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Parliamentary discourse and fact-checkers: Strategies of verification and political agenda

ABSTRACT

Disinformation, a pervasive issue in contemporary society, significantly influences citizens' political decision-making. In response, fact-checking has emerged as a prominent movement, striving to enhance journalistic standards. Although this trend has sparked substantial academic research, only a few studies have thoroughly examined the impact of these journalistic practices on society. Moreover, while fact-checking agencies monitor parliamentary messages, research on the interplay between fact-checkers and legislative activity remains in its infancy. This research addresses the role of fact-checkers in the context of parliamentary disinformation in Spain and their presence in the speeches of MPs, as well as the importance given by fact-checking agencies themselves to parliamentary speeches and the perception citizens have when discussing disinformation. We are interested in knowing what presence they have in parliamentary speeches, what importance the fact-checkers themselves give to parliamentary speeches and what perception citizens have of them when disinformation in parliament is discussed. To this aim, we propose a mixed methodological approach in three phases: (1) documentary

analysis of disinformation published in the Bulletins of Congress and the Spanish Parliament, as well as in the speeches made by the Joint Commission on National Security; (2) in-depth interviews with three journalists from the main Spanish verification agencies working on parliamentary activity: Newtral, Maldita *and* Efe Verifica; *(3) citizen focus groups to address different questions about the ecosystem of information disinformation in Spain. The results show growing attention to disinformation in the parliamentary context; verifiers occupy a relevant space in the political discourse, even replacing mentions of traditional journalists when discussing disinformation, and this contrasts with the lack of recognition by citizens who, despite referring to it as a problem for democracy, barely mention the work of verification agencies in their discourse.*

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Fact-checking has gained importance as a movement to revitalize the ideals of truth-seeking in journalism and even to correct some of the shortcomings of traditional journalism (Singer 2018). In the last decade, it has received great attention from authors from different disciplines, who have tried to investigate its configuration, functions and practices (Magallón-Rosa 2019; Sánchez-Duarte and Magallón-Rosa 2020; López-García et al. 2021; Salaverría and Cardoso 2023). However, studies that have formally evaluated their performance and the extent of their practices are scarcer (Singer 2019, 2021; Tsang et al. 2023).

Firstly, the difficulty in verifying strategic ambiguity in politicians' speeches has been shown (Lim 2018; Hameleers and Van Der Meer 2020; Morris et al. 2020) to be maximal when this verification directly links a politician to lying and manipulation (Ferracioli et al. 2022). Several studies suggest that verifiers should be more transparent with their actions and proactive in communicating their motives and identities (Primig 2022). Secondly, other research has shown that parliamentary activity, catalysed by parliamentary group leaders and spokespersons, generates a significant volume of messages subject to verification by fact-checkers (Campos et al. 2022). MPs on social media contribute to institutional distrust and apathy towards parliamentary work among citizens (Bennett and Livingston 2018). These messages focus on criticizing an institution, a government action or attacking a parliamentary counterpart, reinforcing citizens' distrust of political institutions and their representatives. Also, parliamentarians contribute to generating labels to delegitimise or attack political opponents (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019) or attack the legitimacy of journalism (De-Vreese et al. 2018). Many messages from parliamentarians also generate an antagonistic division of society and a binary view of parliamentary activity, favouring polarization and political tension (Torcal 2023). It is seen primarily in the prevailing trend of messages aimed at delegitimising the other and those whose ideology does not coincide with one's own, through polarized divisions between the in-group, the 'our' 'good', who do the right thing, and the 'corrupt' or 'lying' 'others', who do the wrong thing, thus creating a framework conducive to disinformation (Jagers and Walgrave 2007).

