

# Misinformation and Fact-checking on the disturbances of the *Procés* of Catalonia. Digital impact on Public and Media

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**Abstract:** The outbreak of misinformation and digital propaganda has added to the invasion of fake news, and the prominence of audiences on social networks becomes a hallmark of the political and media agenda. The publication of the sentence of the Supreme Court that sanctioned the rebellion of independent politicians during the *Procés* of Catalonia in 2019 provoked citizen mobilizations that occupied the front pages of the media. The general objective of this paper is to determine the number and theme of hoaxes spread about the riots on different digital platforms. We apply a content analysis methodology to a general sample ( $n_1 = 4,500$ ) of hoaxes reported by fact-checking agencies (*Maldito Bulo*, *Newtral*, *Verificat*) and news items ( $n_2 = 190$ ) published in the national and international press (*El País/El Mundo*, *El Periódico/Ara*, *The Guardian/Le Monde*). The results confirm that private users are the main authors of fake news and that journalists use verification codes to combat misinformation.

**Keywords:** Political Communication; Journalism; Fake News; Hoaxes; Fact-checking; Sentence of the *Procés*; Citizen Activism; Social Audience

## Introduction

The social impact of misinformation increases communicative ubiquity in a context in which political, economic and media structures succumb to the Internet. The massively distributed lie becomes not only normal, but also an immensely powerful propaganda weapon (Woolley and Howard, 2018). A phenomenon that, some authors associate with the rise of populism and nationalism (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). It is also associated with the discredit of the elites and the media. The current radiography incorporates an expert user in the viralization of fake, thanks to mechanisms that resist filters and the control of misinformation (Powers and Kounalakis, 2017).

Consequently, the reinvention of journalism is urgent in a complex framework dominated by fake news. The media face the impact of advanced technology, the effects of platformization and its influence on political leaders (Calvo and Aruguete, 2020; Latour, 2019; Gerbaudo,

2018). Added to this is the threat of active hearings that promote disinformation and hoaxes. A situation interpreted from journalism as a challenge to create an antidote that allows the lie to be discovered and subjected to informative quality processes (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018; Palau Sampio, 2018).

In a situation of confrontation and political conflict such as the one that occurred after the publication of the Judgment of the *Procés* of Catalonia (October 14, 2019) against the leaders and political positions of the Government of the Generalitat, for crimes of rebellion, sedition and embezzlement related to the defense of the sovereignty and independence of the Catalan community, a resurgence of false information about citizen mobilizations is detected on Twitter stands out and the profile of a user-prosumer, who finds in the networks a perfect place to invent, lie and stone the truth. A dilemma arises about the limits of information control and freedom of expression (Aguilera and Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

In this dilemma, international organizations such as the European Commission (2018) promote the creation of an independent group of experts (digital platforms and technology companies, fact-checkers, the media, academics, or members of civil society) to, from a perspective institutional, define and quantify misinformation, in addition to studying possible legal mechanisms to combat them (Tuñón et al., 2019). A project that reinforces fact-checking as a system for verifying statements by political leaders or relevant figures to mitigate, the effects of the proliferation of fake news (Gueham, 2017).

This research aims to respond to the following objectives:

O1. Know the levels of production and dissemination of hoaxes about the Catalan riots on Twitter and their projection in the media.

O2. Analyze the role of users of private Twitter accounts as producers and issuers of hoaxes and fake news about political information.

O3. Evaluate the mechanisms of verification and information contrast of agencies and the media in the coverage of the riots.

From this perspective, recovering social trust through informational quality records and detoxification strategies on the web is seen as an alternative to journalism forced to reverse the impact of the fallacy and fake news in the political conflict.

## **Public sphere and digital activism the Catalan conflict. Media policy in the face of misinformation**

Social networks have generated an unprecedented scale and speed in the dissemination of invented news (López-Borrull et al., 2018). Its rise is indicative of the collapse of the old order of news and the chaos of contemporary public communication (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Waisbord, 2018).

Governments and society as a whole are becoming aware of the importance of a problem that already in 2018 was considered a threat to democracy by 83% of Europeans, highly concerned (74% of Internet users) for online misinformation in electoral periods (EU vs Disinfo, 2018). Joint actions of the world's institutions: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the National Innovation Company (ENISA), advocate stopping this pandemic and developing a culture of security and digital literacy that trains critical audiences and restores citizen's trust in politicians and the press (Nigro, 2018).

In this policy of detection and reporting of fake news, the work of verification teams stands out, both independent and associated with well-established media, which add up to more than 237 initiatives of various categories around the world (Duke Reporters' Lab, 2020). Political fact-checking experts like *Politifact* ([www.politifact.com](http://www.politifact.com)), linked to the Poynter Institute; Factcheck ([www.factcheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org)) and the fact-checking service of *The Washington Post* ([www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker)), in the denial of fallacies of Russian propaganda such as *Stop Fake* ([www.stopfake.org](http://www.stopfake.org)), in checking rumors and urban legends like *Snopes* ([www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com)) or promoters of solidarity actions such as *Full Fact* (<https://fullfact.org>) and research like the *Global Investigative Journalism Network* ([www.gijn.org](http://www.gijn.org)). In the case of Spain, television programs such as *El Objetivo de La Sexta* ([www.lasexta.com](http://www.lasexta.com)) focused on the evaluation of politicians' statements, they are part of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN -Data Verification Network-, 2019). Other reference initiatives are *Newtral* ([www.newtral.es](http://www.newtral.es)) linked to *El Objetivo*, *Maldito Buló* ([www.maldita.es/malditobulo](http://www.maldita.es/malditobulo)) or the portal *Verifica* ([www.rtve.es](http://www.rtve.es)) (Tuñón et al., 2019).

