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Disinformation as a Society-Wide Threat: Journalism and ‘Fakecracy’ in Venezuela

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Abstract

In political systems restricting communication by means of official controls on information, the dissemination of fake news, as well as counterfeit content in general, increases. Audiences in such locations can be more vulnerable to misinformation, as there are no contrasting sources to check or confirm what is being misrepresented. Concurrently, the dynamics of social media also make fact checking difficult given the large volume of content that can be accessed almost instantly. This piece reviews both concepts surrounding the fake news phenomenon and an approach to citizens’ perception of misinformation in their midst. The existence of a political regime hellbent on controlling information creates conditions for citizens to echo rumors and hoaxes. The – still tentative – answer, precisely in view of a system that generally encourages disinformation, hinges on journalism, particularly that engaging in fact checking.

Keywords: fake news, disinformation, misinformation, journalism, audiences, Venezuela

1. Introduction

By April 2020, cell phone coverage reached 66% of the planet’s total population (5.16 billion users), internet coverage reached 59% (4.57 billion users), and the number of active users on social media reached 49% (3.81 billion users) [1].

Meanwhile, by March 2020, every 60 seconds, 4.7 million YouTube videos were viewed worldwide, 4.1 million Google searches were completed, 2.5 million Snapchat snaps were created, 2.5 million images were viewed on Imgur, and 1.3 million logins on Facebook were completed, 1.1 million e-commerce transactions were performed, 190 million emails were sent, 59 texts were sent on Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp messaging, 19 million SMS messages were sent, 694,444 people posted on Instagram, 194,444 people posted on Twitter, and 400,000 apps were downloaded from Google Play and Apple Store [2].

Undoubtedly, in this age, the flood of information to which people are exposed has significantly marked the way they relate, interact, and access newsworthy information. By means of apps and social media, people receive a wealth of information in real time. The confines of time and space are no longer an obstacle to learning what happened elsewhere in the world immediately.

The speed and amount of information exchanged is inversely proportional to users' ability to fact-check, filter, and prioritize it in an expeditious manner. This context sets the right conditions for rumors, misinformation, and fake news to play a major role.

2. On the term 'fake news'

Let us pause and consider the 'term fake news' from the perspective of its meaning in different languages, starting with Spanish, which is the mother tongue and primary language of academic production of the co-authors of this chapter.

In Spanish, the term 'fake news', untranslated, has gained momentum instead of its literal equivalent, *noticias falsas*.

How can this be *noticias falsas*? A news story can be false if a journalist has made mistakes and missed some information. It can be false if a government official lies on a public statement. It can also be false if a media outlet gives news showing only one side of reality for ideological reasons and shapes a news item after a conspiracy thesis, deviating from elements of accuracy in the treatment of information. Therefore, *per se*, *noticias falsas* seems to be a very broad term.

Spanish, unlike English, allows us to check whether the translation *noticias falsas* can have connotations that are more specific. In recent times, the use of the original English 'fake news' does not only refer to mere *noticias falsas* or a news item commonly associated with journalistic work. It seems that technology and the migration of human interaction to the digital realm has spawned new meanings that make 'fake news' seem incomplete or inaccurate.

In the first year of operations of the Venezuelan Observatory of Fake News (Observatorio Venezolano de Fake News, OVFN), founded by the authors and Professor Mariela Torrealba in July 2019, it has been noted that tampering with messages to manipulate the public opinion is linked to processes that, while reflecting the adjective 'fake' in their contents, pale in view of the tools that leave the mere 'fake' in a mild and insufficient description. This adjective becomes a robe that does not completely cover its wearer, and leaves out new ploys in the process of lying, creating confusion and misunderstanding, or seeking to control the belief systems of social media users.

When detecting the information units reviewed by the OVFN, dramatizations have constantly been found in audio messages, with voices of people weeping and crying alert on non-existent events. Additionally, a host of voice notes calling for protests that no groups have convened, making reckless statements to dupe the gullible in the troubled waters of distressing times, manipulating logos and screenshots with doctored graphic design, and using photos of children to make waves of false rumors regarding child abductions have been detected.

