



RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN AUDIOVISUAL COMMUNICATION IN ECUADOR

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ABSTRACT

Disinformation is multiplied through social networks, and many hoaxes show Russian interests, to the extent that the US and the European Union qualify RT and Sputnik as media outlets for the circulation of false facts. This research aims to identify the disinformation generated by RT and Sputnik related to Ecuador in audiovisual media and social networks. The methodology is qualitative and quantitative, descriptive in scope. It is evident that Russian disinformation is present in the country, especially online. It is important to promote media literacy and open a debate on regulation that promotes freedom of expression.

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1. Introduction

Disinformation is "the deliberate dissemination of inaccurate information that aims to undermine public trust, distort facts, convey a particular perception of reality and exploit vulnerabilities in order to destabilise" (Olmo-y-Romero, 2019, p. 4). According to experts, one of the factors multiplying disinformation is the fact that traditional media are being replaced by social networks as reliable information channels, which focus the public's attention on stories rather than sources (Espaliú-Berdud, 2023).

Disinformation is "a powerful weapon used in various international conflicts. Recent wars around the world have carried a very heavy burden of disinformation processes and strategies" (Alonso-Martín-Romo, et al., 2023, p. 2). Disinformation is seen as a form of belligerence whose "aim is to influence the opinions and actions of the citizens of a sovereign and democratic state" (Hanley, 2020, p. 74). According to the European Union, disinformation is one of the greatest threats to democracies because they are "more susceptible to manipulation than totalitarian systems and consequently find it more difficult to offer forceful responses" (Olmo-y-Romero, 2019).

For a decade, there has been evidence of many countries spreading disinformation through social media, but Russian intelligence services dominate the online manipulation market (Bay, 2019) with the aim of falsifying the official version of events and infecting the information environment (White, 2016). In political destabilisation campaigns, "the Russian government has been accused of using clear weapons: the internet and social media, which provide access to the heart of liberal democracies" (López-Olano & Fenoll, 2019, p. 3).

It is important to note that "although Russia is the paradigm of government manipulation, the rest of the governments also play a decisive manipulative role. In fact, we could say that all governments play this role in one way or another" (Varela, 2022, p. 8). Russia does not have a monopoly on the digital sphere and disinformation campaigns, "but any state - as well as non-state actors - can use them to achieve their objectives" (Miguel-Gil, 2019, p. 116). However, Russian disinformation.

This phenomenon is not a new one. However, it is only now that it has expanded its reach by exploiting the possibilities offered by the internet. It has adapted its tactics and instruments to the digital world, adopting vectors and languages specific to this domain. It has also taken advantage of the weaknesses of advanced societies to blur the line between fact and fiction and has used freedom of expression to introduce extremist content. (Colom-Piella, 2021, p. 464).

The phenomenon of Russian disinformation can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with antecedents evident in the Third International (1919) in support of communist subversion. Four years later, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) established a specific office to coordinate Soviet disinformation (Colom-Piella, 2020). This office sought to generate incorrect or imaginary images of reality in the adversary's mind, with the intention of influencing their decisions in a manner beneficial to Moscow (KGB, 1972, p. 79). With the onset of the Cold War, the KGB established Department D (desinformatsiya) to organise and systematise disinformation, in coordination with the Communist Party and the Politburo (U.S. Department of State, 1981). However, due to the limited size and immediacy of the media ecosystem, hoaxes had a minimal impact.

In the 21st century, the media continue to serve as a conduit for disinformation. Russia has a significant presence in the online media landscape, with prominent outlets such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik News. These platforms are designed to disseminate information about the country and its policies, with the objective of promoting a favourable image of Russia. RT and Sputnik are the primary sources of disinformation for Europe (Kragh & Asberg, 2017; Cvjeticanin et al., 2019) and beyond. From their inception, RT and Sputnik were instruments of disinformation.

The Federation now has privileged disinformation tools and communication channels, as well as a network of international contacts that plays a key supporting role. In this context, specifically in 2013 and 2014, two well-known tools at the service of disinformation policy, Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, were created with the objective of deepening the internal division within the European Union (Méndez, 2022).

The US and EU governments describe RT and Sputnik as open propaganda generators for the Russian government. The US State Department's January 2022 special report noted that: "RT and Sputnik media are critical elements of Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem [...] using the guise of mainstream international media to provide disinformation and propaganda support for the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives" (US Department of State, 2022).

