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Misinformation and migration during the COVID-19 pandemic: From the migrant caravan in Honduras to the Filipino diaspora

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Misinformation and migration during the COVID-19 pandemic: From the migrant caravan in Honduras to the Filipino diaspora

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Introduction

Many terms have been coined to describe the spread of false information, including “disinfodemic” (Posetti and Bontcheva, 2020a and 2020b), “massive infodemic” (World Health Organization, 2020), and fake news (Ireton and Posetti, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2017). The spread of such false information during the COVID-19 pandemic has been assimilated to a parallel misinformation pandemic directly impacting lives and livelihoods around the world. Fake news and misinformation on sanitary measures against COVID-19 and policy responses have had a more severe impact on groups considered to be in a vulnerable situation, including migrants (IOM, 2020a).¹

As the latest seismic geopolitical event (McAuliffe, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has also affected migrants’ representations that are intrinsically linked to social, economic and political global transformations. The internet has become the key medium for the spread of both disinformation and information (WHO et al., 2020) and has impacted public opinion on an unprecedented scale. This is especially the case of social media through instant and self-publishing posts (McAuliffe et al., 2020).

This paper analyses how the most used social media platforms have spread misinformation about migrants during the pandemic in two countries: Honduras and the Philippines. First, it examines the types of viral misinformation related to migration since the declaration of the pandemic on 11 March 2020 through the study of the social media accounts of two investigative media outlets. Second, this paper identifies some good practices for online media when responding to misinformation claims about migrants and migration. Studying misleading content from different viewpoints through a multimethod process contributes to a nuanced understanding, which is especially important in the three claims identified in this paper.

Migrants, social media and infodemic

Misinformation about migration and migrants is not new, but the COVID-19 pandemic has arguably made it worse. Indeed, the pandemic has been accompanied by an “infodemic”, which the World Health Organization (WHO) defines as an “overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that occurs during an epidemic. It can lead to confusion and ultimately mistrust in governments and public health response” (WHO, 2020; ISD, 2020; McAuliffe et al., 2020; van Liempt and Kox, 2020; Davey and Boseley, 2020).

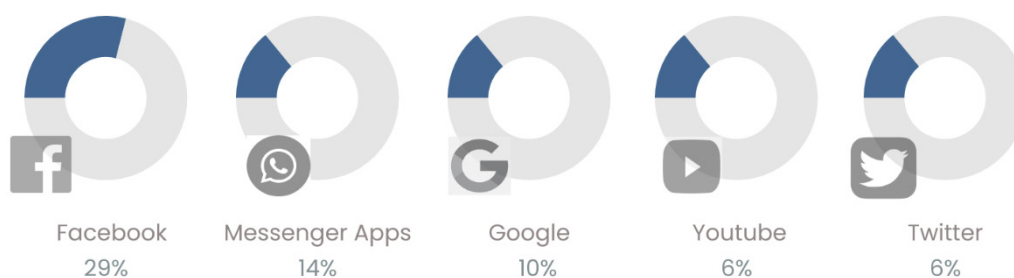
The infodemic, like the virus, can be analysed through a migration lens. Lockdowns, travel bans, and physical distancing have created a global economic crisis (World Bank, 2020). For the 281 million international migrants worldwide (UN DESA, 2021), these restrictions have revealed and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities due, in part, to an increase in xenophobic and discriminatory reactions. Fake news, misinformation and polarization of issues tend to be pervasive in times of uncertainty and anxiety (UN, 2020).

Even if some aspects concerning the exact role social media plays in shaping public perceptions of migration remain “unclear” (OECD, 2020:21), platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter have been used to spread misinformation and fake news about migrants even before the pandemic started (Borella and Rossinelli, 2017). The phenomenon increased after 11 March 2020,

¹ There is no universally agreed definition of migrants or migration. This paper uses UN DESA’s 1998 *Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration* and IOM (2019) to define a heterogeneous group of people who were already in vulnerable situations, such as migrants in irregular situations, migrant workers with precarious livelihoods, or working in the informal economy, victims of trafficking in persons as well as people fleeing their homes because of persecution, war, violence, human rights violations or disaster, whether within their own countries or across international borders, refugees and asylum seekers.

date of the official designation of the situation as a pandemic by WHO. Indeed, as summarized in figure 1 below, some of these social media platforms, especially Facebook, are seen as the biggest medium for the spread of misinformation worldwide.

