Increasing political polarization with disinformation: A comparative analysis of the European quality press

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Abstract

Political polarization and information disorders are not new phenomena on the media agenda, but they have acquired considerable prominence in the wake of international events such as the election of Donald Trump. The present article seeks to help in understanding the interrelation of these concepts –disinformation and polarization– in the European quality press in recent years. Six newspapers (*El Mundo*, *El País*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*) from three countries were selected on the basis of their quality, audience and representative character of their editorial lines between 2017 and late 2022, and a qualitative and quantitative frame analysis (*n* = 286) was carried out. Having observed all the definitions of polarization in the press, it was seen that party political alignment has the greatest presence in the international scenario, coming before the division of public opinion. In the sample, Spain has a prominent position, claiming to be a polarized pluralist country, as opposed to United Kingdom, which closely observes what happens in the United States, or France, where these phenomena have achieved less penetration. The conclusion is that political polarization is presented as a chronic problem caused by political actors who are not going to cease doing so, as opposed to information disorders, which are produced by certain specific international actors, such as Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, and Jair Bolsonaro, who take advantage of communication flows on social media and the latter's lack of regulation. This article suggests that the way to resolve or at least alleviate the problem is by defending quality information and public media, emphasizing citizen responsibility in the face of social media.

Keywords

Political polarization; Issue polarization; Journalism; Digital media; Spain; France; Quality press; Disinformation; Information disorders; Social media; Social networks.

1. Introduction

The election of Donald Trump in late 2016 ushered in a period of polarization and disinformation that gave rise to intense research activity in the Communication Sciences. But neither phenomenon was new or previously unknown.

There is abundant scientific literature on the presence of polarization in North America (**Fiorina**; **Abrams**; **Pope**, 2008; **Kerr**; **Panagopouloss**; **Van-Der-Linden**, 2021), but also in other states in the South of the American continent (**Liotti**, 2014; **Rodríguez**; **Smallman**, 2016; **Fernandes** *et al.*, 2020). With respect to Europe, since its publication, the work by **Hallin** and **Mancini** (2004) has been the reference for placing countries like Spain and France in the Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model (**Brüggemann** *et al.*, 2014**)**. Derivative investigations have questioned the distance of the systems in these countries with respect to the United Kingdom, considered liberal or North Atlantic, but where ideological polarization is seen in the press (**Norris**, 2009), as well as France's inclusion in this model, as fewer parallels are found than with Central European countries like Germany (**Hallin**; **Mancini**, 2012; **Maurer**, 2019).

The *Digital News Report* of the *Reuters Institute* (**Newman** *et al.*, 2022) reflects the existence of three national realities. Media polarization as perceived by the audience is different in the three countries. Spain is situated in the group of highly polarized countries (49% of the audience says it observes a high level of polarization); facing the United Kingdom, which reaches the highest figure for the North of Europe (37%); and France, which remains at a modest 31%, an average figure in the values for Central Europe.

Information disorders reached unprecedented levels following Trump's election as president, although such strategies and effects had been known for a long time (**Mayoral**; **Parratt**; **Morata**, 2019). High intensity political phenomena, like Brexit in Europe (**Bastos**; **Mercea**, 2019), the Covid-19 pandemic (**León** *et al.*, 2022) or, recently, the war in Ukraine (**Erlich**; **Garner**, 2023), have transformed this into a worrying problem, not only for the political class, but also for Public Opinion in general. This can be deduced from the European sociological indicators: the *Eurobarometer* states that 71% of Europeans and 83% of Spaniards consider that they often found fake news in their news intake (*European Commission*, 2021).

A considerable theoretical development is underway on the relation between polarization and disinformation with respect to social media (**Tucker** *et al.*, 2018; **Del-Vicario** *et al.*, 2019; **Azzimonti**; **Fernandes**, 2023). But there are fewer references to media coverage in the contexts of political polarization where disinformation is generated, or the importance of information disorders in increasing the degrees of separation in polarized scenarios (**Masip**; **Suau**; **Ruiz-Caballero**, 2020; **Au**; **Ho**; **Chiu**, 2022; **Van-Antwerpen**; **Turnbull**; **Searston**, 2022; **Levendusky**; **Malhotra**, 2016).

The purpose of this article is to study the interrelation of these phenomena in the European quality press, underscoring investigations that cover different political realities and media cultures (**Capilla**, 2019). An international comparison is made of the media discourse in newspapers with different editorial lines in three geopolitically important countries with different media systems, namely Spain, France and the United Kingdom, to analyse the definition of polarization –actors, issues, moral problems and solutions– and its correlations with the growth in information disorders from 2017 to the present.

1.1. Polarization, a broad concept

The term polarization covers different realities for research in the Social Sciences that are set out below. However, for the purposes of the present study, polarization linked to politics assumes the central role. The most widely held view defines political polarization as the growing ideological division between political parties or groups, which become more extreme in their points of view and less prepared to compromise or work together (**Sides**; **Hopkins**, 2015). That growing distance between the extremes disarticulates the centre (**Corrales**, 2005). This concept refers to the ideological or programmatic distance between these political formations and their followers and the others, which results in a more divided and conflictive political environment (**Osmundsen** *et al.*, 2021).

From the perspective of the Political Sciences, the definitions of polarization between parties are related to affective polarization. Osmundsen's investigation sheds light on the concept as it observes that political polarization implies that the people who identify most strongly with their political party have a perception of the opposing party as posing a threat to their values and way of life. In that sense, affective polarization refers to the tendency to view supporters of the opposing party negatively and supporters of their own party positively, beyond the ideological position of the parties (**Comellas**; **Torcal**, 2023). It refers to the growing aversion and hostility between the supporters of different formations and the existence of negative feelings towards other leaders (**Webster**; **Abramowitz**, 2017).

