

March 2023

DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN SPAIN

By Ana Romero Vicente, EU DisinfoLab

EU DISINFO LAB



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
EMBLEMATIC CASES	4
NARRATIVES	5
COMMUNITY	7
POLICY	9

INTRODUCTION

- Spain is very permeable to disinformation, and almost any topic or event can be instrumentalised to generate deceitful content (e.g., social and economic issues, race, gender, religion, technology, education, regional political tension, etc.). Narratives are often overlapped within the same hoax and recycled from one crisis to the other.
- The Spanish disinformation landscape stands out for its acute political and media polarisation, usually in the form of misleading content. Malign actors mix real data with distorted or outright false information, exploiting the public's legitimate concerns and destabilising the audience by making it difficult to discern reality.
- In recent years, Spain has been affected by various disinformation campaigns that promote democratic destabilisation, often of unknown origin, or encouraged by foreign actors and later amplified by national actors.
- According to this latest [survey](#), more than 80% of Spaniards believe that disinformation is a problem in the country, and civil society is undoubtedly resilient to it. Spain has a dense network of official fact-checkers, several media literacy experts and related initiatives, as well as a nascent legislative mechanism in response to disinformation.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

These are three emblematic disinformation cases that permeated Spain's public opinion to this day.

SINGER RICKY MARTIN, THE DOG, AND THE JAM (1999)

- This 24-year-old story revolutionised the Spanish information landscape, becoming the main topic of conversation in every home.
- The [hoax](#) claimed that a surprise game show was arranged for a teenage girl to be surprised by her idol Ricky Martin, who would be hiding in her bedroom's wardrobe. However, as soon as the girl came home, unaware of the TV cameras, she engaged in inappropriate acts involving her dog and a jar of jam.
- Despite being an urban myth, it got uncontrollably out of hand as dozens of people still claim they saw a video that actually never existed.

THE 11M TERRORIST ATTACKS (2004)

- On 11 March 2004, a jihadist cell carried out an [attack in Madrid](#) that killed 193 people and injured nearly 2,000. Government representatives from the conservative Partido Popular (PP) had initially claimed the Spanish terrorist group ETA had perpetrated the attack. The general elections were to be held three days later, and that argument seemed more favourable for them to be re-elected.
- Various media outlets took over the PP's story in the following years. Conspiracy theories continue to exploit these events for political polarisation. Recent hoaxes already fact-checked suggest that there is evidence linking Morocco, the ETA, and the PSOE (centre-left) to the 11M attack.

CATALAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

- The European Union has detected dozens of hoaxes and disinformation related to the political situation in Spain, especially the [Catalan independence movement](#).
- The regular contacts of the independence movement with Russian officials during the Catalan sovereignty process were the subject of hoaxes by media favourable to the Kremlin. According to the EEAS, this information was presented in Russia as a "paid advertorial from Europe" (i.e., an advertisement written in the form of editorial content), in line with Russia's self-victimisation strategy.

MIGRATION CRISES IN THE CANARY ISLANDS

- Between August 2020 and March 2021, the migrant population arriving in the Canary Islands became the target of an extreme [disinformation campaign](#).
- The hoaxes sowed a lot of animosities. "Spain finances and maintains illegal immigration in 4- and 5-star hotels", said some [messages](#). Others instilled fear about an alleged "[invasion](#)", which would explain why "only young and strong men of military age" rather than seniors, children, and women arrive in Spain.

NARRATIVES

The section illustrates the most recurrent narratives in the Spanish disinformation landscape.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC POLARISATION

- Great political and economic polarisation weakened public confidence in democracy. Disinformation ranges from directly undermining the image of political representatives to presenting distorted data or false content on issues of national interest, such as the economic or energy crisis, the pandemic, or past and present legislation.
- In Spain, there is a historical memory for political and economic matters. Disinformation spreaders frequently revive the past to distort the present with half-truths and unfounded accusations (e.g., corruption, violent acts, electoral fraud, etc.)
- Parties and politicians are often the transmitters of disinformation that is amplified by traditional media and online platforms, especially Twitter. In addition, the relatively recent presence of VOX and Unidas Podemos, standing at the extremes of the Spanish political spectrum, has further broadened this polarisation.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ANTI-MOROCCAN SENTIMENT

- The migratory flows of the last decades have led to a large increase in the foreign population in Spain. The stream of biased, ill-intentioned, or fabricated information about migration has gone in parallel.
- Recurrent falsities state that the West – including Spain – will be “taken over” by Islamic countries. Muslim migrants, mainly from Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa, are the most targeted, with claims that they are coming to Spain to steal, rape, and collect undeserved social benefits. Lately, there has been a strong focus on unaccompanied foreign minors.
- Xenophobic [discourses](#) are mostly found in disinformative and partisan sites or openly discussed by politicians and public figures. This content is then reproduced and amplified on social media, fuelling stigma, discrimination, and hate speech.

