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Disinformation on electoral processes in Spain: the case of the platform Elecciones Transparentes

Desinformación sobre procesos electorales en España: el caso de la plataforma Elecciones Transparentes

Deadlines | Received: 28/10/2024 - Reviewed: 24/02/2025- Accepted: 27/02/2025 - Published: 01/07/2025

Abstract

Disinformation about electoral processes is a recurring narrative used to erode public trust in institutions and destabilize democracies. This study aims to analyze the narratives and content dissemination networks of the Elecciones Transparentes platform, an entity active since 2019 whose primary objective is to discredit electoral processes in Spain. To achieve this, a content analysis was conducted on the platform's two websites, examining a sample of 32 videos and 10 downloadable documents. Additionally, a text mining and network theory analysis was performed on its Telegram channel, which includes all messages published from the account's creation until January 2024, totaling 1,028 messages. This analysis also identified the platform's connection networks and the accounts with which it shares content. The findings reveal a recurring use of simplistic narratives lacking solid arguments or data, which vary depending on the format. Audiovisual content tends to be more speculative, while textual content is more assertive. These narratives encourage citizen participation, portraying voters as watchdogs, and also impact companies and political parties.

Keywords

disinformation; elections; electoral fraud; digital propaganda; Transparent Elections; Telegram; text mining; Political narratives

Resumen

La desinformación sobre procesos electorales es una narrativa recurrente empleada para afectar la confianza de la opinión pública en las instituciones y dañar la estabilidad de las democracias. Este trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar las narrativas y redes de difusión de contenidos de la plataforma Elecciones Transparentes, entidad activa desde 2019, cuya finalidad es desacreditar los procesos electorales en España. Para ello, se realiza un análisis de contenido de sus dos páginas web, tomando como muestra 32 vídeos y 10 documentos descargables. Se añade un análisis de minería de textos y teoría de redes de su canal en Telegram, que recoge todos los mensajes publicados desde el origen de la cuenta hasta enero de 2024, que suponen un total de 1,028 mensajes. A través de esta observación se han identificado además sus redes de conexión, así como las cuentas con las que comparte contenidos. Entre las conclusiones se observa una repetición de narrativas simplistas, sin argumentos sólidos ni datos que tiende a variar en función del formato en el que se presenta, siendo más especulativos en los formatos audiovisuales y más incisivos en los contenidos textuales. Estas narrativas buscan que la ciudadanía asuma el papel de votante-vigilante y, además, impactan a empresas y formaciones políticas.

Palabras clave

desinformación; elecciones; fraude electoral; propaganda digital; Elecciones Transparentes; Telegram; minería de textos; narrativas políticas

1. Introduction: disinformation as a risk to democracy

Disinformation is one of the greatest threats facing democratic systems. The virality and globality of digital propaganda campaigns spring from "different groups doing the same things for different reasons, thus creating a unity of interests between actors who start from different starting points" (Torres- Soriano, 2020). Communities that, a priori, might seem unconnected, find alternative approaches in disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories, which help to extend their divergent beliefs to other issues. This was one of the main strategies of Cambridge Analytica, the company that developed some of the most relevant disinformation campaigns, such as the one implemented for Brexit or in the US presidential election in 2016 (Berghel, 2018). As one of its creators, Wylie (2020: 156) explains, "the company had users who 1) identified as part of an extremist group, 2) was a captive audience and 3) could be manipulated with data". The creators of some of the most effective digital propaganda campaigns understood that they could spread disinformation narratives through small groups of disgruntled populations: "In most Western countries, citizens have the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to agree with the propaganda of hostile nations" (p.193). This is undoubtedly one of the fundamental foundations of Western democratic systems, as Blanco (2023) points out: "Without true information, freedom is not possible, and without freedom, democracy is not possible".

Recently, the Davos Forum published the Global Risk Report (2024), which identified disinformation, social polarisation and cybersecurity as the main global risks in coming years. In the short term, two years from now, disinformation was positioned as the first global risk, especially due to the 70 elections taking place in the world during 2024 (Rizzi, 2023). This concern has also been recognised by major technology companies. Twenty companies, including Microsoft, Meta, Google and Amazon, have signed an agreement to combat disinformation in the upcoming 2024 elections, while paying special attention to disinformation generated with artificial intelligence (EFE, 2024).

