

Conspiracy and pandemic denialism on a hybrid media context: A case study from Spain

In the last few years, the hybrid media context (Chadwick, 2017) has fostered the emergence of an ecosystem of digital pseudo-media sites (Rathnayake, 2018; Palau-Sampio, 2021). Following the path of *Breitbart News*, a plethora of outlets has flourished worldwide, whose aim is to serve as a loudspeaker for far-right parties and collectives – though not exclusively–, but also to take advantage of the clickbait economy (Munger, 2020). Linked to a political affiliation, they have played a major role in the dissemination of conspiracy theories (Boberg et al., 2020; Bruder and Kunert, 2020) and the ‘infodemic’ (Bechmann, 2020) regarding the covid-19 pandemic.

The term “alternative media” has been associated with “far-right media” (Atton, 2006) or “hyper-partisan media” (Benkler et al., 2017) to emphasize their aim to present unconventional coverage of the social reality, unorthodox compared to mainstream media and critical with their notion of newsworthiness or the production and distribution process (Holtz-Bacha, 2020). However, the ambiguity of the concept “alternative media”, which has been associated with left-wing activism since the 1970s (Haller and Holt, 2019), prevents it from adopting it. The term pseudo-media seems more appropriate, as these outlets mimic compositional forms and styles used by mainstream journalists (Rathnayake, 2018), while infringing journalistic conventions and mixing information, commentary, and ideology (Del-Fresno-García, 2019). This concept is also consistent with research that highlights the blended nature of such texts that combine sensationalism, disinformation, and partisanship to provide antiestablishment narratives (Mourão and Robertson, 2019).

This paper combines qualitative and quantitative methodology to analyze the characteristics of the disinformation disseminated by eight Spanish pseudo-media outlets (*Euskalnews*, *Altavoz de sucesos*, *El diestro*, *Alerta nacional*, *El correo de España*, *Mediterráneo digital*, *La Nación digital*, *Contando Estrelas and Mpr21*), with the aim to answer the following research questions: RQ1: What are the characteristics of the pseudo-media?; RQ2: What are the most relevant topics addressed?; RQ3: Which are the expressive resources invested in the headlines and narrative structure? Data gathering was carried out between March 2020 and February 2021 and the sample includes a thousand articles (N=1,009).

The results show clear links with the far-right ideology as well as the presence of a populist, polarized discourse through the use of belligerent, offensive expressions to refer to institutions and their representatives. Conspiracy theories associate the origins of the pandemic to a Chinese laboratory and emphasize a global plan to establish systemic control. Measures to stop the virus are framed as harmful and ineffective, linked to a euthanasia scheme targeted at older people, especially regarding vaccination, which is presented as a solution offered for economic interests. The preliminary conclusions also show three main strategies that complement one another and highlight the importance of analysing the expressive characteristics of disinformation: a polarized discourse, the clickbait patterns in headlines and the mimicry of certain journalistic practices with the aim of skewing them.

Keywords: pseudo-media, hyper-partisan media, polarization, pandemic skepticism, covid-19, right-wing ideology, populism, Spain