It has been noted that international writers and political figures have been misquoted in messages with criticism at certain regimes falsely attributed to them; messages have been forged by mixing half-truths with hoaxes to create confusion among retired persons regarding steps to collect their pension or discredit institutions. Also altered company logos have been used to deceive people into buying products, perform phishing of private banking information, harvest email accounts and send ads on Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, or other social media.

In the barrage of malicious intentions to confuse people, to attack someone's character in the perception of others, or make them believe a situation that has been blown out of proportion, the resourcefulness of players in the shadows has included the simple, inexpensive, and easiest item to alter: a simple audio file containing false information expressing pain or fear. This has been part of the perverse game of creating disinformation units that also circulate, which are outright false, flooding

the web and thereby seeking to disrupt the meanings and constructs that make up what people consider to be reality.

In summary, not only does the term 'fake news' refer to mere counterfeit content, but it also reaches beyond flat-out lying on mainstream media, a practice historically present since their inception. In their midst, intentional deception of leaders and sources has not escaped from public affairs, on issues regarding political power, propaganda, and ideological differences.

From the beginning of civilization to the present day, sometimes an official making a public statement on a certain subject lies. In that case, a journalist writes the note, quotes the statement, and the news is already false from its origin, from the communicational fact of the spokesperson's message, in an attempt at influencing beliefs of the society at which it is directed. In this case, it is a lie on a public statement, a hoax. The news is false because of the spokesperson's statement, not because the piece has been manipulated by its writer. In other words, in real life, it happens that officials lie and this is not considered fake news, although it is a component of misinformation. Hence the importance of the work done by those who check and detect lies and manipulation in public statements, contrasting them with evidence providing audiences with elements to assess whether something was false or some government or interest group intended to manipulate them.

We insist: One thing is the originally false and deceitful, where a falsehood has been stated and, as a communicational fact, it exists and is real, and another thing is the fabrication that someone said something, that a nonexistent statement has been made by an institution. There, the source does not lie, but someone, with misleading intent, counterfeits reality, fabricating an item under the guise of news, in the form of an alleged statement, a voice note, a message from a neighbor, a photo altered by fiction. A content is out there, actually trying to persuade, perhaps by appealing to emotions so it will go viral, because it is desirable, appealing, feared, or disgusting – therefore, because it is conspicuous, it is shared, creating a snowball effect that goes viral, deceiving, falsifying, and disturbing people's belief system.

3. Misinformation and fake news

The fake element is a component of misinformation that could be depicted as a three-legged table: The first one contains ideological propaganda of any kind; the second one, a structured muzzle with censorship mechanisms; and the third one, counterfeit content farms. Fake news may well be the hypotenuse of the triangle. In turn, the word 'disinformation' can be illustrated with a geometric shape of three vertices: a triangle of opacity, censorship, and manipulation.

The term 'fake news', or the one we have proposed to our Spanish-speaking colleagues, *contenidos falseados* (counterfeit content), cannot be replaced with 'misinformation'. Doing so would be to fall into a generalization that seeks to describe a part with the name of the whole. Fake news can cause misinformation, but they are not synonymous, and in that metonymy, inextricable aspects of each term, not necessarily equivalent to each other, go missing.

In many countries, the term 'fake news' has risen to prominence in the form a buzzword from the lips of government officials who often mention it to describe practices that they regard as "communicational attacks". This misuse of the term, in order to blame professional journalists with producing fake news simply because they are critical, has become popular in political circles. Additionally, in academic and journalistic realms, the term 'fake news' has begun to be rejected, and the word 'disinformation' is used to describe this phenomenon, despite the fact that this term also alludes to falsehood from government spokespersons and censorship mechanisms.

Italian researcher, reporter, and teacher Simona Levi [3], an expert in the field of digital democracy, communication, and collective action against corruption, mentions the tendency to selectively omit the term 'fake news' in order to overlap it with the use of the dusty and once more household name 'disinformation'.

In certain circles, the term 'fake news' is rejected and 'disinformation' is preferred. As we will see, an underlying misinformation problem is certainly present. Not only does misinformation include false information, but also disinformation, i.e., the production of altered information in combination with facts or practices reaching far beyond anything resembling news, such as automated social media accounts (bots), doctored videos, or covert and targeted advertising [3].

