Charlemagne Prize Academy Annual Report – on the Future of the Union

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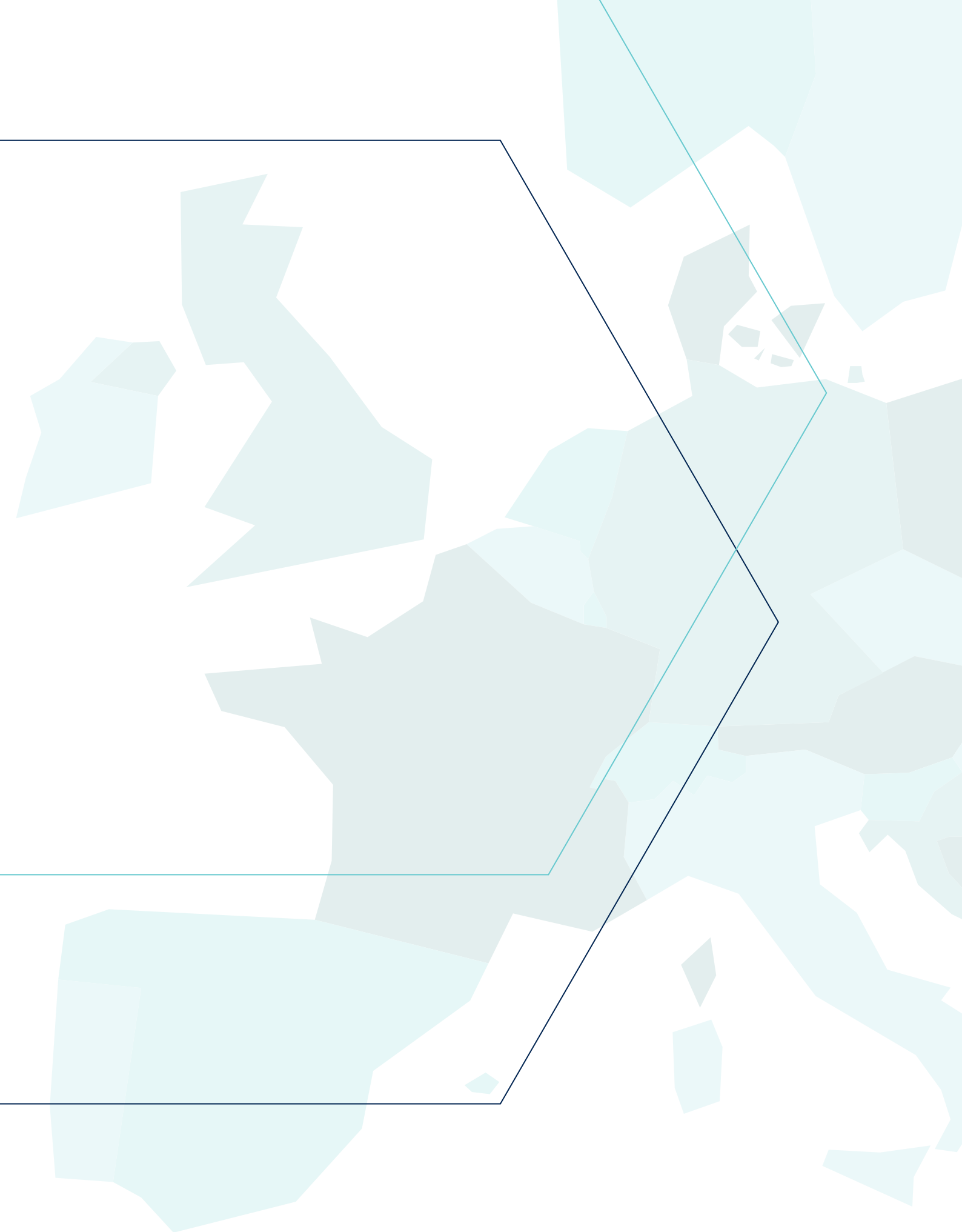
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News consumption and misperceptions about the COVID-19 Crisis:

What can we learn to strenghten resilience in the EU?