On the other hand, civic competence, political knowledge (Marciel, 2022), media literacy (Sádaba and Salavería, 2023) and the actions implemented by governments also differ notably, with the developments depending on the country involved. In Finland, which stands out for its advanced media and digital literacy encompassing issues such as extremism, trolling and online bullying in disinformation, has focused its policies on building resilience in the general public and in the media. This form of literacy is reinforced by trust in their government (Shia and Gjesvik, 2020). In terms of policy action, France and Germany have taken some steps with proposals for national legislation (Saurwein and Spencer-Smith, 2020). In Spain, the Forum against Disinformation Campaigns in the field of National Security has been created as a "space for public-private collaboration to promote debate and reflection on the risk that disinformation campaigns pose to our society" (DSN, 2022). It is worth noting that the very idiosyncrasies of each country's electoral process can, in itself, be a preventive measure against disinformation. In the Norwegian multi-party system, for example, it is rare for a single party to govern alone, which means that political formations have to work in coalition. Disinformation narratives that appeal to polarisation are therefore less effective (Shia and Gjesvik, 2020).

1.1. Digital disinformation on electoral integrity and fraud

Digital disinformation campaigns aim to affect public confidence in institutions and sow doubts about democratic processes (García-Orosa, 2021). This distrust, in some contexts, is accompanied by populist, polarising narratives and hate speech (Arce-García, 2023). There have been numerous cases in the past decade, in different countries around the world, of political leaders who have based their discourses on electoral fraud. Examples include Donald Trump in the United States (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021), Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico. This argument, characteristic of populist leaders, responds to a negative communication strategy that includes elements such as negationism and conspiracy theories (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2021). The dissemination of these narratives can come from issuers with a certain authority, as well as from their followers and other agitators who participate in these disinformation narratives.

The coordination and repetition of models and narratives seems to respond to planning applied in different electoral processes in countries with different realities. Berniga (2023) points out that during the presidential elections in Paraguay in 2023, coordinated disinformation campaigns were identified on issues such as an alleged globalist agenda and electoral fraud. The latter narrative, that of electoral fraud, "contributed to the political climate in the run-up to the elections and complicated the acceptance of the results" (p.518). This distrust was the seed of the assault on Capitol Hill by the supporters of Donald Trump in January 2021 or the takeover of the Brazilian Congress, Presidency and Supreme Court by Jair Bolsonaro's supporters.

Between 2016 and 2022, disinformation has grown exponentially, and electoral management bodies were targeted in 94% of attacks against organisations. The main argument supporting this is electoral fraud, although private companies also seem to be targeted based on assertions that they actively

participate in electoral fraud through the technology they provide (Bicu, 2023). For example, in the case of Mexico, Juárez and Celecia (2023) analysed the content of ten YouTube channels that disseminated false, manipulated or biased information about the National Electoral Institute (INE), the electoral authority in charge of organising Mexico's federal elections in 2021. Among other issues, they highlight how these channels present themselves as objective, impartial and "alternative" media sources compared to the traditional media. These channels use numerous common elements, including sensationalist phrases. Monsiváis-Carrillo (2023) points out that Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) "is a president who has promoted a populist transformation of the Mexican political system through the propagation of political disinformation" (p.154), incorporating among his narratives "that the electoral authorities have been complicit in electoral fraud, that the cost of elections is excessive, and that his government aims to establish an authentic democracy" (p.154).

1.2. Disinformation on postal voting in Spain

It is difficult to discern the limits of when disinformation began to circulate about postal voting in Spain, although there was already some relevant evidence from 2019. Thus, during the 10-N election campaign, some websites pretending to be the media published content claiming that a computer error had affected the postal vote or that vote theft had occurred. Among these publications, it was indicated in news format that the Transparent Elections Platform would carry out a parallel vote count (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2020). In a study of 37 election verifications of the general elections of 28 April 2019 in Spain, Paniagua et al. (2020) point out that 12 of the content sources analysed focused on rumours of electoral fraud, "accusing companies such as Indra or SCYT (awarded the communications of results on election day) of being behind a 'pucherazo'" (p.131). Maldita (2023) indicates that, during the elections in the Community of Madrid on 4 May 2021, false content was circulated claiming that "since 2016 the Guardia Civil no longer has custody of postal votes", which is why it was claimed that electoral fraud could take place. In reality, this measure has never been used. During these elections, a message was also circulated via WhatsApp claiming that they had "falsified PP ballots" including a candidate who was not really on the lists: Toni Cantó. In the general elections of 23 July 2023, Newtral shared a compilation of the main false content collected and, among them, highlighted the increase in voting by permanent residents abroad (CERA), errors in the ballots for voters registered in Guadalajara who lived abroad and videos in which it was indicated that in the postal vote "there is everyone except Vox" (Navarro, 2023).

