Rhetoric of parliamentary disinformation on Twitter

Retóricas de desinformación parlamentaria en Twitter

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ABSTRACT

Democracy is based on individuals' ability to give their opinions freely. To do this, they must have access to a multitude of reliable information sources (Dahl, 1998), and this greatly depends on the characteristics of their media environments. Today, one of the main issues individuals face is the significant amount of disinformation circulating through social networks. This study focuses on parliamentary disinformation. It examines how parliamentarians contribute to generating information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) in the digital public space. Through an exploratory content analysis — a descriptive content analysis of 2,307 messages posted on Twitter accounts of parliamentary spokespeople and representatives of the main list of each political party in the Spanish Lower House of Parliament — we explore disinformation rhetoric. The results allow us to conclude that, while the volume of messages shared by parliamentarians on issues susceptible to disinformation is relatively low (14% of tweets), both the themes of the tweets (COVID-19, sex-based violence, migrants or LGBTI), as well as their tone and argumentative and discursive lines, contribute to generating distrust through institutional criticism or their peers. The study deepens current knowledge of the disinformation generated by political elites, key agents of the construction of polarising narratives.

RESUMEN

La democracia se basa en la capacidad de los individuos para generar libremente sus opiniones. Para hacerlo, necesitan tener acceso a una pluralidad de fuentes y contenidos veraces de información, y este acceso depende, en gran medida, de las características de sus entornos mediáticos. Uno de los principales problemas de la sociedad actual es el elevado volumen de desinformación que circula a través de las redes sociales. Este trabajo se centra en la desinformación parlamentaria. Observa si y cómo los parlamentarios contribuyen a generar desorden informativo en el espacio público digital. Mediante un análisis exploratorio del contenido de 2.307 mensajes publicados en Twitter por portavoces parlamentarios y representantes de la lista principal de cada grupo en el Congreso de los Diputados en España, se estudian las retóricas de desinformación. Los resultados permiten concluir que, si bien el volumen de mensajes de desinformación es relativamente bajo (14% de los tweets), tanto las temáticas (COVID-19, violencia de género, migrantes o colectivo LGTBI), como el tono y las líneas discursivas de los tweets conforman pautas que contribuyen al desorden informativo, generando desconfianza en las instituciones y entre los propios representantes parlamentarios. El estudio ahonda en el conocimiento de la desinformación generada por las élites políticas, sujetos clave en la gestación de narrativas polarizadoras.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Disinformation, Twitter, MPs, political communication, COVID-19, social minorities.
Desinformación, Twitter, parlamentarios, comunicación política, COVID-19, minorías sociales.

1. Introduction and state of art

Despite the epistemological difficulty in defining the term, there is a certain consensus in academic literature that disinformation is a significant problem for democratic systems. This includes the creation, emission, dissemination and reception of messages, through various means, that are intentionally false or misleading, and have political and financial objectives that seek to influence specific audiences (Bennett & Livingstone, 2018). Social networks are a key factor in this process as they facilitate the unprecedented spread of disinformation, damaging and polarising the public sphere (Prokopovic & Vujovi , 2020), and erode citizen trust in democratic institutions (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021).

It is a global problem, and it has become a popular research topic since the 2016 US presidential election, although it is still an incipient field of work (Freelon & Wells, 2020). Scientific literature in the field of political communications has explored disinformation (Cea & Palomo, 2021), but there are still gaps in this area, such as in the field of parliamentary communications. To try to minimise the effects of disinformation campaigns that put democratic principles at risk, different legislative chambers have implemented measures and action plans, including the experimental EU Action Plan against Disinformation before the European Parliament election in May 2019 (Kouroutakis, 2019).

The British Parliament and its Office of Science and Technology, POST (2019), consider disinformation a key issue and one of parliament's main challenges, stating that "content polluters" incited debate on social networks about, for example, the efficacy of vaccines before a parliamentary debate on the issue. Despite studies exploring political disinformation having focused mainly on parties and, specifically, on senior politicians, there are not many analyses of parliamentary discourses on disinformation or of parliamentarians as actors and receivers of disinformation.

This study focuses, therefore, on parliamentarians and aims to explore whether, and to what extent, they contribute to generating informational disorder in the digital sphere. To do this, our study has two characteristics that will help us understand its particularity: first, it considers parliamentary communications networks as political spaces with their own characteristics; and second, it considers the characteristics of disinformation within a complex informational disorder.