In March of the same year, 2022, the European Union imposed sanctions on the state media RT and Sputnik (European Council, 2022) because of the Kremlin's systematic manipulation of information and because they posed a threat to public order and security. Russia's decision was influenced by the following fact:

Russia carried out disinformation activities of unprecedented malice and scale, both in traditional media and on social media platforms, to mislead its citizens at home and the international community on the eve of and during its war of aggression against Ukraine, which Russia launched on 24 February 2022, demonstrating that information can also be used as a weapon. (European Parliament, 2022, C).

Previously, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union stated that Russia carried out disinformation campaigns on Covid-19 in order to undermine democratic debate and increase social polarisation (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2020).

RT and Sputnik in Spanish are also identified as the foreign media with the highest incidence of disinformation in Spanish-speaking countries, according to studies by organisations dedicated to monitoring international economic and political changes (Ponce de León, 2022).

On the basis of the above, and with the intention of highlighting the disinformation practices promoted by the Russian government in Latin America, the case of Ecuador will be studied. This is also due to the Andean country's strategic interest for Russia, given its trade relations, its mineral resources, which are now attracting Chinese investment, and its historically neutral position in international politics. Perhaps the information or disinformation promoted by the Russian media is deliberate in order to position its agenda in public opinion. The purpose of this research is to identify the disinformation generated by RT and Sputnik, in Spanish, related to Ecuador, in audiovisual media and social networks.

2. Methodology

The research uses qualitative and quantitative methodology, which is descriptive in scope, as variables are measured and described as they manifest themselves in reality (Hernández-Sampieri, et al., 2014). Methodological triangulation is sought through three instruments: a survey, social network analysis and semi-structured interviews. A convergence of methods, or triangulation, seeks to explore different facets of a phenomenon using relevant instruments in a sequential manner (Creswell, 2014). Descriptive research produces data in "people's own words, spoken or written" (Taylor & Bodgan, 1984, p. 20), "aims to define, classify, catalogue or characterise the object of study" (Chorro, 2020).

The survey is based on non-probabilistic convenience sampling, because of the availability of participants and because it optimises time "according to the specific circumstances of both the researcher and the subjects or groups under study" (Sandoval, 2002, p. 124). A Google Form was used to collect the data between 15 January and 25 February 2024, which were processed in SPSS statistical software, version 22.

The survey is entitled "Foreign sources in local TV news in Ecuador and perception of fake news" and is based on the location of local free-to-air TV stations authorised by the Telecommunications Regulation and Control Agency (ARCOTEL, 2024). The use of this instrument is justified by the fact that international TV stations can cause bias or a predominance of interests in the audiences that receive them. Some international broadcasters are included in the response options (RT and CGTN, among others) because of references in previous studies, such as in "Coverage of the coronavirus by state-supported English-language news sources. Understanding Chinese, Iranian, Russian and Turkish government media" (Bright et al., 2020) and "Measuring the impact of misinformation, disinformation

and propaganda in Latin America" (Global Americans, 2021). The introduction to the study notes the following:

The right to freedom of expression is linked to the quantity and quality of information that citizens have access to; moreover, one of the first options is television news, which is why this survey aims to identify the diversity and plurality of sources, especially foreign ones, in order to identify possible frames of reference or themes on which viewers' public opinion is formed. Local television is studied because of its proximity and identity with the communities it broadcasts to.

Interviews are recommended in order to obtain direct information from key figures and when it is desired to inquire about subjective personal experiences (Pedraz et al., 2014). They "allow for a qualitative and nuanced expression of the information obtained, serving both as a contrast, confirmation and triangulation of information" (Sancho & Giró, 2013, p. 128). This technique has also been used in studies examining Russia's strategic interests, objectives and tactics in Latin America (Farah & Ortiz, 2023).

Given the risks of misinformation, 14 interviews were conducted with civic opinion leaders to determine their perceptions. The interviewees, who are of legal age, do not hold public office, are not currently involved in legal proceedings, and agree to share their opinions for academic research. The interviews were conducted between 12 and 27 January 2024, with nine men and five women, the average age of the interviewees is 38 years, and they live in different cities of the country. The professional profiles are: eight journalists, three educators and three people linked to the private sector.

