New agents of mass disinformation. Analysis of the publications produced by Spanish political influencers on Instagram

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Abstract. Social media has impacted the way content is both produced and consumed at a mass scale. Influencers have gained, in this new scenario, a notable ascendence over their large audiences; and, though there have been several attempts at analyzing their role, many have lacked systematicity (Riedl et al., 2021). This research aims to shed light on two main research goals: determining whether political influencers disinform; and, if so, detecting possible patterns in the disinforming content that reaches their audiences. In order to do so, the most relevant political influencers were identified, and, subsequently, the contents produced by them were analyzed using the taxonomy on disinformation proposed by Kapantai et al. (2020). Findings show that influencers play a key role in disseminating disinformation on Instagram, since the vast majority of the accounts analyzed (92%) do generate this type of content, which have a large impact on young audiences.
Keywords: Disinformation; Fake news; Influencers; Politics; Instagram.

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Resumen. Las redes sociales han revolucionado la producción y el consumo de contenidos a gran escala; escenario en el que los influencers han adquirido un notable influjo sobre grandes audiencias. Aunque hay investigaciones que han tratado de analizar su papel, en muchos casos han carecido de sistematicidad (Riedl et al., 2021). Nuestro artículo plantea dos objetivos principales –determinar, por un lado, si los influencers políticos desinforman; y, en caso afirmativo, detectar posibles patrones en los contenidos desinformadores que llegan a sus audiencias– y para ello identifica, primero, a los influencers políticos más relevantes y, posteriormente, analiza sus contenidos utilizando la taxonomía sobre desinformación de Kapantai et al. (2020). Los resultados muestran que los influencers juegan un papel clave en la difusión de desinformación política en Instagram; ya que la gran mayoría de las cuentas analizadas (92%) generan estos contenidos, que afectan, sobre todo, a usuarios jóvenes.
Palabras clave: Desinformación; noticias falsas; influencers; política; Instagram.

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1. Introduction

Digitalisation has radically transformed the way in which information is consumed. In particular, social networks have become a powerful means of disseminating, creating, and consuming information. In this scenario, a new figure, capable of gathering thousands of followers and generating a large mass of content, has emerged – influencers. These are peo-ple who dedicate their professional activity to social networks, forging true communities (Wielki, 2020), and becoming opinion leaders (Casaló et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017).

However, Tsubokura (2018) has already pointed out that information on social media is not always as accurate as audiences may expect, noting that more emotional and eye-catching content tends to spread more rapidly as well. Authors like Abidin et al.

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(2021), Mena et al. (2020), Lawson (2021), or Niehr (2021) have also noted a record of cases in which influencers, consciously or unconsciously, have contributed to the spread of hoaxes, or amplified conspiracy theories.

In this sense, Trepte and Scherer (2010) point out that opinion leaders can be uninformed, yet still maintain high levels of leadership and credibility, which makes it crucial to investigate the extent to which they are truly conveying accurate information. These influential profiles ultimately play a key role in catalyzing, amplifying, and/or silencing content.

It is in said context that this research seeks to deepen the knowledge on influencers and the possible disinforming connotations of the political content they share with their followers. In order to do so, the state of the art aims to shed light on the two conceptual fields that are put into relation in this investigation: information disorders as a social phenomenon, on the one hand, and political influencers, on the other.

2. State of the art

2.1. Disinformation as a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon

The pervasive influence of the online sphere on spaces of public information has changed the way users interact with content and, as an inevitable result of this, the way content is produced and organized. The informative offer tends to a progressive customization of content. The open and free nature of content disseminated through social media has led to an increasing obsession for immediacy, which comes with some obvious perks, but also many disadvantages. Amongst the latter, Hylland (2001, p. 70) warned, in the early years of the World Wide Web, that "In a 'free and fair' competition between a slow and a fast version of the 'same thing', the fast version wins. The question is what gets lost on the way. The short answer to this question is context and understanding; the longer one involves credibility".

Technology has enabled the possibility of rapidly spreading content of all nature. In this new environment, the "information cascades" (Vosoughi et al., 2018) are the perfect environment for masses of disinforming content to be produced at a low cost and with a huge impact, in a scale that is unprecedented in history (Boczkowski, 2016). Iconic examples of how disinforming content may have impacted key moments in recent history, such as the US Presidential Election in 2016 or Brexit (Nigro, 2018; Del-Fresno-García, 2019), have led authors like Badillo (2019) to remind the indisputable interest of the phenomenon of information disorders at an international level.

The European Comission (2018a) defended that disinformation could manipulate social debates and behaviors and undermine the public's trust in scientific knowledge, and Magallón-Rosa (2018a) also warned of its harmful effects in rewriting history. The Economic World Forum referred to disinformation, especially at a mass, online scale, as one of the most threatening risks for modern societies, highlighting its technological and geopolitical implications (Howell, 2013).

2.2. Towards a conceptual clarification of informative disorders

Although the complexity of information disorders has been versed upon in the previous epigraph, the need to shed academic light on the field requires a systematic approach in the categorisation of the different forms that said phenomenon can adopt. This is why it is particularly valuable that different organizations have attempted in the last years to categorize and update the different shapes adopted by disinforming contents.

Particularly remarkable, in this respect, is the initial distinction made by First Draft between the three key categories of misinformation (inaccurate content without an intention to deceive), malinformation (partly accurate content with an aim to harm) and disinformation (inaccurate content that also tries to cause harm), published by the Council of Europe (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and later adopted by UNESCO (2018) in their *Handbook for journalism education and training*. A token of how rapidly the phenomenon was evolving is the fact that Claire Wardle, one of the two authors of the aforesaid seminal work, acknowledged in 2019 that "the techniques we saw in 2016 have evolved. We are increasingly seeing the weaponisation of context, the use of genuine content, but content that is warped and reframed" (Wardle, 2019a).

This led Wardle to specify in the aforementioned report for the Council of Europe a more detailed categorisation of the phenomenon that would be further developed in yet another reference guide, *Understanding Information Disorder* (Wardle, 2019b). The seven shapes that information disorders could present –ordered by their potential to cause harm– can be seen in Figure 1.

