Disinformation and media and information literacy: Perspectives of young communicators in Mexico, Chile and Uruguay

Desinformación y alfabetización mediática e informacional: Perspectivas de jóvenes comunicadores en México, Chile y Uruguay

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Patricia de-Casas-Moreno. Full professor at the Faculty of Documentation and Communication Sciences, University of Extremadura. PhD in Communication, specialising in media literacy. Member of Grupo Comunicar, a long-standing collective in Spain specialising in media literacy. She has been Associate Editor of the scientific journal Comunicar, one of the leading international publications in education and communication (indexed in JCR-Q1, Scopus-Q1, top 1% worldwide, etc.). Member of the Alfamed Network and member of the Spanish Association for Communication Research (AE-IC). Researcher with the Edutransforma-T research group at the University of Extremadura. Her main areas of research focus on media literacy, the media and narratives.
University of Extremadura, Spain
pcasas@unex.es
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1205-8106



Elizabeth-Guadalupe Rojas-Estrada. Professor at Antonio de Nebrija University. She holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Huelva (UHU) and a Master's degree in Communication from the Pontifical Catholic University of Valparaíso. She is a member of the Ágora Research Group (HUM-648) at UHU and serves as President of the Alfamed Joven Network, where she promotes research and training initiatives in Media and Information Literacy (MIL). In the field of educational management, she has served as coordinator of academic projects in basic education at the Ministry of Public Education in Baja California Sur, as well as director of Teaching Innovation and Support Centres. She has collaborated in international teacher training projects on MIL in countries such as the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Paraguay and Uruguay. Her work focuses on the analysis and development of public policies related to MIL, with particular attention to its integration into education systems.
Nebrija University, Spain
erojas@nebrija.es
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4104-5830

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Ignacio Aguaded. Full professor in the Department of Education at the University of Huelva (Spain). President of Grupo Comunicar, a long-standing organisation in Spain specialising in educommunication, and Editor-in-Chief for 30 years (1993–2023) of the scientific journal '*Comunicar*' (JCR top 1% worldwide, ranked 1st globally in Scopus). He is Principal Investigator (PI) of the 'Ágora' Research Group, with numerous national and international research projects. He has supervised hundreds of research projects and 55 doctoral theses. He is Director of the International Inter-University Master's Degree in Communication and Audiovisual Education (UNIA/UHU) and Coordinator of the Inter-University Doctoral Programme in Communication (US, UMA, UCA and UHU). Founding President of the 'Alfamed' Euro-American International Network of Researchers, comprising 24 countries. Winner of the University of Huelva's 2015 Best Researcher Award in Social Sciences. He served as Vice-Chancellor for Technology, Innovation and Quality at the University of Huelva for over seven years.
University of Huelva, Spain
aguaded@uhu.es
ORCID: 0000-0002-0229-1118

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Abstract:

Disinformation in the digital age represents a crucial challenge for communication and journalism students, who play a strategic role in safeguarding citizens' right to accurate and verified information. This qualitative study investigates the perspectives of Mexican, Chilean, and Uruguayan journalism students concerning the repercussions of disinformation on their news habits. The study contextualizes these experiences within an increasingly digitized landscape, underscoring Media and Information Literacy (MIL) as an essential vehicle for critical comprehension. Based on focus groups conducted with 36 students across the three countries, the findings highlight the urgent need to incorporate MIL into university curricula in this field, fostering a critical approach to the consumption and production of content. As part of this process, a set of ten best practices for communicators was co-created, conceived as both an educational and guiding tool to mitigate the effects of disinformation.

Keywords:

Disinformation; digital context; media and information literacy; social networks; young people.

Resumen:

La desinformación en la era digital representa un desafío crucial para los comunicadores y periodistas en formación, quienes desempeñan un rol estratégico en la garantía del derecho ciudadano a una información veraz y contrastada. Este estudio cualitativo analiza las percepciones y experiencias de jóvenes estudiantes de comunicación y periodismo en México, Chile y Uruguay respecto a la influencia de las noticias falsas en sus hábitos informativos, y sitúa el análisis en el marco de la digitalización, las redes sociales y el papel de la Alfabetización Mediática e Informacional (AMI) en la comprensión crítica de la información. A partir de grupos focales con 36 estudiantes de los tres países, los resultados evidencian la necesidad urgente de incorporar la AMI en los planes de estudio de esta carrera, promoviendo un prosumo crítico de los contenidos. Como parte de este proceso, se cocreó un decálogo de buenas prácticas dirigido a comunicadores, concebido como una herramienta formativa y orientadora para mitigar la desinformación.

Palabras clave:

Desinformación; contexto digital; alfabetización mediática e informacional; redes sociales; jóvenes.

1. Introduction

French, Storey and Wallace (2023) point out that disinformation, defined as the deliberate dissemination of fake news (information fabricated to deceive or misinform), undermines trust in the media and institutions. This research further argues that this leads to tangible and harmful consequences, such as disturbances to public order or erroneous decisions that even affect public health. For Lim *et al.* (2024), the spread of this type of content is not a recent phenomenon, although they do consider that social media plays a crucial role in accelerating it due to the inherent characteristics of these platforms, which

allow, for example, content to be shared instantly and reach massive audiences in a matter of minutes without undergoing a rigorous verification process. García-Marín *et al.* (2022) reinforce this view by pointing out that algorithms, designed to prioritise content that generates the most engagement, amplify the circulation of news that is not always accurate. Furthermore, they note that social media tends to create echo chambers in which users are primarily exposed to information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs.