- Male, 52 years old, journalist at Radio Bandida 89.7 FM, Ambato.
- Interviewee 2. Male, 42 years old, secondary school teacher of contemporary history, in Cuenca.
- Interviewee 3. male. 40 years old, journalist at Radio Centro, in Quito.
- Interviewee 4. female, 39 years old, journalist at Radio Bakana 100.5 FM, in Loja.
- Interviewee 5. Female, 28 years old, journalist with Oromar TV, in Machala.
- Interviewee 6. Female, 44 years old, public relations officer at the Guayas Provincial Health Department.
- Interviewee 7. Male, 27 years old, digital media journalist in Manta.
- Interviewee 8. Male, 34 years old, journalist for the digital media Poder Informativo, in Manabí.
- Interviewee 9. Female, 27 years old, journalist for the television channel Nortvision, in Tulcán.
- Male, 29 years old, journalist for Radio Caracol 91.3 FM, in Ambato.
- Male, 38 years old, management consultant, in Loja.
- Male, 42 years old, computer security expert, in Nueva Loja.
- Interviewee 13. Female, 32 years old, secondary school teacher, in Quito.
- Male, 55 years old, sociology teacher, in Machala.

The questions answered by the interviewees are:

1. What is your assessment of the Russian disinformation?
2. What are the motives behind Russian disinformation?
3. What are the most common platforms or channels used to spread Russian disinformation?
4. How are Russian disinformation tactics evolving?
5. How does Russian disinformation influence public opinion?
6. What measures are essential for citizens to identify Russian disinformation?

Finally, social network analysis on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) allows for the identification of emerging patterns, trends and key actors that impact on the dissemination of news and the formation of opinions. X contains large volumes of rapidly disseminating, interconnected data, which makes it an ideal tool for studying online interactions and the formation of virtual communities. X provides a constant stream of data that can be captured and analysed in real-time (Kumar et al., 2014; Russell & Klassen, 2019).

This allows for the observation of any potential influence of the Russian government on the publications on the X and Facebook accounts of the Ecuadorian media. The initial step is to identify the most visited Ecuadorian media outlets on the Internet (Del Alcázar, 2023), with the objective of determining those with the greatest audience reach and to ascertain the dissemination or treatment of Russian disinformation. The study will be conducted between 26 November 2023 and 26 February 2024. Social network analysis tools will be employed, as they provide current and valid information.

The following tools were employed: The social media platform FanpageKarma was utilized. For the purpose of data collection on social network X, the following tools were employed: Global Americans (2021, p. 143) and. CrowdTangle is "a tool that allows researchers to explore social network link sharing and account performance over time" (Alaphilippe, et al., 2022, DFRLab, 2020). It is important to note the following:

The closure of X's open API in February 2023 and the slow closure of Meta's Crowdtangle tool have contributed to the growing challenge of accessing social network data to analyse trends in the information space and their impact on societies. The manipulation of the information environment has driven the creation of new ecosystems of researchers working with publicly sourced empirical data. Open-source intelligence (OSINT) may encompass the analysis of publicly available data (Puyosa, et al., 2023).

3. Results

Table 1 presents the findings of a study on the broadcast of news on local television in Ecuador. Eight percent of international news items originate from the RT channel, with a focus on matters pertaining to defence, security, and politics. The sample analysed indicates that local television stations in the highlands are the most prolific in broadcasting news from international sources. Furthermore, it is evident that CNN ((Cable News Network-Cadena) and VOA (Voice of America) are the primary sources of news for the country's local television stations.

Despite operational challenges and a conventional business model, local television maintains its impact through revenues generated from analogue broadcasts and social media accounts. This is primarily due to the influence of news programmes. Local television news has a captive audience comprising adults, older adults and migrants (Ordóñez, 2018; Suing et al., 2018). However, there is a risk of misinformation being spread. This is mitigated by the deontological practices of journalism and the minimal rebroadcasting of RT news observed as a source of misinformation.