The definition provided by the Spanish Royal Academy (Real Academia Española) in its Spanish Language Dictionary (Diccionario de la Lengua Española) for the literal verb form linked to 'disinformation' implies a deliberate intent:

desinformar (lit. "disinform")

1. (transitive) to give manipulated information intentionally in order to serve certain purposes.
2. (transitive) to give insufficient information or to omit it.

In Spanish, there is not a morphologic or semantic equivalent to 'misinform/misinformation'.

Thus, it coincides, in the deliberate trait, with the noun 'disinformation' in English, per Merriam-Webster Dictionary [4]:

disinformation: false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence the public opinion or obscure the truth.

In Spanish, the verb *desinformar* is used to refer to ways of publically stating falsehoods, to creating fake news on social media or to disseminating counterfeit content, whatever this may be. The word also refers to omitting or giving insufficient information, that is, it includes concealing or conveniently failing to inform the public, thereby also alluding to preventing access to public information.

Giving intentionally manipulated information does not exclusively imply the use of fake news, since there are also mechanisms of deception associated with propaganda, that is, the communicational defense of ideological positions of certain governments, or distortion of reality by government spokespersons in order to hide sensitive information, turning it into privileged data only available to small elite groups. Disinformation, then, encompasses more acts than fabricating fake news.

Let us look at the other side of the syllogism: Is every fake news story made with the clear intent to 'disinform', as befits the intrinsic motivation behind this action so defined? What happens when, by mishandling sensitive information, the content is falsified organically, seemingly in an unintentional manner or in a way that cannot be attributed to a disinformation farm? For Romero [5], theoreticians have tried to disassociate these errors. "American and French researchers have separated consequential or mistaken disinformation (misinformation, *mésinformation*) from that premeditatedly and maliciously produced (disinformation, *désinformation*), thereby delimiting two distinct fields of study whose difference is based on the prior intent by the disinformation agent.

Romero acknowledges that, by not including a mistaken and unintentional component in the term, disinformation elements are left out by appealing to their deliberate nature and not to their consequences. Ultimately, as for the sender, it implies a deontological assessment on the legitimate or illegitimate purpose of their communication. Notwithstanding, what goes through the mind of a receiver who

is unaware of the deception? Is the intent of the sender evident in the content as to protect the receiver from the effects of the message on their perception?

Levy [3] finds that separating the unintentional aspect from the premeditated one could be compromising in terms of shielding those who unwittingly issue a false content without premeditation. By excluding them because of their lack of intent to manipulate – the above expert points out – they are removed from a problem of which they are a significant part and, contradicting those who believe that disinformation only exists when it is intentional, Levi points out that it includes misleading, inaccurate information resulting from something premeditated, but also from inertia and malpractice.

The term disinformation was used in the early 20th century by the Soviet regime (*dezinformatsiya*) to refer to activity linked to disseminating partially or completely false news, in an attempt to influence the public opinion, thereby disorienting it [6]. The Russians who migrated into France towards the end of World War I reported that the Bolshevik police used that term to refer to actions aimed at preventing the consolidation of the communist regime, hence its subsequent meaning, in 1944, per the Dictionary of the Russian Language, published in 1949, which defined disinformation as “the action of inducing error by means of deceitful information”. In the Dictionary of the Russian Language, the ideological aspect included the meaning “the disinformation of the public opinion conducted in capitalist countries”; and in 1952, in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, it was considered “the distortion that the United States exercised over global public opinion, through its enormous informational potential” according to Jacquard, as quoted by Andrés Rodríguez [7]. In the late 1950s, Rodríguez states that it was the Russians themselves who, through their secret service, the KGB, established disinformation offices, which replicated during the 1960s in other nations such as East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria, then in the Soviet orbit. Disinformation was considered an instrument to condition individuals.

4. The context in Venezuela

In Venezuela, by January 2020, there were 20.5 million Internet users, 23.21 million active cell phone lines, and 12 million active social media users. Of these, 81% had access through mobile devices. There were 11 million Facebook users, 4.2 million Instagram users, and 1.3 million Twitter users [8].