1.1. Parliamentary networks on Twitter

Previous studies have confirmed the importance of Twitter in parliamentary communications networks (Esteve-Del-Valle et al., 2021) covering three main topics: A first group analysed the topological characteristics of parliamentary networks to find the most influential parliamentarians (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014). A second group, the largest, studied the interaction between members of parliament (MPs) on Twitter with parliamentarians of similar or different ideological positions (Yoon & Park, 2014; Koiranen et al., 2019). A third group, the smallest, focused on the factors that explain why MPs adopt Twitter (Lassen & Brown, 2011; Chi & Yang, 2014). However, there are few studies on disinformation in parliamentary networks, and in the case of Spain, none.

Bradshaw and Howard (2019) noted that Twitter was one of the most popular platforms for disinformation in Spain. Jungherr and Schroeder (2021) demonstrated how digital platforms become powerful conduits of information and mediate between representatives and the people they represent, which facilitates the delegitimisation of discourses, ideas and democratic institutions, and forces us to rethink the complexity of disinformation.

It is understood that parliamentarians' messages should adhere to and obey agreed interests, based on socially shared objective realities. However, when this does not happen and parliamentary messages are controversial, deliberative and parliamentary democracy is compromised (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021).

1.2. The characteristics of disinformation

According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), there are three types of informational disorder: "misinformation", "disinformation" and "malinformation", depending on whether, respectively, the message contains false, erroneous or misleading information without the intention of harming third parties; the content refers to false, erroneous, misleading, inaccurate or deliberately misleading information (Karlova & Fisher, 2013); and the message contains factual information or confidential issues with malicious

intent to harm others. Informational disorder refers not only to the veracity, deceit or falsity of the content of the messages, but also to the rhetoric used, in terms of theme and tone, and the discursive and argumentative construction of the message, making it possible to understand the facts as being misleading, untrue or false, regardless of whether or not they actually are (Hameleers & Minihold, 2020).

Therefore, beyond the interest in detecting hoaxes among parliamentary messages, this research would like to understand how parliamentarians contribute to creating information disorder, accusing others of spreading or deliberately creating false messages, questioning, and delegitimising the actions and efforts of their adversary MPs, and generating institutional mistrust and apathy among citizens (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). It is understood that disinformation can promote false understanding through different means, not necessarily based on false identities, but by using true but misleading content to trigger false inferences (Fallis, 2015), and promoting misperceptions about reality and social consensus (McKay & Tenove, 2021).

Regarding the effects this has, disinformation often seeks to amplify social divisions, through discursive means of "us" and/against "the other", including the propagation of conspiracy theories, and using polarising and sensationalist content that is highly emotional and partisan (Howard et al., 2017). Reddi et al. (2021) noted that disinformation in US politics works at the service of existing power structures and identified anti-black racism, misogyny and xenophobic sentiment as topics susceptible to disinformation.

McFadyen (2021) notes that popular issues in hoaxes are immigration and refugees. At the same time, Das and Ahmed (2021) note that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in disinformation about the virus, leading to anti-mask, anti-vaccine, and anti-5G protests on a global scale. In her 2019 study, Humprecht found that fake story topics strongly reflect national news agendas, meaning that disinformation is not only a technology-driven phenomenon, but is also shaped by national news environments. With the general purpose of proposing an approach to parliamentary disinformation, this study has the following specific objectives:

- O1. Detect whether parliamentarians post disinformation on Twitter.
- O2. Explore whether they contribute to generating informational disorder through a discursive rhetoric that results in facts being perceived as misleading, not true or false, regardless of whether they are.

2. Materials and methods

The study used a mixed methodology based on a descriptive and qualitative content analysis of the messages published on Twitter by a sample of parliamentarians. We used the Spanish context as a case study because Spain has not been included in many parliamentary and political disinformation studies (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021) and the political parties have accounted for a significant number of messages. Based on studies by Ng and Taeihagh (2021), we decided to identify distinctive characteristics in disinformation messages manually, in a non-automated manner. A content analysis made it possible to capture signs of disinformation, and focus on contextual elements and nuances of the messages analysed. The SPSS 26 analysis software was used for the descriptive analysis and NVivo 11 for the qualitative analysis, allowing us to create and identify categories by deriving data from the messages. The analysis was carried out in three work phases:

- Phase 1. Identification of disinformation topics at the time of analysis. Two thousand messages were gathered through the Twitter API from the Spanish Maldita and Newtral fact checkers; 150 of the most retweeted tweets from each profile were filtered, and disinformation topics were identified.
- Phase 2. Identification of parliamentary tweets. A total of 16,418 tweets were collected from a sample of parliamentarians (this sample comprised 17 parliamentarians and 1,000 messages from each of them, with the exception of Pablo Echequine, spokesperson for the parliamentary group Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común, who had only posted 418 at the time of data collection). We subsequently selected 150 of the most retweeted tweets from each profile (N=2,307), and filtered them according to the categories detected in Phase 1. From the total number of parliamentary tweets, a sample of 344 messages containing disinformation detected in Phase 1 was obtained.

