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Article

8M Demonstrations, the Spanish Far Right, and the Pandemic in a Hybrid Media System

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Abstract

For years, the construction of social subjectivity has been conditioned by the role of the so-called mass media, but the multiplicity of media platforms today contributes to the configuration of reality. In this context, this study analyses how the discourse of the far right in Spain effectively criminalised the International Women’s Day (8M) demonstrations in the first year of the pandemic by linking them to an increase in Covid-19 infections. To implement this strategy, Spain’s far-right party, Vox, used its social media accounts, but it also had the support of ultra-conservative digital media outlets to legitimise its discursive distortions. Taking this into account, this article presents a content and critical discourse analysis of the Twitter and Gab accounts operated by Vox and its leaders, Santiago Abascal and Rocio Monasterio, as well as three ultra-conservative newspapers, *La Razón*, *OK Diario*, and *Libertad digital*. The period covered is from 8 March 2020 to 8 March 2021.

Keywords

Covid-19; far right; feminist demonstrations; hybrid media system; International Women’s Day; Vox

Issue

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1. Introduction

After winning 24 seats in the general election of April 2019, the far-right party Vox entered the Spanish Parliament for the first time. Just one month later, it also won three seats in the European Parliament. In this way, in a matter of mere months prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Spanish far-right became an institutional force with a presence in political decision-making bodies. This would also make Spain another of the European countries where the ultra-conservative populist and nationalist discourse of the far right had gained a foothold. Various authors (Goodwin, 2011; Marchat, 2001; Milner, 2021; Minkenberg & Perrineau, 2007; Wagner & Meyer, 2017) have analysed the rise of

political parties of this kind in countries such as Austria, France, Italy, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands, where in some cases they have even become partners in governing coalitions. The main reasons for the success of far-right ideology with European voters are associated with public disaffection with traditional bipartisan politics and the socioeconomic consequences of globalisation (Sandrin, 2021). In a context of economic crisis and reduced national sovereignty, these far-right parties promote the idea of enemies of the people through a nationalist, xenophobic and anti-establishment discourse (Davis & Deole, 2017; Edo & Giesing, 2020; Hart & Winter, 2022) that includes a full frontal attack on feminism (Álvarez-Benavides & Jiménez Aguilar, 2021; Sprengholz, 2021).

This study analyses the case of Vox as a populist far-right party. As Capdevila et al. (2022, p. 3) argue, Vox is characterised by “its nationalism (a centralised, mononational State founded on ethno-national myths), its authoritarianism (belief in an ordered society in which offences against authority must be severely punished) and its defence of traditional values (anti-feminism, anti-abortion, family, traditions and rural life).” We also draw on the perspective of authors like Eatwell and Goodwin (2019) to define this party as populist and radically right-wing.

With the party’s increasing influence on national politics, the public health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 would provide Vox with a pretext for discrediting the International Women’s Day (8M) demonstrations in Spain. Since 2018, 8M has acquired much greater significance in Spain, as it has in the rest of the world, as the date was marked by an International Women’s Strike. Although the first strike was called on 8 March 2017, the event received considerably more attention the following year, with a much larger number of women in many more countries taking part (Moriana Mateo, 2018).

It is worth clarifying that the far right does not deny the existence of inequality entirely, but that it appears in far-right discourse solely with reference to the past, to non-Western societies, or to questions that are presented as natural or inherent to each sex. It is thus common for Vox to reference important historical figures in feminism while at the same time arguing that the movement has “drifted towards extremism” in recent times (Castillo Jara et al., 2019). The acknowledgement of inequality also underpins part of the anti-immigration agenda of the far right, based on the claim that the men who assault “Spanish” women are migrants, predominantly of Arab origin (Berg, 2019; Blee, 2017; Wodak, 2015). In this respect, the relationship between the far right and anti-feminism has been explored in numerous studies. Some of these studies place an emphasis on anti-immigration sentiment, as noted above, but they also highlight other important issues, such as the deliberate use of the relatively small number of women in the party’s ranks to act as “refuters” of inequality by virtue of their existence (Berg, 2019; Blee, 2017); the redefinition of motherhood as a “right” of women, rejecting the conception of it as a traditionally imposed role (Berg, 2019); “disidentification” processes whereby men are not recognised as a privileged social group but instead are distanced from those who actively engage in violence against women and depicted as “victims” of feminist persecution (Bridges, 2021); and the representation of feminism as a driving force for censorship, whereby the expression of far-right ideas is transformed into the epitome of freedom of expression and “anti-political correctness” (Träbert, 2017).

