

**Misinformation on trial:
Media coverage of a murder,
public conversation and fact-checking**

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Abstract

The rise of online misinformation through social networks coincides with their growing use to stay informed and a polarised context that affects journalism and institutions. Beyond fake news, misinformation appears as a response to reality. Even the most dramatic events are subject to an online jury based on interpretative polarisation. This research analyses the case of the murder of Samuel Luiz, after a group aggression in A Coruña, Spain, during the secrecy of investigations. With a mixed-method approach we analyse media coverage ($N_1=159$), public conversation on Twitter ($N_2=757,389$), information disorders and the role of fact-checkers. The lack of information and the publication of some details fuelled a public conversation with ideological and political traits. The media coverage generated frames in which users position themselves for ideological and political reasons. The polarised conversation on Twitter was dominated by non-journalistic actors, with an important influence of the political position. The information disorders show that the noise generated by public discussion completes the story with false, misleading and biased content. Fact-checkers intervened, but their diffusion is limited compared to the volume of the debate on social networks.

Keywords

misinformation; journalism; news framing; social media; Twitter; polarisation; fact-checking

Introduction

In the early hours of 3 July 2021, a 24-year-old man died as a consequence of a group aggression in the city of A Coruña (Galicia, Spain). The following day, local media reported the incident as a group beating during a night of partying and alcohol, the second day of nightlife opening after the COVID-19 restrictions. The judge in charge of the case decreed the need for secrecy in the investigations.

The news interest in the death of Samuel Luiz increased rapidly after the statements of one of his friends who accompanied him that night. She said that the aggressors believed that the victim was filming them with his mobile phone and that one shouted "Either you stop filming or I'll kill you, faggot!". The case then became a social movement, denouncing the alleged homophobic aggression – with protests in key Spanish cities, as well as on social media platforms, where the case took on an international dimension, becoming a politicised and polarised online debate and a prominent topic on the agendas of regional and national media. Meanwhile, official sources remained silent on the case and maintained that all hypotheses were open.

In the early days, one of the first people to help Samuel publicly declared that he had seen 12 possible assailants of Latino appearance. A new social debate was triggered in which the homophobic motive of the attack and the racist beating by a gang of foreigners were confronted. Public discourse exchanged information about the alleged aggressors, although their identities were not yet officially known. It was not until 10 July that information about the attackers and the course of the arrests became known. It was then known that they were residents of A Coruña, and that they had no previous criminal record or any links with Samuel Luiz.

At the same time, it was learned from the victim's friends that two irregular migrants from Senegal tried to defend him from the attack. As a sign of gratitude, the Spanish government processed residence permits to regularise their situation in the country.

The secrecy around the investigations was lifted on 2 August, one month after the crime. It was then that details of how the aggression occurred and the forensic report became known. During the embargo period, 41 people testified and five were arrested, accused of the crime. However, the official version did not resolve the motive for the aggression, as the homophobic motivation of the attack could not be proven at that point.

The main objective of this research is to analyse the phenomenon of misinformation during the secrecy of a local event investigation, with a relevant social impact and international projection, in the context of a polarised and politicised debate. We consider relevant to analyse how the media covered the event, how other actors intervened in the debate on social media and what were their consequences on media coverage, information disorders and fact-checking responses. Specific objectives are listed below:

O1. To study the coverage of the event in two digital media – *La Voz de Galicia* (local) and *El País* (national) – by looking at the related publications during the secrecy of investigation to identify the main frames of the news reporting.

O2. To analyse the public conversation on Twitter around the event, identifying the main communities, actors and themes that emerged – the degree of presence and scope of the media, journalists, political actors and other sources.

O3. To identify and characterise information disorders about the event by observing the main topics that generated dissemination of false or misleading content.

O4. To validate the role of the fact-checkers by analysing their interventions in this case.

Theoretical framework

Media coverage and news framing

The representation of reality through journalism and the audience's perception of the public agenda converge in the theory of framing (Entman, 1993). Understanding communication as a dynamic process, the role of the media in the dissemination of news is conditioned by the selection of a frame: "an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic" (de Vreese, 2005, p. 53). In this way, news media influence people's attitudes and behaviour according to the way they report on an issue, with consequences at the individual and the social level (D'Angelo, 2002). The social construction of reality is conditioned by the selection of elements that predispose the audience to an interpretative frame determined by the presence or absence of keywords, stereotypical images, sources of information, language, quotes and relevant data (de Vreese, 2005).

The frames built in media coverage to emphasise specific aspects of an issue have favoured biased interpretations in relation to migration, race, violence, and homosexuality (Brennen & Brown, 2016; S. Kim et al., 2011; Marinescu & Balica, 2021; Niblock, 2018; Schallhorn & Hempel, 2017). However, the actors involved in frame building are not only media and journalists, but also stakeholders (including political elites, lobbies, and NGOs) and citizens (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019), which are joined by factors both internal (such as editorial policies and news values) and external to journalism (influences from interest groups and social movements). The circulation of news content through social networks amplifies the journalistic news framing beyond news outlets (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019), awakening scientific interest in media coverage on these platforms (Burch et al., 2015; Quinn et al., 2019; Wasike, 2013).

In the case analysed, the information published about the event and those involved could contribute to a social construction of reality with a focus on certain aspects, following the previously mentioned definition and characterisation of news framing. For this reason, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1. News media publications about the event build certain frames from published data on the crime, the victim and the aggressors, as well as images, testimonies and language used in the news.

News and polarisation on social media platforms

The rise of online misinformation through social networks (Allcott et al., 2019) coincides with the growing use of these platforms to stay informed (Newman et al., 2021). The phenomenon of misinformation has caused deep concern in the news media, which sees the platforms as responsible – they do not take responsibility for the content users are exposed to; political polarisation – which creates a climate dominated by ideology and external forces; and the audience itself – it does not critically question what it reads and remains in its ideological silos (Tandoc et al., 2019). The platformisation of news and the growing polarisation of journalistic content favour a polarised public opinion (De Blasio et al., 2022). Partisan news outlets activate the political identity of their audience and 'affective polarisation', which generates distrust among citizens towards those who identify with other parties (Iyengar et al., 2019; Serrano-Puche, 2021).

As a platform, Twitter can favour the dissemination of biased messages due to its short format, the ease of retweeting and trending sensationalist messages – projecting them even outside the social network; the inherent credibility conferred by its informative use by media and journalists; and the possibility of feeding back into disinformation loops that are propelled by users with no special reputation (Chamberlain, 2010). The hate of political opponents fuels the dissemination of messages against the 'other' on this platform, be it fake content or partisan news from traditional and trusted news sources (Osmundsen et al., 2021). Thus, users with a strong political motivation tend to interact on Twitter by disseminating partisan content in information streams dominated by an audience with an opposing ideology (Conover et al., 2021).