According to Arora *et al.* (2024), exposure to disinformation tends to trigger negative emotional responses, such as anxiety and stress, demonstrating that this phenomenon affects not only cognition but also people's emotional well-being. Furthermore, research by Narváez-Llinares and Pérez-Rufí (2022) highlights that fake news not only fosters social polarisation around serious issues, but also reinforces stereotypes and promotes hostile attitudes towards vulnerable groups such as migrants.

The analysis by Elizalde-Robles and Rodríguez-Hidalgo (2021) highlights the particular vulnerability young people face with regard to disinformation, resulting both from their high exposure to digital content and from insufficient training to critically evaluate the information they consume. Recent studies in Latin America also show that, although many young people tend to perceive that disinformation mainly affects others and not themselves, they express significant concern regarding its consequences (Rodríguez-Pérez *et al.*, 2022; Pereyra and Cane, 2024). In this vein, Herrero-Curiel and La-Rosa (2022) emphasise that Media and Information Literacy (MIL) constitutes an essential educational mechanism for strengthening the necessary skills to mitigate the effects of disinformation on this age group.

Whilst the literature warns of young people's general vulnerability to disinformation, it is worth focusing the analysis on those who will act as social mediators of information. Communication and journalism students are not only active prosumers, but their technical training should provide them with a specialised perspective to identify the mechanisms of fake news and propose solutions based on professional practice (Muñoz-Uribe, 2021). Based on this premise, the aim of this research is to identify the perceptions and experiences of these future professionals in Mexico, Chile and Uruguay regarding the influence of fake news on their information-seeking habits. The study situates the analysis within the framework of digitalisation, social media and the role of media literacy in the critical understanding of information, using a focus group methodology. Based on this analysis, the aim is to design strategies aimed at promoting a more informed, critical and truthful consumption of information.

1.1. Media and Information Literacy as an educational response to the challenges of disinformation

In Latin America, no specific legislation has yet been passed to combat disinformation, although some countries, such as Chile, already have draft bills moving in that direction (Fontela-Pedreira, 2024). However, beyond the regulatory responses driven by governments, Sádaba-Chalezquer and Salaverría-Aliaga (2023) warn that it is essential to incorporate media literacy into education systems as an integral part of strategies against disinformation, as it is a key mechanism for empowering citizens and promoting their shared responsibility in this area, thereby moving beyond approaches focused exclusively on technical or legal solutions. In the same vein, the authors highlight the need to understand contemporary phenomena and concepts such as infoxication, which refers to the information overload present in digital environments. In an ecosystem where the volume

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of information exceeds the capacity for individual analysis, particularly among the youngest members of society, there is simultaneously a perceived decline in cognitive filters, facilitating the circulation of disinformation (López-Veneroni, 2021).

By promoting critical thinking, MIL empowers citizens to manage the information they consume effectively, which involves being able to: a) question the credibility of sources; b) identify bias in content and distinguish between verifiable facts, subjective opinions and propaganda; c) verify information by cross-checking it against reliable sources and using verification tools, such as fact-checking websites or academic databases; and d) recognise typical features of fake news, such as sensationalist headlines (Valverde-Berrocoso *et al.*, 2022). However, the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) following the popularisation of tools such as ChatGPT or DALL·E has amplified the challenges in this area. According to Floridi (2024), these technologies exacerbate the spread of disinformation by enabling the automated production of fake content with an extremely realistic appearance. Against this backdrop, Garriga *et al.* (2024) argue that MIL also plays a crucial role in empowering citizens to understand that AI can be used both in the creation of disinformation content, such as deepfakes (videos, audio or images manipulated using AI technology), and in the fight against the spread of disinformation. To this end, advanced verification tools and monitoring programmes capable of identifying patterns are employed.

This educational model also promotes emotional resilience and helps prevent the hasty dissemination of information driven by emotions such as fear or outrage (Lau *et al.*, 2024). In this way, it not only strengthens the ability to make informed decisions, but also helps to mitigate the impact of fake news on people's behaviour, particularly in critical contexts such as substance use (Austin *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, it encourages the active and responsible participation of individuals in public debate, promoting a balance between freedom of expression and digital responsibility, as well as the formation of well-founded opinions and respect for diverse perspectives, principles that are essential for the proper functioning of a democracy (Buckingham, 2019).

The questionnaire administered by Catalina-García *et al.* (2019) to communication students at universities in Brazil, Portugal and Spain explored both news consumption patterns and perceptions of fake news. The results showed that all groups shared a common concern about the negative effects of fake news; however, there are significant limitations in their ability to identify false information effectively. Complementarily, a more recent study by Pereyra and Cane (2024), conducted among communication and journalism students from nine Latin American countries (including Chile, Mexico and Uruguay), showed that they consider the skills acquired during their academic training to contribute only partially to addressing this phenomenon. It is also suggested that this educational gap is linked to the limited inclusion in the curriculum of conceptual and methodological tools that enable students to critically address the new challenges of this century.

Against this backdrop, this study examines these three national contexts which, although diverse in their social and political structures, share significant similarities in their media ecosystems. Mexico, Chile and Uruguay represent strategic hubs in Latin America, with internet penetration rates already exceeding 80% (World Bank, 2024). Furthermore, there is a reported growing reliance on social media as the primary source of information among young people in the region (Reuters Institute, 2023).