- Phase 3. Identification of the disinformation characteristics tweeted by parliamentarians. A content analysis was applied to these 344 messages. Consideration was given to the categories and characteristics of hoaxes outlined by Tandoc et al. (2018), paying special attention to levels of facticity and deceit, and categorised according to the hoax taxonomy of Molina et al. (2021). It focused mainly on the characteristics of the message associated with rhetoric and an analysis of parliamentary polarisation on Twitter (Esteve-Del-Valle et al., 2021). Other disinformation elements were not considered, such as content creation techniques that manipulated images and videos, sources of false information, or automated accounts or bots (McKay & Tenove, 2021), which would need an additional phase of analysis following this exploratory analysis.

Because we were interested in addressing the construction of disinformation by the most media-exposed representatives of each parliamentary group, our analysis of the tweets was carried out on a sample of messages sent by parliamentary spokespeople (8) and the leading MP of each party (8) with a group in the Congress of Deputies (Grupo Socialista, Grupo Popular en el Congreso, Vox, Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común, Republicano, Ciudadanos, EAJ-PNV and Euskal Herria Bildu). Grupo Mixto and Grupo Plural were excluded from the sample as their spokesperson system is rotating and their inclusion altered the representativeness of the group. For those groups whose spokesperson was also the leader of the party (Grupo Parlamentario Republicano, Ciudadanos, EAJ-PNV, Euskal Herria Bildu), the deputy spokesperson for each group was selected. We also included the president of the Congress, who also serves as president of the Board of Spokespeople for the Congress of Deputies, which includes the parliamentary spokespeople. The characteristics and description of the MPs analysed can be found here: https://bit.ly/3snC2Ue. The sample period ranged from 28/04/2020 to 15/07/2021, which meant that the data collection occurred just before the Congress of Deputies rose for the summer break. This period offered an opportunity to capture a standard snapshot of MPs' experiences on Twitter at the close of the legislative activity. No messages or accounts were detected that could not be encrypted or had to be deleted.

3. Analysis and results
3.1. General description of the parliamentary activity

Figure 1 shows the standard activity in volume of tweets, and that the MPs analysed, in general, regularly posted tweets during the recorded period, although several peaks of activity were identified on 8 and 11 March, 20 and 21 April and 24 June 2021. On these days, only the tweets published by two Vox MPs were selected for our disinformation analysis. In neither of these two cases were the tweets related to their party's parliamentary or Congress activity.

Figure 1. Activity on Twitter of the MPs analysed during the sample period
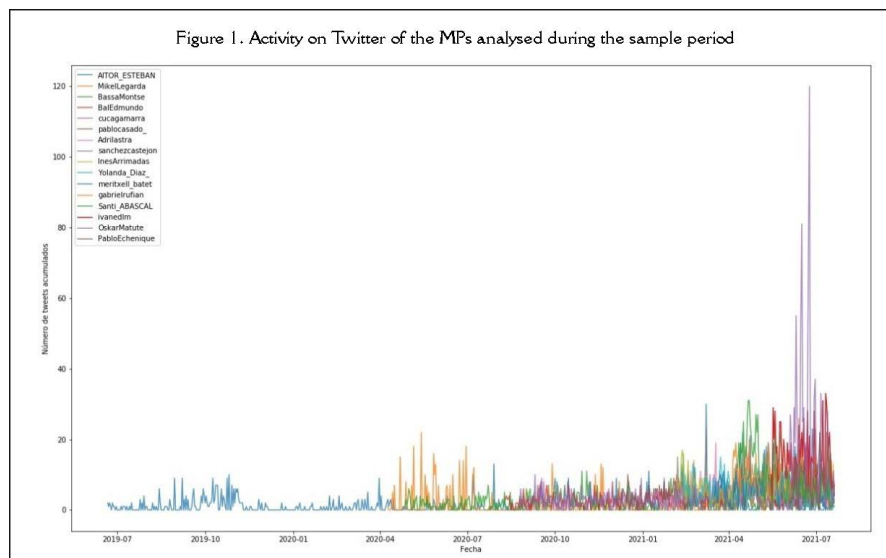
Santiago Abascal registered the peak in his activity on 20 April. That day he posted 33 tweets, all about the electoral poster that Vox had put up in the Sol metro station in Madrid for the Madrid Assembly election; the poster read: "One MENA, 4,700 euros a month. Your grandmother's pension, 426 euro's month". Iván Espinosa registered the peak in his activity on 17 June 2021 with 15 tweets about different topics at different times during the day.

