Injecting disinformation into public space: pseudo-media and reality-altering narratives

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Abstract

This paper analyses the context of disinformation in Spain from the perspective of the pseudo-media (i.e., websites that mimic conventional media to offer partisan content based on alternative facts). Using a quantitative (N = 1,143) and qualitative (n = 396) methodology, this research analyses publications from eight Spanish pseudo-media that reach more than 4 million unique users. Results reveal an interest in three topics: vaccination, restrictions and speculation about Covid-19, national politics –focused on criticism against government– and topics related to human rights –mainly LGBTI, gender, immigration– with a total of 58.1% of the content published in four sections (International, Spain, Society, and Economy). The study reveals a growing trend towards polarisation and the use of clickbait techniques in four out of ten headlines. The Internet and social media are the most common sources quoted, while a third of the items lack sources or correspond to opinion pieces. Minorities and vulnerable groups are framed as a social threat, and the presentation of the coalition government as a danger to Spain that must be put to an end, which makes the discourse of these websites in tune with the ideology of the far right wing.

Keywords

Pseudo-media; Hyper-partisan Media; Cyber-media; Digital media; Polarization; Populism; Pandemics; Politics; Social minorities; Extreme right; Clickbait; Spain; Frames; Disinformation; Journalistic quality.

1. Introduction

The rise of disinformation and reality-altering narratives responds to a complex scenario where converging technological, political, social, and economic factors have favoured their proliferation and pose a threat to democracy (**Waisbord**, 2018; **Bennet**; **Livingston**, 2018; **Esser**; **Pfetsch**, 2020). While disinformation and manipulation have been in place since the dawn of public life (**Cooke**, 2017; **Tandoc**; **Lim**; **Ling**, 2018; **Andrejevic**, 2019), they have never had the resources to achieve a large-scale impact.

Digital technology gave audiences the possibility of producing and disseminating content (**Gillmor**, 2004; **Bruns**, 2008), while depriving the conventional media of the role of mediation (**Couldry**, 2008) that they had exerted for decades. Thereby, the traditional filters of journalism (i.e., fact-checking, contrasting sources, deontology) were left at the expense of the 'networks of trust' interwoven in social media (**Tang**; **Liu**, 2015), with direct exposure to inaccurate, false, or malicious information (**Papadopoulos** *et al.*, 2016), or to backfeeding echo chambers and filter bubbles (**Pariser**, 2011; **Nguyen**, 2020). Concurrently, the development of computational techniques (**Van-Dijck**, 2014) geared to manipulate public opinion (**Howard**; **Woolley**; **Calo**, 2018) has sharpened the perils linked to information disorder (**Wardle**; **Derakhshan**, 2018).

> " The term 'pseudo-media' highlights the deceptive nature of outlets that present themselves as alternatives to the mainstream media "

In a context of de-mediatisation, marked by a consumption of information detached from conventional media (**Newman** *et al.*, 2020), these have also undergone the time of greatest disruption of the news industry since the beginnings of the commercial press (**Lacy**; **Rosenstiel**, 2015). In a hybrid media system (**Chadwick**, 2017), where traditional media also face a deep crisis of credibility (**Lee**, 2018; *Edelman Trust Barometer*, 2021) and of quality, we have witnessed the thriving of scores of websites linked to the spread of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and populism (**Van-Prooijen**; **Krouwel**; **Pollet**, 2015) coupled with initiatives of extremist ideologies (**Krouwel** *et al.*, 2017; **Douglas** *et al.*, 2019). This presence, palpable in the digital ecosystem both for web users and social media, can be regarded as "one example of an ongoing polarization and fragmentation of the political discourse in liberal democracies" (**Haller**; **Holt**, 2019, p. 1668).

The distrust towards legacy media correlates with the support to a populist agenda (**Mudde**, 2010; **Fawzi**, 2019), allied with a communicative style (**Schulz** *et al.*, 2018; **Boberg** *et al.*, 2020) that appeals to emotions (**Wirz**, 2018) and is grounded in anti-elitist attitudes, a preference for popular sovereignty, homogeneity, and an exaltation of peoples' virtues (**Schulz** *et al.*, 2018). **Waisbord** (2018) conceives of this moment in terms of "elective affinity" linked to a far-right spectrum that embraces "post-truth".

Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, we wish to contribute to analysing and cataloguing one of the focal points of disinformation in Spain, channelled through the pseudo-media. Secondly, we intend to delve into their production logics, based on agenda-setting and framing, the formal characteristics of the published pieces and their role in the reinforcement of the polarisation and of the populist agenda.

2. Alternative facts and pseudo-media

The phenomenon of disinformation and the surge of alternative facts has pervaded the public sphere in recent years, particularly since the Brexit referendum in 2015 or the 2016 presidential election in the USA, to the point of igniting a veritable 'infodemic' in the wake of Covid-19 (**Boberg** *et al.*, 2020; **Brubaker**, 2020; **Zarocostas**, 2020). The widespread use of technology as a tool for dissemination (**Allcott**; **Gentzkow**, 2017) cannot be separated from an enabling political and social context. The rise of populism in various Western countries (**Brubaker**, 2017; **Moffitt**, 2020) and of political polarisation (**Kelkar**, 2019) has been accompanied by an ever-increasing presence of "alternative facts" through "statements on key policy issues that directly or indirectly contradict real facts" (**Barrera** *et al.*, 2020, p. 1), to the extent of drawing an association between populism and disinformation (**Hameleers**, 2020; **Tumber**; **Waisbord**, 2021).

The use of "alternative facts" is not exclusively reserved for populist politicians (**Barrera** *et al.*, 2020), nor is it confined to the political sphere (**Sethi**, 2017). They range from the denial of critical issues such as climate change to other trivial ones (**Kelkar**, 2019). Disinformation promotes the "fabrication" of contents "for the sake of earning money from clicks and views", but also deliberate misleading (**Cooke**, 2017, p. 1). The *European Commission* refers to "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information" (*European Commission*, 2018, p. 3), which Bennett and Livingston define as "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals" (**Bennett**; **Livingston**, 2018, p. 124).

In this intent to deceive are those websites that mimic the format of conventional media to provide expressly distorted content aimed at promoting certain ideological biases (**Palau-Sampio**, 2021). The term 'pseudo-media' identifies those sites that resemble "compositional forms and styles used by mainstream journalists" (**Rathnayake**, 2018, p. 3) for purposes antagonistic to journalist orthodoxy, while infringing the most basic journalistic conventions, such as the conflation of data and commentary, with an overt ideological bias (**Del-Fresno**, 2019). This term highlights the deceptive nature of outlets that present themselves as alternatives to the mainstream media ('countermedia'), although they often merely absorb contents and reframe them according to ideological interests (**Toivanen**; **Nelimarkka**; **Valaskivi**, 2021).

Pseudo-media turn rational dissent and democratic debate into unfounded criticism fuelled by value, emotion-based judgements, with the aim of generating mistrust (**Figenschou**; **Ihlebaek**, 2019). Kim and Gil de Zuñiga note that "pseudo-information", far from entailing a concern for "counter-information", in the classical and alternative sense, stands as a deliberate will to negatively influence the social context through "all types of false or inaccurate information" (**Kim**; **Gil de Zúñiga**, 2021, p. 165). This is important to avoid ambiguous associations. While the academic tradition on alternative media has placed the emphasis on those outlets that follow progressive or counter-hegemonic trends since the 1970s

(**Atton**, 2006; **Haller**; **Holt**, 2019; **Heft** *et al.*, 2020), the term "alternative media" has also often been used to refer to far-right media (**Atton**, 2006) or hyper-partisan media (**Benkler** *at al*., 2017).

The emergence of a significant number of far-right pseudo-information websites in the last decade (**Figenschou**; **Ihlebaek**, 2019) has sparked an interest in them, notably after the role played by *Breitbart News* in the 2016 US presidential campaign. Despite being a relatively new phenomenon, as Heft *et al*. note, these sites "have rapidly become a cornerstone of the broader right-wing digital news infrastructure" (**Heft** *et al.*, 2020, p. 3).

