

Fake news about Covid-19: a comparative analysis of six Ibero-american countries

Noticias falsas y desinformación sobre el Covid-19: análisis comparativo de seis países iberoamericanos

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Producers of misinformation and fake news find in fear, uncertainty in pandemic times, and virtual social networks facilitators for disseminating them, doing harder the task to detect them even for experts and laymen. Typologies designed to identify and classify hoaxes allow their analysis from theoretical perspectives such as echo chambers, filter bubbles, information manipulation, and cognitive dissonance. **Method:** A content analysis was developed with 371 fake news, previously verified by fact-checkers. After the intercoder test, it was proceeded to classify disinformation according to their type, intentionality, the main topic addressed, networks where they circulated, deception technique, country of origin, transnational character, among other variables. **Results:** The most common intent of fake news was ideological, associated with issues such as false announcements by governments, organizations, or public figures, as well as with false context elaboration technique. A quarter of the hoaxes analyzed were repeated in several countries, mainly promoting false cures with fabricated content as a deception technique. **Discussion and Conclusions:** Disinformation is a manipulation and filtering phenomenon based on ideological and emotional coincidence shared by those who circulate them. (Dis)information that converges with the users' interests, makes its dissemination indiscriminate, and facilitates its transnationality, with slight modifications, without affecting its acceptance and recirculation.

KEYWORDS: fake news; Covid-19; Intentionality; Deception techniques, Transnationality, Ibero-America, Content Analysis.

RESUMEN

Introducción: Los productores de desinformación y noticias falsas encuentran en el temor, la incertidumbre en tiempos de pandemia y las redes sociales virtuales facilitadores para su difusión, haciendo más difícil su detección para expertos y legos en el tema. Las tipologías diseñadas para la identificación y clasificación de bulos permiten su análisis desde perspectivas teóricas como las cámaras de eco, las burbujas de filtro, la manipulación de la información y la disonancia cognitiva. **Método:** Se realizó un análisis de contenido a 371 noticias falsas, previamente verificadas por *fact-checkers*. Luego de una prueba de intercodificadores, se procedió a clasificar los bulos según su tipo, intencionalidad, tema principal abordado, las redes en que circularon, la técnica de engaño, el país de origen, su carácter transnacional, entre otras variables. **Resultados:** La intención de bulo más común fue de carácter ideológico, asociada con temas como los falsos anuncios de gobiernos, organizaciones o personajes públicos, así como con la técnica de contexto falso para su elaboración. Una cuarta parte de los bulos analizados se repitieron en varios países, promoviendo principalmente falsas curas con contenidos fabricados como técnica de engaño. **Discusión y Conclusiones:** Desinformar es un fenómeno de manipulación y filtraje basado en la coincidencia ideológica y emocional que comparten quienes circulan bulos. La (des)información que converge con los intereses de sus usuarios, hace que su difusión se haga de manera indiscriminada y facilite su transnacionalidad, con leves modificaciones, sin que esto afecte su aceptación y su recirculación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Noticias falsas; Covid-19; intencionalidad; técnicas de engaño; transnacionalidad; Iberoamérica; análisis de contenido.

Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. Introduction

The concept of fake news has been discussed by various authors, however, there is no universal definition of the term. Some researchers distinguish between the terms *disinformation*: news created to deceive, and *misinformation*: news produced without the intention of deceiving, but which end up misinforming (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Fallis, 2015; Giglietto et al., 2019). Others such as Lazer et al., (2018) point out that it is fabricated information that imitates the content of the media, and Tandoc et al., (2018) describe them as viral posts from fictitious accounts, fabricated to look like news.

The analysis of what various authors have come to define as fake news, consequently leads to the proposal of typologies that involve a series of categories that go from satire and parody based on news, to propaganda, manipulated information, and manufactured information, and even misreported information by journalists, to name a few (Tandoc et al., 2018; Wardle, 2017a). For Farkas & Schou, (2018) it also implies a continuous focus on the intentionality behind the production and circulation of fake news that, in the concept of (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), are mainly motivated by financial and ideological interests. The first because, being scandalous and viral, fake news produces clicks that are transformed into advertising earnings, and the second, because fake news can promote ideas that favor certain people and discredit or disadvantage others. However, neither the issue of typologies nor that of the intentions behind the production of fake news have been resolved and it is precisely for this reason that it is important to study them.

The phenomenon of the spread of rumors and unconfirmed information, as well as fake news (hoaxes), has had different effects and intentions over time. The idea that public opinion responds to lies, appealing to emotion, even when it is supplied with verifiable facts that refute it, was treated by

Parmenides of Elea, (n/d), and by Plato (2003) centuries ago. Berkowitz & Schwartz (2016) point out the existence of hoaxes and satires since the 18th century and specify that fake news began to emerge in the 19th century at a time of rapid growth for newspapers helped by emerging technologies, as it happens nowadays. In the same way, the dissemination of rumors and misinformation has been a practice used in times of conflict as a demoralizing weapon for adversaries or as a tranquilizer for members of one's side (Burkhardt, 2017). The power of fake news to generate panic and terror is also often related to the 1938 misinterpretation of the radio broadcast of Orson Wells's novel 'War of the Worlds', which convinced audiences that America was being invaded by aliens (Tandoc et al., 2018).

In the past, rumors and false news took longer to spread, and their dissemination was generally limited to the local context in which they originated unless it was information with particularly serious characteristics. Currently, the immediacy and the inexistence of geographical borders for the dissemination of information through the internet and social networks or messaging applications, makes it more difficult to identify and classify false news or detect its origin and intent with precision. As revealed by Vosoughi et al., (2018), fake news spreads faster, further, and deeper than true news and has a greater than 70% probability of being shared.

At the center of the debate is social-virtual interaction, since the emotional component plays an important role when sharing information through social networks or messaging applications such as *WhatsApp* (Tanz, 2017). The *Pew Research Institute* (Mitchell et al., 2017) points out that the news from emails and text messages, between friends or family, causes more activity (sharing, looking for additional information, or talking about the content *On/Offline*). In parallel, it occurs with the increase in tribalism, that is, the tendency to identify with groups of people who share similar ideas with which the user of these networks reinforces their beliefs (Rainie et al., 2017).

Among the factors that facilitate the spread of fake news is the disinhibiting effect of online interaction, particularly when false profiles that maintain anonymity are used, allowing the publication of alleged data to discredit actions, people, or organizations.

Rehm (2018) also highlights that certain types of content are more likely to go viral, because they are aggressive, sensitizing, provocative, credible, and because the position of the article is easily identified. However, even when the factors that favor the distribution of false news can be identified, Wardle (2017) warns about the complexity of the problem given that the *fake* term fails to describe the difference between misinformation such as the act of inadvertently sharing false information, and disinformation: deliberately creating and spreading false information.

This phenomenon acquires more relevance if it is taken into account that in the Ibero-American context, more and more people have social networks as their main means of news consumption. According to the *Digital News Report Spain* (Vara Miguel et al., 2020) "one in three Internet users aged 18 to 34 uses social networks and blogs as their preferred source of news (31%). One in four (25%) among those aged 18 to 44, while only one in ten (10%) among Internet users over 45 years of age choose social networks and blogs as their favorite means of information" (paragraph 15). Likewise, the *Digital News Report* (Newman, 2017) warns that Latin Americans are the largest consumers of news through social networks and chat applications in the world.

The problem of fake news then acquires important dimensions, since certain people could be being systematically misinformed, even more so if one takes into account the design that technology companies have made of algorithms that only offer people content that reinforces their ideological line, as proposed by the Filter Bubble Theory (Pariser, 2011) which refers to how *Google*, *Facebook*,

and other pages are programmed to collect information about people's interests, habits, and preferences, and filter out what people have not shown interest in. This computer programming allows us to understand that the false information that many users share, in one way or another, is in tune with their tastes, ideologies, and feelings.