Data regarding Internet and cell phone coverage in Venezuela would seem to indicate that a large section of the population has online access and can get information from the varied choices available on the Internet. However, reality includes other variables: Broadband speed in the month of March 2020 was 2.83 Mbps for downloads and 1.47 Mbps for uploads [9], placing Venezuela in second to last place worldwide for its slow connection speed (175 of 176) [10]. On the other hand, in recent years, there has been recurrent and selective blocking on news websites and social media by state-owned Compañía Anónima Nacional Teléfonos de Venezuela, CANTV, the largest Internet service provider (ISP) in the country, as well as by other privately owned ISPs [11].

These controls on Internet content have increased in the last five years with the incorporation of bots and trolls [12] by the government, in order to distort public discussion in the digital realm by positioning certain topics and messages for propaganda purposes on such social media as Twitter.

The activity of SIBCI (Bolivarian System of Communication and Information [Sistema Bolivariano de Comunicación e Información]) officials and their bots positions, on a daily basis, hashtags that artificially rise to trending topics,

consequently burying the topics that are actually being discussed by Twitter users in Venezuela. Social spamming and trolling mechanisms are used, including fabrication of pseudo-news based on controversial tweets by public officials and trending topics powered by the SIBCI. The fact that many public officials do not declare to journalists, but instead direct them to follow their Twitter handles to receive information, helps consolidate this one-way government communication. This tactic makes it easier to 'introduce talking points' on the media, directing them to follow pseudo-news, which would otherwise have no impact on the public opinion [12].

As part of the conflicts encouraged by the government, networks of cyber-activists [12] linked to the propaganda machinery, were also established to promote the political and ideological values of the 'socialist' model. Among the purposes of these networks are criminalizing dissidence and concealing or making invisible misdeeds in public administration (such as acts of corruption or human rights violations, poorly functioning utilities, etc.).

A restrictive regulatory framework for the exercise of information freedoms and communication rights, recurrent bureaucratic actions against the media (administrative penalty proceedings, seizure of equipment from radio and television stations), court procedures (arbitrary detentions for exercising the right to freedom of expression in which due process is not respected, trials initiated against journalists or media executives potentially resulting in jail terms), economic pressure triggering media shutdowns, executive orders resulting in censorship, buyouts of independent media outlets seeking to change their editorial lines, among others, must be added to the restrictions in the virtual realm.

The choices to get news in Venezuela are steadily narrowing. Government information is wrapped in a shroud of opacity, along with severe restrictions on the freedom to seek, receive, and disseminate information in a free and pluralistic manner. The shrinking of the mainstream media ecosystem results in audiences migrating to the digital realm in order to try to get information, and they are thereby left exposed to the intrinsic risks and limitations of this space, already described above.

Media shutdown or buyout by investors with ties to the government, while reducing the menu of information choices, has encouraged the emergence of independent digital journalistic initiatives, characterized by quality information and the conduction of extensive journalistic research covering public interest issues and bringing to light hidden misdeeds that affect citizens. In reason of the impact of their work, they have regularly faced censorship measures and content blocking, as well as developed mechanisms to protect their publications, and encouraged using such tools as virtual private networks (VPNs), so that audiences can overcome the blocking and gain access to their content.

Concurrently, dozens of sites self-described as news services have emerged; but they do not do a rigorous job and rather work as news aggregators that, in many cases, take content from other media without appropriate attribution. Some include, among their practices, the dissemination of shocking content, without any type of sources or documentary basis.

On the other hand, the state-owned media system, which includes dozens of radio stations, TV channels, print media, and a news agency, has become a propaganda machine. From this system, a single view of what is happening in the country, which favors the ideology of its particular socialist model, is conveyed.

Since the Nicolás Maduro administration, another strategy making evident abuse of the ruling power has been devised: The use of the entire system of public and private radio and television media in Venezuela for simulcasting overtly propaganda-oriented addresses without purchasing airtime and on a mandatory basis, known as *cadenas* (lit. "chains"). This is how, in 2019, 116 mandatory addresses were

broadcast on national radio and television *cadena*s, reaching 122 hours, 28 minutes and 54 seconds. Furthermore, the total number of hours of mandatory broadcasts since the regime's rise to power is 1161 hours, 46 minutes, and 10 seconds [13].