Several studies underline their confluence with the growth of populism (**Benkler** *et al.*, 2017; **Wells** *et al.*, 2020), while also noting the interest of these websites to present themselves as journalistic media (**Heft** *et al*., 2020, p. 3), their repetition of stereotypes (**Wasilewski**, 2019), or the combination of "sensationalism, misinformation, and partisanship to provide anti-establishment narratives" (**Mourão**; **Robertson**, 2019, p. 2077).

The notion of pseudo-media more clearly identifies the nature of partisan websites in Spain, whose media system falls within Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralism Model (**Hallin**; **Mancini**, 2004). This is characterised by an ideologically driven media tradition, a strong dependence on political power, and scarce economic autonomy.

3. The new generation of partisan websites and the ecosystem of disinformation in Spain

Since the 2000s, new technological affordances have enabled the emergence of native digital media (**López-García**, 2005). These include initiatives such as *Libertad digital* (2000), *Periodista digital* (2004), or *El semanal digital* (1999) *–ESDiario.com* since 2015–, founded by journalists or politicians, which conveyed conservative ideologies with a blend of information and opinion. Aligned with the neoconservative leanings of the *Tea Party* (**Rodríguez**, 2014), they relied on clickbait headlines to increase audience traffic and revenue. Besides, they focused on the spread of disinformation with strong patriotic and xenophobic undertones (**Martínez**, 2019). This nucleus was further reinforced by an allocation of DDT stations dominated by "politicization" and "clientelism" (**Marzal-Felici**; **Casero-Ripollés**, 2009, p. 105). In the regions governed by the *Popular Party*, the *Grupo Intereconomía* (*El toro TV* and *Radio Intereconomía*) were given impetus; Federico Jiménez Losantos's digital newspaper turned into a multimedia group (*Libertad digital TV* and *esRadio*); and *Popular TV* (*Conferencia Episcopal Española* and *Cadena COPE*) was born.

In the last decade, a wave of pseudo-media linked to the far right[1] and disinformation has populated this markedly conservative ecosystem (**Ramos**, 2021). The xenophobic *Mediterráneo digital* (2010) is a long-standing case. Founder Edgar Sánchez claims that their journalism is "free, independent, and detached from the canons of political correctness (…) in the subsidised press", while he poses next to a bust of Franco in an interview for another pseudo-media (**Navascués**, 2019). Although *El diestro* is the only one that recognizes itself as "the leading news outlet of the Spanish right", and *Contando estrelas* exhibits ultra-conservative beliefs, the ideological foundations of the main pseudo-media are closely related to the far right. *Euskalnews* claims to offer "uncensored news on current affairs in the Basque Country"; *El correo de España* portrays itself as "a newspaper independent from any political party". *Altavoz de sucesos* stresses that "they work daily to report all national and international news with a team of professionals working from all parts of Spain". Its newsroom, however, comprises no more than four people.

These pseudo-media are particularly adept at presenting themselves as distanced from the "corrupt political and media establishment" (**Heft** *et al.*, 2020), engaged in the populist dynamics of social and political polarisation (**Mudde**; **Rovira-Kaltwasser**, 2018). Beyond self-presentation, the identity of the founders reveals links to

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far-right ideology. For instance, *Euskalnews* was launched by David Pasarín-Gegunde, leader of the *Liga Foralista* party (**Del-Moral**, 2020). *El correo de España* is run by Eduardo García Serrano, who worked for different far-right media and describes himself as a "falangist". The list of collaborators includes, among other names linked to the dictatorship, the president of the *Francisco Franco Foundation*. The organization also operates through the publishers *SND Editores*, which focuses on far-right issues and agents. *Altavoz de sucesos* is owned by Jorge Bayer Sáez (**Cid**, 2020), founder of *Diario patriota* and *Caso aislado* –both inactive–, famed for their dissemination of disinformation (**Ramírez**; **Castellón**, 2018). *Alerta nacional* and *Alerta digital* are owned by Armando Robles, former chief communication officer of CEO and populist politician Jesús Gil. Robles presents himself as the "Spanish Donald Trump" (**Del-Castillo**, 2020; **Sánchez-Castrillo**, 2020).

Alongside digital websites, this community is nurtured by audiovisual initiatives such as *Ya* radio station (2017) or *Distrito TV* (2018) –an ultra-conservative, unlicensed DTT–, bolstered by a plethora of social media accounts. The pandemic has meant an opportunity for *YouTube* channels like *Estado de alarma oficial*, started by former *El mundo* journalist Javier Negre, reaching 330,000 followers in November 2021, amid a campaign of conspiracy theories and disinformation (**Portillo**, 2020). Related to this pseudo-media ecosystem, *OK diario*, started in 2015, has been ranked as the ninth most-read digital daily in Spain (*Prnoticias,* 2021), resorting to fraudulent strategies to increase readership, and featuring its director, Eduardo Inda, as a polemicist in a talk show in *La sexta* (**PabloMM**, 2019).

The digital *Mpr21* is an exception in this far-right ecosystem, although it has many similarities as regards the anti-globalist approach; it is also anchored in conspiracy theories, especially by the anti-vaccine's movement. This digital is linked to the *Movimiento Político de Resistencia*, "a group founded by Bolivian citizens in Madrid" (*Facebook*, 2021), and its origin lies in the blog of the same name created in April 2012.

4. Objectives and methodology

This article aims to catalogue some of the main sources of disinformation in Spain through the identification of eight of the most active pseudo-media, totalling an audience of more than 4 million unique users (*SimilarWeb*, 2021) (Table 1) and of their main lines of dissemination of alternative facts. This research uses primary sources as a starting point, i.e., publications retrieved from the websites of the digital outlets that seek to mimic the formal aspects of the mainstream ones, but whose content is misleading and biased.

The corpus analysed consists of 1,143 news pieces, which result from the selection of 150 items published as of 1 July 2021 in each of the eight pseudo-media and the subsequent elimination of duplicates (both among sections from their web and from others). The choice of these websites meets several criteria: bibliographical references (**Hernández-Conde**; **Fernández-García**, 2019; **Vila-Márquez**, 2020; **Palau-Sampio**, 2021), the usual denial of their contents on verification platforms, warnings for infringing ethical codes (**Paradinas**, 2014), their suspension on digital platforms (*El plural*, 2020), or their self-presentation as an 'alternative' to legacy media, together with their daily publication frequency and a presentation format that imitates the information (**Heft** *et al.*, 2020).

Table 1. Analysed media

Media	Established in	Audience July 2021	Pieces analysed*	Date of sample 01/07/2021 <
Contando estrelas (*CE*)	2004	660,000	150	02/08/2021
Mediterráneo digital (*MD*)	2010	350,000	150	27/08/2021
Mpr21 (*MPR*)	2012	170,000	150	21/08/2021
El diestro (*ED*)	2016	1,665,631	121	09/07/2021
Alerta nacional (*AN*)	2018	430,994	150	04/10/2021
El correo de España (*EC*)	2018	220,000	149	11/07/2021
Altavoz de sucesos (*AS*)	2019	140,000	150	29/07/2021
Euskalnews (*EUS*)	2019	590,000	123	23/07/2021

* After eliminating duplicates

For the selection of the items analysed we have excluded those sections that were a priori identified as opinion or those devoted to content alien to four fundamental areas: Spain, International, Economy and Society. For purposes of homogenisation, after an initial selection of content related to the aforementioned sections, we re-coded identifications to allow a grouped analysis based on five variables (see Table 2): section, topic, source type, polarisation strategies, and clickbait/sensationalist elements in the headline. Measuring their visibility and frequency is essential to understand how these websites approach the agenda-setting process, as these are key ingredients in their construction of the allegedly informative proposal that they transfer to the public sphere. The sample was coded in two phases. In the first phase, a single coder was involved to analyse the variables section, topic, source type and frame, with a test-retest of 10% of the sample before completing the analysis. In the second phase, two coders intervened for the headline variables (polarisation and clickbait/sensationalist elements). Intercoder reliability was equal or higher to k = 0.863 (**Landis**; **Koch**, 1977), also on the 10% of the sample.

