

## RESEARCH

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# IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ON STUDENTS OF JOURNALISM AND AUDIOVISUAL COMMUNICATION AT CARLOS III UNIVERSITY OF MADRID

*Impacto de las fake news en estudiantes de periodismo y comunicación audiovisual de la Universidad Carlos III de Madrid*

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### ABSTRACT

In the current media context, more and more voices warn about disinformation, fake news, or false news and the impact that these have through social media on young people. It is important to know to what degree Journalism students detect and interact with this type of information to design strategies within the studies themselves that enable these professionals to detect and avoid the spread of misinformation pieces of news. It is based on methodological triangulation. Quantitative data have been obtained through an online questionnaire administered to a sample of 200 students enrolled in the academic year (2019/2020) in the degrees of the area of Journalism. And through two focus groups with students of these degrees, we have qualitatively approached the opinion of future journalists about fake news. Although almost three out of every four surveyed students state that they know how to distinguish fake news from a true one and more than half consider that the teachers have provided them with tools to fight against misinformation, 97.6% of students consider it important to enhance media literacy in the university classrooms.

**KEYWORDS:** Journalism-Media Literacy-Fake News-Disinformation-Spanish



Undergraduate

## RESUMEN

En el actual contexto mediático cada vez son más las voces que alertan sobre la desinformación, las *fake news* o las noticias falsas y el impacto que éstas tienen a través de las redes sociales en jóvenes. Conocer en qué grado estudiantes de Periodismo detectan e interactúan con este tipo de información es necesario para articular estrategias dentro de los propios estudios que capaciten a futuros profesionales a detectar y evitar la propagación de piezas desinformativas. A partir de una triangulación metodológica se han obtenidos datos cuantitativos, mediante un cuestionario *online* administrado a una muestra de 200 estudiantes matriculados en el curso académico (2019/2020) en los grados del área de Periodismo. Y a través de dos *focus group* con estudiantes de estas titulaciones se han obtenido datos cualitativos sobre la opinión de los futuros periodistas acerca de las *fake news*. A pesar de que casi tres de cada cuatro estudiantes afirman saber distinguir una noticia falsa de una verdadera y más de la mitad consideran que el profesorado les ha facilitado herramientas para luchar contra la desinformación, el 97,6% considera importante potenciar la alfabetización mediática desde las aulas universitarias.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Periodismo-alfabetización mediática-noticias falsas-desinformación-universitarios españoles.

## IMPACTO DAS FAKE NEWS NO JORNALISMO E NA COMUNICAÇÃO AUDIOVISUAL DOS ESTUDANTES DA UNIVERSIDADE CARLOS III DE MADRID

## RESUMO

No atual contexto midiático, há cada vez mais vozes que alertam sobre a desinformação, notícias falsas ou fake news e o impacto que estas têm nas redes sociais nos jovens. Saber em que grau os estudantes de Jornalismo detectam e interagem com esse tipo de informação é necessário para articular estratégias dentro dos próprios estudos que capacitem os futuros profissionais a detectar e evitar a disseminação de peças de desinformação. A partir de uma triangulação metodológica, foram obtidos dados quantitativos, através de um questionário online aplicado a uma amostra de 200 alunos matriculados no ano letivo (2019/2020) nas licenciaturas da área de Jornalismo. E por meio de dois grupos focais com alunos dessas licenciaturas, foram obtidos dados qualitativos sobre a opinião de futuros jornalistas sobre notícias falsas. Apesar de quase três em cada quatro alunos afirmarem saber distinguir uma história falsa de uma verdadeira e mais da metade considerar que os professores lhes forneceram ferramentas para lutar contra a desinformação, 97,6% consideram importante promover os meios de comunicação alfabetização desde as salas de aula da universidade.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Jornalismo- alfabetização midiática- notícias falsas-  
desinformação- estudantes universitários espanhóis.

Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of journalism, there have always been “non-news”, pseudo-news, and misinformation (Burnam, 1975; Galdón, 1994). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, false news emerged accompanied by the growth of newspapers and the technologies of that time (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the universally known docufakes is the *War of the Worlds* that Orson Wells interpreted in the studio of the CBS station with other colleagues on the night of October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1938, a radio reading that generated panic for several minutes to millions of American listeners who believed that New York was going to be invaded by aliens.

In 2016, Oxford chose as its word of the year the term post-truth, defined as: “circumstances in which objective facts influence the formation of public opinion less than references to emotions and personal beliefs”. Their potential does not lie in the level of truth they contain but, in the power to excite and reinforce the previous ideas that citizens have regarding an issue.

