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SPAIN IN THE FACE OF DISINFORMATION: HYBRID CHALLENGES AND CONVENTIONAL RESPONSES

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SPAIN IN THE FACE OF DISINFORMATION: HYBRID CHALLENGES AND CONVENTIONAL RESPONSES

Abstract: In the current geopolitical environment, characterised by the proliferation of information technologies and global interconnectedness, **disinformation has established itself as a multidimensional threat** that compromises national security structures and the social cohesion of states. This article analyses **Spain's institutional and strategic response to disinformation**, framing it within the broader context of hybrid strategies and **foreign information interference and manipulation (FIMI)**.

The study addresses key concepts such as *disinformation*, *post-truth* and *grey zone*, linking them to the **doctrinal evolution of hybrid strategies within the European Union**. Particular attention is paid to the **cognitive domain** and the mechanisms of narrative construction and interpretative frameworks used to shape and distort public perception. The final section offers a **critical evaluation of the main measures adopted by Spain to counter disinformation**, assessing their coherence, implementation and effectiveness in an ever-changing threat landscape.

Resumen: En el actual entorno geopolítico, caracterizado por la proliferación de tecnologías de la información y la interconexión global, **la desinformación se ha consolidado como una amenaza multidimensional** que compromete las estructuras de seguridad nacional y la cohesión social de los Estados. Este artículo analiza **la respuesta institucional y estratégica de España frente a la desinformación**, enmarcándola dentro del contexto más amplio de las estrategias híbridas y de la **interferencia y manipulación informativa extranjera (FIMI)**.

El estudio aborda conceptos clave como *desinformación*, *posverdad* y *zona gris*, vinculándolos con la **evolución doctrinal de las estrategias híbridas en el seno de la Unión Europea**. Se presta especial atención al **dominio cognitivo** y a los mecanismos de construcción de narrativas y marcos interpretativos empleados para moldear y distorsionar la percepción pública. La última sección ofrece una **evaluación crítica de las principales medidas adoptadas por España para contrarrestar la desinformación**, valorando su coherencia, aplicación y eficacia en un panorama de amenazas en constante transformación.

Keywords: Disinformation, *Fake news*, Hybrid strategies, Cognitive domain, Narratives.

Palabras clave: Desinformación, *Fake news*, Estrategias híbridas, Dominio cognitivo, Narrativas.

ABBREVIATIONS

CIS: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas

CNI: National Intelligence Centre

DESI: Digital Economy and Society Index

DHS: Department of Homeland Security

EEAS/SEAE: European External Action Service

ELISA: Simplified Open Source Study

for **ENISA**: European Union for Cyber Security

ESN: National Security Strategy

EU/EU: European Union

FIMI: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference

IFJ: International Federation of Journalists

INCIBE: Instituto Nacional de Ciberseguridad is cybersecurity.

MAEUEC: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation

MPJRC: Ministry of the Presidency, Justice and Courts Relations

WHO: World Health Organisation

NATO/NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation/North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, marked by the rapid dissemination of information through social media and communication technologies, disinformation has become a major strategic threat. This phenomenon, which includes *fake news* and post-truth, has acquired unprecedented relevance in the geopolitical sphere, affecting both the stability of political systems and public perception and national security. Spain has not been immune to these challenges, facing disinformation campaigns that, in many cases, have been used as tools within broader hybrid strategies.

Disinformation is often interpreted as a phenomenon in itself or addressed in an isolated or decontextualised manner (Lazer et al., 2018). The strategies in which disinformation is embedded are relativised, abstracted or ignored (MAEUEC, 2021). Obviating the necessary multidisciplinary approach (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017) or the need to identify the strategic objectives that these actions or disinformation campaigns pursue (Terán, 2019). Even when there is a reference to hybrid strategies and/or the grey zone, it is usually not addressed in depth, being relegated to mere mention (DSN, 2021). Disinformation, far from being an isolated phenomenon, is part of a broader strategic framework, including hybrid strategies and the so-called 'grey zone' (NATO, 2024) and especially *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference* (FIMI).

2. DISINFORMATION, POST-TRUTH AND FAKE NEWS

Disinformation is not a recent phenomenon (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). Since societies began to organise themselves into hierarchical structures, humans have deliberately fabricated and disseminated incorrect and misleading stories (Burkhardt, 2017). From political smear tactics in Ancient Rome to propaganda strategies during the First and Second World Wars (Posetti and Matthews, 2018), disinformation has been used to manipulate and convince others. Disinformation has reached unprecedented levels, altering not only public perception, but also directly influencing political and social processes globally. However, as Julie Posetti and Alice Matthews review in their compilation "*A Short Guide to History of Fake News and Disinformation*" (2018), the fabrication and manipulation of information is not a new phenomenon.

In recent years, the media, political campaigns or sporting (or non-sporting) debates on social networks have been filled with new concepts such as *fake* news (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018), post-truth (McIntyre, 2018) or *disinformation/misinformation* (European Commission, 2022). It has gained public relevance due to a series of international events, such as what happened with the World Cup in Qatar (Newtral, 2022), the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Chan, 2020) or what happened in the US presidential elections (BBC World, 2018); which has reignited the debate on its implications for democratic systems, public perception and the geopolitical interests of certain countries. It is a recurrent debate, where the role of social networks, traditional media, verifiers or cybersecurity are often highlighted. This polysemic, confusing and often ambiguous reality brings together different concepts that attempt to name, explain or allude to different realities.

2.1. CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

Disinformation, *fake news* or post-truth are terms, words and concepts that have become very popular, becoming part of colloquial speech and often used as synonyms in an

attempt to reflect a reality that is usually different and complex. However, although these terms are often used interchangeably, each has specific nuances and characteristics that distinguish them, which is crucial for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (DSN, 2022).

Table 1

Concept	Definition	Relationship with the truth
Fake News	Made-up news with no basis in fact	Completely false
Post-truth	When emotions matter more than facts	The emotional takes precedence over the real
Disinformation	False or manipulated information deliberately disseminated for strategic purposes	It mixes truths and falsehoods to generate a concrete effect.