Despite this high level of digitalisation, the response from communication faculties in these countries has been mixed. According to Muñoz-Uribe's doctoral thesis (2021), whilst Uruguay and Chile have seen a consolidation of critical approaches to technology and journalistic ethics in digital environments, in Mexico, the focus is often marked by the urgency of fact-checking

in the face of a highly polarised environment and risks to the practice of journalism. Despite these particularities, the three countries share a common shortcoming: the lack of systematic training in media and algorithmic literacy, as well as in advanced fact-checking mechanisms within undergraduate curricula. This training gap highlights the need to prepare future communication professionals to confront and counteract disinformation. Furthermore, it ensures that their journalistic work is grounded in accuracy, ethics and social responsibility –key elements for maintaining trust in the practice of communication and journalism (Martín *et al.*, 2024).

2. Method

This research aims to identify the perceptions and experiences of communication students in Mexico, Chile and Uruguay regarding the influence of fake news on their information-seeking habits, within the context of digitalisation, the intensive use of social media and the role of media literacy in the critical understanding of information. To achieve this objective, a qualitative methodology has been adopted, based on the use of focus groups as a research technique.

The choice of this qualitative approach responds to the need to delve deeper into young people's perceptions and experiences and provides a detailed understanding of their attitudes and beliefs (Bautista, 2022). This type of approach will enable the analysis of the underlying motivations, as well as the subjective aspects, that influence their information habits. Furthermore, this methodology will facilitate the identification of specific training needs to promote media literacy against disinformation in this new technology-driven ecosystem.

With regard to the data collection technique, the focus group is based on the principle of the social construction of knowledge, as the exchange of experiences among participants generates collective knowledge (Juan and Roussos, 2010). A semi-structured guide was designed to stimulate discussion, comprising open-ended questions that encourage the exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences (Table 1). The instrument was structured around four dimensions: a) the impact of fake news on the public; b) understanding of the concept of disinformation; c) the public's critical reflection on news consumption; and d) fact-checking and knowledge of the concept of MIL. Although the script maintained a basic structure across the three countries, the questions were phrased openly to facilitate in-depth discussion and the emergence of new categories.

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Table 1. Question guide by dimension

Dimension	Scope
The impact of fake news on the public	- How do you keep up to date with current affairs? - Are you familiar with the term "fake news"? Could you define it or mention some of its characteristics? Can you give an example of fake news that you've come across? - Why do you think fake news is created and spread? Do you think that in some cases it might be to discredit something or someone? - What effects do you think fake news has on society? Do you think it leads to widespread misinformation? - If you've ever come across a piece of fake news, have you shared it without realising? What consequences might that have?
Understanding the concept of disinformation	- What is disinformation? How would you define it? - Do you think society is becoming increasingly misinformed? - What tools, sources or techniques do you use to ensure that the information you consume is reliable?
Critical reflection by the public on news consumption	- What channels do you usually use to get your news? - Do you prefer to get your news from traditional media or from social media, including other people's comments and posts? - When you read a news story on social media, how do you check whether it's true? - If you've ever spotted a fake news story, what signs made you suspect it was false? - Do you think citizen journalism is reliable?
Verification of information and understanding of the concept of MIL	- What do you understand by media and information literacy? - What strategies or solutions would you suggest to reduce the spread of fake news, particularly on social media? - Do you think it is important to educate people on how to consume information via ICT? - What techniques would you use or recommend to check whether a news story is true or false?

Source: Compiled by the author.

With regard to the sample design, a non-probabilistic, purposive quota sampling method was used, based on criteria of gender, country and academic profile: a) young people aged between 19 and 25; and b) students studying Communication and/or Journalism at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (Mexico), the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso (Chile) and the Universidad Católica del Uruguay. Based on these criteria, six focus groups (two per country) were conducted via synchronous online sessions using Zoom, each lasting approximately 90 minutes, between May 2024 and April 2025. The groups consisted of between five and seven participants. The sample comprised a total of 36 university students (11 from Chile, 13 from Mexico and 12 from Uruguay) with an equal gender distribution (18 men and 18 women). Theoretical saturation was assessed progressively after each focus group, through a comparative review of the emerging categories. It was considered

to have been reached when the discourses began to show thematic redundancy, with no incorporation of new substantive categories or significant variations in the identified interpretative patterns.

As an extension of the study's participatory approach, a co-creation session was incorporated at the end of each focus group. In response to the question: "Based on what we have discussed so far, what do you think are the most important actions that communication professionals should take to identify and stop the spread of fake news?", participants collectively prioritised strategies using a qualitative consensus technique. Each group debated and ranked their proposals and, furthermore, agreed on ten guidelines. These proposals were coded thematically and linked to the categories emerging from the content analysis, forming a proactive dimension of the study. Subsequently, a final set of ten guidelines was synthesised, the validity of which was confirmed through independent review and interpretative cross-checking amongst the researchers.

The sessions were recorded and transcribed in full for qualitative content analysis using an inductive approach (Guix, 2008). For data processing, a dimensional analysis matrix in Excel was used, which enabled the units of meaning to be organised and tabulated systematically. The process combined open coding, through which emerging categories were identified from the discourse, with axial coding, which facilitated the establishment of relationships between these categories and their articulation with the initial guiding dimensions. Credibility and auditability were reinforced through researcher triangulation, with independent interpretative checks and the resolution of discrepancies through consensual discussion.