Besides, social networks reproduce communities of 'the same', that is, the digital world is reduced to numerical data and provides the user with information similar to what they usually consume, excluding information that does not match their tastes and preferences (Han, 2016). This overexposes the opinions of the conformity of users of digital social networks and makes them choose the information that aligns with their ideologies, as proposed by the Theory of Echo Chambers. (Cardenal et al., 2019; Munson & Resnick, 2010).

The Information Manipulation Theory (McCormack et al., 2014) also allows the approach to false news or hoaxes as a way to manufacture misinformation that is produced intentionally in an artificial way and that, although it can be based on real situations or experiences, differs in content and quality from real information.

An aggravating factor in this situation is that people have a difficult time recognizing what information is true and what is not, because hoaxes usually originate from websites designed to misinform, whose names tend to resemble legitimate news organizations; others come from sites dedicated to making satirical content and others from sites with a partisan slant (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

On the other hand, Pennycook et al., (2018) state that it is easier for people to believe something if they have heard it before since human beings use familiarity as a mental shortcut to evaluate the accuracy of information. Even if what is reported is false, having read it repeatedly increases the possibility of considering it as true, effects that these researchers have called "illusory truth." The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance also explains that people tend to classify as false and reject news that is contrary to their beliefs, as a way to reduce the discomfort generated by the conflict that arises between (mis)information and their values, even when the news is true (Festinger, 1957; Sindermann et al., 2020).

1.1 Disinformation in times of pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has been a propitious scenario for the creation and spread of fake news. As the *Digital News Report* (2020) points out, which annually publishes the results of a survey in 40 countries on six continents (2000 people per country), and which on this occasion made additional inquiries during April in the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, Spain, South Korea, and Argentina, as a result of this health crisis, the use of social networks and online increased substantially in most countries:

In April, we found that, in our six countries surveyed, nearly a quarter (24%) used WhatsApp to find, discuss, or share news about COVID-19, seven points higher on average than in our January survey that asked about the use of any news. About a fifth (18%) joined a support or discussion group with people they did not know on Facebook or WhatsApp specifically to

talk about COVID-19, and a half (51%) participated in groups with colleagues, friends, or family (p. 14).

Even before the pandemic, more than half of those surveyed said they did not easily recognize the true information from the false one on social networks and, although the report also indicates that the consumption of traditional media increased partially as a result of the pandemic, it continues being worrying that disinformation has the possibility of reaching the public through *On/Offline* social networks.

Between January and March 2020, the *Reuters Institute* (Newman, n. d.) carried out a research to establish the types and sources of disinformation about Covid-19 that circulated in English in that period. When the results were published in April, the researchers warned that more than 20% of the 225 hoaxes analyzed continued to circulate on *Facebook* and *YouTube*, and more than 55% did so on *Twitter*, despite having been checked by verification organizations (Brennen et al., 2020).

The risk of fake news is that it generates misinformation in society and, regardless of the intentions behind those who prepare and distribute it, the main damage is that they delegitimize the true sources (Baron & Crotoft, 2017), which in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic can be even more risky, due to the consequences it can bring to people's health.

The current study focused on five Latin American countries and one European. This diversity constitutes one of the differentiating factors regarding other research carried out (see Brennen et al., 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020) and the recurring topics, the relationship between the type of fake news and the deception technique used by its creators, and the description of their possible intentions were analyzed. Likewise, a comparison was made of the false news that circulated in several of the studied countries, to establish possible elements that favor their transnational nature. All these issues were the starting point of the research.

2. Objectives

The main objective of this research is to characterize the false news that was disseminated in six Ibero-American countries and to find comparison elements that allow establishing shared intentions, especially among those misinformations that are repeated in several countries.

Derived from the foregoing, the following specific objectives emerge:

1. Compare the characteristics of the false information about the Covid-19 pandemic that circulated in the different analyzed countries.
2. Determine the relationship between the type of fake news and the deception technique used by its creators.
3. Describe possible intentions behind the creation of hoaxes about the pandemic and its relationship to the issues it dealt with.
4. Identify what hoaxes were spread simultaneously in the analyzed countries and what elements could be associated with their transnational nature.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and type of study

To meet the objectives and answer the questions of this research, a retrospective bibliometric study (Montero, 2005) was designed on 371 fake news from Spain (127), Colombia (78), Bolivia (27), Peru (28), Ecuador (65), and Argentina (49), which were collected by the verification portals Bolivia Verifica, Maldita.es, Newtral.es, La Silla Vacía, ColombiaCheck, Ecuador Chequea, Chequeado, Ojo Público, and larepublica.pe, and circulated during the period between March 15th and May 31st, 2020.

3.2 Instrument

For data collection, a template was used that included 16 variables to classify the news according to the country of origin, the date of publication, the organization that verifies and reports the hoax, the topic addressed, the scope of coverage, the format in which it was originally produced the false news, the social networks through which it circulated, the type of hoax, the deception technique used, its intentionality, the source to which the news is attributed, if the hoax was reproduced (or not) in traditional media (television, radio, or press), and if it is transnational because it has circulated in various countries (See Annex 1).

For the development of the instrument, Wardle's proposal, (2017) was taken into account, who raises seven types of false information: Satire or parody, Misleading content, Imposter content, Manufactured content, False connection, Fake content, and Manipulated content. Given that Salaverría et al., (2020) point out that some of these typologies correspond more to disinformation techniques, it was decided to open this additional category. In variables such as the format, the social network through which it circulated, the source, and the scope, the proposals of Salaverría et al., (2020) were taken into account, while the variables Intent and transnational nature were of our creation, such as outlined below.

For the current study, the Intentionality variable is operationalized in four categories: The first of them is **Ideological interest**, which corresponds to hoaxes that seek to (dis)accredit governments or introduce anti or pro-system debates, associated with both the political position of those who produce them, as of those who are questioned. This is the case of an Ecuadorian councilor who published a hoax in which he uses images about the construction of roads to give greater force to his misinformation, involving the management of the national president, as a form of ideological questioning (see figure 1).



Figure 1: *Hoax of ideological interest. Involve political issues in the tweet.*
Source: @czamoramatute (Twitter account).

The second category is **Criminal Actions**, which collects false news that, through persuasive tactics, seeks to access private financial information or promises supposed short-term returns with "minimal investments" to rob people. An example is the case of alleged government support during the pandemic in which it is sought to deceive the unwary who, with USD250, would become part of an income system "with GUARANTEED Results" (see figure 2).

ESTADO ALERTA: ¿Cómo Generar Ingresos desde casa mientras dure el Estado de Alerta por Coronavirus? Lenín Moreno ofrece Soluciones



Jerónimo Moya [Follow](#)
Sep 4 · 8 min read



Los ciudadanos de Ecuador no deben de arruinarse por el CODVID-19, deben de generar ingresos desde sus casas gracias a este sistema Bitcoin Code que ofrece Lenín Moreno. Solo se necesitan \$250 dólares para iniciar el sistema, con Resultados GARANTIZADOS..

Figure 2: Hoax with criminal intent. It invites you to make 'investments' in times of pandemic.
Source: Medium.com (blog account @iróimomoyaj).

There are also hoaxes to **destabilize or create panic**, in which it is intended to unbalance and/or produce uncertainty in the audience by leaving hopeless messages about human behavior. It is an example of the supposed genetic manipulation with which the SARS-COV-2 virus was created, in collaboration between North American and Chinese doctors (see figure 3).



Yupe al frente noticias y muladas

23 de junio a las 12:23 · 🌐

Finalmente, el FBI arrestó a un profesor de la Universidad de Boston que estaba en conexión con la universidad China y el laboratorio de investigación en Wuhan, y fue altamente pagado...

Ahora está muy cerca de estar claro que el Coronavirus es un bio ataque planeado y conducido por China.

-Un experto chino asegura a todos que la inhalación de vapor de agua caliente mata el virus Corona al cien por ciento.

Incluso si el virus entró por la nariz, la garganta o los pulmones.

El COVID-19 no puede soportar el vapor de agua caliente.

