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#Mexico2018 | 'Fake News' and Social Media: The New Heads of the Hydra

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The results from the survey of the media in Mexico within this article can only be used for academic purposes.

ABSTRACT

The spread of disinformation on social media has taken democracies around the world by surprise, especially during major political events such as presidential elections. At the international level, political actors like politicians, news media and supranational organisations are discussing how this phenomena will impact the presidential election in Mexico.

This paper looks at whether Mexico and news media in the country are prepared to deal with information operations aimed at influencing public opinion. It provides novel evidence mainly based on interviews conducted with key actors in the Mexican news media ecosystem to understand: 1) in which ways disinformation could distort the Mexican election campaign and 2) whether news media are prepared to deal with it.

Additionally, the paper discusses the absence of laws against the operation of bots and social media fake profiles for political purposes. The author also assesses current regulatory approaches to disinformation spread by reviewing recent international frameworks to tackle this problem.

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Introduction

In the Greek mythology, the Hydra is a nine headed-monster. It was said that if you cut off one hydra heads, two more grow back.

In the modern world, the social media platforms are a kind of hydra. Tackle one and another one pops up to take its place. The role of social media platforms in politics has gripped politicians and journalists and has spiked in importance after the 2016 US presidential elections.

Mexicans have been dealing with this for years. Andrés Sepulveda, a Columbian hacker who was jailed, has often spoken to the press about how in 2012 he ran a completely digital operation to help Mexico's current President, Enrique Peña Nieto block hashtags and comments against his campaign and his person on Twitter. With a 35.000 bots and trolls army, Sepulveda told Bloomberg in 2016 that social media had helped the Nieto's party, the PRI, regain the Presidency.

Mexico goes to the polls again in July 2018 and there is a real concern that information operations¹, often lead by political parties and aimed at distorting public opinion –by means of using trolls, bots and misleading information– will negatively affect the campaign and the results.

As previous electoral campaigns have shown, for instance, the so-called troll farms, of self-employed youth aged between 16 and 21 are capable of creating trending topics that boost the prominence of fabricated and false information.

Most of these activities take place in the shadows. Yet some of those who are behind these operations are not afraid to speak out because there is no specific law to punish their activity. These ventures are helped by the fact that most of the younger population in Mexico² do not trust mainstream media because of their financial dependence on the Government, the biggest advertiser.

Some political analysts like Carlos Pérez Ricard from Oxford University who was interviewed for this paper, contend the use of social media by politicians cannot win an election. Mainly, because the younger population that use it all the time don't go out to vote at the ballot boxes. But young people who are surfing on the internet all the time could influence their parents and other voters. In a fragile

¹ In this study, I will talk about information operations to refer to the activity of disinformation spread by means of using trolls, bots and fabricate false and misleading information.

² According to the last Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism this is a trend for most countries.

democracy like Mexico, where no single political party holds a strong majority, the influence of social media can be powerful.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how Mexican media deal with the spread of disinformation during the electoral campaign. More precisely, I am answering the following main questions:

Are the media in Mexico prepared to identify information operations led by bots or trolls on Twitter and to prevent the publication of false information they spread during the presidential campaign?

Mexico is in the middle of one of its biggest electoral processes in history and there's still a serious absence of laws meant to punish the use of social media for spreading disinformation or undertake information operation aimed at distorting public opinion. This is despite claims that the government has been using bots to silence critical voices. These claims were reinforced by previous studies on tracking bots done by cyber activists like Alberto Escorcía, in Mexico, as well as by recognized experts like Philip Howard from Oxford University.

In the words of researchers from the Computing Propaganda Research Project from Oxford University the *“organised social media manipulation occurs in many countries around the world. In authoritarian regimes it tends to be the government that funds and coordinates propaganda campaigns on social media. In democracies, it tends to be the political parties that are the primary organizers of social media manipulation.”*³

For the upcoming presidential election, the country has its largest proportion of young people with the right to vote in history, more than 25 million people between 18 and 25 years (according to official charts); one in three voters will be younger than 30⁴ years old. Younger voters are also the most prolific users of social media in Mexico. This underlines the potential influence of social networks in the spread of information.

This paper and the necessary research were conducted a few months before political campaigns started.

³ Bradshaw Samantha, Howard Philip N, Troops, trolls and troublemakers: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation, p15, Chapter 1, Computational Propaganda Research Project, Working paper 2017.12, Oxford University

⁴ National Electoral Institute, official charts

Methodology

This qualitative-quantitative research is trying to gain an understanding of whether the Mexican media are prepared for the “information war” on social media.

It provides some insight into the problem and is also an exercise for developing ideas that can be helpful for community managers and editors on the media’s task of tackle false information disseminated on social media platforms before it gets to their own publications.

The research for this paper has been conducted in three stages.

First, a review of the laws in different Latin American countries related to the the use of social networks to spread false and fabricated information.

Second, this paper is also based on semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted mainly by WhatsApp or Skype calls, with social media analysts and activists, marketing experts, digital rights defenders, former political bots and a CEO of a digital personalised content company in Mexico City. The interviews with these experts are necessary because different points of view help to understand how the so called ‘fake news’ are designed, how they influence the mass communication media, the role played by social media platforms on their diffusion and why regulation must be introduced to regulate this phenomenon.

Third, this paper also includes a non-representative survey ran between some of the largest legacy and digital born media that will show whether media in Mexico are prepared for the battle against false information during the electoral process.

Main concepts and definitions

In 2016, Aviv Ovady an expert in technology, journalism and social media of the Centre on Social Networks Responsibility (CSMR) of the University of Michigan, predicted that manipulation of content online was a time bomb waiting to explode.

Sure enough, the bomb exploded and has brought a chaos in public opinion that now, according to Ovady, threats to become an “information apocalypse”⁵ that is going to be characterized by the use of advanced technologies that make it hard to detect doctored videos and other misleading content.

To analyse and understand the potential impact of *information operations* during the Mexican elections, it is necessary to define the basic terminology that is included within this broad concept.

Astroturfing: This is the method through which a fictitious reality is created to give the impression of popularity for one person or product. Two examples are the followers bought on social media

⁵ El experto que predijo la crisis de las noticias falsas de 2016 ahora anuncia el info-apocalipsis, Infobae, March 1st, 2018 <https://www.infobae.com/america/eeuu/2018/03/01/el-experto-que-predijo-la-crisis-de-las-noticias-falsas-de-2016-ahora-anuncia-el-info-apocalipsis/>

platforms and the messages they massively sent to artificially boost the prominence of a specific hashtag or manipulate trending topics.