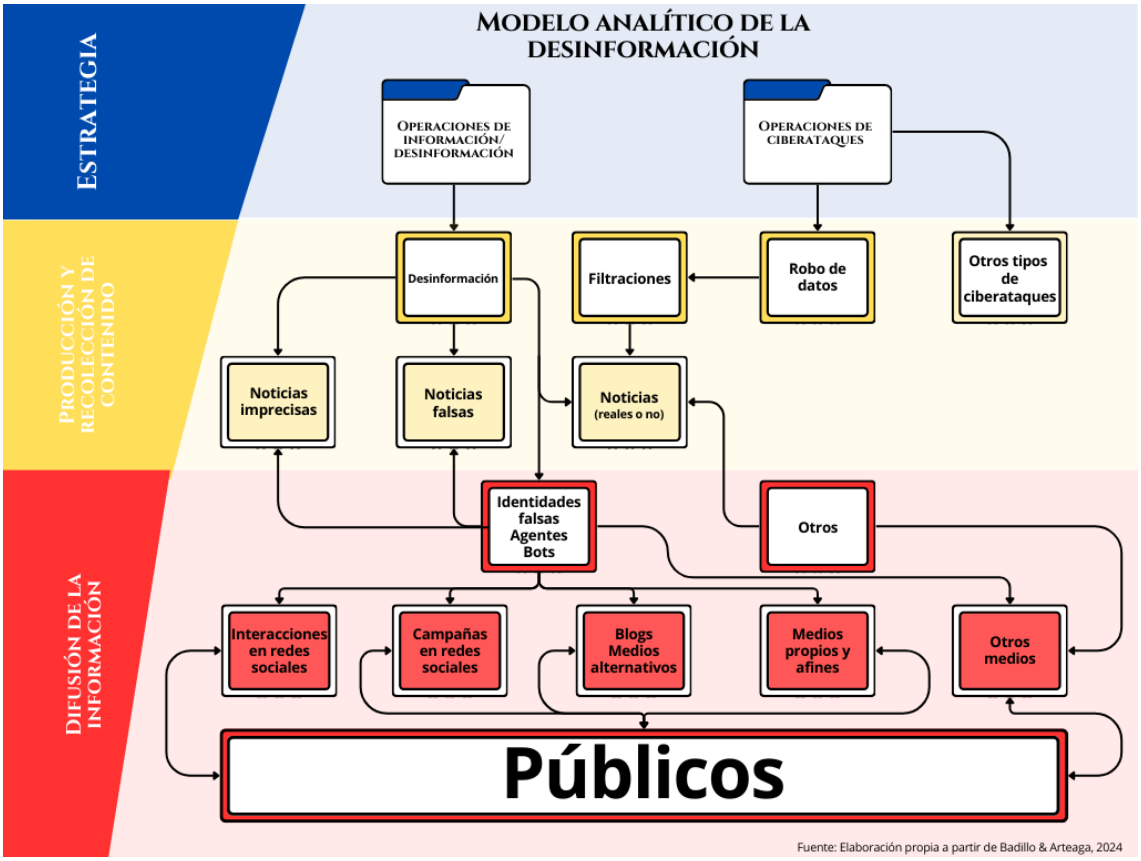
Source: Own elaboration

Let's start by unravelling this complex mishmash of topics by the simplest aspect, *fake news*. We understand *fake news* as false and fabricated news[1] (Gelfert, 2018). These news stories are not only fabricated without any basis in reality, but are often designed to appear plausible and manipulate the audience, exploiting emotions and biases to maximise their impact (DSN, 2022)[2] . They are supposedly news stories created out of fantasy (since they have no relation to reality). Based on Table 1, it is perhaps easier to define them by opposition: they are neither real but decontextualised news, nor exaggerated news (again, real) nor inaccurate news (with real elements) (DSN, 2023a). It is crucial to differentiate *fake news* from other types of misinformation, such as decontextualised or exaggerated news, as the latter, although potentially misleading, are based on real facts, which distinguishes them from completely fabricated news (DSN, 2022). Particularly useful is the analytical model of misinformation proposed by Badillo and Arteaga (2024) shown in Figure 1.

[1] However, it is not a pacified term (Carson, 2018), and although an evolution towards conceptual differentiation can be seen, there are authors (Flores, 2022) and especially in the journalistic world (IFJ, 2018), where "arguments" such as the mere fact that something is false invalidates it to be news (Mayoral, Parratt & Morata, 2019).

[2] The use of artificial intelligence has amplified this capability, enabling the creation of *deepfakes* and other types of manipulated content that can be massively distributed with great speed and reach (DSN, 2023a).

Figure 1



Post-truth[3] is a multifaceted phenomenon (Caridad-Sebastián et al, 2018), where verisimilitude (Rodrigo Alsina, 2005) is more relevant (Rodrigo Alsina, 2005), that is credible, regardless of true or real facts (Dahlgren, 2018). In post-truth, emotions and personal beliefs prevail over objective facts, which has profound implications for democracy and social cohesion, as it allows emotive and often misleading narratives to prevail in public discourse (DSN, 2022; DSN, 2024). This phenomenon not only alters individual perception, but also facilitates the creation of 'echo chambers'[4] in which people are repeatedly exposed to the same ideas, reinforcing their beliefs and isolating them from other perspectives (DSN, 2023a).

There are also multiple definitions of disinformation, which have mutated over time and depending on the sector or field where they are used or outlined (Arteaga, 2020). This term encompasses not only the intentional dissemination of false information, but also the subtle manipulation of facts to distort reality and confuse the public (DSN, 2022). The DSN, in line with EU postulates, defines it as "*Disinformation is verifiably false or*

[3] There is no single position, but unlike the previous (and nuanced) concept, there is a majority consensus on the central element of "wanting to believe" over facts or reality (Olmo, 2019). The phenomenon, "It's a lie, but it might be true" https://twitter.com/hematocritico/status/1241797239779069952?lang=es

[4] An *echo chamber* is a phenomenon in which information, opinions and beliefs are reinforced and amplified within a closed group or community, limiting exposure to different perspectives (Jamieson and Cappella, 2008). For more information on echo chambers see: *The echo chamber is overstated* (Dubois and Blank, 2018). https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428656#abstract

misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for profit or to deliberately mislead the public, and is likely to cause public harm" (DSN, 2022, p.253).