In addition, state-owned media have been used to criminalize dissidence and expose public opinion leaders, opposition political figures, human rights activists, and journalists to public scorn. Between 2013 and 2020, Maduro has appeared on the main state-owned television network, Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), for 1812 hours, 29 minutes, and 33 seconds. This complex outlook is the perfect seed-bed for the use of disinformation as a strategy, whereby broadcasters spread their ideologies, beliefs, or prejudices to the detriment of fact checking.

Disinformation "consists of the intentional selection of biased, incomplete, or altered data," "all content fabricated and distributed" that is "false, inaccurate, or misleading [...] intentionally designed, presented, and promoted to cause public harm or private gain" [14]. It is deceptive in order to modify the "perception" and influence the "behavior" of individuals or groups.

Disinformation processes are manifest among the public opinion "when information processes regarding important facts that in some way concern audiences are incomplete or non-existent" [15]. Disinformation can occur in circumstances such as those taking place worldwide today, under which citizens, via the Internet, are exposed to high doses of content that may result in "misinformation due to an excess of information", which occurs "when a wealth of information about an event is available, but it is provided in a partial, biased, contradictory, or confusing manner" [15].

It may occur as a result of "poor management of information" or as a result of "manipulation by sources, governments, interest groups, or the media themselves in order to prevent the public from clearly and fully perceiving the meaning of the facts" [15]. Unlike journalistic practices in which identification of sources and/or clarity regarding the source of news prevails, disinformation is based on the intent to confuse and encourage certain behaviors among the audience.

The negativity of disinformation is based on the corruption of the reliable process of collecting and presenting facts. Thereby, those who produce it have an extensive menu of hybrid propositions, between the true and the false, in order to spawn doubt, fear, or controversy with the aim of biasing the perception and behavior of different social groups [14].

5. 'Fakecracy' in Venezuela

In order to refer to government communications management based on lies in the digital era, we propose the term 'fakecracy'. It does not matter what ideology is adhered to by a given democratic or authoritarian government resorting to these communicational strategies. What matters is to denote, with this portmanteau, a recent phenomenon in political communications, powered by human interaction on social media by using tricks, ploys, to 'fakecratically' boost certain officials' popularity, set non-organic trends on Twitter, measure the reaction of the public opinion to potential policies through rumor campaigns, fuel fear of government sanctions, even if these are not overtly mentioned, in instances when social control against protests of any kind is necessary.

A government with a 'fakecratic' profile is one that makes premeditated use of falsehoods in official public statements as the basis of its communicational and doctrinal apparatus. It is one that rules from the false, the counterfeit, by establishing restrictions – penalizing or suppressing communicational rights of newscasters and audiences – to avoid the circulation of critical information. Various media have

kept track of lies told by leaders of their respective countries. This effort lays bare the intent of some actors in the Executive branch interested in manipulating the public opinion based on hoaxes or misdirection.

Fakecracy is directly linked to increasing the power of deception in public statements, when that power is enhanced by means of restrictions in the communicational sphere and non-transparent methods to boost trends on social media. What happens if anonymous fabrications are also made to damage the reputation of leaders of power factions not aligned to the official ideology? This is how, in practical terms, hoaxes undermine those “tolerated” spaces – broadcast media owned by the State and those allegiant to the government.

In an environment of fakecracy, criticism only occurs competitively in the digital realm, yet unequally, resulting from a less far-reaching and impactful internet coverage. The power of deception is fueled by censored mainstream media, since the consumption of information on the web is asynchronous. This diminishes the ability to organize social protest and mobilization, contrary to what would happen with criticism and synchronous coverage of certain events on broadcast media. It is managed by the power of media control in order to strip the social fabric of articulation options, of the knowledge product of a common cognitive experience from collective events.

The term fakecracy is suitable in these cases. Every time government officials evade their responsibility under claims that cannot be fact-checked, resulting from citizens and critical and independent press being denied access to public information; every time there is a communications environment where opacity clouds phenomena of great social impact from the public opinion, such as the status of the electric power infrastructure, epidemiological bulletins, or water quality; every time that transparency in government management is not possible because of the systematic failure of accountability regarding public investment, by making use of the media for propaganda and by means of omitting sensitive issues, by resorting to lies tailored by the government in service of the power elite in order to convince people of alleged conspiracies against the those in power, then we speak of fakecracy, of the power of lies, of what is false, counterfeit, used to cling to power.