These features recognised in far-right ideology in the West are also pointed out in studies analysing the discourse of Vox, where a distinction can be made between

those that focus on their public statements (Castillo Jara et al., 2019; Rivas Venegas, 2021) and those that analyse their discourse on social media platforms (Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2022; Luque Ortiz & Cano Alarcón, 2021). The latter of these two approaches has become especially popular in recent years. Drawing on the study by Jordi Bonet-Martí (2020) of the construction of anti-feminist discourse on Twitter, it seems clear that the “lexical battle” (Rivas Venegas, 2021) waged by Vox aims to discredit feminism with recourse to post-truth claims, associated with the phenomenon of fake news and discursive aggression in the context of the heightened sensitivity of public opinion due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Bonet-Martí (2020, p. 3) argues that anti-feminism is constructed as a “countermovement reacting against the various waves of feminist mobilisation” and describes Vox’s reaction as a response to the success of the 8M demonstrations in 2018 and 2019. The antifeminist discursive practices engaged in by Vox were thus intended to link the feminist mobilisations on 8 March 2020 to the spread of Covid-19 in Spain. In this context, our study aims not only to specifically explore the reproduction of an antifeminist agenda in Vox’s discourse but also to analyse the interaction between the dissemination of that discourse in traditional media (where it is beyond the control of the party itself), and its social media messaging (which is directly controlled by the party).

2. Discursive Power and Ideology in a Hybrid Media System

The multiplicity of media channels today is contributing to the configuration of reality and to the way that humans experience the world around them, whereby traditional media are no longer the sole contributors to the construction of our ideological framework. This hybrid media system facilitates interaction between “older and newer media logics—where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms—in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics” (Chadwick, 2017, p. 4).

Andreas Jungherr et al. (2019) posit the possibility of interdependence between the different actors in the digital environment today who possess a discursive power that shapes key issues and how they are framed. These authors suggest that there are systemic, organisational, and individual factors that determine discursive power through communication dynamics in which corporations also give a broadcasting role to the general public via social media. In this complex media system, the shared ideology is the product of a diverse range of interactions representing multiple points of view that can often result in a “cacophony of voices” (Waldherr, 2018, p. 292).

The purpose behind analysing social media and mass media content was not to differentiate between them but to identify their complementary contributions to the construction of public debate. As researchers, we believe this type of combined analysis facilitates “a more

comprehensive study of the evolution of political communication” (Chadwick, 2017, p. 5). This constitutes a new form of discursive power that nevertheless still promotes the legitimisation of values and beliefs through a social and cultural framework (Kollec, 2014).

One interesting aspect of these new forms of discursive power is related to the concept of homophily. This term has been used by various scholars in recent years (Khanam et al., 2022; Valera-Ordaz et al., 2018) to refer to the tendency of people to interact with others with a similar mentality to their own in the digital environment, reinforcing their own ideology in online communities or networks. The concept of homophily is cited in this study to explore how Vox and its leaders, Santiago Abascal and Rocío Monasterio, make use of social media platforms to offer their followers a particular discourse while also drawing on content on Spain’s conservative digital news platforms. In this way, Vox expands its far-right and anti-feminist discourse on Gab and Twitter not only by interacting with its followers but also through news stories published by the three biggest conservative publications in Spain. The condition of homophily between the journalists for these publications and Vox’s party leaders thus amplifies the discursive power of a party that has exploited the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in an effort to disparage and criminalise the feminist 8M demonstrations through the use of disinformation.

From this critical perspective, this study takes up John Corner’s (2016) proposal of a new approach to the analysis of the relationship between ideology and power in the media that takes into account the interaction between cognitive and affective dimensions.