Bot: A bot is a software that responds like a human through text statements and operates on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Bots spread positive comments throughout social media, mostly with a political purpose. We can find many kinds of bots, mainly the so-called Social, Political, Human and Automatized.

Cyber troops: Military or political party teams committed to manipulate public opinion over social media.⁶

Legions: groups, mainly of teenagers, organized by social media with the purpose of creating hashtags, misinformation and hate speech.

Troll: Its main purpose is to attack people, political parties and other users on social media. It spreads hate speech and tries to change positive points of view regarding a person or a specific issue, to negative.

Digital personalized content: This is a term used by those, usually companies, who fabricate information to suit or harm one person, organisation or company. Is information on demand paid by someone to be spread in different digital platforms.

Disinformation: Fabricated content blended with facts. It includes practices like automated accounts used for astroturfing, network of false followers or organized trolling activities⁷. Here I refer to disinformation when mentioning not only practices for producing information but also the array of activities to boost the prominence of this type of content.

'Fake News': 'Fake news', was chosen in 2017 as the word of the year by the Oxford University. In line with previous research, this paper avoids the term except when directly mentioned by interviewees. The main reasons for this, as highlighted in Nielsen and Graves, 2018⁸ and the Report commissioned by the European Commission in March 2018⁹, is that the term is inadequate to capture the complex problem of disinformation. As argued elsewhere¹⁰, the term has also been appropriated by some politicians and pundits to undermine independent news media. Therefore, as previously mentioned the term *disinformation*, which includes an array of practices not only to produce but also to disseminate fabricated or false information, is preferred here.

⁶ Bradshaw Samantha, Howard Philip N, Troops, trolls and troublemakers: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation, p9, Chapter 1, Computational Propaganda Research Project, Working paper 2017.12, Oxford University

⁷ European Commission, A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. Report of the independent High-level Group on 'fake news' and online disinformation. Accessed, June 28, 2018 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

⁸ Nielsen, R. K., Graves, L. "News you don't believe". 2018. Audience perspective on 'fake news'. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

European Commission, A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. Report of the independent High level Group on 'fake news' and online disinformation. Accessed, June 28, 2018 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

⁹ Nielsen, R. K., Graves, L. "News you don't believe". 2018. Audience perspective on 'fake news'. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

¹⁰ Wardle, C. & Derakhshan, H. (2017) Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making. Report to the Council of Europe. <https://shorensteincenter.org/information-disorder-framework-for-research-and-policy-making/>

Fact-Checking: It is the process of attempting to verify or disprove assertions made in speech, print media or online content. Some media had a Fact Checking process before they publish the information, but in this case, I would say that we are talking about a verification process.

Misinformation: The dissemination of false information, either knowing it to be false or unknowingly.¹¹

¹¹ Chandler Daniel & Munday Rod, Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication, Oxford University Press, First Published 2011, impression 7

Literature Review

The literature on *information operations* in the online news domain, including disinformation and misinformation spread aimed at distort public opinion, is in its infancy.

BuzzFeed News carried a story that showed that during the last three months of the presidential campaign in the United States, the main 20 'fake news' spread through Facebook had more likes and comments than the 20 main "true" news broadcasted through the 19 major news websites of the country.¹²

The Oxford Internet Institute and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism have also published widely on this subject.

One of the documents that it is necessary to consult for future studies on the subject is the already mentioned report by the independent High-level Group on 'fake news' and online disinformation commissioned by the European Commission. After months of work the group, integrated by a multidisciplinary team of 39 people, one of them Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Director of Research at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, published an important terminological reasoning rejecting the use of the expression 'fake news' made popular by the US President Donald Trump. But more importantly, the document emphasises the fundamental right of freedom of expression and warns of the dangers of trying to censor content online through future regulation frameworks.¹³

Research published in Brazil, Spain, the U.S., United Kingdom, and Germany among other countries on the efforts made by the media on the elections like in France, where Facebook and Google - two of the main players - joined the Cross Check project to combat misinformation, show how this phenomenon has become a real risk to democracy in the world.

This paper will identify how aware Mexican media is of the problem of misinformation, and what steps they take to avoid publishing false information.

According to the Trust Barometer 2018, conducted by the public relations agency Edelman, 80 percent of Mexicans consider false information a weapon that can influence their decision making. This is the highest proportion among the sample of 28 countries considered for the study.

¹² Silverman Craig, This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook, *BuzzfeedNews*, accessed on March 20, 2018, https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm_term=.pk8oNBVKgO-.JaVmLRVv1r

¹³ Final report of the High-Level Expert Group on 'Fake News' and Online Disinformation, accessed on March 22, 2018 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

The study revealed that, globally, confidence in the media stands at 43 percent among the general population and 53 percent among the most informed population, which implies that they are the type of institution with the least credibility, below NGOs, business and government.¹⁴

The presence of bots and trolls compounds this distrust in the media. One of the most popular studies about this topic is tracking bots and trolls on Twitter, but this approach has several limitations, the main one being development of huge databases that require a great amount of time and large capacity computers to be analysed.

In Mexico there is no academic institution that regularly or systematically covers behaviour of the characters that are setting the new way of disinformation spread on social media. Some consulting companies, like Mesura, Berumen and Associates and activists released their analysis of the bots operating during local elections, but Mexican media don't have any research of their own that might lead them to identify these paid accounts: As mentioned above, doing so requires investing a lot of time and collaborating with external agents.

Researchers of different universities in the United States and the United Kingdom published working papers about the role of social media in the Mexican elections and how some candidates used the social networks as a new communication instrument. One of them was the so-called "Bronco", the first independent candidate in becoming Governor and now, also as an independent, one of the four candidates to the Mexican Presidency.

In the past, this politician was part of the government party; since then he has become the first governor without a political party in the country. He also won the election using "*social media to communicate with the public and eschewed traditional media outlets*".¹⁵ These communication actions, promoting his agenda through social networks overtook the other candidates' traditional media advertising.

Social media is now the more disruptive force in the political arena and Mexican mass media have remained passive in their actions for maintaining credibility.

This paper looks at how different media outlets deal with lack of knowledge on how information operations take place during the Mexican presidential campaign.

It is impossible to talk about the spread of disinformation during elections without talking about Russia and its alleged participation in the manipulation of the public opinion during the elections in other countries like France or the United States.