Affective polarization is often fueled by negative and uncivil political exchanges on social media platforms, contributing to increased social polarization (**Tucker** *et al.*, 2018).

Together with these definitions of polarization, which play a decisive role in this study, it is necessary to refer to others that one can expect to encounter in the field work. There is talk of issue polarization as the degree to which individuals have preferences or opinions on a variety of questions (**Levendusky**; **Malhotra**, 2016). In its aspect related to Public Opinion studies it is concerned with the division of society into groups with opposing beliefs, values and interests (**Peña-Fernández**; **Larrondo-Ureta**; **Morales-i-Gras**, 2023; **Liotti**, 2014). It is thus a process of the separation of the citizens into opposing collectives and factions due to their points of view (**Tucker** *et al.*, 2018).

Closely related to the foregoing, Sociology has analysed the polarization that is created between groups that have their own origins or identity marks, such as religion, sex or ethnic group, which ends up transforming those variables into a motive for confrontation (**Permanyer**, 2012). It is also worth discussing polarization in eco-

> ❝ Political polarization is considered a chronic problem by the European press while disinformation appears as a critical concern ❞

nomic terms, understood as income inequality in a society (**McCarty**; **Poole**; **Rosenthal**, 2016) and the distance of the extremes with respect to the middle class (**Duclos**; **Taptué**, 2015). Up to this point, the scientific literature has found a correlation between these types of polarization that has entailed a multidisciplinary approach to the phenomenon. The set of socioeconomic variables used to determine homogeneity and the size of groups, as well as the separation between them, have been studied (**Gigliarano**; **Mosler**, 2009).

Finally, it is necessary to return to the definition of the European systems made by Hallin and Mancini, which serves as the basis for studying the polarization of media systems. It covers the high degree of party-political parallelism of media actors and the fact that the elites own media and control information sources that are used to strengthen existing beliefs and increase dissent (**Blumler**; **Gurevitch**, 1995). In the public political dialogue, in which the media actors play a decisive role, the latter position themselves firmly and clearly at one of the poles, distancing themselves from the centre; they align themselves with less moderate discourses and in this way actively try to mobilize public opinion (**Teruel-Rodríguez**, 2016; **Masip**; **Suau**; **Ruiz-Caballero**, 2020).

1.2. Relation between polarization and disinformation

Together with polarization, the second axis that guides this investigation is disinformation. So-called "fake news" is content deliberately elaborated on the basis of falsehoods and intended to confuse those who consume it (**Allcott**; **Gentzkow**, 2017). The *European Commission* defines it as

> "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm" (*European Commission*, 2018, p. 3).

Wardle (2020) refers to this phenomenon using the broad term "information disorders", which describes the host of extensive processes by which disinformation in all its varieties (disinformation, misinformation and malinformation) is elaborated and spread.

Studies on the interrelation of the two phenomena suggest that polarization can contribute to the dissemination of information disorders in numerous aspects. In the first place, it can make society more susceptible to basically accepting information that confirms its prior beliefs, even when it is erroneous. In some instances, content is consumed on the basis of perceived affinity with the media organization or with digital profiles, in order to strengthen one's own beliefs, thus feeding selective exposure (**Iyengar**; **Hahn**, 2009; **Humanes**, 2014). This is related to confirmation bias (**Del-Vicario**; **Quattrociocchi**; **Scala**, 2019) which feeds on post-truth (**Capilla**, 2019).

In the second place, polarization creates an environment in which information helps to accelerate the circulation of existing points of view. Echo chambers are demarcated spaces in which messages are exchanged between the likeminded and from which, at the same time, other communities are isolated (**Rodríguez-Cano**, 2017). The penetration of contrary ideas is difficult in such environments.

In the third place, polarization can lead to a breakdown of trust between social groups, making it more difficult to correct or compare fake information or reach consensus with those who think differently about objective facts. The breaking of the bridges of dialogue with political opponents means that the greater the confrontation, the greater the inclination to share fake news that denigrates the other (**Osmundsen** *et al.*, 2021).

Finally, polarization becomes an incentive or an aid for the different actors that create and disseminate disinformation to attain their political goals, which is why it is currently a strategy that is kept active. Different actors that produce disinformation have been studied, such as trolls and bots on social media (**Keller** *et al.*, 2019; **Wang**; **Angarita**; **Renna**, 2018; **Robles** *et al.*, 2022). But the list is much longer and includes individual actors, organizations and even governments that intentionally distribute disinformation about politics for different motives (**Mejias**; **Vokuev**, 2017; **Shu** *et al.*, 2017).

For the scientific literature, the role of politics in creating and amplifying disinformation is crucial. This has an effect on affective polarization and, finally, on the quality of democratic debate; polarization of the elites increases social polarization (**Hetheringthon**, 2001). Thus, those in government have a great importance in the spread of polarized content through social media and, when necessary, they have recourse to media that have little credibility to strengthen their discourse (**Ladd**, 2011).

The complete report by **Tucker** *et al.* (2018) does not address the mass media's role in the relation between polarization and disinformation, as it is basically concerned with observing the leading role of political actors and social media. However, it does suggest that they can contribute to the phenomenon by transmitting sensationalist or biased content that strengthens the more extreme existing political beliefs. The scientific literature explains that the media, including the quality media, are not passive subjects of polarization but have played an important and prominent role in its promotion

(**Pérez-Escoda** *et al.*, 2023; **Teruel-Rodríguez**, 2016). A greater polarization in the media's news activity results in increasing that distance in the audience (**Van-Antwerpen**; **Turnbull**; **Searston**, 2022) in terms of affective polarization (**Levendusky**; **Malhotra**, 2016).