Returning, as indicated above, to some of the first false content on electoral disinformation in Spain, we note the presence of the Asociación Plataforma Elecciones Transparentes, one of the most critical and complex actors. Created in 2019, it has set up an organised structure for the dissemination of content that is always focused on the need to monitor electoral processes. Its activity has been publicly denounced by different security bodies. During the electoral campaign for the municipal and regional elections of 28M in 2023, both the General Information Commissariat of the National Police and the Department of National Security denounced an organised disinformation campaign against the credibility of the electoral process that was articulated in different digital channels. The Asociación Plataforma Elecciones Transparentes (APET) was among its promoters, with the profile of its founder, Pilar Baselga, standing out in particular. Two main narratives were identified: an alleged "pucherazo" ("vote rigging") based on the enlargement of the electoral roll with immigrants or residents abroad and a "pucherazo" based on a manipulation of the count. This last argument had previously been used in the 2016 and 2019 general elections to accuse the company Indra (Fernández, 2023). The origin of this platform is explained by Rafael Palacios, "Rafapal", who states on his website rafapal.com that he does "journalism for cosmic minds". In a video on the Odysee platform, he explains how Elecciones Transparentes was founded, as they suspected that votes were being stolen from the Vox party in the Spanish elections, which he linked it to the theft of votes from Trump in the United States (Rafapal, 2023).

2. Objectives and methodology

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the narratives and content dissemination networks of the platform Elecciones Transparentes, which seeks to discredit electoral processes in Spain. This organisation has been chosen because it is an active entity, with a permanent presence since 2019, that is characterised by its fundamental purpose of questioning the elections. It is assumed that this organisation is a clear issuer of digital disinformation. The secondary objectives are to analyse its narratives and networks of dissemination and connection. To this end, we undertook a qualitative analysis of the content shared on two of its websites, both of which were active at the time of writing:

- Transparent elections (<https://www.eleccionestransparentes.org>)
- Infoelectionstran (<https://infoelectionstran.wixsite.com/my-site-1>).

Likewise, the activity of this platform on Telegram, a channel with 1m505 subscribers (22 January 2024), is also studied to determine the networks of connections involved, as well as the accounts with which Elecciones Transparentes shares content.

2.1. Content analysis methodology

Analytical-descriptive content analysis (Bardini, 2002; Krippendorff, 1990; Peña, 2012) was applied to examine the main narratives for both the audiovisual and the textual material on the two web pages and the content shared on Telegram. This type of analysis allows the decoding of messages and the ability to establish patterns of representation, themes and content dissemination. The audiovisual material analysed comes from the web portal "Transparent Elections" (<https://www.eleccionestransparentes.org>). Although the platform has two web pages, this portal is where the video content can be found. The entire website was crawled, which collected a total of 27 videos hosted on the "Home Page" and 5 videos from the page "Interviews with APET Board members". Thus, the sample comprises a total of 32 videos whose content has been analysed, compiled and recorded on the basis of an analysis sheet with the categories shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Analysis sheet for audiovisual material

Document title	Document publication name
Type of document	Short document, developed document, infographic, etc.
Authorship of the document	Own or external
Content form	Text, text and image, text and icons, etc.
Narrative	Subject matter around which the content revolves
Purpose	To inform, encourage participation, encourage action, etc.
Addressee	Platform supporters, platform members, etc.

Source: own elaboration

The textual material comes from the web portal "Infoelecciones" (<https://infoelecciones.wixsite.com/my-site-1>), another of the APET web pages characterised by its argumentative content, including guides or infographics. As with the audiovisual material, its content has been analysed, compiled and recorded on the basis of an analysis sheet with the categories shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Analysis sheet for documentary material

Document title	Document publication name
Type of document	Short document, developed document, infographic, etc.
Authorship of the document	Own or external
Content form	Text, text and image, text and icons, etc.
Narrative	Subject matter around which the content revolves
Purpose	To inform, encourage participation, encourage action, etc.
Addressee	Platform supporters, platform members, etc.

Source: own elaboration

In relation to both analysis sheets, it should be pointed out that, depending on the information provided by their variables, they present a nominal measurement scale and have mutually exclusive categories.

For the study of the Telegram channel messages, a text mining study has been carried out that applied two graphs: one of multidimensional scaling and another of the frequency of the most used words (words that do not contribute meaning, or *stopwords*, have been eliminated). The words are presented in different sizes based on the frequency of their occurrence, and in colours associating the most closely related words through *k-means cluster* analysis. It is thus possible to observe the main themes found in a large number of messages (Gil-Pascual, 2021).