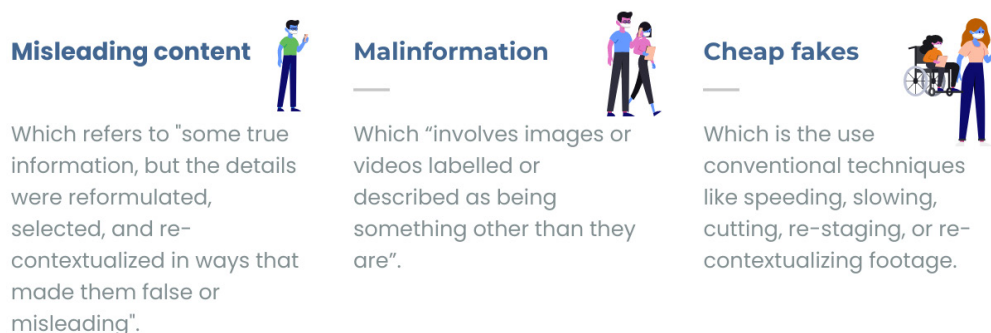
Figure 1. Which of the following if any, are you most concerned about online channels of misinformation?



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Newman et al., 2020.

True or genuine information is often reconfigured or taken out of context. Wardle explains that “true information is spun, twisted, recontextualised or reworked”, rather than being completely fabricated (quoted in Brennan et al., 2020). For Brennan et al., misinformation can be classified based on the extent to which it is “reconfigured” or “fabricated”. In a sample of 225 pieces of disinformation published in English between January and March 2020, they found that the majority were reconfigured claims (59%), while the remainder were wholly fabricated (28%) or examples of satire/parody (3%). The authors identified three sub-types of reconfigured information (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Sub-types of reconfigured information



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Brennan et al, 2020; Wardle, 2019; Paris and Donovan, 2019:6.

Study cases and context

In the “Global South”, social media has become one of the most important sources of information because of gaps in traditional media reach (Bowles et al., 2020). However, every single country has its own peculiarities, which determine how social media is being used to spread misinformation about migrants.

The Republic of Honduras is a country in Central America, bordered by Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, with 9,357,701 inhabitants (INE, 2020a). In recent years, migrant caravans have started in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador – referred to as Central America’s “Northern Triangle” region – heading towards the Mexican-US border to the extent that the number of migrants from these three countries who have been apprehended at the border has surpassed that of Mexican migrants (IOM, 2019: 104). A “migrant caravan” began in Honduras in October 2018 and, since then, there have been at least eight caravans (IACHR, 2019, 2018).

Migrant caravan characteristics

Migrant caravans are a method of migration that can be described through two main characteristics. Migration through migrant caravans are:

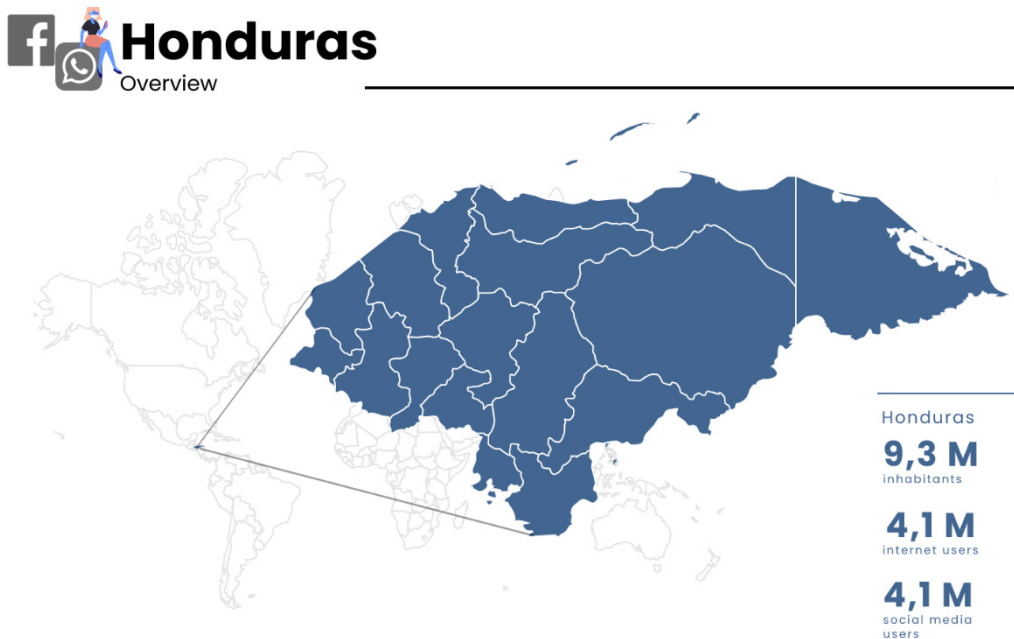
- 1) made by land across international borders, from Honduras towards the United States, through El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico; and
- 2) gathering a large group of migrants.