In this polarised context, where perception of the media system depends on ideological position (Masip et al., 2020) and partisanship favours the dissemination of biased content (Baptista et al., 2021), even the most dramatic events find themselves facing a sort of online jury (Quinn et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2021) based on 'interpretative polarisation' (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020). As seen in previous studies, a number of actors outside journalism or non-journalistic actors –such as partisan and political-motivated actors, and users with no special reputation– guide and feed the public conversation. Together with these factors, low trust in news, fragmentation of audiences and high social media use favour low resilience to online disinformation, as identified in Southern European countries (Humprecht et al., 2020). In this context of political polarisation tending towards disinformation, we formulate the second hypothesis for this case:

H2. The polarised conversation on Twitter is dominated by non-journalistic actors, with an important influence of the political position.

Misinformation as a tailor-made reconstruction of reality

We assume the definition of Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), understanding misinformation as false information that is shared, but that does not necessarily imply harm. It is not just 'fake news' (Tandoc et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) – it includes decontextualization, bias, inaccuracy and hate speech, among others, making media coverage a potential trigger in particular contexts (Motta et al., 2020), especially when it contributes to the simplification of discourse and a propagandistic effect (Correia et al., 2019). Our society globally manifests a fragile trust in media and journalism, and also in institutions (Ireton & Posetti, 2018); in response, different actors shape reality to their preference. Thus, any event is subject to debate and interpretative polarisation, even constructing the story that fits one's own worldview. Subsequently, the ritual view of communication (Carey, 2008) – reinforced by self-communication technologies – provokes the need to share this interpreted message in order to seek communion in shared beliefs.

Media context includes partisan media with potential to polarise and gain acceptance for inaccurate beliefs about political opponents (Garrett et al., 2019); exposure to these news sites may be related to public misinformation (Weeks et al., 2021). Beyond taking an ideological position, counter-media – a "kind of parasites in the hybrid media environment, living on mainstream media and their outputs" (Toivanen et al., 2021, p. 18) – believe themselves to be in possession of the truth, criticise journalistic media, reframe stories and construct new narratives. In this context, although fraudulent media may not have a large audience, substantial parts of the public are aware of and believe the false stories, through mainstream news outlets (Tsfati et al., 2020) or through the circulation of misinformation among counter-media and partisan media sites (Vargo et al., 2018).

The reasons for elaborating a misinformation message can be diverse, the diffusion can be intentional or unintentional. Salaverría and León (2022) highlight several factors that contribute to the dissemination of falsehoods: the popularisation of messaging apps and social networks, confirmation bias and political motivations; noting that misinformation is tightly linked to political polarisation (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020). The credibility that news editors attribute to official and unofficial sources is also an aspect to be observed (Mayo-Cubero, 2020). The lack of official information and the secrecy of investigations lead to the publication of unconfirmed data on social media (Rass, 2021), rumours and unreliable eye-witness accounts due to "porous secrecy" (Patterson et al., 2017), especially in critical situations, emergencies, crimes and terror attacks. In fact, previous studies relate the lack of information with misinformation filling the gap (Scott Brennen et al., 2020), because incomplete information or the absence of official sources can contribute to deception and speculation (Karlova & Fisher, 2013; Rodríguez, 2016).

Taking into consideration the agents and factors involved in misinformation and the circumstance of secrecy –with the consequent absence of official sources and complete information on the case–, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3. In a context of secrecy of investigations, official information gaps are filled with content that is biased by political and ideological interests.

On the other hand, fact-checking initiatives seek to curb the circulation of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, to educate and contribute to restoring credibility in alliance with technology (Authors; Moreno-Gil et al., 2021). The rise of misinformation implies, at a global level, an effort by journalists around fact-checking; but it also involves information actors such as local journalists exercising a relevant online role to inform and engage with their community (Jerónimo et al., 2020), taking advantage of their knowledge and proximity.

Fact-checking is acknowledged to have a positive effect in driving away false beliefs (Carnahan & Bergan, 2021), although some studies point out that it has a limited effect in correcting misinformation (Walter et al., 2020), especially in situations of political polarisation. Moreover, it needs a certain level of engagement from audiences and social connection with those involved (Kim et al., 2022; Margolin et al., 2018) to be successful. For the case under analysis, we present this hypothesis:

H4. Fact-checkers act in response to information disorders generated from the case, although its diffusion is limited compared to the debate on social networks.

Methods

This research uses a mixed methodological approach to address the objectives formulated. Firstly, news framing analysis (de Vreese, 2005) allows us to identify the emphasis on certain aspects of the media coverage of the case to understand how it influences the social construction of reality. We apply an inductive approach in which frames emerge from the material during the analysis (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Thus, we have discarded starting from a set of predefined frames and proceeded with a three-phase analysis: (a) content analysis; (b) preliminary identification of emphasis; (c) categorization and reconstruction of frames – phases a and b carried out by a researcher and phase c with peer consensus. The sample is composed of the articles published about the event ($N_1=159$) during the secrecy of investigations (3 July – 3 August) by two digital media – *La Voz de Galicia* (local) and *El País* (national); these news media outlets are the most consumed general thematic scope newspapers at local and national level respectively. The sample was selected by reviewing daily news stories from both media outlets, then checking the website search results for the query "Samuel". News content was coded qualitatively through iterative processes, so any errors in the inclusion of articles in the sample on other topics were corrected. To identify the main frames, we analysed: the topic, the protagonists of the news, the sources, the state of the investigation, the attributes of the victim and the aggressors, the attribution of responsibility, the presumption of innocence, the classification of the crime, the images and videos, as well as the emphasis of the news (discarding the articles dedicated to opinion).

Secondly, the analysis of the public conversation on Twitter is based on Social Media Analysis techniques, which apply computational methods to collect and analyse large amounts of data that reveal behavioural patterns (Lazer et al., 2009). This social network provides a sample of those who publicly express an opinion, which adds significant value to the research (Lazer et al., 2014). Data were collected through the Twitter API using Python; queries (Table 1) were selected according to trending topics and news events that provoked debate about the case, covering various periods. The total sample was 757,389 tweets from four queries.

The analysis was based on message redistribution (retweets, RT) to investigate the networks that users form by sharing tweets from other profiles. RT analysis allows us to know the reach obtained by re-posting messages, in such a way that we can observe how communities are formed by affinity – according to the connections between nodes that represent the users and the size of the node visualizing its relevance or reach in the conversation. The source and target users of each message were extracted and the most retweeted messages were analysed to identify the main actors – nodes in each community – and topics – content. Communities were visualised with Gephi based on directed graphs, calculating modularity (Blondel et al., 2008) at 1.0 resolution and applying the Force Atlas 2 layout algorithm (Jacomy et al., 2014); the size of the node reflects the degree of entry (RT), and the colour the community belonging.

Table 1. Twitter data collection.

