

# Scenarios of catastrophes in Latin America: Combating rumors and fake news

Élodie Martinez,  
Agence France Presse

## **Abstract:**

During elections, the political propaganda war is in full swing. All means are fit for felling opponents, including the massive circulation of fallacious information. Since the concept of disinformation has entered wide usage, mainly since the American presidential campaign in 2016, ever fewer persons have qualms about lying. The 2018 election campaigns in Brazil, Mexico and Colombia, where acts of violence and corruption scandals are rife, were not spared. Fake news circulates even more in Latin America where most inhabitants use the social media as their major, if not single, source of information, a trend bolstered by for-free (or nearly so) access to platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. During the French presidential election campaign in 2017, Agence France Presse launched a fact-checking website, which it has now extended to cover 18 countries. Its goal is to debunk fake news by providing readers with evidence. Herein, the fake news circulating in Latin America is identified along with the context where it has emerged and the efforts for reestablishing facts.

In 2018, several big countries in Latin America held presidential elections. In this context, stories depicting catastrophes have been circulated.<sup>1</sup>

In Mexico, the left came to power for the first time in recent history. Shelves in supermarkets were empty, and soldiers were finding children's corpses in refrigerators.<sup>2</sup> Women and children were disappearing every day in the subway. Migrants heading toward the United States to invade it were destroying infrastructures and aggressing the population.<sup>3</sup> These alarming stories were nearly always false. This election was the third attempt by Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-leaning National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) to become president, and his first win in a country deeply marked by violence and corruption. The traditional parties, such as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and National Action Party (PAN), had succeeded each other in charge of the government for seventy years, and the people who did not want this situation to change circulated fake news.

A "catastrophe" was also looming over Brazil, where the left had spent the past fourteen years in power. The apocalyptic message spread to keep it from winning was simple but effective: if power stayed in the same hands, the country would sink under corruption, and its population endure a cost of living "*the highest in the world*".<sup>4</sup> Violence would be uncontrollable, and armed gangs would take back over the *favelas*. The poorest and laziest would simply continue to "profit from the system". Worse yet: the state was planning to expropriate children on their fifth birthday,<sup>5</sup> and all little Brazilians would become homosexuals!<sup>6</sup> The most powerful Latin American state was still reeling from corruption scandals involving several leaders. Though not prosecuted, Dilma Rousseff, the

---

<sup>1</sup> This article has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). All websites have been consulted in July 2019.

<sup>2</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/hallaron-cuerpos-de-menores-dentro-de-refrigeradores-en-mexico-no-son-ninos-fallecidos-en-la-franja>

<sup>3</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/no-este-asalto-no-fue-cometido-por-migrantes-dentro-de-un-autobus-en-mexico>

<sup>4</sup> <https://checamos.afp.com/nao-brasil-nao-tem-gasolina-carros-telefonias-energia-gas-ou-carga-tributaria-mais-caros-do-Mundo>

<sup>5</sup> <https://checamos.afp.com/nao-ha-nenhum-indicio-de-que-haddad-tenha-dito-que-depois-dos-5-anos-criancas-pertencem-ao-estado>

<sup>6</sup> <https://checamos.afp.com/nao-o-livro-mostrado-por-bolsonaro-no-jornal-nacional-nao-faz-parte-do-kit-gay>

former president, was removed from office for doctoring public accounts, while the preceding president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, also of the Workers' Party (PT), had been sentenced to twelve years in jail even though he was planning to run for president. Opposite these two leaders, a former army captain and then MP, Jair Bolsonaro, won. His coming to power triggered an upsurge in the far right.

In Colombia too, predictions warned about the end of the world if the right did not manage to come back to power. The apocalypse would be the sure return<sup>7</sup> of the Communist guerillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), since these ferocious fighters would be in the government. The proof? FARC's former members founded the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force. Reality begged to differ. The team of the incumbent president, Juan Manuel Santos, had managed to work out an agreement with FARC that, though applauded internationally, had deepened divisions in Colombia's "civil society". In the end, discontent and fear triumphed: Ivan Duque, the candidate on the right, carried the election.

