MIL and Democracy in Latin America. Lessons from independent journalism: An overview of Mexico and Brazil[1]

AMI y Democracia en América Latina. Lecciones desde el periodismo independiente: Un panorama general de México y Brasil

AMI e Democracia na América Latina. Lições do jornalismo independente: uma visão geral do México e do Brasil

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Abstract: This article examines how disinformation and misinformation impact Latin American democracies, focusing on Mexico and Brazil. Through the analysis of independent journalism and fact-checking agencies like Agência Lupa and Verificado MX, the study highlights how these initiatives promote media and information literacy (MIL). It discusses how far-right populism and authoritarian leaders use disinformation to weaken democracy, while fact-checking journalism emerges as a key tool to counter these effects and strengthen an informed citizenry.

Keywords:

Disinformation, Populism, Independent Journalism, Media Literacy, Democracy, Mexico, Brazil

Resumen: Este artículo examina cómo la desinformación y la misinformation afectan a las democracias de América Latina, con un enfoque en México y Brasil. A través del análisis del

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periodismo independiente y las agencias de verificación de datos como Agência Lupa y Verificado MX, el estudio destaca cómo estas iniciativas promueven la alfabetización mediática e informacional (AMI). Se discute cómo los populismos de extrema derecha y los líderes autoritarios utilizan la desinformación para debilitar la democracia, mientras que el periodismo de verificación emerge como una herramienta clave para contrarrestar estos efectos y fortalecer la ciudadanía informada.

Palabras clave:

Desinformación, Populismo, Periodismo independiente, Alfabetización mediática, Democracia, México, Brasil

Resumo: Este artigo examina como a desinformação e a misinformation afetam as democracias da América Latina, com foco no México e no Brasil. Através da análise do jornalismo independente e das agências de verificação de fatos como a Agência Lupa e Verificado MX, o estudo destaca como essas iniciativas promovem a alfabetização midiática e informacional (AMI). Discute-se como o populismo de extrema direita e os líderes autoritários utilizam a desinformação para enfraquecer a democracia, enquanto o jornalismo de verificação surge como uma ferramenta essencial para combater esses efeitos e fortalecer a cidadania informada.

Palavras-chave:

Desinformação, Populismo, Jornalismo independente, Alfabetização midiática, Democracia, México, Brasil

1. Desinformation is much more than fake news

In the last ten years, democracies have found their central challenge and risk in disinformation, which has undermined the legitimacy and trust of the production, dissemination, and consumption of information and the social, cultural, political, and institutional formation of democracies. Disinformation, according to UNESCO:

> […] is used to refer to deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate people by delivering dishonest information. This is often combined with intercepted and

parallel communications strategies and a series of other tactics such as hacking or compromising people. (Ireton and Posetti, 2020)

At the same time:

Misinformation is generally used to refer to misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent. Both are problems for society, but disinformation is dangerous because it is often organized, well-resourced, and reinforced by automated technology. (Ireton and Posetti, 2020)

The world's democracies face many challenges, such as climate change, wars, mass migrations, socio-economic crises, and the rise of authoritarian leaders who win elections through popular vote while reviving the ideals of the more conservative far-right.

The decline of democracy is especially evident in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Asia Pacific, as well as in parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, as reflected in various attacks on the rule of law. For example, in some Latin American and Caribbean countries, we have observed attacks on electoral management bodies, constitutional courts, the media, and national human rights institutions, as well as the use by governments of COVID-19 as an excuse to reduce oversight of public administration. (Bachelet, 2022)

The simultaneous consumption of information, misinformation, and disinformation through platforms and social networks is increasing. The majority of users worldwide "continue to mention platforms as their main source of online news. [...] compared to 2018," according to the Digital News Report 2024.

