

## Editorial 3

**Dr. Carlos LÓPEZ-OLANO**

Universitat de Valencia. Spain. carlos.lopez-olano@uv.es. <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4710-0805>

**Dr. Sebastián SÁNCHEZ-CASTILLO**

Universitat de Valencia. Spain. sebastian.sanchez@uv.es. <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3751-6425>

**Dr. Mauricio DIMANT**

Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Israel. mauricio.dimant@mail.huji.ac.il. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9397-5525>

### The responsibility of social research as a warning about the disinformation in the democratic memory

#### *La responsabilidad de la investigación social como alerta sobre la desinformación en la memoria democrática*

#### 1. Introduction

Disinformation is a communicative phenomenon inevitably linked to current times. Since the terms "fake news" were globally accepted to describe a communicative practice, especially since 2016, we have experienced various phases of social response, with successive movements of study, analysis and denunciation. The collective perception is having begun a stage, which appears to us as irreversible, where the Habermasian public sphere would take place mainly in social networks. The phenomenon is associated with a change in political communication, with campaigns that unapologetically adopt the practice of disorientation, sowing doubt in voters about democratic processes and their legitimacy, as occurred in the Brexit referendum and in the presidential elections of the United States of America, both in 2016 (Giachanou et al., 2020).

The media change associated with social networks is not limited only to their practices: the acquisition of Twitter by the richest man in the world invites us to rethink participation in this supposed public sphere. Elon Musk has explained about his purchase decision that his ultimate intention is to save democracy. As he has publicly declared, "it is very important that there is an inclusive scenario for freedom of expression (...) Twitter has become a kind of de facto public square, where what is really important is that people believe and perceive that they can speak freely within the limits of the law" (2022). The management of this supposed "public square" now depends on the tycoon, which would allow him, for example, the readmission of Donald Trump to the network, after his account was suspended due to the risk of "incitement to violence" (Osman Şahin et al., 2022).

Radicalization and violent attitudes can be exploited thanks to the ability to encourage and legitimize political actions through incendiary statements. Therefore, we face a dilemma where the dissemination of untrue news and false collective memories could become the price of defending freedom of expression (Sánchez Castillo and López-Olano, 2022). In the current war in Ukraine, disinformation has become a trench strategy, where we have become accustomed to fake videos, blockades and censorship. We see on television the disasters caused by a war that seems to obey the past, and at the same time, the new cyber perpetrators destroying graphic evidence in order to misinform public opinion. More than 150 cyber attacks have been recorded in Ukraine since Russia began its invasion on February 24, 2022. In fact, disinformation is one of the oldest war tactics, although the difference with current practice lies in its communicative impact from networks. The sides enlighten the civilian population with misleading information. Its effect is largely psychological, but very effective: it is increasingly difficult to distinguish what is real and what is fake news.

These massive disinformation attacks invite us to reflect on the historical construction that this conflict will have in the future, and whether the massive production of information on the networks will call into question many realities that are happening in a dramatic way in the Ukrainian civilian population.

## **2. Memory and the construction of identity**

The polarization and expansion of other communicative consequences associated with parties linked to anti-democratic positions, is manifested, for example, in the claim of emotional mobilization of the electorate, or in the intentional establishment of climates of opinion favourable to their ideologies and interests. The media agenda of these new political options protected within democratic societies is limited to a few issues, but always with high social tension.

Within this media agenda we consider that the issues related to the Democratic Memory stand out, referring in Spain to the institutional crimes committed during the Franco dictatorship. But beyond Spain, in many other countries with a past of suffering under the influence of totalitarian regimes, memory is also acquiring a leading role in the media, centralized in dissemination through social networks (Argentina, Chile, Germany, Israel, Italy, Sahara, Cuba, etc.). History –particularly recent history– becomes a story constructed in the first person by people with direct interests, which is at the origin of nation building; history is continually manipulated to fit what is required of it to create the national family (Hobsbawm, 1983).

The story is made to fit, and that is if it is not forgotten, as when democracy passes by for the sake of building a future consensually absent in the matter of reparation and vindication of the victims. The measure is taken to avoid the story that hurts, as defined by Jameson (2002).

In the Latin American case, discussions on democratic memory were conditioned by the failures of post-dictatorial governments in their socioeconomic policies, failing to improve the living conditions of citizens during democratic mandates. This aspect is central to understanding not only the differences with the Spanish case, but mainly the complex, tense and often contradictory construction of a democratic memory in the region.

The high levels of poverty, marginality and inequality reached during the different democratic governments clouded the capacity of the State to achieve a consensual response, socially and politically, in front of cases of human rights violations during said dictatorships. In particular, because memory also implies claims, to which the State did not always have appropriate responses, especially due to the context of high poverty rates.

For this reason, the Latin American image of the possibility of a "Pacto de la Moncloa" was strongly rejected by those political actors who sought to put the reduction of poverty at the center of public policies, over those referring to economic growth. As the protagonists of the documentary film "Las Sandinistas" (2018) comment, "nobody gives up power of their own free will." Faced with this historical experience, democratic memory was not only part of a process of polarization about the past, but also of a process of building power in a present without clear answers to democratic demands for well-being.

