

# WHATSAPP SOCIAL MEDIA'S DARK WEB

HOW THE MESSAGING SERVICE IS BEING FLOODED WITH LIES AND HATE AHEAD OF THE SPANISH ELECTIONS



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## WHATSAPP - SOCIAL MEDIA'S DARK WEB

**Avaaz is ringing the alarm bell on the deluge of fake news and hateful memes on WhatsApp, with a crowdsourced effort detecting hundreds of pieces of potential disinformation and a representative survey showing that about 9.6 million Spaniards received such content.**

**26/04/2019**

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# SUMMARY - WHAT THE REPORT SHOWS

This report shows, for the first time, **that Spaniards using WhatsApp have been flooded with disinformation and hateful memes** ahead of the Spanish elections.

The content presented here was submitted by thousands of Avaaz members from across Spain, and analyzed by a team of Avaaz researchers and data analysts.

**Posts range from fake news about Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez signing a secret deal for Catalan independence** to conspiracy theories about migrants receiving big cash payouts, propaganda against gay people and an endless flood of hateful, sexist, racist memes and outright lies.

According to a new survey conducted for Avaaz by the Spanish pollster Metroscopia, this type of content is widespread: **9.6 million potential voters in Spain (26.1%) have seen such false, misleading, racist or hateful posts on WhatsApp.** That is more than on YouTube, Twitter and Instagram combined and almost as much as on Facebook (27.7%).

And while Facebook and other platforms have received much public scrutiny for the spread of disinformation, WhatsApp has not yet drawn much attention in Europe, even though it is becoming the most popular messaging platform for many, with over 89% of Spaniards using it.

**This report shows clearly that WhatsApp's response to disinformation and manipulative content so far is insufficient:** More than one in four Spaniards have been reached by posts that are false, misleading, hateful or pose a serious threat to healthy public discourse.

Therefore, Avaaz is calling on WhatsApp to implement emergency measures ahead of the upcoming elections, both in Spain and the EU:

- 1. Issue a disinformation warning to all users in Spain and Europe,** ensuring they are aware that WhatsApp is in part being misused to influence public opinion and informing them on how to better protect themselves;
- 2. Implement an hourly forwarding limit,** in order to reduce the viral spread of toxic disinformation. The current forwarding limit of five at a time is insufficient and can easily be circumvented by simply repeating the forwarding action multiple times;
- 3. Provide a button for users to flag content to trusted fact checkers** and massively step up efforts to tackle bad actors purposely spreading such content.

## The study shows

- **Disinformation and hateful content has reached up to 9.6M potential voters in Spain (26.1%),** with WhatsApp being the social network most used in Spain, according to a new Metroscopia survey.
- **The examples in this report, submitted by Avaaz members in Spain, mainly fall into the following categories:**
  - **43% Anti-Left (Anti-Sánchez/Anti-Podemos/ Anti-Separatist and others),** including posts with unfounded allegations that Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez made a secret deal with Catalan separatists, or fake news that he was hiding the fact that his grandfather fought alongside Franco.
  - **14% Anti-immigration,** for example a post claiming that a recent migrant from Nigeria receives more money than a pensioner evicted from his house by the Spanish state. The story is made up, and the photos feature people from entirely different contexts.
  - **10% Anti-LGBTQ/Anti-Feminist,** for example, a story claiming that Madrid Mayor Manuela Carmena planned to set up open "sex zones" for gay people around the city. In fact, Carmena proposed to create a safe environment for LGBT people in Madrid.
  - **25% other false, misleading, racist, and hateful content (including anti-right)\*,** for example, a vintage photo of a white child sitting astride a black child on all fours nostalgically referring to slavery.
  - **8% that we deemed to be neither disinformation nor hateful content,** such as parody.