The term fakecracy, as proposed, attempts at describing a government that links the political use of deception in official addresses, imposed as apparent truths unveiled by means of a communications apparatus also resorting to aligning and orchestrating statements from spokespersons along with counterfeit content circulating on the Internet and to forging non-organic pro-government trends on different social media. Consequently, fakecracies are regimes that resort to fake news in order to persecute dissidents.

We believe that Venezuela may be undergoing a fakecratic process. Part of the regime's communications policy has extolled the achievements of a socialist revolution providing “happiness”, while blaming the American empire for the most severe socio-economic crisis in the nation's history. According to social indicators released by the National Survey on Living Conditions (Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida, ENCOVI) 2018, prepared by Andrés Bello Catholic University and published in 2019, 48% of the population lives in poverty and 94% without sufficient income to meet their basic needs [16].

The only way to counteract fakecratic schemes is freedom of communication, in the form of critical media that can be read, seen, or heard by the population. Therefore, fakecracy relies on citizens' vulnerability resulting from misinformation, rumor campaigns, non-organic trends fueled on social media, and the viralization of fake news.

Venezuelans are vulnerable to fakecracy because of a communicational environment characterized by:

- The inexistence of independent and critical print media, as a product of the government restrictions on newsprint imports, distributed at the discretion of state-owned Corporación Manero.
- The censorship of broadcast television channels. After the shutdown of flagship private network Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV) in 2007, other private channels bowed to prior censorship. State-owned television maintained a propaganda machinery in favor of the regime, while some other outlets – El Universal daily, Globovisión news channel, Cadena Capriles publishing group – were acquired by government cronies, consequently changing their editorial lines [17].
- The removal of independent news channels from pay TV systems by decisions of the National Telecommunications Commission (Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones, CONATEL), a media regulatory agency used as a political commissar.
- Poor Internet coverage [18].

Individuals' vulnerability to fakecracy increases in restricted information environments marked by other disinformation strategies such as denial of access to public information, censorship, and an official propaganda machinery.

6. Journalism v. disinformation

Prior fact checking, rigor in treatment, validation, clarity, cohesion, coherent speech, proper use of language (spelling and wording), and attribution of sources are fundamental conditions in journalism. Data search, on-site news coverage, time and space contextualization to assist in understanding events also are essential aspects. However, it is not a matter of reporting on just any event. Truly newsworthy information must possess such attributes as novelty, timeliness, social relevance, and human interest [15]. In order to be newsworthy, an event must have an impact on the community where it takes place. News, in its pure state, always arises from a surprising, shocking, paradoxical, or transcendental and, above all things, recent event [19].

It is important that journalistic work be done, as a starting point, under standards allowing guaranteeing the quality and rigor of its contents. "A news item, however, may lack some of these characteristics and be equally worthy of publication. But it will lose strength the further it moves away from such premises" [19].

Other elements, defined by Olga Dragnic as "news factors", are also relevant, conferring it informative value and serving as a guide in the process of informational hierarchization taking place within the media: immediacy, geographical proximity of the event, prominence of those involved in the news event (either in light of their social role or their performance in public office), connection of an event with a conflictive situation, effects or consequences thereof, suspension or absence of resolution, which is an indicator of a breakthrough (of economic, scientific, social, health, educational, or cultural nature), peculiarity, presence of unusual aspects, involvement of women in an event [15].

Journalism focuses on facts and goes beyond the obvious. "The knowledge of a concrete fact by the journalist should not be enough to conclude their work. Both they and the editor later reviewing their text must go beyond and search for consequences and repercussions, along with, of course, its background. Sometimes these can become very important regarding the news event" [19].

7. In closing: human rights standards

Under international human rights law and doctrine, all persons have the right to freely express ideas and thoughts “of all kinds” through any medium. Furthermore, they have the right to seek, receive, and disseminate information of their interest, without any preconditions or censorship. Today we cannot speak of receivers or passive subjects amidst the information overflow that exists in the world. Any person who has a digital device and an Internet connection can become a newscaster in full exercise of their freedom of expression.