These topics included several related to gender issues: "Interesting article by César Antonio Molina, former Minister of Culture with ZP (and successor to Carmen Calvo). He attacks the Complutense University for brown-nosing Begoña Gómez, feminazis, Pedro Duque, and all the stupidity generated by (his) left ideologies https://t.co/6dHXUaanH9" (@ivanedlm, 2021-06-17, 1,145RT).

3.2. Disinformation topics

The analysis carried out in Phase 1 confirmed that the Newtral and Maldita fact-checking platforms mostly discredited hoaxes about COVID-19, the LGBTI community, immigration and gender: 41% of the messages analysed by these fact checkers contained hoaxes on these topics, compared to the others that dealt with various issues of national and international politics, and promotional messages from the fact checkers themselves. This allows us to confirm that the disinformation issues highlighted by Reddi et al. (2021) and by Das and Ahmed (2021) in other countries, have also been identified in Spain.

Table 1. Most frequent words according to disinformation topics and parliamentary groups		
Parliamentary group	**COVID-19**	**LGBTI collective, immigration and gender**
Coalition block: Grupo Socialista, Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común, Republicano, EAJ-PNV and Euskal Herria Bildu		
Opposition block: Grupo Popular en el Congreso, Vox, Ciudadanos		

Note. Tweets downloaded from 17 parliamentary Twitter profiles Most relevant words for COVID-19; Coalition block: dose, Spain, vaccination, millions, pandemic, vaccinate, people, covid-19: Opposition block: government, Sánchez, pandemic, Spanish people, Covid, emergency, deceased; LGBTI collective, immigration and gender; Coalition block: women, equality, today, woman, violence, rights, country, day, against, people, support, Spain; Opposition block: Ceuta, government, Spain, against, Spanish people, minors, our, law, borders, immigration.

Of the most retweeted 2,307 tweets by parliamentarians analysed in Phase 2, we found that only 14.3% (344 tweets) were associated with these disinformation topics (COVID-19, immigration, gender and LGBTI). If this data is insignificant in volume, it is significant in that it reflects the fact that MPs mainly tweet about topics other than those discredited by Newtral and Maldita, or those topics that the scientific literature has highlighted as central to disinformation.

However, the qualitative analysis of the 14.3% of messages from parliamentarians on disinformation issues carried out in Phase 3 shows a clear alignment with the information agenda of that moment: The tweets about COVID-19 referred to the management of the pandemic after the end of the third state of emergency, which ended on 9 May 2021, and management of the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out.

Regarding tweets that referred to immigration, most were about the border incident between Spain and Morocco in May 2021.

Table 2. Examples of hoaxes discredited by Maldita and Newtral and the most retweeted tweets containing similar topics posted by parliamentarians