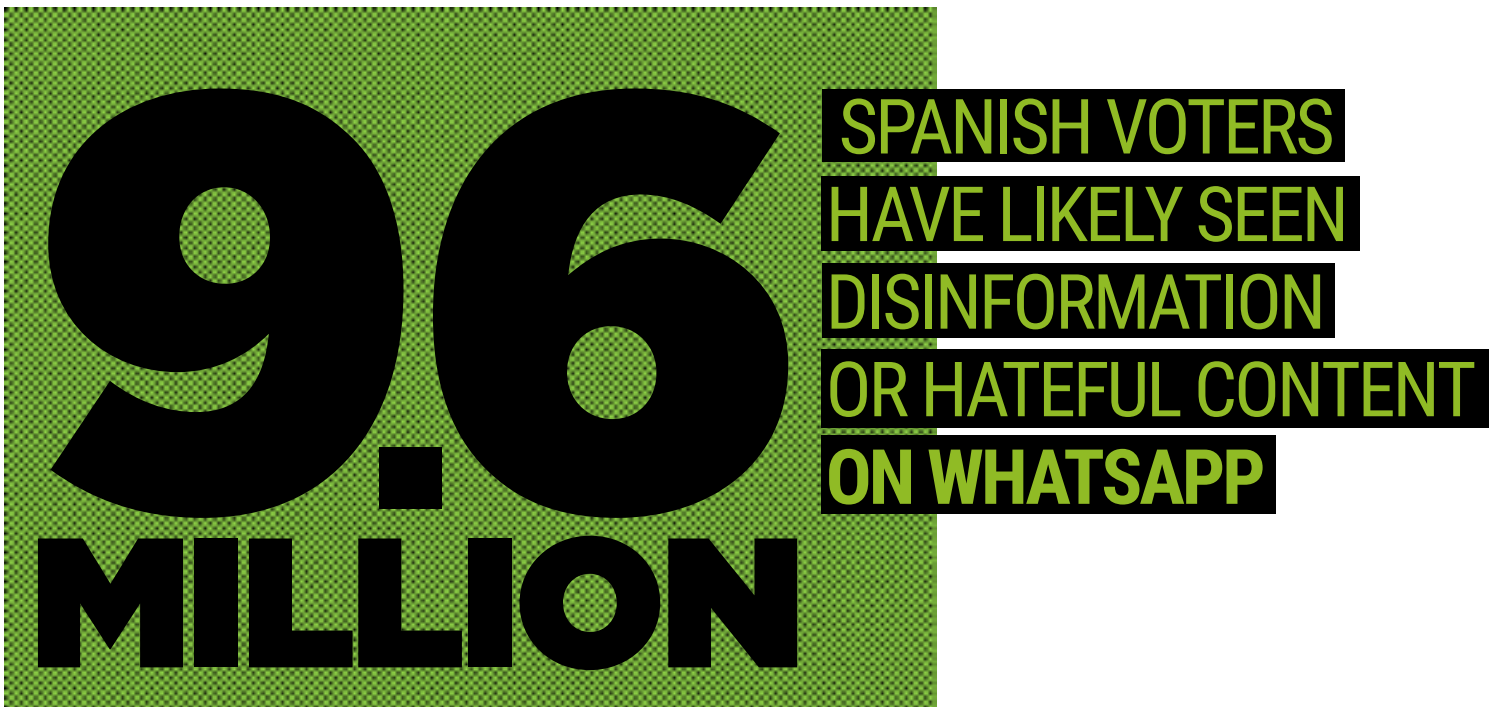
## 2 SCALE - ALMOST 10M REACHED

To underpin the specific examples identified and analyzed in this report and highlight the scale of the crisis on WhatsApp, Avaaz commissioned a public survey with Metroscopia, a leading Spanish political polling institute.

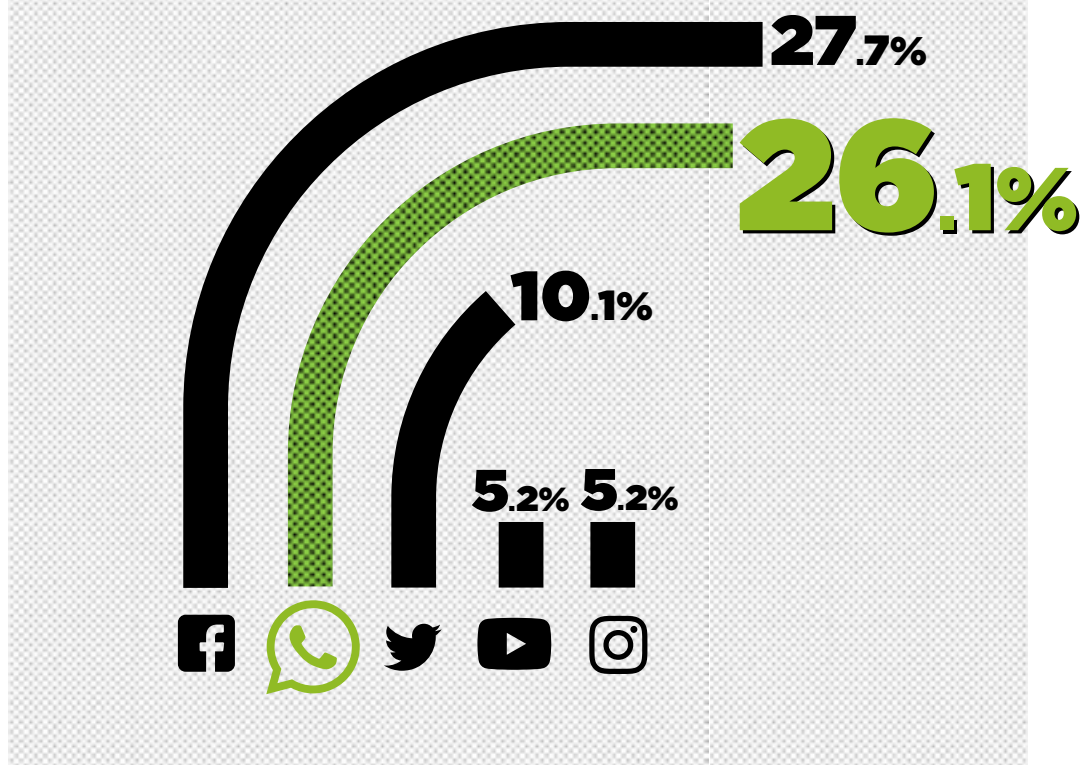
The poll found that about 9.6 million voters (26.1% of a voting population of 36.8 million) likely received political content through the messaging app that they considered false, intentionally misleading, racist, or inciting hatred

or violence. That is more than on YouTube (5.2%), Twitter (10.1%) and Instagram (5.2%) combined and almost as much as on Facebook (27.7%). The poll also showed that almost nine out of 10 Spaniards (89.2%) are using Whatsapp, most of them every day.