Although adequate, this definition restricts or minimises some of the elements that do feature in the National Security Strategy[5] , such as the reference to the cognitive domain (DSN, 2021) or the emphasis on the intentionality and objectives of those who carry out disinformation campaigns (thus providing it with a context). The cognitive impact of disinformation is crucial, as it is not only about spreading false information, but also about altering public perception and judgement, eroding trust in institutions and fostering social polarisation (DSN, 2022; DSN, 2023a). This opinion coincides with other authors such as Artega and Olmo, who point out that "disinformation makes it possible to fragment, isolate and manipulate infected public opinions, discredit and question objective facts and accredit virtual emotions and induced perceptions as real" (Artega, 2020) and "when the falsehood becomes more subtle, more complex, has been created with tactical intentionality, responds to a strategy and pursues objectives, that is when we can speak of disinformation" (Olmo, 2019).

3. HYBRID STRATEGIES AND GREY ZONE

Hybrid strategies are defined as an approach to conflict that combines conventional and unconventional elements, using a variety of tools - military, economic, diplomatic, cyber and information - to achieve strategic objectives (Colom, 2018). These tools include not only the direct manipulation of information, but also the creation of narratives that alter public perception over the long term, a central feature of both influence operations and disinformation (Torres Soriano, 2022). The use of these strategies is justified by their ability to exploit vulnerabilities through an approach that integrates the military with other domains, such as the cognitive and informational, creating a synergy that multiplies their effectiveness in low-intensity contexts (Walker, 1998).

The grey zone, meanwhile, is characterised by the application of tactics designed to remain below the threshold that would trigger open warfare. This concept is fundamental to understanding how state and non-state actors challenge the international order without crossing the red lines that would lead to armed conflict (Martín Renedo, 2022). In practice, grey zone operations range from economic coercion and the use of disinformation to the employment of special forces in covert missions, which are designed to be difficult to attribute directly to a state (McCuen 2008). The overlap between the physical, virtual and cognitive planes in the grey zone allows these strategies to be executed more effectively, as the perception of conflict is manipulated to disorientate target populations and weaken their ability to respond (Lupiáñez Lupiáñez, 2023).

Hybrid strategies[6] and the 'grey zone' is an evolution of historical tactics and strategies of irregular warfare, now enhanced by modern technology and information networks, allowing for more effective and less detectable influence in a global context (Hafen, 2024). Disinformation, propaganda and influence operations are essential

[5] Although this definition is precise, it is important to consider that disinformation can also be motivated by non-political or non-ideological objectives, such as organised crime or the profit-seeking of non-state actors (DSN, 2023a; Marchal González, 2023).

[6] Although the concept of 'hybrid warfare' has been the subject of multiple definitions and debates, there is still a lack of consensus on its precise characterisation, which complicates its study and application in contemporary strategic analysis (Colom, 2018b).

components of these strategies, which are deployed in an increasingly complex and globalised environment (Hoffman, 2009).

Modern propaganda goes beyond the simple dissemination of messages; it is a sophisticated manipulation of information to shape perceptions and behaviour in line with the strategic interests of those who promote it (Calvo Albero, 2017). Propaganda[7] can be seen as an extension of psychological operations, where the aim is not only to influence public opinion, but also to demoralise the adversary and alter their decision-making capacity (Rid, 2021)[8] . Since 2023, such operations have intensified, especially in the context of global conflicts such as those in Ukraine and Gaza, where propaganda has played a crucial role in polarising public opinion and manipulating information on an international scale (DSN, 2024).

In this context, disinformation not only acts as a tool of influence, but also facilitates other hybrid operations by weakening social cohesion and trust in institutions, creating an environment conducive to the implementation of more aggressive tactics without the need for open military confrontation (Alastuey Rivas et al., 2024). It is crucial to understand that hybrid strategies are not a new phenomenon, but rather an evolution of irregular warfare tactics that have been employed throughout history, although social changes and the advance of technology have greatly expanded the tools available for these strategies, allowing their application on a global scale and with a significant impact on international stability (Calvo, 2023). This can be seen clearly in the Russian Primakov/Gerasimov Doctrine, in China's 'Three War' conception or in the Western 'New Grey Zone Conceptualisation' (Adame Hernández, 2024).

3.1. FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE (FIMI)

The concept of *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference* (FIMI) refers to deliberate activities carried out by foreign actors with the aim of distorting information, manipulating public perception and influencing political and social processes in other countries. According to the joint report by the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and the European External Action Service (EEAS), FIMI encompasses a variety of actions including the dissemination of disinformation, propaganda and psychological operations that seek to sow discord and destabilise democratic societies (ENISA & EEAS, 2022). FIMI can also involve the manipulation of cultural and historical narratives to stoke internal conflicts and destabilise social order by exploiting sensitive issues that resonate with existing prejudices or fears in a society (Buvarp, 2021). The sophistication of these operations lies in their ability to exploit pre-existing rifts within target societies, exacerbating divisions and provoking reactions that undermine social and political cohesion (Allenby and Garreau, 2017). These activities can have profound consequences for the stability of democratic institutions, as they focus on exploiting social and political vulnerabilities (ENISA & SEAE, 2022).

In the context of FIMI, it is essential to recognise that these operations do not always involve the dissemination of completely false information. Often, they rely on subtle

[7] Specifically, propaganda is defined as a "set of techniques used, in a systematic way, to spread partial or biased opinions or ideas among the masses, with a proper, often political, intention" (Donoso Rodríguez, 2020, p. 30), which makes it a key tool in psychological operations.

distortions of real facts, employing techniques such as information saturation or the creation of information bubbles (Rid, 2021); making detection and response difficult. These strategies, referred to as "subtle manipulation of the truth", are particularly dangerous as they play with public perception and the credibility of information sources (Castro Torres, 2021). Moreover, the manipulation of information through non-traditional channels, such as social media and instant messaging platforms, allows foreign actors to maximise the impact of their campaigns by taking advantage of the viral characteristics and global reach of these tools (EEAS, 2024).

FIMI is framed within hybrid strategies. Propaganda and influence actions are key tools within the FIMI framework. Propaganda is employed to promote narratives that favour the interests of the foreign actor, using controlled or like-minded media to disseminate specific messages. These narratives are carefully designed to appear legitimate and often rely on biased or biased sources that lend credibility to the messages disseminated (Maggioni and Magri 2015). Narratives devised to generate distrust towards democratic institutions and polarise society (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). In addition, influence actions are aimed at shaping public opinion or influencing political decisions, which can include anything from manipulation of social networks to covert funding of political or media actors in the target country (EEAS, 2023). A recent example of this has been observed in the Romanian presidential elections (European Commission, 2024). The anonymity provided by digital platforms and the possibility of operating through intermediaries or *proxies* adds a layer of complexity to tracking and identifying the real perpetrators of these campaigns, making it difficult to implement effective countermeasures (Castro Torres, 2021). The use of these methods has allowed foreign actors to operate with an additional layer of anonymity and deniability, complicating efforts to identify and counter these activities (DSN, 2024).