Table 1. Stations and themes of international TV channels

TV Stations	DW	AFP	CNN	Euro News	Reuters	RT	TVE	VOA	Other	Total
TV Academy	1									1
Ally TV			1							1
Asomavision			1							1
Breeze TV									1	1
Cañar TV								1		1
Ecotel TV			2		1		1	1		5
Majesty TV		1								1
Manavision Channel 9			1							1
Nortvision									2	2
Plus TV			1						1	2
Sucumbios TV						1				1
Telesuccess				2		1		4		7
Manabita television SOMOS PARTE DE TI (WE ARE PART OF YOU)		1								1
Catholic TV							1			1

TV Stations	DW	AFP	CNN	Euro News	Reuters	RT	TVE	VOA	Other	Total
The Meetings										
TV Norte			1							1
Unimax television		2						1	1	4
Unision TV							2	1		3
UV Television			2			1		2		5
Zaracay TV				1						1
Total	1	4	9	3	1	3	4	10	5	40
Topics	DW	AFP	CNN	Euro News	Reuters	RT	TVE	VOA	Other	Total
Accidents, tragedies earthquakes							1	1		2
Art, culture and diversity					1			1	1	3
Defence, security, armed conflict	1	2	1	2		2		3	2	13
Crimes, trials, legal matters			3				1	1	1	6
Sport			3							3
Human rights								1		1
Economy, business, trade								1		1
General interest									1	1
Environment			1							1
Other issues		1								1
Politics, Government, Elections		1		1		1	2	2		7
Religion			1							1
Total	1	4	9	3	1	3	4	10	5	40

Source: own elaboration, data collected through direct observation.

Prior to the analysis of social media metrics, the impact of the media was established, as evidenced by Table 2. Despite the popularity of conventional media outlets such as newspapers and television, there has been minimal growth in followers and low performance and interaction rates. In this sample, the digital portal Código Vidrio stands out, as each of its publications has a high impact on the audience. In light of the aforementioned evidence, the subsequent analyses will be based on the publications made by the Código Vidrio portal.

Table 2. Metrics in X between 26 November 2023 and 26 February 2024

The media	Page yield index	Fans	Growth in followers (%)	Post interaction rate	Post per day	Print interaction
Code Glass	57%	34.833	10,67%	0,38%	0,61	0,84%
Expreso Newspaper	5%	1.146.833	3,26%	0,01%	42,16	0,01%
Ecuavisa News	6%	2.177.254	3,99%	0,00%	0,00	0,00%
The Universe	48%	3.312.539	4,04%	0,00%	49,58	0,01%
The Ecuadorian Hour	56%	878.646	4,07%	0,02%	10,25	0,06%
La Posta	7%	395.537	7,16%	0,07%	9,17	0,04%
Metro Ecuador	-	6.265	-	0,05%	7,12	0,03%
Firsts	24%	1.266.590	0,70%	0,02%	49,96	0,02%
Vistazo Magazine	6%	752.029	4,18%	0,00%	0,00	0,00%
Teleamazonas News	10%	53.559	6,09%	0,00%	0,00	0,00%

Source: own elaboration, data collected through the Fanpage Karma tool, 2024.

It is evident that Russian disinformation is at play in Ecuador's stance in favour of Ukraine in the ongoing conflict with Russia, evidenced by the transfer of military equipment to that nation. According to Foreign Minister Gabriela Sommerfeld (Primicias, 2024), the non-operational military equipment in question includes helicopters "that have not been flying since 2021 and have not been recovered due to the war in Ukraine" (Pucará Defensa, 2024). Furthermore, the report "Campaigns of Russian Influence in Latin America" also mentions the following:

The maintenance of Russian equipment in the region is hindered by sanctions, rendering it inoperable in many cases. While it is relatively useless for the Latin American region to maintain worn-out military equipment, it is of high value to Ukrainian forces, which have the capacity and infrastructure to maintain it. Such an exchange would be beneficial (Farah and Ortiz, 2023, p. 26).

Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the evolution and sustainability of disinformation originating in the Sputnik and RT media. Table 3 presents the monitoring conducted by the Código Vidrio (Glass Code. A series of journalistic reports in Ecuador, led by journalist Juan Carlos Calderón, which investigate and expose cases of corruption and illicit enrichment in Ecuadorian politics. The term 'glass' symbolises the transparency that should exist in public office) portal between January and February 2024, along with the interactions observed on Facebook.

Table 3. Disinformation and interactions on Facebook reported by Código Vidrio.

