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X Soengas-Pérez, AM López-Cepeda, J Sixto-García (2019): “Media diet, consumption habits and misinformation among Spanish university students”. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, pp. 1056 to 1070.

<http://www.revistalatinacs.org/074paper/1371/54en.html>

[DOI: 10.4185/RLCS-2019-1371-54en](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2019-1371-54en)

Media diet, consumption habits and misinformation among Spanish university students

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Abstract

Introduction. In the current media environment, news consumption has undergone radical changes in terms of possibilities and forms. This research article focuses on the analysis of news consumption in traditional media, on the Internet and in social media among social science students, and particularly among journalism students. **Methods.** Data were collected from a sample of 100 third-year and fourth-year students from five public universities located in cities with different socio-economic profiles, to determine whether environment has an impact on students’ behaviour and news consumption habits, and whether this influence is reflected on students’ routines, interest and preferences. **Results and conclusions.** The press, radio and television continue losing audiences and most students now get the news from digital media platforms as they are already disconnected from traditional news media outlets. Technological developments have enabled new ways of dealing with space and managing time, which have an impact on the way people access information, on news content itself and on people’s possibilities to learn about what happens around them.

Keywords: media diet; young people; media; social networks; disinformation.

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1. Introduction

News consumption among young Spaniards has undergone important changes in terms of forms and possibilities (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; López-Vidales, González-Aldea & Medina-de-la-Viña, 2011), and these changes have also been detected in other countries (Silveira & Amaral, 2018; Vernier, Cárcamo & Scheihing, 2018). Technology democratises access to news content, which is becoming increasingly specialised, and generates new information scenarios (Pérez-Escolar, 2016; Sánchez-Duarte et al., 2015), which involves new more flexible ways to present, distribute and consume information, thanks to the multiscreen society (Catalina-García, García-Jiménez & Montes-Vozmediano, 2015; Pérez-Turner, 2008; Velásquez et al., 2018).

In the current media landscape, traditional media platforms have also developed their digital editions and the news contents that used to be exclusively published on paper or broadcast on radio and television, now can be read and watched on the Internet and social networks, at any time and from any place, instantaneously, both live and on demand (García-Orosa & López-García, 2016; Masip et al., 2015), free from the fixed schedules typical of analogue broadcasts (Campos-Freire, 2015; Suárez-Villegas, 2015). In fact, most young people already get the news from the Internet (Casero-Ripollés, 2012) because they coexist in contexts that are very disconnected from the classic platforms and their media diet and habits are conditioned by factors that did not exist before the digitalisation age (Doval-Avendaño, Domínguez-Quintas & Dans-Álvarez-de-Sotomayor, 2018; García-García, Gértudrix-Barrio & Gértudrix-Barrio, 2014; García-Jiménez, Tur-Viñes & Pastor-Ruiz, 2018).

Data on media consumption reflect a progressive fall in newspaper readership and in radio and television news audience in recent years, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Media penetration among people aged 20 to 24

| | Population | Newspapers | Supplements | Magazines | Radio | Television | Cinema | Internet |
|------------------|------------|------------|-------------|-----------|-------|------------|--------|----------|
| Year 2017 | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 39,783 | 24.3 | 8.7 | 32.8 | 59.3 | 85.2 | 3.9 | 75.7 |
| 20-24 | 2,242 | 17.5 | 5.1 | 32 | 57.14 | 79.1 | 6.5 | 92.4 |
| Year 2014 | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 39,681 | 29.8 | 12.7 | 41 | 61.0 | 88.6 | 3.8 | 60.7 |
| 20-24 | 2,355 | 25.9 | 8.4 | 46.3 | 63.2 | 84.3 | 6.5 | 88.2 |

| Year 2009 | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|--------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Total | 39,462 | 39.8 | 21.9 | 51.3 | 55.3 | 89.0 | 4.3 | 34.3 |
| 20-24 | 2,714 | 40.5 | 17.8 | 61.6 | 58.4 | 87.1 | 7.9 | 56.2 |
| Year 2004 | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 36,405 | 41.1 | 30.4 | 55.1 | 56.8 | 89.6 | 8.9 | 16.8 |
| 20-24 | 2,987 | 44.2 | 28.6 | 71.1 | 63.7 | 87.4 | 21.5 | 31.7 |
| Year 1999 | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 34,497 | 35.2 | 31.3 | 53.3 | 53.0 | 89.4 | 10.2 | 7.0 |
| 20-24 | 3,357 | 38.9 | 37.5 | 72.1 | 63.6 | 86.3 | 25.6 | 14.2 |

Source: EGM: General media framework in Spain. Penetration data reflect the percentage of the audience in relation to the population, expressed in thousands (000). Access: <https://www.aimc.es/otros-estudios-trabajos/marcogeneral/descarga-marco-general/>.