4. COGNITIVE DOMINANCE AND DISINFORMATION

Although the conceptualisation of the cognitive domain is relatively modern, strategies to operate on it such as propaganda (Calvo, 2023), influence (Jordán, 2018) and destabilisation (Quiñones de la Iglesia, 2021) are not. These tactics have historically been used in diverse geopolitical contexts, evolving over time to adapt to new information technologies and changing social dynamics. For example, propaganda, which once relied exclusively on traditional media such as print and radio, is now dispersed through digital platforms and social media, allowing for greater penetration and speed in the dissemination of messages. These tools have acquired unprecedented sophistication, taking advantage of the speed and reach of the Internet and social networks to amplify their effects, as seen in the tactics employed by groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, which have used these technologies to influence global public opinion and legitimise their actions (Astorga González, 2020). The influence of digital platforms is such that they allow malicious actors to segment audiences and personalise messages, creating echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and hinder the dissemination of contrary information. This is enhanced by the use of algorithms that favour polarisation by prioritising sensationalist and emotionally charged content, which, in turn, facilitates the manipulation of the cognitive domain on a large scale (DSN, 2023b).

Louis Althusser's structuralist theory of ideological construction, where the media play a central role in the creation and maintenance of ideologies that dominate public perception, reinforces the understanding of how disinformation tactics are embedded in

the cognitive domain[9] (Althusser, 1971). In line with this, the manipulation of the cognitive domain involves the creation of perceived realities which, although they do not necessarily reflect objective reality, become the basis on which political and social decisions are made (Lupiáñez Lupiáñez, 2023). As various authors such as Foucault point out, language not only describes the world, but also acts upon it (Foucault, 1972), which reinforces the idea that the cognitive domain can be manipulated through the construction of narratives that reconfigure perceived reality.

In relation to disinformation, the grey zone will focus mainly on establishing the context, using strategies such as propaganda or disinformation, with the aim of gradually gaining a strategic advantage over the opponent, which would facilitate improving the effectiveness of future interventions (Hernández-García, 2022). Libicki reinforces this idea by explaining how cognitive operations do not always seek immediate results, but may be designed to sow doubt and confusion, affecting an adversary's ability to make effective decisions in the long run (Libicki, 2021). This approach underlines the importance of gradualism in disinformation strategy, where small changes in perception and narrative can culminate in a significant alteration of the perceived reality, causing the opponent to lose initiative and control over the situation. In this approach, the concurrence between objectives, strategic vision and gradualism should be emphasised.

The relationship between cognitive manipulation and political conflict can also be analysed from a Clausewitzian perspective. Clausewitz argues that war is a rational political act where one seeks to demoralise the adversary not only through direct conflict, but also by manipulating the passions of the population and the perception of reality (Clausewitz, 1976). Through disinformation it is possible to erode the morale of both an enemy army and, even more significantly, its population, with the aim of persuading its political decision-makers to stop their belligerent attitude, to bring about a negotiation or to obtain benefits in an already planned one (Rodríguez Lorenzo et al, 2023).

A fundamental factor to be considered, and one that is often only collaterally addressed, is the political relationship and impact. This aspect, though crucial, is often underestimated in analyses of disinformation, where greater emphasis is placed on the technical or tactical aspects, leaving aside the broader implications for governance and political stability. In a Clausewitzian logic, 'if war is political in nature, it is clear that the main target is not the enemy's armed forces, but the political leadership' (Calvo Albero, 2017).

It is the intersection between the disinformation used in hybrid and grey zone strategies; with the objectives pursued (especially political affectation) where they connect with society, the agenda and public opinion (Sartori, 2007). In this context, the manipulation of information and the creation of alternative narratives not only have an impact at the state or military level, but also have profound implications for the social and

[9] Spanish military doctrine underlines the relevance of STRATCOM (*Strategic Communications*) as a managerial function that integrates INFOOPS (*Information Operations*) and PSYOPS (*Psychological Operations*), applying social engineering and strategic communication techniques to shape the informational and cognitive environment. These capabilities enable the Armed Forces to achieve objectives that transcend conventional means, operating in an intangible realm that permeates all other domains (PDC-01, 2018).

cultural fabric. The construction of these narratives, which use film and media[10] as tools of emotional manipulation, remains central to understanding how malicious narratives can divide and confuse society (Davis, 2005). The ability of these strategies to alter public perception is not only due to the sophistication of the tactics employed, but also to the way in which these narratives align with existing concerns and fears in society, amplifying and redirecting them against specific targets (Castro Torres, 2021).

The construction of malicious narratives, which seek to divide and confuse society, becomes a powerful tool to destabilise not only governments, but also communities and social cohesion as a whole. The need to create a malicious narrative that can be exploited to one's own advantage (Rodríguez Lorenzo et al, 2023), an attractive narrative that sustains the hybrid strategy (Torres, 2022) and the inescapable generation of a narrative that sponsors, covers, strengthens and protects the grey zone (Hernández-García, 2022), give a great role to cognitive frameworks (Goffman, 2006), persuasive communication (Candelas, 2023) and public opinion (Sartori 2007). These elements, although underestimated in many analyses, are fundamental to understanding how disinformation inserts itself into the social fabric and becomes a force for change, eroding trust in institutions and altering the perception of reality. Understanding the relationship between cognitive manipulation and social change is crucial because, as described by Berger and Luckmann (2003), the social construction of reality is a dynamic process (externalisation, objectification and internalisation) that can be easily influenced by actors with control over media (social interaction) and narratives (language).

5. BUILDING NARRATIVES AND FRAMEWORKS

Narratives are structured narratives that seek to make sense of events and shape public perception. Since ancient times, propaganda has been based on the construction of narratives that shape public perception. It has been described how "necessary illusions" are created[11] in order for certain power groups to maintain their influence over society (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). In the context of modern disinformation, narratives are designed not only to convince, but to ingrain beliefs that are difficult to eradicate even when exposed as false[12] . Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler (2017) identify that political misperceptions are not simple information failures, but are due to misperceptions (false or unfounded beliefs held with confidence and resistance to correction), individual factors (such as cognitive biases or partisan or ideological identities) and resistance to change (passive to false information ascertainment or fact-checking processes); but also media and political environments (facilitating selective exposure to sources).