This quantitative approach combines with a qualitative analysis to spotlight on the frames contained in the texts, thereby examining which aspects are singled and stressed in the pseudo-information under analysis. This observation responds to a deductive approach and aims to establish a matrix of the main frames used by these pseudo-media in their coverage of certain issues of public interest. Thus, based on **Entman**'s (1993) definition of the four functions of media framing (problem definition, diagnose causes, moral judgement, and suggestion of remedies), the qualitative analysis of part of the corpus (n=396) will enable us to observe the way these websites prioritise certain frames in their contents. Our decision to apply this method to a limited sample of the total number of items allows us to gain a deeper insight into the body of the texts and thereby uncover the discursive elements (speech acts, presuppositions, rhetorical strategies, implicit meanings) that may relate to the four dimensions analysed. Otherwise, the sole examination of the headlines may hinder their identification.

Table 2. Worksheet for analysis

Sections	Spain: contents related to politics or national.
	International: issues related to other countries.
	Society: health, education, rights, minorities.
	Economy: development of economy, financial, business.
	Other: none of the previous options.
Topics	Covid-19: Vaccination; restrictions; speculation; varia.
	Politics: Criticising the government; *Vox*; *PP*; *UP*.
	Rights and minorities: LGBTI; immigration; gender; childhood; ethnic minorities.
	Ideological issues: Communism, Nationalism, Exaltation of homeland and language, Francoism; Progressivism.
	Security and conspiracy: Military; Theories and confabulation; Afghanistan; Crime.
	Commercial: Covert advertising.
	Communication: Media; Journalism; social media.
	Other: none of the previous options.
Source types	Non-identified.
	Legacy media.
	Other pseudo-media.
	Social media / Web.
	Official communication.
	Opinion.
	Other.
Headline	Polarising elements: war-like language; tension-building.
	Clickbait and sensationalist elements: marks of orality, appeals to the audience, orthographic signs (parentheses, exclamations, suspensive dots), colloquialisms (**Palau-Sampio**, 2016).

The present study aims to provide an answer to the following research questions:

RQ1: On which sections and topics do the pseudo-media analysed focus their attention?

RQ2: What kind of sources are provided to substantiate the pseudo-news?

RQ3: Are features of polarisation and clickbait used in the headlines?

RQ4: Which are the prevailing frames in political news and in issues related to human rights and vulnerable groups?

5. Analysis

5.1. Sections and topics

The pseudo-media analysed are organised in sections that often deviate from legacy media standards, as in the case of *Contando estrelas* or *Mpr21*. Both are organised in sections that transgress thematic or geographical logics, with the inclusion of sections outside media standards. *Contando estrelas* shows a particular focus on military issues (Aviation, Defence, Army) and identity (Language, Spanishness), while *Mpr21* favours sections related to conspiracy (Repression, Strategy, Psychological warfare). After recoding the sample items to homogenise the analysis, the results show a major focus on state issues and on political issues (47.8%). In global terms, these are ranked above the Society macro-section, with almost a quarter of the total, and International, which represents a fifth of the total.

A detailed inspection of the websites' contents exposes diverse interests in their disinformation ethos (Figure 2). While some media focus exclusively (*AS*), or to a large extent (*EC*, *CE*, *ED*), on national issues, others prefer social affairs (*MD*) or topics involving other countries (*EUS*, *MPR*). In stark contrast to the international attention typical of the mainstream media (**Merill**, 1968), we observe an interest driven by the issues that feed their uninformative line. The
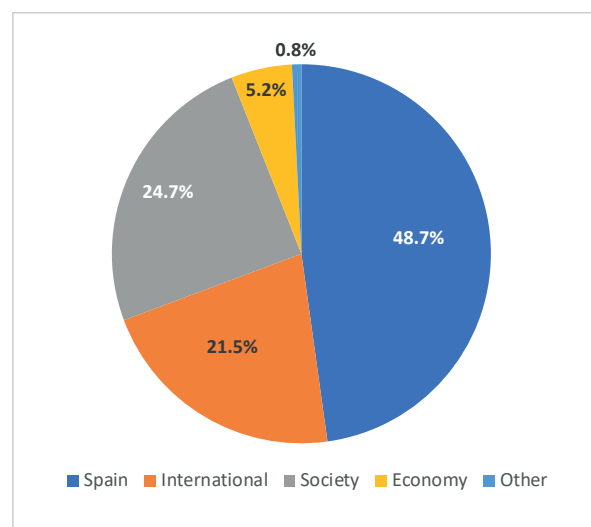

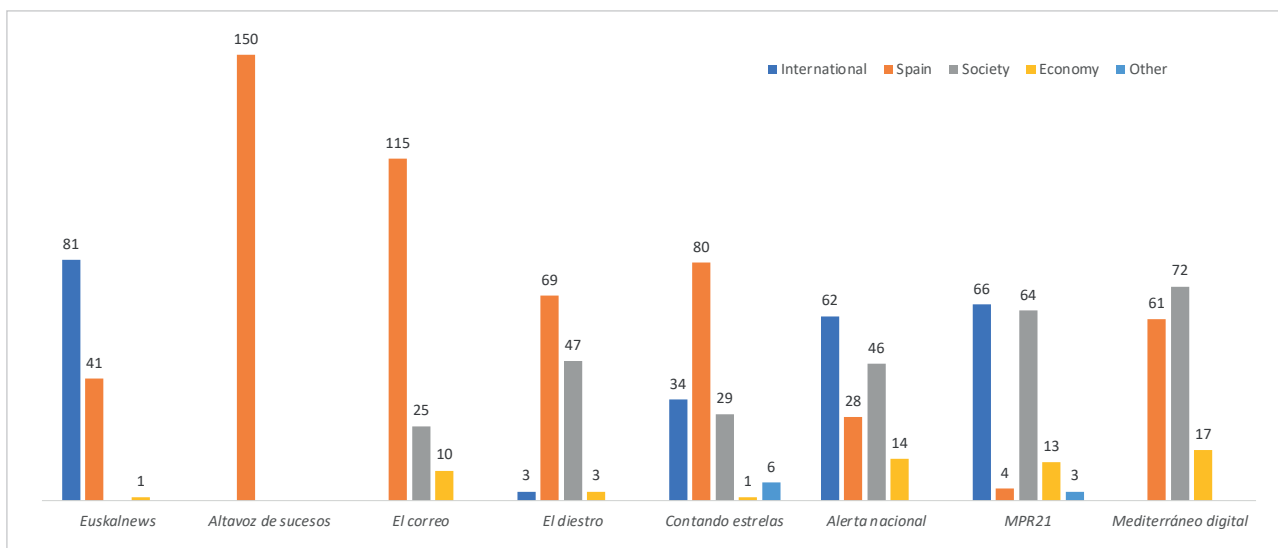Figure 1. Sections covered by the sample contents

Figure 2. Top sections in each pseudo-media

inclination to spread speculation about Covid-19 is at the heart of such headlines as "Vaccination centre and pharmacy set on fire in Martinique as settlers impose curfew" (MPR040821)[2, 3] or "WHO official faces death penalty for discouraging use of ivermectin in India" (EUS200721).

The heterogeneous variety of contents in these pseudo-media has prompted a classification of topics (see Table 3). Overall, the pandemic and its repercussions have received most attention, along with politics. Both represent nearly 45% of the records, which enables us to identify two major disinformation biases. Regarding Covid-19, the spotlight is on vaccination –"Man dies from Covid after vaccination" (MD120721)–, the imposed restrictions –"Abductions in Majorca: Satan worshippers in government subjugate, prostitute and sterilise your children" (EC040721)– and speculation –"Bill Gates funded project to store vaccine history under patient's skin" (EUS220721) or "Scientific journals caught in pandemic's political machinations" (MPR110721).