However, the media and journalists, through the exercise of their informative role, “materialize” this right, as stated by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in its Advisory Opinion AO-5/85 of November 13, 1985, regarding mandatory membership under the law in a professional association for the practice of journalism:

If freedom of expression requires, in principle, that the communication media are potentially open to all without discrimination or, more precisely, that there be no individuals or groups that are excluded from access to such media, it must be recognized also that such media should be, in practice, true instruments of that freedom and not vehicles for its restriction. It is the mass media that make the exercise of freedom of expression a reality. This means that the conditions of its use must conform to the requirements of this freedom, with the result that there must be, inter alia, a plurality of means of communication, the barring of all monopolies thereof, in whatever form, and guarantees for the protection of the freedom and independence of journalists [20].

This role of materializers of freedom of expression, recognized by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, is more than a privilege; it is a commitment made by the media and journalists to guarantee that societies can access information regarding matters of public interest. To the extent that a society is informed, in a free and pluralistic manner, citizens have the necessary input to join public debate and contribute to the defense and/or strengthening of democracy.

Consequently, as the Court has pointed out, plurality and independence of the media and journalists undoubtedly act as a counterweight to the powers-that-be. They contribute to balancing the distortions or manipulations exerted by such powers through after-truth and disinformation practices.

As the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has expressed therein, freedom of expression constitutes the “cornerstone of democracy”:

Freedom of expression is a cornerstone upon which the very existence of a democratic society rests. It is indispensable for the formation of public opinion. It is also a conditio sine qua non for the development of political parties, trade unions, scientific and cultural societies and, in general, those who wish to influence the public. It represents, in short, the means that enable the community, when exercising its options, to be sufficiently informed. Consequently, it can be said that a society that is not well informed is not a society that is truly free [20].

Moreover, it grants journalism a privileged position in the defense of democracy and the rights to information and free expression by stating: “Journalism is the primary and principal manifestation of freedom of expression of thought” [20].

This status of journalism and the media as defenders of democracy is ratified by The United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organization of American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information. In their Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and "Fake News," Disinformation and Propaganda, they established that "It is the mass media that make the exercise of freedom of expression a reality. This means that the conditions of its use must conform to the requirements of this freedom" [20].

Similarly, the declaration warns that: "State actors should not make, sponsor, encourage or further disseminate statements which they know or reasonably should know to be false (disinformation) or which demonstrate a reckless disregard for verifiable information (propaganda)" [21].

Practices such as the use of digital operators (trolls) to boost propaganda content and make other issues of citizen interest invisible, as documented by Puyosa [12], are contrary to the standards set by the declaration.

It should be reminded that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in Principle 5 of its Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression, states that "[...] the arbitrary imposition of information and the imposition of obstacles to the free flow of information violate the right to freedom of expression" [22].

"State actors should, in accordance with their domestic and international legal obligations and their public duties, take care to ensure that they disseminate reliable and trustworthy information, including about matters of public interest, such as the economy, public health, security and the environment" [21].

This premise of the Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and "Fake News", Disinformation and Propaganda, is also repeatedly violated in Venezuela. Opacity of information is proven by the concealment and denial of access to documents essential for citizen control of public administration, such as reports and statistics of public agencies, epidemiological bulletins, and economic indicators (inflation and price indices), among others. Nevertheless, well-supported research, conducted by independent journalists and media, can contribute to breaking the siege and opacity on information, by providing citizens with fact-checked and contrasted information on matters of public interest.

In spite of the restrictions to the informative freedoms, journalists of emerging digital media in Venezuela have organized in the last years, managing to do informative work, in which they have brought to public light facts that had been concealed regarding corruption, human rights violations, damage to utilities infrastructure, among others.

The development of ethics-based journalism can generate essential sources of newsworthy information, with criteria for methodological rigor and fact-checked information, thereby contributing to rebuilding trust and credibility in what we read, see, or hear. If based on the tenets of what is considered and defined as authentic journalism, which we have reviewed in this chapter, and by making this authentic journalism a reference to obtain information, the risks posed by fake news and disinformation will be reduced. Citizens would be better and more adequately informed and equipped with useful tools to develop personally, exercise their rights, and participate in a free and pluralistic exchange of ideas, necessary for the preservation of democracy.

Conflict of interest

The authors are Venezuelan Fake News Observatory management.

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