2.2. Quantitative analysis methodology

The collection of information from the APET Telegram channel has been carried out through the web application itself (https://t.me/eleccionestransparentes_APET) based on a JSON file with all the content

shared from its creation, on 16 March 2021, when the first publication took place, until 22 January 2024, which corresponds to the date of the information collection. The data were then analysed and processed using R software. The aim of this first analysis was to address the channel's connection networks based on the questions: From which accounts does it share content? What networks does it have in place? For this purpose, based on network theory (Barabási, 2016), a map of the connections of the APET Telegram channel was made that identifies all the channels with at least two references on the APET channel and establishes the connections and information exchange links between the different channels. This visualisation makes it possible to determine which other Telegram channels users could reach when accessing this shared content.

The network analysis was carried out using the Gephi programme, version 0.10.1 (Bastian et al., 2009). A file for this programme was created using R with the Telegram channel data. *Clusters* were formed using the Louvain algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008) and represented graphically using the ForceAtlas2 algorithm (Jacomy et al., 2014). Within the network, the values of degree (inputs and outputs from each node or Telegram channel) and *eigenvector* and *betweenness centrality* were calculated to see the importance of each node in the detected network.

The websites were analysed using viewdns.info, an application that offers complete information on the servers and domains of any website. We thus checked the website's history, server location and coexistence with other websites that could be similar. The CrowdTangle application was then used. This is tool from the company Meta, which offers data on the dissemination of websites on their social networks. Its browser extension tracks who shares links from the website on social networks and can identify, among other actors, Facebook groups that usually share content privately (CrowdTangle, 2018).

3. Results

3.1. Content and disseminators on the APET websites

3.1.1. Results of the audiovisual content collected on the website

As explained in the methodology, the audiovisual content analysed was collected from the "Transparent Elections" website (<https://www.eleccionestransparentes.org>) and is shown in Table 3. The date of publication of the videos on the web portal is shown in descending chronological order (the most recent videos appear first), although, on occasion, this order has been altered, and items are inserted depending on the content in question. The greatest number of videos was published in 2023, amounting to 40.6% of the total. This are followed by 2020, with 28.1%, 2022 with 25% and, lastly, 2021, which accounted for 6.3%. Most (81.3%) of the channels to which the videos were published belong to members of the platform itself. Among them, the most prominent is that of José Miguel Alvarado (@ApellidoObligatorio), APET president, who in turn has the largest number of subscribers, as shown in Table 3. This is followed by the platform's YouTube channel and, in last place, Ignacio Vargas, APET secretary, who, in this case, has an irrelevant number of subscribers to his channel.

**Table 3. Record of channels and subscribers where videos were published
(Ordered from the highest to the lowest number of subscribers)**

Channel	Number of subscribers	No. of videos	Platform member
@directo5tv	7,250	1	No
@EstadodeAlarmaTV	3,490	1	No
@MandatorySurname	3,450	12	Yes
@elmurodelaverdad7017	3,330	1	No
@InocenteDuke	2,510	1	No
@ElToro_TV	1,970	1	No
@transparentelecciones	1,770	9	Yes
@ignaciovargaspineda2463	252	5	Yes
@peritoinformatica	190	1	No

Source: own elaboration

The remaining 18.7% corresponds to channels belonging to people outside the platform, but whose common denominator is the content they publish and the profile of the users they target. These include channels belonging both to the media and to private users, most of whom have a substantial number of subscribers. This means that their dissemination capacity is high. In total, and adding up all the channels, the potential audience would be 24,212 users.

The length of the videos is closely related to the format in which the content is presented. Thus, the longest videos (an average of approximately 40–45 minutes) are those that adopt the debate format, which is characterised by the fact that they involve 3–5 people and are all made through group videoconferences, with the exception of one case which takes place on a Toro TV television set. This format of content presentation accounts for 22% of the total number of videos published on the web portal. Videos that adopt the interview format also present a considerable amount of content (an average of approximately 30–35 minutes). In these cases, there is a greater disparity in terms of length, with some interviews lasting just 7 minutes, while others last over an hour. This variability is not related to the number of participants, as there is usually only one interviewer and one interviewee, and exceptionally, two interviewees. This format is the most common, accounting for just over half of the content presented (53.2%). Finally, there are other videos that are less predictable in length as they have a less defined presentation format. A few stand out, such as a live broadcast of almost two hours; three videos of between 48 seconds and 10 minutes in the form of a direct appeal to users to take action against fraud; or three videos in the format of a video clip and hidden camera with a duration of between 3 and 7 minutes.