However, there are also some more critical theoretical approaches to this concept of post-truth, which consider that recipients are blamed for something that is beyond their control since we would rather be facing a phenomenon that becomes a “strategy at the service of the maintenance of a certain rhetoric of truth” when the objectivity or the facts “do not arise from direct experiences” but are “discursive fragments that contain the bias of the issuer” who narrates them or the approach of the media outlet for which they work (Carrera, 2020, p. 81).

In 2017, the Collins English dictionary chose the term fake news as the word of the year and defined it as “false information, often sensational, spread under the guise of news information”.

### 1.1. Fake news in journalism

The phenomenon of fake news is much more present today than ever, thanks, to a great extent, to social networks. In the previous communication paradigm, the media had the exclusive right to “package their information” (Amorós, 2018, p. 159) and distribute it to the rest of the world. Now it has been replaced by a media sphere in which anyone can create information, make it viral, or share it with thousands of people in a matter of seconds through their social platforms.

Fake news represents a problem for journalists, whose credibility in recent years has been diminished as a result of this phenomenon, and a challenge for political authorities who demand regulation on the subject. The 2016 US elections were the springboard for this type of misinformation that went viral and was shared through

social networks with lies disguised as serious news by different candidates (Amorós, 2018; Magallón, 2019; Rodríguez-Andrés, 2017). The Internet and social networks have emerged as the most effective channels for the indiscriminate dissemination of this type of content (Molina and Magallón, 2019; Salaverría, Buslón, et al., 2020).

From international institutions and organizations, concern about fake news is also growing. To try to stop the spread of fake news, fact-checking or information verification platforms have now emerged, where journalists work whose main objective is to detect hoaxes or misinformation and refute them based on the verification of content and the contrast of sources. This work is independent of political intentions (Elizabeth, 2014) and has its origin in the tradition of the American press since media outlets such as *Time* or *The New Yorker* had their own departments to control the editing and verification processes of their contents (Salaverría, Buslón, et al., 2020).

In Spain, the main verification platforms accredited by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) are: Maldita.es, Newtral, and EFE Verifica (Ufarte-Ruiz, Anzera, & Murcia-Verdú, 2020; Vizoso & Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). Although the functions that are developed from these platforms are inherent to journalistic work, the speed in the spread of fake news on social networks has made them serve as support to citizens and, sometimes, to media outlets. The role of the journalists who work in them is essential: "citizens come to them when they need to understand what is happening" (Herrero, 2020). Future journalists must know the working method and have sufficient tools to detect fake news. The fundamental basis for this is based on media literacy.

## **1.2. Media literacy in the face of fake news**

In the current digital context, the proliferation of fake news and the vulnerability of a society with little media literacy, -in terms of the production of its own messages and the interaction with other foreign ones established by the indicators of Ferrés and Piscitelli, (2012) -, has shown the importance, more than ever, of media education. An education that goes beyond the mere instrumental use of new technologies and social networks and is committed to their knowledge and critical use (Gutiérrez Martín, 2008; Lotero, Romero, et al., 2018). According to a study with journalism students from the Universidad del País Vasco, social networks are the main source of fake news, Facebook being the most cited social network (Mendiguren et al., 2020, pp. 176-177).

The European Commission proposed in 2018 a series of initiatives to curb fake news, including promoting media and information literacy to counter misinformation.

Numerous works based on innovative edu-communicative methodologies and experiences, such as those compiled in the work coordinated by Marfil-Carmona, Osuna-Acedo et al. (2018) show the teaching effort that is being carried out in areas such as the university, which is the object of this study, although it is not yet

regulated in a general way throughout the university. In this sense, some achievements come from the initiatives and efforts of the teachers themselves, or some specific university degrees, such as the subject of "Communication and Education" in the Degree in Pedagogy and the Degree in Social Education at UNED. And in the field of journalism, the Universidad de Málaga, to mention another case, offers in its Degree, as an optional subject of 6 credits, "Media Literacy". This scarce presence was already underlined in the work of López and Aguaded (2015) who pointed out in their research on teaching about media literacy in the Faculties of Education and Communication, that in higher education:

There are no instruments that have validated the literacy processes among university students, as well as the motivation and training of teachers or references to media education in the bibliographic manuals most used in the teaching process (2015, p. 189).