Circula esta información a todos los miembros de tu familia y amigos.



Figure 3: Hoax to destabilize. Besides misinforming about the alleged 'creation' of the Covid-19 virus in a laboratory, it offers false miracle cures.

Source: <https://m.facebook.com/pg/Yupe-al-frente-noticias-y-muladas> (Facebook account).

When the hoax cannot be classified in the previous criteria but has been widely shared, it is considered that the intention behind is to generate a high activity in social networks called *Clickbait* with which credibility, followers, and, eventually, money is obtained for the 'virality' with which such (mis) information networks moved. Unlike the previous categories, they can offer hope in times of uncertainty, or supposed "miracle cures" (See figure 4).

ÚLTIMA HORA: Vacuna Rusa contra el coronavirus está lista (+ Detalles)

ENCUÉNTRANOS

Dirección

Calle Principal, 123
Caracas, 1000

Horas

Lunes a viernes: de 9:00 a 17:00 h.
Sábado y domingo: de 11:00 a
15:00 h.

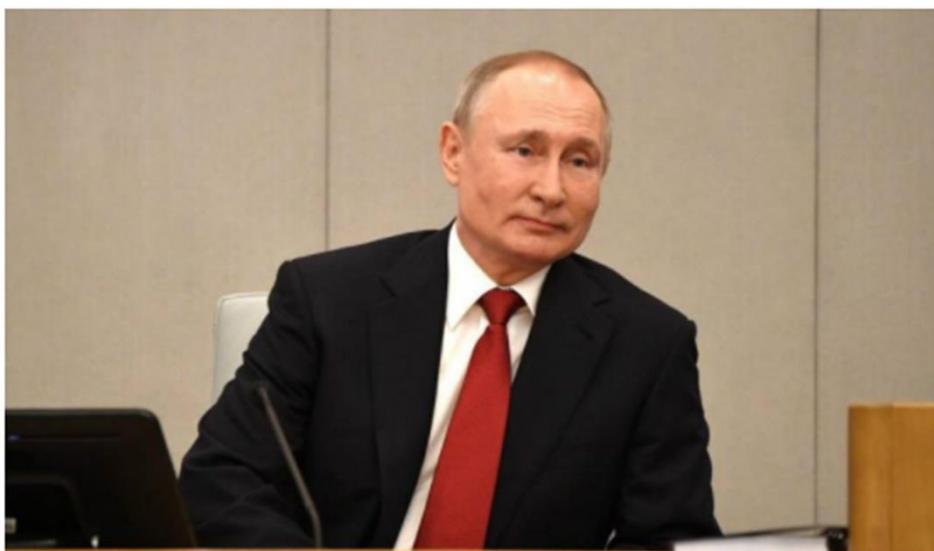


Figure 4: Hoax with online traffic intent (Clickbait).

Source: <https://lanoticia24.com/>.

Returning to what was mentioned by (Tandoc et al., 2018) and by (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), behind the production of fake news there are mainly financial and ideological motivations. The Clickbait and Criminal Actions categories would be attending to financial motivations, but it is not the same to speak of those who intend to generate profits through the viralization of content than to speak of those who seek to do so by an illegal act. For its part, the ideological interest, related to promoting ideas that favor certain people and discredit others, often exceeds its scope. Thus, on some occasions, it does not refer to individuals but an entire government. In other cases, it is about generating ideas contrary to what they call "the official version" on issues that seem to have no discussion, such as that there is global warming or that vaccines prevent the spread of diseases. The anti-system intention is clear in both cases. Other hoaxes are intended to destabilize or create panic in society, but it could not be said that they seek to attack a specific person or government, or the hegemonic political or economic system. Fear, destabilization, directly affects the common people, not the government nor a system.

Finally, the variable **Transnational Nature** refers to hoaxes that were spread in different countries, with or without modifications, as can be seen in Figures 5, 6, and 7, which indicate that the use of a face mask generates hypoxia and that it circulated in Peru, Argentina, and Spain.

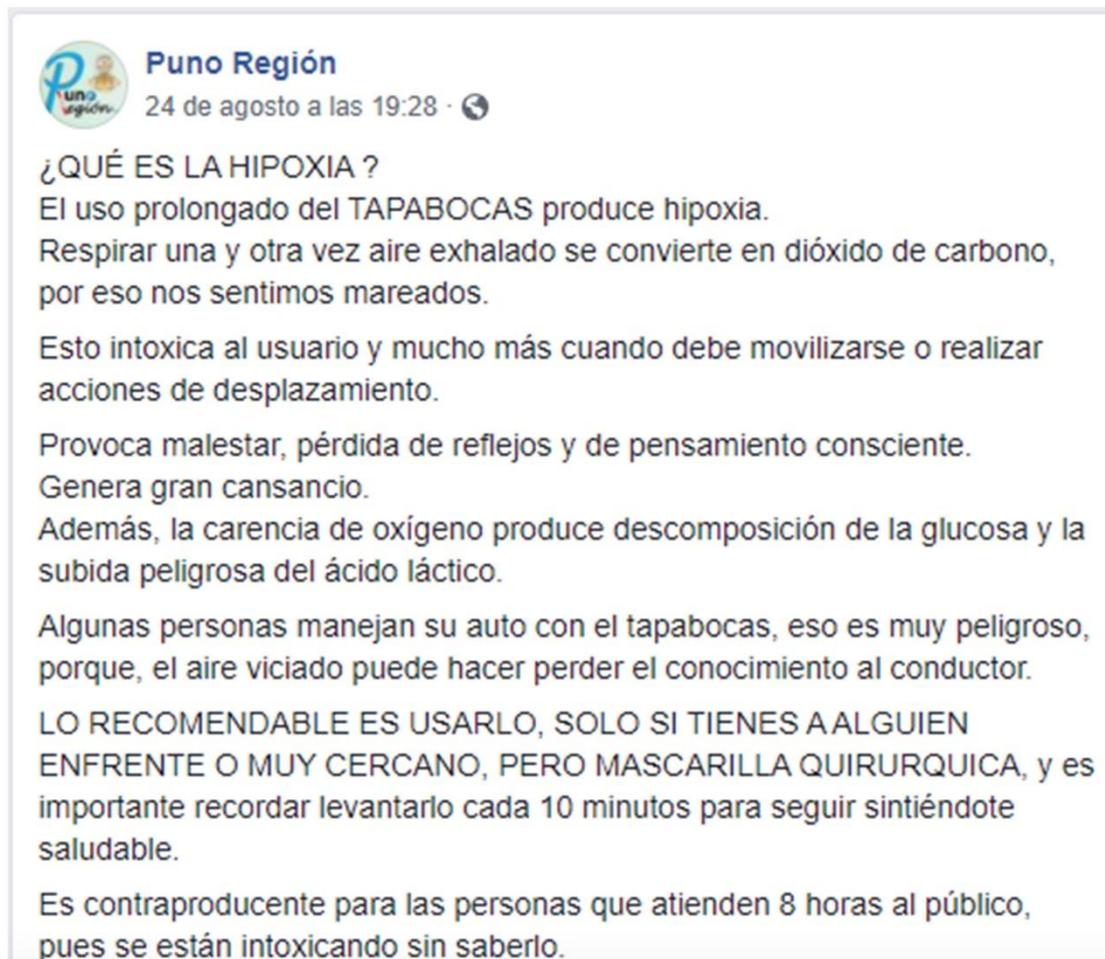


Figure 5: *Disinformative post published on Facebook for the Puno region (Peru).*
Source: Puno Region (Facebook account).



Figure 6: *Disinformative thread-type post published on Twitter for Buenos Aires (Argentina), according to the description of the user's account.*

Source: @LaOvejaNegrah (Twitter account).