1.1. News supply and audience segmentation

Traditional media platforms have not adapted their contents to the demands of the different sectors of society and as a consequence young people show little interest in the contents they offer because they do not meet their information needs. The information published by most news media is too general for the increasingly fragmented and segmented audience (Polo-López, Miotto & Fondevila-Gascón, 2018; Rodríguez-Vázquez, Direito-Rebollal & Silva-Rodríguez, 2018; Santiago, 2017), who prefers the specialised and even personalised content available on the Internet and in social networks.

The decline in newspapers readers and radio and television news audiences is considered by several authors as an indicator of the lack of interest on the part of young people in what happens in the world and a tendency towards misinformation (Marchi, 2012). However, the low consumption of news in traditional media cannot be linked to people's degree of knowledge of current affairs and events, because there are other platforms to consume news, such as the Internet and social networks (García-Avilés, Navarro-Maíllo & Arias-Robles, 2014). In addition, when speaking of disinformation (Rodríguez-Andrés, 2018), it is necessary to explain what being informed means (Goñi-Camejo, 2000; Ríos-Ortega, 2014), because it is impossible to learn about everything that happens in the world, and because different sectors of the population have different information needs and interests. Thus, an event can be considered important or not according to the circumstances. This study addresses disinformation as people's lack of interest in the news and current affairs. This article does not analyse the misinformation imposed by the media, the informative treatment or the framing of the news, nor the manipulation or censorship exerted by the media to hide a part of reality, almost always moved by political or economic pressures exerted by the public and private spheres (Jacquard, 1988; Serrano, 2009).

Durandin (1995) stands out among the theorists and researchers specialised in disinformation. He has made clear that there is no consensus to define and establish parameters to determine what "being informed" means, and to determine what is necessary to know to be informed or what does it take for a person to be considered "well informed". And it is also appropriate to differentiate between being informed, being expert and being educated (Ribes-Iñesta, 2011). In addition, it is necessary to distinguish between qualitative information, quantitative information and useful information, because we are not able to manage all the data we receive through the media, the Internet and social networks (Niño-González, Barquero-Cabrero & García-García, 2017). It is necessary to prioritise to adequately

select from what is on offer on the different platforms, because some information has permanent validity while some news have an expiration date. Each person has specific interests and needs and looks for information that is consistent with his or her personal, social or work profile. That is why it is important for the news flow to be plural so that citizens are able to consume all kinds of contents and select the ones they consider appropriate (Humanes et al., 2013; Humanes & Fernández-Alonso, 2015).

Information saturation and disinterest of the audience are two problems that affect the current media environment and can be caused by an excess of information and the presence of redundant or useless content. Citizens' criteria change because the audience is becoming more demanding and more critical (Echegaray-Eizaguirre, 2015). Their interests and behaviours are constantly evolving and are increasingly unsatisfied with the general content offered by the press, radio and television. They look for alternative and specialised content, more consistent with their daily concerns and their way of life. The profile of today's university students is very different to the one that characterised their parents' generation because they have different needs and interests that influence the consumption of information in the current context, in terms of themes, platforms and even times and places (Casero-Ripollés, 2012).

1.2. New media environments and new information contexts

Young people are part of the new audiences of the media environment, but they are not a homogeneous sector; they belong to different social groups and coexist in different contexts, a factor that must be taken into account when analysing the possible informative scenarios and the different degrees of interest in today's news. Each group, even each person, has needs, both immediate and future, and some preferences, which define their profile, because sometimes there is a correspondence between the ideology of young people and the editorial line of the media they consume (Catalina-García, Montes-Vozmediano & García-Jiménez, 2017).

In the new informative context, characterised by a different way of dealing with space and managing time, it is necessary to redefine the concepts of topicality and useful information. With the constant updating of contents in the digital outlets of the media and in social networks, facts are subjected to a continuous checking and an almost immediate expiration. At the same time, the excess of data and the possibilities of access to the news instantaneously encourage a superficial reading of the texts that leaves out verification and contextualisation, similar to headline journalism (Mancinas-Chávez & Moya-López, 2018).