Dates (2024)	Headlines	Interactions	Reactions	Comments	Shared	Repostings	Repo	Links
15 January	Noboa sparks Kremlin fury over Russian 'scrap metal' swap with US.	69	17	0	52	3	13	https://bit.ly/3wJ0bch
18 January	Russia shores up its propagandistic media plan in Latin America	3	1	1	1	9	34	https://bit.ly/3wQ5nuE
26 January	RT channel amplifies Correa's attacks against the Prosecutor General	0	0	0	0	0	0	https://bit.ly/49DICZJ
1 February	Russian media link dollarisation to drug trafficking and violence	0	0	0	0	0	0	https://bit.ly/48J9ENN
15 February	Russian media predicts sanctions on more Ecuadorian banana companies; Foreign Ministry denies this.	9	1	0	8	1	2	https://bit.ly/3IrvQS4
16 February	Disinformation masquerades as free debate of ideas	1	0	0	1	2	66	https://bit.ly/4aknibF
19 February	Russian banana sanctions lifted, after media demonisation attacks	0	0	0	0	0	0	https://bit.ly/43ec6uD
19 February	Ecuador backtracked on US arms swap: Russia torpedoed deal	21	19	0	2	0	0	https://bit.ly/3V36P7f

Source: own elaboration based on Código Vidrio website and Fanpage Karma.

Table 4. Disinformation on Ecuador published in the Russian media

Dates	Headlines	Web / Social network	The media	Links
11 August 2023	Expert: Ecuador's dollarisation has turned it into a mafia hub	Web	RT News Channel	https://bit.ly/435xodI
6 December 2023	Economist: Ecuador's security crisis started with dollarisation more than 20 years ago	Web	RT News Channel	https://bit.ly/4a5iuqr
22 December 2023	Criminals watched Fernando Villavicencio through Ecuador's 911 system'.	Web	RT News Channel	https://bit.ly/4a3UzaE
4 January 2024	Correa denounces that the Ecuadorian prosecutor "knew that Villavicencio was in danger" and did not protect him.	Web	RT News Channel	https://bit.ly/4a4jJpU
10 January 2024	Dollarisation and drug trafficking: the link behind Ecuador's internal conflict	Web	RT News Channel	https://bit.ly/3wRcR0p
16 January 2024	Dollarisation and drug trafficking: the case of Ecuador	X	RT en Español @ActualidadRT	https://bit.ly/48Sa12c
24 January 2024	Ecuador's indigenous movement asks Noboa for more transparency on the agreements with the US.	Web	RT News Channel	https://bit.ly/3v4heVx
25 January 2024	Colombianising' Ecuador or the real effects of the Southern Command visit	Web	RT News Channel	https://bit.ly/4a3Wz2C
26 January 2024	"There is a danger of US interference in Ecuador's sovereignty".	Web	Sputnik	https://bit.ly/4a6jjPL
28 January 2024	Ecuador is getting closer to the US: why it wants to get rid of its Russian armaments	Web	Sputnik	https://bit.ly/3wMsZjZ
8 February 2024	Soft power, hard hand: how Washington is trying to isolate Latin America from other partners	Web	RT News Channel	https://bit.ly/48DXs0Q

Source: own elaboration based on Código Vidrio website and Fanpage Karma.

A list of the publications referenced in Table 3 is provided below:

- 15 January/24. President Daniel Noboa announced that he would exchange military equipment of Russian origin with the United States for new equipment that would be used to combat criminal activity in Ecuador. However, Russia threatened to consider the country hostile for this exchange. Russia asserts that Ecuador's neutral stance in the conflict would be altered. Sputnik, citing statements by the Russian ambassador to Ecuador, has reported that the scrap metal will be used to support Ukraine. Since 2023, Laura Richardson, the head of the US Southern Command, has overseen the exchange of discontinued military equipment for new American-made equipment. The news reports indicated that the Russian government presumed that the material would be delivered to Ukraine for the purposes of repowering and repairing weaponry.
- 18 January 2024. Russia has established a network of disinformation in Latin America, primarily through Sputnik, RT, and Telesur. According to researcher Douglas Farah, the objective is to cultivate anti-American sentiment, portray the United States in a negative light, and erode democratic institutions in Latin America (Código Vidrio, 2024).
- 26 January 2024. RT and Sputnik have published a series of articles by former president Rafael Correa which contain sustained attacks against prosecutor Diana Salazar. The sources are tweets on X and websites where Correa accuses Salazar of responsibility for the murder