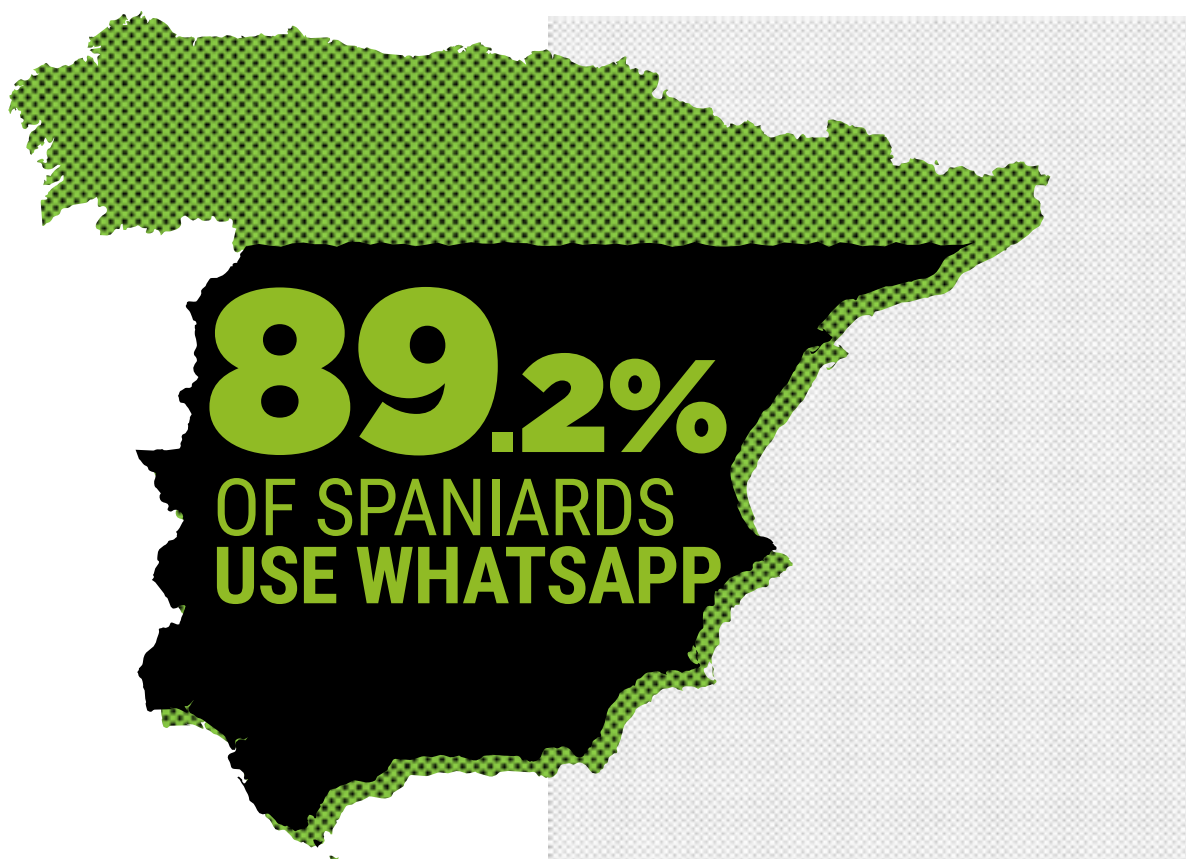
Metroscopia conducted the fieldwork by phone on April 22 and 23 with a representative sample of 2,036 Spanish voters.(1)



## WHATSAPP RIGHT BEHIND FACEBOOK WHEN IT COMES TO LIES AND HATE\*



\* = Percentage of Spaniards seen disinformation or hateful content on each of the platforms



# STORIES - 13 CASE STUDIES

This chapter presents examples of some of the most disturbing items shared by Avaaz's membership in Spain, which our team deemed to be disinformation or hateful content. For each item, we have included a descriptive summary and a link to an independent fact-check. Many of these items were forwarded to us multiple times, but because WhatsApp is encrypted, it is impossible to indicate how far each specific item spread.

## 1 ANTI-LEFT

### WHY IS PEDRO SÁNCHEZ HIDING THE LIFE OF HIS GRANDFATHER?

**DESCRIPTION:** This post claims that the leader of the Socialist party is deliberately hiding the life story of his pro-Franco supporting grandfather.

**TEXT ACCOMPANYING THE IMAGE:** Here we have Lieutenant Colonel Castejón who fought with Franco during the Civil War. This is also historical memory. Ah, and it's Pedro Sánchez's grandfather.

Why is Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) hiding the life of his grandfather? This one gave the coup d'état with Franco in 1936.

**FACT-CHECKED BY [Diario Critico](#): UNTRUE** The man involved in the military coup, Lieutenant Colonel Castejón Espinosa, was born in Manila, when the Philippines was still Spanish territory. But he has nothing to do with Sánchez's grandfather, who was from Lorca, Murcia, and who was called Mateo Pérez-Castejón Díez.

Aquí tenemos al teniente coronel Castejón que luchó con Franco en la Guerra Civil.  
**ESTO TAMBIEN ES MEMORIA HISTORICA**  
Ah, y abuelo de Pedro Sánchez.