In any case, what seems evident is that teacher training is a key challenge in the media literacy process, as Alcolea-Díaz, Reig et al. (2020, p. 106) point out in their analysis of the presence in the curriculum of Media and Information Literacy (AMI by its acronym in Spanish) teachers: "The spread of disinformation and «fake news» poses a severe challenge to educational systems, being key the development of critical thinking and analytical skills for a successful educational intervention".

Fernández-García (2017) presents different media education projects concluding that this literacy is more necessary than ever and advocating for the transparency of the media and the participation of audiences: "If the new generations obtain their information from social networks and other online resources, they must learn to decode what they read" (2017, p. 75).

In Journalism and Communication studies, this media literacy also undoubtedly refers to journalistic literacy itself. In the research by Pérez-Tornero et al., (2018) on how to deal with what they call "falsified news", -given their intentionality-, they bet on transparency, informative quality, participation, and collaboration of citizens: "There are various media literacy initiatives that move from the narrow field of fact-checking to the broader field of critical thinking and humanistic and civic values "(p. 231).

In the same sense, Aguaded and Romero-Rodríguez (2015) advocate the need to integrate media and information literacy, as UNESCO pointed out in 2012, through the reformulation of the media from the audience.

This literacy also affects the current professional profile of the journalist, which goes beyond mere technological skills, which demands new skills for network communication. This mismatch between the academic training of journalists and the demands for job offers have been highlighted in different studies (Álvarez-Flores, Núñez-Gómez, and Rodríguez Crespo, 2017; Marta-Lazo, González-Aldea et al., 2018; Pérez-Serrano, Rodríguez-Barba et al., 2015). Digital literacy in journalism

means, in the words of Usher (2019), to become “professional translators”, “interpreters” of information because today it is even “much more important to be digitally literate than to develop any other journalistic skills”.

However, we must not forget that technology is only the tool, that evolves rapidly, and what remains are the fundamentals: “To know how to filter and contrast the content of social networks, it would be important to advocate for Education as a means to enhance the 'digital humanism' where common sense prevails over infotrash” (Marta-Lazo, González-Aldea, et al., 2018, p. 148). In the same sense, from training that does not forget the essentials of journalism, such as the verification and contrast of information, Bandrés, Badillo et al. (2018, p. 167) request a commitment from the universities of the degrees of Journalism and Communication and their teachers to "encourage excessive zeal when checking and verifying the veracity of the information."

In short, it seems that the transparency of the media, the commitment to verify information, -both by journalists and their companies-, as well as the participation of audiences are essential in the fight against fake news from media literacy.

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

The importance and growing interest in fake news are manifested in the scientific production generated around the term. In recent years, the number of academic papers published in Scopus and WoS on fake news has increased significantly. In 2017 and 2018, 126 and 156 articles were registered, respectively, in these databases, compared to the 7 articles on the subject located in 2016 (Parra & Oliveira, 2018). However, there are hardly any concrete studies -beyond the recent one by Mendiguren et al. (2020) in the Basque Country- on the impact of fake news on Spanish journalism students, future information professionals who are fully affected by this issue.

Therefore, knowing to what degree Journalism students detect and interact with this type of information is necessary and relevant to articulate strategies within the studies themselves that enable students to detect and avoid the spread of disinformation pieces. The starting hypothesis points to the fact that the media consumption habits of young people, in general, favor the spread of fake news and, although Journalism and Communication students can more easily distinguish a true story from a fake one, they create, viralize, and/or share fake news because, despite the specific training of their career, they fail in media literacy.

Therefore, this research aims to know how Journalism and Communication students interact with fake news as well as to measure the degree of satisfaction with media literacy and the tools they receive in their university studies to combat fake news.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

To address the object of study, a methodological triangulation has been carried out combining qualitative (bibliographic review and focus group) and quantitative (surveys) techniques. This research focuses on receivers and adopts the culturalist aspect of audience research that considers that “the very process of using the media as a set of practices and how they are manifested, constitute the main object of interest” (McQuail, 2000, p. 452). It is about knowing how journalism students receive and consume information and interact with it. The work follows an exploratory-descriptive strategy that includes description, records, analysis, and interpretations.

The universe is made up of students enrolled during the 19/20 course in the Degrees of the Journalism area offered at the Faculty of Humanities, Documentation, and Communication of the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. In total, there are 1,231 enrolled students (see table 1). The sample studied for a trust level of 90% and a sampling error of +/- 5% is 190 students, and finally, 202 students were surveyed. The table was prepared from the data published by the quality service of the Carlos III University of Madrid. Available in <https://www.uc3m.es/cld/matricula>

**Table 1:** Students enrolled in course 2019/2020

Enrolled in the UC3M Journalism area Course 2019/2020	
Journalism degree	424
A double degree in Journalism and Audiovisual Communication	582
A double degree in Journalism and Humanities	225
<b>Total</b>	<b>1231</b>

**Source:** own elaboration

For the selection of the sample, we have carried out a non-probabilistic sampling. Teachers of different subjects and courses of different degrees posted a link with access to the survey in the virtual classroom of the university.