> The European quality newspapers assert the work of journalism in confronting information disorders

1.3. Research objectives and questions

The theoretical development of the relation between political polarization and disinformation leads to the statement of the general objective (GO) of this investigation: to analyse the definition of polarization and its correlation with the increase in information disorders from 2017 to the present in the European quality press.

To achieve this end, the fieldwork was sequenced around two coordinated specific objectives and their corresponding hypotheses:

Specific Objective 1: To study the concept of polarization and its different expressions in the European quality press through a framing analysis. To define actors, issues, causes, moral problems and solutions.

> H1.1: The discourse is maintained over time due to different international socio-political events. It is considered to be a real and active concern on the media agenda.

> H1.2: It is not developed with the same intensity in all the national scenarios. It is qualitatively more important in Spain, which has a polarized pluralist system, as against France or England.

> H1.3: Political polarization is the dominant question in the international press and, together with it, political actors are identified as originators.

Specific Objective 2: To analyse the relation between polarization and disinformation to find the causes and possible proposed solutions to this global phenomenon.

> H2.1: International political actors are identified as promoters of the phenomenon, taking advantage of the dynamics of the workings and deregulation of the social media.

> H2:2: The press asserts the value of journalism to confront the urgent issue of information disorders, although social media are identified as originators of the latter.

2. Methodology

To attain the objectives of the investigation a combined methodology was developed to further strengthen the results. In the first place, a quantitative analysis was carried out, paying attention to earlier works (**Ballesteros-Herencia**; **Gómez-García**, 2020; **Matthes**; **Kohring**, 2008) that make a statistical analysis of the variables in the discourse –conceived as elements of a particular conception of the frame– using a template where all the data was manually downloaded. This file was managed as an *Excel* and later queries were made through *Access*.

In the second place, a qualitative methodology was carried out, based on the critical analysis, through which the explicit and implicit meanings were identified by means of inferences of a textual character (**Fürsich**, 2009). The systematization of the qualitative analysis was done with Atlas.ti to find patterns and reduce the subjective factor in the interpretation.

Entman's referential definition (1993) states that:

> "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52).

On this basis, the essential components were observed: definition of the problem, assigning causes, moral evaluation and treatment.

In accordance with **López-Rabadán** (2010) several theoretical levels are involved in the framing studies. This investigation included a dimension with a thematic character (newsframes) concerning questions with a more concrete current interest, according to the most widespread terminology in the academic context (**Sádaba**, 2008; **Igartua**; **Humanes**, 2004). In this sense, **Igartua**, **Muñiz** and **Cheng** (2005) define a frame as a newsframe that:

> "refers to the angle, focus, perspective or treatment of a news item that is expressed in the choice, emphasis or importance assigned to different elements" (p. 158).

Finally, the framing strategies were identified qualitatively (**López-Rabadán**, 2010). Based on an exhaustive and protracted analysis of the journalistic discourse of a medium it is possible to find significant regularities concerning the professional procedures that determine how a news item is framed. This makes it possible to define and characterize the "framing strategy developed by this communication medium" (p. 236).

Thus, the quantitative analysis principally made it possible to study the media strategies with which polarization is associated, while the qualitative analysis, for its part, served for deducing the interrelation of polarization and disinformation by means of the inductive method. In the methodological work, a pretest of 20% of the sample (n= 286, pretest n=58) was carried out to check the designed tool and deduce the issues and actors in the analytical file.

2.1. Sample

Quality newspapers that are referential in the scientific literature were chosen (**Lacy**; **Rosenstiel**, 2015) . The media quality ranking elaborated by *SCImago* was also considered. This is headed by *The Guardian*, while the following European media that appear are *Le Monde, El País* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Thus, together with quality, the newspapers chosen were the most relevant in terms of audience –in both their print and online editions. Differentiated editorial lines were included in order to enrich the sample's representativeness (in the British case, for example, the second newspaper mentioned supported Brexit, while the first was totally opposed). Based on these parameters, the second Spanish newspaper chosen was *El Mundo* and, in the French case, *Le Figaro*.

Table 1. Terms for the selection of the international sample

Languaje	Search terms
Spanish	Polarización + desinformación
French	polarisation + desinformation/ fake news / fausses nouvelles
English	polarization + disinformation/ fake news

To select the sample the advanced database *My News* was used for some cases, but due to its internal restrictions, it was necessary in other cases to go to the digital press archive of each media (*Le Monde* and *The Daily Telegraph*). The period analysed is from 1-1-2017 to 01-12-2022, that is, practically six complete years so that an extensive diachronic study could be developed. Complete articles were the natural unit of analysis. News pieces were sought whose text contained terms referring to polarization and disinformation in the different languages (Table 1) (**Levendusky**; **Malhotra**, 2016).

2.2. Design and procedure

Based on the scientific bibliography (**Ballesteros-Herencia**; **Gómez-García**, 2020; **López-Rabadán**, 2010; **Eberl** *et al.*, 2018; **Palau-Sampio**; **Carratalá**, 2022) and taking the specific objectives of the study into consideration, the variables included in the research file were elaborated. The *Digital News Report* of the *Reuters Institute* (2022) realized a broad European survey that was considered referential for identifying the thematic options for the categories related to disinformation.