DENIALISM AND CONSPIRACIES ABOUT COVID-19 AND CLIMATE CHANGE

- During the pandemic, there was a continuous proliferation of messages denying the existence of Covid-19, hoaxes generating health alarms, providing fake healing tips, or spreading anti-vaccine stances, many with a conspiratorial nature (i.e., the [big reset theory](#)).
- At present, there are still small outbreaks of disinformation about the coronavirus, especially linked to the side effects of vaccines. However, the Covid-19 pandemic opened the door to disinformation about other health crises, such as monkeypox. Communication strategies (e.g., [camouflaging words](#)) were similar and often overlooked by the platforms despite their content moderation efforts.
- Disinformation about climate change is also recurrent in Spain. Conspiracies present alternative explanations for climate events, blame the elites, or frighten communities with alleged climate quarantines and lockdowns. In addition, denialism is disguised in a more [subtle discourse](#) –but their main goal remains to delay environmental protection policies instead of taking immediate action to address the crisis.

GENDER- AND IDENTITY-BASED DISINFORMATION

- The main [gender-based disinformation](#) techniques in Spain tend to deny sexist violence, attack the Gender Equality Law, spreading falsehoods about gender equality policies.
- You can find some traces of the Spanish extreme right in campaigns against the so-called “gender ideology”.
- The [LGBTQ+ community](#) has also been the target of numerous hoaxes, accusing them of child abuse and spreading diseases.

The main actors countering disinformation in Spain are described hereafter.

FACT-CHECKERS -INDEPENDENT ORGANISATIONS

- [Maldita.es](#)
- [Newtral](#)
- [Verificat](#)
- [Infoveritas](#)

FACT-CHECKERS – INTEGRATED INTO THE MEDIA

- [EFE Verifica](#)
- [Verifica RTVE](#)
- [Verifica A3N](#)
- [AFP Factual](#)

Most of them are verified signatories of the [IFCN Code of Principles](#) and some are Meta's independent fact-checking partners.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES AND PUBLICATIONS

- [The forum against disinformation campaigns in the field of national security](#) aims at "safeguarding democratic values, freedoms, and fundamental rights" by recommending initiatives to fight hoaxes and disinformation campaigns. It is attached to the Department of National Security of the Cabinet of the Presidency of the Government and is made up of six people representing the General State Administration and ten from civil society, academia, the private sector, and non-profit associations.
- The PSOE has [announced](#) that it will create a committee to deny "hoaxes" exclusively from right-wing parties in 2023, as it is the year of municipal and regional elections.
- ["Fight against disinformation campaigns in the field of national security: proposals from civil society"](#) is the title of a book published in September 2022; a public-private cooperation initiative promoted by the Department of Homeland Security (DSN).
- [Scientific disinformation in Spain](#) is a study by the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology that analyses scientific information consumption habits, attitudes towards disinformation, and factors related to the ability to identify scientific disinformation.

OTHER RELEVANT INITIATIVES

- [Iberifier](#), an observatory to fight against disinformation in Spain and Portugal, was [launched](#) in May 2021. It includes more than 90 researchers specialised in digital communication, disinformation, computing, and strategic analysis.
- [ALFA MEDIA](#) is an association for the promotion and development of media literacy.
- [ICMedia](#) is the federation of consumer associations and media users.

MAIN CHARACTERS FIGHTING DISINFORMATION

- [Carmela Ríos](#) is a journalist, professor of mobile journalism and social networks.
- [Lorena Jaume-Palasi](#) is considered one of the leading AI experts in Spain. In 2017, the government appointed her a Council of Wise Men on Artificial Intelligence and Big Data member.
- [Mariluz Congosto](#) is a computer scientist, researcher, and teacher specialised in social network analysis and data visualisation.
- [Myriam Redondo](#) is a journalist specialised in international communication and digital disinformation. She authored the book "Digital verification for journalists: Manual against hoaxes and international disinformation".
- [Ramón Salaverría](#) is a professor of journalism at the University of Navarra, a researcher in digital media and media literacy, and coordinator of Iberifier.
- [Raúl Magallón](#) is a professor and researcher at the Carlos III University of Madrid, specialised in digital communication, verification, visualisation and data analysis. He is the author of the books "Unfaking News" and "Disinformation and pandemic".

POLICY

In 2022, [the first conviction for spreading disinformation and inciting hatred](#) was carried out. The user had posted a video showing an assault and accusing a foreign minor of being responsible. The sentence was 15 months in prison and a fine of 1,620 euros. This revived the debate on criminal liability for the dissemination of disinformation.

In Spain, disinformation is of such varied content that, depending on what it refers to and with what intention it is disseminated, it can include very different [criminal responsibilities](#) for:

- Hate crimes;
- Crime against moral integrity;
- Threats to the public order;
- Insults or slander;
- Crimes against public health, fraud, and intrusion. In this regard, unproven and ineffective alternative cures are a growing niche in the disinformation sphere.

This project is funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