Politics is largely dominated by criticism of the government and its measures, which is featured by *AS*, *EC* or *ED*, for instance: "Sánchez wants to militarise those who don't think alike" (EC070721), "Pedro Sánchez may use National Security Law to hide his destinations and luxuries" (AS100721), or "Come on, Prime Liar, pardon Isa Serra, one of your criminals" (ED040721). Besides targeting *PSOE* and members of the government, reprobation is also directed at *Unidas Podemos* (*UP*) and the *Popular Party* (*PP*): "Don't say infectious traitor, say Pablo Casado. He WILL NOT ABOLISH Sánchez's euthanasia bill" (AN080921), or "This is how Feijóo's TV silences Vox and whitewashes Bildu's Galician allies" (CE260721). References to *Vox* often praise their initiatives –"The brave speech of Ignacio Garriga, Vox, defending the most innocent and vulnerable ones" (CE220721)– or they reproduce any witticism on social media: "Santiago Abascal destroys Sánchez's image with a new nickname: 'Pedro Liar'" (AS020721).

A second tier comprises three macro-topics –rights and minorities, ideologies, and security and conspiracy–, which accounts for at least one in ten of the

Table 3. Contents of the sample

Macro-topics	Topics	Pieces	%
Covid	Vaccination	137	23.5
	Restrictions	80	
	Speculation	43	
	Varia	23	
Politics	Criticism of government	137	21.1
	Vox	49	
	PP	29	
	UP	26	
Rights and minorities	LGBTI	50	13.6
	Immigration	47	
	Gender	43	
	Childhood	8	
	Ethnic minorities	7	
Ideological issues	Communism	53	11.6
	Nationalism	35	
	Exaltation of homeland and language	26	
	Francoism	10	
	Progressivism	9	
Security and conspiracy	Military	54	10.3
	Theories and confabulation	39	
	Afghanistan	17	
	Crime	7	
Commercial	Covert advertising	39	3.4
Communication	Media/Journalism/social media	22	1.9
Other	Other	167	14.6
	Total	1,143	100

pieces analysed. The first group is highly concerned with LGBTI issues, immigration, or gender, with an outlook that strays from respect for rights and freedom, as shown in these headlines: "Don't be fooled. Franco did not persecute homosexuals; he did persecute abusers and pimps, today tolerated in the Balearic Islands" (EC020721), "Local police for fake feminists?" (EC030721), "UN (mass) murderers explode: UN criticises Texas pro-life law for 'opposing our gender policies'" (AN100921), or "Two young men, NO NATIONALITY, arrested for sexual assault on Valencia beach" (MD260721).

Ideology remains an obsession for some pseudo-media, notably as regards communism –"The Spanish Inquisition, the French Revolution and communism: which one caused a bigger death toll?" (CE310721)–, or Catalonia and nationalism: "The Catalan nationalist apes and their terrorist acts backed by the complicit silence of authorities and media: the self-declared 'Soldiers of Salamis'" (AN250721). *EC* is known for its exaltation of homeland and the Spanish language: –"Whoever does not care about Spain today is perhaps its enemy" (EC050721); "Our damaged language receives the first defence" (EC040721)–, while censuring progressivism: "It is essential to know the enemy, the 'progressives' and their progress (2)" (EC090721).

Security and conspiracy themes account for 10.3% of the contents, with a notable interest in weaponry –"The footing of the tomahawks of a Spanish Navy SH-60B on the destroyer USS Ross" (CE030721)– military strategy –"Krasni Bor: the biggest and fiercest battle of the Spaniards in the Second World War" (CE010721)–, and a dash of nostalgia: "P-38 Lightning: this is how one of the best fighters of WW2 still flies" (CE020821). Speculation on security is a relevant feature: "From Seal to McAfee: all in danger" (EC020721), "Shall Russia arrive in the Sahel to replace French troops?" (MPR270721), or "Shocking nuclear missile arsenal discovered in China poses clear nuclear threat" (EUS040721).

Beyond ideological biases, a part of the contents include covert advertising: "The best cards with petrol discounts to travel by car this summer" (EC100721), or "Get ready for the Black Friday 2021" (AN150921). This option has a prominent presence in *MD*, with pharmaceutical instances –"What you need to know about *Hemorelax* cream, the treatment for haemorrhoids" (MD250821)–, psychics –"Cheap clairvoyants. Marian tarot. Marian is a cheap and good clairvoyant"
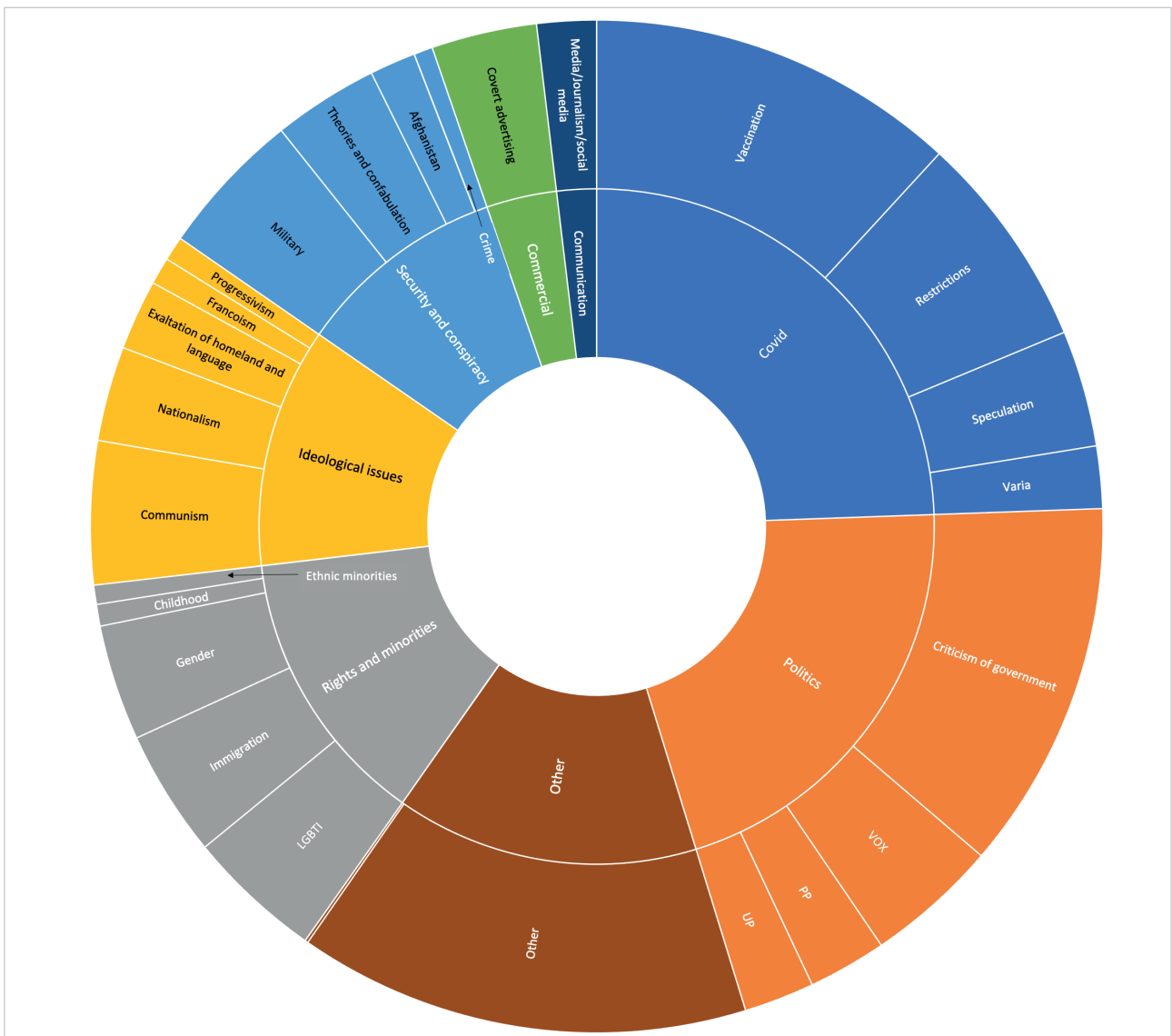

Figure 3. Macro-topics and themes covered

(MD060721), or gambling: "All you need to know about casino bonuses" (MD080721). References to media and journalists are notable for their blunt attacks and insults: "DISTRITO TV denounces that Ignacio Escolar's pamphlets, *El diario* and *Vertele*, are the new pirates of information" (ED100721), or "Brilliant letter of Enrique Diego in 'Rambla Libre' to the 'flunky lackey' Vicente Vallés" (ED010721).