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Tackling misinformation in the EU

Misinformation is seen as one of the major challenges faced by global democracies, due to its potential effects on political attitudes and voting behavior.[1] This article explores what can be done to prevent misinformation effects in the European Union by studying how people informed themselves about the COVID-19, and which were the most common misperceptions, in two countries: Spain and the UK. The past few years, both countries have been experiencing political crises interfered with several kinds of misinformation.[2] Now, the COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled the weaknesses of the more polarized liberal democracies. But this crisis also offers an unprecedented opportunity to learn how to build resilience to misinformation, to protect the EU and the other global democracies.

Europe has long been a referent of democracy and freedom, and its responsibility is to tackle misinformation without resorting to censorship strategies that violate democratic rights. While the discussion about regulation of news media, digital platforms, and political advertising is ongoing, there is a broad agreement about the need to generate democratic resilience by promoting civic education, and media and digital literacy to

[1] See Bayer, J., Bitiukova, N., Bard, P., Szakács, J., Alemanno, A., & Uszkiewicz, E. (2019). Disinformation and Propaganda – Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law in the EU and its Member States.

[2] See EUvsDisinfo (2019). Information manipulation in elections and referenda: Pro-Kremlin disinformation in figures. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from https://euvsdisinfo.eu/information-manipexamples-of-pro-kremlin-disinformation-in-figures/

protect citizens from misinformation exposure.[3] Since 2016, the European Commission has undertaken several initiatives to foster media and digital literacy.[4] However, understanding the drivers of misinformation is still necessary to design appropriate and effective educational programs for each of the Member States.

Democratic resilience to misinformation in Spain and the UK

The Catalan independence process and Brexit have polarized public opinion and fostered several forms of populism, nationalism and extremism, in Spain and the UK. The more polarized countries and their media systems are, the more the citizens engage in selective media exposure, which means that they are more likely to consume only pro-attitudinal content.[5] Also, populist attitudes lead to the consumption of partisan news sites and the use of social media platforms for accessing and sharing pro-attitudinal content.[6] The rise of populism is accompanied by a rise of distrust in democratic institutions and established media.[7] These trends intensify the diffusion and consumption of misinformation, which is driven by psychological mechanisms leading people to believe information that confirms their worldviews.[8] These mechanisms, together with partisan media coverage, generate misperceptions: beliefs that are false or contradict the best available evidence.

Spain and the UK have two different media systems that determine partisanship in news consumption, distrust in legacy news media outlets, and the subsequent misperceptions, to varying degrees. Traditionally, literature has stated that the polarized pluralist system, present in some Southern European countries, is marked by higher levels of ideological alignment between news outlets and political tendencies, and by higher audience polarization.[9] Another difference between the polarized pluralist system in Spain and the liberal in the UK has to do with Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs). While the UK has BBC, a strong PSB that is widely used, trusted, and well-funded, the one in Spain (RTVE) have a low audience reach and trust because it is characterized by significant government intervention. Exposure to counter-attitudinal news and more pluralist views is supposed to be more likely in a media system with a strong PSB, because the quantity and quality of the news are higher and more balanced, presenting diverging perspectives.[10]

Some authors point out that Southern European countries may be less resilient to misinformation mainly due to the aforementioned characteristics of their media systems, and to the higher levels of populism, distrust, and social media use.[11] However, the same authors and other studies suggest that misinformation could become a greater threat to other European countries and global democracies, where there are also polarized debates and high levels of news audience polarization such as the UK.[12] This article analyses the extent to which online news users from Spain and the UK were resilient to misinformation about COVID-19 by studying how news media consumption trends affected misperceptions during the first two months of the crisis. The analysis is based on a novel dataset that contains web-tracking data and a two-wave survey, combining observed patterns of news consumption on mobile and desktop devices, and self-reported data of the same individuals. The sample consists of more than 700 users in Spain and 600 in the UK, covering the period of lockdown in each country, from mid-March to mid-May 2020. The data was collected and provided by two commercial market research companies: Netquest (Spain) and YouGov (UK).

