

Estrella Gualda

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0220-2135>
estrella@uhu.es
Universidad de Huelva

José Rúas

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1922-9644>
joseruas@uvigo.es
Universidad de Vigo

Submitted

September 28th, 2018

Approved

December 19th, 2018

© 2019

Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

doi: 10.15581/003.32.1.179-194

www.communication-society.com

2019 – Vol. 32(1)

pp. 179-194

How to cite this article:

Gualda, E. & Rúas, J. (2019).

Conspiracy theories, credibility and trust in information. *Communication & Society*, 32(1), 179-194.

Conspiracy theories, credibility and trust in information

Abstract

The rapid spread of social media on the Internet has resulted in strong changes in the information and communication landscape. Their inadequate use has given rise to new discussions on truth and post-truth, what is trustworthy and what is questionable, the credibility of messages and their sources. Through this article we aim to examine what citizens believe about the information they receive and if they feel whether or not there is withholding of information. This will be achieved through data obtained from a survey of a statistically representative sample of the Andalusian population over the age of 18 (1,103 respondents, with a maximum margin of error of $\pm 3\%$). One of the main results of this research is the serious lack of credibility of the information received, as many Andalusians (68.1%) believe that information is withheld from them. We have also observed several factors explaining a greater likelihood of finding a high belief in the conspiracy theory on the withholding of information. Finally, the article reflects on the consequences of mistrust in information and we propose an inter- and transdisciplinary approach in order to counteract this mistrust.

Keywords

Credibility, trustworthiness, disinformation, conspiracy theories, post-truth.

1. Introduction: From propaganda to post-truth

From the times of Ancient Egypt, when in 1279 BC Pharaoh Ramses II etched in stone his alleged fake victory against the Hittites (Weir, 2009), in present-day Syria, the history of propaganda details the use of rumours, lies, disinformation and conspiracy, with numerous references and precedents (Domenach, 1963; Durandin; 1983; Jay, 2010) of past practices, rules and techniques still in use today.

To conspire, from its Roman origin (*conspiratio*), showed a positive sense of solidarity as used by Tacitus and Cicero, implying the pursuit of the common good, the air that helps us “breathe together” and share the same breath in the favourable direction in which “the wind blows” (García-Noblejas, 1998). A positive conspiracy in the dissemination of ideas where, over time, the media would play an essential role, not only as transmitters, but also as creators of shared experiences, in accordance with the classical model of participation and “ritual”

described by Carey (1989). This shows us that within communication lies our level of certainty or insecurity about reality and about what others do with their lives.

Communication is a human biological need (Rúas & García, 2018) and a result of our condition as social animals. Being social animals, we also enjoy storytelling and the pleasure of sharing apparently new, original and exclusive stories, and the sensation of handling privileged and alternative information beyond routine and the regular processes of news generation and dissemination.

In the age of information and manipulation (including the creation of newsworthy pseudo-events), televised infotainment and fiction currently provide us with a new dimension of reality based on the concept of post-truth (Harsin, 2015), the felt and perceived truth, where facts matter less than the sensations and emotions they provoke (Rúas & Capdevila, 2017). The term post-truth had already been used by Steve Tesich (1992) to compare the concealment of the Watergate case facts with the Iraq War. This was later developed by sociologist Ralph Keyes (2004) to refer to the creative manipulation of truth, embellished and shaped to the taste of audiences. Post-truth has also been defined as an emotive lie (Hernández, 2017), given its close relationship with manipulation, demagoguery and propaganda.

A reality constructed according to our desires, ideas and cognition that acquires new senses of experience through new methods of communication, thanks to the Internet and social media. These mark the start of a post-modern age of political communication and relationships between politics and the media and within the media itself, in the face of competition between traditional and new media in an increasingly fragmented media environment (Rúas, Mazaira & Rodríguez, 2018).

Events such as the latest US elections, with Donald Trump's victory, add new interpretations and a new dimension to the meaning and journalistic scope of the word "lie". This is a current subject of discussion between American journalists and editors to discern when to use that word, given the moral and intentional judgement it implies and the imitation and contagion effect –and even trivialisation– that its use and abuse can deliver in informative texts (Taksdal, 2017).

2. Credibility versus disinformation

Credibility is related to a necessary attribution of quality (Cabedoche, 2015) and the perceived trustworthiness of a message, source or media, which depends on the simultaneous interaction between them and on multiple dimensions, such as bias and precision (Meyer, 1988; Flanagan & Metzger, 2007).

Credibility also constitutes a professional variable that determines the reputation of a media outlet, including both its behaviour (its journalistic and business reality) and its recognition, namely the assessment made by audiences and interest groups of that reality and the professional functioning, according to the fulfilment of their expectations (Ortiz, Villafañe & Caffarel, 2018).

The recent economic crisis affected the structure and business model of media outlets (Campos-Freire, 2010). Both public and private organisations are driven to legitimise their activity and look for intangible and non-monetary assets that strengthen their corporate reputation, trustworthiness and credibility (Luoma-aho & Makikangas, 2014; Timoteo, 2015).

The decline in public trust and the loss of credibility of institutions opened the door to news based on alternative sources of information, different from traditional and official ones.

Governments, small and medium-sized enterprises and large international corporations fight to make a profit and bring added value (engagement) to their image (Dincer & Uslander, 2010), a process where public and private monitoring faces new challenges and threats through Big Data and automated surveillance.

The constant increase in communication expenditure in the last decade by government institutions, political parties, businesses and NGOs contrasts with the gradual decline in public trust, causing what has been identified as a collapse of public communication (Macnamara, 2018).

The Edelman Trust Barometer 2018¹ notes that only 43% of people trust their national governments and media, compared to 52% of people who trust national companies, and 53% who trust NGOs. Out of the 100 countries surveyed on this barometer, Spain ranks slightly below average (47) in public trust level.

