Article

Together against "the Truth Gap": A Proposal to Fight Invisibility and Misinformation Affecting Women

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Abstract: In 2020, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) marked its silver anniversary by releasing its sixth report on the representation of women in the global media landscape, and in 2021, the NGO Plan International unveiled the tenth edition of its report "State of the World's Girls: The Truth Gap". The study focused on how misinformation impacts equal opportunities for girls, adolescents, and young women worldwide, and proposed strategies to combat the "truth gap". These examples showcase the collective efforts made in recent decades by professionals, academia, institutions, NGOs, and activists to enhance the state of information globally. The aspiration is ambitious, aiming to make information more transparent, accessible, and inclusive, fostering equality, truth-seeking, and the visibility of women, young people, and rural populations. However, the findings from the GMMP reports, as well as the analysis conducted by Plan International and numerous other works, underscore that despite evident social changes worldwide—particularly in the educational, labor, and social realms for women—access to truthful and high-quality information remains elusive. Simultaneously, studies reveal a declining public trust, especially among young people, in traditional media, a shift to alternative information sources, and a deterioration in the quality benchmarks of the journalism profession. Journalism, a pursuit of truth from sources to the public, has historically been and should remain a pillar upholding democracy and freedom. This article employs a qualitative case study methodology to analyze the best practices proposed across various domains to safeguard information quality. Special attention is given to initiatives that aim to involve women and young people in the collective effort against misinformation.

Keywords: right to information; development; disinformation; equality; women; collaborative work

1. Introduction

If something characterizes the contemporary world we live in, it is the coexistence of both true and false information within the same public space and time, coupled with the pervasive and escalating presence of disinformation. This phenomenon is, to some extent, attributed, as asserted by Sádaba-Chalezquer and Salaverría-Aliaga (2023), to the inherent fallibility in all human activities, of which public communication is not exempt. The sheer volume of information disseminated through media and networks is vast, rendering its verification complex, despite the implementation of filters or control mechanisms. The responsibility here lies on media professionals, who should strive to combat what the Anglo-Saxons refer to as "misinformation" (Burnam 1975)—false messages propagated due to inadvertent error—and promptly resort to rectification.

Another manifestation of misinformation, denoted by the term "malinformation" (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), pertains to instances where information, even if accurate, should not be publicly broadcast for ethical, prudential, or timeliness reasons. Concurrently, alongside these forms of misinformation, exists what we currently identify as "disinformation", aligning with the definition provided by the European Commission: "verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and that may cause public harm" (European Commission 2019).

This form of disinformation, in political terms traced by some to Sun-Tzu's *Art of War* (Rodríguez Andrés 2018), or to *subrostrani* in Ancient Rome (Pina Polo 2010), is as ancient as the journalistic profession itself (Mayoral et al. 2019) and has been extensively studied and addressed for decades as one of the primary risks the profession has been facing. As early as 1994, Gabriel Galdón published the inaugural edition of his classic *Disinformation: Method, Aspects, and Solutions* (Galdón-López 1994), in which he highlighted the breadth and severity of the problem.

In our opinion, whatever the origin of disinformation—a lack of criteria when choosing sources, a lack of verification, or a desire to adulterate information for a spurious purpose—and therefore, whatever name it takes, its consequences are serious for the population that suffers from it.

Rather than reducing over time, the increase in information volume and events of singular relevance, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, or US politics, have multiplied the issue in recent years (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 2019; Salaverría et al. 2020), and have made misinformation challenging to detect for the vast majority of media and social network users (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 2019).

During this period, the effects of misinformation have experienced growth, a trend attributed to the emergence of social networking sites, the diminished credibility and influence of legacy media, and their shared spaces, distribution channels, and discursive tools being conceived as an integrated whole (Mayoral et al. 2019). Other contributing factors in categorizing misinformation as a more serious concern today include the virality of false messages becoming popular and their tendency to eliminate public trust in the media (Aguaded and Romero-Rodríguez 2015), along with effects such as confirmation biases (Elías 2018), among others.