However, despite the work of fact-checkers and international organizations such as the Data Verification Network (IFCN), which promotes good practices and the promotion of techniques for the verification of fake news, the open debate continues on the ability to verify the hoax given the informational acceleration (Currie-Sivek and Bloyd-Peshkin, 2018) and the reproductive effect that the Internet favors.

Faced with this dynamic, the media reactivate traditional formulas, incorporating quality encoders adapted to the networks. The objective is to eliminate all the distorting factors of the facts from the information production process and to counteract them with journalistic contrast markers.

Journalism has performed a double function (Table 1) in its digital coexistence on Twitter. In a first moment of decline in the face of the prominence of the audiences (López-García, 2015), the model of rapid diffusion and non-contrast of the network is reproduced, which favors the proliferation of fake news (Wardle, 2017; Nielsen and Graves, 2017).

A second stage identifies a journalism model that reinforces quality control systems, proposing verification codes (Redondo, 2018) and good practice guides against the invasion of hoaxes on the network.

**Table 1.** Fake news coding and metric scales

ACTION CODES			REACTION CODES	
Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 1	Scale 2
Zimdars	Nielsen/Graves	Wardle	Redondo	Norma FACTS
(2016)	(2017)	(2017)	(2018)	(2019)
CODES			CODES	
-Headlines	-Superficial Journalism	-Wrong information	-Check Authorship	-Filter
-Rumors	-Sensationalism	-Parody	-Analyze the content (What)	-Facts/Opinions
-Junk news	-Lack of precision	-Provocation	-Date (When)	-Avoidance: avoid fake site and links
-Satire	-Hyperpartisan content	-Partisanship	-Location (Where)	-Consequence and Context
-Fake Political News	-Use of propaganda	-Advantage	-Information/Opinion (How)	-Tests: Show evidence
-Clickbait	-Use of political lies	-Search for political influence	-Define the goal (Why)	-Sources: avoid using conflicting sources
-Conspiracy theory	-Sponsorship	-Propaganda		
-Hate speech				
-State propaganda				

FACTS: Acronym for Filter/Avoidance/Contex/Test/ Source

Source: Own compilation

### Context indicators. The riots after the sentence of the *Procés*

In a political moment marked by the *Procés* conflict, there are clashes between constitutionalist and independentist forces, disagreements between the Central Government and the autonomies and social mobilizations (Corominas, 2017), as hallmarks of the past and recent history of Catalonia. However, secessionism has become more visceral since the crisis of 2012, reaching its zenith in the referendum on October 1, 2017 (Hernández-Santaolalla and Sola-Morales, 2019; Carrasco-Polaino et al., 2018). Since its inception in 2009, the mobilization around independence has been linked to the activity of grassroots groups and social movement organizations, especially the *Assemblea Nacional Catalana* and *Òmnium Cultural* (Letamendia, 2017), that take advantage of the socio-economic and political crisis to articulate a questioning of the institutions (Pérez-Curiel, 2020; Clua i Fainé, 2014).

The independence process gains, if possible, more force in a context of mediatization and digitalization never before contemplated, expanding with the application of article 155 of the Constitution and culminating with the conviction of the *Procés*.<sup>1</sup>

Social networks become spaces to exercise citizenship in a critical way and an opportunity for the public to act as active political subjects, giving rise to processes of empowerment and democratic deepening (Casero-Ripollés, 2020) at a time of loss of trust in institutions (Gottfried et al., 2016). However, the mechanisms to make the conflict visible after the *Procés* ruling are altered by the invasion of fake messages, carried out by users of private Twitter accounts. The fact-checking agencies (Mantzaris, 2018) detect and denounce on their websites an increase in hoaxes and fake news about the citizen mobilizations that occurred after the publication of the sanctions against imprisoned Catalan politicians. In parallel, the national and international press offers informative coverage in which the publication of the facts prevails over the false ones, following a verification process and journalistic quality codes (Journell, 2017), to which is added the institutional commitment (Comisión Europea, 2018) and from the social platforms (Roth, 2018) to limit the uncontrolled implosion of the lie on the internet.

## Methodology

The research is based on two complementary methodological perspectives: quantitative-qualitative content analysis (Silverman, 2016; Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002) and critical discourse analysis (Flowerdew and Richardson, 2017; Van Dijk, 2015; Nocetti, 1990) that allow to identify, on the one hand, the hoaxes and fallacies published on Twitter by private users and political leaders and, on the other hand, to analyze the verification process of the Spanish data verification agencies (Maldito Hoax, Newtral, Verificat) and the national and international press (El País/el Mundo, El Periódico/Ara, The Guardian/Le Monde). From this perspective, a cause-effect framework (users / agencies / media) is described to investigate to what extent social media, in conflict situations, favor the spread of fake and discern the viability of the verification processes proposed by professionals of the information. The following research questions then arise:

RQ1. Is the use of fake news a characteristic of the information on Catalan riots published on Twitter and in the digital press?

RQ2. What impact do private Twitter users have as the main producers of hoaxes on the mobilizations against the sentence?

RQ3. What verification procedures characterize *fact-checking* agencies and how do they differ from those applied by the media?

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<sup>1</sup> The Supreme Court condemns for the *Procés* cause the former vice president of the Generalitat Oriol Junqueras to 13 years in prison and 13 years of absolute disqualification and the former councilors Raül Romeva, Jordi Turull and Dolors Bassa to the sentences of 12 years in prison and 12 years of absolute disqualification, in the four cases for the crime of sedition with a crime of embezzlement of public funds aggravated by reason of its amount. The sentence puts an end to two years of a judicial process that began on October 16, 2017, with the imprisonment of the leaders of the [Catalan National Assembly \(ANC\)](#) and Òmnium Cultural, Jordi Sánchez and Jordi Cuixart. Two weeks later, the State Attorney General's Office filed a complaint against the entire Government of [Carles Puigdemont](#) and the members of the Parliamentary Board who allowed the unilateral declaration of independence to be voted on October 27.