The diffusion of these extreme, polarizing stories in these three countries had a common denominator: several mobile telephone operators in Latin America were offering, for the purchase of a SIM card, access to a telephone line at a price often below five euros with unlimited, for-free access to Facebook and WhatsApp. In Latin America, these social networks (the most frequented in the world) are very present. The penetration rates of WhatsApp in Mexico (56%) and Brazil (56%) are twice as high as in France (23%), and nearly the triple of Canada's (19%); and in Colombia, this rate was already 54% in 2016.<sup>8</sup> WhatsApp is the major means of communication among inhabitants, and increasingly between firms and their consumers, and (Why not?)... between political parties and voters. As for Facebook, Brazil and Mexico are leaders in the region with, in February 2019, respectively 130 and 89 million users; and Colombia came in third, nearly equal to Argentina, with its 32 million users.<sup>8</sup>

What do these statistics tell us? Half of the population in these countries receive or share contents over WhatsApp and Facebook. Furthermore, these contents are probably their principal, if not single, source of news. On this scale, posts and messages soon go viral through hundreds of thousands of interactions (mentioned and/or shared). During an election, the war of political propaganda is in full swing; and all means are fit for eliminating opponents, including the massive dissemination of fake news.

## **Combating disinformation**

The social networks, mainstream media and political circles are trying to address this major issue. Thought has been given to it; operational decisions have been made; and laws, adopted. Since focus has shifted to the concept of fake news, mainly owing to the American presidential campaign in 2016, awareness seems to have become global. After all, following close on the heels of Donald Trump, a growing number of leaders no longer have qualms about availing themselves of lies in order to gain popularity, broaden their voter base, win an election, advance their political agenda, complain about plots, discredit well-known figures and journalists, or even cover up their tracks when faced with prosecution in a court of law. Social, ethnic and religious groups are singled out on the social networks. Tensions are mounting between countries following the diffusion of fake news on the networks used by the population and at all levels of power.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/las-tres-mentiras-mas-virales-de-la-campana-presidencial-en-colombia>

<sup>8</sup> Data from the Statista website in January 2019.

We have seen this happen in France with the rumor about the Romani trafficking in kidnaped children. This rumor spread like wildfire on the social networks and sparked attacks against the Romani. An immediate hearing was held for eight persons, who were judged for having taken part (solely on the basis of the online lie) in acts of violence against this community.

Groups are starting to form to limit the (sometimes fatal) consequences of fake news and enable the justice system to perform its duty.

WhatsApp, apparently having decided to take action, announced in July 2018 that messages could no longer be sent to more than twenty users at a time. This figure used to be limited to five in Mexico (and also India, the theater of lynchings following rumors disseminated on social networks). Before July, a message could be sent to 256 contacts, each of whom could send it to 256 other contacts. In Brazil, with its more than 120 million subscribers to WhatsApp, a study by Agence Lupa found that 56% of the photographs shared on the social networks between August and October 2018, when the presidential campaign was in full swing, were false or deceptive.<sup>9</sup> Only 8% of the sample of photographs were for real. Since January 2019, WhatsApp has expanded the restriction on sharing a message to five contacts to all its users.

The riposte has not stopped with this action. In Latin America, it has been broadened and diversified in order to fight against the circulation of rumors, fake news and any other, deliberately false information. On the model of CrossCheck, a fact-checking coalition of the media formed during the presidential campaign in France, coalitions have also been set up in Mexico (Verificado) and Brazil (Comprova),<sup>10</sup> not to mention Nigeria, Argentine and Spain. The form varies from country to country, but the goal is the same: journalists from several media work together to detect and check suspicious contents and the fake news circulating on the Internet and social networks. The scale of experimentation is impressive.

Journalists, who ordinarily compete with each other, have decided to work together to limit the negative effects ever more frequently resulting from the dissemination of fake news. Emphasis is placed on the reliability and accuracy of sources, and the interests that organizations or individuals have in spreading disturbing information — for the purposes of destabilization or profit, a point not to be overlooked. An example of a current practice is clickbaiting. Since income is produced as a function of the number of clicks made on an advertisement, ads are wrapped in teasers to attract users to click. These projects for experimenting with fact-checking are educational. When the project comes to an end, each professional returns to his editorial board with the knowledge acquired and with new reflexes, which he can share with colleagues.

Following CrossCheck, Agence France Presse (AFP) — one of the three main suppliers of real-time information in the world — launched a fact-checking program in French on its blog *Factuel* in November 2017.<sup>11</sup> The same was done in English, Spanish and Portuguese in June 2018. Nowadays, AFP journalists check the contents circulating on the major social networks and the Internet in eighteen countries, the goal being to dismantle fake news and ascertain the facts.

In Latin America, the AFP decided, during a first phase and in a partnership with Facebook,<sup>12</sup> to concentrate on Colombia, Mexico and Brazil. Given the presidential elections there in 2018, these three countries lent themselves to the propagation of disinformation. In 2019, the AFP is taking part in a CrossCheck program in Argentine, where national elections are to be held.