Noticias similares

<p>La Diputació de València comença el repartiment de mascaretes entre els Ajuntaments de la província</p>  <p>S'inicia la distribució de 56.000 unitats comprades a la Xina i espera rebre fins a un total de 100.000 mascarar...</p> <p>Hay o comentarios / Leer más</p>	<p>Les mascaretes seran obligatories, a partir de dilluns, en els mitjans de transport públics</p>  <p>Es repartiran dilluns sis milions de mascaretes per part de les institucions</p> <p>Hay o comentarios / Leer más</p>	<p>Les mascaretes seran obligatòries en espais públics a partir de demà, dijous 21 de maig</p>  <p>"Sempre que no siga possible mantindre una distància de seguretat interpersonal d'almenys dos metres"</p> <p>Hay o comentarios / Leer más</p>
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EL SEIS DOBLE **Comentarios**

Jose - 18/5/2020

¿QUÉ ES LA HIPOXIA ?

El uso prolongado del TAPABOCAS produce hipoxia.
Respirar una y otra vez aire exhalado se convierte en dióxido de carbono, por eso nos sentimos mareados.
Esto intoxica al usuario y mucho más cuando debe movilizarse o realizar acciones de desplazamiento.
Provoca malestar, pérdida de reflejos y de pensamiento consciente.
Genera gran cansancio.
Además, la carencia de oxígeno produce descomposición de la glucosa y la subida peligrosa del ácido láctico.
Algunas personas manejan su auto con el tapabocas, eso es muy peligroso, porque, el aire viciado puede hacer perder el conocimiento al conductor.
Lo recomendable es usarlo SOLO SI TIENES A ALGUIEN ENFRENTA O MUY CERCANO, y es importante recordar levantarlo cada 10 minutos para seguir sintiéndote saludable.
Es contraproducente para las personas que atienden 8 horas al público, pues se están intoxicando sin saberlo.
¡Todas las vidas son importantes.!

Que la prevención no te lleve a otro problema... usemos el tapabocas con inteligencia, no con miedo 😊

Figure 7: Disinformative comment published on a web page for the community of Valencia, Spain.

Source: El Seis Doble <http://www.e6d.es/noticias/el-govern-obligar-en-els-prxims-dies-a-ls-de-mascaretes-en-tots-els-llocs-pblics#ad-image-0>.

3.3 Procedure

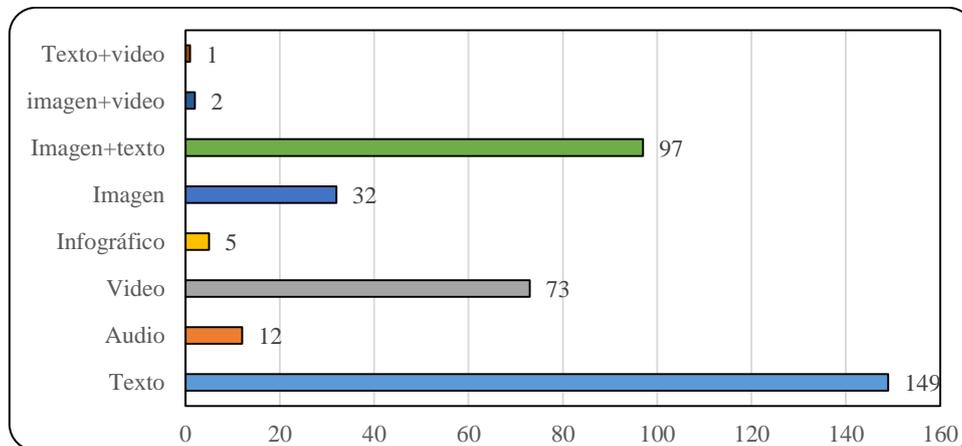
A content analysis was performed to identify and use the classification criteria for fake news, according to the scientific literature reviewed. Using a data recording template, the fake news was classified and recorded according to the criteria chosen for this study. Before the data collection, an intercoder test was performed with a random sample of 10 records. Matches of more than 0.76 and up to 100% were found, according to the *Kappa* statistic, in the different variables of the instrument. Comparative analyzes were carried out with the SPSS statistical package, version 24.

4. Results

The analysis of the data allows an overview of the main characteristics of the hoaxes that circulated in each of the countries in the sample. In the first place, it was possible to show that *Facebook* was the most used network to disseminate fake news since it was used in 32.9% of the 371 cases analyzed. The second place was for hoaxes that were disseminated in two or more networks, which corresponded to 31.9%. They were followed by *WhatsApp*, with 21%; *Twitter* with 5.7%, Email or SMS with 5.4%, and *YouTube* with 3.0%. When analyzing the relevance of the distribution channels within each country, it was found that in Colombia (33.8%), Argentina (53.1%), Ecuador (60%), and

Bolivia (51.9%), the use of Facebook predominated, while in Spain (40.3%) and Peru (42.9%) they circulated through two more networks at the same time (Contingency Coeff.=0.45; $p<0.05$).

The most frequent format used to circulate false content was text (40.2%) since it is easy to access and can be manipulated at the whim of the user. A significant percentage was also detected for hoaxes that used image-text, 26.1%. (See Graph 1).



Graph 1. *Formats in which the hoaxes about Covid-19 circulated.*

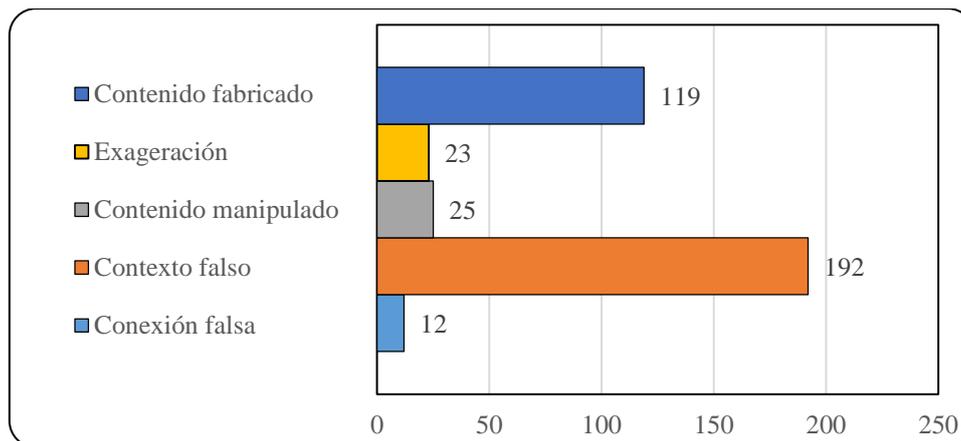
Source: Made based on the sample of hoaxes analyzed.

When looking country by country, there are some differences in the hoax distribution formats. In Colombia the use of text predominated (37.2%), followed by Image-text (35.9%); in Spain, text (47.6%), followed by video (20.2%); in Argentina, text (53.1%) and secondly Image (22.4%); in Ecuador, Image-text (41.5%) and then text (32.3%); in Bolivia, text (29.6%), followed in equal percentage by video and image-text (25.9% each), and in Peru, image-text (50%), followed by video (25%) (Contingency Coeff.=0.44; $p<0.05$).

Regarding the origin or scope of hoaxes, national ones predominate with 48.2% and a frequency of 175. International ones have 44.2% and local ones only obtain 7.5%. However, the individual analysis of each country shows that in Spain, Bolivia, and Peru false news of international scope circulated more frequently (45.2%, 59.3%, and 64.3% respectively), while in Ecuador, Colombia, and Argentina, the national ones predominated (64.6%; 52.6%, and 44.9% respectively) (Contingency Coeff.=0.27; $p<0.05$).

The type of hoax that was most registered was deceptive content, with 79%, followed by impostor content, that is, that in which genuine sources are impersonated, 14.6%, and satire or parody, with 6.5%. The associations between the type of hoax and the country were not statistically significant.

The most used deception technique was the false context, which refers to the genuine content that is disseminated with distorted context information, and which was recorded in 51.8% of the cases. In the second place, manufactured content was recorded, that is, new content designed to deceive and harm, which appeared in 32.1%. The other categories were presented on a few occasions (See Graph 2).



Graph 2. Most used deception techniques in hoaxes about Covid-19.