Regarding the narratives used, the main thematic line focused electoral fraud, and based on this, different plots and subplots were used, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Categorisation of the narratives employed

Narratives	Plot	Subplots
NATIONAL NARRATIVES	Non-compliance with the law by not conducting the general election	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attacks on the company Indra for using its data for general scrutiny - Democratic manipulation and attack on the Constitution - Illegality of the Parliament and the President of the Government - Irregularities recorded in expert reports on the regional elections and postal votes
	Recommendations to challenge the elections for irregularities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Complaint to the Courts and complaints to the Central Electoral Board - What to do as a voter to prevent data manipulation and ensure electoral transparency - Suit to suspend the general elections on the grounds that they are illegal - Proposal to amend the LOREG submitted to the parliamentary groups
INTERNATIONAL NARRATIVES	Distrust of the US election results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fraud to damage Donald Trump - The company hacking the US elections is linked to Indra and the Venezuelan government

Source: own elaboration

The protagonists of these narratives can be defined from two perspectives: from the point of view of the container (who narrates and presents the content) and from the point of view of the content (what or who the plot is about). In the first case, the undisputed protagonists are the members of APET. José Miguel Alvarado (its president) and Pilar Baselga (one of the members) have the highest participation rates, with

53.1% and 43.7%, respectively. People from outside APET also appear as protagonists, albeit exceptionally, as is the case, for example, with the participation of Francisco Serrano, judge and former leader of Vox in Andalusia, or Gabriel Araujo, forensic computer expert.

Second, the main protagonists of the content are the concepts on which it is based. In this way, "general elections", "Indra", "electoral fraud" and "non-compliance with the law" are, in the first instance, the main topics of most of the audiovisual content analysed. Despite this, there is also room for other topics that, in the second term, have a relevant presence and focus on the political panorama, such as: "general elections", "regional elections", "VOX", "PSOE", "PP", "Pedro Sánchez". All are guided by underlying ideas such as the manipulation of votes, the illegality of the electoral process and the need for citizen participation and mobilisation to put an end to this illegal situation.

3.1.2. Results of the textual content collected on the website

As stated in the methodology, the audiovisual content analysed was collected from Transparent Elections (<https://infoeleccionstran.wixsite.com/my-site-1>). All the documents analysed are characterised by their brevity and lack of elaboration and care, as grammatical mistakes can be seen (indiscriminate use of upper and lower case letters), typos ("Calaluña" [sic] instead of "Catalonia") and even download links that do not allow access to the document (as is the case with the "Link to the voting records of 14 February 2020 in Calaluña").

Nearly half (44%) of the documents are brief, consisting of only one page and rather simple in content. These documents include applications for membership to the platform and leaflets advocating for a re-run of the elections due to the lack of a general ballot, which invalidates the Parliament. On the other hand, there are also infographics (11%) that schematically explain the process of electoral fraud in Spain before, during and after the elections. The remaining 45% corresponds to longer documents, with a length of around 3–4 pages, with the exception of the Electoral Regulations, which are attached in full and run to 99 pages. The only document that is not authored by the Platform is the Organic Law 5/1985 of 19 June 1985 on the general electoral regime. All other documents were created by APET and are characterised by the fact that they are mainly text-based (89%). The remaining 11% include, in addition to text, icons that graphically complement the information they develop.

In terms of the narratives used, there is full continuity with the main thematic line detected in the audiovisual material: electoral fraud. Despite this, the textual material also develops calls to action with phrases such as "We encourage you to sign up as a proxy for a party", "What can I do to collaborate" or "What you can do in the next elections". This nuance is directly related to the purpose of these documents: to appeal for users known as "vigilant voters" to act. Sometimes, this purpose is more direct, as in the case of the document in which a complaint model is provided for not carrying out the general ballot, and in others, it appears to be redirected from an initial informative phase that ends in a final, more combative phase. All of this shows that, in 100% of the cases, the final recipient of this material is the user who is believed to be a platform sympathiser aligned with the discourse APET disseminates and who, as a result, is willing to participate and disseminate APET's proclamations.

3.1.3. Dissemination of APET's web pages in Facebook groups

Identifying the Facebook groups that contribute to the dissemination of APET publications was one of the objectives of the analysis of the web pages. The website www.eleccionstransparentes.org was created on 29/09/2017 and has been hosted on various servers in the United States. APET's content has mainly been disseminated through the Facebook and Telegram social networks.