With regard to the media, in the case of Spain, information professionals themselves acknowledge the loss of quality of information, related to the media's lack of political and economic independence, as reflected, for example, in the *Informe anual de la Profesión Periodística* [Annual Report of the Journal Profession in Spain] by the Association of Journalists of Madrid (APM, 2017)².

APM's report history shows a slight improvement in the information Spaniards received from the media in 2016 compared to 2015 (5.7 and 5.5 points, respectively). APM's work also demonstrates the concern of those who work in information who, when asked about the causes of society's critical opinion towards the media, identified the tendency towards spectacularisation (48.3%) and the lack of rigour and quality of information (40.8%) (APM, 2016)³ as the principal causes. In any case, concern about information credibility has been consistent in journalism for more than a decade, during which time most professionals consulted considered that media credibility progressively worsened (APM, 2004 and 2005)⁴.

Several democratic countries are experiencing increased levels of false information imitating journalistic formats, through information tied to both nationalist movements (mainly right-wing radicals) and foreign (mainly Russian) and aimed, in most cases, at undermining institutional legitimacy and destabilising political parties, governments and nations (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), clearly disrupting democracy.

In this regard, the so-called computational propaganda, based on the use of hackers and contamination of information –through bots and digital “drivers” who are part of a process of simulation on social media (Sánchez, 2018)⁵– is attributable to geostrategic operations attempting to disrupt public agenda and distort national or foreign political mood. This was the case as recently reported in the United Kingdom and Spain, who accused Russia of spreading fake news in order to influence their respective elections (Patel, 2017) and also in our country on the occasion of the Catalan referendum.

Hybrid threats by state and non-state actors, as defined by the European Commission itself (2017), including online piracy, financial manipulation, monetary destabilisation or money laundering, as well as disinformation campaigns using social media to control political narrative or radicalise, recruit and direct people in order to intervene in the spheres of influence, destabilise the most powerful supranational structures and create a new world order (Cirdei & Ispas, 2017).

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has warned for years about the global danger of massive digital disinformation as a technological and geopolitical risk and a challenge showing the need to help citizens access reliable information that allows participation in public debates and social decision-making (Howell, 2013).

¹ http://cms.edelman.com/sites/default/files/2018-02/2018_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report_FEB.pdf.

² <https://www.apmadrid.es/publicaciones/informe-anual-de-la-profesion/>.

³ Idem.

⁴ Idem.

⁵ A bot (from the word “robot”) is a fake, active account linked to a Twitter account management tool which is used to retweet (RT), follow other accounts or create trends to become trending topic (TT) (Sánchez, 2018).

Disinformation, understood as an intentional falsehood disseminated as news or in an informative format with a political goal, intends a systematic interruption of common informational flows through deceit. Disinformation's amplifying effect threatens political institutions and democratic values.

As noted by Tuñón (2017), the disparity in knowledge of international reality between a misinformed majority and a well-informed minority, between public opinion and the political elite, can be dangerous for national interests in democratic terms, as national positions on external affairs tend to reflect the particular interests of the political elites and not those of the middle class. This is the case whenever figures such as international correspondents are forced to leave due to cost reduction in favour of the dissemination of information flows spurred by the spread of new technologies and the commodification of information.

If fake news' dissemination and proliferation is evident, so is the proliferation of conspiracy theories on social media with different goals that can cause significant harm. This is not a trivial matter if we consider the information provided by the Eurobarometer 464 on "Fake News and Disinformation Online" conducted in 2018, which shows Spaniards' high degree of belief in being exposed to fake news. In particular, 78% of Spaniards believe they are exposed to fake news at least once a week, and 53% every day or almost every day. Problematically, only 13% are certain they can identify this kind of news.

There is an equally clear perception that this fake news can have detrimental effects on democracy (High-Level Expert Group on Fake news and Disinformation, 2018; European Commission, 2018). Similar results appear in different European countries. On the other hand, citizens admit that the proliferation of fake news through social media is very confusing⁶, as evidenced by a Pew Research Center poll conducted among American citizens, the results of which show that almost a quarter of respondents (23%) claimed to have spread fake news to their contacts on social media, either intentionally or involuntarily (Barthel, Mitchell & Holcomb, 2016; Barthel & Mitchell 2017).

The media have evident socio-economic interests, something analysed from the perspective of Communicating Economic Policy (CEP) in order to find out how media and communicative systems reinforce, face or affect existing social and class relations, with a special focus on their ownership structure, modes and financing, and communication policies according to which they operate (Mosco, 1996).

In this regard, it is evident how economic value outweighs social, cultural or informational value and, ultimately, how the media form part of the economic power structure and the power elite (Segovia, 2017), of which social media is also a faithful reflection (Rúas, Mazaira & Rodríguez, 2018), something that undoubtedly generates mistrust.

3. Methodology

3.1. Objectives, research questions and working hypothesis

This article, based on quantitative data from a survey conducted in Andalusia, aims to respond to the following objective or research question: what Andalusians believe regarding the information they receive and whether they think this information is being withheld from them. This question connects with what we proposed previously about the quality, credibility and trustworthiness of the information reaching the public (Cabedoche, 2015), but also, as we will explain in the following pages, brings us closer to the conspiracy theory that information is being withheld from the public.

⁶ While a well-crafted communication process involves the correct transfer of information, confusion is, on the contrary, the consequence of faulty information which leaves the receiver in a state of uncertainty or misunderstanding. A state of confusion can be defined as the mirror image of communication, as noted by Watzlawick (1994).

