only one there, confessed during some of his frequent and lengthy broadcast radio and TV addresses that he had a passion for hosting public events and for communications. Furthermore, early on his first term in the presidential office and at least until 2007, he contradictorily promoted citizen participation while co-opting and subjecting the wrongly called community media to his political agenda. He strengthened and expanded the state-owned media base, but controlled all their information policies and turned them into a propaganda apparatus at the service of his political project. It promoted the creation of a regulatory and institutional framework encouraging the use of the Internet while developing another for the control of the mainstream media. His “democracy of participants and protagonists” (*democracia participativa y protagónica*) degraded to a new form of old-school authoritarianism.

During the first decade of *Chavismo*, political scientist and media researcher Andrés Cañizález (2011) stated that its hegemonic tendencies took the forms of a narrative (denigrating and intimidating journalists and the media), of executive actions (open assaults on media facilities, aggressions against journalists, and denials of access to public information), of the statutory fabric (use of regulations and administrative resources, as well as court rulings), of media tools (use and abuse of airtime for mandatory broadcasts of presidential addresses and propagandistic bias of state-owned media), and of funding (withdrawal of government advertising to outlets critical of the government).

In May 2007, RCTV was closed under the pretext that its broadcast license had expired, thereby beginning the countdown of all broadcast TV and radio licenses granted in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore,

licenses, that until then had been granted for 20 years, began to be renewed for only five.

However, already in January that year, the government's media expansion, increasingly voracious, had already been given a name: Then-Minister of Information and Communication Andrés Izarra, declared to the media: "Socialism needs a 'communicational hegemony'. Hegemony in the media is an instrument required for the Revolution", and added defiantly: "Yes, we're going to have a communicational hegemony, so what?" (Transparencia Venezuela, 2023)

On the other hand, although the national government had proposed solidifying state-owned media, it was not until the second tenure of Andrés Izarra at the head of the People's Ministry for Communication and Information (2008-2009) when the creation of a National Public Media System was formally discussed. The growth of media outlets in the hands of the State is consistent with the proposals of the Simón Bolívar National Project, 2007-2013. This centralized economic and political plan claims to have as its purpose "to consolidate the national communications system as an instrument for strengthening the revolutionary democracy of protagonists and the formation of the public media". (Presidencia de la República, 2007, 16).

Paola Bautista de Alemán, as quoted in the report made by Transparencia Venezuela (2023), *A Forced Silence (Un Silencio a la Fuerza)* reports that the National Public Media System array operating between 2008 and 2013 consisted of seven television stations, five radio stations, including the Venezuelan News Agency (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, AVN).

The report also states:

Although they were not part of the National Public Media System, 244 community radio stations and 32 television stations contributed to disseminate and amplify the voices of the government sector as well as its narrative, in a travesty of the true essence of community media. (Transparencia Venezuela, 2023)

The academic and researcher in communications Agrivalca Canelón indicates that Chávez's government:

[...] generated a metamorphosis in the structure of the media in Venezuela, increasing the number of players, their variety and ownership profile. In this regard, the magnitude of the public sector has expanded, increasing its media power to the point of becoming the second largest communications group in the country, judging by the number of broadcast radio and TV outlets it owns, including alternative and/or community media. (Canelón, 2014)

After Chávez's death, the National Public Media System was transformed into the Bolivarian System of Communication and Information (Sistema Bolivariano de Comunicación e Información, SiBCI). Additionally, as Paola Bautista de Alemán notes in the report mentioned above, “[...] the Bolivarian Revolution has achieved establishing a communicational monopoly serving the political-ideological objectives of the regime. The totalitarian communicational model and the hijacking of the media's narrative for propaganda purposes is a reality” (Transparencia Venezuela, 2023).

Although in this second decade of the century there is a state communicational monopoly, audiences reached by the governmental and ‘para-governmental’ media system – a term borrowed from Professor Marcelino Bisbal – were and still are very small. Already without Chávez alive as the leading voice (only remaining in file footage), changes in the media system have been intensified by governmental restrictions, particularly in 2014, 2017, and 2022.

