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POLITICS OF DISINFORMATION

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The Influence of Fake News on the Public Sphere

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In memory of Pere Masip Masip (1968-2021)

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Robot Strategies for Combating Disinformation in Election Campaigns

A Fact-checking Response from Parties and Organizations

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Introduction

A combination of disinformation, computer propaganda, media manipulation, and polarization, among other issues, currently defines political communication (Freelon and Wells 2020). In this context, fake news is concealed under a sheen of legitimacy in an attempt to pass it off as bona fide (Tandoc et al. 2018).

Although there has been a growing interest in the study of disinformation since the 2016 US presidential elections, none of this kind of content has originated from the digital context (Burkhardt 2017; Gray et al. 2020). Nonetheless, in the new digital age, the way in which such messages are created, disseminated, circulated, and interpreted, and their possible effects, have changed. Accordingly, in the scientific literature, recent attempts have been made to define and characterize disinformation and fake news (Molina et al. 2021). Thus, in the digital context, there is now an important, albeit recent, corpus of studies and approaches addressing this phenomenon (Parra Valero and Oliveira 2018; Molina et al. 2021). Some of these studies and approaches refer to the fear that messages of dubious origin and veracity may have negative repercussions for the functioning of democracy, by discrediting the institutions and the system underpinning it (Bennett and Livingston 2018). This state of affairs has prompted different social agents, including political parties and journalists, to combat this phenomenon by implementing communication and fact-checking strategies.

In this chapter, the phenomenon is approached from a global perspective. In keeping with the definition proposed in the report drafted by the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, convened to advise the European Commission, it is understood here that disinformation "includes all forms of false, inaccurate or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (European Commission 2021). As noted by Marchal et al. (2018), election periods lend themselves to the dissemination of misleading information, when this is used to achieve political ends.

With this approach, the intention is to gain further insights into the communication strategies that political parties and journalists adopt during election campaigns to combat disinformation, with a view to determining whether or not these include automated actions. To this end, the first point to be addressed is the context in which

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digital political communication is evolving toward the automation of content and communication processes, while also considering the media crisis and the boom in fact-checking organizations. The research questions and the methodology employed are then described, before concluding with a discussion on future lines of research on the automation of fact-checking in political communication.

All of the foregoing draws from the premise that online disinformation is not only a technology-driven phenomenon, but also one shaped by national information environments according to the specific cultural and political context of each country (Humprecht 2019). For this reason, this study focuses on the current state of affairs in this regard in one sole country, namely Spain, in order to inquire into how its political parties and fact-checking organizations deal with disinformation during election campaigns, and the type of measures that they adopt, where appropriate, to combat it.

Context

Computer Propaganda in Election Campaigns and the Origin of Partisan Disinformation

According to Chadwick (2019), digital political communication has gone through two different stages since its beginnings up until the present day, marked by the 2016 US presidential elections. Before then, as the author has also observed, scientific knowledge was chiefly influenced by academic optimism (Rojecki and Meraz 2016): the internet – and, to a greater extent, social media – was basically seen from a pro-democratic perspective, as capable of neutralizing the communication spaces of the traditional political and media elites with the participation of the citizenry, who thus became a "creative audience" (Castells 2010).

Chadwick (2019) points to two globally relevant developments that contributed to foster this vision: Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign – in which, for the first time, an "Internet candidate" (Vaccari 2013) managed to win the election on the basis of the support of online citizen communities; and the transformative impact of the revolutionary role of social media in the wake of the Arab Spring (Castells 2012; Gerbaudo 2012), with the purpose of toppling the region's authoritarian regimes (Salamey 2015), plus the boom in citizen-initiated campaigns (CIC) to which they gave rise (Gibson 2015).

One of the scholars who has expressed the greatest reservations about this techno-optimistic approach is Morozov (2011). As well as calling attention to the limits of the general discourse of the internet as a liberalizing tool, he has accented the fact that, as of the 2000s, a capitalist elite has monopolized the redistribution of digital media in general, and social media platforms in particular. For his part, Fuchs (2014) has justified the growth of the most popular social networking sites (SNSs) because of the need to reinvent the digital economy after the dotcom bubble burst in the year 2000. Ritzer (2015) refers to this digital context as "prosumer capitalism," while Zuboff (2019) describes how the digital connection between individuals has been exploited by others for their own commercial or political ends, although in such a connection the strength of social influence can be exceedingly resistant to challenges and subversion (Papacharissi 2015). Several decades ago, Mosco (1986) prophetically observed that

techno-deterministic currents of thought obey a capitalist logic that justifies the inclusion of new technologies in the market economy, as well as the commodification of the audiences participating in them.