We understand that disinformation can promote false understandings without necessarily relying on fictional identities. It uses true but misleading content to trigger inaccurate inferences, generating informational clutter (Fallis 2015; Karlova and Fisher 2013; Wardle and Derakhsan 2017) and promoting misperceptions about reality and social consensus (McKay and

Tenove 2021). Consequently, disinformation often seeks to amplify social divisions through discursive axes of 'the one' and/against 'the others', including the propagation of conspiracy theories, polarized and sensationalized, highly emotional, and partisan content (Howard et al. 2017). Therefore, information clutter refers not only to the truthfulness, deception or falsity of message content but also involves the rhetoric, in terms of theme and tone, and the discursive and argumentative construction of the message, which makes facts perceived as misleading, untruthful or false, regardless of whether they are or not (Hameleers and Minihold 2022). In this sense, MPs are mobilizing agents of polarizing dynamics instead of more dialogic attitudes, such as debating differentiated positions through reasoning based on facts (Esteve-Del-Valle et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, parliamentary disinformation involves other activities that go beyond political-parliamentary discourse: Norton (2017) points out that one of the great challenges for contemporary parliaments to preserve democracy is precisely to fight against this distrust and scepticism among citizens in a democratic context in which (digital) information is increasingly immediate and confusing, and society is increasingly polarized. Parliaments must also legislate on this new communicative reality: different parliaments worldwide have implemented measures and action plans to reduce the effects of disinformation campaigns that put democratic principles at risk. One of the pioneers was the experimental EU Action Plan against Disinformation, launched before the European Parliament elections in May 2019 (Kouroutakis 2019).

Thirdly, it is key to understand how society is coping with this situation of parliamentary disinformation in a context of instability around the world and in which evidence indicates that disinformation is reaching historical highs after the COVID-19 health pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Sábada and Salaverría 2022). Spanish citizens believe that the most effective way to combat the effects of disinformation is through the work of fake news verification agencies (Casero et al. 2023). Despite the increasing fragmentation of channels through which citizens are informed, and the younger population pays more attention to influencers or celebrities than journalists, dependence on intermediaries continues to grow (Newman et al. 2023). This research aims to investigate the role of fact-checkers as intermediaries in the context of parliamentary disinformation in Spain to find out what presence they have in parliamentary speeches, what importance the fact-checkers themselves give to parliamentary speeches and what perception citizens have of them when they talk about disinformation in parliament.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study proposes a mixed methodological approach to investigate disinformation within parliamentary activity and the importance of verifiers in this context. To do so, we conducted a three-level analysis: we analysed parliamentary documentation; we conducted in-depth interviews with journalists of verifiers and we extracted data from focus groups with citizens to determine their thoughts about parliamentary speech fact-checkers.

In the initial phase, we undertook a rigorous analysis of parliamentary documentation on disinformation to uncover the influence of fact-checkers in the political discourse of the Spanish Parliament. Our data collection process involved using the search engine of the Congress of Deputies website, filtering the results by the terms 'disinformation', 'fake news' and 'noticias falsas',
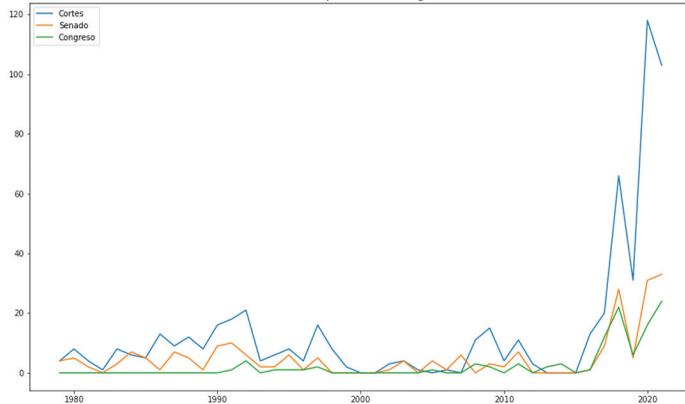
Figure 1: The total number of documents in the bulletins of the Spanish Congress of Deputies that include the words 'disinformation', 'fake news' or 'noticias'. Provided by the authors.

and downloading and scraping 24,678 documents published in the Bulletins of Congress and the Cortes Generales (DS, BOCG) from 2008 to July 2020. From this extensive dataset, we selected the 559 documents that explicitly mentioned these terms.

Subsequently, we added eighteen interventions made between May 2021 and February 2022 by the Joint Committee on National Security about the study of the phenomenon of disinformation and 'fake news' with disruptive effects on society, which were published in the Boletín de las Cortes Generales.