American prosecutor Robert Mueller found evidence that 13 citizens and three organisations of Russian origin had intervened in the presidential election of the United States, in which Donald Trump was the victor.

¹⁴ Edelman, 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Global report, <https://cms.edelman.com/sites/default/files/2018-01/2018%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report.pdf>

¹⁵ Howard Philip, Savage Saip, Flores Saviaga Claudia, Toxtli Carlos, and Monroy-Hernandez Daniel, Social Media, Civil Engagement and the Slacktivism Hypothesis: Lessons from Mexico's "El Bronco", *Journal of International Affairs*, Winter 2016 Vol.70, No. 1, page 56, Columbia University

While Facebook, Twitter other social networks or instant message services like WhatsApp can also spread misinformation.

Chapter 1

The State of the Law

The discussion on the regulation of the internet and social media has in the past focused on how to stop the spread of hate speech and how to protect people's privacy. The dissemination of false information and electoral manipulation was not a major concern.

Many European governments have taken steps towards legislating the internet, but it is not easy. Will Moy, head of the British fact-checking organization, Full Fact, points out that there is a major flow of information through different channels and it is becoming more difficult to differentiate between what is true and what is not.¹⁶

There are 3.4 billion internet users, near 500 million tweets are posted every day, every second the equivalent of seven hours of video is uploaded to YouTube.¹⁷

With these figures, Arturo Sarukhan, former Mexican ambassador to the U.S. points out that Facebook could be the largest country in the world judged by the number of people that use it, even when almost half of the adult population is not online.

Mariluz Congosto, a researcher from the Telematics Department of the University Carlos III in Spain, explains the problem: *"Every time the government talks about the need of regulating the internet, people protest against it very much because the legislation is only about the content and the hate speech, but not about the fraudulent use of Facebook and Twitter for spreading misinformation, disinformation and false news."* He points out that misinformation was rife during the campaign for Catalonia's independence¹⁸

1.1 Latin America and the Emerging Debate

While Europe has taken the lead in the discussion about this phenomenon, in Latin America only a few countries have implemented measures to try to limit the reach of the new threat to democratic processes. The legislation implemented by Brazil and Chile had been noticed on an international level, but this paper will focus on Argentina and Brazil.

On April 23, 2014, the Senate of Brazil approved the Civil Frame of Internet (also known as the Internet Constitution) to protect civil rights on the world wide web. The legislation constrains the responsibility to the intermediaries, ensuring the internet neutrality, freedom of speech and the users' privacy.¹⁹

The Brazilian project, driven by the civil society was considered ahead of its time in matters of rights

¹⁶ Interview conducted in Oxford, February 28, 2018

¹⁷ Sarukhán Arturo, *Geopolítica, redes sociales y la elección en México*, Letras Libres, February 28, 2018
<http://www.letraslibres.com/mexico/revista/geopolitica-redes-sociales-y-la-eleccion-en-mexico#.WpmlKFuQyTA.twitter>

¹⁸ Interview conducted by Skype on December 7, 2017

¹⁹ Marco Civil Brasileño de Internet, PDF

and internet governance.

Last year, Brazil carried out a “mini electoral reform”²⁰ to prohibit the use of false profiles in social media for electoral purposes, but there is little on the use of bots. Fabio Malini, coordinator in a research group at the Espírito Santo Federal University, argued that this should, in fact, be subject to more legislation.²¹

At the moment, a citizen in Brazil can file a complaint to the Civil Court in cases whereby their photograph was used to create a fake profile on the internet.

The person or company that creates a fake profile can infringe on the copyright (when they use photographs of somebody else), but can also be accused of crimes against the honour (if they offend somebody) and of identity falsification. The problem is that most people struggle to ascertain if someone is using their personal information in fake profiles.

On January 9, 2018, the Federal Police of Brazil announced in their Twitter account that they were putting together a special group that would tackle ‘fake news’ during the electoral process, identify and punish authors, no matter if they are social network users or of any platform.

²⁰ Information provided for a source who asked not to reveal the name

²¹ Interview conducted by appear on March 8, 2018



FENAPEF
@FENAPEF



Polícia Federal dará início nos próximos dias em Brasília às atividades de um grupo especial formado para combater notícias falsas durante o processo eleitoral. A medida tem o objetivo de identificar e punir autores de "fake news" contra ou a favor dos candidatos.

12:49 PM - Jan 9, 2018

The announcement by Brazilian Police.

Other countries, like Argentina, are also working on their legislation.

In November 2017, Argentina's Chamber of Deputies returned to discuss a bill regulating responsibility of internet service suppliers. In October 2016 the bill was reviewed by the Senate.

The goal, according to the document, is *"to guarantee the freedom of speech and the right to*

information, preserve the right to honour, to privacy and to the appearance and any other right that ends up affected.”²²

The document states that the intermediaries (access providers, housing and content services, search engine providers and eCommerce platforms) are not responsible for the content created or published by the users. To eliminate content, a warrant must be issued by the court.

Approval of this initiative is pending.

1.2 Mexico and its late beginning

Mexico and Brazil “*are two important examples in the use of bots to silent minorities,*” according to Mailini. He argued that they also highlight exactly why Latin America should draft initiatives to punish cyber troops and those who spread misinformation. They are also an example of why it is necessary to have governance which includes tech companies because “*their relation with governments are not transparent*” and that opacity opens the door to a lot of interpretations of the existing laws.

In the case of Mexico, with the rise of the use of social media, laws were created or modified like the Federal Law for Data Protection, the Federal Law of the Consumer, the Federal Law of Copyright and the policies that regulate activity in the internet, but nothing specific about the use of bots, false profiles or disinformation spread during the electoral process.

At the local level, the Congress of Veracruz, a state in southern Mexico, made a reform to Article 311 of the local Penal Code to establish sanctions for anyone who, “*by any means, falsely affirms the existence of explosive or other devices; of attacks with firearms; or chemical, biological or toxic substances that may cause damage to health, causing disruption of public order, will be imposed imprisonment of one to four years and a fine of five hundred to a thousand days of salary, attending to the alarm or disturbance of the order effectively produced,*”²³ after the detention of two people who spread rumours about acts of violence in two cities of the state, on Twitter, generating panic and alarm.

In December 2017, the Chamber of Deputies approved a reform to Article 1916 of the Civil Code, which refers to moral damage, to sanction cyberbullying. The move sparked a broad discussion on the suspicion that the real objective was to censor social networks. Different specialists reacted through their Twitter accounts to clarify that the right to freedom of speech was guaranteed even with the reform.