Be that as it may, according to Chadwick (2019), mainstream research in this first stage had a common denominator: its fundamentally positive approach to social media engagement, which he claims was indebted to the discourse of Silicon Valley. Wolfram (2019) links engagement to "automated content selection businesses," favoring social media enterprises. Meanwhile, Boulianne (2018) stresses that engagement is regarded as a positive value per se, without considering the objectives, purposes, or consequences of this pseudoparticipation.

As Thorson et al. (2019) contend, most of these researchers do not even highlight the factors affecting the classification algorithms that motivate and condition engagement and its addictive component (Sampedro-Blanco 2018). In this critical sense, engagement implies an interaction with online content that is useful for online advertising metrics and for generating data on the attitudes and profiles of online users (Sinclair 2016).

According to Chadwick (2019), the second stage commenced in 2016, when the international scientific community started to underscore the socially destructive role of social media platforms – chiefly Facebook, because of the data breaches of the Cambridge Analytica scandal – and the potential risks that they posed for Western democracies. All this came to light following the extensive use of bots to generate social media posts designed to manipulate public opinion during the 2016 Brexit referendum (Bastos and Mercea 2019), the 2016 US presidential election (Kollanyi et al. 2016), and the 2018 Brazilian elections (Nascimento and Alves 2018), among others. In this stage, the dichotomy between techno-optimism and techno-pessimism, which, as Morozov (2011) himself notes, involves a techno-deterministic vision, began to be overcome. In view of these developments, the mass surveillance scandals, like that of Edward Snowden's leaks, opened a debate on individual sovereignty and freedom in contemporary democratic contexts (Bauman et al. 2014).

Thenceforth, approaches to, and studies of, monopoly power based on surveillance capitalism (Couldry and Mejías 2019) – Tufekci (2014) talks about a computational turn in politics – started to become more widespread, giving rise to much uncertainty about the impact that digital communication forms might have in the long run. This also led to studies that showed that SNSs went hand-in-glove with fake news, mainly generated by bots to sow confusion, mutual mistrust, intolerance, and even hate in the debate on very pressing social issues like migration (Quandt 2018), and to mislead citizens as regards relevant political processes, with civically ambivalent inducements aimed at encouraging them to share false or misleading information (Chadwick et al. 2018; Chadwick and Vaccari 2019).

In this respect, studies of "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009; Bakshy et al. 2015; Barberá et al. 2015; Sunstein 2017; Bruns 2019), terms coined years before by Eli Pariser (2011) and Cass Sunstein (2017), yielded benefit in the interpretation of the logic of algorithms and perceptions of disinformation that, as Kreiss (2017) argues, can undermine the basis on which people understand and recall political developments and truths (O'Neil 2016; Kreiss 2017; Waisbord 2018).

In short, it is assumed that SNSs are beneficial from the point of view of the citizenry, inasmuch as a large number of internet users participate on them, generating

activity that serves to attract new users. Nonetheless, the rationale of tech corporations should be borne in mind. By and large, this logic conditions the use to which these tools can be put, tending toward swifter, more superficial and more fragmented communication (Barassi 2015), and employing segmentation algorithms of which the internet users themselves are unaware (Pariser 2011; O'Neil 2016).

From the same perspective of this logic, the studies performed during the second stage, to which Chadwick (2019) refers, inquire into the roots of online intolerance and disinformation (Davies 2017; Kreiss et al. 2017). They also address how users' selective attention or exposure to specific messages is shaped, even when they are vulnerable to being exploited, often in a veiled manner, by different types of actors who seek to distort the economy of attention and to influence public opinion by means of subterfuges, to disseminate false rumors, or to combine information from a variety of sources (Kollanyi et al. 2016; Stewart et al. 2019).