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[3] See European Commission (2018). A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation.

[4] See European Commission (2018). Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach. Retrieved September 15, 2020, from https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/communication-tackling-online-disinformation-european-approach

[5] See Stroud, N. J. (2010). Polarization and Partisan Selective Exposure. 60, 556–576.

[6] See Stier, S., Kirkizh, N., Froio, C., & Schroeder, R. (2020). Populist Attitudes and Selective Exposure to Online News: A Cross-Country Analysis Combining Web Tracking and Surveys. The International Journal of Press/Politics, 25(3), 426–446; and Hameleers, M., Bos, L., & de Vreese, C. H. (2017). The Appeal of Media Populism: The Media Preferences of Citizens with Populist Attitudes. Mass Communication and Society, 20(4), 481–504.

[7] See Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2019). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019.

[8] See Shane, T. (2020). The psychology of misinformation: Why we're vulnerable. Retrieved from https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/the-psychology-of-misinformation-why-were-vulnerable/

[9] See Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2017). Ten Years After Comparing Media Systems: What Have We Learned? Political Communication, 34(2), 155–171.

[10] See Castro-Herrero, L., Nir, L., & Skovsgaard, M. (2018). Bridging Gaps in Cross-Cutting Media Exposure: The Role of Public Service Broadcasting. Political Communication, 35(4), 542–565.

[11] See Humprecht, E., Esser, F., & Van Aelst, P. (2020). Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-National Comparative Research. International Journal of Press/Politics.

[12] See Fletcher, R., Cornia, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). How Polarized Are Online and Offline News Audiences? A Comparative Analysis of Twelve Countries. International Journal of Press/Politics, 25(2), 169–195. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219892768

News consumption patterns during the lockdown

During the first months of the crisis, news consumption increased in Spain and the UK, and users accessed online news mainly through mobile devices, going directly to a news site or app.[13] The tracking of online news consumption patterns in Spain and the UK reveals that users mainly relied on established news media outlets to inform themselves during the two first months of the COVID-19 crisis (Figures 1 and 2). Digital editions of newspapers and broadcasters received most visits. In Spain, digital-born outlets were also among the most important news brands (El Confidencial, Eldiario.es, OkDiario). In the UK, BBC had the greatest leadership and was far more visited than RTVE in Spain and CCMA in Catalonia.

Both online news media markets in the UK and Spain were perceived by our sample as highly polarized (Figures 1 and 2). The most visited online sites in Spain and the UK had at least some level of right-left perceived skew. Even though, most of them were closer to the center than the majority of digital native outlets, which were perceived as more skewed and received fewer visits. In the UK, among the most visited legacy outlets there were brands perceived as even more biased than in Spain. Online sites of PSBs in both countries were also perceived as slightly skewed to the respective government's political leaning: RTVE and TV3 to the left, and the BBC to the right. Especially remarkable is the BBC case because its audience is mostly left-leaning.[14] This perceived lack of political independence of most news outlets is associated with distrust that decreased during recent years in both countries and was already low when the COVID-19 crisis started.[15] At the end of the lockdown in May, trust in almost all information sources decreased again, and political institutions and news media outlets were the less trusted.[16] In the UK, BBC was an exception, because more than half of users trusted it, but jointly with the UK Government lost

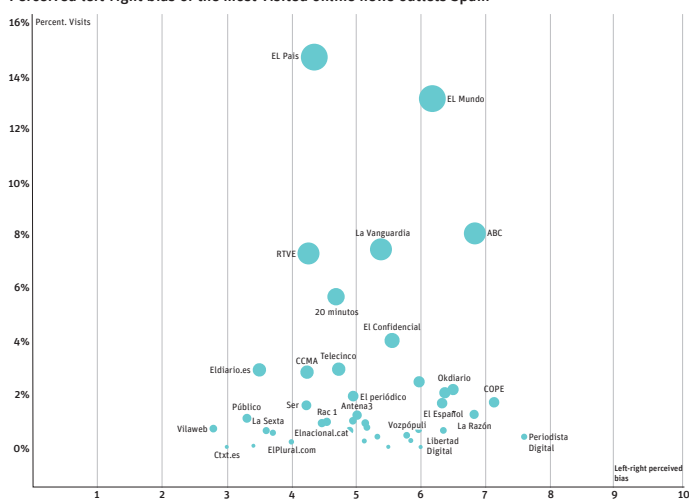**Perceived left-right bias of the most visited online news outlets Spain**

Figure 1:
Left- right bias of the online news media outlets accessed from mid-March to mid-May 2020 in Spain. Source: Own analysis.