Source: Made based on the sample of hoaxes analyzed.

By country, it is observed that Colombia, Spain, Ecuador, and Peru maintain the same trend. However, in the case of Argentina, the most used technique is the manufactured content (57.1%), followed by the false context (28.6%), and in the case of Bolivia, the first is the false context (33.3 %) and is followed by manipulated content, that is, intentionally modified with technological tools (29.6%) (Contingency Coeff.=0.39; $p < 0.05$).

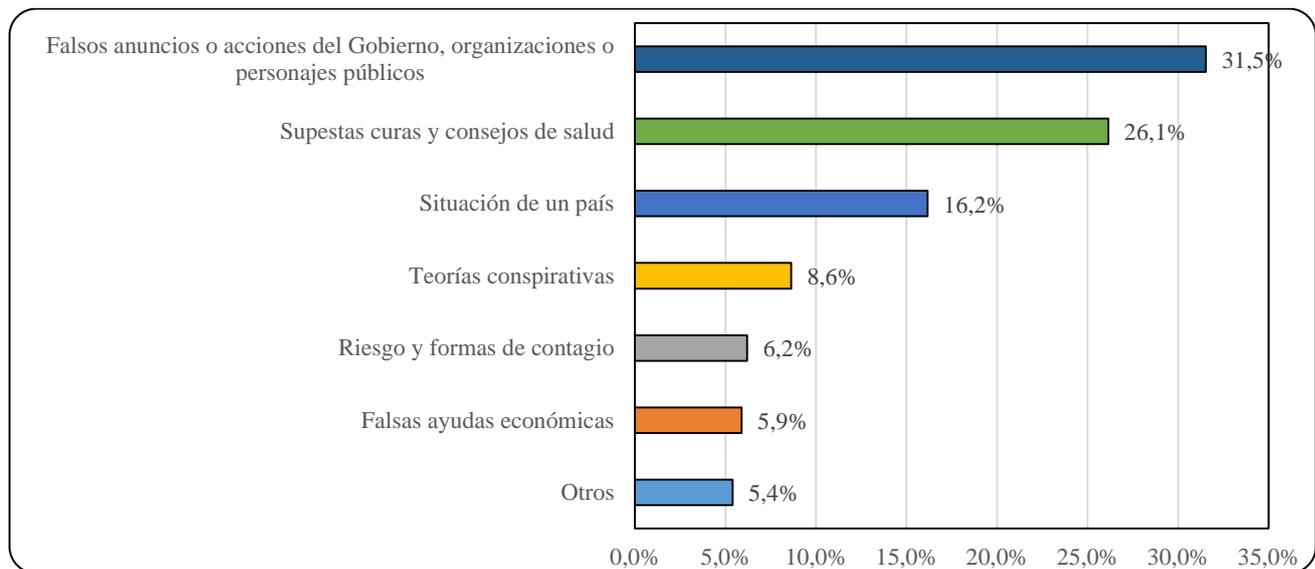
Regarding the intentionality variable, that is, the purpose that people have when circulating the hoax, the category of Ideological Interest predominated, is defined as the desire to discredit or credit governments or introduce anti-system debates, which was registered in 40.4% of the cases. It was followed by *Clickbait*, or interest in obtaining a greater number of reproductions on the networks, with 32.3%; To destabilize or create panic, with 20.8%, and Criminal Actions, whose interest is obtaining personal data to scam or steal people, with 6.5%. If one looks by country, the mainly ideological intention remains in Spain, Argentina, and Ecuador, where they occupy high percentages regarding their hoaxes (54.8%, 49.2%, and 46.2%, respectively). In Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru *Clickbait* predominates (43.6%, 51.9%, and 60.7%, respectively). (Contingency Coeff.=0.38; $p < 0.05$).

The most frequent source is anonymous (80.6%), because it does not have a subject who is responsible for what is published, nor does it have scientific, academic, political, or state support. Real sources, that is, those known persons or entities that are clearly identified although the information is fake accounted for 11.9%; the impersonated sources, where the names of people or institutions are taken to attribute actions or statements that they have not made, corresponded to 4%, and the fictitious or invented to 3.5%. The trend remains the same in each of the countries when observing the data individually (Contingency Coeff.=0.35; $p < 0.05$).

Only 6.7% of the total of false news analyzed was reproduced in the media, which suggests the existence of an adequate filter for confirmation before publishing this type of information that circulates on social networks. Only in Argentina and Colombia, about 14% of hoaxes were published in the media, while in Bolivia and Peru no cases were presented (Contingency Coeff.=0.21; $p < 0.05$).

The topic that most circulated in the group of countries analyzed was related to *False announcements or actions of a Government, organizations, or public figures*, which corresponded to 31.5%. It was

followed by the categories of *Supposed cures and health advice*, with 26.1%; and the *Situation of a country*, with 16.2% (See Graph 3).



Graph 3. *Most common topics of fake news about Covid-19.*
Source: Made based on the sample of hoaxes analyzed.

A high association (Contingency Coeff.=0.83; $p<0.05$) was found between the countries and the topics of the hoaxes that circulated the most. The false announcements of public entities and/or figures were the most recurrent hoax topic in Spain, Argentina, and Ecuador, followed by the alleged cures, which was the most repeated topic in Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru (See Table 1).

In the disseminated fake news, the presidents of the various countries and other public figures such as politicians, king, or queen appear, presumably announcing dates to start or end the confinement process, the duration of the quarantine, or apparent punishments for those who fail to comply with the rules of social isolation. It was common to find political figures apparently linked to (inter)national humanitarian assistance associations who were singled out, for example, for breaching the rules of confinement. There were also multiple announcements of alleged appointments of figures in high government positions, which indicates a manipulation of the information to discredit the characters and, tacitly, their management.

Table 1. *Topics of fake news that circulated in six Ibero-American countries*

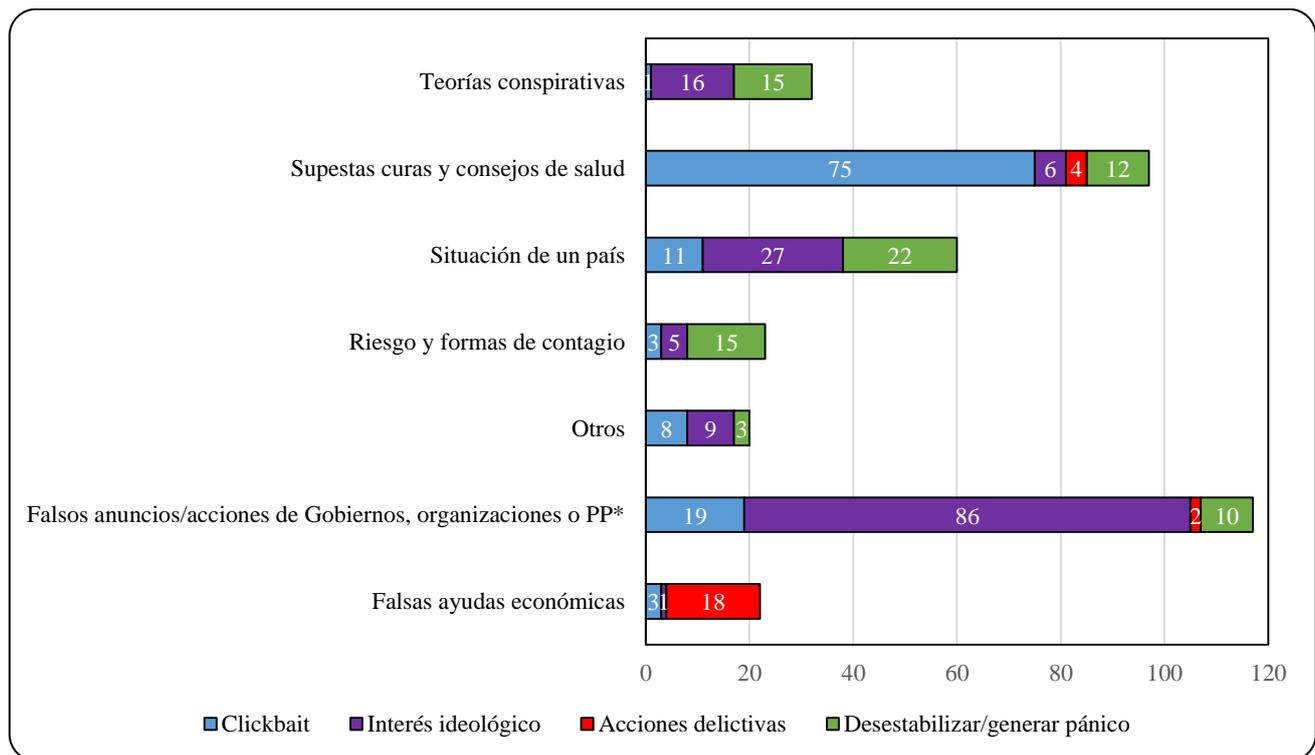
Topic	Colombia		Spain		Argentina		Ecuador		Bolivia		Peru	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
False announcements or actions of the Government, Organizations, or Public figures	9	2.4%	58	15.6%	20	5.4%	23	6.2%	7	1.9%	0	0.0%
Risk and forms of contagion	6	1.6%	6	1.6%	5	1.3%	2	0.5%	1	0.3%	3	0.8%
Alleged cures and health tips	34	9.2%	15	4.0%	8	2.2%	12	3.2%	12	3.2%	16	4.3%
False financial	2	0.5%	10	2.7%	2	0.5%	7	1.9%	1	0.3%	0	0.0%