Chadwick (2019) indicates that the principal change at the time that the first stage came to an end in 2016 occurred when part of the research on SNSs and digital politics switched from revolving around a supposed "serious Internet" to being based on an "ambivalent Internet." As of 2016, the scientific community started to question the authenticity of some digital messages, thus giving rise to the concept of fake news. The ease with which it is produced and distributed, a process that has been fine-tuned thanks to deep learning through artificial intelligence (AI) with multiple instances of digital engagement, has led to a new reality characterized by digital confusion and indecision, which with its disturbing vision of the future has set the alarm bells ringing in democratic states.

From the Media Crisis to the Boom in Fact-checking Organizations

This situation is also characterized by the citizenry's growing skepticism of the media in Western countries, a reality in keeping with their declining confidence in other institutions of democratic government and a phenomenon in itself, something that is also present in the Spanish context described in this chapter (López-García 2020).

Similarly, the discursive polarization (Valera 2019) and the influence that the circulation of digital content can have on it should also be recognized. One of the aspects characterizing false information is precisely its extreme political polarization (Bastos and Mercea 2019). SNSs doubtless play an essential role in this regard, since the social identity of the users who search for information on them appears to have as much impact on determining its credibility as the reputation of those generating it, undermining even further the potentially moderating role of the traditional media (Ekström 2002). By the same token, the structures and commercial strategies of the media environment, which in many aspects exacerbate these dynamics, aimed more at engaging audiences than at fostering a knowledgeable discourse (Kreiss 2017), also exert an influence. To this should be added the fierce competition between media outlets in search of audiences, inundated with digital news, whose content and origin are dubious and manipulated, which they receive via different digital channels and platforms.

During an election period per se, it is essential to take into account the complex relationship between journalists and parties (basically through communication advisors) in reporting on political developments. In this connection, it is also necessary to consider the proximity and similarities between political journalists and the political elite

and the distance separating them from ordinary citizens (Van Dalen 2016), as well as their interrelations with other journalists (Kuhn and Neveu 2002), to the point that political journalists can end up influencing each other. This has led to a consensus on news coverage, in which journalists working for different media outlets use the same sources to cover the same stories from an identical angle. In other words, journalists belonging to different news outlets follow similar organizational routines and tacit rules (Ryfe 2006).

Disinformation is deeply rooted in these developments (Ekström 2002), impacting fact-checking, which is supposed to act as one the bulwarks against it. Fact-checking organizations have attempted to combat disinformation by assessing the validity and accuracy of these messages (Walter et al. 2019). This practice has also been adopted by reputed media outlets (Graves 2016), to the point of converting it into a necessary element of high-quality political news coverage (Walter et al. 2019). Initiatives of this sort are central to the filtering of information consumed by citizens, who do not always question fake news, especially when it reinforces their own beliefs (Hameleers and Van de Meer 2019). In this chapter, fact-checking organizations are understood as nonpartisan and nonprofit consumer watchdogs for voters, whose aim is to reduce the levels of mendacity and confusion in politics (Walter et al. 2019).

Research Questions

In this chapter, an approach is taken to the election campaign communication strategies that political parties and journalists implement, through fact-checking organizations, to combat disinformation, while an attempt is also made to determine whether or not they include automated actions. Accordingly, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: Do political parties and journalists implement automated processes in election campaigns to combat disinformation, and if so, how?

RQ2: How do they assess these automated processes and their future implementation to combat political disinformation during election campaigns?

The answers to RQ1 and RQ2 will be useful in the final analysis, in which an overview of the extent to which these automated processes contribute to combat disinformation will be offered.

Methodology

The study described in this chapter is based on personal interviews with the advisors of the main political parties with seats in the Spanish parliament and with journalists working for the two leading fact-checking organizations in the country, in order to inquire into the scope of automated political communication aimed at combating disinformation. The intention here is to verify whether or not the communication strategies that they implement during election campaigns to combat disinformation include automated actions, such as the use of bots.