Additionally, since 2016, marked by the popularization of concepts such as "fake news" and the so-called post-truth era, a more profound academic and professional debate has been open regarding the impact of disinformation and its role in what many perceive as a systemic crisis in the media (Reig 2015).

Consequently, there has been an increasing clamor from professionals, educators, academia, governments, and civil society to accelerate the enhancement of citizens' media literacy and to implement effective measures against misinformation. As for the concept of literacy itself, we agree with the UNESCO formula that refers to the so-called MIL (Media and Information Literacy) that refers to the essential competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) that allow citizens to engage with content providers effectively and develop critical thinking and life-long learning skills for socializing and becoming active citizens (UNESCO 2021).

Also, in this case, the imperative task of training the population in critical communication skills comes to the forefront. As emphasized by Durán and Machuca, among the objectives to be pursued are achieving an understanding of information's scope, diversifying sources, verifying authenticity, scrutinizing the coherence and quality of information, comprehending media structures, discerning content intentionality, conducting tracking work, and fostering an environment conducive to coexistence, understanding, and the construction of peaceful stages (Durán Becerra and Machuca Téllez 2018).

Concerning the implementation of measures against disinformation, various initiatives have emerged, including the efforts of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation established by the European Commission. The publication of an extensive report in 2018, which highlighted the scale and severity of disinformation (European Commission 2018), led to the establishment of the permanent European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO). In 2022, the Commission introduced its *EU Code of Good Practice* (European Commission 2022), a document collaboratively agreed upon by the supranational institution with platforms, advertising agents, data verifiers, academics, and civil society organizations, outlining the measures proposed by the European Commission in 2021. The code comprises 44 commitments and 128 specific measures in areas such as demonetization (reducing financial incentives for disinformation providers), transparency

(particularly in political advertising), user empowerment, researcher and verifier support, and the strengthening of the supervisory framework.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has also formulated its own protocols to contribute to the defense of accurate information through global public health campaigns that have emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with its far-reaching consequences in terms of misinformation about health (WHO 2020).

Additionally, noteworthy documents include the volume titled *Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation: Journalism Education and Training Manual* published by UNESCO (UNESCO 2020), which outlines approaches to educate and train users to become resilient to disinformation. At the national level, various proposals for action have arisen across different spheres, from the National Cryptological Center—affiliated with the CNI—which authored a report on best practices to fight disinformation (CCN-Cert 2019), to the initiative by the Audiovisual Council of Andalusia outlined in the *Decalogue aimed at protecting young people from hoaxes* (CAA 2020). Furthermore, there are the recommendations from the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia concerning misinformation related to COVID-19 (covering vaccines and the overall reality of the pandemic globally) (CAC 2020).

The aim of all these instruments is to provide users with knowledge and tools for detecting false information and confronting it through verification. Notably, among the demographics directly exposed to unverified information, and whose critical capacity, decision-making based on accurate information, access to timely sources, right to information, and freedom are compromised, young people stand out (Sádaba 2022; Soengas-Pérez et al. 2019), as do women in developing countries (Plan International 2021).

Herein lies the value that we hope this article will contribute to the state of the question and to the critical apparatus in this regard: to transfer to the academic sphere the direct opinion of those who suffer from this problem in particular, through a tool for social listening and questioning of those directly involved that is extensive, profound, global, and with intermediaries from civil society. We hope this will be given time and receive important quantitative support.

The article, of an exploratory nature, aims to respond to the perception, diagnosis, and possible solutions to the problem of misinformation from the point of view of the stakeholders themselves through a direct consultation tool involving content analysis of the local press in more than 70 countries and the survey and direct interview of protagonists in as many states.