In the second phase, we conducted insightful interviews with three journalists from the leading verification agencies operating in Spain: *Newtral*, *Maldita* and *Efe Verifica*. These interviews, held online in January 2022 and lasting an average of fifty minutes each, were conducted with a diverse group of journalists, including two men and one woman, who held key positions in their respective organizations. The interviews followed a semi-structured scheme, addressing two thematic blocks of questions to explore the importance given by verifiers to parliamentary discourse and the role of verifiers in the context of parliamentary disinformation.

In the final phase, we analyse the four focus groups carried out with citizens to investigate their perceptions of digital parliamentary political disinformation in Spain and determine their importance to the role of verifiers in this context. A total of 42 people participated in the focus groups. For the configuration of the discussion groups, a sample was constructed according to the following variables: (1) knowledge of parliamentary activity, (2) ideology, (3) age from 24 to 35 years and (4) broad geographical origin. As can be seen in Table 2, four discussion groups were set up in which four thematic blocks were addressed: the ecosystem of information disorders in the parliamentary context was addressed in terms of their reception and effects, both in the long- and short-term; their purpose and objectives, such as economic or influential; their typology and formats and their channels and evolution.

Table 1: Scripts of semi-structured interviews with Spanish parliamentary staff.

Objectives	Questions
(1) How important is parliament discourse to fact-checkers?	
(1a) How do verification agencies check Members' speech?	How are the messages to be checked in the framework of the parliamentary activity in the Congress of Deputies selected?
	Is there direct contact with the deputy whose speech is being verified to verify the information or inquire about its sources? Is the press officer of the parliamentary group contacted? Other contact?
	Is the deputies' speech generally verified in their public activity in the congress or also in their activity in other media (media, their own social networks)?
	When there has been contact with the deputies in the verification process, are there differences between the different parliamentary groups?
	Challenges.
(1b) What kind of disinformation is prevalent among MPs?	What are the top four or five predominant disinformation themes in the speeches of the deputies?
	Do these issues coincide with the media agenda of the moment? Or might some be timeless issues linked to the ideological line of the party?
	Is the media aware or does it have any perception about whether any deputy or parliamentary group issues more disinformation than the rest?
	Is the disinformation of the Congress of Deputies usually reflected in the media (not verifiers)? And is it replicated by citizens on social networks?
	Has any already verified information been re-exposed in the Congress of Deputies?
(1c) Are there more or less disinformation parliamentarians?	Would you say that parliamentarians are disinformation? Who?
	If yes or for those who do: are they intentionally? Does it respond to any political or group strategy?
(2) What is the role of verifiers in the context of parliamentary disinformation?	
(2a) What is the relationship between MPs and disinformation and the verification media?	Do deputies use verified information in their congressional speeches to rebut other deputies?
	Do MPs replicate or interact with their means of verification through social networks? How do they do so?
	What is the attitude of the deputies towards the verifying media? Is there a difference between the different parliamentary groups? How?
	Have members of parliament or members of the press of the parliamentary groups contacted your media in reference to any of your verifications? How has the process been?
(2b) What are parliament and parliamentarians doing in the fight against disinformation?	Do you think this commission is useful in the fight against disinformation? What can this commission be useful for?
	What do you think parliament can do to fight disinformation?
	Do you think parliamentarians want to fight disinformation or are they interested in it?
	What actors are involved in parliamentary communication in the fight against disinformation?

Source: Provided by the authors.

Table 2: Composition of the citizen focus groups.

Group	Knowledge of parliamentary activity	Ideology	Composition
G1	Learn about parliamentary activity	Voters or sympathizers of PSOE, Podemos, Grupo Plural, ERC (representation of all parties)	Mixed: 50% men, 50% women
G2	Learn about parliamentary activity	PP and VOX voters or sympathizers	Mixed: 50% men, 50% women
G3	Ignorance of parliamentary activity	Voters or sympathizers of PSOE, Podemos, Grupo Plural, ERC (representation of all parties)	Mixed: 50% men, 50% women
G4	Ignorance of parliamentary activity	PP and VOX voters or sympathizers	Mixed: 50% men, 50% women

Source: Provided by the authors.