In this context, the aim of this study is to demonstrate that Vox blamed 8M protests for triggering a rise in Covid-19 infections in the first year of the pandemic, and to which end it used discursive strategies of factual distortion on its Twitter and Gab accounts. In addition, we analyse how this discourse was reinforced by news stories appearing on far-right digital media platforms, resulting in a two-pronged anti-feminist homophilic strategy in a hybrid media system.

For our analysis in the context of a hybrid media system, in addition to three digital newspapers, we selected the social media platforms Twitter and Gab. The latter first emerged as an alternative for the far right in the United States (Jasser et al., 2021), and we were interested in determining whether it had also been effective for Vox in Spain. As the results show, Vox has continued to use Twitter as its main social media platform, while

Gab has remained a marginal option in the projection of its discourse.

To this end, we analyse the connections made between 8M and Covid-19 in content posted on the Vox party accounts on Twitter and Gab, and on the accounts of the party’s national leader, Santiago Abascal, and the president of its Madrid branch, Rocío Monasterio. We also conduct the same analysis on three of the most important ultra-conservative digital media outlets in Spain: *La Razón*, *OK Diario*, and *Libertad Digital*. The three media outlets were selected on the basis of their editorial line, which is characterised by a bias that is skewed further to the right than traditional right-wing views. As has been recently confirmed by the independent organisation Political Watch (n.d.), the newspapers *La Razón*, *OK Diario*, and *Libertad Digital* are all positioned on the far right of the political spectrum in Spain, close to or within what is categorised as hyper-partisan right. This assertion is supported by previous research, including a study by Labio-Bernal (2006) on partisan bias in the Spanish media, and another by Pineda and Almirón (2013) on the rise of the ultra-conservative online news media.

3. Methodology

This study thus expands the analysis of public communications on traditional media to include new digital forms, taking into account the complex nature of the media system today. The period studied covers the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, from 8 March 2020 to 8 March 2021.

In the case of Twitter (see Table 1), a total of 2,873 tweets by Vox, 772 by Monasterio, and 649 by Abascal were processed for this study. To download the data, Twitter’s Application Programming Interface (API) was accessed using Python custom software that facilitates the identification of accounts (@Santi_ABASCAL, @monasterioR, and @vox_es), the specification of time ranges, and the selection only of those tweets posted or quoted by the account holders, i.e., excluding retweets.

In the case of Gab (see Table 1), we found that Rocío Monasterio has no account on this social media platform, so only the accounts @Santiago_Abascal_ and @VOX_Espana_ were analysed. The posts were reviewed manually as their relatively small number made this possible (21 posts by Abascal and 127 by Vox, excluding reposts). It was found that the Vox leader posted nothing related to the 8M demonstrations in this period, while the party’s account dedicated two posts to the subject.

Table 1. Total number of messages analysed on social media.

Twitter (no. of tweets)			Gab (no. of posts)	
@Santi_ABASCAL	@monasterioR	@vox_es	@Santiago_Abascal_	@VOX_Espana_
649	772	2,873	21	127
Total: 4,442 messages				

entails a direct attack on any information, individuals, or sources that might call the fake content into question. Specifically, this analysis will focus on attempts to discredit the feminist movement and its supporters. The fourth category is polarization, defined as an increased distance between the left and right sides of the political spectrum. Of particular interest for this study is the question of how the relationship between 8M and Covid-19 is used to reinforce the identity of Vox as a party, and, in turn, the identity of its voters. In this way, the party seeks to strengthen group cohesion by distinguishing itself from traditional bipartisan politics. The last of the five variables to be analysed is the category of conspiracy theories, whereby events are explained by claiming that they have been orchestrated for “sinister” purposes. The analysis of this category will focus on the theory that the government knew about the public health alert yet still allowed the 8M demonstrations to go ahead, although other conspiracy theories will also be identified.

We selected the categories proposed in Sander van der Linden and Jon Roozebeek’s (2020) study as an analytical technique because we considered it to be a proven method for detecting disinformation. The study by these authors was presented as an experiment involving the participation of around 15,000 people to identify fake news. Their study is also based on the report *Digital Hydra: Security Implications of False Information Online*, directed by Giorgio Bertolin (2017). We believe that in the context of the pandemic and given that anti-feminism is a key element of Vox’s ideology, van der Linden and Roozenbeek’s categories offered an excellent analytical approach for our case study.