First Draft's ascendence in later attempts to further categorize and/or provide support to audiences looking for orientation when it came to combat disinforming content is undeniable. Disinformation was, for instance, coincidentally defined by the European Comission in 2018 as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (European Comission, 2018b, p. 4). Nevertheless, due to the growing importance and new shapes information disorders are adopting, different categorisations (EAVI 2018; Zannettou et al., 2018; and Kumar & Shah, 2018) have emerged, and they need to be considered in the conceptual framework to depict the current state of informative disorders.

Other works, like Kapantai *et al.*'s (2020), have made a further effort to condense the conceptual work of numerous researchers and institutions,

amongst which the ones mentioned before. As a result of this, they propose an extensive taxonomy of the phenomenon of disinformation that has been adopted for this paper, as will be mentioned in the methodology chapter. Said taxonomy establishes eleven criteria and their respective definitions to shed light on the effort to conceptualize the phenomenon of information disorders. Figure 2 reproduces criteria, definitions and the sources used by Kapantai *et al.* (2020, p. 25).

Figure 1. Types of Mis– and Disinformation. Source: Wardle & Derakhshan (2017, p. 17).
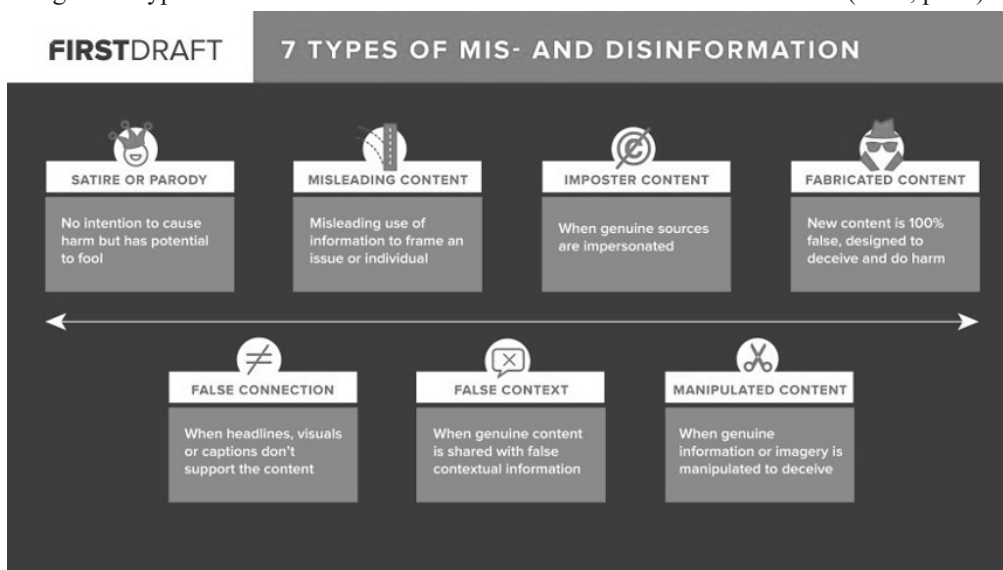

Figure 2. Taxonomy for the categorization of disinformation. Source: Kapantai *et al.* (2020: 25).

No.	Type	Definition
1	Fabricated	Stories that completely lack of any factual base, 100% false. The intention is to deceive and cause harm (**Wardle and Derakhshan**, 2017). One of the most severe types (**Zannettou** *et al.*, 2018) as fabrication adopts the style of news articles so the recipients believe it is legitimate (**Edson** *et al.*, 2017). Could be text but also in visual format (**Ireton and Posetti**, 2018).
2	Imposter	Genuine sources that are impersonated with false, made-up sources to support basically a false narrative. It is actually very misleading since source or author is considered great criteria of verifying credibility (**House Of Commons**, 2018; **Zannettou** *et al.*, 2018; **Wardle and Derekshan**, 2017). (use of journalists name/ logo /branding of mimic URLs)
3	Conspiracy theories	Stories without factual base as there is no established baseline for truth. They usually explain important events as secret plots by government or powerful individuals (**Zannettou** *et al.*, 2018). Conspiracies are, by definition, difficult to verify as true or false, and they are typically originated by people who believe them to be true (**Allcott and Gentzkow**, 2017). Evidences that refute the conspiracy are regarded as further proof of the conspiracy (**EAVI**, 2018). Some conspiracy theories may have damaging ripple-effects.
4	Hoaxes	Relatively complex and large-scale fabrications which may include deceptions that go beyond the scope of fun or scam and cause material loss or harm to the victim (**Rubin** *et al.*, 2015). They contain facts that are either false or inaccurate and are presented as legitimate facts. This category is also known in the research community either as half-truth or factoid stories (**Zannettou** *et al.*, 2018) able to convince readers of the validity of a paranoia-fueled story (**Rashkin** *et al.*, 2017).
5	Biased or one-sided	Stories that are extremely biased toward a person/party/situation/event driving division and polarization. The context of this type of news information is extremely imbalanced (i.e. left or right wing), inflammatory, emotional and often riddled with untruths. They contain either a mixture of true and false or mostly false, thus misleading information designed to confirm a particular ideological view (**Zannettou** *et al.*, 2018; **Potthast** *et al.*, 2018).
6	Rumors	Refers to stories whose truthfulness is ambiguous or never confirmed (gossip, innuendo, unverified claims). This kind of false information is widely propagated on online social networks (**Peterson and Gist**, 1951).
7	Clickbait	Sources that provide generally credible or dubious factual content but deliberately use exaggerated, misleading, and unverified headlines and thumbnails (**Rehm**, 2018; **Szpakowski**, 2018) to lure readers open the intended Web page (**Ghanem** *et al.*, 2018). The goal is to increase their traffic for profit, popularity, or sensationalization (**Pujahari and Sisodia**, 2019; **Zannettou** *et al.*, 2018). Once the reader is there, the content rarely satisfies their interest (**EAVI**, 2018).
8	Misleading connection	Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual. When headlines, visuals, or captions do not support the content. Separate parts of source information may be factual but are presented using wrong connection (context/content).
9	Fake reviews	Any (positive, neutral, or negative) review that is not an actual consumer's honest and impartial opinion or that does not reflect a consumer's genuine experience of a product, service or business (**Valant**, 2015).
10	Trolling	The act of deliberately posting offensive or inflammatory content to an online community with the intent of provoking readers or disrupting conversation. Today, the term "troll" is most often used to refer to any person harassing or insulting others online (**Wardle** *et al.*, 2018).
11	Pseudoscience	Information that misrepresents real scientific studies with dubious or false claims. Often contradicts experts (**EAVI**, 2018). Promotes metaphysics, naturalistic fallacies, and other (**Guacho** *et al.*, 2018). The actors hijack scientific legitimacy for profit or fame (**Forstorp**, 2005).