Finally, to interpret and enrich the discussion of the data obtained from the survey, two focus groups have been developed, a technique developed in the field of research in mass communication (Eiroa and Barranquero, 2018).

The focus group was online through the Google Meet platform and two groups were held on two different days. Each group was made up of 6 people (half women and half men), students of the first year of the Double Degree in Journalism and Audiovisual Communication (PERYCOM) and the first and fourth years of the Degree in Journalism. For its dynamization, a script was used that included some of

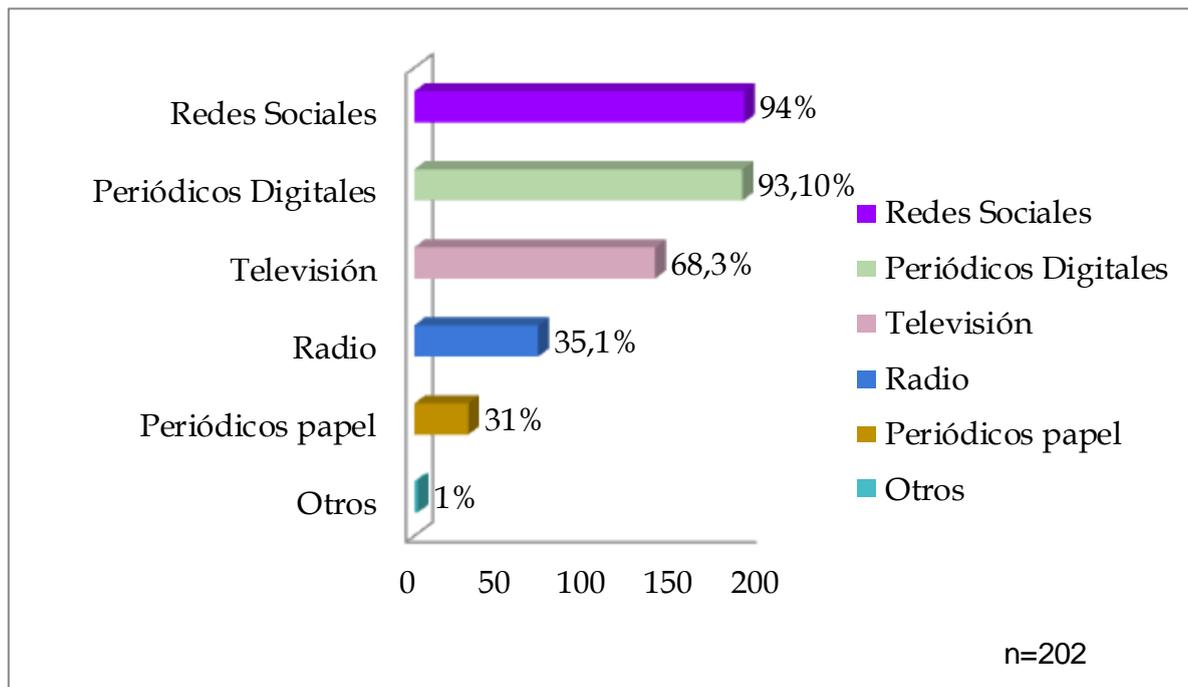
the most important thematic blocks of the research (media consumption, fake news, and media literacy) and questions were openly raised that included some of the most significant results that had been collected in the survey.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Media habits of Journalism and/or Communication students

63.90% of the students in the study indicate that they consult the media once a day, and 27.70% indicate that they access them several times. Almost 6% indicate that they consult the information every three or four days, and only 2.5% of those surveyed indicate that they consult the news once a week or never.

Regarding the most consulted media to stay informed (chart 1), the majority point to social networks (94%) and digital newspapers (93.10%). 68.3% indicate television as the main means of access to information, and far behind are the radio (35.1%) and printed newspapers (31%). Regarding the category "others", the data is not significant (1%) and they indicate the newsletter or what they comment with their environment.



**Chart 1:** *Main means of access to information (multiple choice)*

**Source:** own elaboration.

They consider that getting informed in this way does not necessarily mean more exposure to fake news.