Going back to 2014, communicational milestones included co-opting media dissenting from the government and the non-transparent acquisition of legacy, even centenary media. These moves involved broadcast media that had maintained challenging stances towards the government (e.g., 24-hour news channel Globovisión), traditional newspapers with over 100 years' activity (*El Universal*), or even involved media that had been very lenient with the government's performance (*Últimas Noticias* daily). Although these three buyouts are the most widely known and scrutinized, there is little information on a significant series of acquisitions involving local print, radio, and TV outlets over these years.

A review of studies conducted by Freedom House on freedom in the digital realm prepared by Raiza Uribarri for the communications research NGO Medianálisis notes:

From being a relatively free country in 2011, restrictions escalated until, in 2017, it ranked as a country without freedom in the digital realm, a rating that still persists. There was a year in which the category referring to content improved one point, not because there were no restrictions, but because it was the period during which a remarkable group of Venezuelan journalists launched independent media startups to circumvent the censorship exerted by the government through operations of closure, acquisition, or manipulation of the editorial policies of the mainstream media. (Uribarri, 2021)

The researcher cited above points out that, since 2011 and until 2021, freedoms in the digital realm have been progressively and steadily curtailed. In addition, access has been deliberately narrowed and citizens frequently stumble upon blocked content or a digital realm contaminated by propaganda. The NGO Espacio Público reported that nearly 500 websites were blocked in Venezuela in February 2014, and different NGOs reported that online communications were slowed down during protests across the country. Transparencia Venezuela's report recalled:

[...] the first attempt to control social media was made with the creation of alternative platforms as it is done in China. Therefore, in 2013 Nicolás Maduro called for the creation of a 'Bolivarian Twitter'. Two years later, the Red Patria (Fatherland Network) was born, with apps equivalent to known counterparts: Nido (Nest) functioned as Facebook, Colibrí (Hummingbird) as WhatsApp, and Cardenalito (Lil Cardinal) in lieu of Twitter; but those attempts failed due to the low interest they generated among the public. After the electoral defeat of the ruling party in the parliamentary elections, the government showed its concern about controlling the conversation on social media, primarily Twitter. (Transparencia Venezuela, 2023)

Likewise, as of 2014, through the concerned regulator National Telecommunications Commission (Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones, Conatel), the government banned the transmission of international cable channels in the country. That year, Colombia-based pan-regional news channel NTN24, and in 2017 U.S.-based CNN, CNN en Español, Mexico's TV Azteca, Argentina's Todo Noticias and Colombia's Caracol TV and RCN were banned nationwide. During this second long phase, the government even suspended, in some cases temporarily in 2019, National Geographic, Antena 3 Internacional, VH1 HD, BBC World News, and DW Actualidad in the country.

Venezuelan professor and researcher Luisa Torrealba (2020) indicates that there has been a decrease in mobile and landline phone services, as well as pay TV. However, the number of internet users has experienced fewer oscillations between 2015 and 2019 with ISP penetration remaining at levels close to 60%. The researcher also notes other elements affecting internet penetration and access such as speed, unblocked access, electrical power available, among other elements.

The digitalization forced by the challenges posed to the media in Venezuela (they transform, change their frequency, scope, etc.) does not result from the incorporation and expansion of the technological telecommunications infrastructure, but from progressively restrictive government measures. Venezuelan journalists have taken it upon themselves to rise to the challenge by launching new online media. This so called 'Digital Spring' in Venezuela changed the ownership structure of the media: Journalists have become entrepreneurs and fight hard to provide news for Venezuelans; however, they face a country with electrical power disruptions, poor internet connection, as well as the restrictions, control, and persecution of a government that frequently resorts to media blockades. This has reached the point that Venezuelan online media can only be accessed through virtual private networks (VPNs).

The TV offer has been progressively controlled since the closing of RCTV, print media have been besieged (practically exterminated) in reason of the economic crisis and government policies. In research commissioned by Medianálisis, fake news debunker Héctor Rodríguez (2022) reports that the actions of state-owned newsprint monopoly Corporación Alfredo Maneiro towards newspapers gave the government the control of the production, distribution, and sales of books, magazines, posters, newspapers, and their most essential supply, newsprint. An investigation conducted by news website *Prodavinci* (2021) indicates that, by late 2021, only two daily newspapers were circulating in print format and another 20 are available at a less-than-daily frequency, after exceeding one hundred in 2013. Towards the end of 2022, based on data compiled by the Mapping of the Media (Mapeo de Medios) conducted by NGO Espacio Público, there remain 21 print media, of which 14 are daily newspapers, it should be noted that many of them circulate in a tabloid format, contain fewer pages, and circulate in smaller areas. Six of them are described as national