2. Objectives

The general objective of this research is to know the news consumption habits of Spanish people studying social sciences and, particularly, journalism. The specific objectives are to identify the platforms, media and social networks they consult, as well as the contexts, times, frequency and preferred contents, to determine their thematic preferences and their news consumption habits. The study also aims to determine what platforms are the most credible to them; whether they consider that the press, radio, television and social networks offer useful information; whether they widen and fact-

check the news they read; how often they do it; and whether they discuss general news or particular topics, with whom and how often.

3. Object of study

We focus our object of study on the consumption of information in traditional media, on the Internet and on social networks by the students of social sciences, because we consider that it is a sector of the population that has certain degree academic and professional interests that require knowledge of the news. Moreover, half of the sample was composed of students of journalism because we want to know the type of relationship these future journalists have with the media, the Internet and social networks.

4. Hypothesis

The study is guided by the following hypothesis: Spanish university students prefer the Internet and social networks as sources of information over traditional media. The press, radio and television have digital editions, but have not adapted their content to the needs of an increasingly fragmented, more segmented, more demanding and more critical audience.

5. Methods

To carry out this research we have used a mixed approach that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques that allow us to know the level of news consumption in traditional media, on the Internet and on social networks, and the reasons why young people prefer each option. Data were collected from a sample of 100 second-year students from five public universities located in cities with different socio-economic levels, to determine whether environment has an impact on students' behaviour and news consumption habits, and whether this influence is reflected on students' routines, interest and preferences. The selected universities are: Autonomous University of Barcelona, Carlos III University of Madrid, University of Castilla-La Mancha, University of Santiago de Compostela and University of Seville. A total of 100 students were selected: 20 students (10 men and 10 women) from each of the five universities; 50 studied journalism and 50 studied social science degrees, which are analysed jointly. We only isolated the results of the students of journalism to identify differences, if any, in terms of media diet between the two groups. The surveys were conducted between 5 and 15 November 2018.

The questions are designed to get an overview of the students' media diet, their interest in the news and their relationship with traditional media, the Internet and social networks.

The interviews investigate the major mainstream media and the main social networks in Spain: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *Abc*, *Público*, *La Razón*, *RNE*, *SER*, *Onda Cero*, *COPE*, *TVE-1*, *TVE-La 2*, *TVE-Canal 24 horas*, *Antena 3*, *Cuatro*, *Telecinco*, *La Sexta*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *LinkedIn*, *YouTube*, *Twitter* and *Pinterest*. Although *YouTube* is not a social network per se (as it is not used to interact with friends and share publications), as *Facebook* or *Instagram*, we included it in the sample because it does fulfil the specific social functions of a social network: finding people, linking people, enabling comments and conversation, exchange of messages, following of other users' publications, meeting members of the community for recommendations, liking videos and providing corporate spaces for organisations