2. Access to Information for Young People, Women, and the Developing World

The fourth of the UN Sustainable Development Goals asserts that we must: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality *education* and promote lifelong *learning* opportunities *for* all". It further elaborates in Section 4.3, "By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university", and Section 4.4, "By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship" (UN 2015).

The Right to Information is a universal right recognized in all states, practically without exception since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and is enshrined in our case in the current Spanish constitution of 1978. It is included in Article 20, which guarantees the right "to express and disseminate thoughts, ideas, and opinions (...), and to freely communicate or receive truthful information by any means of dissemination" (Constitución Española 1978).

The aforementioned universal right must also necessarily be acknowledged for the youth, a group for whom it holds vital significance due to their particular circumstances. This age group is notably active in matters related to social demands, resistance to authority, and cultural idealism (Sádaba 2022). Presently, they constitute a target audience with almost unlimited access to digital technology, rendering them particularly influential actors with a voice in that domain (Sádaba 2022). Moreover, they possess high self-esteem

regarding their knowledge of reality, a perception conferred by their continuous connection to networks and sources of information. They perceive themselves as well informed and precise assessors of a reality—specifically, information—that perhaps they do not control to the extent they believe. Thus, it is not evident that this potential access to information and high self-esteem necessarily align with the knowledge and skills required to obtain accurate information and form independent opinions (Feijoo et al. 2021).

However, what happens with the information that reaches groups of young women residing in developing countries? In most common cases, this is a population with less access to formal education, particularly in terms of digital literacy and technology (UNESCO and EQUALS Skills Coalition 2019). They possess fewer training and intellectual resources, among other factors, to confront misinformation. According to various studies, the figures for digital literacy and even reading comprehension reveal concerning data for a significant portion of this group (George Reyes and Avello-Martínez 2021). They represent particularly vulnerable populations (Santos et al. 2017) on several fronts as a gender and age group easily victimized in countries with less tradition in defending equality or where the rights of women and girls are less advanced. Young women, including adolescents, also face the vulnerability of being influenced by the opinions of others (underlying the phenomenon of influencers and their growing social weight) (Lozano-Blasco et al. 2023; Sádaba 2022). Additionally, they are populations that are often prioritized targets for advertising and media attention, both as subjects and objects of focus from brands and advertising. They are frequently simplified through various stereotypes (related to their appearance, social behavior, or identity) and encounter challenges in defining their place in the world and responding to their diversity (Vega Saldaña et al. 2019).

At the same time, there is the paradox that, as a social group, they suffer from marked invisibility: they are overexposed in some aspects, often receiving attention for formal and almost always negative aspects, and in other more positive aspects, they are made invisible. Often, there are no references for their behavior, or those they follow (often peers, friends, or characters they follow on social networks) are not particularly reliable in terms of information and transparency. They generally lack educational tools and skills to combat misinformation (Sádaba 2022).

3. Methodology and Objectives

In this article, we conduct a case analysis of two reports: the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2020, sponsored by the international initiative *Who Makes the News* (WACC 2020), and *The Truth Gap: (Dis)informed online. How malinformation and disinformation online affect the lives, learning and leadership of girls and young women* from Plan International (Plan International 2021).

Of all the documents with recommendations, states of affairs, and proposals published in recent years, we have chosen these two works because we believe that, despite sharing characteristics, objectives, and approaches to a reality that is partly similar and partly different, they are particularly interesting and represent complementary perspectives.

Both studies address women, communication, information, and misinformation. They both initiate a content analysis—a quantitative research method—that is extensive, relevant, and profound in examining the reality they seek to analyze. One focuses on media content, while the other examines the level of access to media and literacy. Both studies commence with an analysis of reality, and following this initial diagnosis, they propose points for improvement.

Both studies also employ a qualitative tool, combining statistical data and surveys (with several tens of thousands of responses) alongside the examination of specific cases (in the case of the GMMP) and in-depth interviews (characteristic of the Plan International study). Both studies have a lengthy historical trajectory that enables them to draw conclusions and analyze long-term trends in the reality under examination. They are international endeavors that compile a significant number of items analyzed by esteemed experts, pro-

viding them with the depth, credibility, and consideration essential for their inclusion in our research.