<https://ep00.epimg.net/descargables/2019/10/14/27b12ba3db1e62e1914c694afd8d0098.pdf>

The analysis is structured in two combined phases related to the verification processes of the fact-checking agencies and the press. The first (F1) focuses on locating on the websites of the verification agencies (Maldito Hoax, Newtral and Verificat) those hoaxes spread on Twitter by private users. In parallel, the tweets related to the *Procés* riots of the candidates who attend the general elections of 10-N are analyzed: (@sanchezcastejon, @pablocasado, @albert\_rivera, @Pablo Iglesias, @santi\_ABASCAL), mentioned in their hoaxes by users.

The second phase (F2) describes the verification techniques applied by fact-checking agencies and compares the procedure with the treatment of facts in digital newspapers of national and international reference (El País/El Mundo, El Periódico/Ara and The Guardian/LeMonde).

To process the information, all the hoaxes on any subject (n=4,500) published during the period between October 7 (the week before the publication of the Judgment) and October 11 are selected from the websites of the agencies. Next, a second sample (n=527) is defined, using the keywords *Procés/Sentencia*. Finally, based on the use of the keyword Riots, a definitive specific sample (n=62) is extracted, relating only to the hoaxes that deal with social mobilization that emerged after the publication of the Supreme Court ruling (14-O). Focusing research on this number of hoaxes is consistent with the indications of methodological models (Silverman, 2016; Cleary et al., 2014; Baker, 2006), who recommend that, in data collection in qualitative studies and critical discourse, quality must prevail over quantity.

Finally, the same keywords (*Procés/Sentence/Riots/*) from the previous phase are applied to the messages published on Twitter by the candidates for the general elections (n=17) and to the news appearing on the front page of the selected press (n=190) and the journalistic treatment is analyzed in order of quality codes, supported by previous scientific studies (Gómez-Mompart et al., 2015).

Based on these constants, a coding manual is designed, which, as shown in Table 2, includes 11 qualitative, quantitative, and discursive variables.

**Table 2.** Cataloging of measurement units

Platforms	Sources	Quantitative- Qualitative Variables	Discursive Variables
•Twitter	• Users • Political leaders • Media	• Diffusion of hoaxes (F1) • Metrics • Location • Topic • Audiovisual resources	•Rhetorical Language •Rhetorical Language • Propaganda Resources •Use of Appeals
•Fact-checking	• <i>Maldito Bulo</i> • <i>Newtral</i> • <i>Verificat</i>	• News Broadcast (F2) • Metrics • Topic • Quality Codes	
•Digital press	• <i>El País/ El Mundo</i> • <i>El Periódico/Ara</i> • <i>The Guardian/Le Monde</i>		

**Source:** Own compilation

The selection of the sample obeys different criteria:

- The time frame covers events related to the political conflict such as the *Procés* sentence (October 14) or the electoral call (November 10). From this perspective, one can inquire about the theory of increased disinformation on Twitter (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2019) in a moment of elections, political conflict and social disorder (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2014).

- Compared to other social networks such as Facebook, YouTube or Instagram, Twitter is selected as an open platform with viral capacity to spread content spontaneously and uncontrollably, which makes it one of the most important influences in shaping the opinion of users (Brubaker and Wilson, 2018). In addition, Twitter has advantages for political communication in electoral campaigns (Campos-Domínguez, 2017) and it is configured as the platform that detects the highest number of hoaxes on the issue of post-sentence mobilizations (Pérez-Curiel and Velasco Molpeceres, 2020).

- The selection of three fact-checking agencies at the national level is justified by their link to the IFCN as well as by the continued activity in social networks as information control systems, their link with the scope of the media and the priority they express in terms of reporting false news about the Catalan riots.

*Maldito Buló* (@malditobulo) is one of the projects that are part of *Maldita* next to *Maldita Hemeroteca*, *Maldito Dato*, *Maldita Ciencia* y *Maldito Deporte*. It has a section on *El Objetivo* of *La Sexta*, collaborate with other programs in the chain (*Al Rojo Vivo*, *Más Vale Tarde*, *La Sexta Noche*) and with a Google Chrome extension that launches an alert, when you enter an unreliable, not reliable, or satirical website (Magallón-Rosa, 2018).

Newtral (@Newtral) is an audiovisual content *startup* founded in January 2018 by journalist Ana Pastor. She is the producer of political programs such as *El Objetivo* and *Dónde estabas entonces* (*La Sexta*). A reference initiative took place during the debate of the elections in the autonomous community of Andalusia (2018), with the verification of the candidates' claims and the reporting of falsehoods issued through Twitter in real time (Tuñón et al., 2019). Verificat (@veri\_fi\_cat) is the first verification platform in Catalonia (2019), inspired by the international platforms *Fact-checking Network* ([www.poynter.org/ifcn/](http://www.poynter.org/ifcn/)) that was born with the aim of preventing the spread of hoaxes from users and politicians on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. The selection criterion responds to the manifest interest in investigating political issues related to Catalonia.

Although the research analyzes the treatment of hoaxes at the national and European level, the analysis of independent *fact-checking* platforms, such as Full Fact (UK) or *Les Décodeurs'*, linked to *Le Monde* (France), has been discarded, after verifying the null coverage of fake information about the riots in Catalonia.

-In the selection of reference headlines has prevailed the criterion of the number of readers, which in the case of national newspapers are confirmed by the General Media Study (<https://reporting.aimc.es/index.html#/main/diarios>) and in the case of the international press by the *Reuters Institute's* Digital News Results Report from the *University of Oxford* (Newman et al., 2019).

Other criteria also applied are the geographical indicator (national and international press), the thematic indicator, given the relevance that these newspapers give to political information, the ideological indicator (more conservative editorial positions such as those of *El Mundo* and *El Periódico*, liberal socialists like *El País*, center-left like *Le Monde* y *The Guardian* or pro-independence and Catalan supporters like *Ara*) as well as the indicator of interest in the coverage of events related to the Catalan *Procés*.