[10] A very eloquent example is the use of more traditional communication (such as cinema) and digital communication (high quality and high production quality videos disseminated *online*) in the communication strategies of organisations as un 'Western' as *Daesh*. With the use, in addition to technical aspects, of emotional tactics and the exploitation of cognitive biases such as anchoring, they have become key components in shaping the perception of the conflict (Astorga González, 2020).

[11] In Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), the expression "necessary illusions" is not found as a textual quotation. However, the concept is developed throughout the book. The concept "*necessary illusions*" comes from the later work of Necessary Illusions (Chomsky, 1992).

[12] According to recent research, susceptibility to misinformation is not only driven by partisanship, but also by a lack of careful reasoning and the use of heuristics, such as familiarity with the information and credibility of the source (Pennycook et al, 2021).

These narratives, once in place, can continue to exert a lasting effect due to cognitive inertia and resistance to changing established beliefs (Libicki, 2021; Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017). False and highly misleading narratives tend to prevail due to their ability to exploit human emotions, such as fear and moral outrage, which increases their impact and dissemination in social networks (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

The concept of *framing* refers to the cognitive structures that determine how we interpret and understand information. These frames act as mental shortcuts that organise information and allow us to interpret events according to prior schemes of meaning. Cognitive frame theory highlights how the interpretative structures that society uses to make sense of events can be manipulated through persuasive communication (Goffman, 2006). The dispute for the control of these frames has become a central element in the fight against disinformation; *framing* not only seeks to combat falsehoods, but also to establish alternative frames that reconfigure public debate (Tuñón Navarro, Oleart, & Bouza García, 2019). In the context of hybrid strategies, and by extension the cognitive domain, frames are used to focus public attention on certain aspects of reality while hiding or distorting others[13] . This process allows certain narratives to prevail, not because of their veracity, but because of the way they are presented and contextualised. This process is key to maintaining narrative control and preventing the fundamental premises of the actions undertaken in a conflict from being questioned (Colom, 2018).

In modern practice, *framing* has become a key tool not only to shape the interpretation of events, but also to influence the emotions of the audience, exploiting cognitive biases that hinder critical reflection (Astorga González, 2020).

5.1. IMPLEMENTATION

The construction of narratives and frames in the context of misinformation involves a complex process of creating narratives and cognitive structures designed to influence public perception in a deep and lasting way. This process is based on an advanced understanding of behavioural science, where cognitive biases such as anchoring, availability and confirmation are exploited to ensure that the narratives constructed are resistant to change (Astorga González, 2020). Sophistication in the construction of these narratives employs the ability to combine real facts with subtle distortions, making them harder to discredit and easier for the audience to accept (Rid, 2021). In this way, narratives, which exploit the cognitive and emotional biases of the audience, are structured to be simplified and emotional, which increases their effectiveness in media manipulation (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). These narratives seek not only to convince, but also to establish a perception of reality that is resistant to correction, even when its falsity is exposed[14] . Repeated exposure to fake news increases its perceived credibility, even when it is initially plausible. This effect, known as the 'illusion of truth', plays a crucial role in the permanence and acceptance of false narratives (Pennycook et al, 2021).

[13] Research suggests that the interaction between social networks and human psychology, in particular the tendency to use mental shortcuts and rely on familiarity, contributes significantly to the spread and persistence of fake news (Pennycook et al, 2021).

[14] Another example would be "memetic warfare", which uses memes and other forms of viral disinformation, seeks to create and disseminate narratives that alter the perceptions and emotions of the target audience, achieving a lasting impact that is difficult to counter, especially when it involves parody content and civilian sources (Arias Gil, 2019).

Moreover, *microtargeting* or segmentation of the population according to their beliefs and values has allowed messages to be tailored specifically to each group, coupled with the proliferation of alternative media and channels (and sometimes opaque to the majority of the population and public opinion) has amplified the ability of these frameworks to influence public perception, increasing the effectiveness of manipulation (Astorga González, 2020). This personalised approach to disinformation dissemination maximises the impact on different segments of society, fostering polarisation and reinforcing pre-existing beliefs while making detection more difficult (Maggioni and Magri, 2015).

The impact of these narratives and frames is such that, even when discredited, they can continue to influence public opinion due to cognitive inertia, a phenomenon in which previously established beliefs are resistant to change (Libicki, 2021). This is particularly evident in the way certain narrative frames persist in public discourse long after they have been proven false, continuing to influence social perception and action (Juurvee and Mattiisen, 2020). In this way, the construction of narratives and frames becomes a powerful tool for shaping public perception and maintaining control over the interpretation of reality.

5.2. IMPACT OF NARRATIVES AND FRAMEWORKS IN THE COGNITIVE DOMAIN

Narratives and frames have a profound impact on the cognitive domain, shaping not only how events are perceived, but also how they are understood and remembered. It has been noted that the creation of a malicious narrative can be exploited to the benefit of those who control the narrative, giving great power to cognitive frames and persuasive communication (Rodríguez Lorenzo et al, 2023; Torres, 2022). These elements are fundamental to understanding how disinformation becomes embedded in the social fabric and becomes a force for change, eroding trust in institutions and altering perceptions of reality. Moreover, these frames not only influence individual perception, but also affect collective memory, conditioning the way societies remember and learn from historical events, which can have long-term repercussions on social cohesion and the formation of national identities (Aznar Fernández-Montesinos, 2021). Propaganda and disinformation not only operate through direct messages, but also shape the cognitive environment in which these messages are interpreted, creating an environment of uncertainty and mistrust that facilitates the manipulation of public opinion (Lupiáñez Lupiáñez, 2023).

Cognitive manipulation has proven capable of altering not only the immediate perception of reality, but also of shaping long-term patterns of thought and behaviour (Astorga González, 2020). The impact of these narratives in the cognitive domain is amplified by the use of information technologies that allow for rapid and massive dissemination, which makes the effects of disinformation more lasting and difficult to counteract (Lupiáñez Lupiáñez, 2023).