Specific categories were also created. For example, a study was made of the two principal concepts to determine which of them played the leading role in the news pieces depending on their position in the headline, subheading and opening

Table 2. Quantitative content analysis file

A	Identification variables	Categories
1	Medium	*Le Figaro, Le Monde, El Mundo, El País, The Daily Telegraph,The Guardian*
2	Date	XX/XX/XXXX
3	Section	Politics, Economy, Technology, Opinion, International, Climate Change, COVID Health, Other
4	Headline*	Open answer
B	**Variables relating to content**	**Categories**
5	Predominance	Polarization, disinformation, both, neither of the two
6	Territorial scope	National, Europe, America, Asia, Africa, International
7	Country *	Open answer
8	Main issue	Covid, Politics, Immigration, Climate Change, Celebrities, Products, War, Economy, Communication, Society
9	Concrete issues*i	Covid, Brexit, Social Media, Elections (countries), Parliamentary activity (countries), War, EU, United States, Other, Negationism, Russia, Communication, Catalonia, Brazil
10	Polarization concept	Political, between countries or political systems, economic, between social groups, in public opinion or over issues, in the media
11	Typology of leading actors	Political, Economic, Mass Media, Negationists, Social Media, Celebrities, NGO, Not specified
12	Leading actors*	Open answer
C	**Framing variables**	**Categories**
13	Moral concepts in polarization	Violence and insecurity, economic losses, harmful to freedom of expression, political destabilization, privacy, health and science, others
14	Solutions to polarizationi	Literacy, Self-regulation of Social Media, Citizens, Dialogue between countries, Quality information, Integration and Social Policy, Legislation, Public Media, Not provided, Insoluble, *NATO* /EU, Others, Political / democracy
D	**Desinformation variables**	**Categories**
15	Guilty of disinformationi	Jair Bolsonaro, Boris Johnson, Extreme Right, Media, Negationism, Not specified, Other, Politics, Populism, Vladimir Putin or Russia, Social Media, Donald Trump or USA
16	Solutions to disinformationi	Regulatory law, Citizens' vote, Economic sanctions, Self-regulation, Literacy, Not provided, Quality information, Economic fines

paragraph; or, where relevant, whether both concepts were secondary. Polarization was categorized according to the meanings contained in the theoretical framework: political, between countries or political systems, economic, between social groups, in public opinion, over issues and in the media. To determine the type of polarization the wording of the journalistic text was referred to whenever this was possible.

'' The press does not propose a solution to political polarization because the actors that cause it –leaders and countries– will continue to encourage it ''

The codification manual contained 16 variables, organized around five axes that can be consulted in Table 2. The pretest of 20% of the sample made it possible to refine the answer options, basically in those variables that required a more extensive catalogue of categories (e.g. solutions to polarization, responsible actors, issues…). The inductive process for creating options is indicated with the name of the variable[i]. Those variables that allowed for an open or multiple answer can be seen (indicated with an *).

To interpret the results obtained in the content analysis, univariate descriptive statistics were used in general. The multiple answer variables have been indicated above.

The qualitative analysis, developed with *Atlas.ti*, consisted in relating all the countries that appeared in each of the articles with the newsframes obtained in the pretest of the sample concerning actors, issues and causes of disinformation and polarization.

3. Results

3.1. Initial quantitative results

The sample finally consisted of 286 useful registers for the six chosen newspapers. The country where most pieces are published on the issue studied is, by a considerable distance, Spain, as it accounts for 45.1%. At the other extreme, the French newspapers taken together only account for 20.6% (Table 3).

The diachronic evolution of the sample is not lineal (Graph 1). The year with the most published pieces is 2020, a period marked by Covid-19. It is followed by 2018, which is significant because it does not coincide with the main political landmarks but with *Facebook*'s black year [*sic*], when *The Guardian* reported that 50 million users' files were ceded to *Cambridge Analytica* for spurious purposes ("*El año negro de Facebook*", *El País*, 1-12-2018). Except for the peak caused by the pandemic, the presence of polarization and disinformation in the newspapers analysed remains fairly stable from 2018.

The pieces analysed basically appear in the opinion section (28.7%) and the international section (23.1%). Therefore, the phenomenon of polarization is situated as an international problem requiring not only information but also reflection and expert opinion. These sections are followed by politics (10.8%) and technology (11.5%). This latter is due, as the following variable shows, to the fact that social media are situated at the epicentre of the phenomenon.

To design the category of the main issue the results of the *Reuters 2022* report were taken into account, in which Covid-19, politics and celebrities were the main events that disinformation pivoted around. It was found that politics accounted for 41.6% of the results and communication and social media for 31.1%. Covid-19 occupied the third place, generating 7.3% of the texts, and in the fourth place, society with 5.2%.

Based on these data a more detailed classification was made by applying several key words, obtained from the pretest on 20% of the sample, to each general issue to refine the allocation of the pieces (Table 5). As many as three thematic indicators could be allocated to each general issue. In this respect, the USA and social media headed the debate in a prominent way (48.6% of the sample taken as a whole).