The *tweets* were downloaded through *T-Hoerder17*, which works with a methodology called *t-hoarder\_kit* an evolution of the *t-hoarder* platform (Congosto et al., 2017). It consists of a set of resources with open-source software that allow both the downloading and processing of *Twitter* information to facilitate the use of analysis tools and visualization in networks. The press releases have been located through online search engines ([www.kioskoymas.com](http://www.kioskoymas.com) and [www.kiosko.net](http://www.kiosko.net)). The statistical program chosen to treat the data related to the defined categories is *IBM SPSS Statistics*, Version 24. The reliability of the intercoders has been calculated with Scott's Pi formula, reaching an error level of 0.98.

## Results and Analysis

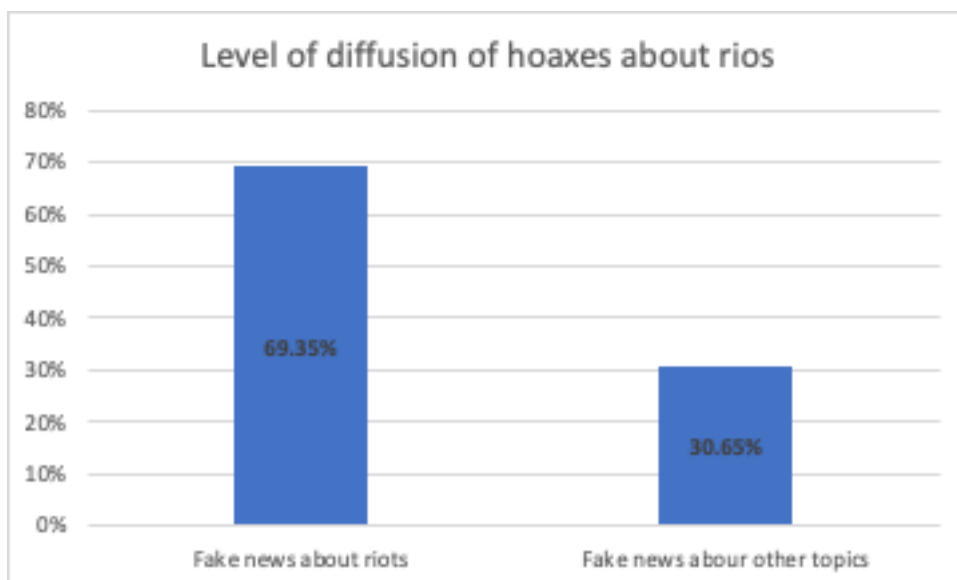
The data exploitation conforms to a triangular methodological structure of comparative content analysis. The quantification, qualification and discursiveness variables define the measurement process based on the contingency, combined and frequency tables generated by the SPSS statistical program.

### *Phase 1. Context indicators, user profile and Fake topics on Twitter*

First, we present some metric indicators with the presence of *fake news* as a mark of the content published on *Twitter* about the riots. In the general framework of the research, we describe the percentage impact of false messages dealing with the conflict in relation to other coinciding events in the sample period.

The percentages (Graph 1) reveal the prominence of fake news on *Twitter*, as well as the relevance of the riots (69.35%) compared to other news events (30.65%). I though the entire process of incarceration of prisoners and subsequent trials focused the attention of the networks, the riots reached maximum levels of dissemination that also took over the *homepage* of the national and international media.

**Graph 1.** Quantification of Hoaxes / Other news on *Twitter*



**Source:** Own compilation



The citizen riots in Catalonia coincide with the days before the electoral campaign and the issue becomes the focus of attention of the leaders and the media; however, the analysis detects the prominence of the public as the main producers of rumors, fallacies and hoaxes on Twitter. As reflected in the data (Table 3), the hoaxes most disseminated by private users focus on issues related to incidents with the security forces (14), followed by events related to the action of the Defense Committees of the Republic (13) and the declarations of governments, parties and political leaders and their strategies in the face of the conflict (6).

**Table 3.** Contingency of source and theme of the hoax

What is the hoax about?	Particular	Media	Political Leaders
Statements from governments, parties and politicians	6	1	2
CDR Action	13	0	1
Incidents with security forces	14	2	2
Events with citizens (attacks, deaths, threats, etc.)	3	0	0
<b>Effects on companies</b>	5	1	0
<b>Incidents in public transport (airports, roadblocks, etc.)</b>	2	1	0
<b>Others</b>	5	1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	48	6	6

**Source:** Own compilation

It is important to note that the “incidence” code is an identifying mark of the published hoaxes (62), which mostly refer to violent street actions, barricades, confrontations with the *mossos* (catalan police), attacks on the media and citizens in general, that do not coincide with the date, the space or the events that occurred.

**Image 1.** Hoax of private users about street protests



<https://twitter.com/JOSETE1978/status/1185687190640250880?s=20>

No police were stabbed in the protests. The National Police itself denies it.

**Image 2.** Hoax of private users against the press



Gonzalo @GquirogaGonzalo · 20 oct. 2019

Me parece una vergüenza que @el\_pais use dos titulares de portada distintos (el mismo día) uno para su edición nacional y otro para la edición de Cataluña.

De qué nos quejamos?? Actitudes como ésta nos han llevado a donde estamos.



1

9

9

↑

<https://twitter.com/GquirogaGonzalo/status/1185959995650826241?s=20>

It is a hoax. Both covers were similar. El País confirms it in the following tweet: [https://twitter.com/el\\_pais/status/1185948324639248386?s=20](https://twitter.com/el_pais/status/1185948324639248386?s=20)

In this line and responding, we verify the participation of individuals as main opinion leaders and promoters of hoaxes, who are followed by their own peers and fan communities. An attitude that highlights the limits of social networks to generate a well-informed citizenry committed to civility (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2018).