Furthermore, as a counterpoint, we integrate reflections achieved from the analysis of a third document that, we believe, will contribute to contextualizing certain issues. While this study is distinct, it is also quantitative, longitudinal, an extended over time (with its first edition dating back to 2012), focusing on young people and media consumption. This document pertains to the Reuters Institute's annual survey on information habits, *Digital News Report* (Newman et al. 2023; Amoedo-Casais et al. 2023 for consultation of the edition on Spain).

We will now analyze the genesis, methodology, and results obtained in each of the reports. The objective is to address the primary aim of this research: uncovering the actual nature of the "truth gap" and the presence of disinformation in the daily lives of girls and young people in the developing world, and to venture—from their own opinion and that of the experts who give them a voice—some proposals for action to reduce this gap.

4. Results

4.1. The GMMP Report: Who Makes the News?

The GMMP (Global Media Monitoring Project) is an initiative originating from the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), "a non-governmental organization established for the defense and promotion of communication rights in order to promote social justice" (WACC 2020). In 2020, it celebrated its silver anniversary by publishing its sixth report on the representation of women in the global media.

The concept behind this analysis is straightforward: it involves monitoring the primary media outlets of countries participating in the study, including press, television, radio, and, in recent years, Twitter and other social networking sites, throughout an entire day. The task is carried out by volunteers from universities, media organizations, and NGOs with an interest in communication and women's issues.

The inaugural GMMP took place on 18 January 1995, a few months preceding the first World Conference on Women in Beijing, and covered 71 countries, encompassing diverse economic, developmental, and political system situations, and more. Over its six editions, the number of countries, media outlets, and volunteers involved has expanded, culminating in the latest iteration analyzing media in 116 countries and over 30,000 news items.

In all the Global Media Monitoring Programs conducted in the years 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020, consistent elements have been analyzed (WACC 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020). Therefore, it is a longitudinal investigation that observes the same phenomenon over a period of time, introducing precise changes in the indicators to ensure the analysis is consistent and possesses relevant statistical value. Within each project, a technical sheet is incorporated to describe the methodology, referring to concepts such as density, weighting, precision, and limitations of the study, to enhance its reliability.

The GMMP methodology categorizes news into seven thematic areas: politics/government; economy; science/health; crime/violence; celebrities/arts/media/sports; and girl–woman. In its analyses, it evaluates the volume of news corresponding to each of these categorizations, along with the presence of men and women in each category. The methodology further considers the medium, from which it is inferred, for example, that audiovisual media are inclined towards news about celebrities and media, while the press is more inclined towards economic and science news. It also takes into account the geographic area where the news is produced. In each case, the presence of women as authors, protagonists, experts, or sources in the news is analyzed to answer the question of who takes center stage in the stories conveyed through the media (WACC 2020).

The objective of the study is to reveal who authors the news, the topics it covers, and the image of women it conveys. To achieve this, the study begins with an introductory presentation of the context or state of the matter, followed by the "Executive Summary", wherein the findings of the edition are specified. The rationale behind the media selection,

justification for the volume of analyzed content, and the identification of situations of special relevance (in the latest instance, referring to the emergence of COVID-19 and its impacts on the study) are outlined, particularly on the chosen date.

Subsequently, the qualitative results derived from the longitudinal analysis "A day in the news of..." and a meticulous examination of selected examples, serving as case studies in each of the countries, are detailed. This approach combines both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, enabling a more profound understanding of the conducted study. The work concludes with insights, recommendations, and medium- to long-term objectives, facilitated by the extensive timeframe of the study, allowing for the observation of the phenomenon and its evolution over time.