This prominent position is strengthened with the results for the geographical variable. With respect to the territorial scope of the problem of polarization for the press, 52.4% of the sample is situated at the international level, as against 24.7% that place it in a single country,

Table 3. Pieces per newspaper

Medium	N	%
The Guardian	69	24.1
Daily Telegraph	29	10.1
El Mundo	40	14.0
El País	89	31.1
Le Figaro	12	4.2
Le Monde	47	16.4
Total	286	100

Table 4. Thematic indicators

| Thematic indicators	Total	%
Social media	115	27.4
Elections United States	55	13.1
Other	38	9.1
Politics United States	34	8.1
Communication	25	6.0
Covid-19	25	6.0
EU and Elections	17	4.1
Politics France	16	3.8
Politics Spain	15	3.6
Russia	14	3.3
Negationism	12	2.9
Brexit	11	2.6
War	9	2.1
Elections Brazil	8	1.9
Elections Spain	8	1.9
Politics United States	7	1.7
Catalonia	6	1.4
Elections France	6	1.4
Total	419	100
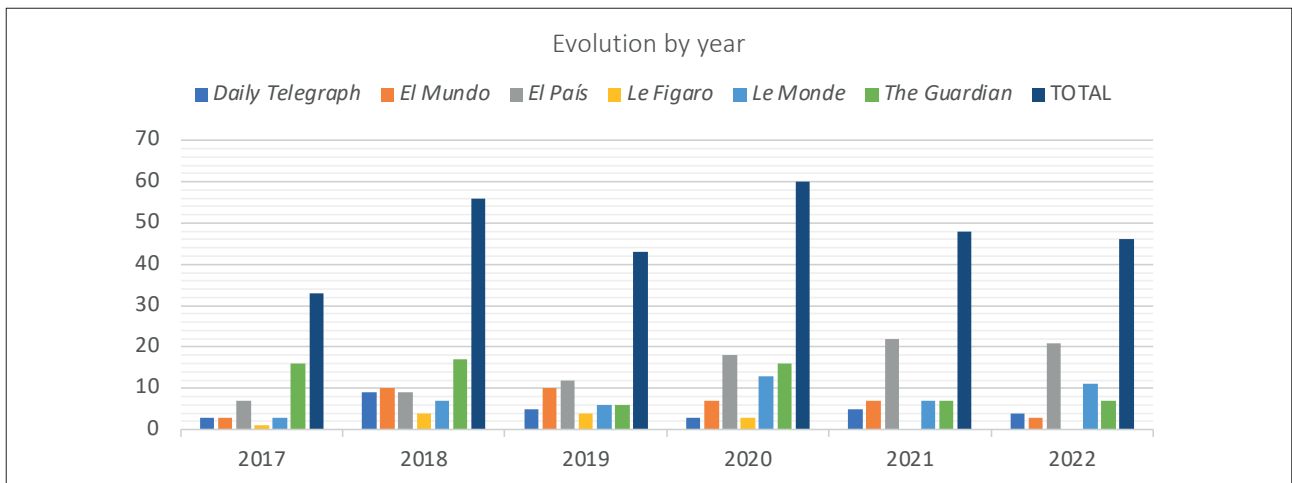
Graph 1. Diachronic evolution by newspaper

and 18.5% that situate it, in general, in the American continent. Specifically, with respect to countries, the United States receives the most mentions (31.1%), followed by the three countries of origin of the media analysed. In Graph 2 it can be can that only other states like Brazil or Russia attain some degree of notoriety.

In the light of these initial data, it can therefore be concluded that polarization is a phenomenon that has attracted continued interest since 2018. It reaches the international dimension because it is thematically linked to US policy and to communication, as this is the field in which the media situate the problems generated by social media since Donald Trump was elected or the Brexit referendum was held.

In order to sketch the profiles of the three countries studied, the degree to which they are the protagonists in their quality press was observed (Table 5). Adding together the results of each of the newspapers, Spain stands out as a reference with 35.6% in its sample, as against the United Kingdom and France; in both, the United States is the geographical epicentre of their coverage of polarization.
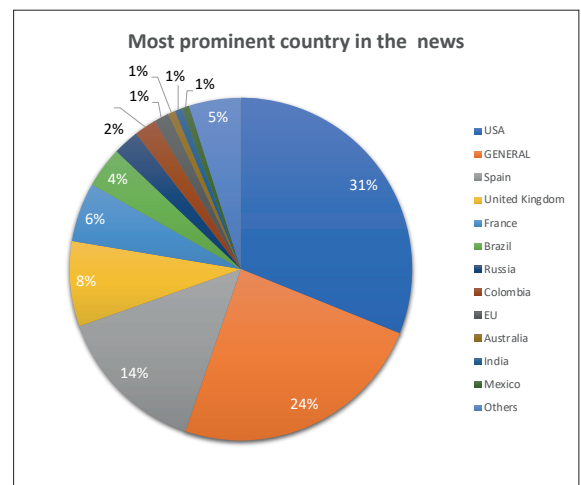
Graph 2. Territorial scope of the sample

Table 5. Most prominent country in the media coverage of each country analysed

Most prominent country in the news / Newspapers' country of origin	United Kingdom	Spain	France	United States
United Kingdom	23,50%			40,70%
Spain		35,60%		26,70%
France			23,70%	23,80%

3.2. Framing polarization

The most decisive variable in this investigation is the definition of the problem of polarization that is spread by the press analysed (Table 8). In the majority of cases, literal reference is made to political polarization. The newspapers use this expression to refer to the distance between the political forces of countries, their programs and discourses.

Thus, on one occasion in *El País* it was referred to as follows:

"Spanish political polarization, although based on objective social circumstances, is basically the result of the behaviour of parties, prepared to do anything in order to win power" ("*Puñales contra la democracia*", 10-01-2022, *El País*).

On other occasions, it is considered to be the distance between the party blocs.