Added to the qualitative thematic analysis is the discursive content analysis of the hoaxes. The rhetorical marks of the language in the published tweets confirm that false messages are supported by mechanisms of fallacy and propaganda, forming a strategy that not only defines the leaders and the media but also the audiences.

In the environment of the Catalan riots, is detected an increase in the use of rhetorical resources that favor disinformation and lies and that focus attention on the attack and criticism of politicians, the security forces and the media.

The exploitation of data (Table 4) confirms a prominent use of tweets with mentions of political leaders that contain opinions as facts (75.0%), stereotypes (71.4%), and appeal to emotion and ignorance fallacies (66.7%), typical of political discourse. The direct participation of the security forces in the conflict has also led to the concentration of tweets in their actions in front of the population, with references to episodes of violence in the police charges against the protesters. The false analogy (50.0%), the equivocation (33.3%), the attributions and the selection of information (25.0%) are the most outstanding resources. In the field of tweets that mention the media, emphasis (100%), the use of labels, the appeal to force, equivocation (66.7%) as well as the selection of information and attributions (50.0%).

**Table 4.** Crossing of mechanisms of language and sources mentioned

		<b>Mentions</b>			
		Políticians	Security Forces	Media	
<b>Fallacies and means</b>	Use of labels				
		% within resources	33.3	0.0	66.7
	Stereotypes				
		% within resources	71.4	14.3	14.3
	Atributions				
		% within resources	25.0	25.0	50.0
	Talk about other sources				
		% within resources	66.7	0.0	33.3
	Information selection				
		% within resources	25.0	25.0	50.0
	Opinions as facts				
		% within resources	75.0	0.0	25.0
	Appel to ignorance				
		% within resources	66.7	0.0	33.3
	Appel against the man				
		% within resources	40.0	20.0	40.0
	Appel to authority				
		% within resources	57.1	14.3	28.6
	Appel to force				
		% within resources	33.3	0.0	66.7
False Cause					
	% within resources	50.0	16.7	33.3	
Appel to emotion					
	% within resources	66.7	0.0	33.3	
Mistaken					
	% within resources	0.0	33.3	66.7	
Emphasis					
	% within resources	0.0	0.0	100.0	

	False analogy				
		% within resources	0.0	50.0	50.0

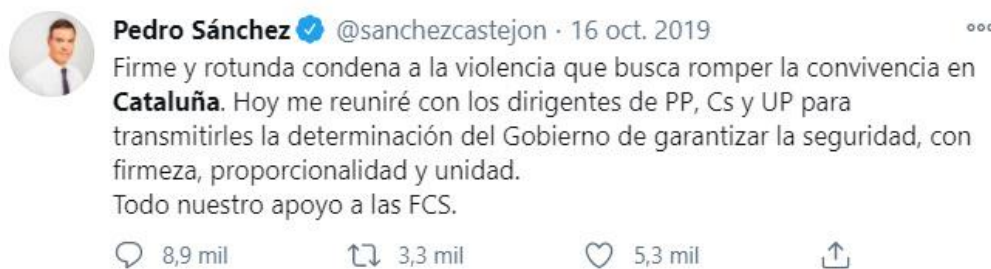
Note: The percentages indicated in red correspond to the type of resources most used in each case. More than one rhetorical device may appear in a hoax.

**Source:** Own compilation

Considering that the sample is situated in the electoral context (November 10), it is observed that the mentions of politicians stand out compared to other sources. The use of the so-called Cyber-rhetoric or language typical of the digital environment is a characteristic that identifies political candidates especially in electoral periods, with the aim of mobilizing the vote (López Meri, 2016). The fallacy and misinformation are features of the language of the candidates for the general elections (10-N), sometimes acting as the engine that generates the hoaxes produced by the public. We selected some of the tweets published in the private accounts of the leaders (17) that reflect these trademarks.

**Image 3.** Tweet by Pedro Sánchez, candidate of Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE).

Appeal to authority / Appeal to ignorance



<https://twitter.com/sanchezcastejon/status/1184378116225077248?s=20>

**Image 4.** Tweet from Pablo Casado, candidate of Partido Popular (PP).

Opinions as Facts / Attributions



[https://twitter.com/pablocasado\\_/status/1186643020965437440?s=20](https://twitter.com/pablocasado_/status/1186643020965437440?s=20)

**Image 5.** Tweet by Albert Rivera, candidate of Ciudadanos (CS).

Use of labels / Appeal to emotion



[https://twitter.com/Albert\\_Rivera/status/1188191579749670912?s=20](https://twitter.com/Albert_Rivera/status/1188191579749670912?s=20)

**Image 6.** Tweet by Pablo Iglesias, candidate of Unidas Podemos (UP).

Selection of information /Opinions as facts



<https://twitter.com/PabloIglesias/status/1183663068305383424?s=20>

**Image 7.** Tweet by Santiago Abascal, candidate of Vox (VOX).

Appeal to emotion / Talk from other sources



[https://twitter.com/Santi\\_ABASCAL/status/1183700375133720576?s=20](https://twitter.com/Santi_ABASCAL/status/1183700375133720576?s=20)

The riots against the sentence were the starting point of an electoral campaign (November 1-8) in which the Catalan conflict, the territorial division and the confrontation with the State continued to be the subject of debate, as in previous elections (Pérez-Curiel and García-Gordillo, 2018). As can be extracted from some of the messages published on Twitter, polarization is a registered trademark of the leaders, as defenders or detractors of the independence movement, with support or disagreement with the sentence, in favor or against the mobilizations or judicial action and governmental. The interpretation of the same event depends on the marks of propaganda and fallacy, present both in political tweets and in those hoaxes published a posteriori by the public. Ultimately, there is a relationship of equivalence between private users and politicians in the use of rhetoric and fallacious language. The ultimate goal is to capture the interest of third-party recipients and potential voters.