Topic	Fact checkers	Parliamentarians
Immigration	RT @malditobulo: ✗ No, this tweet about immigrants entering Ceuta is not from Vozpópuli: it is a false account and the video is from terror attacks in Nice (@Maldita, 2021-05-18, 24RT). ✗ ✗ The false tweets attributed to La Ser, Vozpópuli and El País about "rapes", "murders" and "squatters" in Ceuta https://t.co/Jwb98tLcHe (@Newtral, 2021-05-19. 20RT).	Morocco is invading #Ceuta by sending thousands of assailants spying the cowardly and criminal inaction of the Government that has surrendered our southern border. We demand the deployment of the army and the expulsion of the invaders. I will travel to Ceuta tomorrow to support our fellow citizens (@Santi_ABASCAL, 2021-05-17, 8464 RT).
LGBTI	There are already 10,000 of us fighting hoaxes on TikTok. Join us! https://t.co/dQifmx1IFN. In #Orgullo2021 we discredited three hoax stories and myths about the LGBTI community that are spread every year https://t.co/9yzodi0Ov5. This is how we smash TikTok https://t.co/9IUV6djnou (@Maldita, 2021-06-28, 32RT).	Those who tell you today that 13 people kicking a kid while shouting 'fucking faggot' is not a homophobic murder are the same ones who told you that eight kids arguing with a plainclothes policeman in a bar in Altasasu was terrorism. Shameless. #JusticiaPorSamuel (@gabrielrufian, 2021-07-05, 6796 RT.
Gender	Rocío Carrasco's documentary and 016: the hotline for victims of sex-based violence has not received this many calls since the summer of 2016. https://t.co/KTMABhf3Yz (@Maldita, 2021-06-11, 26RT).	They would have done it too. This is also why we are #MejoresQueEllos (@ivanedlm, 2021-07-08, 2428 RT).
COVID-19	In @malditobulo No, COVID-19 vaccines do not contain "heavy metals" or "magnetic" components that can attract magnets https://twitter.com/maldita/status/1396080156096311310 (@Maldita, 2021-05-22, 24RT). ✗ ✗ It is not true that people who are vaccinated against COVID-19 cannot donate blood because "the vaccine destroys their natural antibodies". #DíaMundialDonanteDeSangre #DonaSangre https://t.co/VtBH2BJIWC (@Newtral, 2021-06-14. 799RT).	Wall Street Journal Exclusive: Three researchers from the Wuhan Institute of Virology were hospitalised as early as November 2019. Suspicion grows regarding the connection between the virus and that laboratory. https://t.co/VetRYbkpBt (@ivanedlm, 2021-05-24, 1866 RT).

Note. Messages downloaded from the respective Twitter profiles.

In terms of tweets about LGBTI, the messages predominantly alluded to the murder of Samuel Luiz in La Coruña on 3 June 2021, as well as to the bill for the real and effective equality of trans people and a guarantee of LGBTI rights, passed at the end of June 2021. Regarding messages about gender, they mostly referred to the girls Anna and Olivia who were murdered by their father in Tenerife in mid-June 2021. There were also other messages about the International LGBT Pride Day (28 June), International Women's Day (8 March), the anniversary of the death of Clara Campoamor (30 April) and a tribute to her in Congress for her advocacy of the female vote in Spain (12 April 2021).

The descriptive data show that the Socialistas (30%) and Vox (18.90%) MPs were those who posted the most messages on Twitter on disinformation issues (Table 3), and the PP were the political party that posted the most messages about COVID-19.

3.3. Content of the parliamentary disinformation messages

An analysis of the content shows that 53% of the tweets about COVID-19, and 33.9% about immigration, gender and LGBTI, showed polarisation characteristics. The qualitative analysis detected nuances in the content of parliamentary messages and interpreted disinformation rhetoric aimed at generating institutional and parliamentary distrust.

- Group 1. Messages that did not contribute to generating informative clutter. These messages were not included within the rhetoric of disinformation, as they comprised institutional declarations; their content did not include criticism nor intention to generate mistrust in institutions or citizen apathy. Most of these messages were tweets from parliamentarians in the government coalition (MPs from Grupo Socialista and Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común) and the president of Congress (Table 4).

Table 3. Description of messages posted by parliamentarians and parliamentary group						
Parliamentary group	Name of MP	Topic				
		Immigration, Gender and LGBTI	COVID-19	Both	Total	Total (%)
Socialista	Sánchez Pérez-Castejón, Pedro	29	31	0	60	
	Lastra Fernández, Adriana	35	9	1	45	
		64	40	1	105	30.5
Popular en el Congreso	Casado Blanco, Pablo	6	17	0	23	
	Gamarra Ruiz-Clavijo, Concepción	4	15	0	19	
		10	32	0	42	12.21
Vox	Abascal Conde, Santiago	23	6	0	29	
	Espinosa de los Monteros de Simón, Iván	31	5	0	36	
		54	11	0	65	18.90
Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común	Díaz Pérez, Yolanda	18	4	0	22	
	Echenique Robba, Pablo	10	0	0	10	
		28	4	0	32	9.30
Republicano	Rufián Romero, Gabriel	14	2	1	17	
	Bassa Coll, Montserrat	2	1	0	3	
		16	3	1	20	5.81
Cuidadanos	Arrimadas García, Inés	4	3	0	7	
	Bal Francés, Edmundo	1	9	0	10	
		5	12	0	17	4.94
EAJ-PNV	Esteban Bravo, Aitor	9	3	0	12	
	Legarda Uriarte, Mikel	.	.	.	.	
		9	3	0	12	3.49
Euskal Herria Bildu	Aizpurua Arzallus, Mertxe	5	0	0	5	
	Matute García de Jalón, Oskar	.	.	.	.	
		5	0	0	5	1.45
President	Batet Lamaña, Meritxell	42	4	0	46	13.37
Total		233	109	2	344	