In order to answer this question, we have utilised one of the five items used in international literature to build what is known as the generic conspiracist beliefs scale, specifically the item that brings us back to the belief that: “Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about”. In the literature on belief in conspiracy theories, two common assessment strategies are identified in studies based on surveys. Some of which use scales gauging generic beliefs, while others address the assessment of beliefs in specific conspiracy theories.

There is also research that has included both approaches. For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the global belief that the population may have regarding whether they are informed about relevant developments occurring around the world. This item, along with others, has been applied in several countries through a questionnaire designed to measure conspiracy mentality, known as the “Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ)”, which has several tested versions with more or fewer items (Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah & Imhoff, 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2013; Moulding, Nix-Carnell, Schnabel, Nedeljkovic, Burnside, Lentini, et al. 2016; Lantian, Muller, Nurra & Douglas, 2016; Swami, Barron, Weis, Voracek, Stieger & Furnham, 2017).

It is, according to Swami, Barron, Weis, Voracek, Stieger & Furnham (2017), one of the four widely used scales found in the study of conspiracy theories. According to Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah & Imhoff (2013), this questionnaire and study of scientific conspiracies “is designed to efficiently assess differences in the generic tendency to engage in conspiracist ideation within and across cultures.”

In this article, apart from understanding Andalusians’ perception about whether they are informed about relevant events occurring in the world, we are interested in identifying the sociological profile of people who strongly believe that the general public is not informed about several important things in the world, which indicates a high degree of mistrust and suspicion towards the information they receive. We are equally interested in furthering our understanding in this area and clarifying which factors seem to have the greatest predictive capacity of this high belief that information is being withheld from them.

One of the aspects that may be linked to the predisposition to being suspicious about the information received, as a working hypothesis, is the tendency to believe in other conspiracy theories, to the extent that it has been documented that there is a certain predisposition to see the world from the prism of conspiracy theories (Butter, 2014). In addition, in the face of the evidence that conspiracy beliefs are common, Uscinski, Klofstad & Atkinson (2016) raise the question of why so many people believe in them, based on previous surveys.

One could think that being indiscriminately exposed to the use and consumption of social media and new media is linked to a lower capacity for critical thinking and a higher likelihood of believing in conspiracies. Uscinski, Klofstad & Atkinson (2016) suggest that at present day there is great concern about the fact that, if conspiracy theories are widely discussed in the media and on the Internet, this could influence the public and condition them to wrongly believe in them. However, in their experimental work, they show how this kind of information seems to affect only those individuals more likely to accept a conspiracy logic. They conclude that the predispositions, and not information, make individuals see conspiracy theories behind different events. On the other hand, they argue that partisanship influences the tendency to see a conspiracy theory, but not in every circumstance, only when this has partisan elements.

Other hypotheses to be explored –considering existing international literature in several fields connected to conspiracy theories– is that several factors such as ideology and level of education affect the proclivity for being mistrustful or expressing this type of global criticism or beliefs that the mighty use their power to hide information. For example, regarding education, we consider, within the meaning of the recent work by Van Prooijen (2017), that highly educated people are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories than people with a

lower level of education, although the reason why remains unknown. The relationships between education and conspiracy theories cannot be reduced to a simple mechanism, as they are the complex interaction of several psychological factors linked to education, as suggested by this author. Other studies (Krouwel, Kutiyski, Jan-Willem, Martinsson & Markstedt, 2017) find links between ideology and conspiracy theories, as well as between ideology and economic assessments. Relationships between conspiracy theories and interpersonal trust and trust in politicians are not that evident.

In the following pages, we explore Andalusians' opinions on the belief or suspicion that they are not receiving adequate information about what is happening in the world. Insofar as the results show a trend towards a high support for this belief, they implicitly suggest a critique of the credibility of information and a mistrust that could be equally related to the consumption patterns of less traditional or modern media, as well as the social media used by Andalusians' in their daily lives.

3.2. *Sample and field work*⁷

This research has been conducted within the 5th Wave of the Citizen Panel for Social Research PIE 201710E018 [PACIS Citizen Panel, IESA-CSIC, www.panelpacis.net]. The work is based on the survey of a representative sample of Andalusians. The sample size is 1,103 interviews. The universe of this research was defined as people aged 18 or over living in Andalusia. For data capture, the sample was selected from members of the PACIS panel.

Members of the PACIS Panel were selected in person in people's homes by qualified interviewers. The sample of this study was selected from the members of the PACIS Panel. In order to conduct the 5th Wave of the Panel, the sample was contacted by email, text message and telephone (landline and mobile).

Once contacted, the interviewees were surveyed combining two data collection tools, using a mixed design: the online mode through the Internet (CAWI) and by computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). In order to obtain the sample of 1,103 interviews, 2,008 people belonging to the PACIS were selected. The maximum sampling error was $\pm 3\%$. In order to select the sample, another applied type of sampling was a stratified selection of PACIS members by age groups and gender, these groups being proportional to Andalusian population above the age of 18. The sample was calibrated through the "raking" method, taking as a reference the total population of Andalusia. The raking process was conducted through the rake module of SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), which implements these types of settings from the sample. The average interview time was 27 minutes. Statistical processing was conducted in SPSS. Other research data, the members of the work team, as well as other results can be retrieved from: <https://eseis.es/investigacion/pacis>.