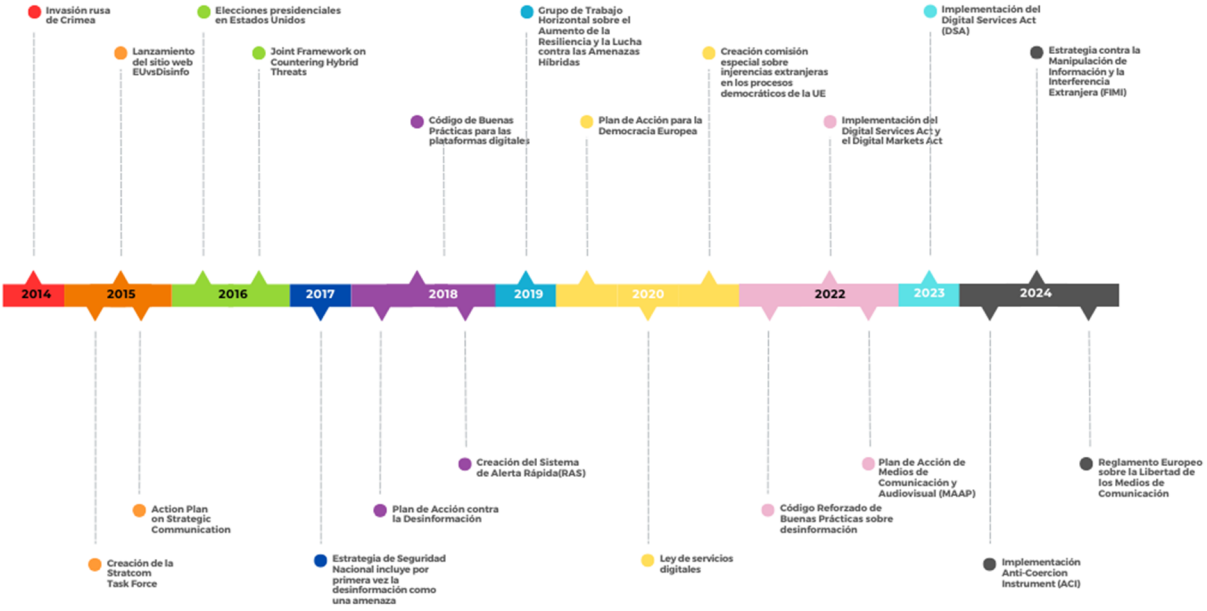
6. EVOLUTION OF DISINFORMATION

The EU has implemented a set of coordinated policies and actions to combat disinformation, recognising its significant impact on the democratic stability and security of member states. The relevance of this threat intensified after events such as the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the 2016 US presidential election, which highlighted how

disinformation could be used as an effective tool in hybrid conflicts and electoral interference (EEAS, 2015). The main milestones can be seen in Figure 2 .[15]

Figure 2

LAS POLÍTICAS DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA EN LA LUCHA CONTRA LA DESINFORMACIÓN



Source: Own elaboration.

In Spain, the perception of misinformation has evolved significantly in recent decades, starting in the second half of the 2010s, marked by a growing recognition of the risks associated with the circulation of false and manipulated information, both nationally and internationally (Badillo and Arteaga, 2024).

Political polarisation in Spain, accentuated by the conflict in Catalonia and the growing fragmentation of the political spectrum, has been a relevant factor in the perception of disinformation (Badillo and Arteaga, 2024). Sixty per cent of Spaniards perceived a great political division in the country, and more than 70 per cent considered that disinformation was contributing significantly to this division (CIS, 2021).

Spaniards' trust in the media remains low (below 5 out of 10)[16] , while the influence of social networks is increasing[17] (CIS, 2024). The Media Trust Index, elaborated by Eurobarometer, shows a significant lack of trust among Spaniards. Forty percent of those surveyed in Spain did not trust the traditional media, 12 points higher than the European

[15] For more information on the evolution of EU actions, see *Spain in the face of disinformation: Hybrid challenges and conventional responses (*Adame Hernández, 2024).

[16] On a scale of 1 to 10 on the trust they have in the media, trust has gone from 4.3 in 2021 to 4.2 in 2022 and 4.1 in 2023 and 2024. The trend is more pronounced as it decreases with age: the 25-34 age group rates it at 2.88 and the 18-24 age group at 3.45 (CIS, 2024).

[1717] The percentage of Spaniards influenced by social networks and the internet when making political decisions has increased from 8.6% in 2021, to 9.4% in 2022, 10.3% in 2023 and 16.2% in 2024 (CIS, 2024).

average, and 58% believe that the media provide information subject to political or commercial pressures, 15 points higher than the European average (Eurobarometer, 2024).

Digitalisation and the penetration of social media have played a crucial role in the evolution of the perception of misinformation. According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2024, Spain has experienced a steady increase in the use of the internet and social media. DESI indicates that, in 2024, 96.45% of Spanish households had access to the internet, 88.23% of the population has higher digital skills[18] and 34.4% of companies use several social networks (compared to 28.5% of the European average (DESI, 2020). This high level of connectivity has increased the population's exposure to disinformation campaigns. The growing importance of social media as the main channel for accessing information[19] , especially among young people[20] , suggests a move away from traditional news formats and a preference for visual and brief content (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024).

Finally, the global context has also influenced the perception of misinformation in Spain. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, triggered an "infodemic", a term coined by the World Health Organisation to describe the overabundance of information, both accurate and inaccurate, which made it difficult for people to find reliable sources (WHO, 2020). During the pandemic, the Latam Chequea network verified more than 1,000 COVID-19-related fake news stories in Spain, many of which were widely spread on social media and messaging apps (Latam Chequea, 2022). This phenomenon exacerbated public distrust and further destabilised the information ecosystem, underscoring the need to strengthen national capacities to effectively detect and counter disinformation (OECD (2024). Amid a growing distrust of traditional media, affecting almost 70% of the population (Novoa-Jaso, Sierra, Labiano, & Vara-Miguel, 2024). Moreover, 37% of Spaniards actively avoid the news, a behaviour that seems to be motivated by the saturation of negative or controversial content that dominates current media narratives (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024).

Spain's institutional response to disinformation has evolved significantly since 2017, when the problem was first recognised in the National Security Strategy, to the implementation of more robust and coordinated policies in the following years. However, this evolution has been marked by both notable advances and some shortcomings in integrating more holistic approaches that include narrative management (Adame Hernández, 2024). .[21]

[18] These include sending/receiving emails; Making telephone or video calls over the Internet; Instant messaging; Participating in social networking; Expressing opinions on civic or political issues on websites or social networks; Participating in online consultations or voting on civic or political issues.