- of candidate Fernando Villavicencio and for inactions. The PR accounts of individuals and organisations aligned with Rafael Correa are also presented, including that of Radio Pichincha.
- 1 February 2024. RT links Ecuador's dollarisation with drug trafficking and violence. The Russian media presents a fallacious argument, suggesting that the current state of insecurity can be attributed to economic measures implemented over two decades ago. The examples provided are based on false premises. RT asserts that the transition to the use of the dollar as legal tender in Ecuador will inevitably result in the proliferation of illicit financial activities, including money laundering. However, this assertion is not supported by evidence. The introduction of the dollar as a legal tender does not, in and of itself, lead to the emergence of illicit financial practices.
 - 15 February 2024. The Moscow News has reported that the Russian government has sanctioned 18 banana companies in Ecuador in retaliation for the agreement to exchange Russian for US-made military equipment. However, the Foreign Ministry has denied that new sanctions have been imposed and has announced the lifting of the embargo on five Ecuadorian companies.
 - 5 January. Russia's phytosanitary control agency suspended the authorisation to import bananas to five Ecuadorian exporters, citing the detection of a pest. However, the Ecuadorian authorities rejected this measure, stating that the companies in question had complied with all surveillance requirements.
 - 16 February 2024. The ban was lifted. RT and Sputnik have been observed to exploit the lack of regulation of social media platforms to disseminate threats, insults and disinformation, which are then circulated "unfiltered" and have the potential to affect the political life of countries. There is a lack of standards or co-regulatory processes that encourage the adoption of good verification practices, which would help to prevent the growth of hoaxes and the infringement of each nation's sovereignty.
 - 19 February 2024. Despite the lifting of Russian sanctions on Ecuadorian banana exports, false arguments were disseminated, including those pertaining to the humpback fly plague and cocaine-contaminated cargo. The Ecuadorian Agency of Regulation and Phytosanitary and Zoosanitary Control has stated that, during inspections conducted between 2015 and November 2019, the humpback fly was not identified as an agricultural pest of bananas and was therefore not registered as such.
 - 19 February 2024. Ecuador has announced that it will not deliver military material to Ukraine following a disinformation campaign, articulated by RT and Sputnik, regarding the intended exchange with the United States. The principal themes of the Russian publications were the alleged interference in Ecuadorian sovereignty and the US "interventionism" in Latin America.

The findings of the semi-structured interviews indicate that, according to opinion leaders, Russian disinformation is believed to originate from "economic, cultural or even traditional interests." As time passes, it becomes increasingly evident that the population is being manipulated, as evidenced by the prevalence of celebrations that are not rooted in Latin America (B. Martínez, personal communication, 20 January 2024). Moreover, Russian disinformation is designed to erode confidence in democratic institutions (J. Pérez, personal communication, 21 January 2024). "Russia has consistently sought to maintain its position as a major power, which has resulted in a lack of stability in information" (J. Sangurima, personal communication, 16 January 2024).

The disinformation that originates from foreign governments is inherently unstable, as it is generated by their respective ministries and secretariats. This phenomenon also extends to the dissemination of false information. Information is disseminated via social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube that is not factual (F. Cedeño, personal communication, 20 January 2024). One strategy of disinformation is the creation of "the famous state-run channels that are in force, such as RT worldwide, which is trying to prevail the socialist culture" (B. Martínez, personal communication, 20 January 2024).

The motivations behind Russian disinformation can be divided into two categories: commercial and political. In the former, the objective is to "position products," as stated by B. Martínez in a personal communication on 20 January 2024. In the latter, the goal is to "undermine confidence in institutions, sow discord, manipulate perceptions, and weaken adversaries," as Martínez also stated in the aforementioned communication. It is possible for disinformation to assist in the achievement of geopolitical objectives. In particular, "Russian disinformation is designed to change public opinion, to change the public's view" (E. Lasso, personal communication, 18 January 2024) and "to weaken confidence in Western democratic systems" (K. Sarango, personal communication, 20 January 2024).

There is a perception that the Russian government is eager to exert political influence, particularly in neighbouring countries such as the former Soviet republics, as well as in China, India, and now even Ukraine, which is located within Russia's typical zone of influence. This is coupled with an ambition to enhance the country's international image in order to achieve the same level of political, social, and economic influence (V. Suárez, personal communication, January 2024). Another objective is the creation of social discord, which serves to exacerbate existing divisions and impede the development of these countries. (V. Suárez, personal communication, 18 January 2024).

The following examples are cited for illustrative purposes.