Topic	Colombia		Spain		Argentina		Ecuador		Bolivia		Peru	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
aid												
Conspiracy theories	8	2.2%	10	2.7%	6	1.6%	7	1.9%	0	0.0%	1	0.3%
Situation of a country	17	4.6%	17	4.6%	4	1.1%	12	3.2%	4	1.1%	6	1.6%
Other	2	0.5%	8	2.2%	4	1.1%	2	0.5%	2	0.5%	2	0.5%
Total	78	21.0%	124	33.4%	49	13.2%	65	17.5%	27	7.3%	28	371

Source: Made based on the sample of hoaxes analyzed.

4.1 How are hoaxes created and with what intention?

Understanding how fake news is constructed and the intention that those who produce it may have is the first step to combat them. The relationship between the topic and intentionality (Contingency Coeff.=0.73; $p<0.05$) shows that behind the *False announcements or actions of the Government, organizations, or public figures* there is an ideological interest to discredit or credit governments or to introduce anti-system or system-backup debates. It is followed by the topic of *Alleged cures and health tips* related to the intention to generate traffic or a large number of interactions (See Figure 4).



Graph 4. Frequency of intentions of the hoax and related topics.

* PF= Public Figures

Likewise, there is a significant, albeit moderate, association between the deception technique and intentionality (Contingency Coeff.=0.40; $p<0.05$). It is evident that the false context is the most used technique regarding almost all intentions, probably because it is easier to rely on real information, but modifying aspects such as the place where it occurs, the protagonists, or how the events have

occurred. The second most used technique is to manufacture content, although it is mainly associated with *Clickbait* (See Table 2).

Table 2. *Topics of the fake news that circulated in six Ibero-American countries*

Deception technique	Clickbait		Ideological interest		Criminal actions		Destabilize or create panic	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Fake connection	7	1.9%	3	0.8%	0	0.0%	2	0.5%
False context	49	13.2%	99	26.7%	3	0.8%	41	11.1%
Manipulated content	3	0.8%	18	4.9%	0	0.0%	4	1.1%
Exaggeration	15	4.0%	3	0.8%	2	0.5%	3	0.8%
Manufactured content	46	12.4%	27	7.3%	19	5.1%	27	7.3%

Source: Made based on the sample of hoaxes analyzed.

The association between deception techniques and types of false news is hardly noticeable but significant (Contingency Coeff.=0.33; $p<0.05$), assuming the type of hoax as the dependent variable. The most representative associations occurred between the false context as a deception technique and the deceptive content as a type of hoax, which means that even when the basis of the information could be true, the context or details that ended up making it false were modified. The second most used technique was manufactured content, that is, completely invented to misinform, related to misleading content (See table 3).

Table 3. *Deception techniques according to the detected types of fake news.*

Hoax type	Satire or parody		Misleading content		Imposter content		Total N
	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Fake connection	1	8.3%	11	91.7%	0	0.0%	12
False context	11	5.7%	169	88.0%	12	6.3%	192
Manipulated content	1	4.0%	15	60.0%	9	36.0%	25
Exaggeration	2	8.7%	21	91.3%	0	0.0%	23
Manufactured content	9	7.6%	77	64.7%	33	27.7%	119

Source: Made based on the sample of hoaxes analyzed.

4.2. Disinformation that crosses borders

Disinformation of a transnational nature deserves special attention because it can help to establish the characteristics of the hoaxes that circulate with greater scope since they are repeated in different countries. When observing the hoaxes in detail during the studied period, coincidences were found in 27 fake news that circulated in various countries, represented in 100 news items (26.9% of the sample). In some of them, topics were repeated, with similar treatment, even when the presentation formats varied. This is the case of the supposed cures with eucalyptus sprays or with chlorine dioxide, which sometimes circulated in text and others on video, and essentially tried to convince people to follow a certain treatment (See Table 4).

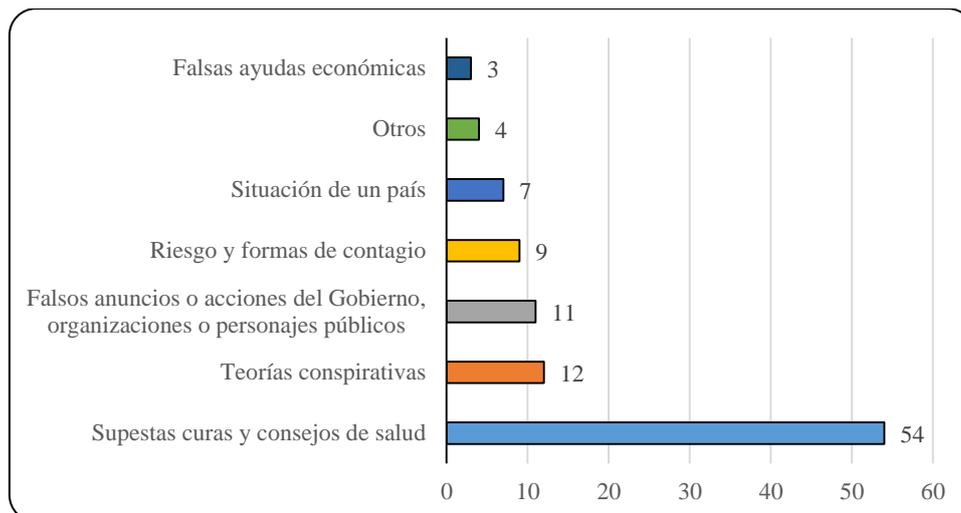
Table 4. *Frequencies with which hoaxes circulated in different Latin American countries.*