On January 29 2018, the National Electoral Institute (INE), the election watchdog, signed an agreement with Facebook to promote citizen participation in politics. Actions included broadcasting presidential debates through Facebook Live, and providing training for public officials, media and civil organizations, but there is no mention the issue of false news or profiles.

María Elena Meneses (RIP), an academic at the Tecnológico de Monterrey in Mexico City and one of the most active researchers in the country in the study of social networks, points out that there is no clear intention on the part of the electoral authorities to deal with these phenomena on Twitter and

²² Proyecto de Ley, accessed March 22, 2018 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EO1As7v0PNrTirzAK5o0e2x83jklQ0I9/view>

²³ Código Penal para el Estado Libre y Soberano de Veracruz, accessed on March 21st, 2018 <http://www.legisver.gob.mx/leyes/LeyesPDF/PENAL200217.pdf>

Facebook.²⁴

"I do not know if there is a serious project on the part of the electoral authority to investigate these new phenomena for the Mexican scenario and it seems truly scandalous to me," she said.

She said Facebook will play a big role in the elections, but Twitter shouldn't be underestimated either, since it is a social network that forms public opinion in Mexico.

Meneses recognizes that in fighting misinformation *"one can, of course, fall in a blockade of freedoms if sanctions are established on the media,"* which is why rather than creating or modifying a law she suggests drafting a national agreement *"in which Facebook, Twitter and Google undertake their share,"* but also public relations and digital consulting companies, so that these platforms block users or companies that are using bots or spreading 'fake news'.

Aleida Calleja, Advocacy coordinator of the Latin American Observatory of Regulation, Media and Convergence (Observacom) is in favour of a co-regulation in which the different platforms take part because even with the changes that have been made in the Mexican regulation since 2013, the year in which the Telecommunications Reform was initiated, among others, to regulate the right to information and the confidentiality of data, the responsibility of all actors has not been touched.²⁵

In electoral matters, she points out that the topic related to advertising of political parties and candidates on digital platforms only has been touched upon, but not the issue of how *"algorithms are deciding dialogues and social discussions and how that can alter the democratic debate, which has already been seen in the United States, in Mexico and in other countries."*

In this respect, Congosto agrees that a large part of the problem lies with the platforms: *"Twitter and Facebook are the ones that could control this better, they should be told that their platforms should not have these things and if they are, they should be fined."*

Calleja insists that the discussion has focused on forcing Facebook, Google or Netflix to pay taxes, but not on the issue of how they influence democratic processes. *"The issue is not being discussed in Mexico, there is a regulatory evasion to not give this discussion, we have not even had the discussion about the net neutrality guidelines,"* she said.²⁶

Malini believes that in Mexico, Brazil and across much of Latin America, there are general patterns that give a clear idea of how the bots act, how false profiles are created and the characteristics of 'fake news'. Together, they give a clear idea about which areas should be regulated in order to close the door of the manipulation of social networks in the democratic process without violating the freedom of speech.

Mexico does have regulation that could deal with this, but the laws are usually used to prevent freedom of speech rather than to ban the spread of false information.

²⁴ Interview conducted by WhatsApp on December 11, 2017

²⁵ The Observacom is a regional think tank regarded to regulations on digital communication among others.

²⁶ Interview conducted by WhatsApp, January 10, 2018

CHAPTER 2

What Makes the Mexican Election Unique?

On July 1, 2018, Mexicans will once again go to the polling stations. Enrique Peña Nieto came to power five years ago as a young politician who was seen before as a hope for change, but he has failed to live up to the promise.

Corruption scandals inside the government and political parties, former governors jailed for bribery human rights violations, lack of resources to fulfil the basic needs for at least 30% of the population, insecurity and growing poverty, are just some of the endless list of complaints that people express in a country where only 20% of the citizens approve of the President's performance²⁷ and where only 15% believes that the economy is growing.²⁸

According to the Latinobarometer Survey, 90% of the people believe that the country is ruled by powerful groups concerned only with their own interests instead of the people's needs.

"There are two Mexicos. One Mexico—wealthier, internationally connected, educated, and urbanized—is strong enough to make its voice heard within a democratic context, while the other Mexico—poor, isolated or hurt by internationalization, less educated, frequently rural and indigenous—remains marginalized even within an open political system".²⁹

At the beginning of 2017, Oxfam revealed that 10% of the richest population control 67% of the wealth in the country. The middle class is struggling not to descend to a lower level of wellness, but with salaries six times lower than in the U.S. (the main economic partner) it's not easy.

Education is also a problem because in 2016, 53% of young adults (25 to 34 years old) in Mexico had education below the upper average, a figure that increased to 63% in people between 25 and 64 years old, according to the Panorama Study of the OECD, Education 2017.

The percentage of Mexicans who did not attend upper secondary schools is much higher than the averages of the OECD countries, which is 22% for people between 25 and 64 years old and 16% for people between 25 and 34 years old.

The reform of education, one of the most ambitious set in motion by the current administration, has been facing opposition from teachers' unions.

In this scenario political parties, neither the ruling one nor the opposition one, have not helped to achieve a real democratization. All those things together might discourage the people from going to the ballot boxes this year.

²⁷ Informe 2017, Latinobarómetro, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Octubre 2017

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Levy, Daniel C., and Kathleen Bruhn. *Mexico : The Struggle for Democratic Development*, p267 University of California Press, 2006

“(Political parties) have been an impediment to the democratization of public life. They have hindered mechanisms of popular participation, they have placed obstacles to independent candidacies and to the institutionalization of autonomous organizations. In general, to the participation of society, they are a handicap for the democratic process,” says Carlos Pérez Ricard, Postdoctoral Fellow in the Contemporary History and Public Policy of Mexico at the University of Oxford. ³⁰

*“A country with such a limited democratic history does not develop these practices and structures quickly.”*³¹

Mexico is a federal republic composed of 32 states. The supreme power of the Federation is divided into three branches: executive, legislative and judicial.

From a federal standpoint, the electoral system is comprised of the National Electoral Institute, an administrative authority regulated by the Article 41 of the Constitution; the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judicial Branch, a jurisdictional authority that is regulated by the Article 99 of the Constitution and the Special Prosecutor for the Attention of Electoral Crimes, a specialized agency of the Attorney General's Office, responsible for investigating electoral crimes on the federal level.