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/17/opinion/brazil-election-fake-news-whatsapp.html?module=inline>

<sup>10</sup> Respectively: <https://verificado.mx> and <http://projetocomprova.com.br/>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://factuel.afp.com/>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/help/publisher/182222309230722>

## Fake news in Latin America?

### Brazil

Out of the countries where the AFP is present in Latin America, Brazil is the one that has provided, and is still providing, the most “raw material” of fake news.

Its political instability has made Brazil a very fertile ground for fake news. Vice-President Michel Temer of the center-right Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) became president in August 2016 when President Rousseff, accused of corruption but not condemned by a court (not even today), was removed from office. On 19 October 2016, Eduardo Cunha (MDB), the former president of the Chamber of Deputies (considered to have been one of the main drivers in Rousseff’s removal), was implicated in the Petrobras scandal of embezzlement involving the national oil company. Temer, who had managed to survive two impeachment attempts, was finally arrested in March 2019 for his part in the same corruption scandal for which Lula da Silva had been sentenced to twelve years of imprisonment in April 2018, even though he had the intention to seek a third term as president. Temer was sentenced to imprisonment for fifteen years and four months.

In this context, all means were mustered on social networks in order to eliminate the Workers’ Party and its candidate Fernando Haddad. A week before the second round of elections, the electoral court opened an investigation following revelations by the daily *Folha de São Paulo* that firms had funded the massive dispatching of messages on WhatsApp that denigrated Haddad. Bolsonaro, the candidate of the Social Liberal Party (PSL), would be elected president.

In October 2018, a study by São Paulo University pointed out that twelve million Brazilians had “shared” fake information on WhatsApp in June — just four months before the election.<sup>13</sup> An editorial in the *New York Times* by three major figures in the fight against disinformation (the head of fact-checking at Agence Lupa and two professors at the universities of Minas Gerais and São Paulo) warned on 17 October, before the vote, “*Fake news poisons Brazilian politics. WhatsApp can put an end to that.*”

Most of the fake news circulated during the campaign took the form of videos, photographs and declarations that were false or had been taken out of context. What was shown was often real, but the caption accompanying it was misleading. For instance, a video that showed persons carrying the banners of the Workers’ Party and physically aggressing other demonstrators was presented as leftists assaulting retirees who supported Bolsonaro’s party. However a reverse search on the Internet and a comparison with similar images recorded by an AFP video-maker established that the events had taken place two years earlier in a completely different story.<sup>14</sup> Another example: a baby bottle with a nipple shaped like a penis was supposedly distributed in public nurseries (obviously a decision made by the leftist government) whereas, in fact, the bottle was an object sold in a sex shop in Brazil.<sup>15</sup>

Several months after the election, fake news was still being disseminated. In March 2009, a photograph of Lula da Silva was shared thousands of times that described him as drunk at Davos, Switzerland, in 2003. Our fact-checking proved that he had been photographed making faces before pupils in a Brazilian school during an award ceremony in 2009.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> <https://jornal.usp.br/tag/fake-news/>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://checamos.afp.com/nao-este-video-nao-mostra-idosas-eleitoras-de-bolsonaro-sendo-espancadas-durante-campanha>

<sup>15</sup> <https://checamos.afp.com/nao-o-pt-nao-esta-distribuindo-mamadeiras-eroticas-nas-creches>

<sup>16</sup> <https://checamos.afp.com/nao-esta-imagem-nao-mostra-lula-bebado-durante-evento-em-davos-em-2003>

## Mexico

Mexico is the Spanish-speaking country with the largest population: 127 million inhabitants. Every year, about a half million people from Central America cross it in pursuit of the American dream. Mexico is also a hub in the drug trade. For decades, the country has witnessed ferocious clashes between the cartels seeking to control this trade. Since the government of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) launched a bloody war against drug dealers, there have been more than 250,000 murders. Last year, a record was set: 33,334 homicides.