One of the main characteristics of disinformation[4] is its rapid spread. In 2018, Science magazine also reported on this situation:

Fake news reached more people than the truth; the top 1% of fake news cascades spread to between 1,000 and 100,000 people, while the truth rarely spread to more than 1,000 people. Falsehood also spreads faster than the truth. The degree of novelty and the emotional reactions of the recipients may be responsible for the differences observed. (Vosoughi, 2018)

In addition, there is a context of populist leaders, both from the extreme right and from political parties and actors identified with the left, with unfounded accusations of electoral fraud, together with the narrative that the press and critical journalism are adversaries (Article 19 MX, 2024), which have undermined confidence in democracy.

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[4] As the conceptual difference was defined at the beginning of this text.

Increasingly polarized political environments quickly produce hate speech and disinformation, which push voters into isolated information bubbles. Motivated by extremist voices, with the help of algorithms that reinforce user biases, already in 2011, activist Eli Parisier suggested: "that search engines and social networks, together with their recommendation and personalization algorithms, are primarily responsible for the social and ideological polarization that exists in many countries."

2. Dissonances between the medium and the message: independent journalism as a tool to socialize MIL skills

There was a lot of enthusiasm at the dawn of the 2000s and 2010s. It was thought that broader access to the Internet would guarantee the democratization of information, that more and more people exercising their freedom of expression would break the monoliths of the large commercial media conglomerates and, therefore, there would be, in addition to greater citizen participation, a strengthening of the democratic public space: a new public agora.

Reality has shown the opposite. The presidential elections in the United States - which brought Donald Trump to the presidency - as well as the Brexit[5] vote in 2016, made clear the few or non-existent digital skills with which the bulk of the population faced disinformation campaigns and the active engagement with which false information was spread through Facebook pages, groups, and other social networks. Post on WhatsApp and hashtags on Twitter (now X). Its consequences had palpable effects on the elections, the participation in exercising the citizen vote, and the decline in the media's credibility.

In 2020, during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the United Nations launched the Verified campaign. Pause before you share, which involved governments and media outlets to raise awareness among their populations and audiences to read the information they received, review the sources, where it came from, and identify whether the content was more alarmist than informative; that is, to promote a minimum level of Media Information Literacy - MIL[6] -, to

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[5] Process that refers to the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union.
[6] Media literacy' refers to skills, knowledge and understanding that allow citizens to use media effectively and safely. In order to enable citizens to access information and to use, critically assess and create media content responsibly and safely, citizens need to possess advanced media literacy skills. Media literacy should not be limited to learning about tools and technologies but should aim to equip citizens with the critical thinking skills required to exercise judgment, analyse complex realities and recognise the difference between opinion and fact. (EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive, 2018, Article 59)

prevent the anti-vaccine movement or protests against home isolation from undermining the effectiveness of the measures implemented by the WHO.

This data verification exercise had its antecedent with Hilary Clinton's campaign team in 2016, which began to become a new facet for journalism developed in digital media from 2013 onwards, whose forms of financing, editorial lines, and greater emphasis on investigative journalism (Amaral, 2022) differentiated them from the standards of traditional broadcast media. We review some cases that emerged in large metropolises in Mexico and Brazil, such as Mexico City and São Paulo.

After the September 19, 2017, earthquake in the Mexican capital, the #Verificado19S collective was created to compare information that alerted brigade members about the population's needs and false warnings that circulated among citizens. The project evolved into #Verificado2018, which followed campaign speeches and candidates in the federal electoral process of that year. These efforts were divided into two projects: El Sabueso de Animal Político and Verificado MX, located in Mexico City and Monterrey, respectively.

In turn, the examples of verification journalism in Brazil, Agência Pública, Agência Lupa, and Aos Fatos, share characteristics in common with the Mexican cases, which are in line with the UN's call with the Verified campaign:

- Development of own methodologies for data verification, with categories and indicators understandable for a non-specialized public.
- Explanatory and investigative journalism through resources for access to public information, for interpretation and contrast of databases.