2.3. New spheres of impact: influencers and politics

As previously discussed, new spheres of influence have emerged after the Internet changed the paradigm of mass communication forever. Influencers have become not only impactful actors in the public sphere, but also credible sources that some have referred to as substitutes of traditional media in the information diet of many users. More specifically, in Spain, 53% of the Internet users follow influencing profiles. A conceptual clarification of the term itself would require a reminder that influencers are considered those that not only have many followers and high engagement rates, but that work professionally in the field that they create content about (in the case that this research focuses on, politics), and owe their prescriptive capacity precisely to this expertise. In addition, it is worth noting the intrinsic relationship between the term "influencer" and Instagram as a social network. Not only because the origins of the term and what we know of it today can be found in this social network, but because metrics reveal that when users follow influencers, 74% of the times this happens on Instagram (IAB, 2022a.) The advertising industry, in fact, considers Instagram as their preferred social network: in 2022 72% of marketers used Instagram for influencer campaigns.

In the specific case of political influencers, which as aforestated is the main focus of this research due to its obvious impact on modern democratic societies, Riedl et al. (2021, p. 2) warn that "political influencers" are not conceptualized uniformly across studies(…)", though these same authors suggest to drop merely "influential accounts–such as those from politicians–", and prioritise those native content creators "more closely related to traditional social media influencers".

Several studies have shown that, under certain conditions and strategies, followers trust influencers because of their expertise on topics they produce content about (Sarmiento-Guede, 2019; Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Belanche et al., 2021). A positive effect of the influence of these content producers on social networks may be the rise in specific profiles devoted to science (Buitrago, 2022; Alonso, 2022; González Romo, 2020), especially when put in relation to studies proving the role played by influencers in rising young people's interest in scientific content (Donhauser & Beck, 2021). A similar effect occurs with the emergence of studygrammers (Izquierdo-Iranzo et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, the combination of reach and credibility of influencers becomes a new challenge in the fight against misinformation. Amongst the most affected areas by this phenomenon of information disruption, politics has especially received research attention due to the democratic, social and organizational effects it entails (Kuklinski, 2000; Swire, 2017; Hochschild, 2015; Bergmann, 2018). As a cause or consequence of the current information saturation and spectacularization of politics, political influencers have managed to generate special attention to their messages (Bause, 2021). These digital opinion leaders become great generators of content, positioning themselves as referents in the minds of users, and they do so in this case in a social network such as Instagram, marked by a visual character, superficiality and ephemeral content (Aguado, 2020).

In this regard, authors like Riedl et al. (2021, p. 5) have pointed out that the study of political influencers is "still limited by a lack of systematic empirical evidence". Future research could work with both qualitative (see, for instance, Abdulmajeed and El Ibiary, 2020) as well as quantitative empirical designs to examine the role political influencers play in public discourse". This perspective has also inspired the design of this research, which will be explained in full detail in the Methodology chapter.

3. Research goals and methodology

This investigation hinges upon two main research goals and three secondary objectives. As the key focus of this research is the link between the dialectics between political influencers and disinformation, the first main research goal (RG1) would be, precisely, to determine whether political influencers disinform and, if so, specify what type of information disorder is occurring.

Additionally, this paper aims to shed light on possible patterns in the discourse of disinformation, which constitutes the second main goal (RG2) and can be articulated through three secondary research goals:

SG1: To specify the characteristics of the accounts where disinformation comes from.
SG2: To determine what type of contents, within the discourse of political influencers, contain disinformation.
SG3: To determine what groups, within the audience, follow the accounts that may disseminate this disinforming content.

Connected to these general and specific research goals, a quantitative methodology articulated around content analysis is used. The proposed categories of analysis follow the taxonomy established by Kapantai et al. (2020), that were previously discussed in the theoretical framework. It should be noted that, unlike other taxonomies used as a standard for categorizing informative disorders, such as those used by First-Draft (also mentioned in the literary review), Kapantai et al.'s excludes satire, parody and other comical devices that do not meet the "intent to harm" requisite and are therefore more aimed to entertain (Kapantai et al., 2020: 13). In this respect, the "harmful aspect" is prioritized, following the definition of disinformation provided by the European Commission (2018b), and which has been used as a reference framework for this research.

Regarding the sample selection for the application of these categories of analysis to the content from political influencers on Instagram, a two-step process was followed: a first phase of identification and selection of profiles; and a second phase for the selection of content for analysis.

Synthesio and Shinebuzz software tools were used to identify the most relevant political influencer profiles on Instagram in Spain. Synthesio is a social intelligence software that collects and analyzes conversation on social networks in order to identify relevant profiles participating in it, as well as the most important flows and topics. Shinebuzz is an influencer profile analysis tool that gathers information from social networks by accessing influencers' performance metrics. This allows them to measure the impact and notoriety of the accounts and identify similar profiles.

When identifying the profiles of political influencers, we have considered the definition of influencers given by Abidin (2015, p. 1): «Influencers are everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media». This premise is crucial to focus on native SMIs profiles and exclude the accounts of political leaders, political parties, journalists, or show business celebrities who comment on current political events, but can not be considered native SMIs since they owe their notoriety to their offline and professional activity. Our research aligns with the trajectory proposed by Munoz (2021), who advances the notion of «influencers-activist» as a progression from cyberactivism. Naderer (2023) focus on non-political SMIs, defining the potential of influencers as political agents and their ability to reach uninterested users and motivate political action. Arnesson (2022, p. 1) proposes that «the political potential of influencers might not always be as spokespersons for a cause or party, but rather as ideological intermediaries who promote a lifestyle to be inspired by, and aspire to.