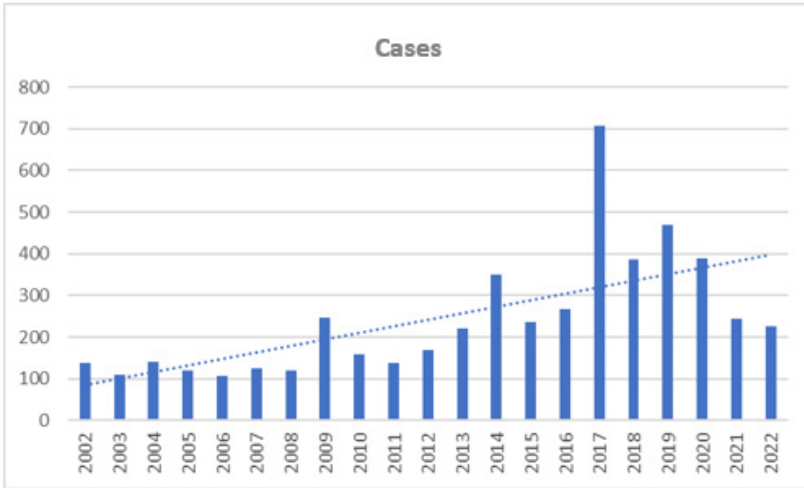
media and one as regional (one or more states), 18 are described as privately owned.

And although there was a first ‘radiocide’ in 2009 with the seizure of 32 radio stations, many others faced a long bureaucratic silence during which they have not been denied renewal of their broadcast licenses, yet they have not been granted. This placed these media in a vulnerable position. In 2017, the National Association of Journalists (Colegio Nacional de Periodistas, CNP) reported the closure of 55 radio stations. Furthermore, in 2022 the number exceeded one hundred, without counting the many radio shows closed following governmental pressure. This has turned Venezuelan radio stations into merely music-playing outlets. According to Espacio Público’s Mapping of the Media, today there are 699 radio stations and 594 of them broadcast daily. Thirty-six of these stations cover the entire nation and another 74 are superstations. Seventy-five indicate that they cover all news sources, but those focusing on entertainment, music, religious programming, etc., prevail.

In research published by Medianálisis, Alfredo Álvarez (2020) indicates that figures released in 2012 revealed that there were just over a thousand radio stations operating in the country, barely over 700 FM and 300 AM. Researcher Luisa Torrealba reports nearly 300 radio stations closed between 2013 and 2022. The CNP estimates 103 stations closed only in 2022. It should be noted that, in Venezuela, broadcast media licenses are under the legal figure of concession from the Venezuelan State. Therefore, at any time, it can order all broadcast media to transmit mandatory simulcasts of official addresses and events, known as *cadenas* in Venezuela and other Latin American countries.

As an NGO that monitors violations of freedom of expression, Espacio Público reports that, between January and December 2022, a total 81 radio stations were closed in Venezuela over 16 states, in addition to another one closed on January 23, 2023. There were also 227 instances and 470 complaints of freedom of expression violations in the study period just concluded in 2022. In the first four months of 2023, the NGO reported 55 instances of freedom of expression violation.

Although freedom of expression violations were not exceptional during the final decades of the 20th century, starting with what has come to be known as *Chavismo*, they began to be massive and statistics of individualized cases began to emerge. The trend line in the graph shows the rise in cases of freedom of expression violations.



Graph 2. Cases of human rights violations reported by NGO Espacio Público, 2002-2022

In May 2023, in its Freedom in the World index, Washington D.C.-based NGO Freedom House again rated the country as not free, dropping to 15 out of 60, down one position from the previous year. In its 2023 report reviewing 180 countries, Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontières, RSF) ranked Venezuela 159th.