Le Monde reflects on another two expressions of polarization: in the media and that found between democratic countries and illiberal regimes:

On one side, "polarization of the media", with the "development of opinion following the model of [the conservative U.S. channel] *Fox News* and the trivialization of the circuits of disinformation", which produces fractures

within countries; on the other, "polarization between countries" between "on the one hand, open societies and on the other, despotic regimes that control their media and their platforms", amongst which the invasion of Ukraine by Russia is the most eloquent expression. ("The war in Ukraine has aggravated 'information chaos', according to *Reporters Without Borders*", 03-05-2022, *Le Monde*), 3-05-2022, *Le Monde*).
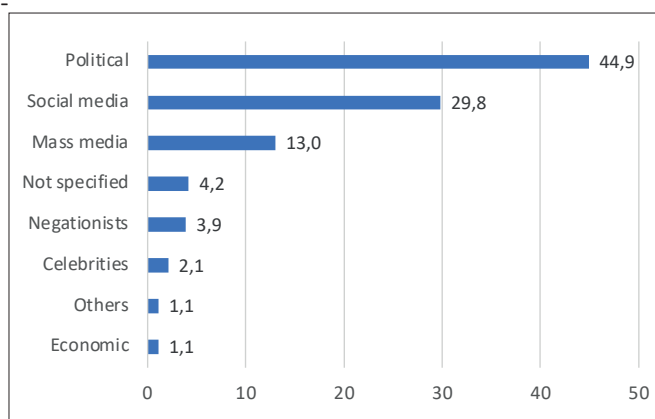
Table 6. Definition of the problem: concept of polarization(%)

Concept of polarization	%	*Daily Telegraph*	*The Guardian*	*El Mundo*	*El País*	*Le Figaro*	*Le Monde*
Scientific negationism	1.4	0.0	4.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.1
Not specified	7.0	24.1	13.0	0.0	4.5	0.0	0.0
Polarization of public opinion	26.2	**34.5**	14.5	17.5	28.1	33.3	**40.4**
Polarization between democracies and illiberal regimes	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.5	0.0	0.0
Polarization between countries	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.3	8.5
Polarization in the media	4.9	3.4	5.8	2.5	3.4	8.3	8.5
Political polarization	50.0	31.0	**53.6**	**70.0**	**53.9**	**41.7**	34.0
Polarization between social groups	7.3	6.9	8.7	10.0	5.6	8.3	6.4
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

It is necessary to look more closely at the small print of this result, as it does not operate in all the media on the same terms. In *The Daily Telegraph* and *Le Monde*, the problem is prominently situated in issue polarization. As against these, in the Spanish press and *The Guardian* the party political field is where the concept is the unquestionable protagonist. Polarization in the media (4.9%) and that found between the different social groups or collectives (7.3%) reach important figures, but of a much lower magnitude.

This quotation from *El Monde*, reflecting on how the social media generate polarization between opinions, exemplifies the profile of this French medium:

"Western democracies are being corroded from within by a polarization of opinions. Each person lives in a parallel word in which it becomes incresingly difficult to debate without being insulting or threatening. The exhaustion of the workings of representative democracy, the absence of a common project in western societies and the lack of efficiency of public policies have spread mistrust, which is the main driving force of this polarization. The social media are not the only ones responsible for the situation, but they have clearly widened the phenomenon, making a business out of it, since what 'shocks' generates clicks and, therefore, profits" "Has Facebook fallen on the wrong side of history?" 8-06-2020, *Le Monde*).

In assigning responsibility the main actors of polarization prove to be politicians (44.9%), followed by social media (29.8%) (Graph 3). In the study of the actors in the sample, Donald Trump (22.8%) and Vladimir Putin (12.8%) emerge as the international leaders around whom the media agenda pivots. Taken together, mentions of the extreme right account for 5% of the data.

Situated in the framing study, one important objective in this investigation is to locate, firstly, the moral evaluation of the problem of polarization and, subsequently, the solutions that the media indicate. With respect to moral concepts, 49.7% of the pieces indicate that polarization brings political destabilization (disturbances in elections, tension in the political debate, crisis of representation of political parties…);

Graph 3. Actors of polarization (%)

Table 7. Solutions to polarization

Solutions to polarization	Total	%
Literacy	18	6.3
Social media self-regulation	20	7.0
Citizens and voting	17	5.9
Quality information	35	12.2
Legislation and Defence	6	2.1
Public media	8	2.8
Not provided	111	**38.8**
NATO /EU	4	1.4
Others (university, NGOs…)	9	3.1
Politics	20	7.0
Regulating social media	38	13.3
Total	**286**	100

followed by harm to freedom of expression (22.7%) (echo chambers, hate speech, manipulation and propaganda in the media…); and the repercussions for health and science linked to Covid-19 (10.8%).

In the field of solutions, it is striking that the sample does not provide a satisfactory answer for putting an end to the phenomenon of polarization (38.8%). The European press analysed has difficulty indicating how to put an end to this problem but, when it does so, it points in three directions. Firstly, there is recognition of the importance of journalism and quality information in creating a climate of debate and it is proposed that it is the media that should contribute to generating a less polarized society. In the British case, the importance assigned to the public media (the *BBC*) for this purpose is striking. Secondly, attention is drawn to the importance of regulating social media to improve the tone of public opinion, or else it is suggested that they should self-regulate. Finally, political actors (national and international) and, above all, the citizens (through voting, mobilization and literacy) are mentioned (Table 7).

3.3. Interrelation between polarization and disinformation

The second objective of this investigation is to observe the intersection between polarization and disinformation in the media discourse of the European quality press. To this end, in the quantitative analysis template and, fundamentally, through qualitative observation made with *Atlas.ti*, different fields have been designed.

