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**Special issue**

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**Introduction**

## Users, content and platforms: A multidimensional approach to the research of news sharing

The sharing of news on the internet and social media has been a growing area of research for scholars. As early as 2011, the Pew Research Center in the U.S. suggested that “if searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next” (Olmstead, Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2011, p. 10). Just a few years later, a review of the literature identified 461 peer-reviewed articles on the topic from 2004 to 2014 (Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling, 2015). No doubt that number has risen since then, particularly given concerns about the circulation of mis and dis-information on social media. It is important to note that the sharing of news is a 21<sup>st</sup> century online phenomenon. Through the ages, people have found ways to disseminate, discuss and dissect the news, from adding their own commentary to the blank pages of eighteenth-century newspapers in England (Singer *et al.*, 2011) to meeting in parks in Paris to hear about the latest scandals at the court of Louis XV (Hermida, 2014).

While sharing the news predates the internet, it is evident that digital, networked technologies and always-on, connected devices have accelerated the dissemination, consumption and interpretation of news and information by citizens. The ability of diverse publics to intervene through the selection, shaping and spread of news and information flows has enabled protest movements to craft their own narratives but also offered avenues for bad actors to attack trust in political and journalistic institutions. Social media, in particular, has become a constituent element in the dissemination of media, amplifying the visibility, reach and impact of content from a range of sources beyond the media, from eye-witnesses to activists to governments and more. By 2021, just under half (48%) of U.S. adults reported getting some of the news from social media (Walker & Matsa, 2021), while in Spain the figure was 55% (Negredo *et al.*, 2021).

With most of the initial research on news sharing focused on Twitter, there has been a need for scholars to consider changes in the media environment, both in terms of technologies and audience habits (Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling, 2015). Aside from addressing the rise of other open social media platforms like Instagram, there is a need to examine how publics share and comment on the news in more closed, private or semi-private spaces such as WhatsApp or Telegram (Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020). Moreover, there is a further gap in research on visual communication and social sharing, given the trend towards the sharing of photos, videos and other visual forms of contents on social media.

Moreover, studies on the sharing of news have tended to focus on the dissemination of political information, often related to concerns about democratic life, trust in the media or mis and disinformation. There has been less work to examine the sharing patterns of economic, science or health information. The last one has been particularly significant, given the global COVID-19 pandemic and talk of an “infodemic” of misinformation (Brennen *et al.*, 2020; Enders *et al.*, 2020).

Regarding the articles contained in this special issue, a current topic such as disinformation coming from governments, it is the main issue addressed by Manfredi, Amado and Gómez-Iniesta, with a focus on the role of emotion in false statements from state actors. The study offers an overview of the political and social factors underlying the use of emotion in disinformation as regards four aspects: politics, economy, diplomacy and security. Drawing on an extensive literature review and analysis, this work offers a seminal contribution towards the development of a theory of emotionally-driven disinformation. The authors underline how the securitisation of disinformation could lead to less individual freedom, accountability and control over the digital space, as well as the many lessons that this type of disinformation offers for international journalism, such as social recognition, ethics and safety of journalists.

Information on social media is not only textual but, mostly and increasingly often, visual. In this sense, Dafne Calvo, Lorena Cano-Orón and Germán Llorca-Abad provide valuable evidence on how disinformation is introduced and spread through their case analysis of a cluster of YouTube videos on COVID-19 and anti-vaccines movements. The algorithm recommendation system presents such content as a tightly closed set to the platform users, thus reinforcing their commonly shared points of view. These videos do not only present the same theories and objectives, they also share discursive strategies such as decontextualizing factual information when not directly manipulating pieces of evidence. This analysis also concludes that emotional appeals are also a common ground for audio-visual misinformation on YouTube.

The work of Villar-Rodríguez, Souto-Rico and Martín leads to a significant contribution towards more refined methods for the detection and tracking of misinformation. Through a case study focused on the spread of anti-vaccines discourses on Twitter within the context of COVID-19, they analyzed a sample of 17,570 tweets about false claims detected by 13 different fact-checking organizations. They found 2,837 examples of misinformation, using a labelling process with Natural Language Processing (NLP) to determine if each tweet supported or denied the input claim. They explain how most shared disinformation tends not to have many interactions, with users only lending their support to a minimal number of tweets. Analysis shows a change in the perception of the spread of false information. Data show how misinformation is disseminated with posts with few or no interactions in general rather than only through virality.

A collaborative platform such as Wikipedia is the object of study in the article of Marta Pérez-Escobar and Paula Herrero-Diz. The authors analyzed the entry for the term, disinformation, in the Spanish version of Wikipedia. They illustrate that, according to several standards, this entry does not meet the necessary requirements to offer a clear explanation of the term. Within the most famous example of shared and collaborative knowledge on the web, there is not a reliable definition of a concept as relevant nowadays as disinformation. In order to solve this problem, the authors recommend a definitional model by gathering the perspectives of experts, media, governments and institutions.

Nieves Lagares Díez, Paulo Carlos López-López and María Pereira López analyzed the use of social media during the Spanish lockdown during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to their results, social media were used even more intensely during this time, not only as a socializing tool but as a source of information. As for credibility, this paper detects two main predictors: age and frequency of use. Those who used social media more often considered these platforms to be more credible, while younger users reported lower confidence in the information found on social media.

Raquel Quevedo Redondo, Tamara Antona and Mireya Vicent Ibáñez develop a bibliometric analysis of scientific production on news sharing. According to their results, this research topic still shows some immaturity features at the intellectual and topical levels, and impedes its ability to stand out as a field or subfield on its own. The authors suggest that

scholars working on news sharing have still not developed specific topics of interest, implying that news sharing remains a subsidiary way to understanding other phenomena. In this sense, the most productive and impactful in terms of citations on news sharing are works related to the spread of fake news.

Ezequiel Ramón deepens on our understanding of social media as spaces for information distribution by investigating how news is presented. His paper focuses on how citizens and social audiences reframe the conversation regarding evictions and housing problems in Spain. It provides evidence on how citizens avoid traditional frames used by mainstream media. Specifically, Twitter users present stories about evicted people from a systemic, not episodic, perspective, highlighting housing rights as a societal issue, rather than as isolated or individual problems. The author suggests that social movements can harness social media to mobilize and galvanize citizens around their ideas and goals.

Overall, the articles in this special issue further an understanding of the complex and multifaceted ways that news and information is distributed, evaluated and interpreted. They build on existing work on prominent issues such as fake news. But they also seek to address some of the underdeveloped areas of research identified by Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling (2015), including the need for broader theoretical work that goes beyond an informational framework. Furthermore, the articles not only consider Twitter as a research object, but also examine video in the case of YouTube, and collaborative knowledge-making in the case of Wikipedia. The focus on Spain adds to a growing body of work taking place outside of an Anglo-American, English-language context. Taken together, the articles highlight how news sharing and social media is an evolving topic which requires multiple perspectives and analyses.

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