“I think it is the opposite because we are more aware precisely because we use social networks. Not everything that is said there is true and we tend to check the information more. However, our parents, their generation, as they use

them less, are less native in that regard, all the things you tell them they believe. I always receive this type of hoax through the family group chat" (Student 1, Double Degree, 4<sup>th</sup> year).

However, being more used to using social networks can be a double-edged sword for many.

"It is true that young people are more used to social networks and we can verify if a news story is false or not better than the elderly, we have more tools. But we also know how to spread them faster than our parents" (Student 2, Journalism Degree, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

"On the one hand, we have more criteria when it comes to differentiating fake news, but when it comes to sharing information, many times we do it without being careful" (Student 3, Double Degree, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

Regarding the question of how they consume the news (multiple choice), we wanted to know the level of depth in their readings. In this sense, 69.30% of the students indicate that they read only the headlines and the lead. And more than half say they read tweets (55.90%). Only 50.50% read the complete news. 29.20% read only the headlines, and 7% acknowledge that depending on the interest that the news arouses in them, on the content, they read only the headline or go beyond the first paragraph.

Students recognize that this superficial reading can be a problem when it comes to identifying fake news:

"Many times, the fastest method to get informed is through social networks or with the apps of a newspaper. The notification pops up and with only the summary that it gives you, you think that you are well informed but you should read the entire news, even contrast it with other newspapers" (Student 4, Journalism Degree, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

"We trust the headlines a lot. In fact, if a headline catches your attention, many times you take a screenshot and upload it to social networks, and maybe what that headline says has many more nuances in the rest of the news that you don't see in the headline. And this can go viral without having understood the news" (Student 7, Journalism Degree, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

The culture of the immediate in which they live and the practices of the media with striking headlines are mentioned as the main reasons when it comes to explaining this superficial consumption of news.

"I think it is also part of the culture that we have today, the immediate. And that culture affects when it comes to getting informed. If we see a very long story, people read the headline and that's it. And other times, it happens that what follows has nothing to do with it" (Student 10, Double Degree, 3<sup>rd</sup> year)

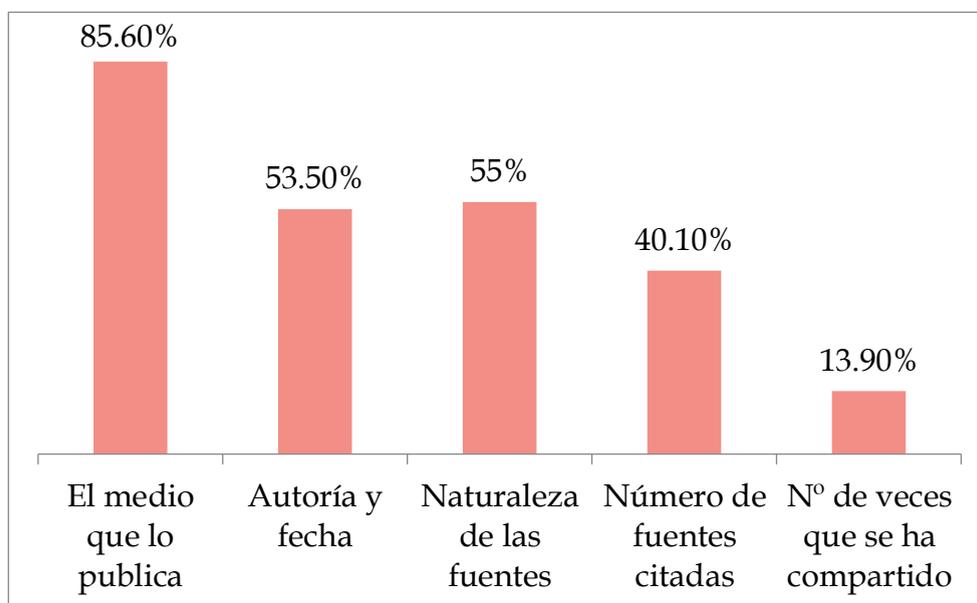
“The headlines are made just to get attention so that you get in there and the media outlet charges for the ads. They do not care if you read the whole news or not and many times the headline has nothing to do with the news” (Student 12, Journalism Degree, 3<sup>rd</sup> year)

“I don't know if the problem is in the news or us. People like to find out what is going on but not know what is going on. That's what happens when you read only the headline and the lead, you find out but you don't know” (Student 5, Journalism Degree, 4<sup>th</sup> year)

#### 4.2. Knowledge of fake news

70.80%, almost three out of four students, claim to know how to distinguish fake news from a true one. More significant and perhaps worrying is that 29.20% openly state that they do not know how to distinguish a real news story from a fake one.