When selecting the profiles of political influencers, we have also taken into account, as anticipated in the previous literary review, our focus on "native" Instagram profiles; since, otherwise, the accounts of political leaders, political parties, journalists, or show business celebrities who comment on current political events would also have to be considered as influencers. The fact that the Instagrammer's notoriety is required to come from his or her specific activity on this social network, and not from other occupations, excludes accounts that owe their mass of followers to the exercise of a profession or activity prior to or different from their activity on Instagram. In the case of politics, adding accounts whose notoriety stemmed, rather, from their offline activities would require to not only include the accounts of political leaders and parties, but also media and journalists whose content deals with politics as a result of the direct exercise of their profession, or celebrities that can be related to politics (such as singers or actors).

Other criteria applied to obtain the profiles of the most relevant political influencers on Instagram in Spain aimed at including, for instance, those frequently cited by leading social network analysts –with the goal of identifying macro-influencer profiles (Cotter, 2019; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). Others were also included in relation to the nature of the accounts (Riedl et al., 2021), their thematic scope (Suuronen et al., 2022) and geographic scope. As a result of this criteria based on the aforestated references, the final selection required that the accounts analysed meet the following requisites:

- Having more than 25,000 followers, of which at least 10,000 must be Spanish.
- Registering an average engagement rate per publication of at least 1%.
- Regularly generating publications with high political content.
- That the influence of the owners of these accounts stem from their creation of specialized political content, not from their role in professional politics or as political journalists.

This last criterion ensures that all the attention of this research falls on the figure of the "content creator" associated with the definition and activity of influencers on Instagram, and not on the relevant figures associated with politics in traditional scenarios and media –for whom this social network is one more means, among others, to channel their activity. This criterion of identifying the influencer as a figure who owes his notoriety to the activity he carries out in networks, follows the definition discussed in the literature review of this paper and relates to the works of authors like Riedl et al., (2021) or Suuronen et al. (2022).

This first phase of identifying the influencer profiles included in the study took place between April 15 and August 10, 2022. A total of 40 accounts met the selection criteria (Figure 3).

In a second phase, a representative sample of the content that was going to be analyzed was selected with a later aim to apply to it the aforementioned taxonomy of the disinformation phenomenon. The population size, taking into account the totality of the contents published by the influencers (N=40) is 54,116 publications. The sampling unit was established by selecting the ten most recent fixed-format content at the date of extraction (September 27, 2022). This way, a total of 400 publications constituted the final sampling unit. The recording unit is the image or video of the content itself, as well as the text or caption accompanying the image.

This analysis has a margin of error of 5%, and a confidence level of 95%, so that the sample offers sufficient representativeness according to descriptive statistics applied to media (Riffe et al., 2019). The coding of these contents using the disinformation taxonomy was carried out manually by two of the authors of the research. In order to ensure reliability, a pooled sample of 100 publications was analyzed. After two rounds of coding, a level of agreement of 91.2% was obtained.

Figure 3. Most relevant political *Influencers* on Instagram (N=40) in Spain. Source: own elaboration.
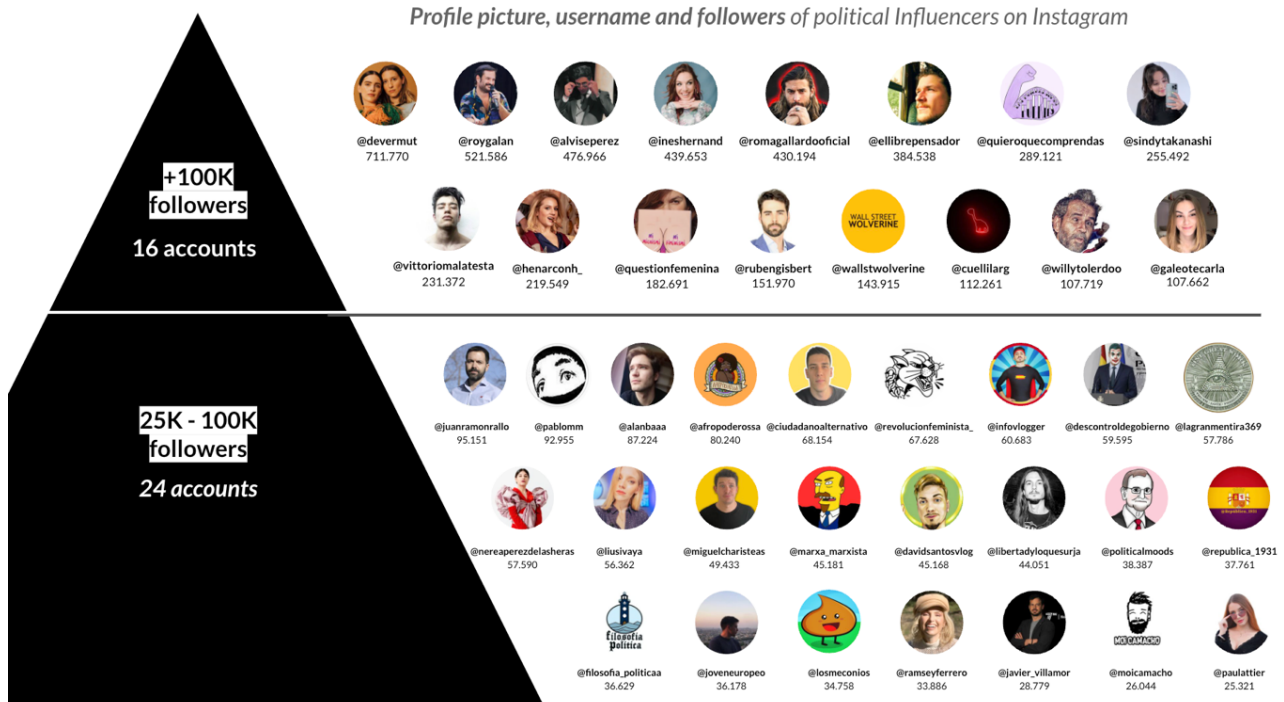
Finally, in order to respond to SG1-3, the results obtained in relation to the level of disinformation were triangulated with data extracted from the influencers' profiles, their audience, and the contents under study (N=400). The categories belonging to "Influencer profile" and "Content" were obtained and coded manually. The remaining categories belonging to "Influencer performance" were extracted with the tool Shinebuzz. The extraction and coding process was carried out on September 27, 2022 (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Metrics extracted from the profiles of political influencers (N=40), their contents (n=400) and their audience. Source: own elaboration.