RESULTS

What is the role of verifiers through parliamentary documentation?

Most Spanish MPs use the terms 'disinformation', 'fake news' and 'noticias falsas' (in Spanish 'fake news') interchangeably to refer to the same phenomenon. In the 440 parliamentary speeches analysed, a total of 1350 times some of these terms were mentioned. Of these, the most frequently used was 'disinformation' (320 mentions), followed by 'fake news' (255) and 'noticias falsas' (110). The parliamentary group that most frequently used one of these terms was the PSOE (which was also the one that accumulated the highest number of interventions during the period under study, exactly 26.59 per cent of those collected in the sample), followed by the Popular Parliamentary Group (PP) (which referred to one of these terms on 234 occasions and was also the group with the second highest number of interventions collected, exactly 16.36 per cent) (Table 3).

We do not observe significant differences in the frequency count regarding the preferred term used by each parliamentary group. In general terms, the Socialist Group used the term 'disinformation' more often (36.53%) but also used 'fake news' (26.36%) and 'noticias falsas' (18.82%). The Grupo Parlamentario Popular and the Grupo Parlamentario Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común used the term 'fake news' on more occasions, and the Grupo Parlamentario del PNV and Ciudadanos, preferably 'noticias falsas', but all of them used all three terms on some occasion. Therefore, there does not seem to be any criterion among the groups to use and mention one or the other term, and they use them interchangeably.

By deputies, the President of the Government Pedro Sánchez Peréz-Castejón is the politician who most often mentioned one of the terms studied in this analysis: in a total of thirteen parliamentary interventions, he mentioned the word 'disinformation' sixteen times, 'fake news' (seven times) and 'noticias falsas' twice. After him, Juan Carlos Campo Moreno (Minister of Justice) was the politician who most often mentioned one of these terms in the Congress of Deputies: in a total of two speeches, he mentioned the

Table 3: Parliamentary interventions with mentions of 'disinformation', 'fake news' and 'noticias falsas'.

Party/Parliamentary group	No. interventions	Total mentions	No. mentions 'desinformación'	No. mentions 'fake news'	No. mentions 'noticias falsas'
PSOE	117	382	114	48	29
PP	72	234	56	53	8
Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común	63	174	32	40	15
Others	50	148	40	26	8
Ciudadanos	40	120	17	27	16
VOX	25	74	20	12	5
PNV	13	58	6	5	18
Unidentified	10	36	10	7	1
ERC	13	32	5	10	1
CiU	9	28	6	7	1
EH Bildu	7	28	2	9	3
Junts	10	24	4	7	1
Nueva Canarias	2	8	0	2	2
Coalición Canaria	2	6	3	0	0
Foro Asturias	3	6	3	0	0
Mixto	1	6	0	2	1
BNG	1	2	1	0	0
Compromis	1	2	0	0	1
UPN	1	2	1	0	0
Total	**440**	**1370**	**320**	**255**	**110**

Source: Provided by the authors.

word 'disinformation' 22 times, 'fake news' once and 'noticias falsas' once. Then, PNV deputy Mikel Legarda Uriarte referred, in eight interventions, to 24 disinformation terms (seventeen 'noticias falsas', five 'fake news' and two 'disinformation'). The rest of the politicians did not present significant data regarding the total volume of mentions of any of these terms in their parliamentary speeches.

When analysing institutional documentation, we found that fact-checkers, including media such as *Maldita*, *Newtral*, *Efe Verifica* or the International Fact-Checking Network, are mentioned in 5.3 per cent of parliamentary publications on disinformation. We have detected that their presence in political discourses addresses three different perspectives. On the one hand, citizens mentioned fact-checking media as a source of reference to support data or statements made by parliamentarians: Not in all countries in Europe and our environment – this what Maldito Dato pointed out to him (he shows a press clipping) – tolls are paid on highways for the conservation and maintenance of roads (Gamazo Micó, GPP/26 October 2021).