The investigations of the access to information published by NGOs Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (IPyS) (Alvarado, 2023) and Transparencia Venezuela (2023) give a bleak picture: Nearly 15 million people live in full or moderate local news deserts; currently, the country has barely 21 print newspapers circulating at a restricted frequency and with a lower number of pages against the 121 that circulated in 2013; the situation of restriction and government control over the TV offer is constantly documented; in this regard, alerts are permanently issued on the closure of shows and stations; although independent digital media have emerged, the country has no reliable electricity supply, and Internet connection is primarily covers large cities just for the

minuscule section of the population that can afford its high costs against precarious income.

A survey on information and cultural consumption in the country conducted in September 2022 by Espacio Público and the UCAB indicates that 69.5% of the population never reads the written press and 20% do so occasionally; 40.3% prefer international cable channels to get news; 37.9% never visit news websites and 21% do so occasionally. In addition, 60.2% have stopped getting news occasionally because of power outages. For 62.9% of respondents, the primary way to get news is social media, although it is recognized as censored, and 29.6% of respondents say they get the latest news on television. The primary means to which the resort for news are WhatsApp (46.5%) and Facebook (15.1%).

This problematic situation points to an underinformed, uninformed, and misinformed population, among whom the Venezuelan government saturates all media spaces available.

A Bilingual View on Misinformation, Disinformation, Fake News, and Hoaxes

In the country's media landscape and amid government self-promotion, restriction, and control policies, disinformation and hoaxes are spreading. This is caused by the non-existence of alternative worldviews that a contrasting news ecosystem could provide to the population.

As native Spanish speakers, we, the authors of this research, wish to provide a broader perspective by analyzing the meaning of terms related to our study subject both in English and our mother tongue. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, misinformation is “the act of giving wrong information about something; the wrong information that is given”, and disinformation is “false information that is given deliberately, especially by government organizations” (OUP, n.d.). Meanwhile, *desinformación* is the only term in Spanish and it encompasses the meanings of both ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation’. Therefore, context should be examined when non-natives read sources in Spanish so that they find out if a specific instance

of the term implies a non-deliberate occurrence (misinformation) or malicious intent (disinformation).

In Venezuela, mis/disinformation (i.e., *desinformación*) is experienced in this twofold dimension: Both its meaning ‘mis-’, from ‘wrong’, and ‘dis-’, the deliberate one that has been considered increasingly significant in recent years. The term *desinformación* (as in ‘disinformation’), explains Fernández (2020), also alludes to the increasingly deliberate efforts by certain stakeholders to misinform with lies, half-truths, or contaminating and even saturating citizens, in what have become known as ‘disinformation operations’. It is a modality within what has been called ‘problematic information’. He adds: “Disinformation leads to the trivialization of lies and, therefore, to the relativization of truth”.

Parra and Oliveira (2018) explain that, since the end of the 20th century, we have seen large-scale disinformation campaigns addressing climate change, vaccines, food, nutrition, origins of life, health, weapons in the hands of citizens, generic drugs, cure or origin of diseases, nuclear energy, or the impact of migration. In addition, we have witnessed the infodemic that has spread rapidly in recent years and has been described by the World Health Organization (WHO), UNESCO, and other international organizations as being similar in severity to that of a pandemic.

It is often discussed whether we should speak of fake news or disinformation. Disinformation is a broad field that includes fake news, but omissions, saturation, and other forms of manipulation of information are not necessarily fake news. In Spanish, ‘fake news’ is almost synonymous to ‘hoax’ (*bulo*). Literally, *bulo* means “false news that is spread, generally, in order to harm someone” (RAE, n.d.). The most authoritative dictionary in our language, that of the Real Academia Española (RAE) defines it as “false news disseminated for some purpose”. On the other hand, the Venezuelan Fake News Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Fake News, OVFN, 2019) explains that the term first appeared in 1853. In the original definition of *bulo*, the intent, the interest of someone to harm another is evident. The Fundación del Español Urgente (Fundéu, 2017) suggests Spanish speakers to understand the English adjective ‘fake’ as ‘false’ or ‘counterfeit’. Other authors advise against the use of the term ‘fake news’, given the contradiction of linking a news item to a false nature.

Therefore, we agree with OVFN's Professor León Hernández, who defines 'fake news' as counterfeit information or content, not news.