5.2. Sources cited in the texts

The analysis of the sources shows that nearly half of the pieces examined (44%) refer to a source external to the pseudo-media. As Figure 4 shows, the information published most often comes from materials found on

Figure 4. Types of sources

other websites or social media. One out of five news items (20%) cites a source in this category. One common practice is to resort to profiles of political actors on social media like *Twitter* to support a pseudo-news item, as in "*Vox* rejects the curfew: 'Millions of Spaniards live unconstitutionally confined'" (AS170721), based on a tweet of the far-right MP Macarena Olona; or "Surreal: Yolanda Díaz blames the 'climate crisis' for a fire in a gas pipeline" (CE050721). Audiovisual content found on the Internet, *YouTube* or non-specialised websites often becomes the source of a pseudo-news item on the grounds of showing a "curious video" they claim they have "come across": "#SoloVídeos: Could this be the injection they use to 'vaccinate' some people?" (ED010721).

In addition to the existing resources available on the Internet for all users, these pseudo-media also use media of varying quality to reproduce on their websites, as evidenced by the sources cited in 24% of the items in the corpus. 14% of the total refer to mainstream media insofar as, regardless of their political and economic independence, these are media organisations with a long history. Their structure and contents meet some minimum journalistic standards.

Figure 5 lists the media and agencies that are cited as sources of information in at least two news pieces in the corpus. The media occasionally cited include international organisations such as *CNBC* –"This is how today's Marxist feminism is funded: Bill Gates' and Jeff Bezos' ex-wives donate 40 million dollars to gender equality projects" (AN010821)– and Spanish ones like *El confidencial*: "The Ministry of the Interior will track 'asymptomatic terrorists' with artificial intelligence (they don't have any other kind left)" (MPR040821). The data reveal a recurrent focus on three predominantly conservative media outlets: *El mundo*, *ABC* and *esRadio*. These are cited as sources in up to ten pseudo-news pieces, mostly political and highly critical of the coalition government. These conservative media add to others like *Libertad digital*, *COPE* or *Vozpópuli* (Spanish), and *Fox News* and *New York Post* (international).

The media count also includes, albeit to a much lesser extent, more progressive media organisations like *El país*, *La sexta* or *Cadena SER*. However, these are not cited as sources to reproduce their contents but rather to attack and distort their
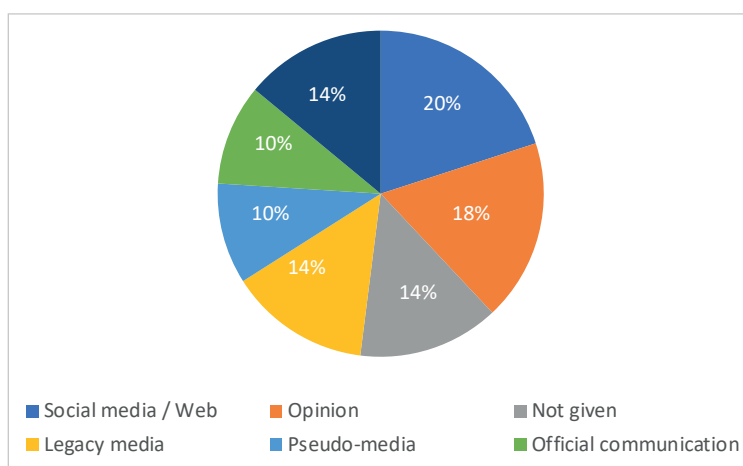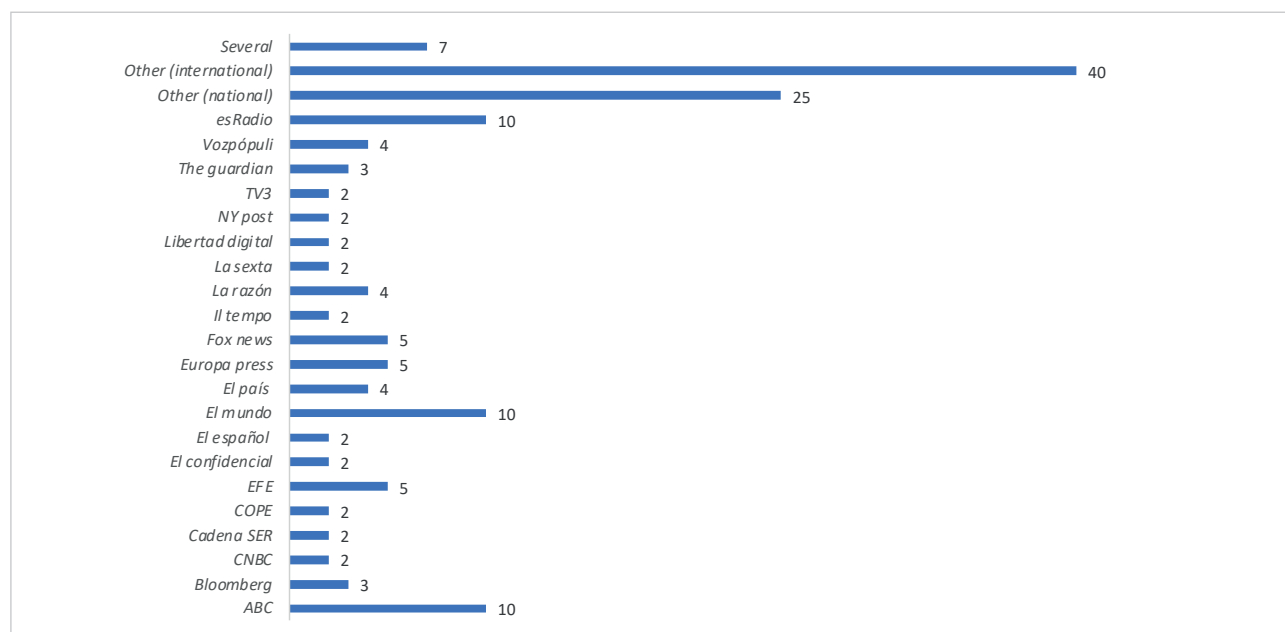

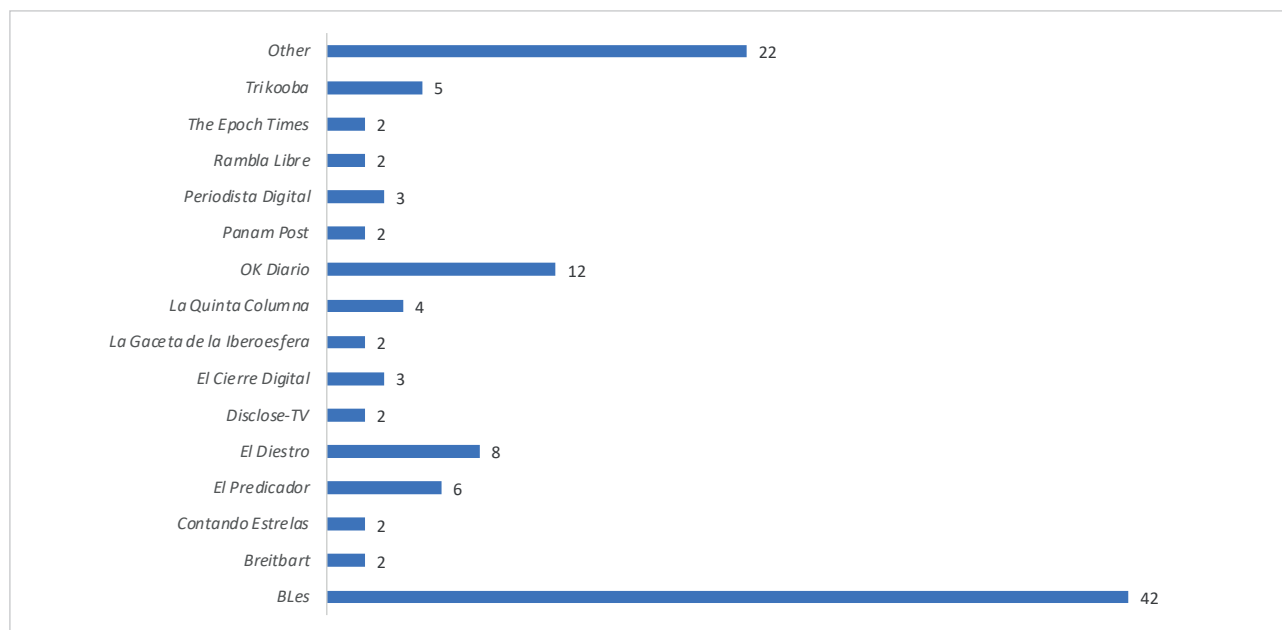Figure 5. Mainstream media cited as sources