¿POR QUÉ PEDRO SÁNCHEZ (PSOE) OCULTA LA VIDA DE SU ABUELO?: ÉSTE SE LEVANTÓ CON FRANCO EN EL 36



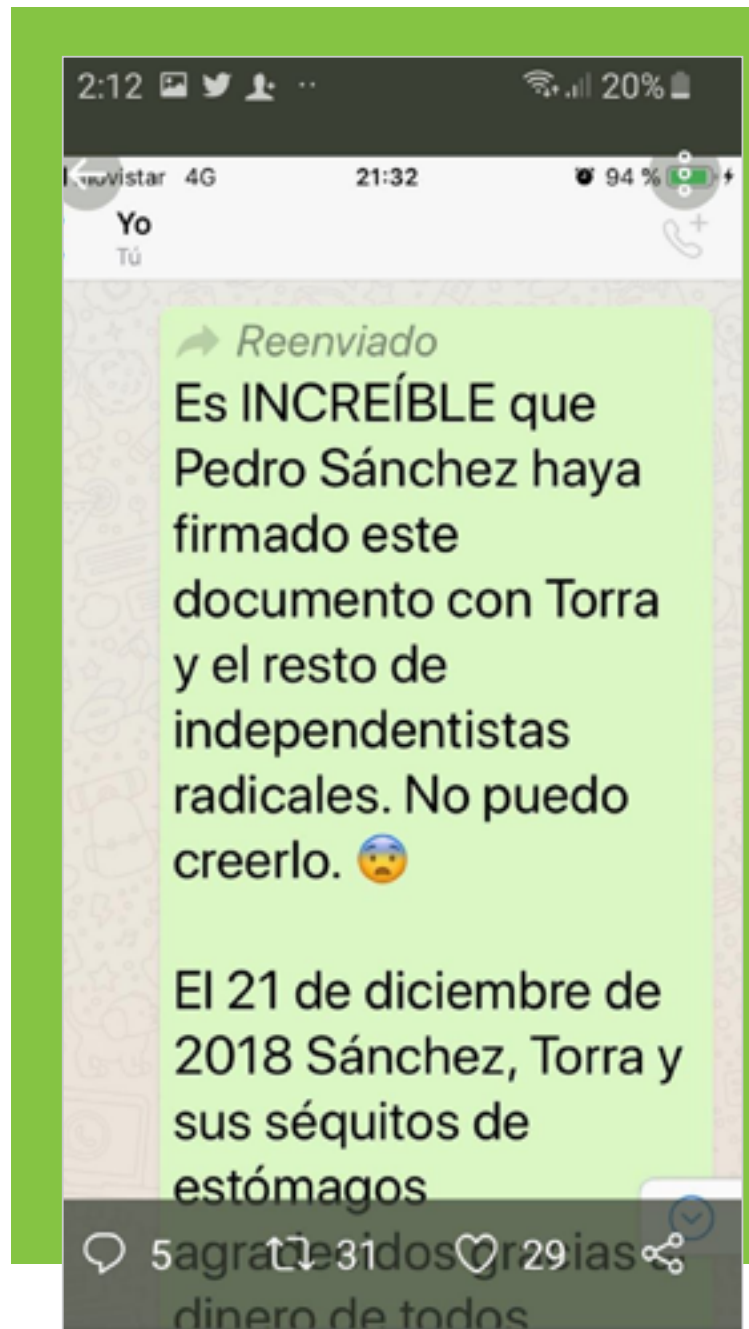
## SÁNCHEZ'S SECRET DEAL WITH CATALAN SEPARATISTS

**DESCRIPTION:** Pedro Sánchez has agreed with pro-independence Catalan parties that in return for their support to help him form a government he will support the independence of Catalonia.

### SUMMARY OF THE TEXT SHARED IN SPANISH

**(Full text in Annex):** An accord between Sánchez and pro-independence Catalan parties has been negotiated secretly, and the media hasn't been covering it properly. The current Spanish PM is working with the pro-independence Catalan parties and has agreed to separation, and that Spanish taxpayers would pay the cost. This is what to expect of Sánchez if he wins the election in April.

**FACT-CHECKED BY La Vanguardia: UNTRUE** The Spanish government's official position is that no new forums are opened to debate self-governance or independence.



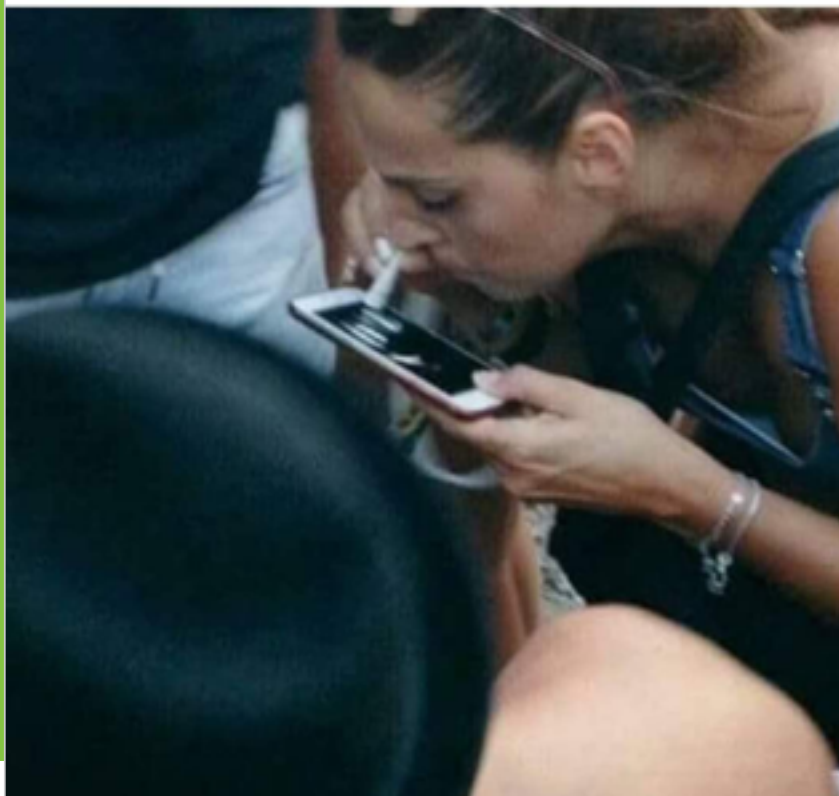
## THE COCAINE-SNIFFING PODEMOS AND PSOE ACTIVIST

