Fire in the Earth System Abstracts
Vol. 1 FES-Fire on the screen-107
Valencia, Spain, 3-7 November, 2021
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Disinformation Analysis on Wildfires Through Fact-Checking Verification in Spain

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Abstract

The media ecosystem where citizens must coexist and in which the amount of information that arrives through multiple platforms can generate 'infoxication' is denominated 'information disorder' by the UNESCO (2018). Within this 'disorder', false information deliberately distributed by political, social and media actors to obtain all kinds of revenues is increasingly generating a public health risk, where citizens do not have all the relevant information to make informed decisions on various issues. Popularly called 'fake news', the disinformation phenomenon generates misperceptions that benefits whoever distributes it. In the case of wildfires and their media coverage, the interpretative frameworks available in each context have led to highly divergent views, focusing on causes such as: a) the individual responsibility of an arsonist; b) the economic motivations of political parties and lobby groups; and c) the political and collective responsibilities in relation to climate change and forest management (Castello & Montagut, 2019). In this context, disinformation related to wildfires confuses and polarizes the public debate, generating erroneous and banal views. This study analyses the types of disinformation present in false publications –texts, pictures, graphics– detected by fact-checkers in Spain –Maldita, Newtral, Verificat– regarding the topic 'wildfire'. A total of 41 verifications collected by these media between 2017 and 2021 have been analysed. Findings show that the most common type of falsehoods are false context and manipulated content. Furthermore, results also reveal the misinformation strategies present in sample (that is, content that is not intended to deceive but which can be confusing or misleading). In this case, the most common type of falsehoods are false connection and misleading content. Similarly, findings indicate that Spanish fact checkers not only verify false, partially false, and confusing information regarding wildfires in Spain, but their work also focus on global natural disasters such as the great fires of the last 3 years in Australia and Brazil. Therefore, this shows how false content produced in other media contexts can also become viral in Spain, thus connecting the disinformation phenomenon between different cultural environments.

Keywords: wildfires disinformation misinformation fact-checker Spain

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