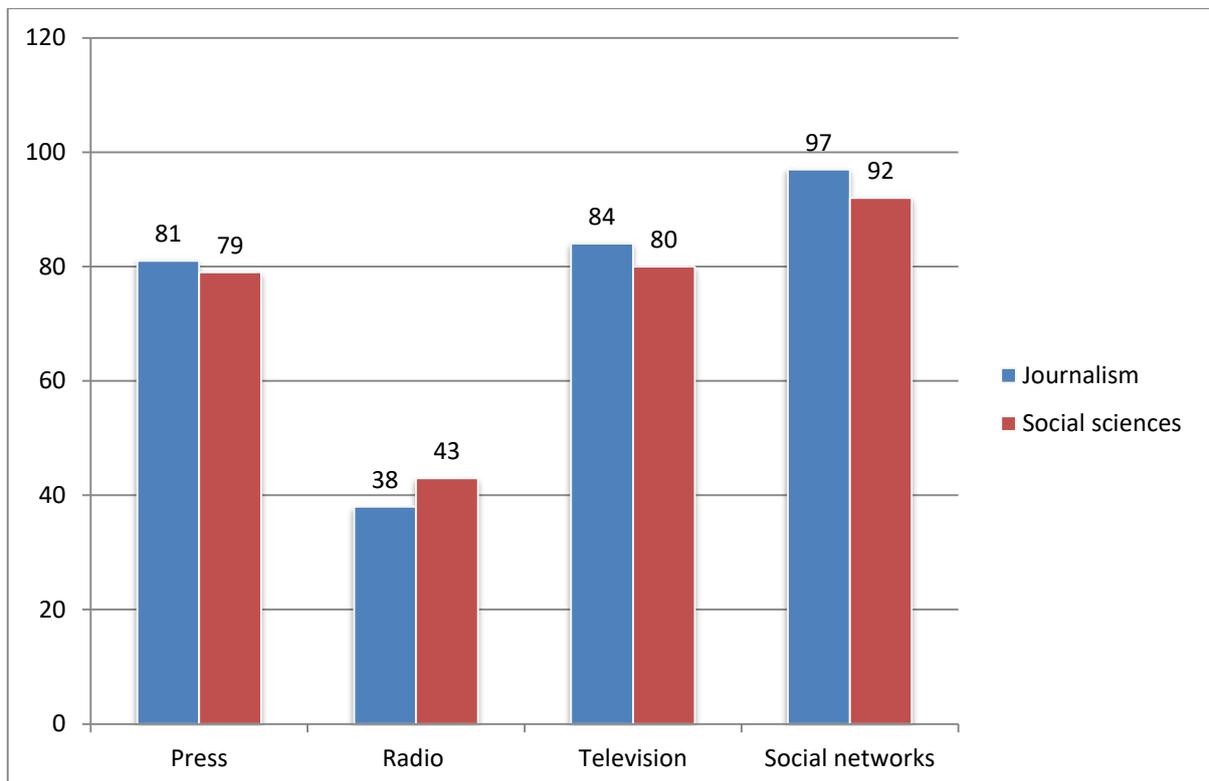
(channels). The difference between *YouTube* and the rest of social networks is the consumer model, in terms of the product (exclusively video), its consumption (users visit the site to consume the product and generate derivative interactions as in the rest of networks, but the user knows in advance the product to be consumed) and the access to that consumption (*YouTube* is the only social network that does not require users to register and set up a personal profile to access content) (Sixto, 2018).

6. Results

6.1. News consumption in traditional media, on the Internet and in social media

97% of the journalism students prefer social networks as source of information, over traditional media, while 92% of students of other social science degrees also have this answer. Traditional media are no longer the most consulted source among university students: the press is read by 81% of journalism students and 79% of social science students; radio is listened to by 38% of journalism students and 43% of social science students; and television is watched by 84% of journalism students and 80% of social science students. These data confirm the tendencies detected by the Spanish media survey (EGM) and the studies carried out by Bárbara Yuste (2015), which show that news consumption habits have changed among young people, who progressively abandon conventional media and increasingly use social networks and mobile devices.

Figure 1. Students' preferred news sources by media platform



Source: Authors' own creation

The previous percentages are high, except in the case of radio, but do not correspond with a relevant regular consumption of the press and television, because many students, as we can see below, do not

use traditional media on a daily basis. Of the students who read newspapers, 15% do it every day, 6% several times a day, 37% two or three times a week, 23% once a week, 11% only when documentation on some subject is required or in extraordinary circumstances, and 8% never do it.

Radio is the least used as source of information: 9% of students listen to it once a day, 5% several times a day, 17% two or three times a week, 48% once a week, 10% only when documentation on some subject is required or in extraordinary circumstances and 11% never.

On the other hand, the regular news consumption on television is much higher than that recorded in the press and radio. 82% of students watches a newscast once a day, 9% several times a day, 6% once a week and 3% two or three times a week.

Students' activity on social networks shows that this digital medium is the preferred option for information. 5% consult them once a day, 90% several times a day, 3% every two or three days and 2% once a week. Here the percentages are inverted with respect to the press, radio and television. Almost all students consult social networks several times a day, which is a minority option in traditional media.

The Internet is responsible for many of the changes that have taken place in the new media landscape, but it is not yet consolidated as a predominant option to consume information on all media. 98% of university students prefer the digital editions of newspapers and 77% also listen to the radio on the web, while 79% watch television news always in the analogue option.