Disinformation	Number of news in which it is repeated	Number of countries in which it circulated
Chlorine dioxide cures the coronavirus.	9	5
Eating alkaline foods helps fight the coronavirus.	6	5
COVID-19 is an exosome and is caused by 5G. There is a plan to spread it around the world.	14	5
Prolonged use of a facemask produces hypoxia.	7	5
Ginger, lemon, onion, and garlic together neutralize Covid-19.	5	4
Tasuku Honjo, 2018 Nobel Prize winner for Medicine, said that "the coronavirus was man-made."	4	4
Vaporizing Eucalyptus Cures Coronavirus	6	3
Photo of the supposed doctor who died from coronavirus or who was looking for a cure to the disease.	5	3
Drinking seawater prevents the spread of coronavirus.	3	3
In Italy, they discovered that COVID-19 causes thrombosis instead of pneumonia by doing autopsies.	3	3
The Gates Foundation describes itself as a center for population reduction.	4	3
COVID-19 was made in a Chinese laboratory.	2	2
A food card is being handed out.	3	2
Video of black bags with corpses.	2	2
Gargling with baking soda and hot water kills the coronavirus.	2	2
The heat from the hairdryer kills the Covid-19.	2	2
Coffee cures Covid-19.	2	2
In Italy, they threw bills to the streets to show that health is not bought with money.	2	2
The National Government set these dates to activate productive sectors.	3	2
Russia has a vaccine ready for Covid-19.	2	2
The Washington Post confirmed that COVID-19 patient zero worked in a Wuhan laboratory.	2	2
The coronavirus is fought only with treatments against thrombosis.	2	2
Video showing corpses crammed on the ground in black bags.	2	2
COVID-19 is a bacteria that can be cured with aspirin.	4	2
232 children have died from COVID-19 in Italy.	2	2
Blood type influences vulnerability to COVID-19.	2	2
A photo from a 2003 newspaper that talks about the current coronavirus.	2	2

Source: Made based on the sub-sample of transnational hoaxes.

There were times when the same news item addressed different misinformation on an issue, such as the alleged effects of 5G technology, which in some countries circulated as a cause of the coronavirus, and in others it was associated with a conspiratorial plan to spread Covid-19 through the antennas. In other transnational fake news, the image was repeated, but the text was adapted to the context of each country in which they circulated. For example, a photo of the Spanish porn actor Ángel Muñoz, dressed as a doctor, was used to report on the alleged death of a young doctor while treating infected patients. In each country the name that was given to the supposed doctor or the institution for which he worked changed. The same image was released announcing that it was a doctor who apparently was working in the search for a vaccine against the virus. For this reason, in some cases the same hoax was classified into different subject categories, depending on the country and the false content that was being disseminated.

The predominant topics in transnational misinformation were false cures and health advice (54%); followed by conspiracy theories (12%), and false announcements or actions of the Government, organizations, or public figures, with 11% (See Graph 5).



Graph 5. *Transnational hoax topics.*

Source: Made based on the sub-sample of transnational hoaxes.

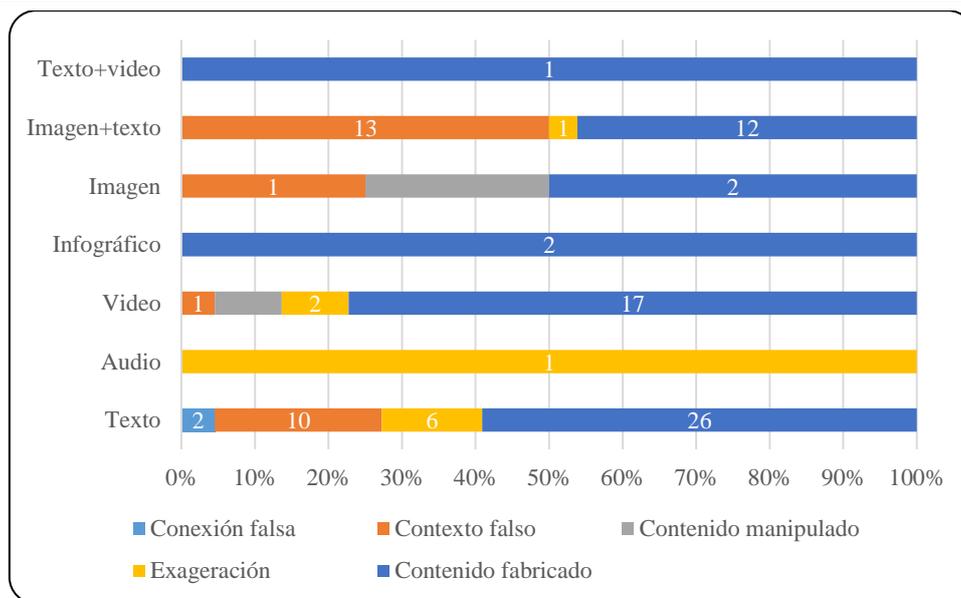
The topics most likely to go viral transnationally were those that give the reader hope to protect themselves from contagion, created with plausible techniques, even when based on manufactured content (34%) or on the exaggeration of the medicinal properties of certain elements that have traditionally served communities to ease flu symptoms (10%). The association turned out to be moderate, but statistically significant, between these variables (Contingency Coeff. = 0.54; $p=0.02$).

The main intention of the transnational hoaxes is *Clickbait* (54%), followed by the interest in creating panic or destabilizing (22%), ideological interest (19%), and criminal actions (5%). The association between these variables is relatively high (Contingency Coeff. = 0.72; $p=0.000$). In the case of false cures and health advice, the main intention was to obtain a viral diffusion of the message (41%), which could hide commercial reasons, as in the case of chlorine dioxide, which was promoted as a miraculous cure for various diseases.

Another characteristic of hoaxes that crossed borders was that they tend to be mostly supposed news of international origin 69%, which facilitates their circulation without modification. Disinformation at the national (29%) and local (2%) level usually require changes to move from one country to another, as in the case of announcements of dates to reactivate the economy, where there was content created for each country.

These international fake news had the predominant intention to generate reproductions (Clickbaits, 37%), followed by destabilizing or creating panic (16%), and of ideological interest (15%) (Contingency Coeff. = 0.38; $p=0.008$).

Finally, a statistically significant relationship was found, with a moderate association (Contingency Coeff. = 0.53; $p=0.027$) between the format and the deception technique used in transnational hoaxes. Manufactured content circulated mainly as text (26%), followed by video (17%), and an image accompanied by a text (12%). Meanwhile, hoaxes in which the basic information was real, but was falsified in context were disseminated as an image with text (13%) and as text (10%) (See Graph 6).



Graph 6. *Format and deception techniques used in transnational hoaxes.*

Source: Made based on the sub-sample of transnational hoaxes.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study, referring to the fake news about Covid-19 that circulated in 6 Ibero-American countries, shows a comparative analysis around recurring topics, the relationship between the type of fake news and the deception technique used by misinformers, and the identification of their possible intentions. The comparison of fake news that crossed borders established possible elements that favor its transnational nature, which constitutes a difference from those research that focus on news from a single country (Brennen et al., 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020), as it shows the characteristics of those hoaxes that are likely to circulate internationally due to their general and undifferentiated nature and that have disinformation that mainly appeals to emotion, rather than to specific individuals, in common. Some of these hoaxes were satirical, such as those that used photos of porn actors dressed as doctors, but only those who knew the characters could classify the information as fake news.

This study shows that social networks, by being selected for fake news to circulate, are significantly affecting the production of information, since, as stated by (Alonso González, 2019), as the news created by any person coexist with the news generated by journalists and multiplies the effect of information overabundance that, together with the anonymity provided by digital platforms, becomes an ideal breeding ground for the proliferation of fake news, as well as the difficult identification of true facts for the audience.

The difference between the terms erroneous information (Misinformation) and disinformation proposed by Wardle (2017) is debatable since there is also a difference between misinterpreting information (true or false) and sharing it. In both cases, reiterating the recommendation to promote critical thinking about 'novel' or unusual content is especially relevant in times of pandemic and uncertainty since it is the user of the information who is responsible for whether or not the (mis)information spreads.

According to the findings of this research, *Facebook* continues to be, in the context of the six countries analyzed, the platform through which hoaxes circulate most frequently, followed by fake news that circulated through two or more platforms at once, such as *Twitter*, *WhatsApp*, and

YouTube. This is a difference from what was reported by (Salaverría et al., 2020) who highlight the power of *WhatsApp* as the platform where “hoaxes are disseminated in greater quantity and with greater reach” (p. 11). This, although it may be true in the case of Spain, has an important nuance, because according to what was found, both for Peru and for Spain the first place in the distribution of hoaxes is shared through several social networks at the same time.