Political parties are associations of public interest that are conducted in accordance with certain principles and ideas, in order to promote democratic participation and serve as citizens' organizations to occupy positions of popular election, through a universal, free, secret and direct vote.

Mexican electoral system doesn't have a second round, so the candidate that has the majority vote on the election day, even if it's not more than 50%, wins the election.

“A second round does not solve the nation's ills. But, it would help to make a transition from an imperial presidency to one in which power comes from the popular mandate. That would give the next president the necessary popular support to face the erratic neighbour from the north. Even more importantly, it could galvanize the Mexican political system to implement changes that are so urgently needed: improve security, build a better education system, and provide a favourable environment to promote long-term investment, to create a competitive economy in the 21st century that would benefit the society.” ³²

For the first time in the history of the country, independent candidates without the support of political parties are running for President.

The country is also facing the election with more elected positions to be filled than at any time in history - a total of 3,416 positions, namely: President of the Republic; 128 senators, 500 federal deputies; eight governors; governor of Mexico City and 16 mayoralties; 591 local deputies of relative majority; 391 local deputies by proportional representation; 1,596 members of city councils; 160 councilors of Mexico City and 24 municipal boards of the state of Campeche.

The electoral law allows for any of the eight national political parties to form alliances with others to

³⁰ Interview conducted in Nov 2 2017, Oxford, UK

³¹ Levy, Daniel C., and Kathleen Bruhn. *Mexico : The Struggle for Democratic Development*, p271, University of California Press, 2006

³² O'neil Shannon, Why Mexico needs a second round, El Financiero, accessed December 1st <http://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/opinion/por-que-mexico-necesita-una-segunda-vuelta.html>

launch common candidates.

2.1 Democracy, media and social media

In countries with democracy issues, the role of the media is important because it can disseminate information that can be used by the population to make better decisions. But media in Mexico is in the middle of a struggle. Trust in the media is less than 50%. According to the *Digital News Report 2017* from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, only 49% of the population have trust in the media.

In the past, TV has had the power of empower politicians and political parties, as happened in 2012 when Peña Nieto married to a well-known former Televisa soap opera actress, Angélica Rivera, but now *“it is striking that the top source for online news is digital-born media.”*³³

The *Digital News Report 2017* shows that in certain brands the use of digital-born media is higher than the legacy media: for example, the news website *Aristeguinoticias.com* has 41% weekly usage, followed by *El Universal* online (a web version of *El Universal*, one of the oldest newspapers in the country) with 36%.

One in five Mexicans³⁴ check the news on the internet using mainly mobile phones, five times a day , for a total of 8.1 hours.³⁵ Digital-born media consumption is rising in Mexico and there is a lot of reasons that can explain it, the main ones being that they offer information for free, are more spontaneous and are seen as more free than legacy media.

Traditionally, all the legacy media in the country has had the same main advertiser: the government. An inability to find different sources of income and make the business profitable has planted doubts about impartiality of the news published by legacy media over the years.

With the rise of independent digital-born media, many readers begin to doubt in the quality and impartiality of the information published by the newspapers, but there are also millions of young new readers for whom print information is no longer relevant.

These new readers also encourage their older relatives (parents, grandparents) to consume news on mobile devices, because, besides free access, it is also more convenient and gives them the opportunity to be informed in real-time with the aid of powerful visual narratives.

“What was learned in Mexico is that there is already a widespread lack of credibility in traditional media in the country and the power of social networks for mobilisations such as #YoSoy132, which emerged in a university and by young people”, said Maria Elena Meneses, a Mexican researcher from Tecnológico de Monterrey, a prestigious private university.

The use of internet in Mexico hasn't only opened the door for consumption of news through different devices, it has also introduced the population to a new communication tool: social media. Expectedly,

³³ Digital News Report 2017 from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, p47

³⁴ Bermudez Daniela, *Ranking de medios nativos digitales*. El Economista, accessed 23 November 2017, <https://www.economista.com.mx/tecnologia/Tendencias-en-los-medios-nativos-digitales-20170104-0022.html>

³⁵ 2017 13 Study of Internet Users Habits in Mexico, Mexican Internet Association

Twitter has become a major influencer on Mexican public opinion.

In the political landscape *“networks have already become a channel within political campaigns. Depending on Internet consumption and the socio-demographic configuration of the electoral competition field, they may have a greater weight than traditional channels”*, said Carlos Correa Paz, an expert from Cecubo Group, a Political Marketing firm based in Spain with operations in Mexico since 2012.³⁶

Each internet user is connected to five different social media, mainly Facebook (95%), WhatsApp (93%), YouTube (72%) and Twitter (66%) and spends almost three hours per day using them.

The figures reveal not only the increase of news consumption through news websites, but also the influence of social media on people.

According to the newest study on web consumption by the Mexican Internet Association, 9 out of 10 people are interested in democratic processes and they will be looking for relevant information online.

97% of them will look for campaign proposals in social media and 79% - on the news websites. The most sought-after information will be campaign proposals, political actors and opinion leaders.

Meneses said the 2012 Presidential election was a test for the social media operation. It may have helped Peña Nieto’s win power but he has not been able to control it while in office.

“We have mobilisations through social networks. We have the Ayotzinapa case³⁷, for example, we had social networks adverse to Peña Nieto throughout the six years he was in office. He was never able to recover himself as president of Mexico from the #YoSoy132 coup. He never regained digital public opinion,” he said.

Correa reminds that in 2012 there was a certain obsession with the quantitative impact of the activity on networks and, above all, on the statistics of followers / friends / fans. There was a certain idea in the collective-media imaginary of a correlation between the people who followed them in networks faced with their vote intention.

But *“in recent years and although there is still a long way to go, the politician thinks of other types of indicators such as interaction and conversation, on one hand, and on the other they already understand the social network channels as an immediate and direct way to reach the voter.”³⁸*

Analysts agree that confusion will be one of the common topics during the campaigns, especially because there isn’t a very clear sign of how the news media will tackle the spread of disinformation.

“Confusion is part of the elections. There is always confusion of information, of credibility, but only those who have the resources to pay will benefit from it. What I have seen is that the PRI in 2012 had the strongest resources, therefore I imagine that the PRI with its political machinery will be the most benefited and as it is currently weakened, it will look for any way to do it”, said Rupert Knox, a doctoral

³⁶ Interview conducted by email December 18, 2017

³⁷ The 43 students missing in Guerrero on September 26 of 2014

³⁸ Interview conducted by email on December 12, 2017

student at Sheffield University who has studied social networks in Mexico.³⁹

Despite their growing popularity, digital-born media share the same weaknesses as legacy media, the issue of disinformation spread by bots, mainly in the social media, a topic that will be explained later.