**DESCRIPTION:** This post claims to show Podemos and PSOE activist Vicki Donda snorting cocaine off a mobile phone. It implies that this will be the future for Spain if PSOE and Podemos form a government.

**TEXT ACCOMPANYING THE IMAGE (translated):** Vicki Donda, activist and sympathizer of the feminist movement of Podemos and PSOE. A good sign for Spain as they let more socialist leeches enter the institutions. Huge lines.

**FACT-CHECKED BY Newtral: UNTRUE** The image first appeared on Pinterest in 2016 and has continued to spread in various humorous groups, even crossing to Mexico and Argentina. The picture does not depict a Podemos activist. The same image with the name of Ana Roda from the Spanish party Ciudadanos has also been shared. It does not depict her either, as confirmed by her party.

Vicki Donda activista y simpatizante del movimiento feminista de podemos y PSOE 🙄  
Buen augurio le pronostico a España como dejen entrar más sanguijuelas sociales a las instituciones.  
Tremendas lonchas 🤢



## PICTURE OF THE PRIME MINISTER OF LUXEMBOURG WITH HIS PARTNER

**DESCRIPTION:** The picture claims to be of the prime minister of Luxembourg with his partner attending a gala dinner. Xavier Vettel is Luxembourg's first openly gay prime minister. The picture is a clear attempt to shock the reader because it shows a man wearing a dress, trading on anti-trans and anti-gay rhetoric.

**TRANSLATED TEXT WITH THE IMAGE:** "The Prime Minister of Luxembourg with his partner at a gala dinner. THE END OF THE WORLD IS NEAR!"

**ORIGINAL TEXT:** El Primer Ministro de Luxemburgo y su pareja, en una cena de gala. ¡EL FIN DEL MUNDO ESTÁ CERCA...!

**FACT-CHECKED BY [Maldito Bulo](#): UNTRUE**

The photo depicts the Austrian singer and artist Conchita Wurst, in an evening gown, walking up the stairs at the Vienna Opera Ball. The other people in the photo are not (and do not resemble) the prime minister of Luxembourg or his husband.



# MADRID MAYOR CREATING OPEN-AIR SEX ZONES FOR GAYS

**DESCRIPTION:** This story claims that the current mayor of Madrid will set up "sex zones" for gay people around the city. These zones will be for gay people to have sex in public.

**VERIFICATION BY Maldita Bulo: UNTRUE** Madrid Mayor Manuela Carmena was talking about creating a safe environment for LGBTQ people in the city, not places where gay people could have sex in public. Her cabinet also denied that there were plans to create cruising zones.



**Carmena creará zonas para que los gays follen al aire libre en Madrid**

Publicado el Miércoles, 11 Abril 2019 22:48 Escrito por David Enguita



La yaya "magdalena" de Madrid vuelve a sorprender ante un anuncio sin sentido y perjudicial con la ciudadanía, además de ilegal. La nueva ocurrencia de Manuela Carmena, es permitir y legalizar las zonas de "cruising" en Madrid, para que los gays puedan ir a follar al aire libre. Tal cual.

Así lo anuncio en un acto de presentación del informe de delitos contra la LGTBifobia en la Comunidad de Madrid, al que acudí como alcaldesa, pero que acabo siendo un acto electoralista y partidista de Más Madrid, como así recogen las redes sociales de la formación "traidora" de Podemos.

[En España, es GRATIS el cambio de sexo pero el dentista es de pago]

Según recoge el mismo informe, hay hasta 7 casos que el Observatorio Madrileño contra la homofobia, transfobia o bifebia, los que han registrado en zonas de cruising, tanto en parques, como en baños de centros comerciales o zonas de vestuarios. Además aseguran, "hay un incremento notable".

Algo que preocupó mucho a la alcaldesa de Madrid, quien durante su intervención asegura, "no podemos permitir que...

**TITULARES DE PORTADA**

- ¡La JEC podría anular el voto por correo! Detectan un fraude con las papeletas del PP de Castellón  
By: Medtembrino Digital Post: 17-04-2019  
Leer más...
- Europa devuelve a Puigdemont al mundo real: si quiere ser eurodiputado, tiene que recoger el acta en Madrid  
By: Medtembrino Digital Post: 17-04-2019  
Leer más...
- ¡Los podemitas están de suerte! Consiguen revivir cerebros de cerdos que llevaban 4 horas muertos  
By: Medtembrino Digital Post: 17-04-2019  
Leer más...
- Detenidos dos sanitarios que iban violando a las pacientes que recogían en su ambulancia  
By: Medtembrino Digital Post: 17-04-2019  
Leer más...
- Una inglesa borracha intenta cortarle el cuello con un vaso a su amiga en Magaluf  
By: Medtembrino Digital Post: 17-04-2019  
Leer más...