As the study did not involve any clinical intervention or procedures posing a risk to participants, it was not submitted for review by a formal ethics committee. However, the protocol was designed and conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Data collection was conducted anonymously, in accordance with the Personal Data Protection Act (Organic Law 3/2018, 2018). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were briefed on the study's objectives, procedures and risk-free nature, as well as on the voluntary nature of their participation and the possibility of withdrawing without repercussions. To ensure anonymity, the testimonies were coded using alphanumeric labels relating to gender/age/country (e.g. M/20/MEX, F/19/CHI). To this end, any trace of personal identification was removed. The protocol for storing the recordings and transcripts involved using restricted-access folders to ensure the secure custody of the information and its exclusive use for scientific purposes.

3. Results

3.1. Qualitative analysis

The results obtained are presented below, organised according to the relevant dimensions of the study and the items analysed. This will allow for a detailed and structured examination of the most significant findings. It should be noted that the quotations included in the figures have been selected for their representativeness of the predominant discourses identified during data collection, rather than as isolated examples, following criteria of thematic recurrence and qualitative saturation.

Impact of fake news on the public. The first dimension focuses on an in-depth analysis of the impact of fake news, as well as assessing its effect on public perception and its consequences in various spheres, both social and communicative. In this regard, the selected sample indicates that, as future communicators and active news consumers, they keep up to date with

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current affairs. Consistently across the different groups, participants describe information-gathering routines characterised by frequent use of social media as the main channel for accessing current affairs.

When asked how they stay informed or which tools they use to access quality information, the groups in Mexico and Chile indicate that Twitter –now known as X– is the most widely used platform among the wide range of social media networks. In Uruguay, however, they mention that TikTok plays a predominant role as a source of information, reflecting differences in the dynamics of information consumption across the various countries. These differences are evident in the discourse of the groups analysed in each country, with a comparable qualitative design in terms of the number of groups and participant profiles, allowing for the interpretation of these variations. Furthermore, this preference may confirm that, in this context, there is high demand for internet access and extensive use of mobile networks amongst the younger generation. Undoubtedly, this type of platform has become a dominant channel for information exchange and confirms the regional trend towards the mediatisation of everyday life, where young people integrate news consumption through hybrid digital environments that combine entertainment with information a dynamic already highlighted by the Digital News Report 2023 (Reuters Institute, 2023), which analyses six Latin American countries.

On a different note, although traditional media have also been mentioned, podcasts generate more interest among this demographic, as they offer a quick and dynamic way to keep up to date with the news. Similarly, Google News and digital media are practical tools for staying informed. However, national and international media have been mentioned in a negative light, as young people prefer to focus on regional or, failing that, local news. From a Latin American perspective, this tendency towards media mistrust is linked to young people's perception of traditional national media, which they believe is influenced by political or economic interests, a perception that has also been documented in the research by Labarca *et al.* (2022).

With regard to the concept of fake news, most participants confirmed that they were familiar with the term, defining it as "unverified and untrue information that is disseminated with the intention of discrediting an institution or, in some cases, to attract more views". This definition recurred across the three countries analysed, suggesting a shared conceptual framework amongst the students, albeit with some nuances. The responses analysed are linked to strategies such as clickbait, using sensationalist headlines to increase the number of views. Young people confirm that unverified content is spread virally via entertainment and social media platforms and that, even as future communication professionals, they fall into these traps of disinformation and fake news. For example, well-known cases that have come to the fore in relation to this issue include the fake news spread during the Covid-19 pandemic and that relating to the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

When asked about the reasons behind the spread of this type of fake news, the response is unanimous: financial gain, views and clicks. Furthermore, in the case of the group from Chile, the media outlet's editorial line and political stance were highlighted, whilst the young people from Uruguay believe that this is driven by manipulation from the political and/or economic sphere seeking to profit from it. Similarly, some participants mentioned the lack of regulation and control on digital platforms, the speed at which unverified information spreads, and social polarisation as factors contributing to the mass circulation of disinformation.

From another perspective, participants point out that older people are the most likely to fall for fake news as they are less familiar with electronic devices and lack the necessary training to identify and deal with false information appropriately. However,

they also reflect on how their own generation is not immune to this phenomenon: although they consider themselves more adept at using technology, they admit that they often do not go to great lengths to verify sources or cross-check information before sharing it (Figure 1). The comments gathered in this first figure reveal an ambivalent self-perception; participants simultaneously acknowledge technical skills and limitations in systematic verification. This pattern of discourse is repeated across several groups and reinforces its analytical relevance. Regarding the spread of fake news, two young Mexicans indicated that, although they are aware that spreading false information can have negative consequences and is unethical, they admit that immediacy and a lack of time to cross-check sources often play a decisive role. This argument also appears, with variations in discourse, among participants from Chile and Uruguay, and points to a cross-cutting factor associated with audiovisual consumption habits.