Social media has played a key role in mobilizing migrants to join the caravans. Members of the caravans have been motivated to move for a variety of factors including violence and poverty in their countries of origin, and to seek better opportunities.

Sources: Astles, n.d.; IOM, 2018a.

According to We Are Social and Hootsuite (2020), in January 2020, there were 4.1 million internet users in Honduras and 4.1 million social media users (see figure 3 below).

Figure 3. Internet and social media users in Honduras



Source: Author's own elaboration based on National Statistics Institute of Honduras, 2020; We Are Social and Hootsuite, 2020.

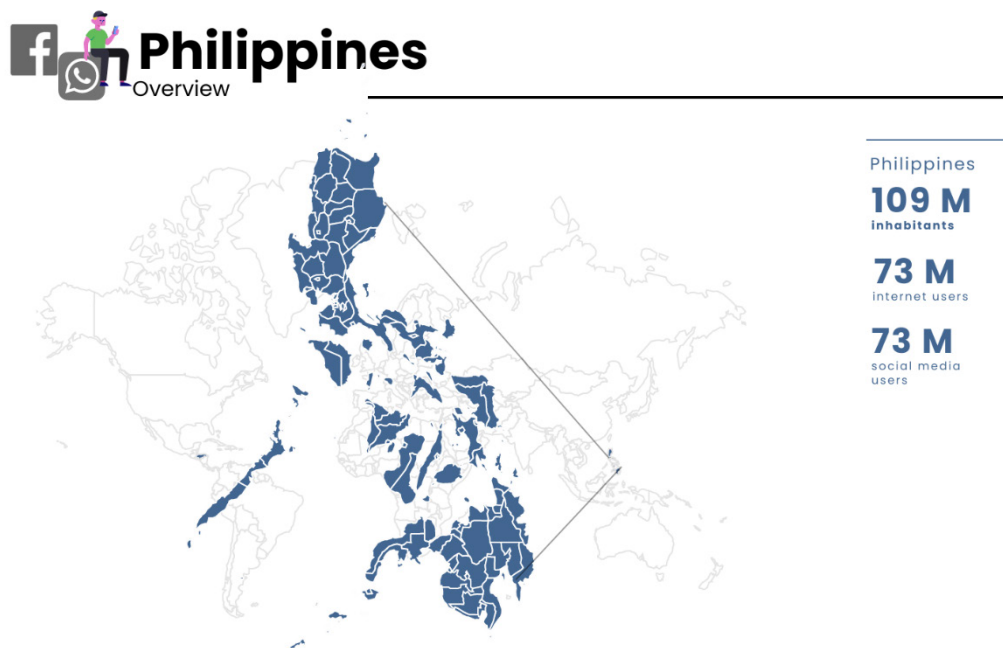
ILifeBelt demonstrated that 92.6 per cent of the users in Honduras accessed networks through their smartphones in 2016. Even more importantly, the social media platforms that were mostly used in all Central America and the Caribbean, including in Honduras, were WhatsApp (79,7%) and Facebook (77,6%).

The archipelagic country of the Republic of the Philippines is situated in the Western Pacific Ocean. The Philippines is the 13th most populated country in the world, with 109 million inhabitants (POPCOM, 2020). The Filipino diaspora² is also one of the largest in the world, with about 10.2 million people in more than 200 destination countries and territories, according to the Philippine Government's Commission on Filipinos Overseas (2020).

² There is no widely accepted definition of diaspora. The term in this paper refers to Filipino migrants and their descendants who live outside the country of their birth or ancestry, either on a temporary or permanent basis and who still maintain affective and material ties to their country of origin (Agunias and Newland, 2012).

The Philippines is a highly connected country. There were 73 million internet users in January 2020, with a 67 per cent of internet penetration in the country (Chua, 2020; see figure 4 below).