In the national indigenous strike of 2019, RT employed a presenter to discuss the alleged internal problems exclusively, and the broadcast made a notable impact on the political landscape. The objective was to destabilise Ecuador. The news was presented as being in turmoil, when in reality, the strike was concentrated in the capital. Another case occurred in Manta. In this instance, it was observed that when violent deaths occurred, images from other cities and other conflict-ridden countries were presented from Russia in order to misrepresent them as genuine. In the current year, Daniel Noboa has publicly declared his intention to deliver arms to the United States in exchange for new weapons. This prompted Russia to take action. This disinformation has the effect of making our nation feel affected (M. Moreira, personal communication, 16 January 2024).

The most prevalent platforms for the dissemination of Russian disinformation are social networks X and Facebook (B. Martínez, personal communication, 20 January 2024; R. Sánchez, personal communication, 12 January 2024; E. Lasso, personal communication, 18 January 2024; J. Pérez, personal communication, 21 January 2024), which include fake news websites and YouTube channels. Experts can monitor these platforms using data analysis tools and collaborate with the platforms themselves to identify and remove fake content (M. Pantoja, personal communication, 27 January 2024). However, one of the interviewees stated the following:

I do not consider the media to be influential in disseminating dubious information, citing the fact that RT has been "banned" in many countries. In the contemporary era, individuals have the capacity to access a plethora of information sources, including those in English, Russian, and Spanish. Through the use of translators, they can comprehend the nuances of these sources. In order to prevent the dissemination of these narratives, it is necessary to educate the population about the nature of fake news, its impact and how to identify it (E. Ponazheva, personal communication, 16 January 2024).

The dissemination of false information is facilitated by the lack of controls and accountability on certain online platforms. These platforms lack the necessary mechanisms to verify the veracity of the information they display, and they can easily upload information without any form of authentication. This was confirmed by F. Vásquez in a personal communication on 21 January 2024. "In essence, they are the most commonly employed means of disseminating false information due to their accessibility, visibility, and prevalence among a large user base. Furthermore, there are the Russian state media outlets RT and Sputnik, which are conducive to the government's ability to manipulate information. Additionally, there are messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, which facilitate the dissemination of misinformation. (V. Suárez, personal communication, 18 January 2024).

The interviewees indicated that Russian disinformation tactics and techniques "will continue to improve; however, there is concern about the impact on citizens who are not educated to identify false

information" (E. Santana, personal communication, 21 January 2024). Additionally, greater technological sophistication and adaptability to new platforms have also been observed (E. Villacís, personal communication, 22 January 2024). Russian disinformation tactics include the use of "deepfakes," the amplification of conspiracy theories, and the exploitation of sensitive issues such as immigration and political polarisation (M. Pantoja, personal communication, 27 January 2024).

Two pertinent testimonies regarding the mechanisms by which disinformation is disseminated in Russia are: In the contemporary era, there is a growing tendency to utilise artificial intelligence in the pursuit of specific objectives. Furthermore, the suggestion has been made to enact legislation to combat the dissemination of false information. However, it is first necessary to believe in our common sense and ability to verify (E. Ponazheva, personal communication, 16 January 2024). Furthermore,

the most obvious strategy is the one used by the Russian Federation when it comes to spreading information across platforms or social networks. This strategy is adapted to the countries according to the social network that is most used. In some countries, Facebook is the dominant social media platform, while in others, TikTok is more prevalent. Additionally, social media companies employ microtargeting, which involves creating niche audiences and disseminating content tailored to specific demographics. This strategy aims to enhance the impact of social media campaigns. When analysed by group, the information in question is found to have greater influence (V. Suárez, personal communication, 18 January 2024).

The dissemination of disinformation by the Russian media has the effect of sowing doubts and mistrust in democratic institutions, as well as promoting polarisation and social conflict (M. Pantoja, personal communication, 27 January 2024). This is achieved by "creating discord within society, which in turn leads to a war against state institutions and citizens" (V. Suárez, personal communication, 18 January 2024). The following is emphasised:

They do not allow for the dissemination of information regarding the missteps that are made within Russia. The fact that they only showcase content that they consider to be positive affects the veracity of their actions. They manage public opinion, emphasising that they have no mistakes and that the correct course of action is to remain within that orbit. Furthermore, target countries emulate Russian communication strategies, resulting in the proliferation of disinformation, which ultimately facilitates the imposition of totalitarian control over information. The most significant cases, with the greatest impact, are Venezuela, Cuba, China and North Korea (F. Vásquez, personal communication, 21 January 2024).