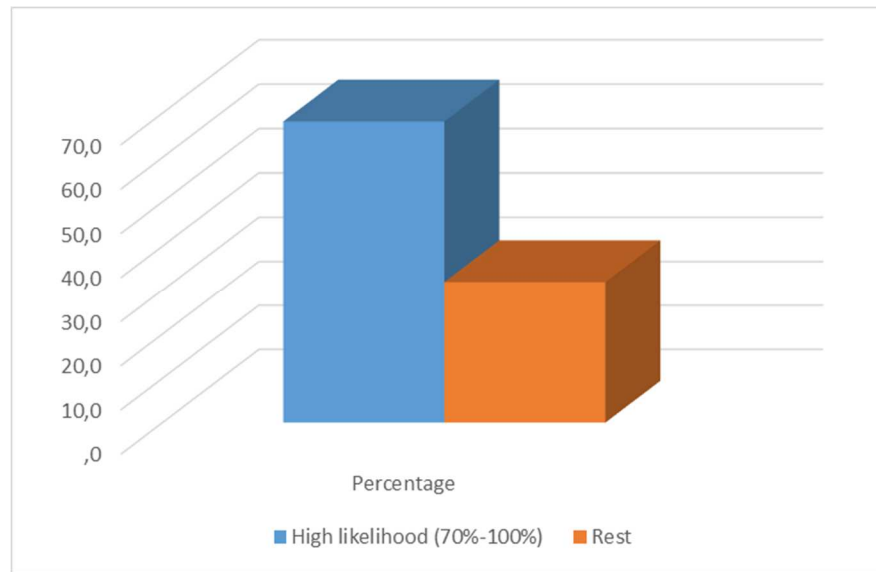
3.3. *Dependent variable*

In order to respond to our main goal, namely trying to understand the strong belief in the idea that "many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about", the previous item was used as a dependent variable. The basic results are laid out in Chart 1, where 68.1% of Andalusians show a high belief that information is being withheld from the public⁸.

⁷ The technical information about the sampling, calibration and fieldwork process was provided by the IESA-CSIC (Institute for Advanced Social Studies - Spanish National Research Council), Spain.

⁸ To facilitate comparison with other international studies, this item was answered by the interviewees in the original questionnaire expressing the degree of likelihood that what the item expressed was true considering as a scale: 0% - certainly not, 10% - extremely unlikely, 20% - very unlikely, 30% - unlikely, 40% - somewhat unlikely, 50% - undecided, 60% - somewhat likely, 70% - likely, 80% - very likely, 90% - extremely likely and 100% - certain (Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah & Imhoff, 2013).

Chart 1: Degree of agreement with the claim that “many very important things happen in the world which the public is never informed about”.



Source: Own elaboration.

4. Results

4.1. Bivariate analysis

Several bivariate analyses⁹ were performed to find out which issues put to Andalusians were statistically related to a high belief in the withholding of information from the public (as a dependent variable). Simple binary regression analysis was also conducted with the variables statistically related to the previous belief.

A greater high belief that the public is misinformed is linked in our study to different socio-demographic factors such as age, education, employment situation or occupation. We have found greater mistrust in the information received among the youngest interviewees (18-44 years old), university students, and uneducated persons (in a non-linear relationship), people who work and, to a greater extent, technicians and professionals, as well as service workers, if we look at the occupational categories.

Regarding religion and ideology, we found that atheists and non-believers are among the sectors with the greatest mistrust in information received, as well as segments more associated with left-wing ideology than other ideologies, where we also found people who mistrusted the information received. Through variables such as Andalusians' memory vote recall and voting intention we can see that voters of Unidos Podemos and Ciudadanos, who are also the youngest and greater social media consumers in our investigation, are more likely to show a high belief that the public is not informed of some important events.

It was also discovered that the tendency to find the belief in the concealment of information was more likely in cases with an equally high belief in other generic conspiracy theory beliefs about which interviewees were asked, specifically through the items included in the aforementioned “Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ):” “politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions,” “government agencies closely monitor all citizens,” “events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities,” “there are secret organisations that greatly influence political decisions.”

⁹ Statistical tests such as Chi2 or analysis of variance (ANOVA), according to the character of the variables, in relation to the dependent variable to be explained.

On the other hand, it was found that several aspects such as use of free time and access, use and frequency of use of communication technologies were linked in this study to having doubts about the information received. Thus, Andalusians citing among their free-time activities “browsing social media, chats, etc.” are more likely to show a high belief in the withholding of information. We found the same tendency among users of communication technologies such as mobile phones to make calls or texting, computers, email, WhatsApp or another app, virtual social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.) or tablets (iPad, e-book, etc.).

This is also linked to the frequency of use of these technologies, noting that a high frequency of use of these technologies by Andalusians (one or more times per day or constantly), as well as recent access to them, was linked to a high belief in the likelihood that “many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about.”