Table 5: Facebook groups involved in the dissemination of APET posts and the most forwarded message within each group

Facebook Channel	Information	Followers	Interactions
COALITION PATRIOTIC ELECTIONS	On Saturday 29 July we denounced at the (ELECTIONS) conduct of the General Canvass of Madrid	1486	54
Platform Elections Transparent	Collaborate with the association Plataforma Transparent Elections in the Basque and Galician elections	2007	37
File Royuela	COMPLAINT FILED OVER FAILURE TO CONDUCT GENERAL ELECTION IN ZARAGOZA	9210	14

Facebook Channel	Information	Followers	Interactions
Platform Coriana Voters	Without a general election, Parliament is illegitimate.	2066	14
Affiliates from VOX2	WITHOUT GENERAL ELECTIONS, PARLIAMENT and the GOVERNMENT are ILLEGAL	1910	10
COALITION PATRIOTIC	On Saturday, 29 July, we filed a complaint at the Plaza de Castilla Courts regarding the failure to conduct the General Count in Madrid.	323	7
THE VOICE OF ANDALUSIA	On Saturday, 29 July, we filed a complaint at the Plaza de Castilla Courts regarding the failure to conduct the General Count in Madrid.	781	6
After 8-M	On Saturday, 29 July, we filed a complaint at the Plaza de Castilla Courts regarding the failure to conduct the General Count in Madrid.	2790	6
I believe in esradio	"We need journalists and reporters for the Galician and Basque elections" They will be accredited by the Transparent Elections Platform Association	10343	5
Inés Arrimadas with Spain	"We need journalists and reporters for the Galician and Basque elections" They will be accredited by the Transparent Elections Platform Association	18944	5
Citizens go!!!! Let's go!!!	"We need journalists and reporters for the Galician and Basque elections" They will be accredited by the Transparent Elections Platform Association	1593	4
We want to see podemitas in niqab and the Cup in burqa	On Saturday, 29 July, we filed a complaint at the Plaza de Castilla Courts regarding the failure to conduct the General Count in Madrid.	1531	4

Source: own elaboration

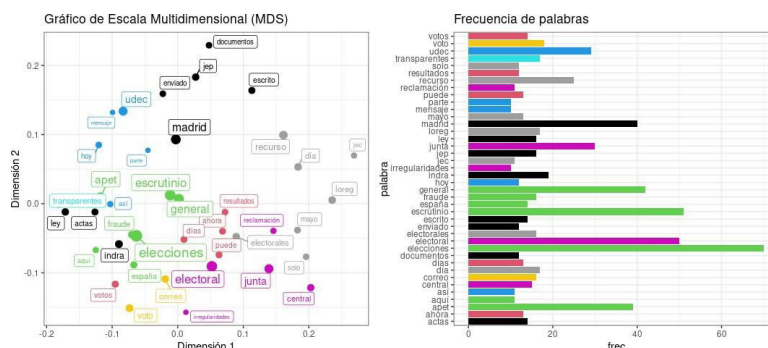
As can be seen in Table 5, the Facebook channels and the most widely disseminated messages call for collaboration is requested and denounce various electoral campaigns in Spain. Adding up the number of followers of these groups, there appears to be a potential reach of 52,984 users. The second website (<https://infoeleccionestran.wixsite.com/my-site-1>) does not appear to be shared in any Facebook or Instagram groups. As it is on a free server, it is not possible to see its history and creation date. The website content also has not been updated since April 2021.

3.2. Analysis of Telegram networks and APET content

3.2.1. Analysis of Telegram content

Text mining analysis of the texts posted on the Telegram channel is shown in Figure 1. This analysis makes it possible to detect the main issues raised in the different messages: the qualification of fraud in the scrutiny of the elections in Spain, irregularities of the Central Electoral Board, doubts about the postal vote, doubts about the documents and minutes processed by the company Indra (which was in charge of the management of the electoral scrutiny), as well as appeals to the Central Electoral Board (JEC) and the Provincial Electoral Board (JEP) of Madrid. As can be seen, all of these issues call into question the legitimacy of the elections in Spain and present APET as a kind of safeguard that lodges complaints and appeals to the electoral boards.

Figure 1: Multidimensional scaling and frequency graph of most used words



Source: Own elaboration

These themes are developed through narratives whose prominence evolves with APET's strength and political developments. From March 2021 to September 2022, the messages focus on APET's actions to ensure electoral transparency. The narrative highlights that APET is the first citizen platform authorised to conduct a general canvass according to the law, which is described as a "historic milestone". It also highlights the allegations, resolutions and appeals filed against the illegitimacy of the elections. The participation of APET members and the repercussions of their actions are also emphasised. José Miguel Alvarado and Pilar Baselga are the main actors, and they warn about the lack of general scrutiny and encourage voters to monitor the electoral processes or join the UDEC candidacy.

From November 2022 to December 2023, there is a shift in APET's content away from a focus on its own worth to addressing other external narratives. Of particular note is the introduction of the theme of international election campaigns, particularly in Brazil during the assault on Congress, the Presidency and the Supreme Court by Bolsonaro supporters. The messages focus on the figure of Lula da Silva and point to him as an "inciter" of these events, while magnifying his participation in implicating Bolsonaro supporters in acts of vandalism. The presence of the United States is also mentioned in this narrative, with the suggestion of electoral fraud perpetrated by the left with the help of a company, Indra, linked to Sánchez in Spain. This discourse relates directly to APET's previous narrative of electoral fraud.