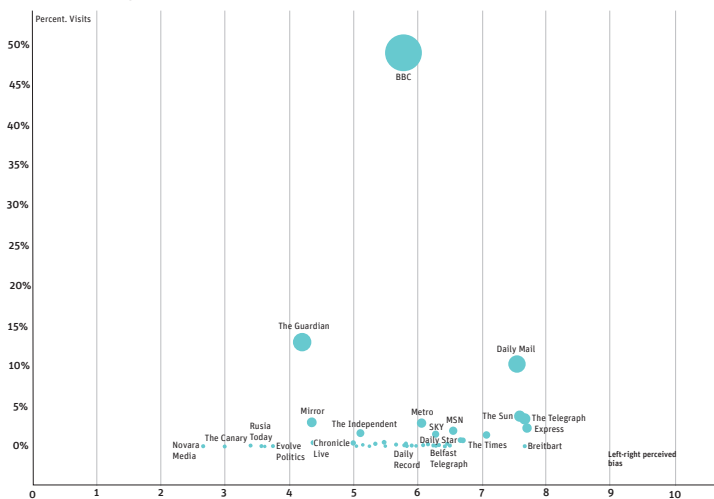**Perceived left-right bias of the most visited online news outlets in the UK**

Figure 2:
Left-right bias of the online news media outlets accessed from mid-March to mid-May 2020 in the UK. Source: Own analysis.

[13] See further in Victoria-Mas, M. (2020a). News consumption patterns, misinformation perceptions and trust during the COVID-19 crisis in Spain. Retrieved from https://www.charlemagneprizeacademy.com/en/publications/factsheet-news-consumption-patterns-and-misinformation-perceptions-during-the-covid-19-crisis-in-spain; and Victoria-Mas, M. (2020b). News consumption patterns, misinformation perceptions and trust during the covid-19 crisis in the UK. Retrieved from https://www.charlemagneprizeacademy.com/en/publications/factsheet-news-consumption-patterns-and-misinformation-perceptions-during-the-covid-19-crisis-in-the-uk

[14] See Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Levy, D. a. L., & Nielsen, R. (2017). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 1–108.

[15] See Newman, N., Richard Fletcher, W., Schulz, A., Andı, S., & Kleis Nielsen, R. (2020). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020.

[16] See further in Victoria-Mas, M. (2020a). News consumption patterns, misinformation perceptions and trust during the COVID-19 crisis in Spain. Retrieved from https://www.charlemagneprizeacademy.com/en/publications/factsheet-news-consumption-patterns-and-misinformation-perceptions-during-the-covid-19-crisis-in-spain; and Victoria-Mas, M. (2020b). News consumption patterns, misinformation perceptions and trust during the covid-19 crisis in the UK. Retrieved from https://www.charlemagneprizeacademy.com/en/publications/factsheet-news-consumption-patterns-and-misinformation-perceptions-during-the-covid-19-crisis-in-the-uk