Facebook has tried to combat the spread of fake news, but the lack of news literacy by the public makes it difficult to make decisions to choose and discard dubious news and sources, from those that could be trusted. The projects *Facebook Journalism Project* and *New Integrity Initiative* (Aspray & Cortada, 2019; Cortés & Isaza, 2017), monitor the effect of fake news on the public and inform said virtual social network to seek better literacy in audiences, as they suggest better cyber filters against hoaxes. This type of initiative should be encouraged, as well as the consultation of verification journalism portals or initiatives (fact-checking journalism), which fulfill the purpose of educating the audience by providing a service that clarifies and classifies the information as true, false, or doubtful, so that people can make determinations about the information they consume (Elizabeth, 2014). Although this informative practice would not prevent the spread of fake news, as proposed by (Nielsen & Graves, 2017), it turns out to be an alternative tool to the indiscriminate consumption of On/Offline information.

On the other hand, the characterization of fake news shows how some types of format, disinformation techniques, topics, and scope to which fake news refers are used more frequently, which suggests that they increase the possibilities of diffusion of the hoaxes. Thus, the most frequently used format was text, given the ease of manipulating and distributing it through social networks, messaging applications, or emails; followed by the use of images and texts in the false message, which appeals to the reader's sensitivity, to the pathos described by Aristotle (Johnson & Stavru, 2019), that is, to the audience's empathy.

Most of the fake news was made with the false context technique, that is to say, on a piece of usually true information, modifications or reconfigurations are made to achieve a different effect from the fact that produces it, as has been found previously in other research (Brennen et al., 2020). Another good part of the content is completely manufactured and this means that its creators use engagement techniques, designed to generate an emotional connection with the recipients of the message, hence the transnational fake news was focused on possible cures or treatments to combat Covid-19, followed by conspiracy theories, and mentions of the another country's situation, always alarming due to the reference to infections or deaths. The vulnerability of people and fear and uncertainty are then used to construct messages.

Regarding the topic on which fake news is about, the most recurrent in the group of countries studied was that of *False announcements or actions of governments, organizations, or public figures*, related to ideological intentions [(dis)credit sources or introduce anti or pro-system debates] and, secondly, there are health issues, which coincides with the findings reported by Salaverría et al., (2020): alleged cures, advice, and forms of contagion, topics that obtained the first place in Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru. This shows that the uncertainty in the face of the pandemic and the lack of truthful scientific information promotes false beliefs in supposed ancestral or traditional solutions, promoting the dangerous practice of self-medication to avoid contagion. Transnationally, this was the most popular hoax topic.

When carrying out the analysis of the six countries as a whole, it was found that concerning the scope, hoaxes about national situations predominated, followed by those that dealt with international aspects. However, the comparative tables showed that Spain, Bolivia, and Peru the significantly high

percentages were hoaxes of international scope, while in Ecuador, Colombia, and Argentina they were those of national origin. When looking at the characteristics of the fake news that was spread in several countries at the same time (transnational), it was found that the fact that a hoax's scope is international favors it being spread through several countries, possibly because it does not require too much effort to adapt it to particular national contexts.

It was observed in the transnational hoaxes that those messages that are similar to each other circulate reinforcing the involved misinformation, even if the piece or format changes. Such dissemination is what can generate the effect of illusory truth (Pennycook et al., (2018) making people believe the false information contained. Even when the same verification was not made about the repetition of news in the set of the 371 analyzed hoaxes, it is estimated that the trend is repeated, which could lead to new research that explores the relationship between the frequent repetition of the message in different hoaxes and their acceptance as true by people.

This research showed that a low percentage of fake news reached the mainstream media, which could mean that fact-checking journalism is a practice that does help combat the problem of fake news, without indicating that its effect is representative (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012) but, in some way, it manages to alert the mainstream media not to replicate fake news.

On the other hand, the intention behind the generation of fake news was mainly of an ideological nature, since through them the government's management of the pandemic is criticized or, sometimes, it is also about obtaining support for their policies. However, ideology also involves those cases in which it is about selling anti-system ideas, such as the supposed dangerousness of vaccines (abc.es, 2020) or the theory that 5G antennas spread the disease, in which discourse there is a destabilizing intention (ColombiaCheck, n. d.). In such cases, the main idea of the message with which it is intended to misinform the public must be properly considered to correctly classify the apparent intention behind it. Although this variable is not exhaustive, it is expected to contribute to the analysis of the intentionality with which fake news is generated.

While the information manipulation theory (McCornack et al., 2014) contributes to understanding how misinformation is manufactured, the echo chamber theories (Cardenal et al., 2019; Munson & Resnick, 2010) and of filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) contribute to the tendency to share (mis)information that coincides with the interests and values of the users who consume them. For its part, the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Sindermann et al., 2020), complements the previous ones by explaining how it is decided on what is shared or not, either by (1) adding (searching) consonant information, (2) trivializing or underestimating the consonant attitudes of those who experience dissonance, or (3) changing their posture or attitude towards the (mis)information that is consumed.

Finally, it is convenient to carry out a qualitative complementary study on the discursive characteristics of hoaxes to detail the intentions and motivations of their creators, given the clear orientation to destabilize or create panic among the public, as other research has also reported (Batastin, 2020; Karalis Noel, 2020). This study would contribute to the delimitation of the categories of intentionality proposed in this research and could help both to detect and clarify analysis categories that are still unexplored.

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Annex 1

Variables coding table

Variable Name	Coding Instructions
Hoax code	The code is written sequentially 1, 2, 3, etc.
Verifying organization	1= Bolivia Verifica; 2=Maldita.es; 3=La Silla Vacía; 4= ColombiaCheck; 5= Ecuador Chequea; 6=Newtral.es; 7= Chequeado; 8= OjoPúblico; 9= larepublica.pe
Title	The title of the news is written
Country in which the hoax circulated	1= Colombia; 2= Spain; 3= Argentina; 4= Ecuador; 5= Bolivia; 6= Peru
Topic	1=False announcements or actions of the Government, organizations, or public figures; 2=Risk and forms of contagion; 3=Cures and health advice; 4=Financial aid; 5=Conspiracy theories; 6=Situation of a country; 7=Other
Scope	1= Local; 2= National; 3= International
Format	1= Text; 2= Audio; 3= Video; 4= Infographic; 5= Photo; 6= image-text; 7= image-audio; 8= image-video; 9= Text-video; 10= text-audio
Networks through which it circulated	1= <i>Whatsapp</i> ; 2= <i>Youtube</i> ; 3= <i>Facebook</i> ; 4= <i>Instagram</i> ; 5= <i>Twitter</i> ; 6= Other; 7= All networks.
Hoax type	1= Satire or parody (in a joking sense, not intended to hurt, but deceives); 2= Misleading content (misleading use of information to incriminate someone or something); 3= Impostor content (impersonates genuine sources)
Deception technique used	1= Fake connection (headlines, images, or captions do not confirm the content); 2= False context (genuine content that is broadcast with false context information); 3 = Manipulated content (Genuine information or images are manipulated to deceive); 4= Exaggeration (based on real data, but increases its scope); 5= Manufactured content (new content designed to mislead and harm)
Intentionality	1= Clickbait or get more views; 2= Ideological interest (discrediting or crediting governments or introducing anti-system or system-support debates); 3= Criminal actions (obtaining personal data or money); 4= destabilize or create panic.
Source	1= Anonymous; 2= Real; 3= Fictitious; 4= Supplanted
Hoax reproduced in the media	1= Yes; 2= No
Media that published the fake news	1= Press; 2= Television; 3= Radio; 4= Cybermedia; 5= Press and television; 6= Press and radio; 7= Press and cybermedia; 8= television and radio; 9= television and cybermedia; 10= radio and cybermedia.
Transnational nature	1= The false information circulated in only one country; 2= The false information circulated in several countries.
Countries where false information was repeated	Write the countries.
Changes in the repeating news	Write what changes in each country in which the false base news is presented.