4. Results

Based on the application of the template of categories provided by van der Linden and Roozenbeek (2020) to identify fake news strategies, the analysis yielded the results outlined in this section.

4.1. Emotional Content

All of the messages posted on Gab and Twitter make use of this strategy. The emotion they most often aim to elicit is anger, followed by distrust and suspicion, with the clear objective of inciting hatred that is directed especially at the government coalition of the leftist parties Unidas Podemos and PSOE, but also sometimes at the traditional conservative party, Partido Popular. “Id al infierno ya” (Go to hell already) and the invented word “Criminalas” (Vox, March 23, 2020), which ridicules inclusive language by applying a feminine form to the gender-neutral noun criminal, are some of the expressions directed at the ruling PSOE party, and more specifically at the women on the government’s Equality and State Pact against Gender-based Violence Committee, in what constitutes a clearly anti-feminist attack. This

approach is also reflected in the suggestions of “sectarianism” and “political obsession” in relation to the demonstrations (Vox, September 30, 2020).

This strategy is also adopted widely by the news services analysed, specifically with the repeated use of pejorative terminology in their headlines, such as “infectódromo del 8M” ([8M infectodrome] *OK Diario*, February 24, 2021), which allegedly triggered an increase in “infections by 2,000%,” while the Spanish government is labelled the “socialist-communist executive.” This terminology is complemented with other expressions such as “the feminists Irene Montero and Carmen Calvo—ministers—will be allowed to congregate to shout their misandrist proclamations,” and the kind of language that Vox is known for is echoed in references to the “aque-larre” (witches’ coven) that sent “thousands of women to their deaths” and descriptions of the demonstrations as “one of the darkest moments in history” to justify the proposal to designate 8 March as the “National Day of Remembrance for Victims of Coronavirus” (*OK Diario*, February 23, 2021). The emotional tone is turned up in other articles that make reference to “marchas de las mujeres de extrema izquierda” (marches of the women of the far left), “aque-larres sectarios” (sectarian witches’ covens), and “manifeminazi” ([feminazi demonstrations] *Libertad Digital*, March 10, 2020), which are linked to a “bomba vírica” (viral bomb). The 8M protests of both 2020 and 2021 are thus depicted as “manifestaciones asesinas” (killer demonstrations) where “once again, the left sends thousands of people to their deaths” (*Libertad Digital*, September 22, 2020).

4.2. Impersonation of a Reliable News Source

On social media platforms, there are five notable cases that draw on different sources of authority. The first is the use of numerical data to highlight the size of the crowds that gathered for 8M, focusing on a feminist demonstration (without specifying the location) over other gatherings (Vox, March 13, 2020). The second is an assertion of supposed “information” about the government’s awareness of the public health emergency prior to 8 March featuring a screenshot image (Vox, April 9, 2020). The third case is the use of scanned copies of official documents, particularly a memo from the Ministry of Health (Monasterio, June 11, 2020), while the last two examples involve a video featuring Spain’s Minister of Equality, Irene Montero, used in one case with minimal editing (Vox, June 1, 2020) and the other as part of an elaborately produced montage (Vox, June 4, 2020) that evokes the idea of a “candid camera” that “catches out” someone who is lying.

This strategy is also used by the news publications, along with quoting celebrities to validate the position expressed in the article. One news story contains the claim that a judge has launched a “judicial investigation into the national government’s delegate for the Madrid region for misconduct in allowing the 8M

(demonstrations)” (*OK Diario*, March 25, 2020) while neglecting to mention that the judge herself had not initiated the investigation but was merely hearing a complaint filed with the court, or that the investigation did not mean that the delegate had been charged with the alleged offence. In another article, reference is made to a “report” that blames the demonstrations for “causing at least 1,500 infections” (*La Razón*, January 22, 2021), without mentioning that this report was dismissed by a Madrid court in the complaint filed against Fernando Simón, the official responsible for Spain’s pandemic response, on the grounds that it lacked a scientific basis.