Electoral fraud is materialised in subplots centred mainly on the failure to carry out the general ballot and, precisely for this reason, they attack Indra for being the company "subcontracted by a government of Freemasons" that manufactures false data and skips the procedure for counting the votes, or the National Police for "not defending the law" and "obeying traitors" by not demanding that the general ballot be carried out and allowing an "illegal" Parliament and Government to be in place. This discourse of fraud and illegality intensifies as the date of the general elections (held in July 2023) approaches, because they already speak of "evidence of fraud" and the need to invalidate these elections due to the existence of "massive vote-buying schemes", the alteration of the municipal register and the potential of the "fraudulent vote from abroad", because "Sánchez is preparing with Indra the rigging of the general elections".

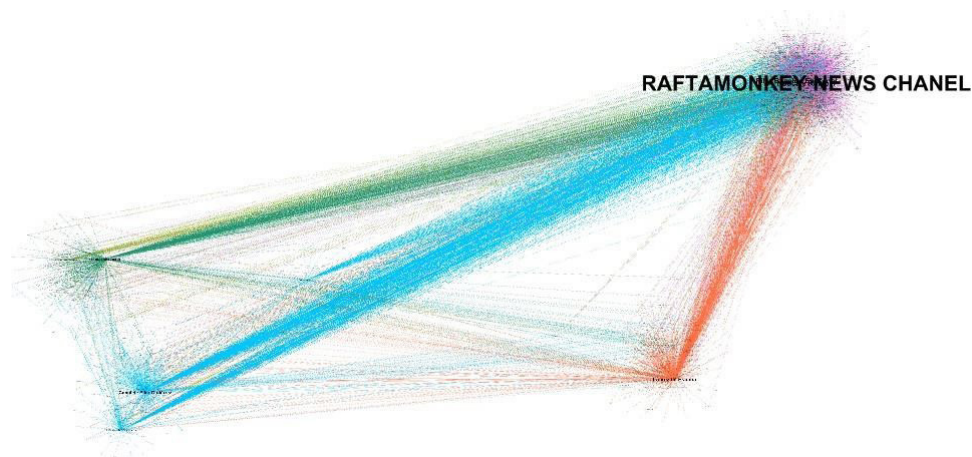
The narrative of electoral fraud is closely linked to that of the appeal to political parties. Two distinct aspects of this can be seen: on the one hand, that which affects the PSOE and links it to its strategy "to steal the elections" and its failure to comply with electoral law, and on the other, that which affects the PP and, mainly, Vox as political parties whose inaction contributes to the failure to comply with electoral law: "With their attitude they have placed a very powerful weapon in the hands of the Government for the next general elections". For this reason, they repeatedly call on Vox and its leaders to monitor and demand compliance with the LOREG and that it is not a "party that acts as a 'back-up party'". They even go so far as to ask Santiago Abascal to take responsibility because, despite being the leader of the only party that "for the moment, has not been caught buying votes", they "forget" to comply with the requirements of the General Electoral Law.

3.2.2. Analysis of Telegram networks

The Telegram channel (https://t.me/eleccionestransparentes_APET) has a total of 1,505 subscribers at the date of data collection (22 January 2024) and has been sharing content since 16 March 2021. In total there are 1,028 messages on the channel, with a total of 555 external links, 153 photos, 144 files, 82 videos, 24 audios and 8 voice messages. Using network theory, the establishment of network connections between channel content rebroadcasts indicates there are five clusters of channels that rebroadcast APET content, as shown in Figure 2. The first cluster centres on the "RAFTAMONKEY NEWS CHANEL" channel, with

58.92% of traffic, "ELECCIONES TRANSPARENTES. APET NOTICIAS CHANNEL" with 13.66%, "Pilar Gutiérrez Channel" and "ElDiestro. Opinión en Libertad" with 12.04%, "La Voz de España" with 10.14% and "Noticias Plandémicas" with 5.24%. In total, interconnections were found between 5,682 channels on this social messaging network, many of them focused on conspiracy theories, primarily anti-vaccine conspiracies.