Query	Dates	Tweets	RT	Nodes	Modularity	Communities
Q1: Samuel	3-5 July	351,172	284,392	145,871	0.680	2875
Q2: #JusticiaParaSamuel	3-10 July	352,737	321,011	163,321	0.602	893
Q3: Riazor Blues	11 July	48,538	45,335	20,218	0.468	70
Q4: senegaleses	13-19 July	4,942	4,233	3,944	0.829	135

Notes:

Q1: "Samuel" is the name of the victim. This search introduced some noise, which was filtered out in the clustering process in the graph. Specifically, communities referring to other people with the same name in other countries were identified, although the conversation on Twitter extended beyond Spain and therefore required manual work to identify the main nodes and their messages.

Q2: #JusticiaParaSamuel was the hashtag initiated by the victim's circle that achieved greater projection as a virtual movement, involving LGTBI organisations and activists, and being trending topic during one week.

Q3: "Riazor Blues" is the name of the local soccer club's fan group that sparked a debate on July 11 over the connection to one of the aggressors. The term was chosen because it is broader than the hashtag, as the group could be mentioned without using the tag or the user name, and thus appeared in the trends of the day.

Q4: "Senegaleses" (senegalese) refers to the nationality of two men who assisted the victim; because anonymity was maintained, news media and users referred to them in this way. For a week they were in the news, between their identification and the granting of a regular status in Spain.

To address information disorders, we conducted a qualitative analysis based on the previous study of public conversation on Twitter. As an exploratory approach, the most retweeted messages in each community of the above-mentioned four datasets were analysed to understand what the predominant messages are and what are the main topics under discussion. We analysed communities' ideological positions and how actors

relate to the case (e.g. politics, friends, journalists, etc.), in order to understand the composition of the debate, its polarisation and the elements of the case that are subject to misinformation. A reverse search was carried out in the datasets, based on key terms of the viral tweets that were published by the leading polarised communities (e.g. related to the homophobic motivation of the crime or the traits of the aggressors). As a result, we identified messages, users and communities related to information disorders. Further details on the selection and size of the sample for this purpose, what aspects were observed and how the classification of information disorders (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017) was applied are provided below.

The role of fact-checkers was addressed by collecting all the publications of Spanish fact-checking organisations registered in the Duke Reporters' Lab database, signatories of the Poynter Institute's IFCN Code of Principles and the fact-checking initiative of the Spanish public service media: AFP Factual, EFE Verifica, El Objetivo, Maldita.es, Neutral, Poletika, VerificaRTVE and Verificat. Topics and sources were analysed in the fact-checks published (3 July – 3 August), as well as the diffusion of the fact-checks on Twitter (based on RT).

Limitations

Among the limitations of this research, it should be noted that this is a case pending trial by jury. Regarding the methods, the introduction of automated data collection and the formulation of queries could affect the findings, although they have been checked in several phases to reduce the risks of error. From the perspective of framing, we analysed the social construction of reality with a focus on certain aspects, so we cannot assume that there is an absolute truth but rather different interpretative frameworks, although these may have consequences in the public debate. Furthermore, the systemic approach of the study may be a weakness of the paper, as it limits the detailed analysis of each dimension and the relationship between them.

Results

Media coverage

The media coverage of this event took place under the condition of secrecy, between 3 July and 2 August 2021. During this period, there was no possibility of access to information about the judicial process or sources (evidence, testimonies, etc.). The media only had access to sources outside the proceedings or statements outside the investigation and their reporting was conditioned by the protection of the victim, the aggressors, and the presumption of innocence.

Despite the limitations during the judicial process, the role of the media is especially relevant due to the impact and social interest aroused by the event from the start, with

the danger of opening a parallel trial. The lack of official (and judicial) information on the investigation and the interest of the media in the case fuelled coverage in which explanations were sought for what happened.

The analysis of the news published during the period of secrecy has allowed us to identify the frames (O1) that we present below, paying attention to the topics covered (Table 2), the approaches and the details emphasised that were published in order to reconstruct the event and its motivations. Following is a description of five narratives of the case and the end of the secrecy of the investigations to test the hypothesis H1 (News media publications about the event build certain frames from published data on the crime, the victim and the aggressors, as well as images, testimonies and language used in the news).

Table 2. Classification of news by main topic.

Topic	<i>La Voz de Galicia</i>	<i>El País</i>	Total
Context (city, youth, socialization)	2	2	4
Incident	6	2	8
Investigation	30	5	35
Mention	8	12	20
Opinion	26	12	38
Politics	8	2	10
Protests and social impact	27	5	32
Senegalese	5	1	6
Victim and family	4	2	6
<i>Total</i>	<i>116</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>159</i>

A group beating after the reopening of nightlife

This was the first version of the event: a 24-year-old man, Samuel Luiz, died after a group beating on the second day of nightlife in A Coruña, after the restrictions imposed by the pandemic had been lifted. These were the facts known during the first two days after the incident. They connected the aggression to partying and alcohol. In summary, the story of the events at this time was: a group of young people went out at night, drank, and, after a misunderstanding, beat another person to death. Images were published of the victim in life and, later, of the place where the aggression took place, and an improvised altar that was set up as a tribute with messages from the family, flowers, and other objects.

"Either you stop filming or I'll kill you, faggot!"

This phrase changed everything in the coverage and social repercussions of the case. A friend of the victim announced to the media and on social networks that Samuel had been attacked following this threat. From the third day after the incident, the focus shifted to the homophobic motive. Investigations progressed and arrests began. Official sources

kept all hypotheses open and did not reveal details, due to the prevalence of the secrecy of the investigation and the lack of evidence to definitively consider homophobia as the reason for the crime. However, a debate on the possible hate crime had begun, which provoked political reactions – statements in the media and on social networks – protests in different cities and virtual movements such as #JusticiaParaSamuel (Justice For Samuel), which included LGTBI organisations and activists, as well as celebrities.

The news reports stated that the perpetrators might be tried for homicide or murder, related to the use of different terms for the violent incident: "fatal beating", "group assault", "brutal beating", "mob", "lynching", "crime" or "murder". From the moment the victim's sexual orientation came to light, media interest in the victim's personal history and environment increased. The media analysed published profiles of the victim highlighting his professional job, his beliefs and hobbies, but also looked into his family history (his origins in Brazil) and, in some cases, going beyond news interest.¹

Political leaders take a stand on possible homophobic hate crime

Political representatives at regional and national level reacted to the possibility that the cause of the crime was homophobia. The media projected the politicisation of the case, reinforced by social denunciation, while the victim's father asked that his son's death not be "used as anyone's flag". In the news items analysed, condemnations of the crime as a hate crime and positions of greater caution and prudence were identified, with cross accusations. The repercussions made it into a politicised case in Spain and in the international media.

Investigating the traits of the aggressors: nationality, affiliations, relationships

As more details of the attack emerged, inquiries were made as to who the protagonists were and why it was a gang attack. Witnesses made public statements about their assistance to the victim and the sighting of the aggressor group ("dark skin, short dark hair"). The media published information saying that they were residents of the city and of Spanish nationality, a clarification that responded to xenophobic attacks and the hypothesis that the perpetrators of the crime belonged to a gang of foreign origin.