Figure 1. Dimension 1. Impact of fake news on the public



Source: Compiled by the author

Understanding the concept of disinformation. The second dimension of understanding the concept of disinformation and its application is analysed from the perspective of the term's definition. In this regard, the sample indicates that, despite being closely linked to fake news, this strategy is used in areas of public interest such as politics, science, health and the environment. Consequently, it has a significant impact on public opinion and social behaviour. With regard to the concept,

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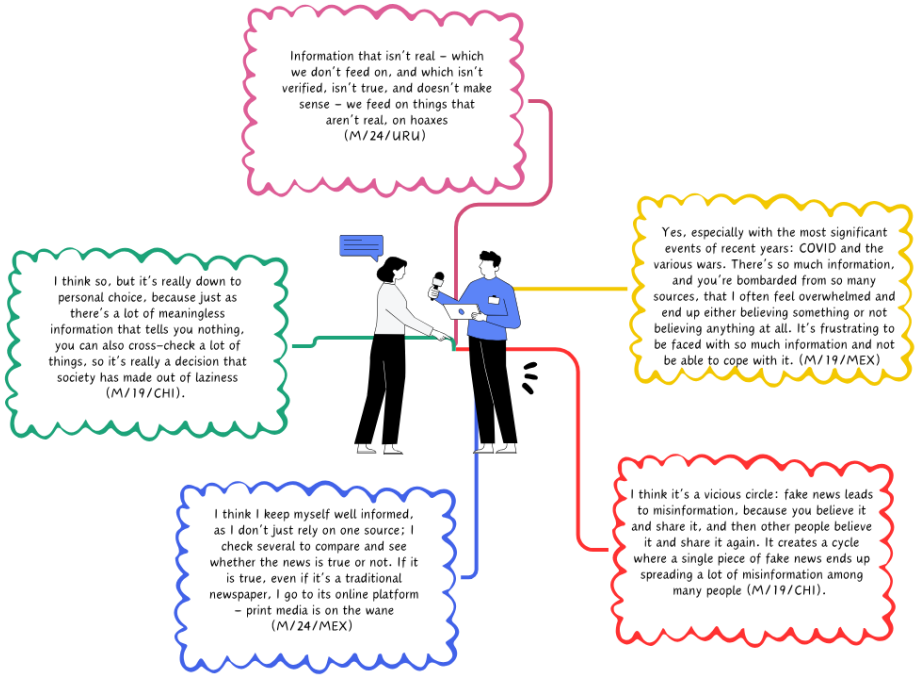
some students define it as "empty", "manipulated" or "incomplete" information, alluding to a lack of interest in quality news. This link between disinformation and matters of public interest in the Latin American context influences the ways in which young people position themselves as citizens in the face of the circulation of fake news. In contexts such as Chile or Mexico, where political processes are characterised by turmoil and controversy, media coverage has been marked by polarisation and a crisis of institutional credibility. As a result, young people state that disinformation directly affects their civic participation, as it limits their ability to make informed decisions and causes them to feel "apathy" or "disinterest".

In a related vein, the focus group in Chile discussed how, with the expansion of social media and increasing user accessibility, anyone can create and disseminate content, particularly in a context where artificial intelligence is playing an increasingly significant role in the field of communication. In light of the rapid and largely unregulated growth of digital platforms and resources, two students emphasised the need to foster a culture of media literacy that promotes the critical and conscious consumption of content. In this regard, they highlighted that this task falls particularly on communication professionals, who bear the primary responsibility for ensuring accurate and high-quality information. This expectation regarding the ethical role of the communicator is part of the growing demands of young Latin Americans (Luna-Muñoz, 2022), who demand critical citizenship and, at the same time, call for transparency, rigour and accountability in the circulation of information, as exemplified by the #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico, which emerged during the 2012 presidential elections, led by university students to denounce the lack of plurality and objectivity in the media.

With regard to verification techniques, some participants stated that they compare different media outlets to cross-check the news. Furthermore, some young Chileans mentioned the use of specific digital tools, such as reverse image search engines, to verify authenticity. However, there is clear evidence of an urgent need to introduce changes to the educational curriculum, as a weakness is apparent: future professionals in communication and journalism lack the skills and knowledge required to tackle disinformation and, consequently, the fake news disseminated across various channels (Figure 2). The statements gathered in this figure reveal perceptions of information overload, specific verification strategies and reflections on the chain circulation of unverified content. Rather than being interpreted as a widespread shortcoming, these findings suggest the coexistence of nascent verification practices alongside information routines characterised by media overexposure.

Figure 2. Dimension 2. Understanding the concept of disinformation



Source: Compiled by the author

Critical reflection by the public on news consumption. In this regard, participants state that they do not believe a piece of information to be true unless it is published by a verified media outlet. Furthermore, they seek to establish criteria for news consumption by reading or watching reports by specialist journalists. For their part, the selected sample shows that, in general, they are able to identify fake news, and among the most frequently cited responses in this regard, they highlight that headlines, the way the news is presented, or the outlet in which it is published enables them to recognise signs of what might be fake news. Similarly, they state that they pay attention to the author of the news, establishing a significant criterion based on whether the author is an expert in the field of communication, a news agency or, conversely, what is known in journalistic jargon as a "figurehead expert". Added to this is the fact that, increasingly, the use of artificial intelligence is creating a significant divide within the journalism profession through the automated generation of content, which leads to a loss of quality and journalistic rigour.