Fake news revolves around the action of disseminating counterfeit content presented in the form of any other item of news output. It seeks to pass itself off as legitimate on mainstream and social media, as well as websites, intent on being spread or made viral by appealing to the emotions of audiences. In this way, it stretches beyond the matter it addresses and intends to intimidate, cause hopelessness, or erode reputations.

In *Fake News: una Revisión Sistemática de la Literatura (Fake News: A Systematic Review of the Literature)*, Parra and Oliveira indicate:

It is becoming increasingly difficult to discern what is true from what is fake. The political, media-related, and social uses of concepts such as after truth or fake news is a global issue that threatens the entire population as a whole, the media, and the Internet itself. Evidently, the existence of fake news is nothing new, since the spread of unchecked information is as remote as our existence. (Parra and Oliveira, 2018, 1)

Researchers at Spain's Complutense University (Universidad Complutense) indicate that the true/false dilemma has been concurrent with the expansion of industrial journalism in the 19th century. They note several cases such as a publication back in 1835, from a series of six issues on the New York Sun, which warned about the existence of life on the Moon, a precedent of H. G. Wells's widely known work, *The War of the Worlds*. Subsequently, a young Orson Welles produced and performed this play with other colleagues in a Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) radio studio on the night of October 30, 1938, the eve of Halloween. Other precedents of the phenomenon pointed to developing cases of xenophobia and religious intolerance, such as the publication among Philadelphia print media of untrue news items on Irish citizens stealing bibles from American public schools, which sparked public riots.

Fake news is a societal problem. Commenting on the study by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) which showed that fake news items are 70% more likely to be shared, Spanish professor Manuel Blázquez-Ochando indicates that "fake news has alarmed the scientific community, which is beginning to question the

extent to which it is possible to recognize the truth in the information universe” (Blázquez-Ochando, 2018, 2).

The breeding ground of fake news is mass disinformation, often in a context where after truth prevails. In other words, they are “circumstances in which objective facts have less influence on the formation of public opinion than emotional appeals and personal beliefs”, as noted by Fernández-García (2017). These circumstances are usually present during electoral periods, war scenarios, and economic, social, political, or health crises. This allows hoaxes to distract the public or sway public opinion and decision making

Venezuela’s media ecosystem and its disinformation processes walk on a two-way street. There exist severe material, technological, and individual restrictions to access information. To this is added a government policy of information control and opacity, as well as a third growing scenario that includes the viral circulation of false content.

In Venezuela, the phenomenon of disinformation takes on important dimensions in a context of information restrictions and precarious conditions. At the 10th Congress of Venezuelan Communication Researchers (Investigadores Venezolanos de la Comunicación, InveCom, 2023), held in June 2023, during his keynote speech, researcher Andrés Cañizález blew the whistle on the denials of access to official data faced by researchers. In this regard, the sharply declining public data available, the meager submissions of government agency reports to the Legislative, the non-existent possibility of accessing official data or first-hand information provide a breeding ground for the spontaneous emergence of conjectures.

One of the tactics that encourage disinformation, with content created to harm intentionally, is what some platforms devoted to debunking fake content have called smear, vilification, or stigmatization campaigns:

By means of them, attempts at contaminating information flows, sneaking in allegations that may be untrue or misleading – disinformation – with which they seek to sway public opinion. All of them have common factors; they are part of broader influencing operations that seek to cause damage to a specific target – a certain person, media outlet, political party, or organization. They are driven in no casual way: They use disinformation tactics, techniques, and procedures that generally leave

digital forensic trail proving that they are orchestrated efforts. Moreover, although they sometimes arise from anonymous sources, by analyzing their traits and patterns resorting to concrete and irrefutable evidence, their promotion can be attributed to previously identified disinformation schemes. (C-Infirma, 2023)

In this way, there is evidence of a systematic content output that not only attacks and harms personalities or institutions with inaccurate information, lies, tampered data, and errors, but also misdirects the attention of the public conversation towards fabricated, amplified, set up topics. In this way, the need for facts on relevant issues is disregarded, diminished, and overshadowed by a banal dissemination of orchestrated campaigns of deceit.

In a publication by the Coalición Informativa (C-Infirma) partnership, composed by different Venezuelan news websites, communication researchers, and fact-checking platforms including *El Estímulo*, *Efecto Cocuyo*, *Medianálisis*, *Cazadores de Fake News*, and *Probox*, the kind of campaigns conducted by the government to monopolize the flow of contents and position issues has been documented and profiled (C-Infirma, 2023).