Categories	Description/operationalization
Influencer profile	
Name	Profile name on Instagram. It can be the real name of the person or a pseudonym.
Username	User name on Instagram, which can be different from the profile name. It is the name that appears after the "@".
Profile bio	Brief description about the user and/or the contents offered by that profile.
Verified Badge	Verifying badge for the profile granted by Instagram to officially appoint that account as authentic and belonging to a public personality.
Gender	Male / Female / NA/NK.
Age ranges	13-17 / 18-24 / 25-35 / 35-44 / 45-54 / 55-64 / +64 / NA/NK.
Educational level achieved	Baccalaureate / Vocational training / Graduate / Post-graduate / NA/NK.
Education	Area of knowledge in which the influencer has been trained.
Content	
Number of posts	Total amount of posts published up to the extraction date.
Topic of the publication	Topic related to politics treated by the publication: International / National / Society / Economy / Environment / Culture / Identities / Others
Instagram Format	Reel / Live / Carousel / Post (depending on availability at the moment of extraction)
Publication Format	Image / Video
Length of the *caption*	Amount of characters in the text field of the publication on Instagram: Short (<150 characters) / Medium (150-500 characters) / Long (>500 characters)
Influencer performance	
Number of followers	Influencer's total amount of followers.
Audience localization	Spanish audience (total and relative) amongst the influencer's total audience

Categories	Description/operationalization
Audience gender	Male / Female / NA/NK
Audience ranges	13-17 / 18-24 / 25-35 / 35-44 / 45-54 / 55-64 / +64
Likes	Average of likes of the 50 last posts
Comments	Average of comments of the 50 last posts
Shares	Average of shares of the 50 last posts
Saves	Average of saves of the 50 last posts
Total engagement	Average of likes, comments, shares and post saves
Engagement rate	Using the formula accepted on Instagram: result of the sum of likes, comments, shares and saves (total engagement), divided by the number of followers of the account multiplied by 100

4. Results

4.1. *Influencers, a key figure of political disinformation on Instagram*

A first important result after applying the disinformation taxonomy to the sample of content analyzed (N=400) indicates that 213 of the publications contain some type of disinformation, which confirms that more than half of the content created by political influencers on Instagram (53%) can be labelled as disinforming.

From the total of the influencers studied (N=40), only three of them manage to avoid generating content that includes any type of disinformation, which means, in turn, that a vast majority of the influencers analyzed, 92% (37), do generate disinforming content. In the most extreme cases, represented by four of these accounts, 100% of the content analysed is disinformative.

To understand the true scope of these results, it is necessary to remember that the 40 political influencers accumulate a total of 54,116 publications; an average of 1,387 publications per profile. We are, therefore, analyzing great content generators. In addition, they have an average engagement rate of 3.65% and an average of 174,488 interactions per publication (158,111 likes, 1,784 comments, 13,112 shares and 1,481 saves). Taking these data (especially the engagement rate) into consideration, it can be determined that these profiles have high levels of interaction with their audience and the content they generate is well liked by their audiences. These metrics connect to disinformation in a relevant way, as the phenomenon achieves, under the activity of influencers, a particularly striking diffusion power, with important viralizations given the high number of shares registered.

There are also relevant findings in light of the results obtained through the triangulation between data coming from the content analysis and the information retrieved regarding the influencers' profiles. The profile verification badge granted by Instagram, which by definition seems to grant greater credibility to those who enjoy it, does not guarantee, however,

that political influencers publish quality information. 23% (9) of the influencers analyzed have badges, and the disinformation generated by these profiles represents 28% (60) of the total disinforming content (n=213).

Another widespread belief that our results seem to at least nuance is related to the use of pseudonyms. The absence of a real name tends to generate more doubts as to the reliability of the information broadcast. However, the use or not of a pseudonym does not have a significant impact in the case of political influencers, as proved by the fact that the rates of disinformation do not vary substantially between one type of account and another.

Nor does the influencers' level of education have a significant impact. 14 of the profiles analyzed (N=40) are graduates or postgraduates in Economics, Law or Political Science. However, this knowledge does not exclude them from generating disinformation at the same level as the rest of the profiles, whose level of studies is lower. The average amount of content with disinformation for graduates and postgraduates is 59.2%, while for those without university studies the percentage is lower (51.2%).

4.2. A multi-faceted phenomenon: one post, many types of disinformation

As indicated by several authors the same content or news item can, and in fact often does, present different types of disinformation. For instance, conspiracy and pseudoscience are often found together (EAVI, 2018). In this respect, the analysis points out that 59% (125) of the disinforming content simultaneously present more than one type of disinformation. Specifically, the most striking cases show that 15% (31) of the content can be categorized in three types of disinformation at the same time, and 8% (17), in four. The sum of all the different types of disinformation recorded in the 213 units with disinforming content found results in a total of 413, an average of 1.98 types of disinformation per content unit labelled as disinforming.

Regarding the influencers' profiles, a prominent correlation has been found between the influencers

who generate more disinforming content and those with higher records of different types of disinformation per publication. Overabundance of disinformation in these profiles occurs due to a steady recurrence of the "Biased or one-sided", "Trolling" and "Misleading connection" categories, but have also differential traits such as the recurring appearance of other categories like "Hoaxes", "Conspiracy theories" or "Rumors".