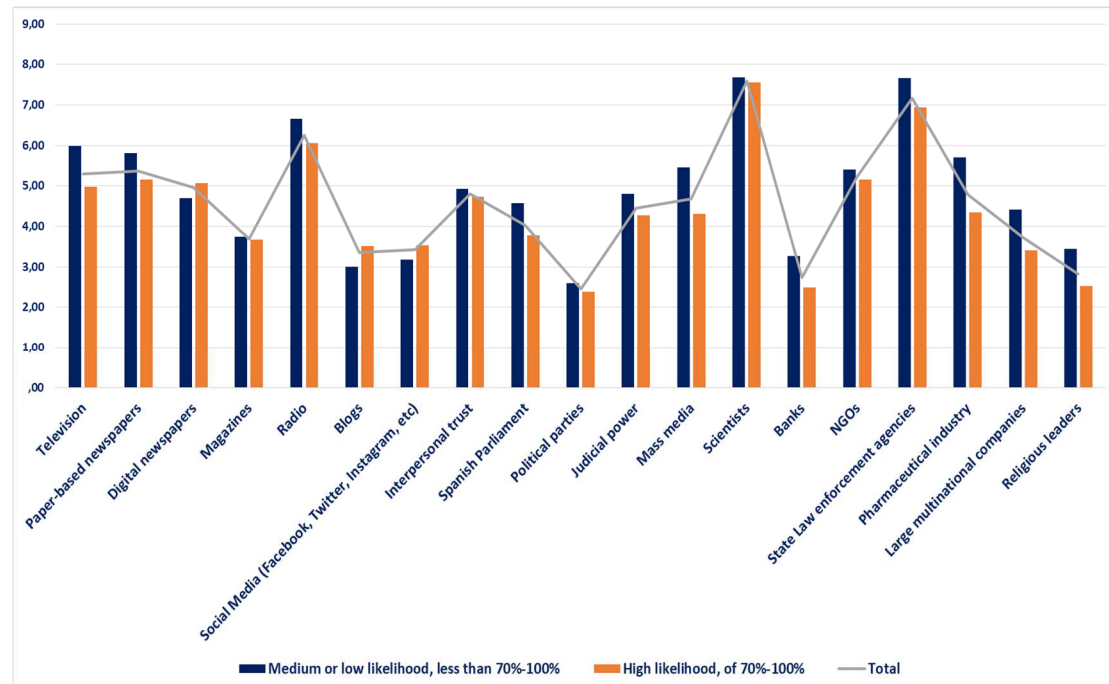
On the other hand, it was also found that a greater mistrust in the information received was linked to a greater diversity in the use of social media and, in that respect, when Andalusians showed this greater diversity of use (participating in social media, forums, chats, instant messaging, calls, video conferences, carrying out administrative tasks, searching for information or documentation, etc., online buying and selling, accessing, downloading or using audiovisual material, uploading photos or videos), the tendency to believe to a greater extent the hypothesis that information “is being withheld” was more prominent.

Another matter of great concern is one related to trust. In this regard, the bivariate analysis revealed that a greater mistrust on the Internet (through the item: “websites try to prevent us from knowing what they are going to do with our personal data”) was linked to greater mistrust in the information received by the public.

An interesting element originates in the verification of the relationship between the degree of trust shown towards different aspects (interpersonal trust, trust in the media and social networks, trust in institutions and leaders) and the belief in the likelihood that the public received quality information. The average values of trust in different aspects are shown on Chart 2. The line reflects the global degree of trust obtained for each aspect. The bars compare the segment that showed a high belief in each item compared to those showing a medium or low likelihood in relation to this belief.

In line with the analysis of variance conducted, regarding trust in magazines or interpersonal trust, trust in NGOs, scientists or political parties, the differences between both segments are not statistically significant. However, we identified a statistically significant tendency to support the conspiracy theory about the withholding of information about the world to the public when showing greater trust in digital newspapers, blogs, or social media. In turn, those believing less in that conspiracy theory showed greater average trust in television, paper-based newspapers, magazines or radio, as well as in institutions such as the Spanish Parliament, judicial power, the media, banks, State security forces and bodies, the pharmaceutical industry, large multinational companies or religious leaders. Or in reverse: we have found that lower trust in the aforementioned media, institutions or leaders is linked to a greater belief in the withholding of information about important events happening in the world.

Chart 2: Degree of interpersonal trust, in the media and social media, institutions and leaders, in relation to the belief in the degree of likelihood that “many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about”.



Source: Own elaboration. Note: The chart reflects average values based on a scale of responses where 0 means “no trust” and 10 means “total trust.”

Other aspects we gathered information on were the opinion on traditional media in Spain (press, radio and TV), as well as on new online media. Concerning this aspect, we found a greater tendency towards a high belief in the withholding of information, both among the most critical Andalusians –regardless of the media– and those agreeing that the media are serving the government and manipulating public opinion or those believing that the media lie deliberately and agreeing less that information is cross-checked and verified. A similar tendency was found regarding online media in Spain. In conclusion, in the bivariate analysis we found several signs of connections between aspects such as socio-demographic variables, consumption patterns and trust in different social media and belief in the withholding of information.

4.2. Multiple binary logistic regression analysis

As a consequence of the preceding analyses, in this section we consider which aspects already assessed through bivariate analysis have a greater predictive capacity of the high belief in the assertion that “many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about”. In order to answer this question, we conducted a multiple binary logistic regression analysis considering as a dependent variable the degree of likelihood of occurrence expressed regarding the previous item. This variable was dichotomised with 1 representing the “high belief (70%-100% probability)” in this conspiracy theory about the withholding of information and 0 representing “remaining cases” (representing a medium or low belief in this theory).

The goal was to identify through regression the factors helping to better predict this high belief, associated in our case to a greater degree of suspicion or mistrust of the information received. Binary logistic regression is a technique that studies the probability of occurrence of the assessed event (the high belief in this theory). Table 1 synthesises the dimensions and

aspects explored through regression statistical analysis, among which the existence of a statistically significant association (via bivariate analysis and through several simple binary logistic regression analysis) had already been confirmed:

Table 1: Dimensions studied through multiple binary logistic regression.

Independent		Dependent
<i>Socio-demographic</i> Age Religious definition Religious practice Level of education Employment situation Occupation Ideology Voting intention Vote recall <i>Index of generic beliefs in conspiracy theories</i>	<i>Trust</i> Interpersonal trust Trust in leaders and institutions Trust in media and social media Trust in the Internet’s security and privacy <i>Diversity of use of social media</i>	Belief that “many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about”

Source: Own elaboration.

During the analytical process, the variables described in the previous table were introduced in different stages throughout the procedure “Introduce” in the SPSS program, assessing whether the incorporation of independent variables achieved a significant increase in the global adjustment of each resulting statistical model. The omnibus tests reflect a better adjustment in the explanation of the dependent variable when introducing into the model the independent variables when Chi-square’s significance is < 0.05, as happens in our case. This means that independent variables help explain the dependent variable (Table 1). On the other hand, the goodness of fit of the global model, or its explanatory power, measured through Nagelkerke’s coefficient of determination, R², indicates that the model can explain 59% of the variance of the dependent variable. This model was able to correctly classify a high percentage of cases (85.7%) and also obtained a high score regarding sensitivity, being able to diagnose 92.9% of high belief in the withholding of information (see Table 1).