Figure 2: Network map from APET Telegram channel



Source: Own elaboration

Observing the traffic from links and interconnections, it can be seen that the channels that supply the most information are "RAFTAMONKEY NEWS CHANEL" (output grade 3,909), "Noticias Rafapal" (1,327), "Pilar Baselga en Canal" (1,323), "La Voz de España" (876) and "Canal de Pilar Gutiérrez" (801). The rest fall below 500 links. These can thus be considered to be the main content distribution channels. This leadership in content creation is corroborated by the fact that they are also the channels with the greatest intermediation (*betweenness centrality*), with "Apellido Obligatorio" in fifth place at the top of the list of interconnected channels.

Eigenvector analysis, or *eigenvector*, was used to determine the importance of a node (or channel in this case) within the network. Thus, the ten most important channels in the interconnection network are those of (*eigenvector* value in brackets): "Alvise Pérez" (1), "Noticias Rafapal" (0.87), "LIBERUM ASOCIACION" (0.84), "Julio Ariza" (0.82), "Apellido Obligatorio" (0.78), "Pilar Baselga en Canal" (0.76), "✠ Espiritu Templario ✠ ✱ News 🇺🇸" (0.76), "CONCIENCIA MUNDIAL" (0.76), "CANAL5TVINFORMA" (0.76) and "Diffusion. New Biology" (0.76). In first position, Alvise Pérez has been convicted on several occasions of making insinuations about various political positions without providing evidence (Ballesteros, 2020; El País, 2022; Pozas, 2023). In second place is Julio Ariza, the creator of the Intereconomía media group and close to the Vox political party (González, 2023). In third place is Liberum Asociación, an association dedicated to "restoring the rights and freedoms usurped in the course of the pandemic" (liberumasociacion.org, 2023). It is important to note that many of its connected have to do with anti-vaccine or conspiratorial Covid denialist groups, followers of the conspiratorial group QAnon, the *red pill* movement, as well as religious far-right ideology from the United States, Russia or Brazil.

The links in the messages refer mainly to videos from the APET YouTube channel (65 videos), but also include other visual content portals, such as Rumble.com (5 videos) and Odysee.com (4 videos). According to journalist Wendy Siegelman, Rumble.com is considered YouTube's main competition for far-right figures and content that has been banned on other platforms, such as misinformation about Covid, and is owned by investors related to Trump Media & Technology Group (Siegelman, 2022). Odysee is another video platform associated with disinformation and hate (Marshall & Tanfani, 2022), where the Russian channels RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik continue to broadcast their content after being banned in the EU following the war in Ukraine (Martin, 2022). APET has its own channel on Odysee.com (https://odysee.com/@Plataforma_Elecciones_Transparentes:8) where it broadcasts and rebroadcasts content.

4. Conclusions

Disinformation related to electoral processes is increasingly prevalent and presents common narratives that are adapted to local contexts. Its fundamental objective is to generate mistrust and unease in public opinion. This malaise affects democratic stability and is instrumentalised to cement other disinformation

campaigns. After analysing content developed by APET, it can be seen that its main intention is to sow doubt about possible electoral fraud in Spain. APET does so by means of poorly elaborated and simplistic narratives, which tend to be adapted according to the format in which they are presented. Audiovisual content is more speculative and seeks to sow doubt through testimony by APET promoters. Textual content is more incisive and appeals to citizen participation in the role of vigilant voters. Such content also affects companies and political parties. APET appears to be an entity capable of initiating legal proceedings and social initiatives to confront these alleged attempts at fraud. According to APET, these attempts are also applied in other countries.

Although the narratives are simplistic and may have little persuasive power, the networks connecting and disseminating this content amplifies its capacity. Just taking into account the networks analysed in this study, which collected the main Facebook groups that have shared publications from their web pages, as well as the Telegram channels with a connection from a jump from their own channel, we estimate a reach of 77,196 users. To these should be added the rest of the followers of their social networks, as well as those of third-party connections that contribute to their dissemination. Herein lies one of the limitations of the work that could represent an opportunity for future research: measuring APET's dissemination capacity and network structure to determine whether there are also connections with similar groups in other countries. The identification of participating actors and narratives may thus also be useful for future work that considers the local context of other countries and offers comparative frameworks. Research on misinformation related to electoral processes and the dissemination of their results to society can be particularly useful in raising public awareness and helping to make citizens more resilient to deception and on their guard against polarisation. The stability of our democracies depends on it.

5. Contributions

Task	Author 1	Author 2	Author 3
Conceptualisation	X		
Content curation		X	X
Formal analysis	X	X	X
Acquisition of funds			
Research	X	X	X
Methodology	X		X
Project management	X		
Resources			
Software			X
Monitoring	X		
Validation	X	X	X
Visualisation			X
Drafting: original draft	X	X	X
Drafting: proofreading and editing	X	X	

6. Funding

The research on which this article was based did not receive any funding.

7. Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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