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Commentary

Coronavirus in Spain: Fear of ‘Official’ Fake News Boosts WhatsApp and Alternative Sources

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Abstract

The communication of the Coronavirus crisis in Spain has two unexpected components: the rise of the information on social networks, especially WhatsApp, and the consolidation of TV programs on mystery and esotericism. Both have emerged to “tell the truth” in opposition to official sources and public media. For a country with a long history of treating science and the media as properties of the state, this very radical development has surprised communication scholars.

Keywords

Coronavirus; Covid-19; fake news; journalism; social media; Spain; WhatsApp; YouTube

Issue

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1. Background

Spain is a Western European country, but with some differences from others when it comes to scientific culture and scientific information in the media. In 17th and 18th centuries, the country suffered an oppressive inquisition which, after Galileo’s trial, considered science a threat to religion and the State (Elías, 2019; Jacob, 1988). Furthermore, during the last century (1936–1975), the country suffered a dictatorship that considered science not as knowledge, but as a method of persuasion at the service of the state and religion. This perspective is still prevalent now amidst the Coronavirus crisis.

2. Government Control of Coronavirus Communication

In Spain, the heads of scientific organizations such as the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) are chosen by the government. The royal academies of science and medicine are financed by the Government (Rubio, 2019); therefore, contrary to developments in Germany,

the US and the UK, they fear a confrontation with power. The same applies to the state-run news agencies—e.g., the EFE Agency—and state-owned radio and television. In a way, they work just like the Chinese news agency Xinhua, i.e., they are propaganda by nature (Ingram, 2019; Twitter, 2019). This subsidized ecosystem of science and the media facilitates an environment in which an important part of public opinion does not believe in official sources—the government, government scientists, public media or royal academies—because they are not free to disagree with the official line. If there is no criticism, the impression is that information is either manipulated or controlled by the State.

One important aspect of government efforts to tame public opinion around Coronavirus is its misuse of language, namely the presentation of a negative reality through positive metaphors. For example, the lockdown is called “hibernation” of the economy. The centres to host thousands of asymptomatic patients were called “Noah’s arks.” The most successful of all is that the number of deceased and infected has become the “curve.”

The most repeated aim by the government and its scientists is not to reduce deaths or infections, but “to flatten the curve.” Even anti-government journalists have fallen into the dialectical trap of these metaphors.

Another very controversial metaphor has been the “committee of wise experts,” scientists hand-picked by the government. It does not call them “scientists” but “wise experts”; that is to say, “unquestionable.” The newspaper *El Mundo* (second in national circulation) ran a headline on its front cover on April 12: ‘The eight “wise experts” of the president against Coronavirus: Three of them were deniers at the beginning of the pandemic’ (Rego & Iglesias, 2020). The article, widely shared and discussed on social media, showed the ties of these experts with political parties, which might indicate hidden influences. Such dynamics are in fact used as a common government manoeuvre to control health information in the media (Catalan-Matamoros, 2011) and have been followed in other previous scientifically-based Spanish catastrophes such as the toxic spill of Doñana Natural Park in 1998, and the Prestige oil tanker accident in 2002. Here the government uses scientists with alignment to the dominant political ideology, who are used to cloak political slogans with science. The rest of government scientists do not have permission to speak with journalists under the threat of revealing state secrets, a very serious crime in Spain (Elías, 2007). The strategy is always the same: (1) electing a government scientist as a spokesperson who will then be rewarded with a promotion; (2) inundating journalists with tons of confusing data so that they do not have time to look for independent sources and check it; (3) threatening independent scientists (with indirect threats if they speak to the media); and, finally, (4) twisting language.

The Covid-19 crisis has also seen a novel element: the frequent and long press conferences given by the President, Pedro Sánchez (PSOE, centre-left wing party). But journalists could not attend these conferences to ask questions, prompting the Spanish Journalists’ Association to complain. The government, in an attempt to give an image of transparency, invited journalists to a WhatsApp group to submit questions. The problem arose when the selection of these questions was made by the State Secretary for Communication, a position appointed by the President, and many journalists never saw their questions being asked at press conferences. Some media outlets and opposition politicians suggested that the government emulates the strategy of communist leaders, such as the Cuban Fidel Castro or Venezuelans Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro with his *Aló Presidente* (Hello President). The alleged links with Venezuela of leaders of the Podemos political party, who acted as advisers to Chávez and Maduro, have inflamed social media, which criticise Podemos for adopting the Chávez communication strategy. But the President, Pedro Sánchez, a member of the PSOE, still needs Podemos to govern in coalition. This debate on whether Pedro Sánchez is emulating communist leaders has diverted the attention from

the pandemic information given by the President. Many journalists refer to “yesterday’s press conference” not as such but as “yesterday’s *Aló Presidente*,” undermining the President’s image (Rodríguez, 2020).