Regarding what elements students take into account to know that the news is fake (chart 2), 85.60% indicate that they look at the media outlet that publishes it, 55% at the nature of the sources that are cited in the news, 53.50% the authorship of the information and the date on which it was published, 40.10% in the number of sources that appear in the informative piece, and, finally, with less significant data, 13.90% of the surveyed students indicated that they look at the number of times the news has been shared. In recent months, social networks such as WhatsApp have limited the number of times a message can be forwarded to groups or contacts. It seems that messages that are forwarded very frequently are more likely to contain hoaxes.



**Chart 2.** *What do students look for to know if a news item is fake (multiple choice)*

**Source:** own elaboration.

The key being, for almost 86% of those surveyed, the media that publishes it, they go to traditional media to verify the information in case of doubt because they consider them more reliable.

"Sometimes when I read a piece of news that sounds strange to me, which may be fake news, the first thing I do is see which media outlets have published it. And many times, I get the news in various media but I still do not give it sufficient credibility if large media outlet such as El País, ABC, La Vanguardia, and others have not published it" (Student 6, Journalism Degree, 4<sup>th</sup> year)

"The traditional media are more credible but all are susceptible to falling into fake news" (Student 1, Double Degree, 4<sup>th</sup> year)

When students are asked through which media outlet they have received more fake news, 45.50% indicate that WhatsApp is the main channel, followed by 36.60% who point to social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. A worrying fact if one takes into account that social networks are the means through which most students get informed. Finally, 5% indicated others such as Instagram or confidential.

Although Whastapp is the medium through which they receive more fake news, for students, it is, nevertheless, the least reliable from the beginning.

"I agree, we tend to believe the audiovisual more but when you receive an image via WhatsApp, it is always better to wait a bit to know if it is true or with verification tools such as Maldito Bulo or Newtral" (Student 10, Double Degree, 3<sup>rd</sup> year)

84.20% of students consider that citizens are the greatest generators of fake news, followed by 44.60% who think that politicians are the ones who create more fake news, and 37.60% point to the media as the top fake news creators.

For students, the fact that the media are not the main creators of fake news and appear in third place does not diminish the seriousness of the fact.

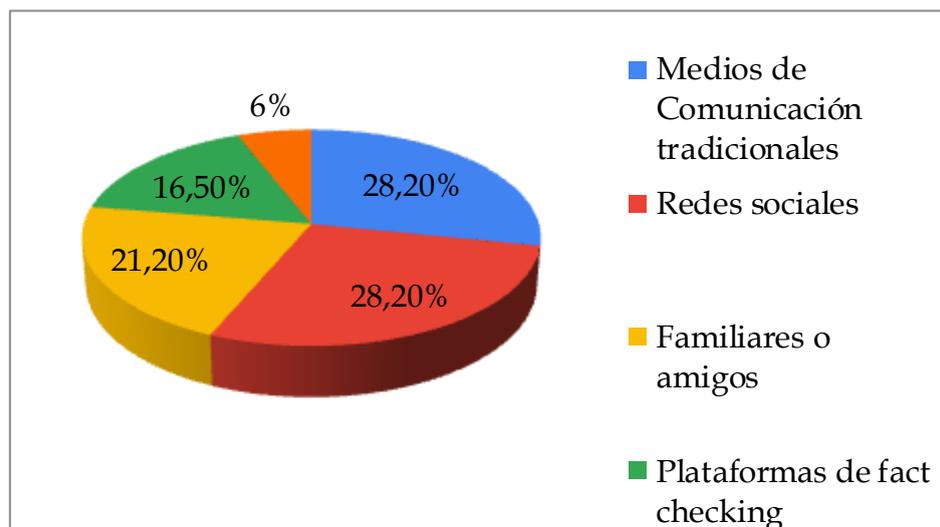
"It is not convenient for the media to spread fake news because of the fame they can get and lose all credibility. Their role should be to put an end to them, deny them, give truthful information with which we can contrast them" (Student 4, Journalism Degree, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

"Fake news is brought out by politicians, citizens... but it is often the media who spread them. For me, the media are more responsible than citizens or politicians" (Student 5, Journalism Degree, 4<sup>th</sup> year)

Regarding the topics of fake news that are most shared are: social topics (44.70%), politics (23.50%), sports and health (11.80%). Less significantly, there is science (2.40%).