It is important to note that in the sixth edition of "Who Makes the News" (WACC 2020), there is only one section dedicated to studying the issue of misinformation. It is specified as one of the items in the "Celebrities, Art, Media, Sports" category, under the heading "Fake news, inaccurate information, disinformation, bad information". The analysis reveals that only 21% of the total information referring to this issue is carried out by women. The unique structure of the model does not permit further analysis of this specific item, as it is not the subject of additional studies, nor is it addressed in any of the specific cases studied.

One piece of information provided by GMMP 2020 indicates that it would take 67 years to achieve parity between men and women in communication. In other words, the presence of women as information agents, expert interlocutors, and active subjects is only superficial. Despite the apparent changes in the public visibility of women, breaking the glass ceiling, and empowerment between 1995 and 2020, these changes are, in real statistical terms, still modest and not very significant (WACC 1995, 2020). Thus, in those 25 years, the analysis of a typical day in the media paints a static image, with few noticeable positive changes when, at first glance, it seems that the reality of the world has evolved at a much faster and solid pace. Is this a mirage, or are the media, in this case, lagging behind society?

The 1995 research revealed that only 17% of news subjects—people who are interviewed or are the focus of the news—were women. Twenty-five years later, this figure has increased to 25% in 2020 (Martínez Rodríguez 2022).

An interesting addition to the latest editions of the GMMP is the incorporation of "success stories" in their qualitative analysis. They highlight positive coverage or suggest trends to enhance the visibility of women in the media (idem). All of these efforts aim to counter the findings echoed by GMMP 2015: "The quantitative and qualitative evidence gathered has revealed that women are, in contrast to men, strongly underrepresented in news coverage. The result of this under-representation is an unbalanced picture of the world, one where women are largely absent" (WACC 2015).

As the executive director of UN Women points out in the preface to the latest report "UN Women is proud to support the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) report, and its strong, evidence-based wake-up call to create change in the media industry. Increasing the representation of women and other gender minorities in news coverage is vital; not only as subjects but as experts and professionals, as well as increasing women's leadership in newsrooms and boardrooms. The media can also play a crucial role by refusing to perpetuate stereotypes, such as those that portray women solely as victims or homemakers. We have seen how fast traditional gender stereotypes are reasserted when crisis strikes, especially at home where decisions about caregiving work are made" (WACC 2020).

Since the first edition, the analysis has included most Western countries, which are characterized by democratic tradition and a commitment to equality. Additionally, the initiative has expanded to encompass many countries in the process of development. This growing inclusivity, with an increasing number of countries studied, is a common trend shared with the other study under consideration in this research. This study particularly addresses the real state, including information, of women from various environments, societies, and cultures.

4.2. *"State of the World's Girls 2021: The Truth Gap" by Plan International*

The global NGO Plan International was founded in the midst of the Spanish Civil War in 1937, initiated by a journalist and a volunteer present in the conflict to assist orphaned boys and girls. While it initially focused on sponsorship, over its 85 years of existence, it has expanded its scope of action, always with a focus on welfare, education, and raising awareness about the situation of at-risk minors. As part of its informative mission, in 2007, it began to publish reports on "The State of the World's Girls", with each annual edition having specific focuses and objectives along the same lines.

In 2021, Plan International dedicated its tenth report to analyzing how online misinformation and disinformation affect the lives, learning, and leadership of girls, adolescents, and young women, particularly in challenging environments, or those bordering on social exclusion. It specifically concentrated on the influence of this phenomenon on equal opportunities for girls, adolescents, and young women globally. The study introduced the term—used as its title—*The Truth Gap*: a new divide that, when added to gender, age, and socioeconomic gaps, renders the quest for truth nearly insurmountable for many girls (Plan International 2021).

The research was conducted in 33 countries, employing a combination of methodologies. Initially, a survey gathered responses from over 26,000 adolescents and young women. The questionnaire, translated into various languages, comprised 16 closed questions, most of which allowed for the selection of multiple responses. The questions were categorized into four areas: socio-demographic data; online participation in social issues; misinformation and disinformation; and digital literacy.