Following this line of argument, the concept of citizen journalism as a reliable source of information comes under scrutiny. This practice, which has emerged as an alternative for the production and circulation of information, promotes media

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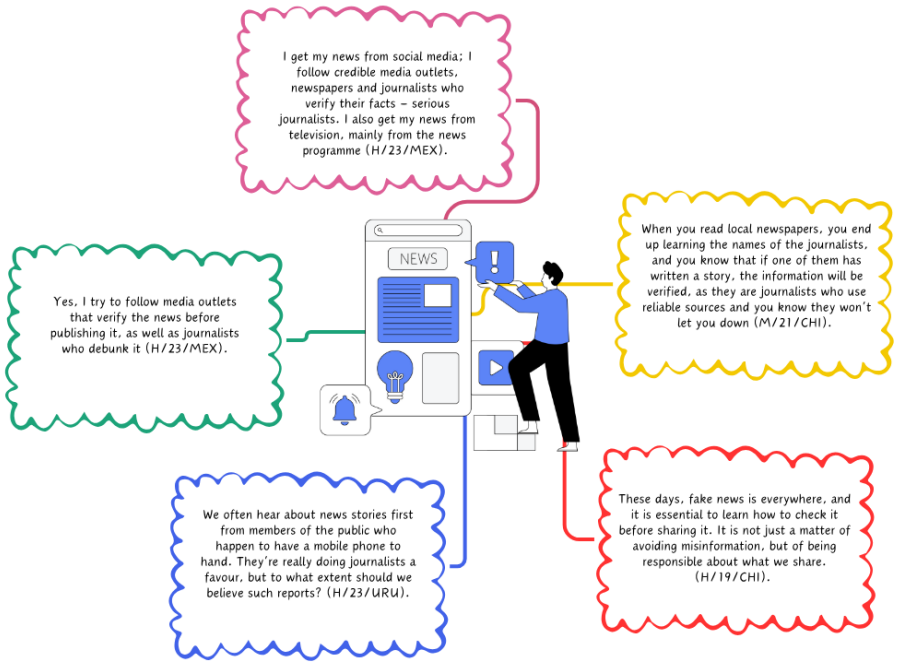
democratisation; however, it also gives rise to risks linked to a lack of professional training, the absence of rigorous verification processes, and the potential influence of individual biases (Horoub, 2023). Nevertheless, young Mexicans recognised its strengths: immediacy, accessibility, local coverage, a diversity of voices and direct interaction with the audience. These positive assessments of citizen journalism are found mainly in Mexico, whilst in Chile more cautious views regarding reliability predominate, and in Uruguay intermediate positions are observed. This distribution of views is interpreted in an exploratory manner, given the qualitative nature of the study design. This democratises access to information and broadens the diversity of perspectives, although, according to two young Chileans, it also increases the risk of misinformation and the spread of fake news due to a lack of rigour and verification (Figure 3). The quotes in this figure illustrate a tension between openness of information and concerns about verification, a theme that emerged repeatedly in the focus groups. This perception reflects the documented tensions in the region between young people's digital empowerment and the precariousness linked to the structural conditions that guarantee access to verified and reliable information (Dorado, 2024). In the Latin American context, technological access does not always translate into critical literacy. This leads to re-signified uses, where young people employ platforms as tools for expression, albeit without the appropriate frameworks to assess the quality of content.

Figure 3. Dimension 3. Citizens' critical reflection on news consumption



Source: Compiled by the author

Verification of information and understanding of the concept of MIL. Although this concept has been established throughout the analysis of the results, it is at this point that it truly comes into its own. A large proportion of the young people selected were unaware of the definition of the principle or, conversely, had only a partial understanding of the subject. A minority were able to outline the main principles and the relationship under consideration in this research. Following a detailed explanation of the terminology, the participants agreed that education is the foundation for critical thinking. This point is key when considered alongside the recommendations of organisations such as UNESCO (Zuazo, 2023), which highlight the need to incorporate MIL as a cross-cutting theme in training programmes for communicators in Latin America. In countries such as Mexico, Chile and Uruguay, where significant inequalities in access to and quality of education persist, the development of media literacy is not guaranteed, which underpins and reinforces the vulnerability of young people to disinformation.

Following the debate, they themselves recognise the need to introduce a curriculum that incorporates skills for analysing the content they produce and consume. This call for educational reform emerges consistently across all three countries, although it is more prominent in Chile and Mexico, whilst in Uruguay it features more moderately in the discourse. The growing proliferation and presence of digital information, as well as the central role of the media in everyday life, overexposes young people to an extreme degree. It is therefore essential that they develop critical skills to interpret, evaluate and verify the information they generate and consume, particularly as future professionals in the communications sector. Furthermore, this reinforcement will enable them to recognise biases, understand how algorithms work, identify fake news and produce content from an ethical perspective (Figure 4). The statements collected reinforce the central importance attributed by participants to media literacy as a strategy, emerging as one of the most consistent discursive themes in the qualitative analysis.