Figure 6. Pseudo-media cited as sources

information: "The constitutional rights Pedro Sánchez threatens with his new abuse of authority on the National Security Law" (CE040721), based on the following news piece in *El país*: "All adults in Spain can be mobilised in the event of a crisis".

Figure 6 shows the group of pseudo-media cited as sources of information in 10% of the news pieces analysed. One of the pseudo-information websites which most prominently features (40 items) is *BLes*, which advertises itself as "Uncensored news of the world and Latin america". *BLes* is cited in *EUS* in news pieces related to Covid-19, as in: "A study reveals that heart inflammations (myocarditis) after Covid vaccine are higher than expected" (EUS010721), or "Moderna accidentally confirms that all vaccine takers are part of an experiment" (EUS180721). Along with *BLes*, three other pseudo-media also stand out as sources: *OK diario*, *El diestro* and *El predicador*. The use of *El diestro* as a source in *EUS* is evidence of the interrelationship between some of the websites that are part of the study. This is also the case of *CE*, which is cited in some news pieces in *AN*. The diversity of pseudo-media includes a sizeable number of international portals such as *The Epoch times*, *PanAm post*, and *Breitbart news*, as well as Spanish like *Trikooba*, *La quinta columna*, *El cierre digital* or *Rambla libre*.

The second most frequent type of source used in the items analysed (18%) is a personal signature in opinion texts. These pieces, however, are not included in the Opinion sections but appear together with the rest of apparent current affairs contents. This is, for instance, the case of "Shame! The electricity bill higher than ever, they are announcing cuts in pensions… and the trade unions keep silence" (ED030721), published in Politics, and "Playing the idiot: Moncloa's tactics for stunning and confusing Spaniards. BEWARE! It's working" (AN300721), located in Society. The next most frequent category is that of texts lacking any sources (14%), varying from political issues to the reporting of events. The first category includes the item: "Communist Garzón caught! Sirloin steak served at his wedding!" (AS090721), where the only reference to the source is: "as reported on Thursday".

The weight of news pieces citing official sources is relatively lower (10%). These include press releases, press conferences or declarations to journalists by institutional representatives. The category Other (14%) gathers those items combining sources from different categories, together with documentary references.

5.3. Polarising strategies and clickbait in headlines

The analysis of the headlines shows the presence of polarising strategies in almost 6 out of ten of the headlines. In these, there is a predominance of bellicose lexicon or an explicit attempt to increase confrontation through expressive devices. Although 58.8% follow this strategy, the differences among websites are notable. This trend is consistently employed by pseudo-media *AS* and *EUS*, which virtually double the figures of *CE* or *MPR*. In this vein, *AS* resorts in their headlines to verbs that turn criticism into verbal violence and cause confrontation: "Losantos destroys the Spanish left: 'It is revolting, totalitarian, and abject'" (AS020721), or "Rosa Díez smashes Sánchez again: 'He wants to rule like a *dictator* leaning on our enemies'" (AS260721).

The use of adjectives that denigrate actors alien to the pseudo-media alignment is not only proof of ideological bias but also of the attempt to build an extremely divisive political climate, as shown in references to "The calamitous Carmen Calvo" (AS100721), "The useless Garzón" (EC090721), or "The despicable vice-president of the Castile and León Council" (ED080721). This attitude also spreads to journalists: "The sectarian Mónica López" (AS020721), or "The heinous Antonio Maestre" (ED010721).

This urge to exacerbate division permeates headlines by means of statements that dispute the official measures against Covid-19 –"Fernando López Mirones warns to be vigilant: the official propaganda misleads us" (EUS150721)–, while offering alternative readings –"The biologist Jon Ander Etxebarria says that politicians arbitrarily create the waves based on the tests administered" (EUS160721).

These same formulas are used to stigmatise certain groups, with a special focus on the LGBTI movement –"The free state of Bananas, Orwell's prophecies, and the LGBT tyranny that is already over us" (EC040721)–, gender equality, which appears as superfluous in public budgets –"Vitoria City Council spends 74,000€ on 'street lamps with a gender perspective'" (MD260721)–, or abortion rights are turned into murder: "Miserable New Zealand: babies born alive and left to die" (AN090721). On the

Figure 7. Percentages of polarising headlines and clickbait in the pseudo-media

MD website there are increasingly virulent messages that link migration to physical and sexual violence –"A Moroccan rapes and tries to slit the throat of the NGO volunteer who rescued him and found him a flat in Ceuta" (MD030821), or "A prisoner of an ethnic group we can't say rapes a state officer in a prison bathroom" (MD060721)–, thus radicalising the rejection of migration: "Abascal, NO to Afghan refugees: 'Let Muslim countries shelter them'" (MD170821).

Together with polarising headlines, the analysis unveils the use of clickbait strategies that incite digital audiences to click on headlines. Clickbait is found in 38.1% of the items, with a more prominent occurrence in pseudo-media *ED*, *AN* and *MD*. The analysed pieces display a wide array of options, including exclamations, rhetorical questions, or direct appeals: "What's next?" (MD160821), "'Shall we have it back?' The Constitutional Court annuls Pedro Sanchez's government's lockdown" (MD140721); "Listen to the way minist-rous Celaá explains how she intends to vaccinate children. You've had it, minist-rous!" (ED020721), or "What you and I know" (ED030721). Lists feature prominently, especially in *CE* and *AN*, serving to strengthen the polarising message: "The 8 disgraces of Simone de Beauvoir, the midwife of gender ideology and left-wing degenerate" (AN280821), or "10 signs (showing) that Spain is taking an authoritarian drift thanks to the left" (CE190721).

Signs of orality take the form of judgments preceded by a colon –"John's Biden monstruous betrayal: He gave the Taliban a list of 300,000 Afghans who helped the US: now they are being hunted down" (AN290821), or "The red scum smells of dirty money: Podemos and Correa had a frontman to shift nine million dollars" (AN041021)–, the use of capitals and parentheses: "(SHOCKING VIDEO) Irene Montero's cunt, Minister of the Spanish Government, on the lips of the whole of Spain" (AN100921), or "NO JOKE: Morocco demands half of Spain's tourist revenue from the Alhambra in Granada" (AN030721). The use of colloquialisms emphasises certain aspects –"C'me back t'Spain! Europe lifts Puigdemont's immunity" (MD300721), "Show them you got balls! Santiago Abascal to return to Ceuta after being declared 'persona non-grata'" (MD250721)– or to ridicule with insulting or derogatory words: "Pope Francis, operated in Rome because he couldn't shit" (MD050721), or "Socialist education. All the same…donkeys: PSOE says that resit exams lead to 'social gap'" (AN150921).

One fourth of the headlines in the corpus combine clickbait strategies with polarising factors. This pattern can be seen in sensitive topics such as vaccination –"Are you just going to get vaccinated? Did you forget the disaster caused by insufficiently research drug like thalidomide?" (ED010721)–, or gender violence: "What would happen if it were the other way round? A woman breaks a glass in a man's face?" (MD090821).