Table 4: List of experts cited in the Appearance of the Joint Commission on National Security of the Spanish Parliament.

Profile	Date
Captain de Frigate of the Navy, senior analyst at the Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies	24 May 2021
Brigadier General and Director of the Department of Homeland Security	24 May 2021
Army Colonel specialist geo-strategy, defence security, terrorism jihadist e intelligence	25 April 2022
Head of Strategic Communications Service European of External Action	29 November 2021
Journalist, co-founder and CEO of *Maldita*	15 June 2021
Researcher at the University of Melbourne	23 September 2021
Director of the Cabinet of the President of the Government	25 April 2022
Director of Pandemia Digital, Observatory against disinformation. Specialist analysis of social networks and disinformation	24 March 2022
Director of the Cabinet of the Presidency of the Government	27 May 2021
Director of Policy Public Policies of Twitter (X) Spain	19 October 2021
Full Professor of Law Constitutional Law at the Complutense University of Madrid	15 June 2021
Dean of the Faculty of Communication of the University of Navarra	22 February 2022
Full Professor of Journalism at the University of Navarra	2 June 2021
Professor at Constitutional Law University of Valladolid	29 November 2021
Policy Manager public policy for Spain and Portugal at Facebook	2 June 2021
Member of the European Court of Auditors	23 September 2021
Professor of Political Science and Administration at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)	19 October 2021
Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Seville	22 February 2022

Source: Provided by the authors based on the information available on the website of the Congress of Deputies.

The presence of fact-checkers has also been detected as a main object in the parliamentary statements:

> I am concerned – especially watered by public money – about the lack of transparency in the economic flows, for example, of the fact-checkers. I am concerned about the famous fact-checkers who have put on the shirt, be it Efe Verifica Radiotelevisión Española Verifica, that come from public money and therefore serve the government.
>
> (Sánchez del Real, GPVOX/ 22 February 2022)

A third perspective in which this type of media participates as participants in the parliamentary activity itself: 'As the source interviewed from Agencia Efe says, the news verification service has been developed and expanded with Efe Verifica, and buildings are being resized, especially at the more expensive headquarters in Madrid' (Cañas Pita de la Vega, President of Agencia EFE/ 19 October 2022).

About this third perspective, when analysing the appearances of the Joint Commission on National Security in the study of the phenomenon of

disinformation and fake news with disruptive effects on society, we find that of the eighteen interventions made between May 2021 and February 2022, two correspond to journalists belonging to one of the verification media (*Maldita* and Pandemia Digital, observatory against disinformation), compared to other profiles of the rest of the participants, including researchers, mainly in the field of law and communication, public officials related to national security or representatives of social media platforms (X and Facebook).

How important is the verification of parliamentarians' speeches for verification agencies?

In interviews with journalists from fact-checking agencies, we found that two of the three agencies interviewed (*Newtral* and *Maldita*) systematically checked parliamentary speeches, mainly the speeches of political leaders. In the case of *Maldita*, the verification activity in Congress focuses more on plenary sessions than on parliamentary committees 'as a matter of routine and even journalistic criteria and public relevance'. In addition, a large part of the verifications of parliamentarians are information or statements that are later confirmed as true.

In *Newtral*, the fact-checking team develops an agenda with all the daily interventions that the main political leaders of all political forces will make in parliament, including media interventions, press conferences, statements and appearances or interventions in the Congress of Deputies. The team then selects the most important interventions or those that reflect the most controversial issues. *Newtral* focuses more attention on the verification of parliamentary speeches in government control sessions:

> The whole team concentrates on active listening. We divide into groups; some people note down the sentences containing verifiable elements, and the rest review the data. We are interested in doing this in real-time, and we are concerned about the control sessions because this is the moment in which the participation of politicians is most exposed, and it is a very susceptible moment for disinformation to contaminate the rest of the debate.
>
> (*Newtral* journalist, 27 January 2022)

Newtral also selects as verifiable phrases those that contain a fact, a comparison or a historical fact, which they can check with official, international or expert sources and where the political group that has issued the disinformation can be asked about the sources it has used. *Newtral* also uses an algorithmic system to select verifiable messages:

> We have developed an artificial intelligence system that allows us to monitor the activity of politicians, including MPs, who have social networks. After several months of training the algorithm to select verifiable phrases, it now drinks from the Twitter accounts of the 350 MPs, as well as many other politicians, and selects the messages that it thinks we could verify.
>
> (*Newtral* journalist, 27 January 2022)

Even so, they point out in the interview that the algorithm's selection is still not perfect and sometimes does not consider factors such as relevance, so it always requires manual review.