### *Phase 2. Verification indicators in the agency sector*

In this phase we analyze the verification procedures that characterize fact-checking agencies and how they differ from those applied by the media. The exploitation of data shows that the agencies lack records that help users differentiate between true information and false news. *Maldito Bulo*, *Newtral* and *Verificat* point out more the form (colors, capital letters, warnings, overprinted marks) than the background (number and diversity of sources, use of background, real or fictitious context, false and sensationalist marks of language, author's profile of the hoax and prevention against manipulation). In this sense, the agencies limit their function to locating the hoax in the text or in the image and, to a lesser extent, to explaining the denial. The presence of false content is significant (Table 5) that correspond to other sources (50%), to another place (19.4%) and to another date (14.5%) or even that respond to a montage of images (9.7%), which contribute to reinforcing citizen confusion and unsafety, with high doses of misinformation.

**Table 5.** Contextualization marks of the hoax

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Correspond to other sources	31	50.0
	Montage of images	6	9.7
	Correspond to other date	9	14.5
	Correspond to other place	12	19.4
	Others	1	1.6
	Total	59	95.2
Lost	System	3	4.8
Total		62	100.0

**Source:** Own compilation

In general, the agencies do not provide additional information to alert users to *fakes* trademarks nor interpretation nor analysis of the facts, beyond confirming the denial.

### Image 8. Hoax published in the Maldito Bulo agency

**MB** MALDITO BULO   
@malditobulo

Bulos y desinformaciones sobre la situación en Cataluña que circulan coincidiendo con el aniversario del #10Oct



Bulos y desinformaciones sobre la situación en Cataluña que circulan coincidiend...  
En los últimos días se han empezado a viralizar varias desinformaciones relacionadas con Cataluña, coincidiendo con el segundo aniversario del ...  
🔗 maldita.es

11:10 a. m. · 1 oct. 2019 · Buffer

<https://twitter.com/malditobulo/status/1178960273765539841?s=20>

**Image 9.** Hoax published in the Newtral agency

<https://twitter.com/Newtral/status/1184369398452293633?s=20>

**Image 10.** Bulo published in the Verificat agency

[https://twitter.com/veri\\_fi\\_cat/status/1184879474116124672?s=20](https://twitter.com/veri_fi_cat/status/1184879474116124672?s=20)

In short, the agencies' verification function requires the incorporation of elements that guarantee the reliability and credibility of the information. It is a task in which collusion with the media is essential, which seems to re-emerge after periods of public mistrust.



### *Verification indicators in the media*

At this turning point, which starts from the agency-media connection, the study shows the results obtained regarding the treatment of information published on the Catalan riots by six internationally relevant digital headers. A total of 190 homepage news corresponding to two national newspapers (*El País/El Mundo*), two catalans (*El Periódico/Ara*) and two internationals (*The Guardian/Le Monde*) they constitute the sample of the final phase of the investigation.

For the measurement of journalistic quality codes and following previous methodologies (Pellegrini and Múgica, 2006) related to the Journalistic Added Value (JAV), we designed a specific formula for the study in the field of media:

***IQL Informative qualification level = [V1 Presence + V2 Quantity-Diversity of Sources] + [V3 Background-Context + V4 Explanatory-Interpretative-Opinion Data] / V5 Informational Verification Level***

The variables used to calculate the level of quality of news about hoaxes published in the media refer to:

- To the presence of sources in the text (V1) as a primary element of contrast in journalism.
- To the number and type of sources (V2) since it is considered that the use of multiple sources, from different sources, is a guarantee and credibility factor compared to a single source, with a determined ideology.
- To the background and the space-time situation (V3) in which the events take place, given that the audiences need to know the causes and circumstances surrounding the events. Therefore, those journalists who incorporate these data provide information quality criteria in the production of the texts.
- To the use of data that explain, interpret and provide an argumentative value judgment (V4) in order to help the public, discover the possible intentionality of statement journalism and, consequently, have tools to locate hoaxes and misinformation.
- The contrast and verification process (V5) inherent to journalistic work, which the information professional must apply to the sources consulted and which can be clouded by working conditions (salaries and job instability) and media pressure (production rates and lack of time for data verification).

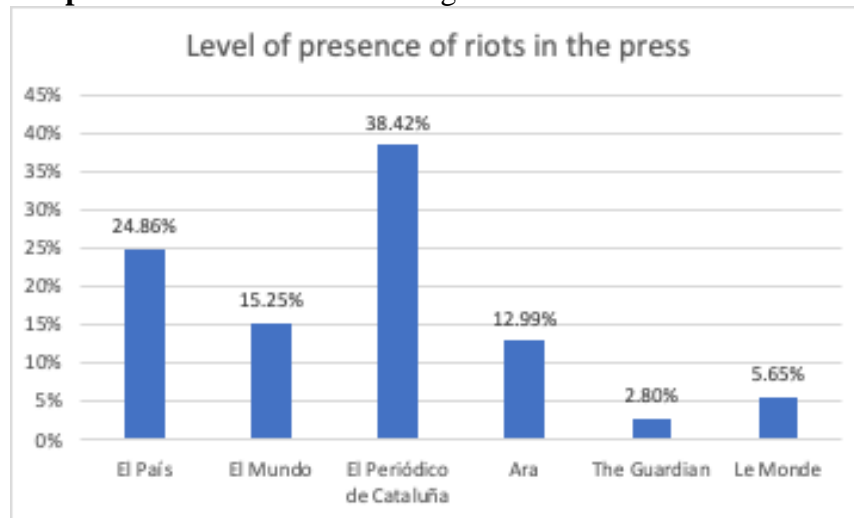
The sum of all these variables and their applicability in the media context reinforces the possibilities of news broadcasters and receivers to promote quality journalism that curbs disinformation.

The results explain the importance of applying quality verification processes compared to other fact-checking methods that do not include an in-depth analysis of these values.