The sample comprises the pieces in which the two terms (polarization and disinformation) –through different operators in each language– were represented. First, which of the two prevailed was observed, attending to their relevance in headlines and the two first paragraphs. In 47.2% of the cases, information disorders achieved more relevance for journalism, facing 12.6% in which polarization was the newsworthy element. In the rest of the cases, both were of similar importance –whether high or limited (30.8%). It can therefore be concluded that disinformation was perceived as a more urgent problem for journalism and is the more prominent of the two concepts studied here.

The social media emerge as the individual actor responsible for information disorders in 33.6% of cases (Graph 4). They are followed by individual political leaders who, in aggregated form, occupy first place in the attribution of responsibilities: this is the case of Donald Trump (10.5%) and Vladimir Putin (8.4%). It is worth noting that for *El País, Le Monde, The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, social media are the main culprit, while *El Mundo* focuses on political actors.

For the media analysed, the solution to the problem of disinformation involves the legislation of countries and supranational bodies (19.6%), quality information and public media (18%), citizen literacy (11.5%) and the self-regulation of social media (10.1%).
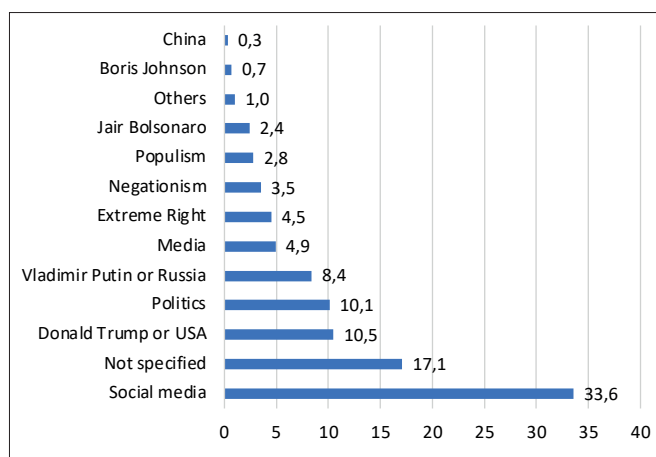
Graph 4. Actors of disinformation (%)

The analysis of the media frames provided a differentiated profile for each of the countries analysed, as well as for the United States, Brazil and Russia, which were the protagonists on the media agenda in the dialogue on disinformation and polarization. Political polarization is an argument that is common to all of them (Table 8). The the three European countries also coincide in believing that political actors are the ones who create disinformation in order to polarize, but each country has its own identity marks: in Spain, disinformation on Covid-19 and the central role of social media as promoters of disinformation and polarization; in the United Kingdom, the importance of the public media against information disorders; and in France, the leading role of the social media and the existence of polarization in public opinion.

> With respect to the rest of the actors, the texts point to the importance of Russia as a promoter of disinformation to destabilize other countries. In the United States a clear confrontation is evinced between the supporters of Donald Trump and the critical media that denounce the former president's concept of "fake news" when he refers to criticism or editorial freedom.

The following two quotations from *The Guardian* illustrate the dialogue on polarization and disinformation. In the first, the role of Russia, the United States and social media is situated in the phenomenon:

> "[Disinformation] Typically defined as the dissemination of deliberately false information, it took flight with Russia's social media attack during the 2016 election. Trump pushed disinformation about the economy, coronavirus, election and countless other topics. The willingness of Republicans and conservative media to do likewise raised fears of a fundamental breakdown in trust in government institutions and the media". ("Alternative facts, witch-hunt, bigly: the Trump era in 32 words and phrases", 28-12-2020, *The Guardian*).

The second addresses the problem of disinformation as food for polarization in Brazil, essentially, but with worldwide repercussions. Opinions are polarized through social media and hate speech is incited:

Table 8. Dialogue on polarization / disinformation by country

	Brazil Gr=22	Spain Gr=51	United States Gr=161	France Gr=29	Russia Gr=60	United Kingdom Gr=40
Literacy Gr=20	0	6	0	6	0	0
The Trumpist concept of "fake news" Gr=45	0	0	31	0	3	0
Disinformation causes polarization Gr=23	0	3	2	5	1	1
Disinformation on Covid Gr=50	3	10	9	0	1	1
Echo chambers Gr=27	0	1	6	1	0	0
Disinformation causes violence Gr=11	0	0	4	0	1	0
Hate speech Gr=40	3	1	7	1	1	2
The extreme right creates disinformation Gr=18	1	2	5	2	3	2
Social media feed disinformation Gr=168	6	7	27	11	21	5
Social media cause polarization Gr=90	1	2	19	4	5	6
Lack of social media self-regulation Gr=57	0	0	14	2	1	2
The media help counter disinformation Gr=34	1	3	6	0	0	4
Public media against polarization and disinformation Gr=16	0	1	2	0	1	10
Polarization causes violence Gr=12	4	0	2	0	0	0
Polarization between democracy and illiberal regimes Gr=11	0	0	4	0	8	0
Polarization between social groups Gr=32	1	1	8	1	0	4
Polarization between opinions Gr=58	1	5	11	8	4	3
Media polarization Gr=15	0	0	11	2	1	0
Political polarization Gr=139	8	24	48	3	4	9
Politics creates disinformation to destabilize Gr=83	5	9	17	4	33	3
Populism creates disinformation Gr=20	2	2	10	2	3	3

"Social media –once hailed as an agent of global concord– has become the purveyor of falsity, anger and hatred. Its algorithms polarise opinion. Its pseudoinformation drives argument to the extremes. Even an apparently stable democracy such as Germany this week finds its centrist consensus torn apart, as the electorate divides between far right and radical left". ("Fear and anger won the election in Brazil. It's a wakeup call to the world", 29-10-2018, *The Guardian*).