To select the political advisors, the snowball technique was applied, following the exclusive criterion of having recently participated in election campaigns as a

Table 10.1 Study participants

Code	Category	Sex
A	Investigative and data journalist and section coordinator	Male
B	Content manager	Male
C	Political advisor	Male
D	Political advisor	Male
E	Political advisor	Female
F	Political advisor	Female
G	Political advisor	Male
H	Political advisor	Male

Note: So as to safeguard the privacy of the interviewees, only general descriptions are provided.

communication advisor for one of the main political parties with seats in the Spanish parliament. The initial contacts were obtained from the Asociación de Comunicación Política (Association of Political Communication, ACOP). In the case of the journalists, the fact-checking organizations were contacted directly, and they selected the most adequate person for the interviews (see Table 10.1).

After contacting all the interviewees by email and by phone, the interviews were conducted via videoconference during the last election campaign in Spain in 2019, with digital recordings for transcription. The transcriptions – more than a hundred pages – were then manually coded line by line, creating codes subsequently located in unified conceptual containers, from which a list of topics for addressing the research questions was generated (Tracy 2013).

The interviews were carried out using a structured questionnaire with open questions obtained from virtual interaction and in accordance with the organizational and practical criteria recommended by other authors. The interview method is considered to be effective for obtaining the views of experts and main actors on a new or emerging phenomenon.

Results

Bots for Generating Content and Combating Disinformation

There was a consensus among the interviewees on the use of bots during election campaigns, acknowledged by political parties in previous studies (Campos-Domínguez and García-Orosa 2018) and also endorsed by fact-checking organizations (Figure 10.1).

On the one hand, the advisors confirmed their use and advantages for political parties, insofar as they allowed them to engage a broader segmented audience, but with a limited investment in human resources (Interviewee D). Interviewee E stressed[1] "the effectiveness of a more automated and rapid communication." While, for his part,

[1] All quotations from interviewees have been translated from Spanish into English by the authors.

Figure 10.1 Examples of content posted by the fact-checking organizations during the 2019 election campaign.

Interviewee B noted that politicians had realized some time ago that journalist/politician intermediation no longer existed and that they could now communicate directly with the electorate.

The main tools employed included bots for generating and distributing segmented messages, thus allowing voters to have a more specialized and global vision because they could ask all types of questions and receive immediate replies (Interviewee C). However, the need to maintain a certain degree of caution was perceived among politicians because, according to Interviewee F, this could give parties a bad image and undermine their credibility.

In connection with this, it was detected that, even though automated processes were being introduced in these organizations, the idea of concealing these practices from citizens to prevent them from discovering that a machine was intervening in their relationship with politicians or political parties still prevailed. On this point, Interviewee D declared, "It's important to proceed with extreme caution so as to prevent them from catching us out, because that would dumb down debates and undermine their authenticity."

All the interviewees agreed that, in Spain at present, those activities based on automated discourse generation processes were still in their infancy, albeit becoming more widespread in each successive election campaign, and their future would depend on the intensive use of Big Data for fine-tuning voter segmentation and for generating information that ends up being echoed in the traditional media (Interviewee H).

The interviewees working for fact-checking organizations also corroborated the use of automated processes for disseminating information during election campaigns. For Interviewee A, bots were basically used for combating disinformation based on canards that had already been refuted, by checking the political discourse and the electoral hoaxes that were repeated time and again in each election campaign. Interviewee B explained that these techniques were combined with other, manual ones, for the purpose of developing tools, employing machine learning and AI, and filtering false or misleading information.

At any rate, both the journalists and the advisors explained that it was during election campaigns that there was a greater interest in making fake news go viral,

above all via social media groups and bots. Interviewee B claimed that some political parties in Spain had disseminated toxic content on SNSs and, once they had seen that it worked, were now doing the same with the traditional media (Figure 10.2). Furthermore, according to them this practice was commonplace in the 2019 election campaign.

The journalists working for fact-checking organizations claimed that they were unaware of the tools employed by political parties, even while recognizing their widespread use for segmenting messages and making them go viral during election campaigns. They also admitted that they felt unprepared to cope journalistically with these party strategies and viewed their future development with some caution.