During the first appearances of the detainees, it came to light that they claimed to be under the influence of alcohol ("we were drunk") and media outlets published that they had no previous records and did not know the victim. A week after the incident, the media identified the presumed authors, with their names, ages and some additional information (neighbourhood, profession, relationships). During the third week of the case, images

¹ The victim's profile published by El País on 9 July 2021 was entitled "Samuel Luiz, the boy who taught the Bible and played the flute in church" and highlighted that "the young man lynched in A Coruña did not talk to his family about his homosexuality". The main photograph showed the victim in an act of the religion he practised.

were published of the detainees arriving at court, some of them with their faces uncovered.

Two Senegalese with irregular immigration status were the first to help Samuel

The media told the story of the two Senegalese who defended the victim during the group attack, which came to light through the testimony of the friends, who also located one of those involved. The media coverage emphasised their status as irregular migrants ("without papers") and their nationality to highlight their heroism. They also moved the debate on whether they should receive residence permits for their acts of gratitude. The bureaucratic procedures began immediately, and, in a few weeks, the government granted regular status to both of them. The identity of the migrants was protected in the media, except for their first names, although one news item published full names and a video of one of them being identified.

End of the secrecy of investigations

On 2 August 2021, the secrecy of the investigation was lifted, which had been criticised for the limitations it imposed on the public disclosure of information, given the importance of the case. The media published the reconstruction of the event, details of the forensic report and the identification of the detainees and accused. In general, the information already known was summarised and complemented. In addition, an interview with the inspector in charge of the investigation was published, although some issues – such as the possibility of it being a hate crime – remained open.

Due to the strategic selection of media for analysis – *El País* (national) and *La Voz de Galicia* (local) – we can assess the influence on the coverage of the degree of proximity between the media and the event. *El País* reported the incident in an already politicised context and interpreted the case as a hate crime; they gave greater relevance to political reactions and statements; and it is perceived that the coverage was mainly made from Madrid – for example, when comparing the homophobic danger of the cities and when introducing errors in the locations. There was also a clearer focus on the LGTBI framework. On the other hand, in *La Voz de Galicia*, a greater knowledge of the local context was evident; there was not a single frame – or not found in the coverage as a whole – a greater diversity of sources and a more intense coverage during the investigation was thus perceived.

Public conversation on Twitter

The mediatization of the case happened, to a large extent, through social media. We analysed the public conversation about the event at various points in time to identify the main communities, actors and themes that emerged (O2), as well as the relevance of the media and journalists. Thus, we tested the hypothesis H2 (The polarised

conversation on Twitter is dominated by non-journalistic actors, with an important influence of the political position).

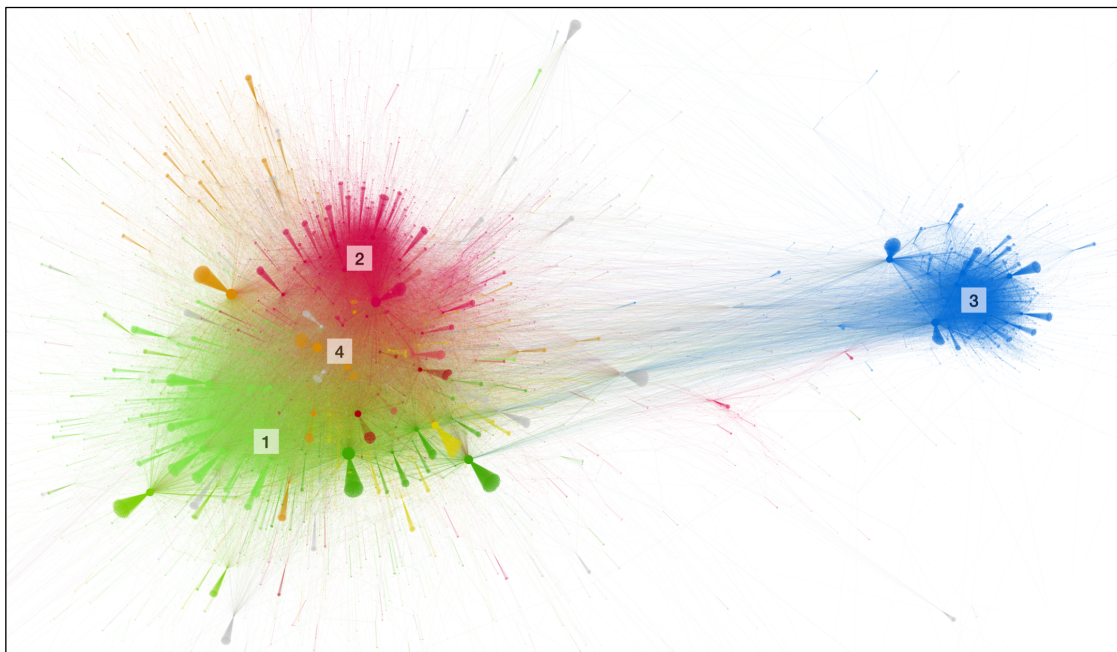
The analysis of retweets mentioning "Samuel" (Q1) in the first days after the crime reveals, in the first instance, the prominence of political actors in the conversation (Table 3). The 100 users with the highest number of retweets accounted for 53.2% of the total number of messages retweeted – a relevant sample for analysing the types of actors involved. Political parties and representatives reach 20.0%; if we add the 18 citizens who took a political or ideological position, we can conclude that more than a third of the main actors in this conversation on Twitter intervene from a defined and public political-ideological position. Journalists and the media have a relevant, albeit secondary, position. The repercussion of impact and relevance of this media case is reflected in the involvement of pro-LGTBI groups and users and public figures from culture and sport.

Table 3. Categorisation of the 100 users with the highest number of retweets related to the case, mentioning "Samuel", between 3 and 5 July 2021 (Q1).

Category	Users
Politicians & political parties	20
Journalists	16
Culture and sports	13
News media	9
Citizens (ideological-political position)	18
Citizens (pro-LGTBI)	11
Citizens (not specific focus)	11
LGTBI organisations	2

The graphical representation of the communities in this conversation gives rise to a clear pattern of polarisation (Fig. 1). On the one hand, the biggest block is made up of messages denouncing homophobia, left-wing politics and the media coverage; on the other hand, right-wing politics. The most prominent community (Fig. 1: 1) is made up of LGTBI organisations and citizens who demonstrated along the same lines of condemning a hate crime based on the victim's sexual orientation. Left-wing politics (Fig. 1: 2) is made up of various communities led by political parties: Unidas Podemos, PSOE, Más País and other actors; their general position was to condemn the crime as a hate crime. Right-wing and centre-right politics make up a single community (Fig. 1: 3) in which parties, representatives and people related to VOX and Ciudadanos stand out; among the most prominent messages are cross accusations with other political parties, criticism of the attribution of the homophobic motive and the silence about the identity of the aggressors. The media and journalists run through the main block, with different positions represented in a central and dispersed position in the graph (Fig. 1: 4). The local community – media, journalists and institutions – appears in a similar position (in yellow). The representativeness of each community is shown in Table 4.