The second phase involved in-depth qualitative interviews, with the participation of 22 girls and young women aged between 15 and 24, representing 18 countries worldwide (Germany, Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Spain, United States, Wales, Indonesia, Ireland, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Peru, Dominican Republic, and Sudan). These interviews, conducted through Zoom, WhatsApp, or Microsoft Teams, had an average duration of 45 min. The questions covered three main topics: their Internet interventions and participation, experiences with misinformation and disinformation, and their knowledge and exposure to digital literacy. Additionally, participants were asked for their perspectives on potential actions to address the issues of misinformation and disinformation.

It should be noted that the study categorizes the surveyed young women and women as "young activists", encompassing "a broad range on the activist spectrum: from seasoned campaigners in leading roles, to those who spoke out from time to time on an issue or topic they were passionate about, or were volunteering around certain issues". Consequently, the surveyed individuals are initially committed to or interested in the subject under consideration (Plan International 2021).

The methodology of the research we found in *The Truth Gap: (Dis)informed online. How malinformation and disinformation online affect the lives, learning and leadership of girls and young women* also incorporated social listening tools for a one-month duration, utilizing a list of primary keywords related to misinformation and disinformation. At the end of the month, there were over six million publications on social networks (Twitter (now X), Instagram, and Facebook) related to the three specified keywords: politics and elections, COVID-19, and sex and sexual health (idem).

Much of the study's significance depends on the opinions and proposals of the respondents. Two young individuals from Benin and Cameroon take the responsibility of writing the preamble. In it, they assert that "We, as young people, must not only be protected from online abuse and harassment, **we also need to be able to navigate the internet safely, to find accurate information and know how to distinguish between what is true and what is false**. Online platforms are a powerful tool for young women and girls to create change. But on the other hand, **misinformation and disinformation fuel prejudice and disrupt girls' actions**. It can lead to physical harm, censorship and threaten freedom of expression. It can also affect girls' mental health and greatly reduce their selfesteem. False information creates

a hostile environment online, instils fear in girls, and blocks the use of good information for useful purposes. These impacts are a barrier to girls and young women using the internet and learning online. To combat this, so girls can express themselves freely online, it is necessary to encourage internet users to check the facts they are exposed to, to develop a critical mind and to question the reliability of information before believing and sharing it. **It is also necessary to have relevant laws in place**. And when we talk about laws, we must also recognise the importance of protecting freedom of speech and expression". (Plan International 2021; the bold text belongs to the original text).

Among the main findings of the study—published in two formats, the full report and an executive summary, with detailed proposals for action for each of the agents involved— are data revealing that 91% of the girls and young women surveyed are concerned about misinformation or disinformation on social media. Furthermore, 25% of those consulted have questioned the information they received at school, and misinformation and disinformation negatively affect 87% of the girls and young women surveyed.

The study also provides data on how misinformation discourages or limits the activism of young women in their respective areas, a delicate circumstance in a population group on whose drive, capacity for empowerment, work, and educational and social entrepreneurship many important decisions for their future depend (Sádaba 2022).

Likewise, it provides data that 70% of young women have never received training— neither at school nor in the family environment—on how to identify misinformation and disinformation. Throughout the extensive interviews, it collects a variety of contributions about how young women worry about being manipulated.

Among the main consequences revealed by the study, the existence of a digital gender gap stands out, which includes a gap in digital skills to navigate and use technology: men are 21% more likely to be connected than women, and that figure increases to 51% in countries of the southern hemisphere (Plan International 2021).

It is also established that the image offered through the media of young women—their lives, opportunities, and experiences—is broadly false and quite bleak. This is an image that counters the initiative, creativity, and proactivity with which girls and young women respond to the challenges they encounter—particularly in those areas of special difficulty.