Considering the first of the statistical values (*V1 Presence*), the diagram (Graph 2) offers a comparison in the press object of study that reveals the importance that the mobilizations reached in the press. *El Periódico* is the Catalan newspaper that dedicates the most space to riots (38.42%), followed by national newspapers such as *El País* (24.86%) or *El Mundo* (15.25%). Behind is *Ara*, local and with a marked pro-independence profile (12.99%) and the

international newspapers *Le Monde* (5.65%) and *The Guardian* (2.82%), which confirm the relevance of this event caused abroad.

**Graph 2.** Levels of media coverage of the riots

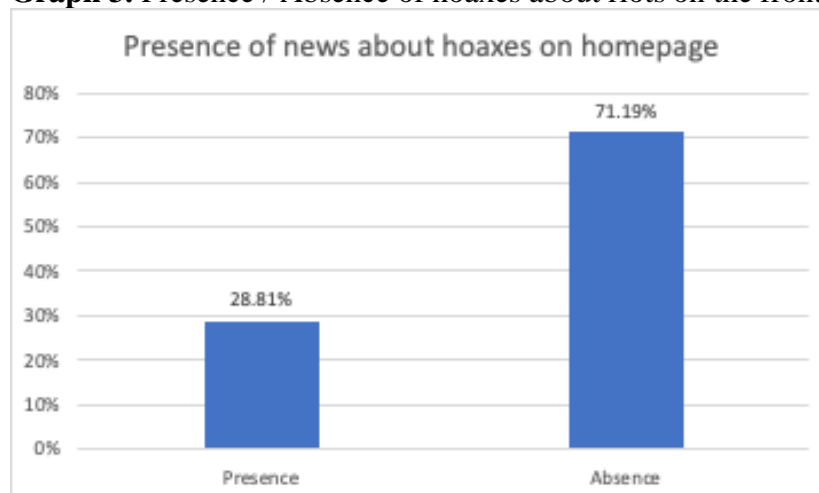


**Source:** Own compilation

As reflected in previous studies (Pérez-Curiel, 2020: 107) the *Procés* of Catalonia and subsequent events (referendum, application of 155, Catalan elections, escape from Puigdemont, imprisonment of prisoners, Supreme Court ruling, citizen mobilizations ...) have concentrated interest in the networks and the media, both in their traditional and digital format, generating an open debate on a political conflict marked by the division between independence and constitutionalist forces.

In addition, the data reveal (Graph 3) that information on riots only appears as the first news item on the homepage of *El País* and *El Periódico de Cataluña* (28.81%), although it is among the top ten published news of all the headers (71.19%).

**Graph 3.** Presence / Absence of hoaxes about riots on the front page



**Source:** Own compilation

Regarding the second value (*V2 Quantity and Diversity of Sources*), we analyze the number and type of sources used in each information (institutional, governmental, political, judicial, citizen, expert) and its scope (local, regional, national or international).

The data scrutinized on the number and frequency of sources (Table 6) show that the media have been characterized by the use of a multiple and diverse typology, responding to the basic principles of journalistic information. In this order, the security forces (53.4%), political leaders (35.2%) and the Government of Spain (34.7%) stand out, without ignoring other reference sources such as citizens (22.2%) and regional government sources (21.6%) or local (19.9%). Expert sources (18.2%), citizen associations (15.3%) or judicial representatives (13.1%) that also achieve representativeness in the information disseminated are not ruled out.

**Table 6.** Frequency indicators and types of sources

		Answers		Percentage of cases
		N	Percentage	
Number of times each type of source is used	Government of Spain	61	12.6	34.7
	Autonomous Government	38	7.8	21.6
	Local Government (Town Councils)	35	7.2	19.9
	International Government	7	1.4	4.0
	Political Parties	12	2.5	6.8
	Political leaders	62	12.8	35.2
	Judicial representatives	23	4.7	13.1
	Citizen associations	27	5.6	15.3
	Citizenships	39	8.0	22.2
	Security forces	94	19.4	53.4
	Media	19	3.9	10.8
	Specialized and expert sources	32	6.6	18.2
	Other sources	36	7.4	20.5
	Total	485	100.0	

**Source:** Own compilation

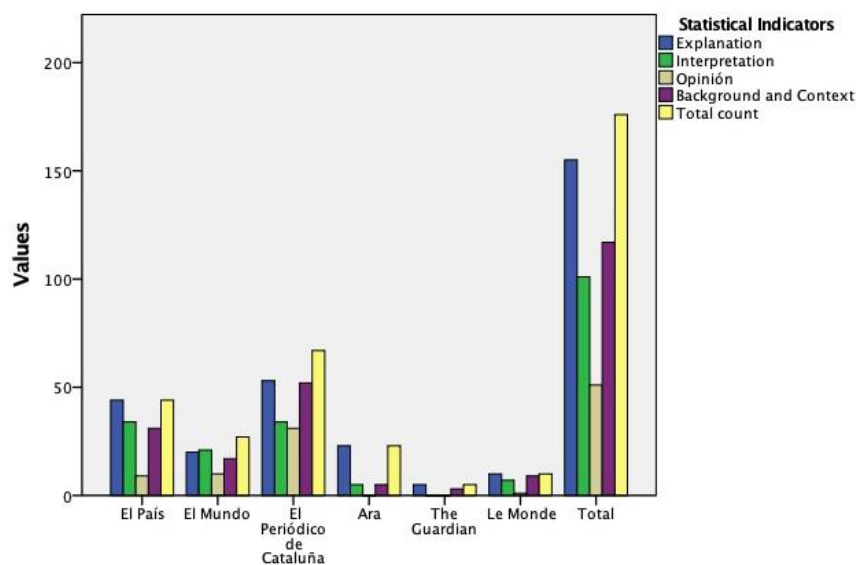
Finally, by adding the third and fourth values (*V3 Background-Context + V4 Explanatory-Interpretative-Opinion Data*) it is verified how newspapers behave in terms of the treatment of false news compared to the dynamics of *fact-checking* agencies.