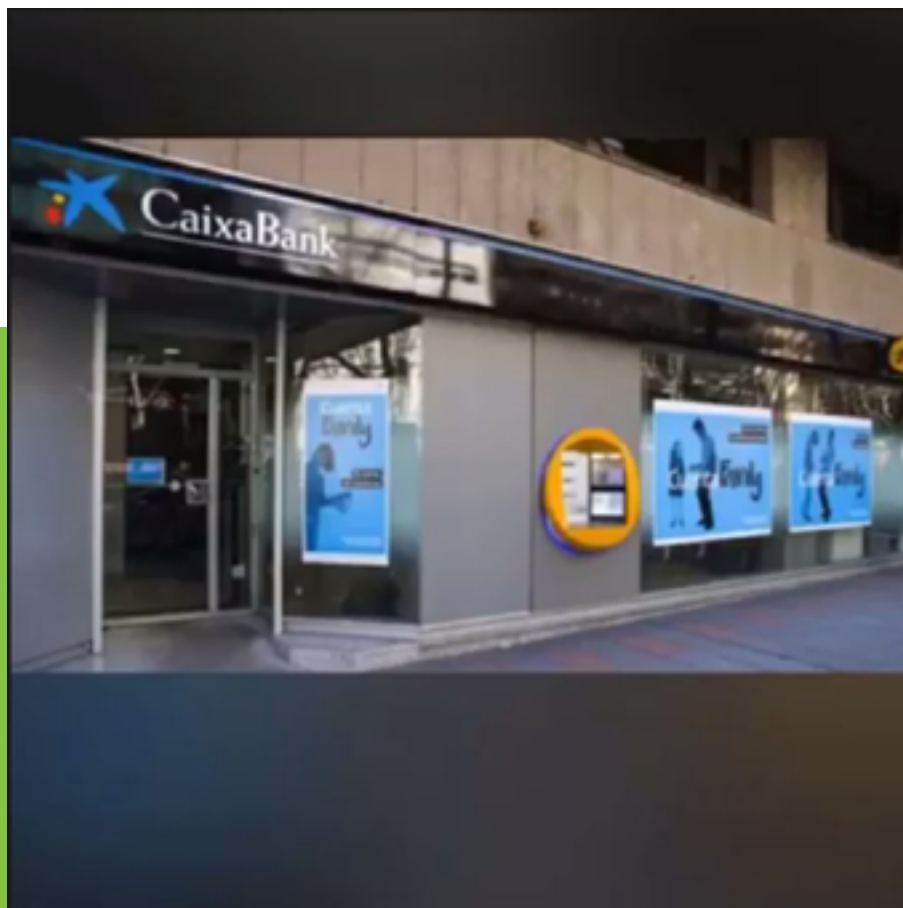
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**MAGHREB MAN RECEIVES 1,800€ A MONTH**

**DESCRIPTION:** This piece of disinformation has been spread via a WhatsApp audio message. It claims the speaker saw a client of North African or Middle Eastern origin in a bank receiving 1,800€ a month in social welfare payments.

**TRANSCRIPT OF AUDIO:** Allegedly recorded at a bank where it is said that the client of North African origin receives 1,800€ a month in social welfare for him and his three children.

**FACT-CHECK BY Maldito Bulo: UNTRUE** According to interviews with the Department of Labor, Social and Family Affairs of the Catalan region these numbers are not accurate. A family of four (one adult and three children) would, at most, get 1,042€ a month.



## THE SPAIN OF PSOE AND PODEMOS

**DESCRIPTION:** This post claims that a recent migrant to Spain from Nigeria receives more money than an elderly man evicted from his house by the Spanish state.

**TEXT ACCOMPANYING THE IMAGE:** Jorge: Spanish, Andaluz, 93 years old. Has worked all his life. Evicted from his house by the state. It has taken a year to find a public shelter.

Mohamed, Nigerian, 20 years old. Two (years) in Spain where he has not worked, neither during day nor night. The state has given him shelter these two years, a mobile phone and 30€ a day.

If you are indignant, share this!

**FACT-CHECK BY Maldito Bulo: FAKE** "Jorge" is in reality a 101-year-old Greek man named Konstantionos Spanos, who appeared on CNN. "Mohamed" is a 27-year-old Nigerian who was caught for narcotics trafficking in India.

The images circulated in Italy in February 2018 with almost exactly the same text. It was also debunked by Butac.

**LA ESPAÑA DEL PSOE Y PODEMOS**

**JORGE:**  
ESPAÑOL. ANDALUZ. 93 AÑOS. HA TRABAJADO TODA SU VIDA. DESAHUCIADO DE SU CASA POR EL ESTADO, HA TARDADO UN AÑO EN CONSEGUIR UNA PLAZA EN UN ASILO PÚBLICO.

**MOHAMED:**  
NIGERIANO. 20 AÑOS. DOS EN ESPAÑA EN LOS QUE NO HA TRABAJADO NI DE DÍA NI DE NOCHE. EL ESTADO LE HA DADO ALOJAMIENTO ESTOS DOS AÑOS, UN TELÉFONO MOVIL Y 30 EUROS AL DÍA.