It is noted in the research that there is an added problem, in this case, regarding sources of information: those used are not always relevant; they play with the difficult situations of information recipients to spread half-truths; there is a lot of misinformation that is spread virally among peers and is not verified; and there is a lack of credit and trust in traditional sources of information.

The study also shows how girls and young women tend to depend on online information about certain topics—sexuality, health, girls' rights, and feminism—that are not openly discussed in their homes or at school, something also highlighted by Santos (Santos et al. 2017). False information is particularly problematic and difficult to verify and faces serious consequences. Likewise, the study includes the fact that misinformation and disinformation in this and other areas limit the lives of girls and young women and have a negative effect on their mental health (*idem*), in addition to generating real difficulties for them in identifying false information on the Internet.

Finally, the report collects data from the study by the Economist Intelligence Unit and Google (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021) on violence on the Internet. Conducted in 51 countries, it concluded that 67% of this type of harassment (or cyberbullying) involves "rumors or slander intended to discredit a woman's reputation".

Other conclusions of the study reflect data that—well supported and oriented—can be positive. Young women give importance to social media, and 9 out of 10 regularly participate in online talks and debates on social issues. Girls and young people use both traditional and social media to obtain information and learn; they feel distrustful of online information sources and are concerned about misinformation and disinformation. The latter is not positive, but it is a first step to become aware and provide means to fight to overcome this situation.

The other notable contribution of the report is the final recommendations it introduces for all the agents involved in this reality: governments and supranational entities, the media, content platforms, civil society and NGOs, users . . . and even Internet providers. In summary, these recommendations emphasize that governments must supervise the development of rights and promote digital literacy. This includes increasing investment in ICT education, engaging girls and civil society in political and legislative debates around the issue, and recognizing, investigating, and addressing the implications of misinformation and disinformation on girls.

Online platforms are encouraged to work with actors (girls, youth, and civil society) to design and implement solutions that increase the digital literacy of girls and boys. They emphasize the importance of interventions starting from real experiences and needs, and of offering tools and initiatives for data verification. They highlight the positive experience of the measures initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic when online platforms worked together, implementing technical solutions to address false information and disinformation.

They propose to the media to collaborate with organizations to share specialized knowledge and disseminate good practices around the verification of data and information, along with other verification methods, and commit to not spreading misinformation and disinformation (mis- and malinformation).

Internet providers must—say Plan International analysts—work with governments to promote connectivity, ensure that mobile Internet access becomes widespread, and pay special attention to freely accessible educational content.

Suggestions for civil society institutions and non-governmental organizations include providing financial and technical support to organizations working on girls' digital rights, especially those promoting campaigns against misinformation and disinformation.

Finally, supranational organizations are encouraged to involve girls and young women in debates on regulation, standards, and policies, ensuring that their experiences and demands are reflected, as well as to investigate misinformation and disinformation and their effects on individual human rights.

4.3. Digital News Report from Reuters Institute

We indicated at the beginning of this article that the objective of the chosen studies is to X-ray the reality of the presence of women in the media and minimize the negative effect of misinformation on the lives and opportunities of women, particularly young women or those in situations of poverty and vulnerability.

There is a third study that we referred to in the introduction, and whose results we cannot ignore because, although it is not the objective of the analysis, it sheds light on some aspects discussed. This is the long-running Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute, which has been carried out in 46 countries for 12 years, and which conducts 93,000 online interviews with media users.

In its conclusions when presenting the 2023 report, it recalled "the different conditions in which journalism operates around the world, but also the common challenges around low audience engagement and low trust, in an era of media abundance" (Newman et al. 2023).

Among the most notable data of the study, the executive report discovers that only 22% of respondents initially use a website or application to consult information, which represents a drop of 10% since 2018. The growth of networks as a point of access to information, particularly those preferred by young people, such as YouTube or TikTok, has reached 44% of people aged 18 to 24 in all markets, and 20% in terms of use for information, with very rapid growth in the areas of the Asia-Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. Additionally, audiences on these networks say they pay more attention to celebrities, influencers, and social media personalities than to journalists (a situation that does not occur in the case of networks with a more mature audience, such as Instagram or Facebook).