Figure 1. Graph based on retweets about Samuel from 3 to 5 July (Q1).



1: Citizens (pro-LGTBI) and LGTBI organisations; 2: Politics (left-wing); 3: Politics (right-wing and centre-right); 4: News media, journalists and local.

Table 4. Communities related to the case and with more than 2% of the nodes (Q1).

Community	%
Citizens (pro-LGTBI)	18.7
Community A	16.0
Community B	2.7
Politics: left-wing	17.6
Unidas Podemos	10.8
PSOE	2.5
Más País	2.2
Others	2.1
Politics: right-wing & centre-right	11.7
News media & journalists	8.9
Community A	4.9
Community B (police charge after protests)	4.0
LGTBI organisations	7.8
Local	4.2

Note: Communities A and B designate groups identified when applying the algorithm in Gephi and are named as such because they do not have a characteristic description.

The 100 most retweeted messages account for 44.3% of the total and their analysis allows us to identify the priority themes of this conversation. As shown in Table 5, more than a third of the tweets denounce homophobia as the cause of the crime – they highlight the sexual orientation of the victim and interpret that there is a homophobic motive behind his death. This debate, which has concentrated most of the public conversation, is reflected in the high level of politicisation shown in most of the messages analysed: for political interest or to denounce the political use of the case. The remaining group of messages refers to the event with a neutral tone, to the victim's environment

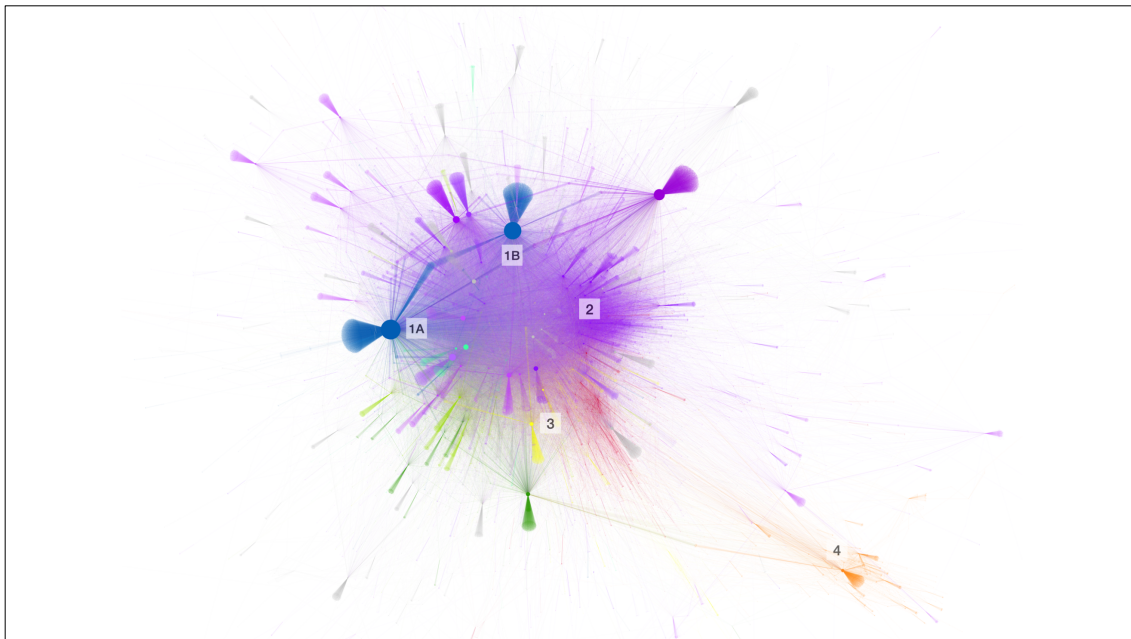
and to the protests; there is also criticism of the media coverage for its silence on other cases of violence, for the concealment of the aggressors' identities, or for the limited visibility of the victim's photograph. Of the 100 most retweeted messages, only eight were published by news media.

Table 5. Categorisation of the 100 most retweeted posts related to the case, mentioning "Samuel", between 3 and 5 July 2021 (Q1).

Category	Tweets	RT	% of total
Politization	37	44,501	15.7
Hate crime (homophobic)	34	41,466	14.6
Event and family (neutral)	14	16,603	5.8
Protests	10	15,954	5.6
Silencing	5	7,399	2.6

To complete the analysis of the public conversation during the secret part of the investigation, we paid attention to other trending topics and specific themes during this period. The hashtag #JusticiaParaSamuel (Q2) was initiated by the victim's circle, with two friends explaining their point of view on the alleged hate crime in the two tweets with the greatest impact (between them they account for 11.5% of the total RT). As this was a supportive initiative, there was no notable polarisation; the two friends and the LGTBI movement were the most prominent, followed by the field of culture and sport. The main core (Fig. 2) is made up of different mixed communities, including the viralisation of a supportive image created by a user. Away from this main core, right-wing political actors are identified who, for example, question the non-publication of the aggressors' identities to learn more about the causes and deny homophobic motivation.

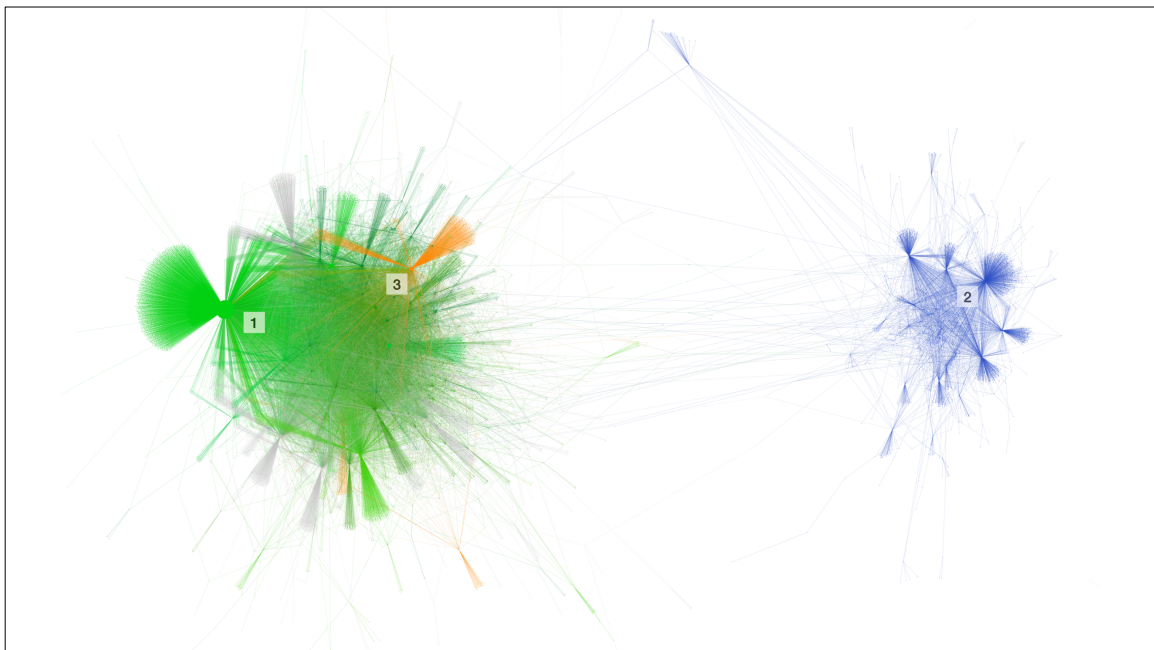
Figure 2. Graph from retweets on #JusticiaParaSamuel from 3 to 10 July (Q2).