4.3. Biased, offensive, and deceitful content

Regarding the patterns of recurrence of different categories of disinformation in the influencers studied, the most common is "Biased or one-sided" present in 29.5% of the content studied (118 out of 400 contents), followed by "Trolling" with 24,5% (98), and "Misleading connection" with 19,8% (79). Other recurring disinformation categories are "Conspiracy theories" (32) and "Hoaxes" (30) (see figure 5).

Figure 5. Recurrence of different categories of disinformation. Source: own elaboration.
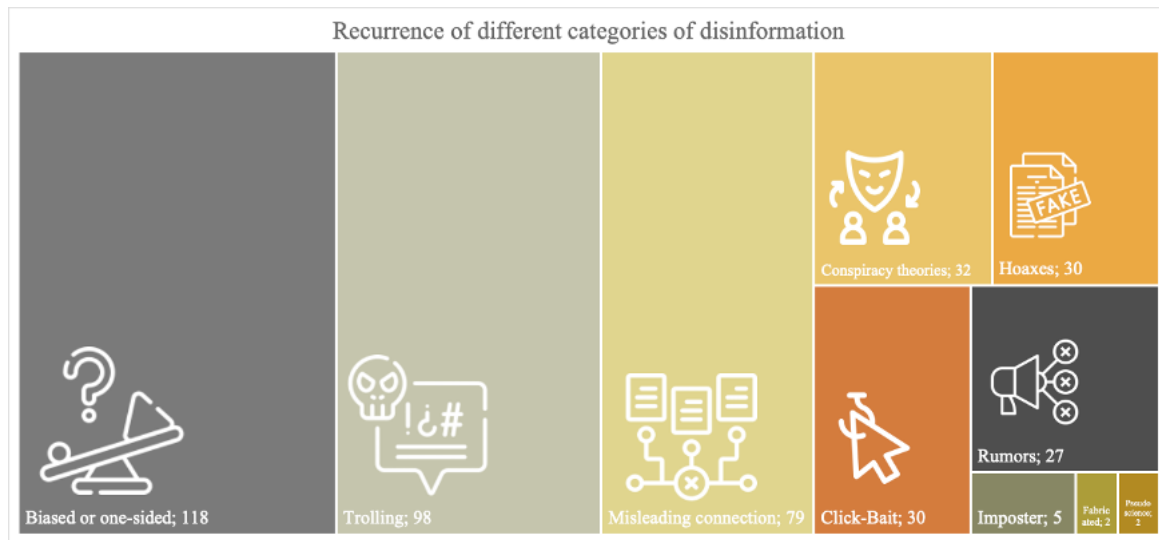
With much less recurrence, although worth commenting due to its relationship with the particularities of these profiles on Instagram, "Clickbait" (5) is also found. It is usually employed to link the influencer's publication to other content on networks such as YouTube, Twitter and Telegram –motivated, as explained by the influencers themselves, by the fear of censorship on Instagram. Regarding the "Imposter" (5) content found, it is worth noting that, the few publications in this category that indicated the source, did so in a very vague manner –with an Instagram handle or mentioning the source or author in an unspecific way. Furthermore, in relation to this last category, although not directly related to its definition, it should be noted that four cases of plagiarism of information coming from media reports were found.

There is hardly any record of the "Fabricated" category (2), which was labelled by many of the sources presented in the literary review as the most serious type of disinformation. No disinforming content belonging to the "Fake reviews" category has been registered either, most likely due to the political nature of the content of the profiles analyzed. Figure 5 shows the most recurring types of disinforming content that appear in the profiles of political influencers studied.

Figure 6 illustrates several examples of disinforming content found in our analysis. The first one, for instance, illustrates a case of biased publication by influencer @galeotecarla, followed by 107.622 users. In the publication, she reviews and

explains the Bill on the comprehensive guarantee of sexual freedom, omitting passages of it and making a biased interpretation of it (Carla Galeote, 2022). An example of misleading connection could be pro-Russian influencer @liusivaya's trip to "report" on the "reality" of the war in Ukraine, where she uses street lighting in Frankfurt to point out the lack of security and fear in Von der Leyden's EU –she ultimately ends up linking it all to the rise of the extreme right in Europe (Liu Sivaya, 2022). Example 3 is a case of disinforming content linked to trolling and satire: political influencer @infovlogger insults and calls a government minister a degenerate on television, accusing her of having been working for years to launder money and promote pederasty and paedophilia (InfoVlogger, 2022). It should be noted that this political influencer had his Instagram account censored on several occasions for violating the platform's rules, even though he describes himself as a journalist in his Instagram bio.

An example of hoaxes could be @pablomm criticising the president of the Autonomous Community of Madrid for declaring an official mourning period to honour Queen Elizabeth II after she passed away. As a continuation of this criticism, @pablomm also accused the president's party of not having offered condolences to deceased writer Almudena Grandes (Pablomm, 2022) –which was untrue, since both the president and the party sent their condolences to the

writer's family– while linking the argument to the deaths provoked by Covid-19. @pablomm's example illustrate a case that falls into two categories of disinformation: hoax, first, and the misleading connection, afterwards. Another example of content that falls into several categories of disinforming content is the last

caption, published by Alvise Perez (2022), who has nearly half a million followers. In this video, with an aim to promote his telegram group that qualifies as clickbaiting, he pours out a series of conspiratorial messages about the power elite, corruption, judges and the media.