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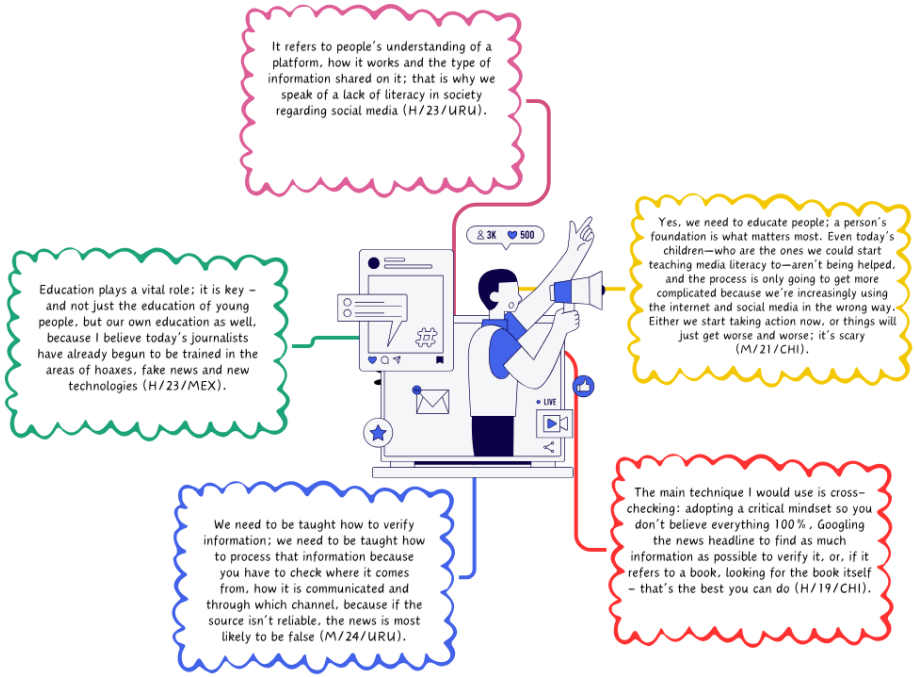
Figure 4. Dimension 4. Verification of information and understanding of the concept of MIL



Source: Compiled by the author

3.2. Decalogue of good practices for tackling disinformation and fake news

These recommendations aim to prevent the spread of misleading content, but also to help build a society that is better informed, more critical and more responsible for the content it consumes and/or generates. Journalists play a crucial role in this regard: they must take the lead in verifying information, educate the public, promote transparency, set an example of integrity, and identify manipulation.

Figure 5. Ten-point guide to best practice in tackling disinformation and fake news



Source: Compiled by the author

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4. Discussion and conclusions

The concept of MIL has emerged as a crucial element in equipping citizens with the skills needed to analyse, understand and critically evaluate the information to which they are constantly exposed (Fernández-García, 2017; Pérez-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2024). However, this study highlights the lack of understanding of this term, which has become a widespread problem in society and increases vulnerability to disinformation and fake news. This implies the need to implement public policies and strengthen the curriculum in educational contexts, particularly in higher education, which is the field of focus here (Vélez, 2017). MIL is essential for preparing future citizens and communication professionals to face the information challenges of the 21st century (Sádaba-Chalezquer and Salaverría-Aliaga, 2023). Undoubtedly, media literacy education promotes critical and responsible consumption of information, thereby strengthening a democratic and participatory society capable of identifying disinformation (Portugal and Aguaded, 2020). However, the results obtained in this study qualify this general statement, since, although students acknowledge the importance of verification and critical thinking in theory, their everyday information practices reveal patterns characterised by immediacy, reliance on social media and superficial scanning of headlines. This divergence between declarative knowledge and actual behaviour reinforces the importance of addressing MIL not only as a normative framework, but as a competence embedded in students' real information habits.

In this vein, the study's recommendations aim not only to integrate MIL into curricula, but also to build collaborative learning ecosystems which, through community-focused MIL programmes, joint content production and verification projects, and other initiatives, connect educational institutions –particularly schools of communication and journalism– with the media to tackle the challenges posed by disinformation. This is particularly relevant in Latin America, where MIL policies are at different stages of development and implementation. In light of the empirical findings, this proposal takes on particular significance, given that participating students tend to prioritise rapid access to information over systematic fact-checking processes. This finding highlights the need for educational interventions that directly influence consumption habits.

While analyzing the results, it became clear that participants from all three countries felt they were misinformed about current affairs, particularly in the field of politics, due to the vast amount of information available online. According to Cornellá (2013), this situation is referred to as "infoxication", defined as the information overload to which individuals are exposed, particularly in digital contexts. Consequently, society experiences a perception of widespread misinformation, as, rather than delving deeper into content and verifying its accuracy, many users limit themselves to consuming headlines and disseminating unverified information (Andrada *et al.*, 2024). In this context, this challenge is central to the training and ethics of new generations of communicators. It is crucial, as future professionals, to equip them with the necessary skills to ensure that the content disseminated is verified, thereby promoting responsible consumption. In line with the study's objectives, these results enable the identification of an information pattern characterised by fragmented consumption, incidental exposure to news on social media, and limited verification. This helps to explain the self-perception of disinformation expressed by the study sample.

It should be emphasised that, although this perception was common across the three countries analysed, significant nuances were identified. In Mexico, for example, the volume of political content perceived as biased reporting reflects a context of heightened media polarisation. In Uruguay, meanwhile, students reported a higher level of trust in certain traditional media

outlets, which may be explained by a less concentrated media landscape. Finally, in Chile, concerns emerged regarding the manipulation of information on social media during recent social protests.

On another note, one of the study's findings is the detrimental role played by social media during the Covid-19 pandemic (Salaverría *et al.*, 2020). This was a period in which, in the words of Eysenbach (2002), an "information epidemic", also known as an "infodemic", took hold. This excessive and uncontrolled spread of information, much of it false, caused panic and confusion amongst the public in crisis situations. This highlights and reinforces the urgent need to regulate the flow of information in such contexts to mitigate misinformation. For future communicators, it is essential to understand the power and influence of digital platforms in the dissemination of content, as well as the responsibility to ensure high-quality information. This phenomenon underscores the need for this group not only to master content production, but also to master verification strategies in order to counter the weaknesses of disinformation and, consequently, fake news. Furthermore, the responses indicate that, in countries such as Chile and Mexico, the emotional impact resulting, for example, from the infodemic was more intense, as young people used social media as their primary source of information. In Uruguay, there was a greater tendency to cross-check information with traditional media. This helped to mitigate the effects of information overload. This contextual difference must be taken into account when designing future education policies.