[19] WhatsApp has overtaken Facebook as the main source of information in Spain, with 36% of users using WhatsApp to access news, compared to 29% using Facebook. This transition highlights a shift towards more private, messaging-centric platforms (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024).

[20] TikTok and Instagram are growing rapidly among the under-25s. TikTok is used by 30% of this age group for information, while Instagram reaches 25%, surpassing more traditional platforms such as YouTube, which stands at 15% (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024).

[21] For more information on the evolution of Spain's policies against disinformation, see *España frente a la desinformación: Desafíos híbridos y respuestas convencionales (*Adame Hernández, 2024).

7. CURRENT MEASURES AND TOOLS TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION IN SPAIN

The core of Spain's infrastructure for combating disinformation centres on the Permanent Commission against Disinformation, which coordinates the operational response to disinformation campaigns. This commission acts under the supervision of the Secretary of State for Communication, which leads the government's strategic communication policy. In crisis situations, the Disinformation Coordination Cell manages the response, ensuring that the government's actions are swift and effective (ORDEN PCM/1030/2020, 2020).

The Forum against Disinformation Campaigns in the Sphere of National Security has been one of the main pillars of Spain's strategy against disinformation. In 2023, seven papers were presented that address various facets of the problem, from verification and prevention methodologies (such as *prebunking* and the inoculation theory[22]) to the analysis of Russian disinformation in the context of the war in Ukraine (DSN, 2023b). At the end of 2024, they presented the second edition of the Forum's work, advancing on aspects such as the role of the media and the communications departments of public and private institutions, FIMI, the link between disinformation and hate speech, and working hypotheses on the Spanish media ecosystem and public opinion in relation to disinformation (DSN, 2024b). The Forum channels public-private and public-social cooperation, articulating a strategic and multi-sectoral approach. The depth of its analyses, as well as its efforts to address a complex reality, are clearly evidenced in the evolution of its respective publications.

Or other initiatives such as the positive communication campaigns of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation to combat disinformation through verifiable narratives[23] , the development of technological tools such as ELISA[24] (Simplified Study of Open Sources) or the DANGER project (INCIBE. (2024), the Action Plan for Democracy[25] (MPJRC, 2024) or the order establishing the elaboration of the National Strategy against Disinformation Campaigns (Order PJC/248/2025, 2025). It is worth noting the lack of studies, reports or analyses on the impact of institutional measures against disinformation.

7.1. ACTION PROCEDURE AGAINST DISINFORMATION

The Procedure for action against disinformation regulated by Order PCM/1030/2020, has as its fundamental purpose the creation of a coordinated framework to detect, analyse and

[22] *Prebunking* is a preventive communication technique that consists of exposing people to a weakened version of disinformation before they encounter it, in order to increase their resistance and critical capacity against future attempts at manipulation. This strategy is similar to psychological 'inoculation', which seeks to generate cognitive immunity against false narratives (Maldita.es, 2023; Roozenbeek et al., 2022).

[23] Highlighting the campaigns "Voto exterior", "Tu Consulado", "Viaja Seguro" and information on the Ley de Memoria Democrática (DSN, 2024. p. 103).

[24] ELISA monitors websites suspected of fostering disinformation campaigns, enabling early detection and a more agile response by authorities (CCN-CERT, 2019). In 2023, it increased its capabilities, integrating artificial intelligence algorithms that allow it to identify disinformation patterns more accurately (DSN, 2024).

[25] Which provides, inter alia, for the implementation of Regulation (EU) 2024/1083 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 establishing a common framework for media services in the internal market and amending Directive 2010/13/EU (European Regulation on Freedom of the Media).

respond to disinformation in Spain (ORDER PCM/1030/2020, 2020), particularly in situations affecting national security. This procedure was approved by the National Security Council and falls within the context of European strategies to combat disinformation, particularly those set out in the 2018 EU Disinformation Action Plan.

The procedure is articulated in four fundamental axes: detection, analysis, response and evaluation; and in four levels of activation. The Secretariat of State for Communication is in charge of general coordination, acting in close collaboration with other ministries, the National Security Council Situation Centre and the Working Group against Disinformation. This inter-ministerial group is responsible for advising and proposing actions to the National Security Council, ensuring an integrated and coherent response . [26]

The implementation of the procedure provoked public controversy and led several organisations to file appeals and complaints before the Contentious-Administrative Court[27] . It has also been criticised for its lack of clarity in the definition of competences and fields of action of the different authorities involved (Gómez, 2020; Garrós Font & Santos Silva, 2021) or the lack of specialised resources (Badillo & Arteaga, 2024).

The Supreme Court established very clear limits on the work and scope of the "Procedure for Action against Disinformation" and the bodies it creates by stating that it does not create or grant new competences and cannot affect fundamental rights (Supreme Court, 2021). Thus restricting the protocol to an internal action plan limited to establishing coordination criteria. It also establishes a legal definition of disinformation[28] , something that the procedure does not do.

[26] Annex II sets out the functioning and mode of action of the permanent commission against disinformation (ORDER PCM/1030/2020, 2020).

[27] For more information on the Disinformation Action Procedure, see *Spain in the Face of Disinformation: Hybrid Challenges and Conventional Responses (*Adame Hernández, 2024).

[28] According to the ruling, disinformation is understood as "verifiably false or misleading information which is created, presented and disseminated for profit or to deliberately mislead the public, and which is likely to cause public harm" (Supreme Court, 2021). This definition is taken from the Disinformation Action Procedure (ORDER PCM/1030/2020, 2020) which in turn is taken from the European Commission's Communication COM (2018). The Disinformation Action Procedure limited itself in its point 1. Context to reproducing the European Commission's definition.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the article, we have analysed how disinformation is embedded in a broader context of geopolitical tactics and strategies, highlighting its role in FIMI. This broader context is enriched by the consideration of how narrative frameworks are strategically employed to steer public debate towards specific narratives that favour the interests of those who construct them, minimising or distorting aspects of reality that might contradict these interests (Tuñón Navarro, Oleart, & Bouza García, 2019; Astorga González, 2020). It has been argued that disinformation does not act as an isolated tool, but is part of a coordinated set of actions designed to influence public perception, manipulate the narrative and create uncertainty in political and social processes (Hoffman, 2009; McCuen, 2008).