Among the measures proposed by citizens to identify Russian disinformation, it is suggested that "the first thing is digital literacy. The most effective method of avoiding misinformation is to ensure that individuals are able to discern the veracity of information by understanding its source, the identity of the creator, and the subject matter". (V. Suárez, personal communication, 18 January 2024).

It is of the utmost importance to collaborate. It is imperative that governments, academic institutions, and civil society work in concert to disseminate information, develop sophisticated detection tools, and educate the public on the recognition of disinformation. It is imperative that there is transparency and international cooperation in order to address this global threat (J. Pérez, personal communication, 21 January 2024).

Other suggestions include "the establishment of cultural radio stations" (B. Martínez, personal communication, 20 January 2024), "reading and analysing information sources (J. Sangurima, personal communication, 16 January 2024), and "the formation of a corporation between companies and the state to identify false information through the use of artificial intelligence" (V. Suárez, personal communication, 18 January 2024).

4. Conclusions

The objective of the research was successfully achieved. The evidence presented in tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 demonstrates the misinformation disseminated by RT and Sputnik about Ecuador between January and

February 2024. It reveals that this misinformation is present to a lesser extent in broadcast media than in digital media and social networks.

The Code Glass publications demonstrate the necessity for the dissemination of substantiated data to the community in order to distinguish disinformation disseminated by Russian media and to promote verified information. The indexes of the Glass Code portal's web and social media publications provide a basis for countering the subtle, but apparently effective, Russian disinformation campaigns, which are strategic for the Putin administration because of their reach and because "in the end, cheaply, Russia does not have to invest almost anything" (Glass Code, 2024).

RT and Sputnik exemplify the classic public agenda-setting approach (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), presenting themselves as impartial arbiters of information, yet in fact seeking to influence the way in which their audiences perceive and evaluate the issues they report. This entails defining the boundaries of their audiences' knowledge and judgments. Since the 1970s, there has been a growing body of empirical evidence indicating a causal relationship between media attention and the perceived relevance of news topics by audiences (Protess & McCombs, 1991).

The results of the social network analysis corroborate those of previous studies, indicating that RT's objective is to disseminate misinformation. Its broadcasts are characterised by the "juxtaposition of disparate elements, including factual information, partial truths, and rumours, on matters of direct Russian interest" (Montes, 2022, p. 42).

As in other studies, based on the testimonies of opinion leaders, this study argues that it is important to educate citizens in media literacy and provide them with tools to recognise false information (Murrock et al., 2018), with the intention of procuring critical thinking. The opinions of the interviewees serve as a basis for understanding that, even with minimal media literacy, people are aware of the intention of the Russian media to privilege its policies.

In parallel with media and information literacy, a debate is opening up in Ecuador on how to regulate online communication in a way that avoids disinformation and promotes rights and freedom of expression. This debate is already taking place in countries that have suffered the consequences of Russian disinformation. The Joint Statement on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression and other international authorities emphasises that "The human right to disseminate information and ideas is not limited to 'correct' statements, but the right also protects information and ideas that may shock, offend and disturb" (United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression et al., 2017). This declaration calls for a review of the measures taken by the EU to ban the broadcasting of Sputnik on its territory expressed in the following paragraph:

In our view, this measure is of such extreme severity that it is difficult to justify in a democratic society that recognises freedom of expression as one of its pillars. In a mature society such as Europe's, where there is also a great deal of pluralism and a wide variety of media with very different editorial approaches, the threat that disinformation from a Russian media outlet could pose is, in our view, hardly credible. Nor is it clear that banning them is an effective means of pressure [...] The 21st century has been heralded as the era of open and pluralistic communication, and yet we see new forms of public and private censorship emerging. (Tristante & Teruel, 2023, p. 327).

Future lines of research will include the following: 1) The study of the content of publications through text analysis (frequency, occurrence, n-grams) and discourse analysis, with the support of tools such as Octoparse 8 or Sketch Engine (Alina-Mogos et al., 2022). 2) In a similar vein, it is proposed that the influence of Russia on the deliberation of X in Ecuador can be established by monitoring specific accounts whose profile is favourable to their interests. This approach allows for the understanding of the discussion they generate in public opinion.

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