Figure 6. Examples of political influencers' disinfoming content. Source: own elaboration.
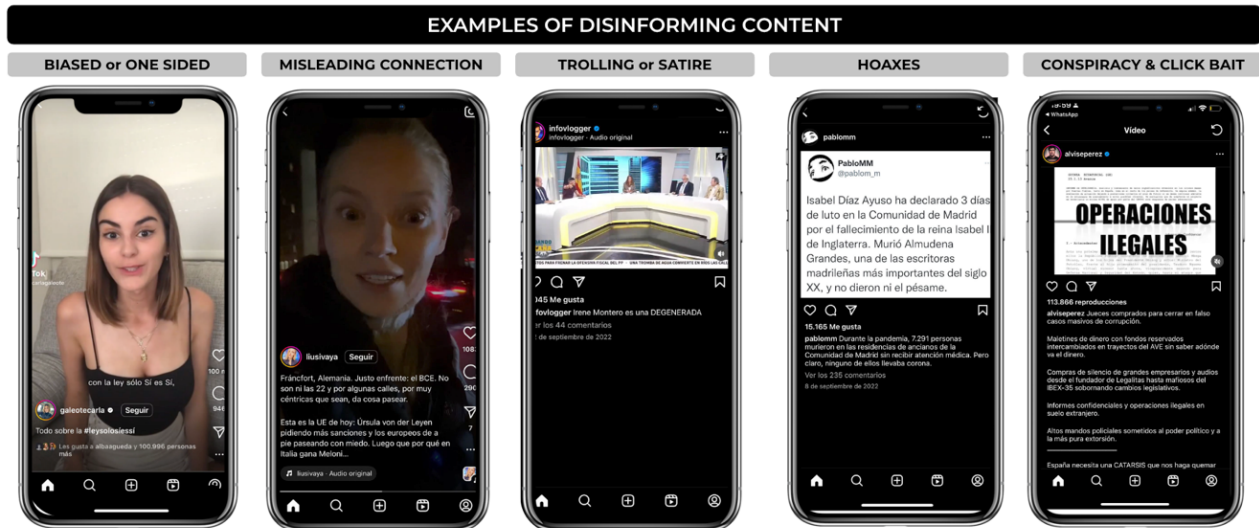
4.4. Disinformation follows trendy formats and breaking news thematics

In relation to the topics where disinformation occurs more frequently, the most recurring are identity politics, with 34% (73); international politics, with 18% (38); national politics, with 15% (31); and Economy, with 14% (29). The remaining 19% of the disinformation spotted in this study is distributed amongst various topics, such as environment, health, culture, social issues, or political correctness.

With regard to the formats used by disinformation publications (N=213), disinformation appears most frequently in Reels (video format), and with a more varied use in terms of the types recorded. Disinformation in Reels (110) represents more than half of the cases of disinformation, and up to 252 types are recorded. The Reels in which this misinformation materializes are videos in which the influencer himself makes comments on camera on a specific topic, as well as productions and interventions of the influencers themselves in the media.

As for images, misinformation appears more in content with a greater textual content (screenshots, tweets, texts) than in those that rely on purely visual elements (photographs, illustrations, graphic compositions). As for the length of the caption, disinformation is supported by publications with short text, 150 characters or less.

4.5. Audience patterns and disinforming effects on them

The 40 influencers analyzed have an impact on 6,031,403 users, an average of 150,000 followers per

influencer. Of that total amount of users who follow political influencers, 94% (5,678,316) are impacted by some form of disinformation –in other words, only 6% (353,087) consume disinformation-free content. 33% of users (1,974,975) are impacted by at least 7 disinforming contents out of every 10 published by the influencer they follow.

In relation to gender, the proportion of female followers is 60% (3,591,327), while 40% (2,440,075) are men –hence, there are more female users impacted by disinforming content coming from these accounts. However, a remarkable trend in this metric is that there is a direct relationship between the level of disinformation and the proportion of male users who consume it: the higher the number of disinforming contents, the higher the proportion of men.

With respect to the age ranges of the audience, 4.2% (258,000) of the followers of the influencers studied are between 13 and 17 years old; 34.3% (2,069,809), between 18 and 24; 39.2% (2,368,685.02), between 25 and 34; 15% (905,086) between 35 and 44; 7% (425,871) between 45 and 64; and the remaining 0.06% (3,755) are over 65.

As can be deduced from the data above, political influencers have a mostly young audience, 78% (4,696,495) of their followers are under 34 years old, so it is worth noting the seriousness of the impact of their disinforming content impacts mainly these young generations. In fact, for influencer accounts with all their content labelled as disinforming, users under 34 amounts to 87% of the total audience, which means that nearly half a million young people (461,094) follow highly disinforming influencers.

Figure 7. Sex distribution by amount disinforming content. Source: own elaboration.
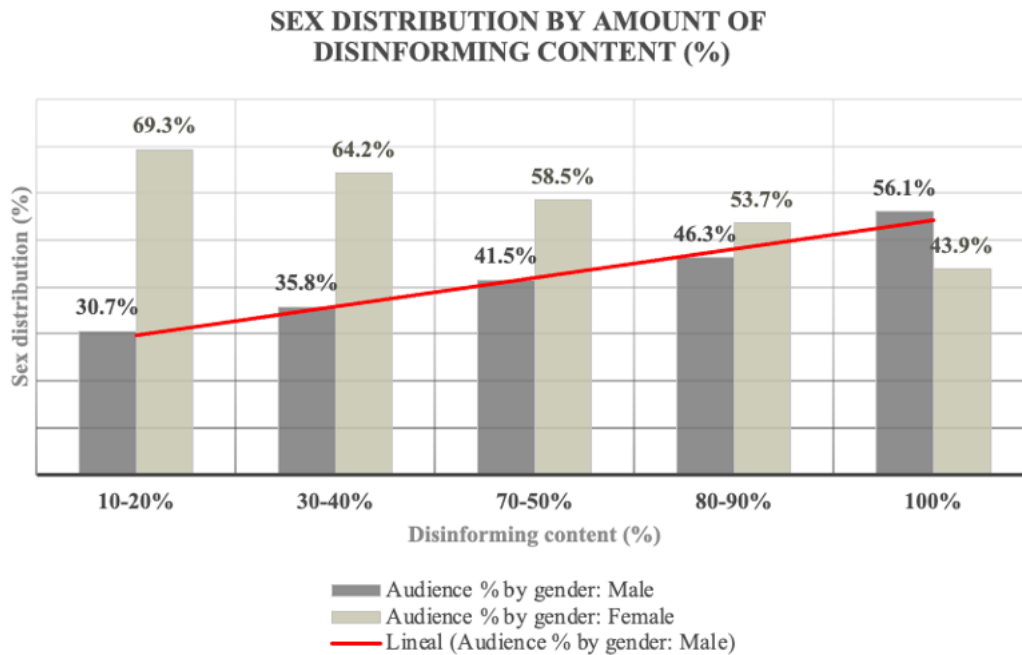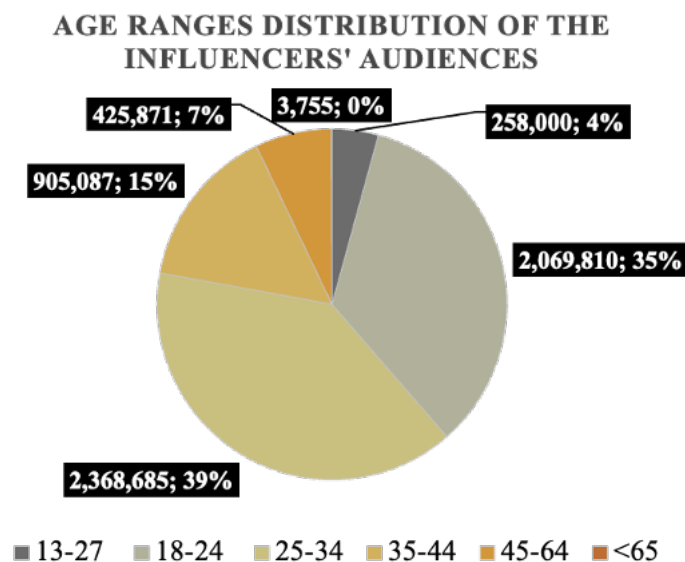
SEX DISTRIBUTION BY AMOUNT OF DISINFORMING CONTENT (%)