In Brazil, instant messaging platforms have played a crucial role in the elections since 2018 to disseminate disinformation. Knowing the influence that the production, dissemination, and consumption of fake news has on the population, with this background, during the 2022 elections, Projeto COMPROVA joined five other newsrooms: Agência Lupa, Aos Fatos, Estadão Verifica and Universo Online (UOL) and in collaboration with the Supreme Court of Justice of Brazil (TSE). In this way, the Confirma 2022 coalition verified more than 300,000 questions and requests from voters with the help of a bot built by Meedan. A key element in the analysis of the Brazilian case is the crucial role that Agência Lupa e Aos Fatos played as news and verification agencies, almost in real-time, during the attempted coup in the Plaza de los Tres Poderes in Brasília, on January 8, 2023, where the role of these messaging platforms, as well as social

networks, was made evident in the organization of groups of the Bolsonarist far right, known as the "Lupa nos Golpistas"[7] (Lupa lança documentário em 8 de janeiro; assista ao making of, 2023) database.

3. The role of the far right and populism

Fact-checking journalism as a tool against disinformation in Mexico and Brazil provides several elements of MIL, according to DW Akademie 2024[8]: on the one hand, they are information projects by journalists who know how to appropriate messages to create new ones in individual and collective authorship management; in addition to creating content with a specific purpose, effectively and ethically. The purpose has been determined by the political context in both countries, where autocratic governments have imposed the need to verify statements and claims made by political leaders at official events and daily press conferences, statements about facts that can be contrasted and verified with data from at least two other sources, to refute them, contextualize them. Authoritarianism and autocratic leadership rely on offering alternative realities or "other data" to the population and public opinion. Néstor García Canclini understands phenomena such as Trump, Bolsonaro, and other elected authoritarianism, a cultural and communication crisis.

In the case of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, in addition to holding press meetings almost all morning during the pandemic, promoted Facebook Live meetings every Thursday afternoon; in turn, in the case of Mexico, the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador has been characterized by the government communication exercise known as "Las Mañaneras," a two-hour morning press conference, every day.

According to Joao Carlos Correia, this communication crisis is a political strategy and discursive tool of populism. From there, we recover some of the characteristics mentioned by the author: a) it is frequently presented as a personalized agenda around a central leader without qualifications. The party organization would lose of its own accord; [...] c) evidence a profoundly anti-intellectual content developed around simple ideas and performances that functions by contrast as a reporter of the performances of technocrats or professional politicians disdainfully associated with the elite and the establishment; [...] g) arise frequently in post-modern

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[7] Documentary available on the Agência Lupa YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jst6IbBcaNw
[8] From the online course for journalists: AMI in brief. Understanding and combating disinformation, February 2024.

communities (digital groups) where like-minded thought predominates (or thought is equal to two others) and where the news is subordinated to ideological proximity without critical distance, turning itself gracefully. à concordance with a message and not with its prior verifiability (Correia, 2019).

This way, verification journalism becomes essential to promote MIL, counteract information manipulation, and defend transparency. Their role is not only to denounce disinformation but also to promote a better informed and critical citizenry, with verifiable elements with which they understand why the statements of political leaders, in the cases of Mexico and Brazil, support both disinformation and misinformation. Spreading false connections between facts, manipulating data about their actions, or, in the extreme case of the verification work carried out by Agência Lupa, promoting hate speech and attacks on democratic institutions.

According to DW Akademie, such efforts constitute dimensions of disinformation with which the MIL, through an ethical, active commitment of journalism agencies and people responsible for the production of news, can encourage audiences, the public, users, and readers of information to share content that minimally contrasts the dominant flow of repeated, even amplified, statements not only through social media or messaging platforms but even in traditional media, under the pretext of disseminating matters of general interest. In our opinion, the next step in these verification efforts and public knowledge methodologies would be to provide guidelines for collective work to revive the active interest of the public, audiences, and users to regain interest in the news as part of the Reconstruction of the legitimacy of journalism.

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