- Group 2. Messages that favour informative disorder. In them, political criticism of parliamentary opposition and counterparts predominates (Table 5). This criticism manifests in four areas: (a) messages criticising the government, either by indicating its "inability" to manage the health or immigration crisis (messages sent by parliamentarians from the opposition to the government: Grupo Popular, Vox and Ciudadanos), (b) messages criticising the "irresponsibility" of the opposition (tweets posted by the government coalition, Socialista and Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común), (c) messages supporting the government and criticising the opposition (from ERC, EAJ-PNV and Euskal Herria Bildu parliamentarians) and (c) messages from opposition parliamentarians criticising other parties or parliamentarians from the opposition itself (in this case, from Vox MPs who attack the Grupo Popular to reaffirm their positions).

Table 4. Inference table of uncritical messages that do not generate informative clutter		
What do they say?	Who says it?	What do we say they say?
"Spain is going to make a qualitative leap forward in vaccination. In June, we will receive 13 million doses from Pfizer. We are rigorously meeting objectives. With this delivery we are on the path towards herd immunity. 97 days left. #YoMeVacunoSeguro https://t.co/yls7IN5tew" (@sanchezcastejon, 2021-05-13, 641RT). "Happy #Orgullo2021! @Congreso_Es lights up On #DíaDelOrgullo We will celebrate #igualdad, respect, diversity, progress for #LGBTI rights and #libertad. #Orgullo2021 #Pride2021 https://t.co/YrUGsOpTN2" (@meritxell_batet, 2021-06-28, 51RT) "The equal pay tool Royal Decree 902/2020 comes into force on 14 April. Companies will be able to easily identify the pay gaps between men and women and can correct them. Equal pay for equal work https://t.co/zH9TWgHxwm" (@Yolanda_Diaz, 2021-04-12, 1199RT).	Mainly among parliamentary leaders of the government coalition (Grupo Parlamentario Socialista and Grupo Parlamentario Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común) as well as messages from the president of Congress.	They describe actions and institutional positions. This is not seen in critical content. They do not intend to generate mistrust or apathy among citizens.

The explicit criticism in these messages can be seen in *ad hominem* attacks questioning the veracity of their counterparts' statements – messages issued by Grupo Popular parliamentarians indicating that the government hides information about the health crisis – or the honesty of the representatives – for example, in messages from the Socialista spokesperson.

Table 5. Inference table of critical messages that favour information disorder		
What do they say?	Who says it?	What do we say they say?
"Listening to Casado today (in a debate regarding COVID and the state of emergency) it is impossible to distinguish his message from the usual one about a general debate on the state of the country with front-on opposition and continuous criticism. And he is half way through. Weird strategy. If there even is one." (@AITOR_ESTEBAN, 2021-02-24, 127RT). "I hear PP leaders preaching about the State of Emergency... a state of emergency that they described as an attack on freedom and that they did not support in Congress. They only care about attacking the Government. Have they no shame?" (@Adrilastra, 2021-05-09, 1418RT).	This is seen in all parliamentary groups.	Critical messages or attacks on parliamentary counterparts. They manifest in criticism of the opposition and the government coalition. These criticisms are seen in *ad hominem* attacks and are polarising messages.
"Deaths from COVID-19 in SPAIN exceed the official number by 24,000, according to @Abc_es. The real number that Sánchez hides: 53,000 deaths. The government will have to answer for it in Congress. No matter how hard they try, they won't be able to hide the truth. #NosMienten https://t.co/7ZGnOLuIOo" (@cucagamarra, 2020-09-13, 340RT). "The Cangas de Onís PP town councillor, Mari Fé Gómez, is one of the politicians who has used her position to jump the queue of hundreds of thousands of people and get the COVID-19 vaccine. Spread the word, because the PP is trying to cover it up". (@Adrilastra, 2021-02-04, 1410RT).	Grupo Parlamentario PP en el Congreso and Grupo Socialista.	Messages about the veracity of the facts or the honesty of the representatives. They question the facts, express doubt about their authenticity and question the honesty of political representatives and the veracity of their speeches.
"In a flawless message, Felipe VI shows his closeness to the Spanish people who are going through an awful time because of the pandemic and the crisis. And he defends national unity, constitutional harmony and the exemplary nature of institutions. Together we will overcome this situation with a great King at the helm. https://t.co/4WldVRAhH7" (@pablocasado_, 2020-12-24, 1253RT). "When the "justice" department of a country endorses and justifies hate speech against minorities, democracy has a very serious problem. https://t.co/aZZHr9GajF" (@PabloEchenique, 2021-07-05, 675RT).	Grupo Parlamentario Popular en el Congreso, Grupo Socialista, Grupo Parlamentario Republicano and Grupo Parlamentario Euskal Herria Bildu.	Messages about institutions. They create mistrust and discredit different institutions that comprise Spanish parliamentary democracy, their members or actions or, conversely, they generate support for them and their speeches.