Figure 8. Age ranges distribution of the influencers' audiences

AGE RANGES DISTRIBUTION OF THE INFLUENCERS' AUDIENCES

A final note in this respect lies in the impact of disinformation coming from these profiles on users between the ages of 13 and 17. Although this range represents a smaller percentage of the audience share (4%), their vulnerability is undoubtedly greater.

5. Conclusions

The research carried out shows high levels of disinformation by political influencers on Instagram. In this respect, and in relation to our RG1, it can be concluded that political influencers are a key figure of disinformation on this social network, both because of the high rates of disinforming content in relation to the total amount of publications they feed their users with, and because of the wide range of disinforming categories in their discourse.

Regarding the latter, the most recurrent types of disinformation registered in the analysis ("Biased or one-sided" and "Trolling") are consonant with what could be expected from ideologically polarized profiles and strongly politicized content. These results are also consistent with the previous hypotheses on the negative effects of political influencers in terms of radicalization (Riedl et al., 2021; Abidin et al., 2021; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Schmuck et al., 2022). In addition, the presence of other categories such as "Conspiracy theories" or "Hoaxes" confirm the results of these previous investigations. All in all, the contents published by political influencers can be characterized as biased, offensive and misleading.

Moreover, the average results obtained in how wide the range of disinformation categories that occur simultaneously is (an indicator that, coincidentally, rises as the content published by the influencer

gets larger) allows us to point out that, on Instagram, political disinformation resorts to numerous tools, and that different types of disinformation tend to intermingle with one another. The changing nature of the phenomenon (glossed in the literature review by authors such as Wardle [2019a]) makes experts confront renewed challenges in categorizing and defining subtypes of disinformation.

That the content generated by influencers is so strikingly disinforming is serious not only because of the reach of their content, since their publications impact millions of users, but also due to the fact that, precisely because of their prominence, they acquire a supposed authority status that leads their audience to believe them to a high extent (Casaló et al., 2020; de Veirman et al.; Belanche et al., 2021). This contrasts highly with the proved level of inaccuracy, if not outright falsehood, of the majority of their content.

Despite the fact that Instagram has implemented functionalities to fight disinformation, only 1 of the 400 units analyzed showed the platform's disinformation warning. This circumstance reveals the lack of protection faced by Instagram users, and the need to strengthen research in this area, in order to transfer the results to a media literacy process that warns about the disinformation potential of these profiles.

In response to RG2 and the first of its specific objectives SG1, it should be noted that neither verification badges, nor the publication of content under a real name, nor the possession of studies –even on the topic covered in the content– are a guarantee for finding reliable information in these profiles. These variables, which may be present in the collective imagery as signs for granting greater credibility, do not, however, correspond to reality. The levels of disinformation found in these cases are similar to those registered in accounts that do not have the verification badge, publish under a pseudonym, or have not reached higher educational (graduate/postgraduate) levels.

As for the SG2, the dominance of Reels in the disinformation field leads to infer that the audiovisual language, through the video format, offers the best op-

portunities for disinformation. We note, therefore, that disinformation is making the most of the visual codes of entertainment and the format that can be considered as the most fashionable on the Internet (especially bearing in mind the uses in other social networks with large young audiences, such as TikTok). Other parts that are also frequently prone to disinform are the texts included in images, as well as the short texts of the captions.

Finally, a closer look on the data tackling SG3 reveals one of the most worrying conclusions of the study: the enormous impact that disinformation has on users under 34 years old. More specifically, the fact that children between 13 and 17, simply by following these influencers, are impacted by an enormous amount of political disinformation is particularly remarkable, bearing in mind that they are amidst the process of consolidating their criteria towards civic responsibility. These results offer an interesting avenue for future research due to the important consequences that this hyper-exposure to disinformation at an early age may have for the quality of the democratic process.

This last circumstance only underscores the importance that influencers are acquiring as new agents of political communication, and the attention that the academic community should pay to their activity with its own methodologies of analysis, specifically developed to rigorously study new phenomena of social communication whose impact on society is considerable –often greater than that caused by traditional political media.

While the activity of influencers diversifies the more traditional contents, formats and roles of politics, the phenomenon as a whole does not benefit truthful information of information of quality – necessary for the free decision-making required in any democracy. It does, however, bring an abundance of disinformation that reinforces radicalization, polarization, echo chambers, and suspicions of conspiracy – all disinformative practices that are contrary to the democratic spirit.

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