Celebrities quoted in the news articles analysed include a former basketball player, Alfonso Reyes (*La Razón*, June 10, 2020), and a Spanish soccer player, Pepe Reina, both of whom were highly critical of the government’s handling of the pandemic, who are presented as legitimate sources of opinion on the issue. In the first case, the article cites a tweet by Reyes in which he asserts that “it has also been demonstrated that most of the people who have died (from Covid-19) are men but we don’t accuse it of misandry,” with reference to Irene Montero’s suggestion that the attacks against 8M were anti-feminist. The second article simply highlights the fact that Pepe Reina liked a tweet posted by the spokesperson in the Congress for Partido Popular, Margarita Prohens, to Irene Montero, and adds that it “is the most forceful response to Irene Montero and her feminism.” The inclusion of these celebrities adds nothing new to the information but serves merely to reinforce the stance taken by the publication.

4.3. Discrediting

While Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez is mentioned only once on Gab, on Twitter we can find a full frontal attack on Irene Montero, Carmen Calvo (who was deputy prime minister at the time) and to a lesser extent, Isabel Ayuso (president of the Community of Madrid). Although there are references to Sánchez, the criticism with reference to the Spanish government or the ruling party (PSOE) is more diluted, i.e., the attempts to discredit them are less personal. This reveals a consequence of the machismo of Vox, which reserves its harshest attacks for women even when the government’s leader is a man. In this respect, the study found a considerable number of hashtags targeting Montero (*#IreneCierraAlSalir*) and her party, Podemos (*#PodemosCiao*), but most were aimed at discrediting the government (*#ApoyoALaMoción*, *#MotivosParaLaMoción*, *#GobiernoDimisión* and *#GobiernoDelBulo*). It is repeatedly claimed that the government and its members lied or concealed information, raising doubts about their trustworthiness and suggesting that they are guilty of negligence and of putting the public at risk. In fact, on Gab there are even photo montages in which the party name, Unidas Podemos (United We Can), is rewritten as “Unidas Pandemias” (Pandemics

United) and the heart icon that forms part of the PSOE’s logo is replaced with the coronavirus icon (Vox, March 20, 2020) to elicit an emotional response.

In the news publications analysed, the efforts to discredit the government evident in the emotional content described above are amplified in order to attack feminism itself or those who represent it, with a fixation on Montero in particular and female government ministers in general. The articles make sensational claims against Montero, suggesting that she is “heating up the streets as 8M approaches, despite the coronavirus threat” (*OK Diario*, February 23, 2021), or describing her party, Podemos, as a “movement of radicals” who support the “artist Pablo Hásel after he was sentenced for glorifying terrorism” (*OK Diario*, February 24, 2021). In these articles, the demonstrations are conceptualised as a partisan strategy, directed by “Irene Montero and her feminism” (*La Razón*, June 10, 2020), an argument maintained for the coverage of the 2021 protests, as evident in the headline “Irene Montero calls another 8M mass demonstration despite the rise in Covid infections” (*La Razón*, January 22, 2021). The association of the 8M protests in 2021 with Montero is combined with Vox’s call to have the date declared the “National Day for Victims of Coronavirus,” a call rejected by Montero, who is further discredited as a result (*OK Diario*, February 23, 2021).

4.4. Polarization

On the social media accounts analysed, and especially on Twitter, Vox could be said to present itself as “against the world.” Although it places the blame for the rise in Covid-19 infections chiefly on the government, and especially on its female ministers, it also seizes the opportunity to attack the traditional conservative party, Partido Popular, in its role as the governing party of the Community of Madrid, for encouraging the 8M demonstrations. The polarising logic separates those who have been negligent and irresponsible by supporting 8M gatherings from those who have been cautious and protective by rejecting them, with Vox placed all alone on the latter side and all the other political parties placed on the former. The “National Day for Victims of Coronavirus” (Vox, February 22, 2021) constitutes the core of Vox’s polarization efforts, marking a clear distinction between those who are concerned for the public and seek to protect them and even take revenge on those who do not, and those who supported the 8M demonstrations and therefore do not support Vox’s proposal for a day honouring the “victims.”