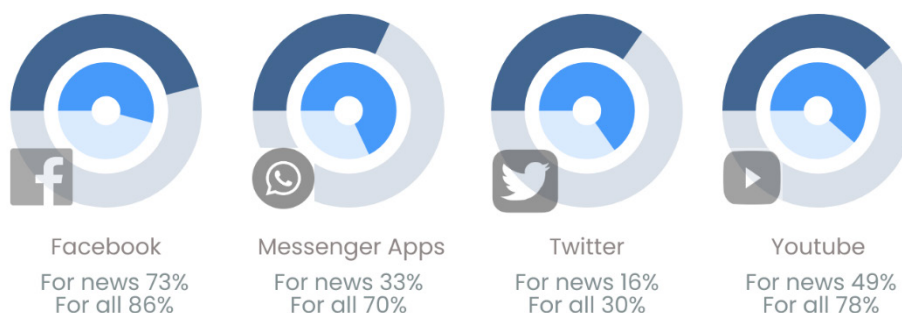
Figure 4. Internet and social media users in the Philippines



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Commission on Population and Development, 2020a; Philippine Government's Commission on Filipinos Overseas, 2020.

Facebook is the Philippine preferred social media platform, with many using the site for reading, discussing and sharing news.

Figure 5. Top social media and messaging in The Philippines



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Newman et al. (2020).

A Reuters Thomson study demonstrated that only 22 per cent of respondents of the study trust news on media and, even more importantly, only 34 per cent trust news they used (Newman et al., 2020). Indeed, Facebook (47%) is the most concerning platform for fake news and misinformation for the Philippine respondents, followed by WhatsApp (15%), YouTube (6%) and Twitter (2%).

Method

Digital misinformation is a multifaceted problem, which does not have one single root cause nor any single solution (European Commission, 2019). For this reason, this paper draws on a two-pronged methodological approach.

First, a social media analysis explores the different types of misinformation directed towards migrants in Honduras and the Philippines during the first eight months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper focuses on migrants' representations made in the Facebook and WhatsApp accounts of two investigative online media: *Contracorriente* and *Rappler*. *Contracorriente* is an investigative media related to Honduras and Central American region and *Rappler* is a Philippine media which started as a Facebook page in 2011 and later evolved into a complete website.

Second, the author conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with Honduran and Philippine journalists who report on migration and fact-checking issues.³ The purpose of these interviews is to examine causes and consequences of misleading content about migrants in the public opinion of these two countries and the good practices developed by these two media against the infodemic.

Limitations

This study was conducted in two specific and different countries which require further study on the subject of misinformation. The results cannot easily be transferred or generalized to other countries or societies, but instead provide valuable insights and a non-exhaustive list of illustrative examples.

Regarding social media analysis, WhatsApp messages are encrypted and were thus obtained through the respondents of the second phase of the multi-method design. In-depth interviews sample size was in line with general practice in qualitative studies, but political concerns may have made responses vulnerable to some degree of bias. Some respondents hesitated to express some explicit criticisms of media depictions of migrants.

Analysis and results

Migrant caravan

The *Contracorriente* journalists who were interviewed explained who was producing misinformation about migrants. In their opinion, the disinformation was coming from internet users through comments and content. In order to analyse this last point, 43 posts about migrants made in the *Contracorriente* Facebook account during 2020 were analysed. Out of these, 27 were about different migration issues and 16 concerned the only migrant caravan which started in October 2020 in San Pedro Sula, in the north-west of the country, and was later blocked in Guatemala.

All of the Facebook posts with the label #MigrantCaravan achieved 433 reactions, were shared 252 times and received 13 comments. These comments were addressed to governments of the countries of origin, transit or destination, journalists and migrants.

³ The respondents' names have been anonymized in the discussion below.

Figure 6. Reactions to posts on the migrant caravan of October 2020



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Facebook, 2020.