**SI ESTAS INDIGNADO  
COMPARTELO**

## "THOSE WERE REAL GIFTS!"

**DESCRIPTION:** This meme is expressing nostalgia for the time when you could give away slaves as gifts.

Esos si eran regalos



## WOMEN IN PHOTOSHOPPED CHAINS

Aquí un hombre al que hay que respetar porque eso que veis en la imagen forma parte de su religión. No como los hombres occidentales que somos unos machistas retrógrados por regalar rosas a una mujer.



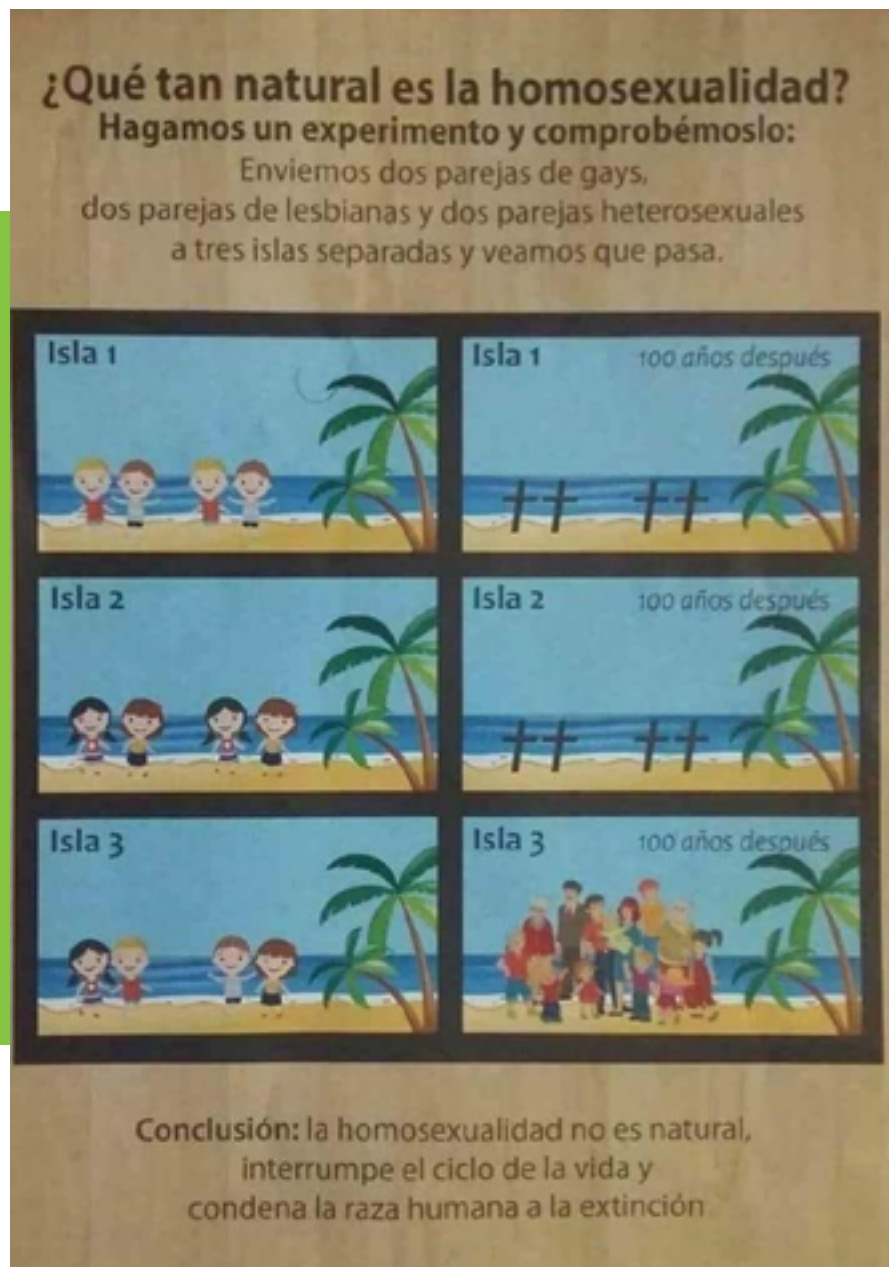
**DESCRIPTION:** The doctored image of a man "leading" three chained women down the road is accompanied with the text "Here's a man who must be respected because what you see in the image is part of his religion. Unlike Western men who are sexist and reactionary for giving roses to a woman."

The original photo can be found [here](#).



## HOMOSEXUALITY IS NOT NATURAL

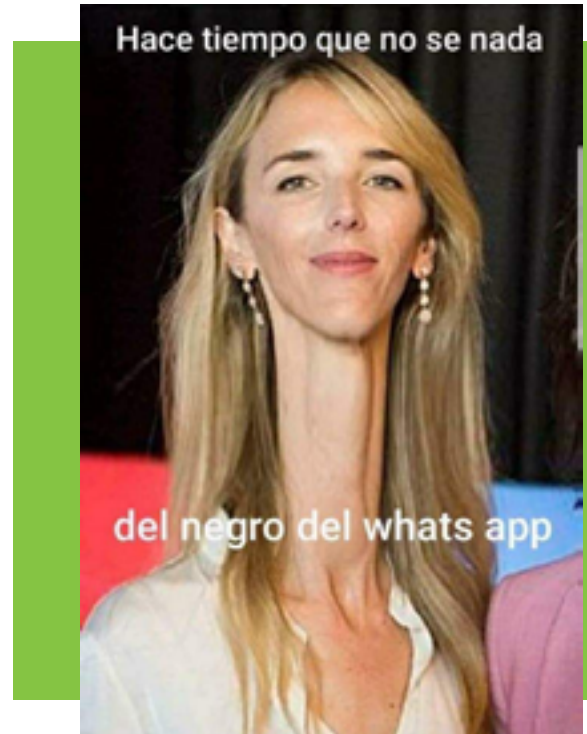
**DESCRIPTION:** This homophobic post depicts a number of islands with a number of couples, concluding that homosexuality is not natural and leads to human extinction.