5.4. Frames

To identify the preferred frames in the pseudo-media under analysis, we conduct a qualitative approach to the news pieces on the macro-topics "rights and minorities" and "politics", which comprise 34.7% of the total corpus. Our aim is to describe how their contents contribute to a particular framing of certain problems, an interpretation of their causes, their moral judgement, and their recommendations on ways of resolving them.

5.4.1. Immigration threatens citizenship security

The frames of the news stories on events involving migrants concur in portraying them as criminal actions. The pseudo-informative framing of immigration as a threat to citizenship security is clearly observed in *Mediterráneo digital*, which gathers 53% of the total items, as in: "Colombian man arrested for beating and smashing an elderly woman with a walking frame against a wall to steal her purse" (MD120821). Other sites reproduce similar patterns: "A 19-year-old Colombian man arrested for brutal attack on health worker in Madrid Metro" (AS190721). Underscoring the nationality of the alleged perpetrators in the headlines evinces an attempt to justify the incidents based on their foreign origin, under
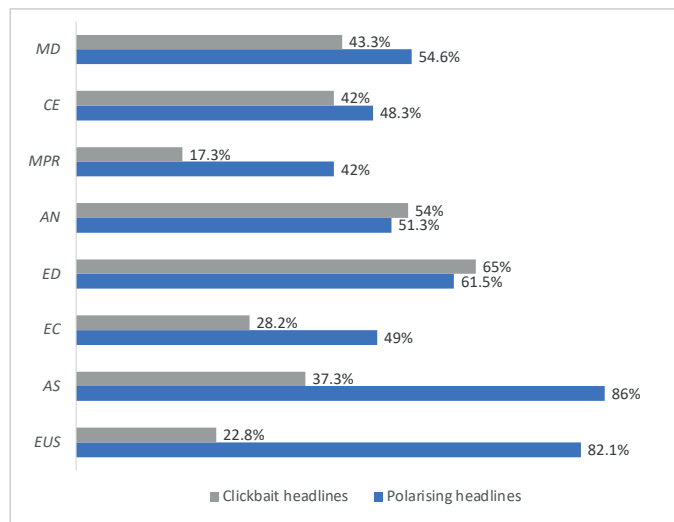
the protection of the government –"Sánchez's government wish to repopulate emptied areas of Spain with migrants" (AS010721)– and the European institutions: "Jihadists who chopped off heads in Syria welcomed in Europe as 'heroes of freedom'" (MPR120721). Furthermore, the contrast of migrants with the description of vulnerable profiles (an elderly woman with reduced mobility), or linked to health and social services, heightens the good-vs-evil moral conflict.

The systematic approach to migration issues through police action constructs a narrative whereby migratory affairs must be solved by state security forces. Nonetheless, some items in this category also report on calls for action from *Vox*: "Vox responds to illegal Moroccans pleading to be taken in after the invasion of Ceuta: 'Deportation!'" (AS190721). At times, some pieces even seem to urge Spaniards' individual action to tackle the purported migratory issue: "Arrested in Palma for punching a Moroccan who tried to rob him on the beach" (MD050821), which concludes with the telling pseudo-media's interpretation of the aggression against the migrant person: "The hunter becomes the hunted. He will think twice next time".

5.4.2. Affective-sexual and gender diversity threaten Spanish morality

The prevailing frame around the LGBTI community depicts the recognition and legal protection of affective-sexual and gender diversity as problematic: "The Government's latest: they seek to transform the sexual culture of the Spaniards" (ED060721), or "The Trans Act, a threat to women and children" (CE030721). The complicity of the coalition government with the demands of the LGBTI people –"Sanchez's government hoists the LGBT flag in Hungary but not in Iran or Saudi Arabia" (CE090721)–, but also the involvement of the *PP* with part of this community –"The contemptible and traitorous 'cowardly right' of the Putrid Party, Pablo Casado and his gay True Believers do it again: PP votes in favour of reprisals against Hungary for not bowing to the LGBTI lobby" (AN1000721)– appear as causes that explain the strength of "LGBT totalitarianism", which "comes swathed in rainbow but whose evilness makes communism look tame by comparison" (EC020721).

The 'evil' of the LGBTI is a powerful factor of moralising evaluation which dominates the framing of this issue and is embodied in the recurrent ideas of indoctrination of minors, the most defenceless and vulnerable people –"LEGO makes LGBT dolls. US families warn the Danish brand: stop indoctrinating our children, or we'll buy no more toys" (AN030821)–, who become the target of corruption: "Listen to the song by the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus: 'We will corrupt your children'" (ED080721). The framing of LGBTI people fails to reveal clearly how to address the issue. There are, however, some veiled suggestions: "AND THEY'RE OUTRAGED BY ABUSES? 'We're coming for your children': the terrible song of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus" (AN100721). Other more explicit recommendations are based on religion, as seen in the closing of the text "Gender identity wants to destroy the family" (EC080721), which reads: "We must raise awareness, put relativism aside, and follow the words of the Acts of the Apostles 5, 29: 'We ought to obey God, rather than men!'".

5.4.3. Feminism causes grievances among Spanish people

The dominant gender framing seeks to present feminism as the real problem, fuelling ideas of false reports of gender-based violence: "Yet another false report! A woman who accused her ex-partner of abduction and mistreatment is caught" (MD040821). The use of the term "feminazi" –which refers to "any woman who reports falsely (more than 1,000,000 false reports since 2004) to profit from a separation or divorce" and to the "Gender Dictatorship they have established here" like "German Nazism" (EC050721)– is coupled with description of gender legislation as an instrument of inequality, citing *Vox* as source: "Ángeles Criado (Vox): 'Equality laws generate inequality'" (EC090721). The framing of violence and gender evokes a negationist reading of male violence. On the premise that "violence is not a matter of men or women" (MD160721). Violent acts carried out by women are highlighted: "Arrested in Lora del Río for stabbing her husband and trying to suffocate her baby" (MD140721).

In addition to viewing feminism as problematic, this frame attaches negative moral judgement in news pieces on abortion, defined as "a form of barbarism for which God and history will hold us accountable" (EC100721) and "to kill and butcher a human being in their first months of life" (CE090721). These sites also condemn all women who terminate their pregnancies –"a mother who wants to kill her unborn child" (AN140721)–, human right experts who defend the legal basis of this procedure –"the UN murderers and genocides" (AN100921)–, and the medical professionals who take part: "the murderous rats" (AN170921). The pseudo-informative frame analysed ultimately suggests that the solution is to halt and reverse the advances achieved by feminism: "Third legal defeat of the gender act in Madrid: how many are needed to annul it?" (CE270721).

5.4.4. The coalition government is dangerous for the country

The frames above fall within a common macro-narrative that views them as symptoms of a larger nationwide concern: a coalition government that protects immigration and embraces the LGBTI and feminist agenda (see summary of frames in Table 4). The framing analysis of the 241 pseudo-information pieces under 'Politics' shows this. The greatest number of pieces –aimed at criticising the ruling of *PSOE* and *UP*– coincide in their diagnosis: the current left-wing government is dangerous for the country, in line with actors like *Vox* –"Abascal on Sánchez's government: 'They a threat to peaceful coexistence, to freedom and to Spain'" (AS170721)– or the church: "Bishops denounce that Sánchez's government 'puts freedom at risk'" (CE270721).