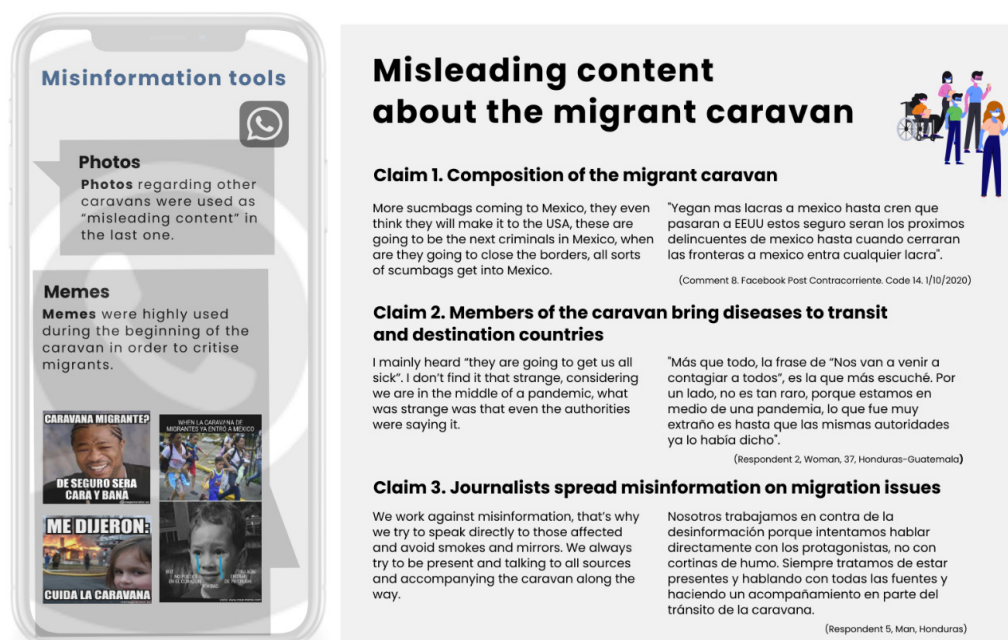
This content is particularly interesting in WhatsApp, where journalist respondents recognized misleading content but also satire and parody. *ContraCorriente* journalists detected that their photos regarding previous caravans were being used during the October 2020 one to discourage people to join it.

I remember that some international press colleagues tried to know if the photos about the militarization used through WhatsApp groups photos were of the last caravan or they were previous. The photos were ours and were being used to misinform [Recuerdo que algunos compañeros de prensa internacional intentaron contrastar a través de grupos de WhatsApp fotos sobre la militarización de la última caravana que eran anteriores. Las fotos eran nuestras y estaban siendo utilizadas para desinformar] (respondent 1, woman, Honduras; author's translation).

Memes were another type of medium which were highly used when the caravan started in order to criticize migrants, especially on WhatsApp. As noted by one of the journalist respondents:

In fact, they do it to create fear among members of the caravan. Especially through Facebook, through WhatsApp, I was receiving memes that were being used in the groups [Incluso lo hacen con la finalidad de infligir miedo dentro de los integrantes de la caravana. Sobre todo, por Facebook por WhatsApp me llegaban memes que utilizan en los grupos] (respondent 5, man, Honduras (author's translation))

Figure 7. Misinformation and misleading content about the migrant caravan and claims



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Note: Author's translation of original quotations beneath each of the three claims.