Based on an analysis of the impact of fake news on the public, the findings show that it has a negative effect on information consumption and, furthermore, fosters a sense of mistrust towards both traditional and digital media. Social media, characterised by its immediacy and accessibility, contributes to the spread of this trend. In the field of communication, this phenomenon poses a critical challenge to how future professionals must approach the creation, management and distribution of content in the digital context. This finding is in line with recent Latin American studies (Labarca *et al.*, 2022) which demonstrate how the rise of disinformation has undermined the credibility of the media and caused citizens to retreat into closed and homogeneous information environments. This phenomenon, referred to as an "information bubble", calls for a rethinking of training strategies from an ethical, critical and inclusive perspective (Bajaña-Tovar, 2021).

Meanwhile, with regard to understanding the concept of disinformation and the consumption of quality news, the findings highlight that the immediacy of social media poses a challenge that exacerbates the difficulty in distinguishing between truthful and false content. Undoubtedly, the most popular tool and device amongst young people today is the mobile phone. All other forms of media are relegated to the background. However, despite choosing this device to produce and consume information, they also state that there is a significant "mediamorphosis" of the media. The digitisation of information and the fragmentation of content generate information overload and create a false sense of knowledge. Furthermore, it undermines the critical thinking skills of young people, even though they are the future experts in communication. The results show that young people display a high level of interest in current affairs. At the same time, however, it is emphasised that we must provide the necessary tools to train future generations of communicators to become content creators and consumers capable of navigating and reporting on a sea of information in a critical and responsible manner. This need for critical training cannot be separated from the socio-political contexts in which these young people engage. In Chile, there is a strong link between news consumption and digital activism; in Mexico, the passive and recreational use of platforms predominates; and in Uruguay, there is a marked concern for the democratic quality of public debate.

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In line with this line of research and in relation to the previous point –namely, society's development and critical reflection on news consumption– these younger generations state that they tend to get their news from social media. From their consumerist perspective and, at the same time, as future communicators, they are aware of the risk of relying on unverified sources. This indicates that there is still a long way to go before a more critical approach to news consumption is adopted. From a communication perspective and as future information experts, it is essential to reflect on the information habits of these new generations. There is a significant gap between awareness of the risks of misinformation and the adoption of responsible information consumption habits. These findings call for the promotion of an educational approach that helps young people develop the right skills. It is not merely a question of identifying sources and verifying information, but also of understanding the mechanisms underlying social media algorithms, which prioritise viral and sensationalist content over the quality of the information. More specifically, the findings point to the coexistence of hybrid information practices. On the one hand, there is intensive, daily consumption of content via mobile phones and social media platforms; and, on the other hand, there is occasional, non-systematic verification of content, mainly when it raises doubts or has a strong emotional impact. This finding allows for a more nuanced interpretation of young people's information-seeking habits and provides evidence to guide MIL interventions that are better aligned with the observed behaviours.

Regarding the study's limitations, it should be noted that the sample is limited to young students from three universities in Mexico, Chile and Uruguay, which restricts the possibility of generalising the results to other groups of young people with different academic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is recommended that the research be expanded to include participants from other academic disciplines and more diverse social contexts, as well as incorporating the perspective of teaching staff and other key stakeholders, such as experts in the field, to strengthen and validate the proposed ten-point guide. Furthermore, it would be valuable to compare the findings with the expected competencies in the training programmes of Communication and Journalism faculties in the region. In this regard, the possible effect of social desirability should be considered, given that the study participants may have provided responses aligned with professional expectations. Likewise, the prior explanation of the MIL concept may have generated reactivity and influenced their responses.

Finally, regarding the verification of fake news and how the concept of MIL influences this, it should be emphasised that one cannot be understood without the other, as they are essential for mitigating the harmful effects of disinformation on society. Furthermore, the analysis of information consumption habits and the risks associated with unverified sources highlights the urgent need to educate the public, as well as current and future communicators. Thus, the findings regarding students' information habits support the relevance of strengthening MIL from an applied perspective, focused not only on conceptual knowledge but also on changing actual practices regarding access to, selection of, and verification of information. Consequently, to demonstrate this, a set of ten best practices has been established to serve as the basis for a strategic proposal to be included in a media education curriculum across all educational levels, but above all in higher education, particularly within communication and journalism degree programmes.

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6. Specific contributions of each author

	First name and surname
Concept and design of the project	Patricia de Casas Moreno
Methodology	Patricia de Casas Moreno and Elizabeth G. Rojas Estrada
Data collection and analysis	Patricia de Casas Moreno, Elizabeth G. Rojas Estrada and Ignacio Aguaded
Discussion and conclusions	Patricia de Casas Moreno and Elizabeth G. Rojas Estrada
Drafting, formatting, proofreading and approval of versions	Patricia de Casas Moreno, Elizabeth G. Rojas Estrada and Ignacio Aguaded

7. Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest

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