Side doors to online news outlets in Spain and the UK

■ Spain ■ UK

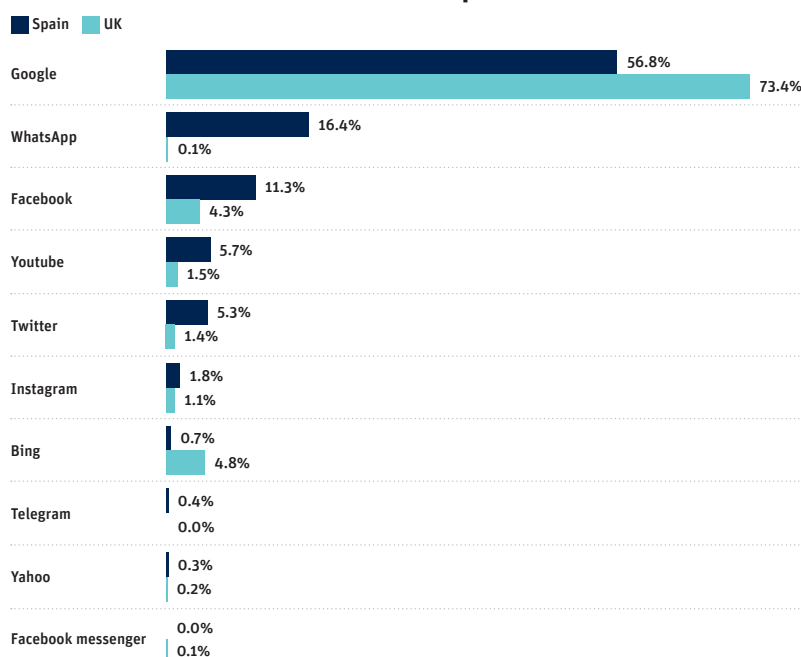|	Spain	UK
Google	56.8%	73.4%
WhatsApp	16.4%	0.1%
Facebook	11.3%	4.3%
Youtube	5.7%	1.5%
Twitter	5.3%	1.4%
Instagram	1.8%	1.1%
Bing	0.7%	4.8%
Telegram	0.4%	0.0%
Yahoo	0.3%	0.2%
Facebook messenger	0.0%	0.1%

Figure 3:
Side-doors to online news in Spain and the UK during the two first months of the COVID-19 crisis. Source: Own analysis.

credibility for more people than other sources.[17] Most users in both countries blamed governments and politicians for spreading disinformation, but average levels of trust in governments and news organizations are almost identical, perhaps reflecting the way that many media organizations focused on amplifying government messages. [18]

Distrust in democratic and media institutions is concerning when it leads to access information mainly through alternative online platforms and news sites, where most bottom-up and partisan misinformation is shared.[19] During the two first months of the crisis, social media platforms were the second main access door to the news.[20] However, while in Spain they were almost as important as news media sites or apps, in the UK they were a secondary option. Digital tracking of news consumption shows the great relevance of social media and, also notably, of messaging apps such as WhatsApp, as side doors to the news in Spain in contrast with the UK (Figure 3).

Misperceptions about the new coronavirus
The surveyed users were asked how certain they were about the truthfulness of some claims and conspiracy theories spread

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[17] See further in Victoria-Mas, M. (2020b). News consumption patterns, misinformation perceptions and trust during the covid-19 crisis in the UK. Retrieved from https://www.charlemagneprizeacademy.com/en/publications/factsheet-news-consumption-patterns-and-misinformation-perceptions-during-the-covid-19-crisis-in-the-uk

[18] See Newman, N., Richard Fletcher, W., Schulz, A., Andı, S., & Kleis Nielsen, R. (2020). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020.

[19] See Brennen, A. J. S., Simon, F. M., Howard, P. N., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation. Retrieved April 15, 2020, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation

[20] See further in Victoria-Mas, M. (2020a). News consumption patterns, misinformation perceptions and trust during the COVID-19 crisis in Spain. Retrieved from https://www.charlemagneprizeacademy.com/en/publications/factsheet-news-consumption-patterns-and-misinformation-perceptions-during-the-covid-19-crisis-in-spain; and Victoria-Mas, M. (2020b). News consumption patterns, misinformation perceptions and trust during the covid-19 crisis in the UK. Retrieved from https://www.charlemagneprizeacademy.com/en/publications/factsheet-news-consumption-patterns-and-misinformation-perceptions-during-the-covid-19-crisis-in-the-uk

in each country, or internationally, and debunked by several fact-checking services and news media outlets.[21] Most of them were not credible. Users in both countries demonstrated to be aware of the best evidence on the origin of the new coronavirus and its remedies after the first two months of the lockdown. However, some false claims gained credibility for remarkable percentages of users (Tables 1 and 2). Political propaganda was the kind of misinformation that gathered credibility for higher percentages of people in both countries. This kind of misinformation is composed of false claims spread by political or unknown sources, but with some apparent partisan intention.[22]