In the news articles, the polarization is similarly defined based on the stance on the 8M demonstrations; however, the “Vox against the world” narrative is not evoked as often, with a focus instead on demonstrating the distance between the progressive PSOE–Podemos governing coalition and the right and far-right opposition parties, Partido Popular and Vox, respectively.

The attempt to lay blame for the rise in Covid-19 infections is thus intended to create the idea of two conflicting blocs, a notion reinforced by the publications analysed. These news services seek to make clear that Vox distances itself from the prevailing bipartisan position, as stated in *La Razón* (February 23, 2021), rejecting the concept of “gender violence” condemned in the Institutional Declaration by both the conservative Community of Madrid government and the leftist parties on the occasion of 8M that year. They repeatedly highlight this conflict through news stories about a debate between Montero (Podemos) and Margalida Prohens (Partido Popular), in which the latter claims that “on 25 February, there were strong suspicions that the coronavirus was going to turn into a public health catastrophe” (*La Razón*, June 10, 2020). *Libertad Digital* takes a similar approach when it places the permission granted by the national government’s delegate for Madrid, José Manuel Franco, for 8M demonstrations to go ahead in 2021 in opposition to the stance of the city’s mayor: “Franco authorizes demonstrations on 8 March of up to 500 people and [Mayor] Almeida calls for none to be allowed” (*Libertad Digital*, February 24, 2021). The idea is to place the theories that the 8M events did not cause the spread of the virus in opposition against the theory of the conservatives, supported by the news publications themselves, that there was a direct cause-effect relationship between the two and that therefore the government should “apologise” because the demonstrations “represented a serious risk.”

4.5. Conspiracy Theories

The idea of a government conspiracy to allow the 8M events to go ahead despite the risk appears in most of the messages on both Gab and Twitter. The evidence offered includes the fact that some government representatives attended the 8M demonstrations wearing latex gloves. There even seems to be an intention to link the government to a kind of purge of outsiders, portraying it as the enemy of the women it claims to stand up for. This appears to be the insinuation behind accusations that the government ministers were “wearing latex gloves while [they] exposed the people” (Vox, 23/03/2020), or that “the ministers were warned during the demonstration not to kiss each other. Why wasn’t everyone else?” (Vox, 02/06/2020), or that the government “went to a demonstration with latex gloves on while assuring Spaniards that they do not need to take any measures” (Vox, 10/03/2020). Vox seeks to convey the idea that the government has the objective of exterminating people outside their group: “Their Spain is not the schools, or social services or hospitals. Their Spain is power” (Vox, 19/03/2020), with “power” evidently meaning domination and repression. Such assertions ultimately feed the theory that the government “is untouchable,” portraying it as a kind of mafia that the courts would not dare to hold accountable for what happened (Vox, 26/06/2020).

Vox’s claim that the government knew that the 8M demonstrations would increase the number of infections but did not prohibit them because they served as propaganda is also reflected in the news articles analysed. For example, in a story on a judicial investigation into the national government delegate in Madrid over allegations of misconduct (*OK Diario*, 25/03/2020), the digital news service highlights the fact that the complaint was based on the claim that the delegate ignored the warnings of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, but it distorts the information by failing to clarify that these warnings applied to all gatherings from 5 March to 14 March 2020, including the 8M demonstrations, but also including a massive rally held by Vox that was largely overlooked by the media. The same idea of a conspiracy is also present in a news article that claims that “the government’s inaction and its obsession with allowing 8M cost lives,” along with the assertion that “we know today that if the lockdown had happened seven days earlier, 23,000 deaths would have been averted” (*OK Diario*, 23/02/2021). This same argument is taken up by *La Razón* when it claims that the 2020 demonstrations were encouraged to promote “the ideological agenda” of feminism, “prioritising it over health” (22/01/2021). In short, the claim is that the government knew of the risks but did not prohibit the demonstrations because “it is committed to propaganda” (*Libertad Digital*, 10/3/2020).