Disinformation has had a critical impact on key events over the last decade, impacting both institutional stability and social cohesion. Analyses have revealed that public policies in Spain, while attempting to respond to these threats, have been insufficient due to their fragmented and predominantly reactive nature (Badillo and Arteaga, 2024). This has placed Spanish institutions in a vulnerable position in the face of increasingly sophisticated disinformation campaigns, which have exploited weaknesses in inter-institutional coordination and the lack of a comprehensive preventive approach (Bennett & Livingston, 2020).

The institutional response to disinformation has been limited by the lack of integration between cybersecurity and cognitive defence. The anonymity provided by digital platforms and the possibility of operating through intermediaries or 'proxies' adds a layer of complexity that makes it difficult to identify the real perpetrators of these campaigns (Castro Torres, 2021), fostering the need for a more proactive and forward-looking strategy (Arias Gil, 2019). While significant efforts have been made to improve surveillance and response to disinformation, these have been fragmented and lack the coherence needed to effectively address threats. An example is the absence of a proposed National Strategy to Combat Disinformation Campaigns since 2022 (DSN, 2022). This is clearly exemplified by the activation of Level 1 of the Disinformation Action Procedure. The lowest level of activation of the Procedure involves the concurrence of high-level State bodies such as the Secretary of State for Communication, the DSN, the CNI and the Secretary of State for Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence, among others (ORDEN PCM/1030/2020, 2020). It also assigns a predominantly reactive role, which reinforces the limited institutional response and scope.

Another example, the construction of narratives and frames by malicious actors has proven to be a formidable challenge, as these tactics not only distort reality, but also undermine trust in democratic institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 2003; Candelas, 2023), an element that has been little addressed in the Spanish institutional response, and where bets such as digital literacy or fact-checkers (DSN, 2021) yield very limited results. Luckmann, 2003; Candelas, 2023) an element little addressed in the Spanish institutional response, and where bets such as digital literacy or *fact-checkers* (DSN, 2021) yield very limited results (Pennycook, Bear, Collins, & Rand, 2020; Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017). In fact, false and highly misleading narratives tend to prevail due to their ability to exploit human emotions, such as fear and moral outrage, which increases their impact and diffusion in social networks (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Analysis of the effectiveness of the proposed strategies suggests that a comprehensive approach combining technical and cognitive measures is essential to develop an effective response to misinformation. Current strategies, although necessary, have failed to anticipate and respond to emerging threats due to their reactive (Badillo and Arteaga, 2024) and partial approach that does not address key elements of the problem such as narratives. There is a clear need to adopt a more proactive and prospective stance, allowing institutions not only to respond to current threats, but also to anticipate and neutralise future disinformation campaigns (Libicki, 2021).

One of the initiatives proposed by the main actors is the implementation of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, which can play a crucial role in the early identification of disinformation patterns (NATO, 2021; INCIBE, 2024; DSN, 2024b; European Commission, 2025). These technologies enable real-time analysis of large volumes of data, facilitating the detection of anomalies that could indicate the presence of coordinated disinformation campaigns (Rodríguez Lorenzo et al., 2023). However, as discussed throughout this article, for these tools to be effective, it is essential that they are integrated into a broader framework of institutional defence, including both cybersecurity and cognitive defence.

In addition to technological measures, research underlines the importance of strengthening both society and its institutions, increasing their strategic depth and capabilities. The fight against disinformation requires greater investment in economic, institutional and human resources (Rodríguez Lorenzo et al., 2023), commensurate with the magnitude of the threat. Incorporating the logic of the hybrid society into strategic and tactical proposals can increase their effectiveness and reduce the costs of investing in the response (Arias Gil, 2020). This logic allows for greater adaptation to emerging threats and a more efficient response. It is essential for Spain to develop robust national capabilities, especially given that FIMI involves not only major powers such as Russia and China, but also a variety of actors (Badillo & Arteaga, 2024), for which the response cannot rely exclusively on international bodies such as NATO or the EU.

It is necessary to overcome the paradigm that focuses on fostering critical thinking and media literacy and move towards the concept similar to the one proposed by Arias Gil of "strategic citizen" (2020). This new approach implies transforming the logic of individual responsibility, which is passive, atomised, partial and of medium/long-term development, into a more proactive, collective and coordinated social response. Rather than relying solely on individual training in critical skills, the strategic citizen is a collective, proactive, decentralised (but coordinated) resource that can act quickly in the face of disinformation threats. This shift in approach could enable a more dynamic and effective response, addressing threats in the short term and facilitating greater adaptability to the changing tactics of disinformation actors.

A key recommendation is the need for specific training, simulations and manoeuvres in the area of disinformation, similar to those carried out in other areas of security and defence. This proposal is absent from all the documentation analysed above. These activities would enable institutions to be better prepared to identify and neutralise disinformation campaigns before they cause significant damage. In addition, a shift towards a more proactive (use of strategic communication) and forward-looking posture is proposed, allowing potential attack vectors to be identified and preventive measures to be taken to minimise, neutralise or mitigate them before they become real threats. This

includes incorporating the asymmetric logic of the hybrid society, where tactical and strategic responses can be more effective and less costly (Arias Gil, 2020).

Finally, the creation of more dense and coordinated structures in the fight against disinformation is presented as an essential measure. This includes the training of middle management in public administration, the private sector and civil society, especially in areas related to communication, foresight and socio-political analysis. Such training is crucial to ensure that all sectors of society are aligned and prepared to face the complex threats posed by disinformation (DSN, 2022). In this sense, the dispute for the control of narrative frames has become a central element in the fight against disinformation, where the aim is not only to combat falsehoods, but also to establish alternative frames that reconfigure public debate (Tuñón Navarro, Oleart, & Bouza García, 2019). Similarly, knowing, eliminating, mitigating or neutralising one's own cultural, political or social vulnerabilities is key to eliminating attack vectors, reducing vulnerabilities and increasing residency.

In conclusion, there is a need for a significant change in the way Spain deals with disinformation. It is not enough to implement technical or reactive measures; it is essential to develop a comprehensive strategy that strengthens social, cognitive and technological aspects, promoting a more coordinated, proactive and adaptive defence against disinformation threats in an increasingly dynamic and complex global hybrid environment.

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