Chapter 3

The Media vs The Hydra

One of the key points of this chapter is to analyse just what the Mexican media know about disinformation spread on social media accounts and if and how bots to distort public opinion.

A survey conducted among Mexican legacy and digital-born media showed that there is a gap in their processes that can potentially allow false or fabricated information be spread during political campaigns.

Nineteen media organizations were contacted for the survey, and 11 of the most important news companies in the country, according to the ComScore September figures, some agreed to answer the questions under the condition of not mentioning the names or their specific strategies of covering electoral campaigns or information that could be useful for their competitors.

Electoral campaigns officially began on March 30. The survey took place in December 2017, during the beginning of pre-campaigns in the country. Therefore, the results reflect the problems and the situation in the media as of that time.

Among the companies that agreed to answer the survey are some of the most important Mexican legacy media.

One is El Universal, which has been in print for a century and has embraced the digital-age. .

Another is Excélsior, a news website that is ranked in the top five of the most popular news websites in the country.⁴⁰

Reforma is yet another media – both print and web versions of which compete with the other two - that participated in the survey.

Mexican Editorial Organization (OEM in Spanish), a company that owns a publishing group with nationwide and local circulation, as well as 43 news web sites, also took part in the survey.

Among the digital-born media that participated in the survey Aristeguinoticias.com, a web site qualified by the *Digital News Report 2017* as the most consulted news websites in Mexico, stands out.

SinEmbargo.MX, an Aristegui and MSN close competitor and one of the aggregators of online content with the highest traffic in the country, also took part.

³⁹ Interview conducted by Skype December 11, 2017

⁴⁰ According to ComScore figures, September 2017

The survey respondents include editors in chief, content directors, general editors and editors of innovation and strategy, market lead, information chief and community managers.

The poll had nine questions related to the size of the newsrooms, the route of the information before publication, processes of verifying information, awareness about 'fake news' websites and 'fake' Twitter accounts that publish paid-for information and role of their community managers.

All the media share the same worries regarding the spread of false information during the campaigns, but one of the most interesting points are different strategies followed for tracking – or indeed for ignoring – suspicious information.

Their survey results reveal that in the years following the presidential election of 2012, Mexican media didn't make an effort to avoid publishing false or fabricated information which had gone viral on social media.

One of the clearest examples of how bots and trolls distorted political debate came in 2017 during elections in the State of Mexico which has a population of 15.1 million.

Alberto Escorcía and his cyber activist group @LoQueSigue_ detected that 17% of the support messages for the official candidate, Alfredo del Mazo, came from bots, mainly from accounts located in South American countries like Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.

According to the group, the most popular account among the candidates from Mexico received about 80,000 messages a day during the campaign, out of which 13,000 contained positive messages and came from accounts that have Latin American countries origin and were generated by the same semi-automatized program.

In this particular election, Escorcía and his team spent a month analyzing tweets regarding the three main candidates: Alfredo del Mazo of the ruling party, the leftist candidate Delfina Gómez and the right-wing candidate Josefina Vázquez Mota.

Tracking showed that the leftist candidate who, according to the polls, was closer to the official candidate at all time, was the target of 81.3% of the bot attacks. The messages were estimated to have had 351 million views.⁴¹

These numbers reveal why, during presidential campaigns, it is important that the Mexican mass media rely on strategies of not just verifying information disseminated through social media, but also identify Twitter accounts, as well as Facebook pages of "supposed media", which replicates information on social media platforms.

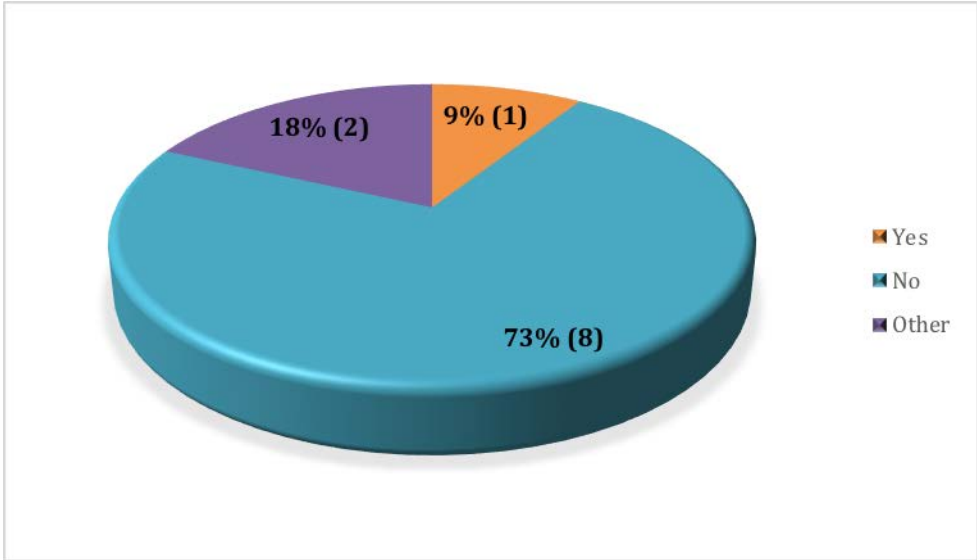
3.1 We are aware but...

When asked "*Are you worried about the possibility that fake information could be disseminated during the next electoral campaigns?*", 73% of respondents answered "Yes", 18% didn't give neither

⁴¹ *Miles de bots actuaron en la campaña del Edomex. Delfina el principal objetivo de ataques*, accessed February 3, 2018 <https://loquesigue.tv/delfina-es-blanco-del-81-3-de-ataques-de-bots-durante-la-campana-a-gobernador-del-edomex/>

affirmative nor negative answer. The 18% expressed their concern for the subject.

