

How disinformation is negatively fueling the migration discourse

Disinformation is not new. It has existed since ancient times. What's new then? Now it's much easier to spread a hoax than 20 years ago thanks to the amplification of channels available to consume and share information. In this regard, not only information has been democratized, but also disinformation. A combination of changes in consumption patterns, lack of media literacy, loss of trust in journalism and the lack of business models for the digital media largely contribute.

Maldita.es is an independent non-profit fact-checking media outlet. One of three inquiries we receive relates to migrants and refugees. The vast amount of disinformation circulating is increasing hate speech towards refugees and migrants and contributes to polarise the public and political debate. The most common migration hoaxes that we can find online are ones where migrants steal jobs from locals, access free health treatments or are involved in criminal activities.

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In spreading this misinformation people use the most popular digital channels like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or WhatsApp, where the public can easily run

into pictures, videos and memes spreading fear and fake news.

Anyone can spread manipulated information. It's not related to any particular ideology or social class. Sometimes the rationale behind it is simpler than you might think: they believe they are doing the right thing.

Disinformation has become an international phenomena and the strategies behind it are usually the same, as fact-checkers organisations like the International Fact-Checking Network has proven.¹ It's common to see the same hoax repeated in different countries. It's the case of a widely circulated picture in Spain and Italy of a group of black men believed to be aboard the Open Arms vessel when in reality the photo was taken at a music festival in London years before.² A recurrent unfounded rumour circulating in the United States states that undocumented immigrants get Medicare for free.³

How has coronavirus made it worse?

Since the beginning of this outbreak, our Whatsapp service usage has grown more than twofold. We are now currently receiving between 1000 and 3000 queries a day, more than 3 per minute, compared to a total daily average of 250 queries. Almost 50% of the hoaxes users report are a text, image or an audio that circulates in this messaging application.

With COVID-19 we have observed that the disinformation topics are shifting as the crisis advances. At the beginning of the crisis, when the virus was only new to China, we observed that disinformation was related to the nationality or race of those affected by COVID-19, mostly targeting the Chinese community.

Today, with the beginning of the month of Ramadan, the focus of disinformation is evolving around the privileges that the Muslim community is allegedly

¹ <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>

² <https://maldita.es/malditobulo/2019/08/21/no-esta-foto-no-ha-sido-tomada-en-el-open-arms-es-de-asistentes-a-un-festival-de-londres-en-2015/>

³ <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2019/feb/27/facebook-posts/no-undocumented-immigrants-dont-get-medicare-free/>

enjoying by not having to comply with the lockdown.⁴ The strategies are usually the same: republication of fake old disinformation and sharing decontextualised pictures or videos from other countries.

What solutions are needed?

The solution is simple: we need to provide people with facts and verified information so they can make up their own minds. In the fight against disinformation, only if journalists and citizens themselves go hand in hand will we be able to create a safe, healthy, and well informed society. Here are our tips to avoid disinformation.⁵

Don't ignore the problem. Our narrative is simple, direct and aggressive. We have observed that there are usually two groups of people: Group A who believes that migration is a good thing and Group B who believes it is not. In between, though, there's a third group of people who are not positioned towards any of the former. If they are constantly targeted with disinformation they might not be able to differentiate what's true from what's not. They are our main target and our methodology ensures that the information we provide them is verifiable.⁶

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We employ the same language as hoaxers do in order to fight against algorithms. When a user searches for "young migrants" in the Internet the first result he or she will find is Maldita's website. We use words such as *menas* and *paguitas*, because, even knowing that they contain negative migration-related connotations, those are the terms used by social media hoaxes. *Mena* is a derogatory word for migrants under 18 years of age who are no longer supported by their families. It is not unusual to find stories accusing them of receiving large government support.

⁴ <https://migracion.maldita.es/bulo-desarrollo/no-este-video-de-una-marcha-de-musulmanes-en-valencia-no-esta-grabado-durante-el-estado-de-alarma-por-el-coronavirus-es-de-noviembre-de-2018/>

⁵ <https://maldita.es/los-manuales-para-que-no-te-la-cuelen/>

⁶ <https://maldita.es/metodologia-de-maldito-bulo/>

Our project's name, Maldita Migración, literally means "Danmed Migration". By calling it this way we are able to attract an audience seeking out the negative and then redirect them towards reliable data that debunks their beliefs.

Our evidence shows that new migration narratives and fact-checking tools must go hand in hand if we are to ensure a healthy information ecosystem. This is a tool that needs to be at everyone's disposal as everyone has the right to verified and reliable information to make better informed decisions.

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About Maldita.es

Maldita.es is an independent non-profit fact-checking media outlet. Maldita Migración is a journalistic project supported by Intermon Oxfam.