All in all, they also highlighted the advantages for journalists of automating their analysis of party communication in the fight against misinformation:

> We reproach the parties that do not reply to us when fact-checking their discourses, and when a political discourse is constructed, the information has to come from somewhere. If that were automated, it would make things much simpler for fact-checkers. At the moment it's a tool that isn't being exploited as much as it could be, but in the future I believe we should attempt to tackle that automated response and segmentation of the discourse, and how we could dialogue with those tools, because it would allow us to create our own responses to that automation of their work. But we have not yet noted that they're using something that influences us.
>
> (Interviewee A)

In the opinion of the fact-checkers, political parties should try to minimize the risks for democracy in the future. Interviewee A also stated that allowing for the segmentation of the discourse and doing so automatically, which would in turn make it possible to know how to generate data or to create a discourse that engages the audience, would be a revolution for political parties. Yet the media and fact-checking organizations

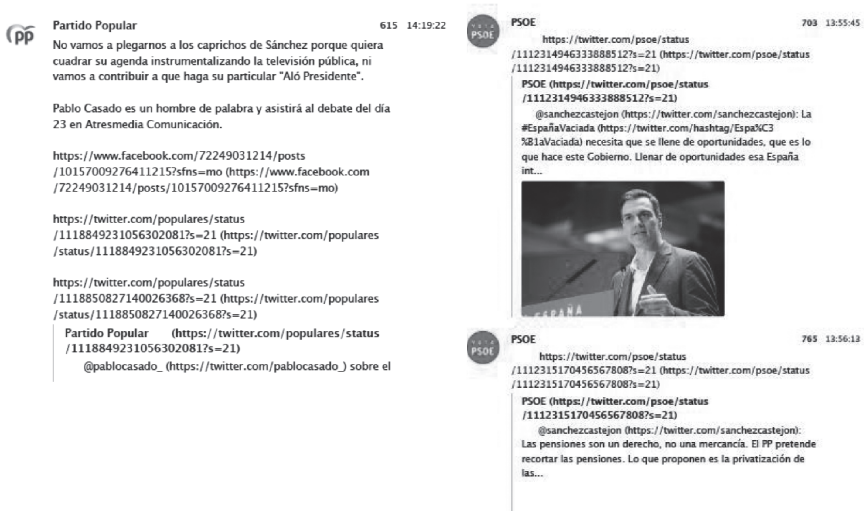

Figure 10.2 Examples of content posted by political parties on SNSs during the 2019 election campaign.

should learn how to cope with this new scenario. As Interviewee B acknowledged, "This will oblige us to learn a lot more about bots. We're focusing on how they generate election propaganda, which now has nothing to do with the previous state of affairs, and parties are increasingly more savvy." This is tantamount to admitting that the media are progressing in the use of these tools, mainly for audience segmentation, to the point that the discourse will tend to be adapted more and more to each media outlet, and to each citizen, which is where the challenge for fact-checking organizations lies.

In relation to the audience, both the advisors and journalists admitted that polarization was one of the principal defining traits. What for the parties was an advantage allowing them to convince voters with their discourse (Interviewee F), for the fact-checking organizations was a hindrance to their work:

> There is a certain type of audience who, when we fact-check a political discourse, don't want to listen, they disregard it. And when we bring to light some or other piece of information that endorses their opinions or beliefs, they share it. It has been seen very clearly in this election campaign.
>
> (Interviewee A)

The journalists working for the fact-checking organizations indicated that the traditional parties were less prone to spreading canards and lies than the so-called new parties; twisted, manipulated, or misleading messages were quite a different matter. In the interviews with the political advisors, it was discovered that the use of bots for disseminating information was a matter of course in all the political parties. From these interviews it can be deduced that political initiative depends increasingly on social media, because they allow for engaging new audiences, and even the traditional media. The advisors believed that SNSs made users more dependent on content and, as an additional benefit, made it easier to leverage direct communication with the citizenry, thus circumventing the traditional filters. In this respect, the journalists working for the fact-checking organizations also endorsed this view, and considered that the scope of action of the consolidated parties and their way of conveying messages in the traditional media was delimited, as was also the case with their use of public media outlets during election campaigns.

In this sense, notwithstanding the fact that the advisors also underscored the importance of the traditional media – chiefly television – in election campaigns, they noted that the platforms of the major SNSs like Facebook and Twitter were contributing to breaking the communication monopoly of the traditional media. This opinion was also held by the journalists working for the fact-checking organizations, who specified that this situation was going from bad to worse among the youngest audiences. Interviewee A pointed out that they shared the desire to consume information and slaked that thirst not only by reading newspapers or watching television, but also by following influencers and journalists on Twitter or apparently well-informed agents as part of their daily information diet.