More than half of the students who shared fake news indicate that they found out that the news was false (chart 3) through the media (28.20%) and social networks (28.20%), and 21.20% indicate to family and friends when detecting that the news was fake.

On the other hand, only 16.50% of those surveyed indicate that they found out about the falsehood of the news through verification platforms, such as Newtral or Maldita. The rest of the respondents (6%) do not remember where they found out.



**Chart 3.** *How do they find out that the news was fake?*

**Source:** own elaboration.

#### 4.3. Media literacy at university

97.70% of students consider it important to promote media literacy at university. Students consider that media literacy is necessary, not only in Journalism and Communication studies but in all careers and even from pre-university levels, at much earlier ages.

“It must be before, from primary or secondary school, as a subject that explains the repercussions of spreading fake news. They are judicially very soft with these issues. If there were stronger judicial examples, people would think about it before spreading fake news” (Student 12, Journalism Degree, 3<sup>rd</sup> year)

“I also agree. It should not be a thing of only university careers linked to the media but a work that is carried out at home and an earlier age. It seems a very important task because everyone already has social networks and you can spread fake news” (Student 4, Journalism Degree, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

However, students believe that this media literacy is especially relevant and necessary in the case of communication professionals.

"If we are going to be a reliable source for others, not only in the professional world but for friends, family... because as we study Journalism, they come to us to ask questions about these fake news issues, I think we should be more aware and know more about the subject" (Student 11, Journalism Degree, 3<sup>rd</sup> year)

"Most teachers place a lot of emphasis on sources and truthfulness. I speak in our favor because I think we are more careful with fake news. Friends my age, who have the same level of literacy in social networks, pay less attention to checking sources before sharing something than a journalism student like myself" (Student 10, Double Degree, 3<sup>rd</sup> year)

However, very few students understand media literacy in its full sense, not only as an instrumental or technical training in the use of technology but also in its broader meaning that implies the consequences of its misuse and public service responsibility.

"More than education in social networks, I believe that ethical education is necessary. The problem many times is not to know if the news that is going to be published is a lie or not, but to know if it is worth publishing something false due to the benefits that it may entail or if I prefer not to publish it and be a good journalist" (Student 3, Double Degree, 1<sup>st</sup> year).

70.45% are satisfied with the resources or tools that their teachers have provided to detect fake news. While 29.55% do not consider them sufficient. Among the tools or resources that the teachers have provided them, they mainly point out: Keys and techniques to know how to identify fake news, tools to verify information on the internet, examples of content verification, data journalism, and talks given by verification professionals.

To the extent that the media dedicated to fact-checking in Spain have appeared, especially in the last two years (Newtral 2018, or Maldita.es in 2018), senior year students show different opinions regarding the tools provided in the degree compared to the first-year students.

"I am in the first year of the degree but I am satisfied with the training to be able to verify the news. I did not know about Newtral or Maldita, for example, and they are fundamental tools to deny fake news. But they will inevitably continue to exist and it is up to each one of us to spread them, even create them, or not" (Student 2, Journalism Degree, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

"In the current plan, they do teach us how Maldita, Newtral work... and they teach us using the very tools that appear on those pages to disprove hoaxes. The way journalism is taught in universities is changing" (Student 3, Double Degree, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

However, senior students disagree with the tools provided.

“I finish this year. There are good intentions because they place a lot of emphasis on sources and veracity as concepts but they do not go any further. I would like them to give some hope or tools to face it because I believe that society has already given up” (Student 1, Double Degree, 4<sup>th</sup> year)

“I discovered these tools and a few more things in my internship. I felt so lost and had spent a career. I think that more than the subject and the tools, it depends on your teachers” (Student 5, Journalism Degree, 4<sup>th</sup> year)

These testimonies highlight the urgency of this media education, which, beyond these fact-checking tools, makes them understand that the basis of everything is in the fundamentals and quality of journalism.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The media habits of Journalism and/or Communication students show a low level of informative updating compared to what would be expected of Journalism and Communication students. Currently, to be informed you have to consult the information more than once a day.

The fact that they mainly go to social networks and digital newspapers to stay informed is in line with the habits of the analyzed generation, born amid the emergence of social networks. Although social networks are a breeding ground for fake news, the young respondents believe that by getting informed through social networks and digital media they do not necessarily have to have more exposure to fake news. However, they recognize that the speed and lack of verification often make them viralize fake news more quickly than other generations, like their parents.