Throughout the analysis, the hypothesis is that there are several factors helping to explain that part of Andalusians have a high belief in the withholding of information. The objective of the regression is to try to identify the variables that best predict this high belief, related in our case to a higher degree of suspicion or mistrust in the information received. In relation to socio-demographic profiles, we found that secondary studies are predisposed to score higher in high belief in the withholding of information, as well as, with regard to those who work, doing housework also has significant partial effects in the explanation of this belief when other constant variables are maintained.

Regarding politics, under the regression model, mistrust of the information received is more likely to increase among PSOE supporters in voting intention and those declaring not to know who to vote at the time the survey was conducted, in contrast to possible voters of the PP. Additionally, in preliminary bivariate analysis, the intention to vote for Unidos Podemos or Ciudadanos or other parties proved to be statistically significant compared to voters of the PP, the latter being less likely to express mistrust in information.

On the other hand, we verified that belief in other conspiracy theories from 4 items of the aforementioned “Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire” (Bruder et al., 2013 and Imhoff & Bruder, 2013) was accompanied by a greater likelihood of showing a high belief in the withholding of information.

We also built a synthetic index reflecting the diversity of use of social media among Andalusians (from participating in social networks, forums, chats, instant messaging, calls, and video conferences; to meeting new people, flirting, carrying out administrative tasks, searching for information or documentation, etc., buying and selling online, accessing, downloading or using audiovisual material, uploading photos or videos, and maintaining their own blog or web page). The index was built based on 7 variables. Regarding the dependent variable, we found that a greater diversity in the use of social media was linked to a higher probability to believe that the withholding of information is very likely.

Greater trust in social media like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram conveys a greater risk of a high belief in the conspiracy theory that we do not receive all the important information, compared to those who have less trust in social media. Furthermore, the Andalusians most suspicious of what websites do with our personal data face the risk of believing that it is very likely that information is being withheld. Finally, we also noted that, the greater the trust in religious leaders and scientists, the less likely it is to distrust the information received.

In accordance with the values in Exp(B) -measuring the strength of the relationship of each variable from the model with the dependent variable-, the seemingly more relevant aspects of our model, as seen in Table 1, are related to variables such as education, employment situation, voting intention and belief in generic conspiracy theories, although the model would not reach the same predictive capacity if it is not included the aforementioned set of factors.

Table 1: Multiple binary logistic regression. Variables explaining the high belief that "Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about".

	B	E.T.	Wald	gl	Sig.	Exp(B)
Constant	-3.826	1.864	4.214	1	.040	.022
Level of education (Basis=University)			6.864	2	.032	
Uneducated (1)	.677	.503	1.812	1	.178	1.968
Secondary education (2)	1.174	.448	6.857	1	.009	3.235
Employment situation (Basis=Employed)			6.624	4	.157	
Housework (4)	1.418	.683	4.303	1	.038	4.128
Voting intention (Basis=PP)			10.026	8	.263	
PSOE (1)	2.076	.846	6.022	1	.014	7.975
Undecided (7)	1.499	.631	5.640	1	.018	4.476
Index of belief in generic conspiracy theories	.785	.112	48.825	1	.000	2.191
Diversity in social media participation	.432	.188	5.303	1	.021	1.540
Trust in social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)	.198	.086	5.357	1	.021	1.219
Degree of agreement: Websites are trying to conceal what they are going to do with our personal data	.431	.171	6.357	1	.012	1.539
Degree of trust in religious leaders	-.210	.103	4.144	1	.042	.810
Degree of trust in scientists	-.267	.131	4.130	1	.042	.766

Information about the regression model			
-2LL	306.288		
Omnibus Tests	χ^2 238,885, df=63, p<.001		
Cox y Snell R ²	41.80%	Global classification accuracy	85.7%
Nagelkerke R ²	59.0%	Specificity	69.5%
Hosmer & Lemeshow test	p=0.591	Sensitivity	92.9%

*=p<.05; **=p<.01; ***=p<.001.

Explanatory note: This is a synthetic table, which allows us to identify the more significant relationships. In the omnibus test, if the model is significant (less than 0.05), this means that independent variables help explain the dependent. Specificity refers to the percentage of non-occurrence correctly predicted (medium or low belief) and the sensitivity is the percentage of occurrence correctly predicted (in this case, the high belief in the withholding of information). Regarding the table's coefficients (B), if the significance (Sig.) of each coefficient linked to the study's variables is less than 0.05, this means this independent variable explains the dependent. The sign of the coefficient (B) indicates the direction of this relationship. The exponential value of B (Exp(B)) refers to the strength of the relationship of the variable with the dependent. If it moves away from 1, the relationship is stronger.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In light of this research, which has documented that Andalusians are exposed to multiple sources of information, it is difficult to imagine totally effective strategies to reverse, in our scenario, the high tendency to mistrust the received information. This raises significant and difficult challenges in terms of information and communication, but also for experts in social and educational intervention and for awareness and education about a responsible use of social media.

Two conclusions from the analysis we conducted are, in our view, evident. On the one hand, we established the high degree of mistrust shown by Andalusians towards the information they receive, to the extent that they sense that there is a withholding of relevant events which they are not informed about. This issue, taking into account that seven out of ten Andalusians believe this, directly refers us back to credibility and mistrust problems.