1A & 1B: Friends; 2: LGTBI support (different types of actors); 3: Local; 4: Politics (right-wing and centre-right).

The link between one of the detainees and the Riazor Blues fan group of the local football club sparked a debate on 11 July (Q3), following the publication of the information in a national media outlet. The main tweet was launched by a controversial ultra-right-wing tweeter who questioned the known version of events on that date and exposed misleading and biased data, with a xenophobic and politicised tone. The main community (Fig. 3) represents 46.5% of the total RTs mentioning "Riazor Blues", whose discourse was supported by right-wing political actors. On the opposite side, we identified the response of the mentioned fan group, some left-wing political actors, and local users. In view of the clear polarisation, in this case the disinformation discourse had a notable repercussion and coincided with one of the periods of greatest politicisation, one day after the names of the alleged aggressors arrested were known.

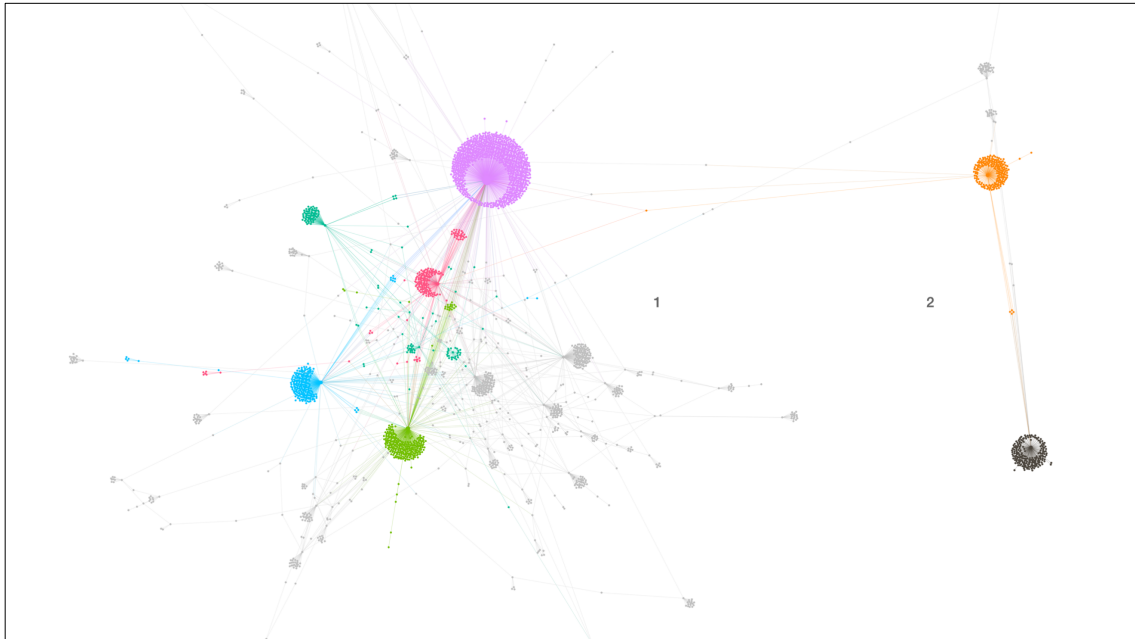
Figure 3. Graph from retweets mentioning "Riazor Blues" on July 11 (Q3).



1: Politics (far-right); 2: Riazor Blues, politics (left-wing) and local actors; 3: Politics (centre-right).

Finally, on 12 July, the possibility of the government regularising the situation of the immigrants who tried to save the victim was raised. Between 13 and 19 July, the conversation on Twitter (Q4) showed, once again, a marked polarisation. The main communities (Fig. 4) were made up of the media that reported the news and users who were in favour of this exceptional measure; however, the 4th and 5th communities in terms of RT volume criticised the initiative, considering that the nationality of migrants who commit crimes should be withdrawn, or questioning whether there is work for them.

Figure 4. Graph from retweets mentioning "senegaleses" from 13 to 19 July (Q4).



1: Supporting the regularization of Senegalese migrants; 2: Against the initiative.

Information disorders and fact-checking

In response to objective O3, we identified and characterised misinformation content about the case and assessed the role of fact-checkers. We first addressed the emergence of misinformation and the typology of information disorders in order to test the hypothesis H3 (In a context of secrecy of investigations, official information gaps are filled with content that is biased by political and ideological interests).

From the data collected on Twitter, we took a sample of the most retweeted messages (Table 6) to carry out an exploratory and qualitative analysis, observing the content of the message, the information it provides, the source that supports it, the community to which each actor belongs and its relationship with the facts. In this way, we identified those messages that construct a narrative that contradicts or completes the officially known facts and, especially, if they introduce a marked bias, polarised ideological positioning or hate speech. From the most disseminated messages from polarised communities (see Figures 1-4) we identified key terms (e.g. related to the homophobic motivation of the crime or the traits of the aggressors) and searched other posts in the Twitter datasets for further details on the types of information disorders, following the Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) typology. Below, we explain how the events occurred, how they relate to the frames, to the media and to the interests of the user communities. Subsequently, the different levels of information disorders identified are classified and described.

Table 6. Samples for the qualitative analysis to identify information disorders.

Query	RT	Sample	% of total RT
Q1: Samuel	284,392	100 most retweeted messages	44.3
Q2: #JusticiaParaSamuel	321,011	100 most retweeted messages	56.1
Q3: Riazor Blues	45,335	25 most retweeted messages	71.2

Q4: senegaleses	4,233	10 most retweeted messages	67.3
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In the beginning, the facts were only partially reported by the media due to inaccurate coverage of the events – for example, local media were criticised for calling the event a "crime" or "death" instead of a "murder". The secrecy of the investigations and the repercussions of the case led to constant polarised debates based on unconfirmed facts. To the analysis of the most disseminated messages on Twitter, we added the reverse search for misinformation content from the media and counter-media, based on key terms of the viral tweets that were published by the leading polarised communities and the fact-checks.