As to future prospects, the advisors insisted not only on the advantages of these processes, but also on the need for caution in order that the citizenry should perceive that they are increasingly more and better informed (by means of information segmentation techniques), without sensing that they are being replied to by a machine,

rather than a politician. Nevertheless, the journalists working for these organizations warned against the dangers that the lack of intermediation might pose for election campaigns, while underscoring the constraints of the major content networks when attempting to curb disinformation. In the words of Interviewee B, "the reaction to the closure of fake accounts on the part of SNSs has been to design even more sophisticated bots in order that they should appear to be as human as possible, until they are made indistinguishable from the real thing." From a theoretical point of view, it is only appropriate for a political party to seek the broadest coverage possible, without any journalistic intermediation, in order that its content should offer it the highest electoral return among a collective of potential voters via Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, or the medium that best suits its purposes. But this signifies that fact-checking will also become more complex, and professionalized political communication processes may hinder, in this sense, the fight against disinformation.

Discussion and Conclusion

First and foremost, our study has allowed us to confirm that content automation tools are here to stay in election campaigns in Spain. In the case of the political advisors, we have detected that, although they were concerned about disinformation and canards, they took an ambivalent stance on the pros and cons of using tools, such as bots, to generate and disseminate fake news. This can be seen in the fact that they all clearly stressed the risks that messages of this type posed for democracy. Nonetheless, all the interviewees confirmed the widespread use of bots for the mass dissemination of segmented messages. Thus, the study of disinformation during election campaigns and its tactical use by political parties and organizations should always be supplemented with field research on the same tool that allows for verification of the information that they offer when broaching the subject of their campaign strategies.

As for the fact-checking organizations, we have shown that, to a greater or lesser degree, they also resort to the use of automated tools for disseminating their own content, as well as their intention to develop other practices based on more sophisticated AI tools in the future. We thus believe that it is relevant to stress the importance of expressing critical views on techno-determinism, not only from an optimistic (techno-solutionist) perspective, but also from an apocalyptic perspective. The use of automated tools for fact-checking demonstrates the existence of an active journalistic profession that is also striving to find solutions to contemporary problems relating to the exploitation of information by traditional political actors.

Although the replies from the interviewees do indeed point in this direction, we have not been able to confirm here a correlation between a greater use of bots on the part of political parties and an increase in canards and fake news on social media. Similarly, it is impossible to infer that a more intensive use of automated tools by fact-checking organizations implies combating disinformation with more or less efficiency. Therefore, this is a pertinent question that should be researched in the future.

Second, when assessing these automated tools and their future development for combating disinformation during election campaigns, both the political advisors and the journalists took ambivalent stances. The former recognized that the mass use of these practices may undermine the citizenry's confidence in democracy, while the

latter acknowledged the limitations of their fact-checking. According to both, political parties have grasped that the aim of disinformation campaigns is not to disseminate objective information; instead, they have realized that the idea is to engage audiences with the messages that they want to hear, a circumstance that compromises the effectiveness of journalistic work aimed at combating disinformation. Therefore, when attempting to combat disinformation, it is important not to disregard the context in which misleading content is generated and distributed, which is characterized to a great extent by the fragmentation of audiences, who are susceptible to consuming and sharing information in tune with their beliefs or ideology without questioning it.

The results of our study should be viewed in light of a number of limitations. First, even though the in-depth interview method allowed the interviewees to reflect on and give meaning to their personal experiences, these were constrained by their personal opinions. In other words, what they said might not always have been in keeping with what they actually did. Moreover, the individual experiences of the interviewees might have differed slightly from those of their colleagues. Second, it should be borne in mind that all the interviewees only talked about and referred to their own experiences in the Spanish context. Disinformation is doubtless a phenomenon that deserves to be researched both at a "micro" level, as in our study, and in its global dimension. Lastly, although we have suggested a number of approaches to the object of study, we have not broached other important subjects such as the imbalance in communication flows during election campaigns, the influence that advisors and fact-checking organizations may have on each other, and in summary, how all this may contribute to fostering or limiting professional political communication practices during election campaigns. These are important issues that have not been addressed here, but should be examined in future research.

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