On the other hand, our research data show that there are different factors to consider in order to explain the high belief in the deficiency of the information received. Some variables matter more than others, but we found an improvement in the explanation and understanding of Andalusians' belief in the withholding of information when socio-demographic and ideological dimensions are simultaneously combined, and when taking into account in the design of the statistical model aspects such as the degree of trust shown towards different institutions, leaders, mass media or social media, as well as the way they approach social media or the very tendency of believing in global conspiracies. For example, even though the left-wing electorate appears to be generally more critical and distrustful, compared to the right-wing electorate, other factors such as age (being the youngest, those with a more active and diverse use of social media) also play a role in the explanation of the belief in the withholding of information. It was therefore noted in our data the complex and multifactorial character of the study of these types of belief.

In the coming years, given the effects that the lack of trust in information may have in delegitimising institutions and other domains, it is a matter of urgency to commit to fact-checking strategies and tools that make it possible to recover trust in information. Equally important are educational and intervention actions with the public in order to promote critical learning on how to approach information in our current societies.

On the other hand, given the difficulty of both identifying and managing false information, there is a need for an inter- and transdisciplinary approach, where the collaboration of different disciplines (communication, sociology, psychology, education, social work, etc., as well as those approaching issues related to social media security) allows

us to respond to and counteract how rapidly fake news and disinformation arise in a Spanish sociological context with a lack of commitment to institutions, as evidenced by the data from this study's survey or others at a national level. This data equally show that the population perceives that institutions such as the Parliament, to cite a relevant example, do not worry about the problems Spaniards are actually interested in¹⁰.

However, we must not forget that there is a confirmation bias, a human tendency to obtain information that fits our belief systems, playing an essential role in the cascading generation of information. This is in addition to a selective exposure to messages which facilitates the formation of echo-chambers, notably groups of individuals and ideas acquiring, reinforcing and shaping their preferred narrative and where dissident information is ignored, as noted in recent discussions on controversial topics at a national level –as was the case in the Colombian peace process or the United Kingdom's Brexit–, and that led to a strong polarisation of the opinions spread by social media, which facilitated the detection of numerous fake and misleading news (Del Vicario *et al.*, 2018).

Ultimately, the road to credibility and reputation leads through the necessary resilience in organising information and curating content (Hernández, 2017). This path also involves acknowledging the change in the cognitive, emotional and sociocultural order of virtual communities, which occurs through new expressive and collaborative-writing practices in message production and narrative, and the construction of a shared reality.

This article is part of the work developed within the framework of two research projects: "XESCOM: Red Internacional de Investigación de la Gestión de la Comunicación" (ED341D R2016/O19), a project coordinated by the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela's Novos Medios group, with the groups iMARKA, from the Universidade de A Coruña, CP2 and BiFEGA from the Universidade de Vigo, funded by means of competitive tendering by the Consellería de Cultura, Educación y Ordenación Universitaria of the Xunta de Galicia; and the R&D project "DEBATv, Debates Electorales Televisados en España: Modelos, Proceso, Diagnóstico y Propuesta" (CSO2017-83159-R) funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities and the Spanish State Research Agency, supported by the European Union's European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Furthermore, this work falls under the COST Action (H2020) on "*Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories*" (COMPACT, 2016-2020), funded by the European Union's Framework Programme Horizon 2020. In Andalusia, it is part of the research project "Teorías de la conspiración y desinformación", which won a competition to conduct a survey on this topic in the *5th Wave of the Citizen Panel for Social Research in Andalusia* (EP-1707, PIE 201710E018, IESA/CSIC, www.panelpacis.net). We thank the Institute for Advanced Social Studies (IESA-CSIC) for funding this study's survey and, especially, its Technical Unit for Applied Studies (UTEA), executor of the PACIS, for the work carried out.

References

- Barthel, M. & Mitchell, A. (2017). Americans' attitudes about the news media deeply divided along partisan lines. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.journalism.org/2017/05/10/americans-attitudes-about-the-news-media-deeply-divided-along-partisan-lines/>
- Barthel, M., Mitchell, A. & Holcomb, J. (2016). Many americans believe fake news is sowing confusion. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/>
- Bennett, W. L. & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 122-139. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317>
- Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N. & Imhoff, R (2013). Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across cultures: Conspiracy

¹⁰ In relation to the recent September Barometer No 3223 by the CIS (2018): http://datos.cis.es/pdf/Es3223mar_A.pdf.