Almost three out of four respondents confess that they read only the headlines and the lead of the news. These are two of the main elements that make up the external structure of the news and provide information about what is happening but the level of depth on the subject is scarce. To this is added the fact that almost 56% read tweets to be updated, which is consistent with the use of social networks mentioned by themselves, where the majority pointed to them as the main means they used to access the news.

This superficial reading of the news can be a problem when it comes to being well informed and not falling for fake news that, through striking headlines, get a quick reaction when sharing them without contrasting the received information. For some, the responsibility for not doing so is on themselves, influenced as they live in the culture of fast consumption and immediacy, but they also hold the media and their clickbait policies responsible for eye-catching headlines.

Regarding the knowledge of fake news, the results are a little ahead of the perception that the general population had when the issue of fake news emerged in Spain,

where 60% of Spaniards believed that they knew how to detect false news (Manzanero, 2017). But the most significant, and perhaps worrying, is that almost a third openly state that they cannot distinguish a real news story from a fake one, a percentage that is not so low if we take into account that these journalism students must prepare to work in a context where verifying information is essential in the fight against fake news.

Being the media outlet the key to identifying fake news for almost 86% of respondents, one might wonder if they consider that there are more and less credible media outlets, or if traditional media have more credibility, are more trustworthy than digital natives, or the contrary. The traditional media are more reliable according to the students, which collides with the fact that later they are not the chosen ones when it comes to consuming information.

It seems evident that there is a lack of collective awareness of the repercussions of the spread of fake news, as shown by the fact that students consider citizens as the greatest generators of fake news. It is in this area where journalism must take center stage denying false information.

Social issues and politics are the main sources of fake news for students. These results also coincide with those obtained from a research work carried out with journalism students in the Basque Country who consider that social and political issues are where fake news stories are most abundant (Mendigueren et al., 2020, p. 177), although the Basque students place politics first.

Social networks and citizens become both agents of access to information and disinformation, according to the students themselves, by pointing to them as the main ways by which they learned that information was false. The fact that only 16.5% of those surveyed found out about the falsehood of the news through verification platforms, such as Newtral or Maldita, is significant because, being journalism students, it would be expected that they would go to these platforms to contrast if a piece of news is a hoax or not.

Taking into account the described results, students perceive that they need more means or tools to detect hoaxes or fake news, and in this sense, almost one in three do not consider the tools and resources provided by their teachers sufficient. For this reason, almost 98% affirm that media literacy should be promoted in the university. This coincides with the results of the research with journalism students from the Basque Country who pointed out that "91% believe that it would be interesting if training courses were implemented in schools to teach how to distinguish reliable information from that which is not" (Mendigueren et. al, 2020, p. 179).

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

The results of this research show some worrying data regarding how journalism and communication students at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid detect and interact

with fake news. The media consumption habits of these young people, mainly social networks and digital media (90%), do not necessarily imply in their opinion a greater exposure to fake news, and they point out that they can verify whether a news item is fake or not better than older people, and have more tools. In fact, almost three out of four students say they know how to distinguish fake news from real news. However, despite the specific training of their career, they do recognize that they viralize and share them.

Trying to understand the reason why they share this false information, we detect that the way the news is consumed has an influence. Only half of the surveyed students say they read the full story and 35% only read the headlines. Although they blame the media for their clickbait practices, they acknowledge that not delving into the news leads them to share fake news.

WhatsApp is the network through which most fake news stories arrive according to students, followed by Facebook and Twitter. Social networks are the platforms in which young people spend the most hours and this massive exposure to them would explain why they are also the channels from which they receive more hoaxes or misinformation.

The traditional media, the big headlines, are their reference when it comes to checking possible fake news and, in this sense, 85.60% indicate that they pay attention, first of all, to the media outlet that publishes it and also to the information authorship, so the credibility of the professional, besides the media outlet, is increasingly important. Despite the new tools to detect hoaxes and verification platforms, only 16.50% use them.

29% claim not to distinguish real news from fake news. This is something especially serious if we take into account that these are journalism students who, in the future, will be responsible for creating and sharing information, and it also reveals that teacher training continues to be a key challenge in the media literacy process.

Although the way journalism is taught in universities is changing, one in four students is not fully satisfied and does not consider sufficient the resources or tools that their teachers have provided to detect fake news. They unanimously believe that it is important to promote media literacy at university in all careers, and even from pre-university levels.

The results of the research at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid show coincidences with the one carried out in the Basque Country and highlight the need for more diagnoses to design adequate training strategies aimed at Journalism and Communication students.

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