Regarding the frames identified in the news coverage (see section 'Media coverage'), misinformation was related to two areas: (a) the homophobic motivation of the crime; and (b) the traits of the aggressors. On the one hand, the lack of official information on the origin of the violent act and the public denunciation of the victim's circle as a hate crime gave rise to politically and ideologically charged debates. In many cases, the view was reduced to the understanding that condemnation of homophobia implies support for the left; while repeating the official version, omitting this motive as a cause or questioning it, would be linked to the right.

The characterisation of the aggressors was at the centre of the debate, as it was considered evidence to link the crime to certain traits and thus simplify the case. In the first few days, a witness stated in various media outlets that he came across a group of 12 young men who were "mulattos of South American origin"; this information was supported by media and profiles that described the assailants as a gang, foreigners or Latinos, and described the incident as a racist murder. From 10 July onwards, when the names of those arrested became known, additional information began to be published, especially in alternative media² and ultra-right-wing profiles, which pointed out that a woman was involved in instigating the fight ("violent feminist") as well as a member of a local ultra-left-wing fan group. These characterisations attempt to change the interpretative framework of the facts, shifting the focus from the possibility of a homophobic crime to an attack by a gang of immigrants with left-wing ties.

These simplifications provoked reactions against the role of the media, in both senses: "they hide homophobia and are accomplices in the whitewashing of the ultra-right" or "they impose the official version". The fact that the secrecy of investigations was decreed made it difficult to make official information available and generated mistrust towards some media, which had to rectify on the fly. Media and journalists mentioned documents from the investigation that could not be made accessible, even supporting information that was not confirmed by official sources. Images of the alleged attackers began to circulate in forums and social networks and were published by some media – usually

² Alternative news media position themselves as "counter-hegemonic correctives to mainstream news media or are described as such by their audience or third parties" (Holt et al., 2019, p. 866). They are predominantly digital, critical of mainstream coverage and include right-wing initiatives that have heavily skewed the online alternative media scene (Nygaard, 2021).

pixelated; in some cases they obtained photographs from the private sphere through social networks.

During the analysis, we identified misinformation content originating in alternative media and television talk shows, but the greatest impact was caused by users with strong ideological or political positions and a significant loudspeaker effect. We have detected that the disinformation that users put into circulation – or re-distribute – is rarely linked to an original media source, but rather they publish the same idea or even copy the message, omitting the reference to the source, which they consider irrelevant. In other words, a particular discourse that serves an ideological cause takes priority over the reliability of the information.

Typology of information disorders

In this section we present an analysis of the information disorders that were identified following Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) typology, from which we identify false context, as well as misleading, false and manipulated content.

The politicisation of the case facilitates the generation of different interpretative frameworks in which misleading and biased contents circulate. Regarding the causes, we have found counter-media which published that a friend of the alleged attackers claimed that it was not a homophobic attack – a questionable source as she was not a witness – or assessments such as "in the end, the official version is imposed to the liking of feminists and gay organisations: the official reality". However, the identity and traits of the aggressors was the most frequently used topic to elaborate hypotheses about the event. Numerous alternative media highlighted data from unofficial sources to support their discourse and, consequently, have had repercussions in communities that identify with their political-ideological position. The supposed origin of the detainees ("Latinos", "South Americans", "mulattos", "foreigners") first appeared in a witness statement. This information was the subject of news reports and messages aimed at linking violence with immigration and criminal gangs; it was denied by sources in the investigation, who expressly stated that those involved were of Spanish nationality and residents of the city. Since the publication of the identity of the detainees, enquiries have reinforced this discourse by providing more unproven features. The link with the Riazor Blues – a weak, spurious connection – and the description of one of those involved as a "rowdy feminist" were used to show that the arrest "dismantled the campaign against the right". Some alternative media went so far as to report: "They intend to turn a racist murder into a homophobic crime: 13 mulattos beat a 24-year-old man to death", using biased data and unofficial sources for tendentious purposes.

The case has also been the subject of false information. Right-wing counter-media published reports saying that the police disregarded the homophobic crime – when official sources did not dismiss any hypothesis – or that the victim's father "knew well" that the death was not because of his sexual orientation – when he asked for his death not to be used as a flag. Even a self-described "independent" (far-right) media outlet

published false content on the same dates about the murder of a gay man by an unaccompanied foreign minor. As an example of false context, a photograph of Samuel's alleged assailant was circulated on social media, when in fact it showed a man accused of a crime in Venezuela in August 2020.

The manipulation became visible in a counter-media that published, according to the testimony of the victim's companion, that "it has nothing to do with a homophobic crime". This reference does not coincide with the statements of that person and with the publications of other friends who spoke out clearly.

One aspect to consider in the analysis of misinformation is the feedback with social networks. We have identified that the viral messages that transmit this false or biased information do not usually refer to sources and media; on the other hand, there were media outlets that gave voice to these users by including their tweets in the published pieces.

Fact-checkers

To validate the role of the fact-checkers (O4), we analysed the activity of the four Spanish organisations that published content related to Samuel's crime. In total, there were six fact-checks published by Spanish fact-checking platforms, which responded to the main points of misinformation (Table 7), along with two contextual publications³ and eleven publications in networks. In this phase, we tested the hypothesis H4 (Fact-checkers act in response to information disorders generated from the case, but its diffusion is limited compared to the debate on social networks).

Table 7. Fact-checks on the case.

Date (day)	Organisation	Link	Topics	Techniques
5 July (3)	VerificaRTVE	https://bit.ly/3JHZ1Pt	Hate crime	Sources verification, links to news media and Twitter
6 July (4)	Maldita.es	https://bit.ly/3BnnLcz	Hoax (picture)	Reverse search, links to news media and Police
7 July (5)	Newtral	https://bit.ly/34G5BqH	Hoax (picture)	Reverse search, links to news media and Police
7 July (5)	AFP Factual	https://bit.ly/3JksNtg	Hoax (picture)	Reverse search, links to news media, original publication and Police
13 July (11)	Newtral	https://bit.ly/3GNnZe8	Traits of aggressors	Sources verification, links to news media and Police
14 July (12)	Maldita.es	https://bit.ly/3LxG2c4	Traits of aggressors	Sources verification, Wayback Machine, links to news media

The actions of the fact-checkers coincided with the main foci of misinformation following the incident, albeit with different approaches. VerificaRTVE (an initiative of the public broadcaster) focused on the debate related to the evidence of hate crime. Maldita.es (a

³ Regarding hate crimes against LGTBI people and hoaxes about immigrant violence against LGTBI people.

non-profit media outlet), Newtral (a media start-up) and AFP Factual (an initiative of the AFP agency) debunked the hoax photograph of an alleged aggressor out of context and analysed the data on the features of the detainees. Their fact-checks coincide with two phases: the first publications related to the event and the causes (5-7 July), and the polarised discussions after discovering the identity of the detainees (13-14 July).