Also targeting political parties, especially during election season, smear campaigns seek to erode the already weakened Venezuelan opposition, consequently “sowing discord and widening divisions among its different factions”, with special interest in destroying the reputation of any alternative to the political project contrary to the ruling elite. In this way, the self-destruction of its main adversaries is promoted.

C-Infirma highlights landmark cases of this type of fabrication of untrue information, its process towards becoming viral, and reach. The investigations of this partnership provide a means to expose those who replicate fake, fabricated, inaccurate, and decontextualized information. This kind of content aims at disturbing perception processes to persuade and weaken all those who are deemed as ‘adversaries’, or otherwise smear them. Concurrently, the use of anonymous boosters in stigmatization campaigns is also recurrent; in this case, they consist of accounts with poor identity data devoted to disseminating damaging content with the clearly stated intent of harming those targeted by them. In all instances reviewed, there prevails the use of tags and repeated phrases to boost topics and trends,

pin replicated content, and get it forwarded among their contacts.

The news partnership mentioned above also notes that to this list of tactics are added smear campaigns targeting journalists by fabricating content to link them to bogus corruption cases or different crimes. Fake profiles are also created in social media, impersonating their identities, to ridicule and make attempts to discredit them through contents in which they are portrayed as ‘liars’ and ‘spin doctors for hire’. These are unfounded stigmatization campaigns, with untrue ideas, inaccurate links, and lack of evidence.

The NGO Transparencia Venezuela has documented how those who are devoted to fabricating and disseminating content to boost and promote the pro-government version operate. It also points out that “*Chavismo* has pioneered using bots and trolls as swarms of propaganda operatives on Twitter”. According to the data released in investigations by Probox (Da Silva and Marín, 2023), almost 90% of the more than 200 million tweets on political issues were boosted by the Ministry of Communication and Information (Ministerio de Comunicación e Información, MinCI).

Although many of these messages are automatically disseminated by bots, there are also people who, for profit, spread content created to boost trends. The website *RunRunes* (2023) released findings on an ‘online protest’ of the so-called *Tuiteros de la Patria* (Tweeters of the Homeland), who receive monetary compensation for replicating biased, pro-government content on social media. In that case, the online protest was held demanding overdue fees, which confirmed that the dissemination of pro-government topics and trends is done for hire.

Consequently, Venezuelan disinformation is composed of particular ingredients that intensify its reach. In addition to misinformation, extensively profiled and studied by organizations such as Medianálisis, Provea, IPyS, and Espacio Público, there is the added dimension of government secrecy, obstruction to access information, concurrently with orchestrated campaigns from government entities – based on the restructuring of a media ecosystem governed by a hegemonic structure – to attack, stigmatize, and discredit any attempt of dissent.

In addition to a scenario where the government benefits from the lack of information by obstructing access to specific data and creating information gaps, there is also a crusade to construct a public discourse. This seeks to boost conversations, social media trends, and even fabricate content with digital tools (including artificial intelligence [AI]) that mimics ‘news’ unsupported by data. Such content should be treated with caution in the absence of empirical evidence.

One of the most controversial examples that sparked global scrutiny regarding the distribution of communication and information involved the use of AI to create a format that mimics a newscast, with data and content favoring and praising the government of Nicolás Maduro. The website *Cazadores de Fake News* (2023) released an analysis of this specific case. Domestic and international media focused on the use of this digital tool to create manipulated content.

The OVFN has identified a phenomenon in which topics supporting the pro-government stance were systematically made viral on Twitter, directly linked to accounts created to automatically disseminate content generated to like and boost trends – bots and personal profiles with specific tasks. The content’s origin and the users or accounts responsible for its distribution were analyzed using the Hoaxy tool when applicable. The study indicates that these are not mere trends or organic conversations, but coordinated and driven campaigns with repeated strategies around different topics.

The viral online activity analyzed proves that pro-government trends are rarely spontaneous conversations (Rico, 2022). Instead, they exhibit characteristics consistent with automated and orchestrated campaigns designed to amplify specific topics, individuals, and trends.