## CAYETANA ÁLVAREZ DE TOLEDO MEETS “THE BLACK GUY FROM WHATSAPP”

**DESCRIPTION:** This photo of the People’s Party candidate for Barcelona, Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo, famous for her long neck, has been altered here to make it resemble a widely-shared meme, known in Spain as “the black guy from WhatsApp.”



## UNIDAS PODEMOS (UNITED, WE CAN)

**DESCRIPTION:** Explicit content shared after the name change of Podemos to “Unidas Podemos”.

**UNIDAS  
PODEMOS.**



## VOX LEADER ABASCAL WITH REVERSED MEGAPHONE

This photo shows Vox leader Santiago Abascal holding a megaphone backwards, pretending this is what he actually did at that event. The image is doctored. The original image can be found [here](#).



# METHODOLOGY -

## HOW THE STUDY WAS DONE

Avaaz used a combination of crowdsourced submissions from its members, data processing tools like Twilio and fact-checks by Spanish media to arrive at what we believe is an insightful picture of the scale and impact of fake news and hateful memes on WhatsApp in Spain.

- **CONTENT SUBMISSION:** This report is based on a crowdsourced project, joined by 5,833 Avaaz members all over Spain. Members were invited to join the “Avaaz Whatsapp Watch” and forward content received on their WhatsApp that they deemed false, misleading or hateful to a specific phone number we set up.
- **SCOPE:** Ultimately, Avaaz received a total of 2,461 submissions, including over 992 unique media files and 1,469 text submissions. Our researchers and data analysts were able to review, analyze and categorize 548 of those submissions in chronological order. We examined the content flagged and limited our analysis to posts containing text, images and videos.
- **TIME FRAME:** The project was launched on April 11, 2019. Data collection for this report ended 14 days later, on April 24, 2019.
- **FACT-CHECKING:** The highlighted pieces in this report were fact-checked using information provided by well-established media outlets and fact-checking sites, mostly from Spain, like El País or Maldito Buló.
- **CATEGORIES INCLUDED IN THE STUDY:** The 13 selected pieces in this report are mostly malicious or factually incorrect posts. Other items submitted from Avaaz members in Spain can be found in the Annex, that is available on request. Not all have been fact-checked or verified, but they do demonstrate the wide variety of purposely misleading, partisan, racist, homophobic or offensive memes circulating on WhatsApp.
- **VIEWERSHIP ESTIMATION:** Although some of the images/texts have been shared dozens of times, we are unable to provide a detailed viewership estimation because of encryption in WhatsApp, which renders the platform difficult to analyze. Therefore, we conducted a representative survey with Metroscopia, which shows that up to 9.6 million of the Spanish voting population (26.1%) say they have received such content.

■ **METROSCOPIA SURVEY:** The fieldwork for the WhatsApp survey was carried out by phone on April 22 and 23 with a representative sample of 2,036 Spanish voters. (1)

- 89.2% of Spaniards use WhatsApp: 79.6% every day; 8.6% several times a week; 1% several times a month.
- 35.9% have received political content on WhatsApp in the last month: 11.6% often; 24.3% sometimes.
- 29.3% have received political content on WhatsApp that they consider potentially false, intentionally misleading, racist, or inciting hatred or violence: 5.3% often; 24% sometimes.
  - Extrapolated to the entire polling sample (including non-Whatsapp users), this represents 26.1% of the Spanish voting population.
- Political content that users consider potentially false, intentionally misleading, racist, or inciting hatred or violence has also been received on other social media: 27.7% on Facebook; 10.1% on Twitter; 5.2% on Youtube; 5.2% on Instagram.

■ **AVAAZ MEMBERSHIP IN SPAIN:** Avaaz has a total of 706,645 members in Spain.

■ **ANNEX:** Other items received from Avaaz members in Spain can be received upon request by journalists.

## ABOUT AVAAZ

**Avaaz is a global citizens' movement with over 50 million supporters worldwide, including 20 million in Europe and about 706,000 in Spain.**

This study was carried out by a team of researchers and data analysts set up by Avaaz to detect and debunk disinformation ahead of the EU elections.

Over the coming weeks, Avaaz members from across Europe will work alongside this newly launched team to monitor disinformation operations across the European Union and help identify fake news, uncover the networks driving it and work with platforms and governments to correct false or misleading content and hold perpetrators accountable.

Avaaz plans to produce other similar reports to inform the public and decision makers about the spread of disinformation across the continent.

To schedule an interview with one of Avaaz's campaign directors or simply stay informed about further reports and investigations from our team, please contact:

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**AVAAZ**

26/04/2019