The third agency interviewed (*Efe Verifica*) only carries out verification when a parliamentary intervention goes viral in the media, on social media or generates a public reaction:

> For us, the criterion for verification is when the statement acquires a transcendence that is in the public debate, without attending to the day-to-day business of Congress or the Senate. The size of our editorial office forces us to optimise resources, and some statements do not always have a significance commensurate with the effort involved in verifying them.
>
> (Journalist of *Efe Verifica*, 24 January 2022)

This criterion is something that we also observed in the other two agencies interviewed when it comes to giving preference to verification.

The agencies state that verification was applied equally to all parliamentary groups. The three agree in focusing resources on verifying the speeches of the leader, spokesperson or deputy leaders of each parliamentary group: 'It is a weighting by relevance in political and public discourse' (*Maldita* interviewee), and they detect that 'there are parties that lie more than others' (*Efe Verifica* interviewee), even as a political strategy, given that some issues appear repeatedly both inside and outside the parliamentary seat. One solution proposed by the verifiers is for politicians to answer them for repeated disinformation (*Newtral* interviewee).

The agencies said they did not record specific data on the most repeated types of disinformation detected in parliament. However, they described three main themes: firstly, issues related to the daily news and political agenda, which, according to the three interviewees, is where political groups try to make their discourse profitable to generate support that can later be translated into votes. Among these issues, COVID-19 was mentioned in the context of the pandemic or the issue of macro-farms, an issue that became relevant in January 2022 following statements made by the Minister for Consumer Affairs Alberto Garzón in an interview in *The Guardian* newspaper. Secondly, they highlighted timeless issues related to gender, migration or the economy, which 'are linked to ideology and above all to the discourse of each party' (*Maldita* interviewee). Thirdly, interviewees from *Newtral* and *Maldita* also pointed out that, above and beyond the issues, the use of false, inaccurate or out-of-context data or figures abound in the speeches of parliamentarians, which leads to verbal battles in which they use figures as 'throwing weapons'.

The interviews also addressed the opinion of fact-checkers on parliamentarians as disinformers: interviewees stated that they suspected a political strategy in the use of disinformation in their parliamentary speeches by implementing actions such as the repetitive exposure of already verified hoaxes: '[s]ometimes disinformation ends up being a party argument and in social media this discourse is distributed, with this possible false statement' (*Maldita* interviewee). The traditional contact of the journalist (in this case, the fact-checkers) is dominant in the relationship of MPs with the verification media and the press officers of the different parliamentary groups. Only on rare occasions does communication take place in reverse: parliamentarians contact the scrutineers for clarification. In many cases, working routines involve different press offices than the parliamentary group (such as the government or the party). However, the parliamentary group press offices work better, with a closer attitude towards the verifiers than the party press offices (*Maldita*

interviewee). All three agree that there is an increase in parliamentarians' attention to the work carried out by the verification media and that they even use the information verified by the media to refute other parliamentarians, both in the Congress of Deputies itself and through their social networks, where they sometimes interact with the verifying media themselves.

Finally, the verifiers do not reflect a clear position on the possibilities of the fight against disinformation in parliamentary activity and propose several solutions: on the one hand, parliamentarians should be more transparent and publish the sources of their data so that the media and journalists can more easily verify their speeches (*Newtral*); on the other hand, not only parliamentarians, but also advisors and press teams should act more responsibly to the challenge of combating disinformation (*Maldita*) and finally, they stress that the work of the media, and not only of the fact-checkers, remains essential to address the problem of parliamentary disinformation (*Efe Verifica*).