4. Discussion and conclusions

This article is intended to help compensate for the limited quantity of studies that, with this combined methodology, address the relation between polarization and information disorders in the European sphere in recent years (**Tucker** *et al.*, 2018). Works that bring together different realities in Europe facilitate an understanding of the shared values and singularities of each media system (**Deirdre**, 2003).

The size and representativeness of the sample made it possible to achieve the objectives outlined. In the first place, a framing analysis was carried out to study polarization and its diverse expressions in the European quality press. Since 2017, this issue has continued to be relevant on the media agenda without any decrease

> Social media are responsible for the spread of disinformation due to their deregulation, and political actors that seek to destabilize other countries take advantage of this

(H1.1). The importance of 2018 lies in the fact that *Facebook* practices that had influenced electoral processes in Europe and the United States were made known, thus showing the fundamental role of social media in the relation between polarization and disinformation. The data for 2020 are due to the Covid-19 pandemic, another priority issue on the agenda.

> Spain is the only country analysed where polarization is a significant issue, not only at the international level but also as a national problem

The polarization that is most written about is political polarization, understood as the ideological or strategic difference and confrontation among party political actors (H1.3). Here too, concern about the debate in public opinion over issue polarization can be seen, but the political dimension has acquired greater importance than in previous periods (**Levendusky**; **Malhotra**, 2016).

This is a question with far-reaching consequences that encompasses the international scene, going beyond national questions, and politicians are identified as its cause. It is significant that, in spite of the fact that the political class is considered to be the instigator of the phenomenon, responsibility for its resolution is shifted onto other actors, since it is considered that the political class is a beneficiary of the situation and has no interest in mitigating its effects (**Villaplana-Jiménez**, 2022). Thus, on the media agenda, the majority warn that this problem is not going to disappear.

Of the European countries considered when analysing the framing strategies, Spain is the only country where a prominent position was found in the sample in general, and in its national newspapers in particular. This strengthens Spain's designation as a polarized pluralist country (**Hallin**; **Mancini**, 2004) where polarization has formed part of the media agenda for many years. In France and the United Kingdom certain similarities were found, although the British newspapers showed greater concern about the phenomena studied with their gaze directed at the United States. In the French newspapers less interest was found in either field, and the repercussions of these occurrences in the national scenario are not frequently debated (H1.2).

The second objective of the investigation was to analyse the relation between polarization and information disorders to identify the instigators and possible proposed solutions. As a first fundamental conclusion with respect to this terminological pair, it should be underscored that disinformation has predominated in the coverage of the quality press, where it is presented as a critical or acute problem at the present time, while polarization has been addressed with a chronic approach, as something endemic to our age.

Regarding the international significance of the problem, the responsibility of the political agents of the big powers (the United States, Brazil, Russia) and, primordially social media, is clearly indicated (**Tucker** *et al.*, 2018) (H2.1). In the two American cases reference is made to the domestic situation of the respective countries, while Russia is pointed to as the creator of information disorders to polarize the rest of the world (**Mejías**; **Vokuev**, 2017).

The conclusion is that social networks do not create disinformation, but reproduce it and in this way feed polarization. Although in a minority of pieces, always promoted by the technological companies themselves, reference is made to the potential of social media to enrich the public space of debate and break echo chambers (**Barberá**, 2015), the fact is that they are considered to hold an outstanding responsibility for the phenomenon due to their lack of self-regulation and the opacity of their algorithm. The way to resolve this, or at least attempt to palliate it, is by referring to the potentials of quality information and the public media –essentially in the United Kingdom– and the responsibility of citizens facing social media (**Zimmermann**; **Kohring**, 2020).

The second fundamental conclusion to be drawn is that disinformation is a contemporary weapon, used by states and political leaders to destabilize western democracies. They create false content and spread this over social media, making use of the latter's viralization mechanisms, to feed echo chambers –taking advantage of the isolation between groups generated due to affective polarization– and in this way divide international public opinion.

The press outlines a common procedure to confront the phenomenon. In the first place, it identifies political actors as the promoters of polarization and disinformation, but demands that civil society and the private sector collaborate in the solution (**Liotti**, 2014), while warning that achieving this is complex. Similarly, reference is made to quality journalism and fact-checking as necessary strategies (**Au**; **Ho**; **Chiu**, 2022).

Thus, in the second place, great importance is assigned to the press in confronting polarization and information disorders in contemporary democracies. In critical contexts of current geopolitics, and facing convulsive scenarios –the war in Ukraine, the pandemic, the situation in the United States or Brazil– the importance of quality journalism is asserted (**Tandoc**; **Jenkins**; **Craft**, 2018) (H2.2). Trust is placed in the literacy of citizens and constructive journalism to fight against polarization and contain disinformation as these are phenomena that can undermine democracy (**Van-Antwerpen**; **Turnbull**; **Searston**, 2022).

The present article has answered the questions posed, but suggests new ones. The proposal is for a future investigation to be carried out on the dialogue between

> In the United Kingdom the value of the public media in confronting political polarization is asserted

information disorders and polarization in the American media, with the objective of understanding both the national gaze and the gaze directed at international actors such as Russia and Europe. Similarly, the replicability of the methodology created for this article will make it possible to validate its usefulness and objectivity, and thus overcome possible limitations in the results.

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