In the UK, the left-wing and the apparently anti-Brexit false claims were considered the most credible, although a claim from the conservative government also earned some credibility. The claim believed by a great majority (60.6%) was the one made by Keir Starmer (leader of the Labour Party), about the rise of deaths in care homes.[23] Another false claim against the UK Government widely shared on Facebook and Twitter was the most credible: 30.5% believed and 33.1% were not sure about the fact that Boris Johnson refused 50,000 ventilators offered by the EU.[24] Also remarkable is the false statement made by the UK Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, who stated that the

Most common misperceptions in the UK

Type of Misinformation	Claim	Source	Platform	Partisanship	Credibility in the UK
Propaganda	Death in care homes are rising	Politician	News outlets	Left-wing	**60.6%**
Misleading claim	Ibuprofen can agravate the infection	Politician	Facebook and Twitter	None	**39.9%**
Propaganda	Johnson refuses ventilatos from the EU	Unknown	Whats App and Twitter	Unknown	**30.5%**
Propaganda	Governmen hits its pledges about number of tests	Politician	News outlets	Right-wing	**22.8%**

Table 1:
Most common misperceptions about the Covid-19 in the UK during the two first months of the Covid-19 crisis. Source: Own analysis/ Poynter/ IFCN/ Chequeado.

Most common misperceptions in Spain

Type of Misinformation	Claim	Source	Platform	Partisanship	Credibility in Spain
Propaganda	Spain is the country with most deaths	Politicians	Social media and news outlets	Right-wing	**33.5%**
Propaganda	WhatsApp censors messages	Unknown	WhatsApp	Unknown	**27.0%**
Conspiracy theory	Coronavirus is a biowepon	Unknown	Facebook and WhatsApp	Unknown	**23.3%**
Misleading claim	Ibuprofen can agravate the infection	Politician	Facebook and Twitter	None	**22.9%**

Table 2:
Most common misperceptions about the Covid-19 in Spain during the two first months of the Covid-19 crisis. Source: Own analysis/ Poynter/ IFCN/ Chequeado.

[21] See further in Victoria-Mas, M. (2020a). News consumption patterns, misinformation perceptions and trust during the COVID-19 crisis in Spain. Retrieved from https://www.charlemagneprizeacademy.com/en/publications/factsheet-news-consumption-patterns-and-misinformation-perceptions-during-the-covid-19-crisis-in-spain; and Victoria-Mas, M. (2020b). News consumption patterns, misinformation perceptions and trust during the covid-19 crisis in the UK. Retrieved from https://www.charlemagneprizeacademy.com/en/publications/factsheet-news-consumption-patterns-and-misinformation-perceptions-during-the-covid-19-crisis-in-the-uk

[22] See Kleis Nielsen, R., & Graves, L. (2017). "News you don't believe": Audience perspectives on fake news. (Accessed June 2020) https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/news-you-dont-believe-audience-perspectives-fake-news

[23] See Full Fact (2020) "Covid-19 deaths in care homes have started to fall" (Accessed May 2020) https://fullfact.org/health/care-homes-starmer-johnson/

[24] See Full Fact (2020) "No, the UK didn't turn down 50,000 ventilators offered by the EU" (Accessed May 2020) https://fullfact.org/online/50-thousand-ventilators/

Government was achieving its target of COVID-19 tests: 22.8% believed that was true and 15.4% were not sure. [25]

In Spain, right-wing and apparently populist propaganda was considered the most credible: 33.5% believed that Spain was the country with the most deaths by the number of inhabitants in the world, a misleading claim spread by right-wing Spanish politicians[26]; 27% believed that WhatsApp was censoring critical messages against the Spanish Government.[27] This late malicious hoax was spread via social platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp by unknown sources.[28] But its implicit sense of distrust in political institutions and the establishment, leads to believe that populist movements may have had a key role in its creation or distribution.