The study recognizes that "despite the hopes that the Internet would broaden the democratic debate, we currently detect less participation in online news than in the recent past" (Newman et al. 2023). Around 22% participate in online news, with 47% never doing so. The profile shows that men are the most active across countries as a whole, with a higher educational level and more partisan in their political opinions.

In terms of trust in news, 40% of respondents say they trust most news most of the time. Finland remains at the top of general confidence (with 69%), while Spain reaches 33%, and Greece remains at 19%.

The study states that 36% of respondents worldwide consciously avoid the news. The figure has increased seven points since 2017, with infoxication during the COVID-19 pandemic being one of the possible causes of the process. In the case of Spain (consultable in Amoedo-Casais et al. 2023), 29% of those surveyed say they avoid the news, especially the "hard" topics: national politics (39%), the war in Ukraine (34%), business, finance, and economics (27%). The percentage of people who visit a specific media website to read the news has decreased from 32% in 2018 to 22% in 2023, while access through social networks has increased in the same proportion. This is especially significant among young people under 24 years of age.

5. Conclusions

The two main studies presented here have very different methodologies, but they agree on giving the spotlight to those involved and making them participate in their objective: to understand the reality of information about women and the misinformation they suffer to try to remove it.

Both studies come from civil institutions with a vocation for social service and a long history in favor of media research (in the first case) and the dissemination of equality (in the second).

Both carry out a concrete diagnosis of the reality they focus on based on combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and in the case of Plan International, listening to networks.

One conclusion drawn from the Plan International Report is that, faced with the common problem of young women in developing countries lacking media literacy and critical capacity, the initiative has to come (and in fact, usually comes) from the users themselves. They are the ones most concerned and eager to learn how to avoid manipulation and misinformation by selecting reliable sources, undergoing training in verification tools, and improving their reading and critical skills, among other measures.

The volume and results obtained from both studies confirm that those interviewed express a clear interest in accessing quality, verified, verifiable, and relevant information. This interest is also reflected in the desire for public participation and activism among the young women surveyed in the Plan International Report, as they are keen on breaking the cycle of misinformation.

We believe that in this task they must be supported by other stakeholders: peers, educational institutions, and the media. It is important to be aware of the possible bias towards certain interests (both political and by lobbyists and pressure groups), and not to give excessive attention to the issues of gender, feminism, representation of women, etc., to the detriment of other issues that are also relevant (in our opinion).

The results from the third document studied—the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report on media consumption around the world—lead us to believe that young people, even when equipped with access to media and tools for adequate critical analysis, are not interested in doing so, and this interest is rapidly declining. They often prefer to inform themselves through their peers, social networks, or unverified sources, rather than relying on mainstream media.

While the study does not explicitly identify the causes of this detachment from the media, a deeper exploration is necessary to reverse the trend and restore the prestige of

the journalistic profession. Journalists play a crucial role as verifiers, influencers of public opinion, and guarantors of citizens' right to information.

Addressing the disinformation gap in all social groups, particularly the most vulnerable, is a challenge that requires urgent attention. This effort can also contribute to overcoming journalism's identity crisis. We align with Mayoral's assessment that "in a world where anyone can express their opinion on any matter, in a hyperconnected environment where social networks amplify the dissemination of various content, journalistic media and journalists make sense—and become essential—if they instill trust and commit to fact-checking or verifying everything they publish" (Mayoral et al. 2019).

Regarding recommendations that can be made to all those involved (governments, platforms, the media, civil society, etc.), we suggest that they should be involved in this important task and be aware of the potential consequences of addressing (or not) digital literacy among young women. We echo the proposals that Plan International addresses to each of them. This is a starting line that can lead, with time, education, and the interest of all parties, to eliminate the truth gap.

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