The techniques used to cross-check information include source verification, reverse image search, retrieval of old websites with the Wayback Machine and links to other websites and profiles of the media, institutions, politicians and security forces. It is worth highlighting the availability of WhatsApp in Maldita.es, Newtral and RTVE to verify content sent by citizens, and a chatbot in Maldita.es.

Despite the successful intervention of the fact-checkers, their diffusion on Twitter does not reach remarkable levels compared to the volume of public conversation on that platform. The tweets linking to the fact-checks (Table 6) had a total of 73 RTs (7 August 2021); only one misinformative tweet related to the traits of the aggressors – specifically in the conversation about one of them belonging to Riazor Blues (Fig. 3, community 1) – received 7,800 RTs, showing clarity about the imbalance between the size of the conversation and the dissemination of fact-checks. However, it should be noted that these platforms have other channels of dissemination, including appearances on television, radio or podcasts, so that it is not possible to know its actual impact.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has analysed a media case determined by the secrecy of investigations and the local nature of the event. With the risk of a parallel trial, explanations have been sought to quell interest in knowing more about the crime and its causes. The role of the news media and of the fact-checkers in the face of a turbulent public debate has been evaluated in a scenario where the lack of official information, politicisation and polarisation have provoked a climate of misinformation.

Media coverage of the event originated a series of frames that emphasised data on the crime, the victim and the aggressors (H1). The homophobic motive and the characterization of the presumed aggressors established an interpretative framework, but the actors involved in the frame building were not only the media and journalists (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019), but also political representatives and citizens. In fact, in this case the positioning for ideological and political reasons marked the representation of the event in the media to a large extent. After the initial doubts about the attribution of causes, the possible homophobic motive gained strength in social networks. Despite the lack of official confirmation, a good part of the public opinion framed the case as a hate crime. A social and political response was triggered, in addition to the polarisation of public opinion – reinforced by the identities and traits of the aggressors.

The analysis of the public conversation on Twitter shows that, in addition to its polarisation, it is dominated by non-journalistic actors, with an important influence of the

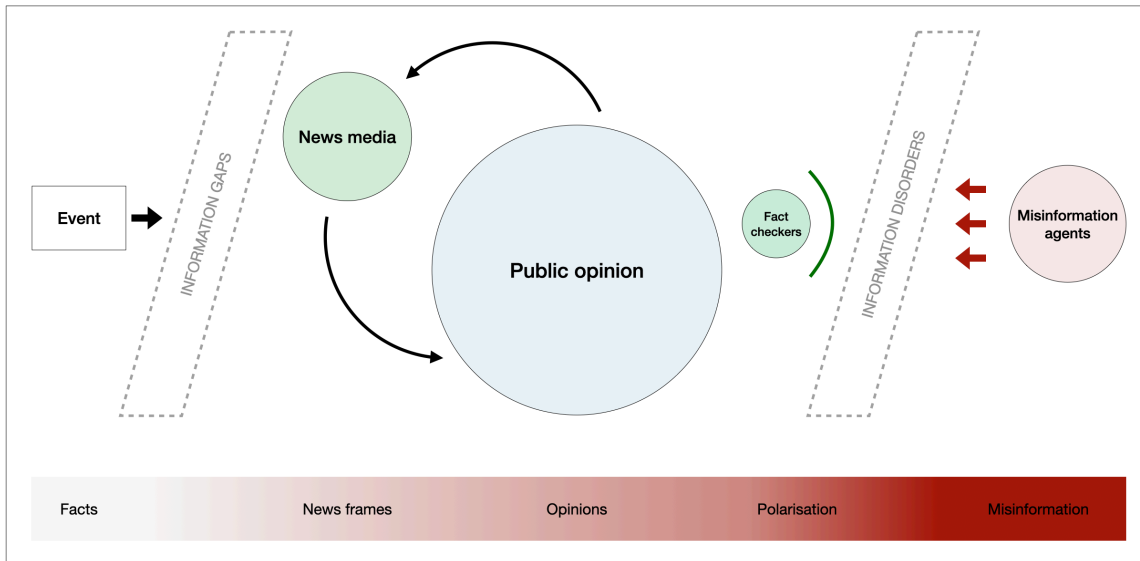
political position (H2). The leading role in the different moments analysed is played by political actors, users with political-ideological positions, as well as the collectives and celebrities involved. Using the hashtag promoted to support the investigation of the case and collect testimonies, the victim's circle – one of the most prominent sources of information in social networks and the media – played a key role. Among the cases analysed, the linking of one of the arrested with a fan group of a local football club demonstrated the marked polarisation instigated from the ultra-right and with a disinformative message.

An interpretative polarisation scheme (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020) has been demonstrated, contextualizing the same data and facts in very different ways in society, due to the great repercussion achieved. Due to the secrecy of the investigations, the official information gaps were completed with content biased by political and ideological interests (H3). From the initial doubts about the crime, we passed to the misinformation that contributed to the simplification of discourse (Correia et al., 2019). The information disorders appeared, precisely, in the most present frames – homophobia and traits of the aggressors – and were protagonists of the most polarised debates. It is confirmed that in the dissemination of falsehoods, the use of social networks, confirmation bias and political reasons (Salaverría & León, 2022) intervened, even feeding back misinformation from users without an outstanding reputation (Chamberlain, 2010). The role of the media, apart from partisan and counter-media, was also criticized according to their position regarding the possible cause of the crime – in the main analysis of Twitter their position was central and they did not have a presence in the most polarised community.

The fact-checkers intervened in response to information disorders, but their diffusion was small compared to the volume of the debate on social networks (H4). They addressed the central issues of the debate (homophobia and traits of the aggressors), in addition to debunking a hoax based on a photograph and contextualising related topics. However, the resonance they have had on Twitter falls far short of the noise generated by the public conversation.

To summarise, the tentative model (Fig. 5) presents a dimension of actors involved in the circulation of information and a parallel scale in which content flows from fact-based to misinformation (as opinion and polarisation grow). The information known about the event is conditioned by a circumstantial factor (secrecy of the investigations) that generates information gaps. News media covered the event first, but different actors were quickly incorporated to fill in the gaps in the story, feeding back into the media coverage and influencing the frame building. With the course of time and the growing impact of the case, the messages took the form of polarised opinion, and, in more radical cases, misinformation agents took advantage of the information gaps to fill them with misleading and biased contents, which tried to curb the fact-checkers, to limit their impact on the media and society.

Figure 5. Relationship between actors and messages in the case analysed.



The analysis of this case highlights the value of proximity in news coverage. It warns of the risk of feedback between social networks and news media in line with other studies, a reminder that should be considered in journalism practice. In addition, the origin and evolution of misinformation from the local level, incited by polarisation around a tragic event and under the secrecy of investigations, has been noted.

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Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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