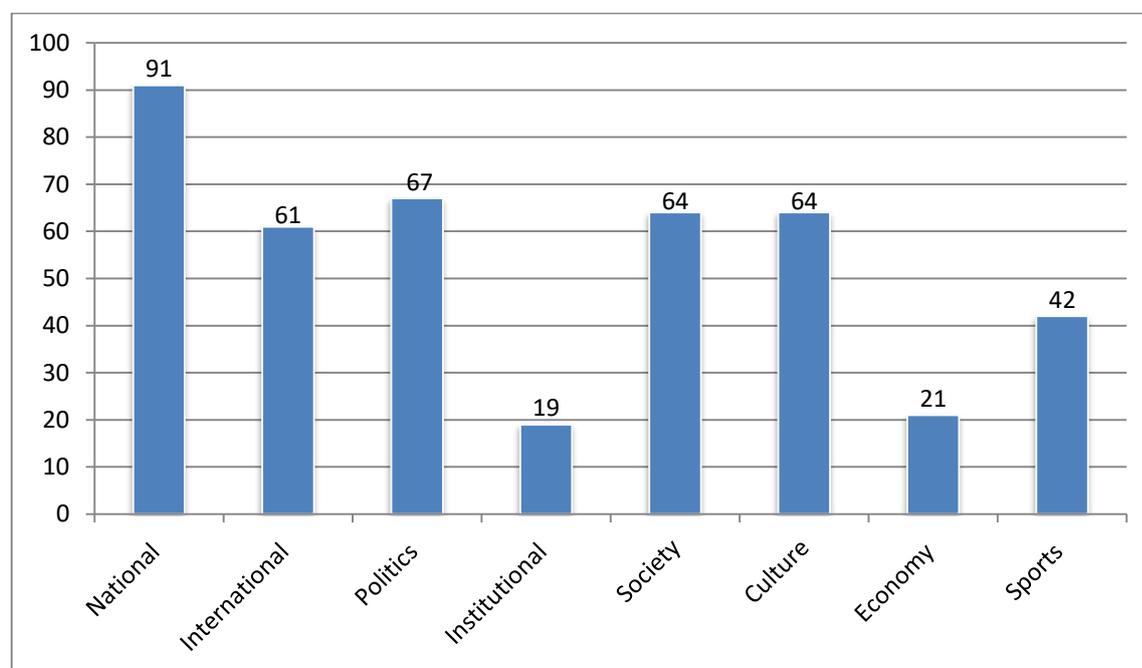
6.2. Most consumed news media outlets and networks

El País, with 42% of readers, is the most consulted newspaper, followed by *El Mundo* (33%), *ABC* (27%), *Público* (23%) and *La Razón* (18%). Among radio newscasts. *SER* stands out with 37%, followed by *Onda Cero* (28%), *RNE* (25%) and *COPE* (24%), with very similar percentages. 46% of the students prefer to watch the news in *Antena 3*, 41% in *La Sexta*, 38% in *Telecinco*, 29% in *TVE-1*, 8% in TVE's Canal 24 horas, and 6% in *Cuatro*. There is also a preferred social network. *Twitter*, with 72%, is the preferred social network as source of information, followed by *Instagram* (68%), *YouTube* (52%), *Facebook* (45%), *LinkedIn* (34%) and *Pinterest* (21%). It is important to note that the sum of the percentages for each platform sometimes exceeds 100% because some students consult various media.

6.3. Most attractive news sections

National news (91%), political news (67%), society and culture, both with 64%, and international news (61%), are the most attractive contents for students. Other relevant issues for students are sports (42%). Economy (21%) and institutional information (19%) are the least-consulted subjects.

Figure 2. Students' preferred news sections



Source:

Authors' own creation

6.4. News consumption in the press, radio, television and social networks

The digital editions of traditional media have changed the news consumption habits of citizens, and students are no exception. Thanks to media hybridisation, the press, radio and television have integrated features that were specific to other platforms, and this process has modified news access protocols. The different categories considered in this research are not exclusive because a student can consult a medium several times a day, so the sum of the partial percentages can exceed 100%.

9% of the students read the press in the morning before leaving home, 11% reads it on their commute to school, 15% in class breaks, 32% at noon, 41% in the afternoon and 7% at night. 10% also listen to the radio in the morning, 4% on the commute to school, 3% in class breaks, 29% at noon, 8% in the afternoon and 35% at night. 6% watches television news in the morning, no one on their commute to school or in class breaks (although technology allows it), 32% at noon, 3% in the afternoon and 30% at night.

The activity in social networks is very different and much higher than that recorded in the other platforms. 62% consult social networks in the morning before leaving home, 29% on their commute to university, 71% in class breaks, 22% while eating at noon, 34% in the afternoon and 82% at night.