Some other misleading claims and conspiracy theories spread internationally, mainly through social media platforms, were credible for remarkable percentages of the sample. The Ibuprofen's potential harmful effect on the infection spread by the French Health Minister gathered credibility for considerable percentages of people in both countries (22.9% in Spain and 39.9% in the UK). This viral misinformation, spread mostly on Twitter and Facebook, had a massive impact mainly because it was propagated by a credible source (the French Health Minister), and thereby also replicated by news media outlets.[29] Also, the intentional creation of the virus as a bioweapon gained credibility for a significant percentage of users in Spain (23.3% were certain or very certain), in contrast with the UK (9.1%). This theory was fed by multiple viral claims distributed mainly through Facebook and WhatsApp. [30]

Generating democratic resilience to misinformation by empowering citizens

During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain and the UK, misinformation did not have an overall penetration. However, propaganda and some other kind of misinformation caused misperceptions in notable numbers of users from both countries. News consumption levels increased and users mainly relied on established news media brands to inform themselves about the pandemic, but misleading statements from politicians were also amplified by these news media outlets. Additionally, social media platforms were the second main access door to news and the main channel through which most credible partisan malicious hoaxes were spread. Especially in Spain, they were almost as important as the news media sites, most people shared and discussed news through WhatsApp, and the conspiracy theory about the intentional creation of the virus gathered some credibility.

This article explored some of the drivers of misinformation in order to propose measures to prevent misinformation effects and strengthen resilience in the EU. The analysis shows that, although most users were well-informed, some of them were more vulnerable to misinformation. As previous research has shown, usually the less educated were the ones that spent less time in news consumption during the first months of the pandemic.[31] Additionally, if users hold partisan or populist attitudes, they are more likely to believe information that confirms their own worldviews, regardless of the platform or news outlet from which they access news.

This analysis indicates that the measures undertaken by the European Commission to promote media and digital education, aiming to increase democratic resilience, need to remain a priority. But specifically, the supported initiatives should focus on promoting not only an instrumental digital competence among users, so they know how to fact-check contents, but more importantly, critical thinking skills to know when they need to do it. If they are aware of the different political ideologies and their persuasion strategies, in each of the Member States, but also of their own cognitive biases, they will be less vulnerable to partisan and populist misleading messages even from credible and official sources. In that way, media literacy should include civic education contents to foster a well-informed citizenry, balanced in news consumption, and able to build their opinion far from the most polarized extremes in their countries.

[25] See Full Fact (2020) "Government misses one of its Covid-19 test targets" (Accessed May 2020) https://fullfact.org/health/coronavirus-test-targets/

[26] See Newtral (2020) "Pablo Casado: «[España tiene] la peor cifra de muertos por habitante del mundo»" (Accessed June 2020) https://www.newtral.es/pablo-casado-muertos-habitante-coronavirus/20200613/

[27] Maldita.es (2020) "No hay nadie controlando, revisando o censurando el contenido de tus mensajes de WhatsApp" (Accessed May 2020) https://maldita.es/malditobulo/2020/04/14/censura-whatsapp-control-whatsapp-gobierno-maldita/

[28] See Chequeado (2020). "Información chequeada sobre el Coronavirus" in: https://chequeado.com/latamcoronavirus/

[29] See Xaudiera, S., & Cardenal, A. S. (2020). "Ibuprofen Narratives in Five European Countries During the COVID-19 Pandemic". Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review (Accesssed June 2020) https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/ibuprofen-narratives-in-five-european-countries-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/

[30] See Poynter (2020) "The CoronaVirusFacts/DatosCoronaVirus Alliance Database" (Accessed September 2020) https://www.poynter.org/ifcn-covid-19-misinformation/

[31] See Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Simon, F. M., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). Information inequality in the UK coronavirus communications crisis. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-07/Fletcher_et_al_Information_Inequality_FINAL.pdf