Table 4. Main frames in the macro-topics 'Rights and minorities' and 'Politics'

Topic	Definition of problem	Causes	Moral judgement	Proposed solution
Immigration	Immigration poses a threat to citizenship security	Foreign origin The government The EU	Violence against vulnerable or benevolent people	Action by State Security Forces Expulsion Individual vigilance
LGBTI	Affective-sexual and gender diversity pose a threat to Spanish morality	Government and other parties bow to the LGBTI lobby	Indoctrination and corruption of minors	Protection against corruption of minors Moral and religious integrity
Gender	Feminism causes grievances among Spaniards	False reports of gender-based violence Gender laws cause inequality Women also commit offences, and these are kept hidden	Abortion (killing a child) is inhumane	Halt and reverse the feminism advances
Coalition government	The coalition government is dangerous for the country	Supports immigration and takes on the LGBTI lobby agenda Shameless, ineffective, and illegal action	Hypocritical Revengeful Totalitarian	Resignation Expulsion Rebellion

The frame 'The coalition government is dangerous for the country' is underpinned by references to their ludicrous actions –"Ridiculous Pedro Sánchez schedules 3-day agenda in the US and won't see Joe Biden" (AS160721)–; their ineffective policies on economy –"Thank goodness they are leftists! The government to cut pensions" (MD010721)–; education –"Socialist education. All the same…just like dumbs: PSOE says that resit exams create 'a social gap'" (AN150921)–; health –"Losantos blasts the government's health policy: 'A criminal stream of lies and nonsense'" (AS180721)–, and even accuse Sánchez of inciting unlawful actions: "Sánchez's government faces charges after the first state of alarm was declared illegal" (AS140721).

Along with these reasons, the Government is also subject to moral judgement, which translates into three strategies. Firstly, via accusations of alleged deceit and hypocritical behaviour: "The cynical message of Sánchez's government after refusing to condemn genocidal crimes" (CE070721). Secondly, the government is portrayed as vindictive: "Sánchez's government doesn't rule out demolishing the cross of the Valle de los Caídos" (AS200721). Finally, the analogy with a totalitarian administration is recurrent as a means of stressing the government's attributed evil nature: "FOR THE DELUSIONAL AND THE BLIND. Sánchez is (exactly) following the Führer's footsteps: THUS CAME HITLER'S REGIME" (EC100721), "20 things that should not be normal in a democracy but actually are in Spain" (CE110721).

Under the rationale of this frame, the appropriate solution is to end the government. One scenario is resignation, as requested by *Vox* and echoed by some of these pseudo-media: "Macarena Olona is clear: 'The government must resign outright'" (AS140721). Another option is to overthrow the government. The articles that suggest this possibility are rather vague about how to do this: "Rosa Díez forewarns a 'hot autumn' to end Sánchez: 'He won't stop until we stop him'" (AS030721). Others, however, suggest tactics that resonate in Spanish society: "Towards another civil war. Sanchez's [coalition government] is a replica of that of 1931" (AN310721). In any event, if the current government remains in power, there is the option of rebellion against the government and their regulations: "For purely testicular reasons, I will never comply with the new and atrocious national security law: because I don't fucking want to" (EC040721).

6. Discussion and conclusions

Websites that simulate the appearance of media outlets while infringing the criteria of quality and journalistic ethics are key agents in the Spanish information disorder. This research provides a novel approach to the study of disinformation, based on a comparative analysis of the contents of eight pseudo-media gathered from their own websites. This allows us to examine their production patterns, both in terms of the selection of topics and the biases they favour, as well as to evaluate one fundamental aspect: their sources. The rise of these pseudo-media outlets –five of which have emerged since 2016– reinforces the configuration of a partisan ecosystem when fake news first showed their capacity to impact public opinion (**Olmo-Romero**, 2019).

The results of the present study reveal an obvious ideological intent in the selection of contents (**Bennet**; **Livingston**, 2018). This factor stands out in texts that are inconsistent with rigour and informative diligence, both in the headlines and in the story or the actual grounds. However, this commonality in the presuppositions of deception and manipulation does not rule out some heterogeneity in interests and specialisation (**Heft** *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, we can distinguish three groups of pseudo-media according to their focus: (1) politics, (2) human rights, and (3) Covid-19 and conspiracy theories.

The prominence of the section Spain in the group of pseudo-informative websites unveils their role as influential instruments in the unfolding of national politics. Thus, the *PSOE-UP* coalition government is framed as a threat to the country, incapable of enacting effective policies and whose authoritarian nature demands an urgent solution, whether it be resignation or overthrow. These clearly resonate as civil war discourses. By contrast, these websites present

> The approach to migration issues constructs a narrative linked to the security forces action

far-right *Vox* as praiseworthy and deserving credit. This is coherent with their drive to generate division, as can be seen in the high degree of polarisation of their headlines. This Manichean discourse connects with "authoritarian populism" insofar as it prevents any real debate and jeopardises the articulation "of communicative democracy" (**Atton**, 2006, p. 575). The contents of these pseudo-media thus contribute to delineating an "us *vs* them" strategy, typical of rising populism in recent years (**Brubaker**, 2017; **Moffitt**, 2020).

> ' In addition to viewing feminism as problematic, this frame attaches negative moral judgement in news pieces on abortion, defined as "a form of barbarism" '

This polarising nature extends to issues related to human rights through a choral reproduction of stereotypes in their treatment of certain social groups (**Wasilewski**, 2019). Pseudo-information on immigration, LGBTI people and feminist and gender issues deploys their ideological and populist discourse on minorities and vulnerable groups. These are framed as a threat security, childhood, and men's rights, respectively. This message, which also targets the responsibility of institutions, is overlaid, in parallel, with tabloid journalism techniques, like clickbait, which allows them not only to deliver anti-establishment narratives (**Mourão**; **Robertson**, 2019, p. 2077) but also to seek economic profit through clicks and visits (**Cooke**, 2017).

The polarising rhetoric of these pseudo-media connects with far-right ideology and the practices of certain US ultra-conservative media that seek to redirect the anger of their audiences (typically men) towards more disadvantaged groups (women, immigrants) through the so-called "journalism of resentment" (**Kimmel**, 2019). The contents analysed appear to be suited to cater for the concerns of an audience that shares much of the profile of the *Vox* voter, "mostly male, who feels wronged by policies that are the result of what they label «gender ideology»" (**Michavila**, 2019, p. 32), and who exhibits a blatant hostility towards immigrants (**Castro-Martínez**; **Mo-Groba**, 2020).

The prominence of the Covid-19 pandemic in these pseudo-media is reflected in many news pieces where the spread of conspiracy theories acquires great importance, together with polarisation and clickbait. With a patent political intent, the discourse on the health crisis paves the way for speculation and the generation of mistrust towards vaccination and health restrictions. The lack of substantiation of the pseudo-news pieces is also confirmed by the analysis of the sources. Most pieces simply lack them, or else rely on the Internet to find material for their contents. Others are merely opinions. The references to mainstream media reveal the alignment and sympathy of these websites with conservative media organisations, the ones they cite the most. Furthermore, references to other pseudo-media, both in Spain and abroad, evince the interest of these websites in establishing a non-formal collaborative network of disinformation, disguised as journalism, which feedbacks on content and shares audiences, as in the case of social media (**Froio**; **Ganesh**, 2018).

The conclusions of the present study are limited to the type of production, the ideological affiliation of the pseudo-media, and the period of analysis. In this regard, future research may also broaden the scope to other similar websites and other means used by pseudo-media to deliver their contents and reach other audiences (e.g., social media, *Telegram*, etc.). Moreover, the results obtained in this study may also be contrasted with the contents of these websites in different timelines –which may not be affected by exceptional situations like the Covid-19 health crisis–, or in other political contexts. This would help determine the highly partisan and polarising nature of most pieces of the corpus modulates under different circumstances or whether, conversely, it constitutes a distinctive feature of these pseudo-media as a reality-altering strategy. A contrastive analysis of pseudo-media aligned with left-wing positions would also be in order.

> ' The 'evil' of the LGBTI is a powerful factor of moralising evaluation and is embodied in the recurrent ideas of indoctrination of minors '

7. Notes

1. The presence of far-right-leaning media in Spain has been marginal after the return to democracy, confined to some remnants of the Franco regime such as *Arriba* (1935-1979), *El alcázar* (1936-1987) and the magazine *Fuerza Nueva* (1966-2017), or the only far-right newspaper born after the death of the dictator, *El imparcial* (1977-1980), which sought to be a means of expression of the far right (**Palau-Sampio**, 2020).

2. All headlines are originally in Spanish. A translated version is provided for ease of exposition.

3. Coding identifies pseudo-media (*MPR*) and publication date (ddmmyy).

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