Even the left-wing media such as *Público* have criticized the government for using the bandwagon effect (herd effect), whereby people assimilate the beliefs of the majority even when they are not convinced. In one article, Sánchez is criticised for copying the strategy of former US President Harry Truman: ‘If you cannot convince them, confuse them’ (Calderón, 2020). The journalist who wrote this comment, César Calderón, was immediately fired by *Público* (Carvajal, 2020), who admitted that it was pressured by the government, demonstrating how it exerts enormous power not only on state-run but also on private media. All this explains why that a large segment of the Spanish population prefers alternative sources—namely social media platforms and, quite curiously, “alternative television” shows that usually rely on mystery—for news during the Coronavirus crisis.

3. Alternative Media Spaces for Independent Science

In Spain there are two well-defined types of scientists. Those working at universities are quite independent and are allowed to publish their articles and in their blogs with full freedom. Indeed, some of them are being very closely followed during this Coronavirus crisis, such as members of the Spanish Mathematics Committee (Comité Español de Matemáticas, 2020). These scientists working at universities must pass a rigid and demanding national accreditation system to secure tenure and be promoted (ANECA, according to the Spanish acronym). On the other hand are scientists working in public research organizations such as the CSIC or the Carlos III National Health Institute. These do not have to pass any national accreditation or have to teach, although they are required to achieve the same research levels as university scientists. This privilege comes at a high price: They are not allowed to publish/speak without the approval of managers who are appointed by the government in office. If politicians tell the public to follow a specific expert advice which then turns out to be problematic, the blame is placed on scientists who cannot protest because this would be considered a serious disciplinary offense to reveal national secrets, even if they are scientific data. In Spain, it would be impossible for a government scientist to discredit the government, as, for example, Dr. Fauci is doing with US President Donald Trump (Mars, 2020). It is happening now when the left is in government, and it has happened before when the right was in office. Spain can thus be regarded as what the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes as ‘politically democratic, but socially fascist societies’ (Revista IHU, 2016).

This has led to quite a significant situation in the Coronavirus crisis: Public trust is placed in the information that comes through social media, especially

WhatsApp, as well as through “alternative” television programs that usually cover mystery and esoterism. The first WhatsApp messages on the Coronavirus, which contradicted the official messages claiming that this pandemic was not dangerous, were videos and audios from clinicians denouncing the real situation they were facing in their own hospitals and asking for more protective equipment. Some of them were subjected to disciplinary action by their professional associations (La Voz, 2020; Vizoso, 2020), which restricted their freedom of expression against politicians and the authorities. Despite these threats, “alternative” TV programs, of an esoteric and mysterious nature (e.g., Fourth Millennium), invited these clinicians to speak (Molina, 2020). In this Coronavirus crisis, the digital media platform that has benefited most has been WhatsApp, which takes a leading role in positioning Spain as the country with the highest growth: 76% compared to 50% in other countries (EuropaPress, 2020). In April 2020, the company limited a number of groups to share messages, which was criticized by the media because only the messages against the government were restricted. WhatsApp quickly clarified that the orientation of the messages was not filtered, and that it was just a method to stop massive sharing of fake news. However, there was a general feeling that most of the forwarded messages were against the government.

Another winner seems to be YouTube. The Spanish state-run media are bound to the State, similarly to Chinese public media. In February, a report from Italy by the popular correspondent in the Spanish public television, Lorenzo Milá, went viral (TRESB, 2020): ‘Covid-19 is a new type of flu; it is true, we have no viral memory, nor do we currently have a vaccine, but it is just a type of flu,’ he declared. This report was shared widely on social networks and was retweeted by, among others, Pablo Echenique, the CSIC scientist and national deputy of Podemos (a political party governing in coalition together with the PSOE). The counterpoint in these previews about the pandemic was, curiously, given by a TV program on mystery and esotericism, *Cuarto Milenio* (Fourth Millennium), which attracted the highest audience ratings of all programs broadcast by the private channel Cuatro (Ecoteuve, 2020). While the public media tried to soften the pandemic, this program interviewed a Spaniard living in China who predicted, together with some guest experts, what would happen later (Reinoso, 2020). This would have been shocking for Spanish state-run television, and it led social networks to contrast the two approaches, which has surely impacted on public opinion. This development would have been impossible before the digital era. Following the pandemic restrictions, channel Cuatro put Fourth Millennium on pause, as well as others, but curiously, it coincided with the government support of 15 million euros for private media as these were considered a public service during the pandemic. Criticisms were raised in social media: Was this support aiming to influence a favourable view for

the government? As this controversial TV program was put on pause, the presenter opened a YouTube channel which within a few days reached more than 500,000 subscribers (Jiménez, 2020). His interviews and his live shows surpassed a million views in only a few days and are highly forwarded on social media, strongly impacting public opinion.

As Spanish public opinion continues not to trust official sources, WhatsApp messages and YouTube channels criticizing the government have become so relevant and prevalent that the government has considered using the Prosecutor’s Office to censor this alternative discourse in the social media. And, as Donald Trump does, the Spanish government’s strategy to handle critical views is to call them fake news (Elías, 2018). Whether such strategy succeeds is a matter for much more research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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