The criticisms in the messages analysed not only seek to discredit the government, opposition or parliamentary counterparts, but also include criticism of other institutions, such as the Spanish monarchy (in messages mainly from ERC and EH-Bildu) or the Judicial arm (fundamentally from the spokesperson for Unidas Podemos) (Table 6).

• Group 3. Messages that reinforce informative disorder. In this third group the messages moved beyond criticism and aimed to: a) generate fear and insecurity in citizens; b) attack specific groups; or c) generate doubts about the legitimacy of the media, highlighting a lack of veracity (under the label of "fake") (Table 6).

Table 6. Inference table of messages that reinforce informative clutter		
What do they say?	Who says it?	What do we say they say?
"Morocco has used them as human battering rams, and instead of condemning this and making it known to the international community, the Spanish government disperses them throughout the territory, becoming an accomplice, together with the Autonomous Communities, in the kidnapping of these minors. It is an aberration dressed up as humanitarianism. https://t.co/IAOwLdPaym" (@Santi_ABASCAL, 2021-05-22, 3290RT).	Grupo Parlamentario VOX.	Messages that seek to generate a confrontation with external groups, describing them as the "enemy" and using a bellicose tone.
"Twitter is wonderful and has come up with the perfect term for this thing: magrebitarra [North African ETA terrorist] https://t.co/TYA9KD4O31" (@ivanedlm, 2021-07-08, 2428RT).	Grupo Parlamentario VOX, Grupo Socialista, Grupo Parlamentario Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común, Grupo Parlamentario Republicano and Grupo Parlamentario Vasco (EAJ-PNV).	Messages that seek to show the superiority of their own identity through the stigmatisation of other groups.
"I was initially bothered that the media did not report on the important issue at hand: the covert amnesty that PSOE is negotiating with the PNV to release ETA terrorists. But thank you to those liberals who have insisted on focusing on the North African... https://t.co/mbaPYd7air" (@ivanedlm, 2021-07-09, 850RT).	Grupo Parlamentario Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común and Grupo Parlamentario VOX.	Messages that question the legitimacy of journalism and the media.
"Now that those who denounced the Minister for Equality for using an advisor for personal affairs have been sentenced to eight years in prison for extortion, what is the judge going to do with the fake trial that has no evidence instigated by these gangsters? Will it go ahead and let them get away with it? https://t.co/4ykV4UytIK" (@PabloEchenique, 2021-07-10, 983RT).	Grupo Parlamentario Confederal de Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común and Grupo Parlamentario VOX.	Messages that denounce the term 'fake'.

These messages were mainly posted by Vox parliamentarians and refer to citizen insecurity in a context in which the enemy is identified as "them" – an external agent or even a specific country (Morocco or China) – and where the "disloyalty" of the government was highlighted, as they did not defend Spain's interests against external "enemies". Similarly, tweets attacking specific groups (underaged immigrants and women) are worth noting, as there is an attempt to show the superiority of one group, "us", over these other groups ("them"). These messages were mainly posted by Vox parliamentarians.

Finally, there are messages that question the legitimacy of journalism and the media, especially in tweets posted by the spokespeople for Vox and Unidas Podemos, who also tweet messages that denounce (or accuse) fake content.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Beyond an interest in detecting false or misleading messages among MPs, the purpose of this research study was to explore parliamentary disinformation and investigate to what extent representatives of the Congress of Deputies in Spain contribute to generating informational disorder. We found that the tweets posted by MPs about the most popular disinformation topics (i.e.: COVID-19, Immigration, LGBTI and gender) only accounted for 14% of the total tweets analysed. This finding allows us to conclude that parliamentarians generate messages on a variety of topics and that their influence, in volume of messages, in generating informational disorder is limited.