- Mentality Questionnaire. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 225. <https://www.doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225>
- Butter, M. (2014). *Plots, Designs, and Schemes. American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the present*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Cabedoche, B. (2015). New challenges for journalism education: A contribution to UNESCO politics. In L. Kramp, N. Carpentier, A. Hepp *et al.* (Eds.), *Journalism, Representation and the Public Sphere* (pp. 57–68). Bremen: Edition Lumière, 57–68.
- Campos-Freire, F. (2010). Nuevos modelos de gestión de las empresas mediáticas. *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, 16, 13–30.
- Carey, J. (1989). *Communication as Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Cirdei, I. & Ispas, L. (2017). A possible answer of the European Union to Hybrid Threats. *Scientific Bulletin*, 44(2), 1–8.
- Comisión Europea (2017). EU welcomes establishment of the Finnish centre of excellence for countering hybrid threats. Retrieved from https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/24572/eu-welcomes-establishment-finnish-centre-excellence-countering-hybrid-threats_en
- Del Vicario, M., Quattrociocchi, W., Scala, A. & Zollo, F. (2018). Polarization and Fake News: Early Warning of Potential Misinformation Targets. *ARXIV*. Retrieved from http://adsabs.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/bib_query?arXiv:1802.01400
- Dincer, O. & Uslaner, E. (2010). Trust and growth. *Public Choice*, 142, 59–67.
- Domenach, J. M. (1963). *La Propaganda Política*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba.
- Durandin, G. (1983). *La mentira en la propaganda política y en la publicidad*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- European Commission (2018). Eurobarometer 464 on “Fake News and Disinformation on line”. Retrieved from <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/flash/surveyky/2183>
- Flanagin, A. J. & Metzger, M. J. (2007). The role of site features, user attributes and information verification behaviors on the perceived credibility of web-based information. *New Media and Society*, 9(2), 319–342. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1461444807075015>
- García-Noblejas, J. J. (1998). *Medios de Conspiración Social*. Pamplona: Eunsa.
- Harsin, J. (2015). Regimes of posttruth, postpolitics and attention economies. *Communication, culture & Critique*, 8(2), 327–333. <https://www.doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12097>
- Hernández, A. (2017). Resiliencia de la organización de la información en la era de las posverdad. *Alcance*, 6(14), 47–59.
- High-Level Expert Group on Fake news and Disinformation (2018). *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation*. March. European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology, Luxemburg. Retrieved from <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6ef4df8b-4cea-11e8-be1d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>
- Howell, W. L. (2013). Digital wildfires in a hyperconnected world. World Economic Forum, Tech. Rep. Global Risks. Retrieved from <http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2013/risk-case-1/digital-wildfires-in-a-hyperconnected-world/>
- Imhoff, R. & Bruder, M. (2013). Speaking (un-)truth to power: Conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude. *European Journal of Personality*, 28, 25–43. <https://www.doi.org/10.1002/per.1930>
- Jay, M. (2010). *The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Keyes, R. (2004). *The Post-Truth Era. Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

- Krouwel, A., Kutiyskib, Y., van Prooijenac, J-W., Martinssond, J. & Markstedtd, E. (2017). Does Extreme Political Ideology Predict Conspiracy Beliefs, Economic Evaluations and Political Trust? Evidence From Sweden. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 5(2), 435-462. <https://www.doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v5i2.745>
- Lantian, A., Muller, D., Nurra, C. & Douglas, K. M. (2016). Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Validation of a French and English Single-Item Scale. *International Review of Social Psychology*, 29(1), 1-14. <https://www.doi.org/10.5334/irsp.8>
- Luoma-aho, V. L. & Makikangas, M. E. (2014). Do public sector mergers (re) shape reputation? *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 27(1), 39-52.
- Macnamara, J. (2018). Public Relations and Post-Communication. Addressing a paradox in public communication. *Public Relations Journal*, 11(3), 1-20.
- Meyer, P. (1988). Defining and measuring credibility of newspapers: Developing an index. *Journalism Quarterly*, 65, 567-574. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/107769908806500301>
- Mosco, V. (1996). *The Political Economy of Communication*. London: Sage.
- Moulding, R., Nix-Carnell, S., Schnabel, A., Nedeljkovic, M., Burnside, E. E., Lentini, A. F. & Mehzabin, N. (2016). Better the devil you known than a world you don't? Intolerance of uncertainty and worldview explanations for belief in conspiracy theories. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 98, 345-354.
- Ortiz, Y., Villafañe, J. & Caffarel, C. (2018). Investigación para la evaluación de la reputación de los medios de comunicación. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 73, 845-869. <https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2018-1285>
- Patel, M. (2017). Detection of Malicious Authored News Articles. Albert Nerken School of Engineering. Doctoral Thesis. Retrieved from https://cooper.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/assets/MirajPatel_Masters_Thesis.pdf
- Rúas, J. & García, F. J. (2018). *Persuasión y neurociencias. Apelar al cerebro*. Salamanca: Comunicación Social.
- Rúas, J., Mazaira, A. & Rodríguez, A. I. (2018). Nuevos medios y medios tradicionales en la red. Espacios de opinión e interacción política en la era Trump. *Icono14*, 16(1), 86-113. <https://www.doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v16i1.1118>
- Rúas, J. & Capdevila, A. (2017). "La comunicación política hoy: retos y amenazas". *Communication & Society*, 30(3), 145-153. <https://www.doi.org/10.15581/003.30.3.145-153>
- Sánchez, J. (2018). La presencia y la simulación en redes sociales. *Más Poder Local*, 34. Retrieved from <http://www.maspoderlocal.es/files/articulos/simulacion-redes-sociales-mpl34.pdf>
- Segovia, A. (2017). La integración de los medios en la élite del poder. *Revista Internacional de Comunicación y Desarrollo*, 7, 19-22.
- Swami, V., Barron, D., Weis, L., Voracek, M., Stieger, S. & Furnham, A. (2017). An examination of the factorial and convergent validity of four measures of conspiracist ideation, with recommendations for researchers. *PLoS ONE*, 12(2), e0172617. <https://www.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0172617>
- Taksdal, H. (2017). All the president's lies: Media coverage of lies in the US and France. *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*. University of Oxford. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/all-presidents-lies-media-coverage-lies-us-and-france>
- Tesich, S. (1992). A Government of Lies. *The Nation*.
- Timoteo, J. (2015) (Ed.). *Los intangibles en el valor de las empresas*. Madrid: Díaz de Santos.
- Tuñón, J. (2017). *Comunicación Internacional. Información y desinformación global en el siglo XXI*. Madrid: Fragua.
- Uscinski, J. E., Klostad, C. & Atkinson, M. D. (2016). What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions. *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(2), 57-71. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1065912915621621>

- Van Prooijen, J. W. (2017). Why education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 31, 50-58. <https://www.doi.org/10.1002/acp.3301>
- Watzlawick, P. (1994). *¿Es real la realidad? Confusión, desinformación, comunicación*. Barcelona: Editorial Herder.
- Weir, W. (2009). *History's Greatest Lies*. Beverly: Fair Winds Press.