5. Conclusions

As noted in the introduction to this article, Jordi Bonet-Martí (2020) conducted a study of different Twitter accounts that had attempted to link the 8M demonstrations to a rise in Covid-19 infections. His study found that in the absence of scientific evidence, these accounts used “*post hoc ergo propter hoc*, also known as the false cause fallacy” to support their claim (Bonet-Martí, 2020, p. 10). As this author explains, this fallacy “involves attributing a causal connection between two events for the mere fact that one, the supposed cause, occurred prior to the other” (Bonet-Martí, 2020, p. 10). Drawing on Bonet-Martí’s findings, this article has explored this misrepresentation of the relationship between the 8M demonstrations and the rise in Covid-19 infections, focusing on Vox’s antifeminist discursive practices on Twitter and Gab, which are reinforced in three of the biggest conservative digital news platforms in the country.

The analysis points to the following conclusions. While the corpus of news stories for this study makes a quantitative connection between the rise in infections and the feminist demonstrations, our discourse analysis has also revealed the use of derogatory terminology promoted by the representatives of Vox to sway public opinion. Although this specific terminology appears to have been used more in public speeches by Vox leaders than in posts on its social media accounts, it is clear that the news publications analysed have reproduced the

arguments and ideas put forward by the far-right party on Twitter and Gab. The social media profiles of Vox and its leaders have exploited the pandemic to push their propaganda and attack the government, but their critique has a markedly misogynistic and anti-feminist dimension in view of their obsession with both the female cabinet ministers and their support of feminism: For example, there is no hashtag created to discredit Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez as there is for the Equality Minister, Irene Montero (#IreneCierraAlSalir).

On the other hand, the social media accounts analysed all have the common denominator of a total lack of transparency: the source of the data is not disclosed, nor is any link or reference provided to enable users to verify the information. In the case of news publications, the impersonation of a reliable source is achieved through self-serving concealment of information and the use of celebrities who are used as “clickbait,” vesting them with supposed authority as opinion leaders.

To discredit the feminist movement, the social media profiles establish a direct relationship between the high infection rate of the virus and the (poor) decisions of the government, most notably, allowing the 8M demonstrations to go ahead. More specifically, both the social media accounts and the news outlets direct their attacks at Irene Montero, whom they accuse of instigating the demonstrations for the purposes of propaganda to promote “her feminism,” in an effort to suggest that she does not represent women in general, as reflected in the Vox hashtag #NoHablesEnMiNombre (You Don’t Speak for Me).

The fact that the polarization strategy is more visceral on Vox’s social media profiles than it is in the news articles is understandable if we interpret it as part of an electioneering campaign that rejects and criticises issues insofar as they can be reinterpreted in partisan terms. This also explains why the anti-feminist discourse is articulated around the objective of distinguishing the party from its political opponents and leveraging this strategy to win more votes. The digital news publications echo the discourse of Vox, but their motives are broader as they reflect an ideologically driven editorial line that does not have a direct electoral objective, even though it may be oriented towards the promotion of certain political outcomes.

Finally, conspiracy theories are also more explicit on social media profiles than in news articles, as not only do they accuse the government of concealing and lying for ideological reasons, but they even portray it as a totalitarian dictatorship that seeks to eliminate its opponents. This line of argument obviously contradicts Vox’s hypothesis that the government promoted the 8M demonstrations due to its ideological affinity with feminism, as the promotion of a feminist program is not compatible with the “extermination” of the very women who make that program possible. Nevertheless, this contradiction is easily accommodated in the context of disinformation and fake news, which do not require logical rigour or coher-

ence. The argument that the government knew the situation but did not act accordingly is reinforced without the need for confirmation in a court of law. The party’s discourse thus asserts the idea that the power structure on which the PSOE–Podemos government is founded makes it impossible for anyone to find the courage to challenge it, except for Vox, depicted as a righteous avenger acting for the good of society.

The results of this study offer new insights into the use of factual distortion as an anti-feminist homophobic strategy adopted on social media accounts on Gab and Twitter, and by conservative digital news publications. It has also been revealed here that although Gab was created as a social media platform for the far right, in practice Vox’s discourse has not been disseminated on this niche channel as effectively as it has on the much more mainstream Twitter platform.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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