The data reflect that most students consult social networks throughout the day. This is the main difference with respect to traditional media (press, radio and television), which are consulted at more specific times and in a much lower percentage.

6.5. Fact-checking, expanding on details and ensuring plurality

5% of students read more than three newspapers regularly, 7% reads three, 18% two and 70% reads one. Among radio listeners, 3% listens to more than three stations, 5% three, 11% two and 81% one. 9% watches more than three TV newscasts, 17% three, 45% two, and 29% one. 15% consult more than three social networks, 71% three, 11% two and 3% one. The data show that the consumption of information on television is more plural than in the press and radio, and that the activity in social networks is much greater than that recorded in traditional media.

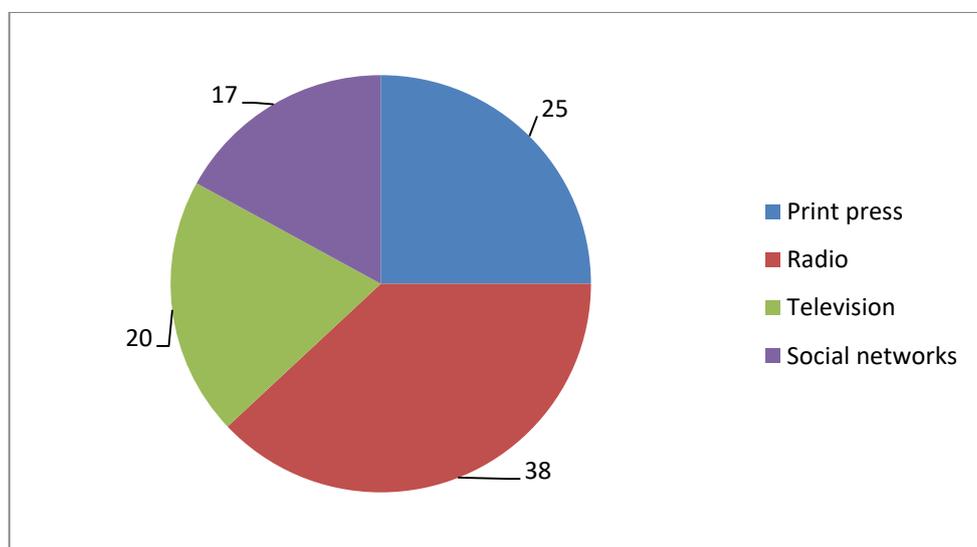
74% of the students who consult various media or social networks only consume information to learn what is happening in their surroundings and in the world, but they do not question the information treatment of news. They do not have a critical attitude towards the framing of news events, nor show any interest in knowing alternative viewpoints. This data contradicts the theory that young audiences are becoming more and more critical and more demanding. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that reading several newspapers, listening to several radio newscasts, watching several news programmes and visiting several websites or several social networks is not necessarily the same as fact-checking because each media offers different content. Just 26% of the students confirm the veracity of the news or expand on the details of the news story to have a more complete version of the news events. And of this 26%, 95% do it sporadically when they are interested on a particular issue, and 5% do it on a regular basis. Fake news and misinformation only worry 56% of the students. In addition, 41% find the information offered by the press, radio and television in its analogue editions not very useful, and 32% are neither convinced by the usefulness of the content of the digital editions.

65% do not make comments about the news events they learn about. Only 35% of students share their opinions or views on the approach or the informative treatment of some issues that they consider relevant. Of this 35%, 53% do it with classmates, 40% with friends, 3% with family and 4% with teachers. The latter case only occurs when the student discusses a news story with a teacher voluntarily, without it being a part of the teaching activities.

6.6. Credibility of platforms

Radio is the medium with the smallest audience, but it is the most credible one for 38% of students, followed by the press and television, with 25% and 20% respectively. Social networks are the least credible source of information (17%), although most students consume news through them: 97% of journalism students and 92% of other social science students.

Figure 3. Most credible media platforms among students



Source: Authors' own creation

6.7. Results by career, sex and university

Journalism students prefer *El País* (41%), *SER* (52%), *La Sexta* (35%), *Twitter* (34%) and national news (29%), and students from other social science degrees prefer *El Mundo* (36%), *Onda Cero* (38%), *Antena 3* (32%), *Twitter* (31) and international news (25%).