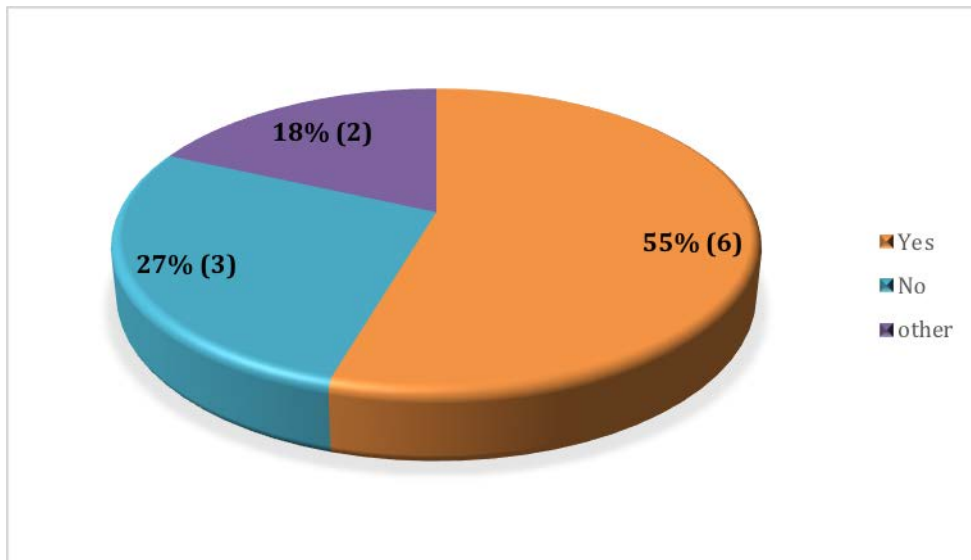
Figure 1 “Are you worried about the possibility of ‘fake’ information being published during the electoral campaigns?”



In addition to this question, the survey asked if the teams identified Twitter, Facebook accounts or websites that spread false information or digital content in favour of any Mexican potential presidential candidate.

Only 18% gave an affirmative answer. The remaining 82% said they don't have any knowledge or that they have identified only a small number of social media accounts related to the publication of 'fake news' or comments in favour of any political party or candidate.

Figure 2 “Your team has identified social media accounts or websites that spread ‘fake news’ for benefitting any potential presidential candidate?”



The case of MSN en Español (Spanish MSN), which have an office in Mexico, stands out. This website does not produce its own content, but publishes content in collaboration with a few media partners in Latin America and the United States. Their head of marketing Alejandro Fuentes said that the company has sometimes broken off relations with content producers that published ‘fake news’.

MSN’s team has also detected some websites with political affiliations. In these cases the team paid special attention to the headers and the content. If the substance of a story was based only on declarations and not on facts, they made it clear in the header that the information was based on opinion.

The survey also asked media houses what measures they are taking to avoid publishing false or fabricated information during the election campaign. Only three media houses have considered implementation of special training. Out of three, only one had the intention of working with a specialized organization.

One media agent confirmed to have a double-check system in place and another alleged to have a special guide on how to distinguish ‘fake news’.

When it comes to the videos and viral news content, just one media outlet seeks out the original source. None of the media outlets polled specified their verification process in respect to breaking news.

In December 2017, none of the media outlets have analyzed what to do in case of a massive attack of bots and trolls spreading false information.

María Elena Meneses, said the media face a difficult scenario.

“We are in a very vulnerable situation in Mexico, facing this phenomenon that no actor in the country is daring to attack,” she said.

The media outlets also said the responsibility of verifying information lies with the reporter and the editor. The editorial boards decide more general matters concerning the daily, weekly, monthly or annually coverage. Only one media outlet said that their social media staff participate in decision

making over what to publish.

That said, community managers still play a crucial role in news rooms. They inform editors of trending topics or which hashtags are going viral and it is easy to see how they can end up being gatekeepers for disinformation activities.

One of the participants of the survey said the community manager is the first ‘filter’ in identifying false or fabricated information or sources. Two media outlets with print and web platforms specified that their community manager is a person with high-level technical and journalistic training or journalism experience.

In general, mass media prefer to recruit employees with social network experience and metrics knowledge for these position. Others train their staff in house, like SinEmbargo.

Chapter 4

‘Fake News’ or ‘Digital Personalized Content’?

4.1 Business is business

Bots can be lucrative business. Captiv8, which looks at influencers and brands relations, said that an influencer with 100,000 followers can make \$2,000 on average by putting out a promotional tweet, while one with a million followers can make up to \$20,000 per tweet.

Carlos Merlo, founder of the Mexican company Victory Lab, a digital consultancy on electoral campaigns, has cashed in on this trend. He can fabricate on-demand news and easily spread it through social media. His Mexico City-based company, works with software that can control up to 200,000 Twitter accounts at the same time.⁴²

Merlo doesn’t believe he is committing any crime. From his point of view, bots, trolls and ‘fake news’ business in Mexico has grown for three main reasons: Twitter algorithm’s failure that allows you to manipulate specific data, such as location of those who use the accounts, and control up to 20 profiles from a single cell phone.

Secondly, he says he does not violate any legislation. No law prevents him from doing what his company does. The line between regulation of inappropriate conduct online and censorship is so thin that keeps the door open to this kind of practices.

Finally, in the absence of real political programmes and facing polarized citizenship, Mexican politicians are eager to give the impression that they have millions of supporters.

This kind of social media activity also makes economic sense. In Mexico, the cost of every vote is 114% more expensive than in countries like the U.S., Brazil, France or Russia.

During the 2012 presidential elections, the cost per voter was estimated at \$25, while in Brazil it was

⁴² The interview was conducted by WhatsApp on December 15, 2017

at \$12.23, in the U.S. - \$11.67, and only \$1.88 in France.⁴³

Merlo argued that investing traditional political campaigns merchandising, like T-shirts and caps, is 20 times more expensive than buying online and social media basic promotion service with a simple pack of *"Digital Personalized Content"*.

In December, U.S. National Security adviser, H.R. McMaster, said that there was evidence of Russian meddling in Mexican elections in a speech to the Jamestown Foundation.⁴⁴

McMaster said the Russian government has already launched a campaign to influence Mexico's election and stir up division, but didn't give any detail of this alleged operation.

Merlo's company's website may offer some clues. Victory Labs promotes itself with the phrase *"Russian Technology Mexican Talent."*

For £2.700 a month, a politician seeking re-election can buy a basic package. This will give access to on-demand news websites which will run *'personalized'* content based on information that the client sends through his spokesman or communication office.

This information is spread through different websites managed by the company and through their social media accounts. In addition to the profiles handled by the software, every web page has a page on Facebook and a Twitter account.

Since the information is disguised as 'news', Facebook can't label it as advertising. Once published, the information seeks to go viral via different accounts that work to turn it into a hashtag or a trending topic on Twitter. The rest is left to the readers and social media users who, without knowing, help disseminate prefabricated information.