Second, despite this small quantity of messages, we did note a disinformation rhetoric in the messages posted, not necessarily associated with veracity or deception, but with an argumentative and discursive construction, as noted by Hameleers and Minihold (2020). In this sense, we identified tweets from parliamentarians that contained certain discursive strategies such as accusing other representatives of being false, thus strategically contributing to generating institutional mistrust and apathy among citizens (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). The messages focused on criticising an institution, a government action or attacking a parliamentary counterpart are worth noting, as they reinforce citizens' distrust in political institutions and their representatives. The analysis we carried out allowed us to detect a predominant tendency of messages from parliamentarians aimed at delegitimising the "other" and groups whose ideology does not coincide with their own, through fostering polarised divisions between the internal group, "us", who do the right thing, and the "other", who does the wrong thing, thus creating a framework conducive to disinformation. In addition, the rhetoric of disinformation contained in the messages emphasises the antagonistic divide in society and in politics, where the inner group, the "goodies", is compared to the others, the "baddies", "corrupt" or "liars" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), thus contributing to shaping a black and white perspective of parliamentary activity, parliamentary representatives, and by extension, of society, juxtaposed with a corrupt and dangerous elite (Hameleers & Minihold, 2020). This is particularly worrying in the current context of an exponential increase of political discontent. The confrontation between representatives and who they represent usually ends up benefiting emerging political parties, whose discourses and attitudes are often harmful to democratic institutions.

Our analysis also allowed us to identify tweets sent by MPs accusing others of falsifying documents, and using labels to delegitimise or attack political opponents (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). In addition, there were attacks on the legitimacy of journalism in messages from MPs accusing the media of being dishonest and deceiving or manipulating citizens (De-Vreese et al., 2018). Again, these messages are very worrying as they attack key institutions for simply allowing the proper functioning of democratic systems. Take for example, the damage done to the credibility of the media through Donald Trump's repeated attacks on it, usually done through his Twitter account.

Within the set of tweets analysed, there are also messages that emphasise the need for the dominant identity groups to maintain and ensure a uniform racial order (Kreiss, 2021), and an attempt to affirm the superiority of their own identity through the stigmatisation of other groups. In this particular case, the entrenchment of white racial dominance occurs through exploiting pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices, undermining the political autonomy and legitimacy of marginalised people (in this case, immigrants, LGBTI, and women). Our findings provide significant data on parliamentary disinformation networks on Twitter. The results have shown that there are many messages that favour informational disorder and some,

although fewer, that reinforce this disorder. On Twitter, MPs can act as mobilising agents to current polarising dynamics (Esteve-Del-Valle & Borge, 2018) or they can adopt a more dialogic attitude, such as by arguing different positions through the use of reasoning based on facts (Esteve-Del-Valle et al., 2020). The health of the public sphere depends in part on the attitudes that MPs adopt in these new online spaces. Habermas (2006) reflected on the effect that social networks – as information (or disinformation) flows – can have on generating reasoned opinions. We thus expect MPs, as central agents of this new sphere, to act responsibly, considering the consequences their behaviour has in this space. However, the responsibility of ensuring the civic functioning of the online parliamentary public sphere should not fall exclusively to MPs. The Spanish Congress or Senate can, for example, develop digital civic literacy programmes (civic media literacy; Mihailidis, 2018) with the aim of raising awareness among MPs of the pernicious consequences that a harmful use of social networks can have on the health of public debate, and provide them with the necessary tools to prevent them from spreading disinformation content via their social networks.

The main limitation of this study was its limited time and geographical framework, which conditions the issues addressed by the MPs based on the political and informational agenda of that space and time. The selection of the most widespread messages has also meant that other messages that may have contained disinformation were not included in the sample. However, this research is one of the first contributions to the literature outlining how disinformation and discredited content is configured in the communication of parliamentarians, which can be an influential rhetorical device to delegitimise incongruous versions of reality and achieve political success by emphasising consistent realities. In today's digital and fragmented information environments, constructions and accusations of deception, an inability to adequately govern, and corruption or disloyalty can be more influential than the dissemination of objective information. Of course, this study only collects a snapshot of the tweets posted by MPs. Although the sampling avoided bias, there is a possibility that sampling from a different period may yield different results. For future studies, expanding the control variables, considering the subject of the tweet sent by MPs and whether they have recently received negative media coverage and, perhaps, taking into account prominence through a medium other than Twitter followers, would be of interest.

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