The Probox website (2023) supplied valuable information on Twitter tag behavior and socio-political trends in Venezuela. In 2022, out of the 200 million tweets analyzed, only approximately 15 million pertained to non-pro-government trends. Additionally, the national government reached the highest average of messages disseminated by automated means. The study reports that Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba have shared identical topics on at least 29 occasions. Probox asserts that “a handbook seems to be reportedly followed almost identically in these three countries, showing how their regimes contaminate and

manipulate information that they cannot directly control”.

It is clear that pro-government forces have tampered with boosting topics, tags, and online ‘discussions’ as part of a disinformation campaign to distract from the consumption of verified and quality content. This deception includes spreading disinformation in the form of hoaxes.

The spread of false content is garnering increasing attention and contributing to the multifaceted practice of disinformation in Venezuela, as described above. Various local websites have been established to detect and debunk fake, inaccurate, manipulated, and decontextualized content. The contributions made by these initiatives include unveiling the characteristics of inaccurate, fraudulent, manipulative, and otherwise misleading content, as well as keeping record of debunked or confirmed news items. Indicators developed by these initiatives have exposed the components of hoaxes, facilitating a wider comprehension of their creation and objectives. For instance, they identify the interested parties behind false content, so that the public can discern the intended audiences of disinformation.

Hoaxes can arise from unverified mistakes or can combine truths with unverified interpretations and data. It is possible to decontextualize actual past events and present them as current, which constitutes counterfeit content. Studying the methods of eliciting certain reactions can facilitate the understanding of fraud.

The success of false content in drawing audiences’ attention is attributed to its ability to appeal to emotions and generate immediate reactions. Purposes such as fueling fear, distraction, confusion, alarm, rejection, and obtaining private data to commit digital fraud are among the motives behind hoaxes. Patterns to validate beliefs, fears, or outrage are also prevalent. Even irresistible offers can serve as bait to catch the attention and achieve recirculation.

Understanding the connections between the indicators making up a hoax leads to a more comprehensive understanding of disinformation processes, which in turn provides means to fight its effects. This begins with the formation of opinions as content consumers in the digital age, as we face a constant deluge of information.

By way of Conclusion, Some Choices to Walk through the Maze

Amid controversial scenarios, with few options to access fact-checked, quality, rigorous, and accurate content supported by formal production processes, spaces are opening up to overcome the difficulties.

In the United States, effective solutions have been implemented to fight the constant use of disinformation, also known as ‘fakecracy’, in the short, medium, and long term, as Hernández (2020) explains.

Hyperlocal and offline journalism responses have been promoted to address information gaps or deserts in isolated communities with precarious internet access. This is necessary not only because such communities are often not part of the public agenda, but also because they face severe limitations in accessing news websites owing to fewer traditional media available as explained above.

Concerning the dissemination of false content or hoaxes, numerous websites specialize in detecting, debunking, and analyzing disinformation campaigns designed to massively disavow targeted personalities. Their efforts are based on thorough verification, contrast, and triangulation of reviewed content. Consequently, disinformation campaigns in Venezuela are constantly refuted.

Collaborative journalism initiatives among several media outlets jointly producing and disseminating news content have solidified the endeavor of reporters, along with digital structures to strengthen news websites (Viloria, 2022). In addition to improving content quality, these partnerships are more successful at countering attempts to prevent the dissemination of validated, fact-checked information. If an outlet is under attack, the other partnering media persist in releasing their jointly produced whistleblowing, hoax-debunking news items.

For the purpose of citizen oversight of this deluge of disinformation, digital literacy initiatives have also been promoted. They seek to develop digital skills to circumvent the obstacles of blockades and censorship imposed by the government. In this regard, they have aimed at educating on fact-checking processes, development criteria to consume content in an era of overwhelming connectivity.

However, the race against disinformation is uneven, and even more so in Venezuela. Although efforts to curb and fight disinformation effectively dismantle campaigns of lies and manipulation, they also promote developing criteria in content consumption and skills to use verification processes, coupled with constant rebuttals. Disadvantages to face the hoax production apparatus persist amid opacity, secrecy, and silence, plus the persisting and growing restrictions on access to free, plural, fact-checked and quality information. Meanwhile, the recipe for disinformation in Venezuela seems to have increasingly more ingredients.

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