Male students prefer *El País* (56%), *SER* (50%), *Antena 3* (41%), *Twitter* (43%) and international news (37%), while female students prefer *El Mundo* (45%), *SER* (38%), *La Sexta* (32%), *Instagram* (29%) and national news (25%).

There are no significant differences across universities, which shows that the socioeconomic environment in which the study centres are located does not influence the information consumption preferences.

7. Discussion and conclusions

News consumption patterns have changed significantly in recent years. The results of this research coincide with the audience trend detected by the General Media Survey (EGM), which has confirmed that there is a progressive abandonment of traditional media and a boom in news consumption in social networks, which have displaced the press, radio and television as sources of information for young people, especially those between the ages of 20 and 24.

Now there are new informative scenarios, characterised by the fragmentation and segmentation of audiences, who are increasingly specialised, more demanding and more critical. And in this context is where university students must be placed as part of an audience that has new needs and does not

conform to the content offered by the traditional and digital editions of the media, which have not been able to adapt to the new scenario to be able to compete with social networks and seize the opportunities offered by technology.

Thanks to the Internet and social networks, young people have a new way of dealing with space and managing time, and this circumstance affects the forms of access to content and the possibilities of information consumption. Technology allows users to consult any news, free of charge, at any time, from any place, live or on demand. But this ease to access all kinds of content is not always accompanied by a relevant consumption of information by university students, at least at the level that would be expected from an audience whose immediate and future interests are directly linked to knowledge and the analysis of current events and affairs, especially in the case of journalism students.

It is important to differentiate the quantitative values from qualitative aspects. Generic data on information consumption in traditional media do not reflect the actual situation. The global results indicate that 80% read the press, 42% listen to the radio and 82% watch television, but 60% only use one medium as source of information and 25% only do it once a week. Only a small share of students (8%) reads several newspapers, tunes in to several radio stations or watches news on several television channels each day. And the share of students who regularly consume newspapers, radio and television is even smaller (6%). However, we must also take into account the fact that some students only use one medium as source of information by affinity, because there are studies, such as Catalina-García, Montes-Vozmediano and García-Jiménez (2017), that show that many citizens are loyal to those news media whose editorial line is consistent with their ideology.

The new scenario is complex, even contradictory. The supply of news is increasing, but 65% recognises that there is saturation, redundancy and duplication in content, and 53% believes that there is a bad management and poor distribution of the media because the current number of news media organisations in Spain does not offer an attractive, innovative and diverse information option, with specific quality and plural proposals for the different sectors of the population. For 59%, the biggest problem is that the media are still immersed in general information, when the current audience is looking for specific content, according to their needs and their specific interests. In addition, they consider that it is necessary to redefine the concepts of topicality and useful information, in order to adapt them to the new informative reality.

The data show that a large share of university students does not consume news rigorously. 74% do not fact-check the news or expand on the information, and grant credibility to the media and are satisfied with a single version of the events and are not interested in knowing other views on the same story. They neither take advantage of the virtual socialisation spaces that facilitate the exchange of opinions and the analysis of news events. 44% are not worried about fake news or misinformation.

98% of university students prefer the digital editions of newspapers and 77% listen to the radio on the web, but 79% of viewers watch television in the analogue option and only 21% watches TV news on the web. In contrast, there are no significant differences in terms of consumer habits and media diet between the different universities. The socioeconomic environment in which the study centres are located does not influence the results, but there are differences in terms of preferences between students of journalism and students of other social science degrees, and between male and female students as shown above.

Radio, the medium with the smallest audience, is the most credible while social networks are the most used but also the least credible medium among university students.

- This article is part of the activities of two research projects: “New values, governance, financing and public audiovisual services for the Internet society: European and Spanish contrasts” (RTI2018-096065-B-I00), funded by the National Programme for Innovation, Development and Research oriented to the challenges of Society of the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities and by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF); and “Uses and information preferences in the new media landscape in Spain: journalism models for mobile devices” (CSO2015-64662-C4-4-R), funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain, and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

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How to cite this article in bibliographies / References

X Soengas-Pérez, AM López-Cepeda, J Sixto-García (2019): “The media diet, news consumption habits and disinformation of Spanish university students”. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, pp. 1056 to 1070. <http://www.revistalatinacs.org/074paper/1371/54en.html>
DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-2019-1371-54en](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2019-1371-54en)

Paper received on 7 December. Accepted on 10 June.
Published on 12 June.