The global sum of all the values divided by the fifth value (*V5 Informational Verification*) indicates the *IQL Informational Qualification Level* registered by each of the selected media.

The stacked bar chart (Graph 4) indicates that, values such as explanation or the use of background and context data are positioned ahead of other qualification records. With the results broken down, and following the geographic criteria, at the local level it stands out significantly *El Periódico de Cataluña* in front of the newspaper *Ara* regarding the use of

antecedent data (44.4 / 4.3), explanatory data (34.2 / 14.8) or interpretative data (33.7 / 5.0). As for the national newspapers, it stands out *El País* versus *El Mundo* in the use of antecedent data (44.4 / 28.4), interpretive data (37.7 / 20.8) and explanatory data (34.2 / 26.5) ahead of *El Mundo*. With regard to the international press with proportionally less informative coverage of the events, it is observed that *Le Monde* outperforms *The Guardian* in all codes, although both use especially explanatory data (6,5/3,2) *background* (7,7/2,6).

**Graph 4.** Contingency of added journalistic quality values



**Source:** Own compilation

The total of analyzed news ( $n = 190$ ) about riots in Catalonia published as one of the top ten pieces of information on the *homepage* indicates the trend towards qualification, verification, and information contrast, shared by all the analyzed media. In short, it describes an exercise of control and reaction against the production and consumption of hoaxes, offering a truthful perspective that weakens the fallacy and misinformation. A strategy, that adds to the demand of the institutions (quotation) to combat lies and restore trust towards the media and journalism professionals.

## Discussion

The invasion of invented news on digital platforms (López-Borrull et al., 2018), together with a viralization process led by anonymous users (Pérez-Curiel and Velasco Molpeceres, 2020) marks a turning point to reflect on the chaos of communication and the inability of institutions (Gottfried et al., 2016) to curb this digital infodemic. Networks like Twitter have been forced to set limits and propose a necessary sanction for those who make fraudulent and misinformative use of the network (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021). Especially, situations of conflict and political polarization (Neudert and Marchal, 2019) favor rumors and lies with an effect on an empowered audience on the network (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). The distrust of the public towards politics and the traditional media, which are losing their pre-eminence as the main sources of information on public affairs (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018), generates new habits of news consumption and changes the way in which users citizens attribute relevance to the present. Communities of users are created in social networks who seek information produced

by their own peers, generally not contrasted, or verified by media professionals (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). At the end of the chain, there is usually a user who does not know the origin and viralizes the falsehood (Redondo, 2018).

The role of politicians as emitters of fallacies also constitutes a risk factor (Naderi and Hirst, 2018). The influence they exert on network users (Powers and Kounalakis, 2017) becomes a matter of interest for scientific research, especially in a crisis situation in which the levels of false propagation skyrocket.

In parallel, the demand for quality journalism (Gómez Mompert et al., 2015) that postulates media education (Pellegrini and Múgica, 2006) and strengthens the verification of the facts and the rise of information against sensationalism (Journell, 2017) takes center stage in the post-truth era (Redondo, 2016). The research highlights the interest of the national and international press in covering the riots in Catalonia, showing codes that imbue the news with guarantee and credibility. There is a trend in the press towards the use of codes such as the contrast of the facts, the diversity of the sources, the use of antecedents or the explanation and critical argumentation (Palau Sampio, 2018), to weaken hoaxes and those who promote them. Recovering public trust (Casero Ripollés, 2020; Waisbord, 2018) in times of political conflict, with extreme levels of polarization, should be a media priority.

## Conclusions

The data analysis reveals the impact of fake news during the *Procés* riots in Catalonia, as well as the role of private users as the main producers of hoaxes, ahead of politicians and the media. Twitter is positioned as an engine for spreading hoaxes and fallacies thanks to its ability to go viral and have direct access to the public. RQ1) confirms the use of false information as a constant in the messages posted on Twitter. The answer to a first research question (The main framework of the study poses a second research question (RQ2) about the preeminent activism and leadership of the social audience as a promoter of online hoaxes. These new actors act as echo chamber and speakers of the lie. The strategy includes convincing their own peers and fan communities, taking into account the distrust of citizens in politicians and the media. Added to this is the influence of a context of conflict defined by the November 10 elections in Spain. From this perspective, the thesis is reinforced that polarization and misinformation during electoral periods intensifies and is a hallmark of political discourse on the Internet. The debates and outbreaks of the candidates for the elections show an index of confrontation between parties and criticism of the central and regional government based on lies.

In line with the third research question (RQ3), we note the need for a review of the verification procedures applied so far by the fact-checker agencies. The reporting of hoaxes on Twitter must be completed with processes that better explain to users why it is a hoax and that offer the correct information. The data collected shows in most cases that the agencies only report on the location of the hoax within the message or are limited to offering images referring to other dates and places. From this point of view, a reflection is proposed on the procedures of fact-checking agencies as promoters of disinformation rather than as channels of denial, given the helplessness, passivity, or alliance of the audiences themselves.

We consider that a contribution of our research for the implementation of the quality of journalism is the formula for calculating the level of journalistic qualification, which registers the sum of basic requirements that journalists must apply to combat the levels of rumors and hoaxes coming from networks social. In a stage where the impact of disinformation is causing democratic instability, journalism has to reinvent itself and claim its social responsibility. Future research is necessary to verify whether the public sphere, in addition to speaking out against the effects of disinformation, is activating a communication strategy that guarantees

actions by political institutions, the media and social platforms against chaos and information clutter. At the same time, new studies are urgently needed to review the role of audiences through citizen panels that allow knowing their opinion and position in the face of the increase in hoaxes on Twitter. Above all, when they have become new actors involved in the reproduction of the false.

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