"The goal is to be broadcast on TV. Pushing our story until it gets to be the most talked about topic on Twitter and then it must go on television, because the people put pressure to be this way, because if it is something new about a candidate the people began to write to the news accounts to tell them 'hey, what's going on? Why you are not talking about this, what do you have against it?' People have something that we have analysed a lot and that analogue media can't understand and it's that people themselves demand the news and when it is broadcasted we hit people that have no internet access," Merlo said.

According to Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Lucas Graves⁴⁵, focus groups undertaken in the U.S., Spain, Finland and the United Kingdom revealed that people consider advertising and poor journalism as 'fake news' more than the information disguised as news.⁴⁶

⁴³ *Cuánto cuestan las elecciones de Estados Unidos y cómo se comparan con otros países*, accessed on February 23, 2018 <http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-37856444>

⁴⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-russia-usa/russia-meddling-in-mexican-election-white-house-aide-mcmaster-idUSKBN1EW0UD>

⁴⁵ Graves Lucas, Nielsen Kleis Rasmus, "News you don't believe": Audience perspectives on 'fake news', Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, October 2017, page 1

By the kind of information posted on websites like the ones administered by Victory Lab, I consider that their content falls within the 'poor journalism' category because it is not information elaborated by a journalist or with journalistic purposes. It also falls into the propagandistic behaviour category because it aims to promote the proposal or politic figure, therefore it's included in what people consider 'fake news'.

Victory Lab is not the only company which offers this kind of service in Mexico. An ex-bot interviewed for this paper on the condition of anonymity revealed how the company which he worked for offers its services to Mexican politicians, two governors among them.

For the purposes of this paper he will be named "Bot 1"⁴⁷ and his name will remain anonymous because of confidentiality agreements. The name of the company won't be revealed either because there is no authorization to make it public.

The company for which he worked for between 2012 and 2014 presented itself before its clients as *"Digital media and social media strategy agency"*. Together with him, another 18 people worked mainly as political bots. Another agency division operated four news websites.

The operation was like the one on Victory Lab, as Bot 1 says: *"As a digital media company, what we offered to politicians was rounds of news with web pages created for this purpose. They combined the on-demand reports with organic content."*

The strategy was different for each politician, depending on the pack he bought. The main kit was composed by the publication of a determinate number of news on the different websites as the support of 150,000 social media accounts.

Bot 1 was in charge of the operation of the social media profiles of a governor for who 60 fake accounts were created to create positive image of him and his actions.

The company also bought accounts of influencers with more than one million followers to change their profile and give them the name of 'mother account'. Once the webpages posted a news story, this 'mother account' published a Tweet with the link to it.

Other 29 accounts would be connected to the 'mother account' through TweetDeck. This profiles replicated all the content posted by the 'mother account', with the contract the politician was offered with at least 10 comments for each Tweet to build conversations and balance the negative and positive on them.

Some politicians hired the company services just on crisis cases like the ones resulting of corruption scandals or organized crime attacks. In both cases tourist information of the state was handled to distract the attention.

Bot 1 said how on the middle of a drug cartel, which paralyzed for hours one of the main cities of the country, the government hired the services of the company and set an operation system with four influencers and local actresses in the city where the attack was perpetrated.

Each one posted three tweets about the City's tourist attractions without mentioning the name of the

⁴⁷ Interview conducted by WhatsApp on December 14, 2017

governor. The news websites posted 10 reports per day during the time the contract stipulated.

"The contracts were worth millions", Bot 1 said. He told the existence of officials paying for the account of other officials.

The same as Merlo, Bot 1 denies that the company he worked for was fabricating 'fake news,' instead he called it 'information with makeup.'

Conclusions

The answer to the original question: is the Mexican media able to identify the spread of false or fabricated information on social network or accounts that spread it, is a resounding *"No."*

After the 2012 presidential election people began talking about how social media was being manipulated. Some consultancy companies and activists started tracking alleged bots and trolls, but they were thwarted by ever changing algorithms, the ability to hide geolocation, among other things, and by the combination of automated and human bots.

The conclusion of this research is reinforced by the launch of *Verificado2018* (Verified2018) - an initiative that sought to replicate models already carried out in other countries which have had elections, like ElectionLand in the USA and Crosscheck in France, - on March 12, 2018. The project began as a way to share reliable information in the wake of Mexico's devastating earthquake in 2017, but has now become one of the more trusted fact checking operations in the country.

Verificado2018, says its principal developer, has Facebook, Twitter and Google Labs among its participants and is supported by 60 media, NGOs and Universities. It is also the first action taken in Mexico to fight misinformation. Future investigations will surely give testimony to the results of the initiative.

On the upside, Verificado2018 represents the first great effort of collaborative journalism on national scale: legacy media are finally beginning to work together to fact check and to collaborate on stories.

This paper found that some media tried to establish fact-checking operations in the past, but did not have access to public data which is necessary for proper verification.

Indeed, all media companies fall down in their verification processes. There are few professional fact checkers and editors and reporters are expected to carry the load.

Another question that remains unanswered is if the real intention of the so-called cyber troops is to win elections or to dismantle the regime. It is still not clear if this kind of operations with bots, trolls and the spread of false or fabricated content are capable of winning an election.

Another weakness is lack of legislation that sanctions companies create false profiles for political use as well the alleged media accounts or blogs entrusted to spread false news or make them go viral.

It is clear that stronger regulation is needed in electoral sphere, data privacy, criminal and civil laws to prevent companies, individuals and governments from engaging in this kind of activities, but also is necessary to say that social media users can change the way they relate to technology.

Media and laws play an important role, but readers and information consumers could become more active and skeptical of the information that spreads on Facebook and Twitter.

A simple exercise of checking that the information comes from a reliable source, a recognized media, for example, or if the data, facts and arguments are confirmed, could help block the spread of disinformation.

As a final observation, it is interesting to mention that in this election, the media are fighting for their survival and credibility. In 2018 many things could change the way we practice politics and journalism.

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Interviewees

Aledia Calleja, Observatorio Latinoamericano de Medios Alberto Escorcía, digital activist (México)

Anonymous source (Brazil)

Bot 1 (México)

Carlos Correa, political consultant (Spain)

Carlos Merlo, Victory (México)

Carlos Pérez Ricard, Oxford University (UK)

Dulce Ramos, Poynter Institute (USA)

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