This context explains why violence is the main preoccupation of Mexicans. Fake news mostly consists of authentic photographs or videos taken out of their context. Recently, a video purportedly showed migrants destroying a toll booth on a road. However the persons shown were not foreigners but Mexican truck drivers violently demonstrating against the installation of the tollgate.<sup>17</sup> Users on the social networks often take a photomontage of corpses on beaches for real, and share it.<sup>18</sup> The same holds for photographs showing the bodies of children said to be victims of organ trafficking who were found in a truck in Mexico, whereas the photograph was of casualties of a bombardment in Gaza several years ago.<sup>19</sup> Nor is Mexico free from corruption scandals. Accusations are made from all sides, but not all of them are grounded, *e.g.*, the recent accusation that President Obrador owned a residence in Los Angeles with, as proof, a screen capture... from the video game Grand Theft Auto.<sup>20</sup>

## Colombia

Violent domestic conflicts have marked Colombia's history for a half century now. After making peace with FARC, the government is still seeking an agreement with the National Liberation Army (ELN) to put an end to a war that has riven the country and caused the death, "disappearance" or displacement of approximately eight million people. A car bombing, claimed by the ELN, killed 21 people at a police academy in Bogota in January 2019. The AFP, checking out the official version of this event, showed that the facts were different from what authorities claimed.<sup>21</sup>

Understandably, the guerillas are an important figure in the fake news that circulates in Colombia, the country in Latin America with the third largest population (48 million), following Brazil and Mexico. To show a mass grave, supposedly located in Colombia, of FARC's victims, a photograph from 1996 was circulated of a mass grave discovered after the massacre at Srebrenica in Bosnia.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, political and economic crisis in neighboring Venezuela has had repercussions. According to the UN, 2.7 million people have fled Venezuela since 2015, and the number of departures — approximately five thousand a day since 2018 — is not falling. Colombia has received 1.1 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela; Peru, 506,000; Chile, 288,000; Ecuador, 221,000; Argentina, 130,000; and Brazil, 96,000. This massive arrival of foreigners is a cause of serious concern to many Colombians. Videos showing aggressions purportedly committed by Venezuelans have gone viral in both Colombia and Brazil.<sup>23</sup> The ones I have analyzed were fakes, as were images that depicted what was said to be an intervention by foreign forces for overthrowing Nicolás Maduro's government.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/no-no-son-migrantes-causando-destrozos-durante-su-paso-por-mexico>

<sup>18</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/se-encontraron-mas-de-35-cuerpos-en-una-playa-del-estado-de-sinaloa-en-mexico-no-es-falso>

<sup>19</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/no-estas-imagenes-no-son-de-ninos-victimas-de-trafico-de-organos-en-mexico>

<sup>20</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/no-esta-foto-no-muestra-una-mansion-de-lopez-obrador-en-los-angeles>

<sup>21</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/inconsistencias-en-la-version-oficial-del-atentado-con-coche-bomba-en-colombia>

<sup>22</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/hallaron-la-fosa-mas-grande-de-latinoamerica-la-imagen-es-real-pero-es-de-serbia>

<sup>23</sup> Respectively: <https://factual.afp.com/no-las-personas-que-atacan-la-policia-colombiana-en-este-video-no-son-venezolanas> and <https://factual.afp.com/venezolanos-asesinaron-comerciantes-en-brasil-falso>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/estos-son-aviones-de-la-fuerza-aerea-estadounidense-preparandose-para-atacar-venezuela-falso>

Fake news was also disseminated about the recent conflict with native Americans in southwestern Colombia who were demanding the land promised to them. A photograph from the AFP in 2012, taken when Roméo Langlois (a journalist kidnaped by FARC) was set free, was circulated in March 2019 as depicting a Native American. The intent was to make people believe that the natives were heavily armed, like the guerillas, and therefore just as dangerous.<sup>25</sup> A video that accused the same Amerindians of destroying installations was shot in 2017 in Brazil.<sup>26</sup>

## **Lessons learned**

Rigorous fact-checking takes us back to the origins of journalism. It forces us to provide readers with compelling evidence beyond any doubt; to ascertain the source of online contents, which have been deliberately excerpted from their context; and to corroborate the facts. Not being judges, we do not verify what cannot be verified (*e.g.*, opinions). The challenge is enormous. As many studies have shown, disinformation is shared more often than true information.<sup>27</sup>

In our era, citizens, readers and information consumers must undergo a learning process. They must learn to adopt the reflexes for fostering doubts about the contents in circulation and to use the tools freely available, such as the AFP's, to debunk fake news. Our articles explain how we go about fact-checking in the hope that more and more people will do so before sharing a dubious message or post. This group effort might, some day, narrow the swath of disinformation.

---

<sup>25</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/no-esta-foto-no-muestra-la-minga-del-cauca-en-colombia>

<sup>26</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/no-este-video-no-muestra-indigenas-destruyendo-infraestructura-electrica-en-colombia>

<sup>27</sup> Like the study at MIT: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/technology/twitter-fake-news-research.html>.