At this point, we claim critical reflection and debate on the use of memory as a topic included in the political agenda in different countries with an absolutist past or present.

## **3. Disinformation and memory: academic research**

In this monograph we can see how historical memory is a highly politicized concept, in which events that occurred more than eighty years ago are capable of generating controversy and polarization on networks such as Twitter. This is the case of the poet Federico García Lorca, who after a message from a leader of the Vox party entered the media agenda due to the immediate controversy aroused. The character of an icon for those who claim memory, a victim of repression for being homosexual and manifestly on the left, murdered and buried in a common grave that remains to be found, did not prevent it from being stated that Lorca today, in Spain, would vote for those of Abascal.

The study of the reactions on twitter to this statement offers very interesting conclusions, such as the profusion of anonymous accounts that use the platform to comment on these political issues. The response to the statement regarding Lorca causes an unquestionable rejection, with a reaction that exceeds in number and impact, the conversation generated by Vox's own supporters and even the diffusion in the traditional media. This reaction confirms the ability of the extreme right to generate polemical, polarizing debates without much effort and that mark the media agenda of the moment.

A new network such as TikTok, which is among the six most used globally, is also addressed. For this reason, it is important to consider the scope of his publications to study such a complex and controversial issue in Spain as the Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, which together make up the referential elements of Law 52/2007, of December 26, known as the "Ley de Memoria Histórica". How these issues

are addressed on a digital social platform where visual overstimulation and humorous narrative prevail is essential to understand the incidence of this information, especially among the youngest. One of the keys to understanding how TikTok induces what kind of news lies in the algorithms, since they are the ones that lead us to content that reinforces our points of view. Disinformation is evident in this network and manifests itself in various ways, which in many cases compromises the handling of information by young audiences who, far from the media, remain with these messages without contrasting them through alternative channels.

In another article, one of the main challenges of the media agendas of democratic societies is analyzed: the triangular tension between "truth", "identity" and "instantaneity" in moments of crisis, such as those in which a threat and danger are collectively experienced. Along with the limits of "journalistic professionalism" –or socially accepted values and norms about objectivity– the article presents, through a comparative analysis, a discussion about the process of constructing collective images that become part of the process of construction of a memory of said crisis. In other words, we are invited to think about and discuss the difficulty of media treatment of terrorist attacks, but not only because of their (mis)information to the public, but also because of the (mis)knowledge they generate in the future.

The disinformation campaign on Twitter about extrajudicial executions committed by members of the Colombian Army, cases that were listed as "combat casualties," is also being studied. Through a qualitative analysis of 602 publications, the article identifies the narrative and the argumentative categories, as well as the emotions mobilized in the actors involved. This analysis invites us to rethink the relationship not only between disinformation and social networks, but also between political polarization and historical memory, contextualizing the impact that these relationships had on the attitudes of Colombian citizens towards the peace negotiations. Because despite the fact that disinformation practices are widely known by the public as practices against which one must be prepared in order not to fall under their harmful effects, it still achieves its objectives. The article invites us to reflect on this contradiction, where greater awareness does not imply less influence.

The case of George Floyd is addressed too, who was murdered on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis (Minnesota) after being arrested by three police officers who believed that he had bought cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill. The incident sparked a deep debate about the legacy of racism in American institutions, particularly the police. Protests erupted across the country and continued through much of the summer. It was a turning point on racial issues in the US, causing changes in public opinion about racism. This research has helped clarify how that event was perceived by social media users. The article has offered an insight into the process of transnational memory formation. Previous literature proposes that the formation of democratic memory in social networks is faster, more contested and less limited than by the nation-state. The research presented here helps refine these concepts in several ways, most notably by adding the cosmopolitan element, a concept that is rarely applied to social media.

Finally, the anti-Jewish narratives that are maintained or generated in Slovak social networks are analyzed, as representative of what happens in Eastern Europe. The revitalization of inherited mechanisms and the new narratives perceived in digitally disseminated anti-Semitism reveal an increase in latent xenophobia, with the return of racist movements that is, to say the least, worrying. Up to seven fully valid current narratives are identified, among which the questioning of scientific facts and authorities, and the establishment of radical points of view in digital media stand out. This state of things shows the uncontrolled radicalization of the digital space referring to a latent anti-Semitism that is coming back with force.

#### 4. References

Giachanou, A., Zhang, G., & Rosso, P. (2020). Multimodal Fake News Detection with Textual, Visual and Semantic Information. In *International Conference on Text, Speech, and Dialogue*, 30-38. Springer, Cham.

Hobsbawm, E. J. (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.

Jameson, F. (2002). *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Routledge.

Musk, E. (2022). Elon Musk talks Twitter, Tesla and how its brain works. TED Talks. 14/04/22. <https://bit.ly/3wfhyp4>

Osman Şahin, R. J., & Umut Korkut (2021). Policy-making by tweets: discursive governance, populism, and Trump Presidency. *Contemporary Politics*, 27(5), 591-610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2021.1935009>

Sánchez-Castillo, S., & López-Olano, C. (2021). Vetting and verifying multimodal false information. A challenge for democratic societies. *Anàlisi: Quaderns de Comunicació i Cultura*, 64, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/analisi.3461>