How do Spanish citizens perceive parliamentary disinformation?

Regarding the analysis of the discourses in the focus groups with citizens, we found several cross-cutting ideas about parliamentary disinformation and the importance of fact-checkers: citizens identified disinformation as a significant challenge to democracy. They viewed parliamentary disinformation as a term coined by the media and MPs, with the perceived weakness of journalism in Spain being a key factor.

We found similar interpretations of disinformation among ideological groups: on the one hand, citizens sympathetic to centre-left and left-wing parties consider that disinformation is a collective and structural problem, in contrast to those sympathetic to centre-right and right-wing parties, who believe that disinformation is a circumstantial problem for which 'the government' is responsible. Similarly, the first axis considers disinformation a global problem aiming to make the population 'hate' something or someone. In contrast, for citizens who belong to the centre-right and right-wing ideological axis, disinformation is a problem that only concerns Spain and whose aim is to 'abhor us' and 'control' the population by the political representatives who govern the country.

Along the same lines, the solutions put forward by the two axes differ: while for citizen groups located on the left the solutions to combat parliamentary disinformation are collective and collegial (by the media or by social media platforms), for citizen groups ideologically located on the right axis, the solutions are individual and are achieved by the proactive search for information, beyond the media of fact-checkers who are 'companies that are bought' by the power groups to contribute to 'abhorring' the population.

There is no mention of how important the role of fact-checkers can be in addressing or resolving disinformation among the citizen groups raised in this study.

DISCUSSION

Through the analysis, we can conclude that fact-checkers occupy a space in parliamentary discourse, replacing traditional journalists in the Disinformation Commission. In 5.3 per cent of parliamentary publications on disinformation, fact-checkers are mentioned either as a source of reference to back up data or in their appearances in parliamentary speeches. In addition, parliamentarians refer to verifiers in their speeches as sources to back up their parliamentary

interventions or as targets of their attack. Therefore, fact-checkers role as intermediate actors in parliamentary disinformation is demonstrated. However, there is also a concern about their work, especially the need for more transparency in the economic flows of fact-checkers who receive public funds.

On the other hand, the journalists interviewed verify the interventions of MPs in different fields, although without prioritizing parliamentary activity over other types of political activity. At least two agencies systematically monitor parliamentary interventions, which suggests constant attention, especially towards political leaders. Issues related to current affairs and the political agenda are mentioned, including COVID-19 and macro-farms. Timeless issues related to gender, migration and the economy are also highlighted. In addition, journalists interviewed by verifying agencies point out that some parliamentarians pursue political strategies by repeatedly exposing disinformation, which contributes to an image of disinformation. Parliamentarians are also increasingly focusing on verification work, using verified information to challenge other parliamentary groups in Congress and on social media.

Citizens perceive disinformation as a problem for democracy but do not mention fact-checkers work in the focus group discourse. They relate disinformation to the lack of credibility of the general media and the weakness of journalism in the Spanish context. In the study, we also observed differences in how citizens perceive parliamentary disinformation in Spain and the solutions they propose according to the different ideological tendencies of citizens.

The study concludes that fact-checkers' presence in parliamentary discourse highlights growing attention to disinformation and the importance of verifiable data in political discourse. Moreover, the relationship between fact-checkers and MPs is evolving, with MPs paying increasing attention to their work. However, their role is not fully recognized by the public, which also presents a complexity in addressing disinformation from a unified perspective. Transparency, media collaboration and societal engagement are seen as key aspects of addressing disinformation from a parliamentary perspective.

Therefore, while there is a clear relationship between parliamentarians and verification agencies, which gives a clear protagonism to the latter in the Spanish legislature, it is striking that citizens do not mention verifiers. However, other studies indicated that Spanish citizens believe that the most effective way to combat the effects of disinformation is the work of fake news verification agencies (Casero et al. 2023); in this study, none of the participating citizens mentioned fact-checkers as part of the solution to parliamentary disinformation. This idea would point to the fact that the classical political media actors of parliamentary information (politicians and media) continue to form a communicative elite of their own, far removed from the citizenry.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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