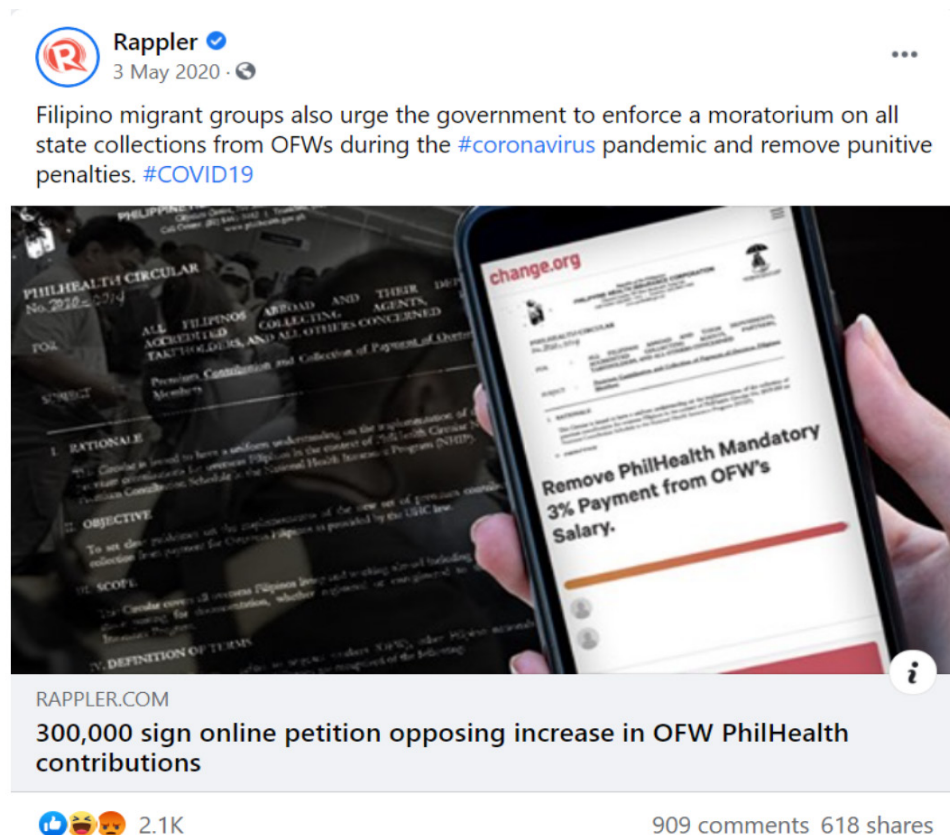
Filipino diaspora

Rappler published 49 posts regarding migrants during 2020, 39 from 11 March to 11 October which concerned different international issues, such as the Mexican-United States border, the asylum seekers and refugees in Greece, and the Filipino diaspora situation during the COVID-19 crisis.

All identified cases of misinformation arose in comments made on posts published by the Rappler Facebook account and concerned Filipino migrants living abroad and the repatriation process during the pandemic.

Indeed, content concerning Filipino migrants was the one attracting the most interactions, being shared 2,507 times, commented upon 1,945 times and achieving 5,929 reactions. Reconfigured content is the most common type of misinformation identified in the comments, even though there were also examples of satire and parody, mainly in the form of memes (see figures 8 and 9 below).

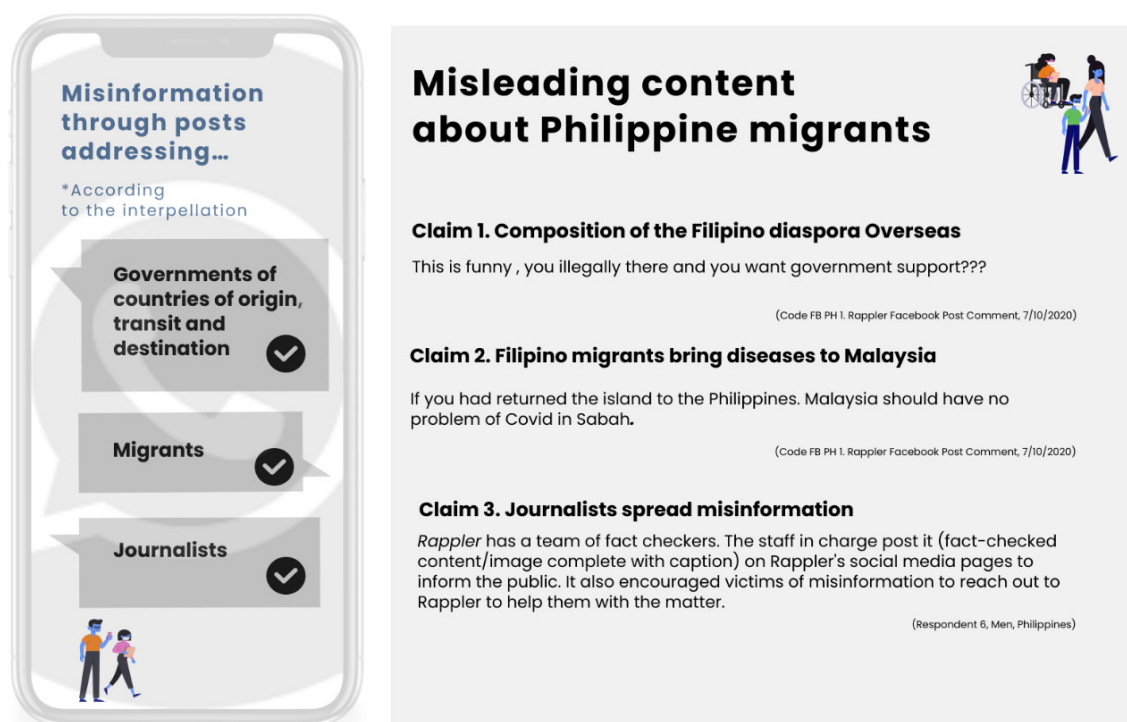
Figure 8. Reactions to post on Filipino migrants



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Facebook, 2020.

As in the Honduran case, the Philippines comments content generates misleading information about migration addressing three main actors: governments and authorities, migrants and journalists.

Figure 9. Misinformation, misleading content about Filipino migrants and claims



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Discussion

According to the OECD (2020), there are two opposite narratives related to COVID-19 and migration:

- (1) The essential jobs industries (health-care sector, agriculture, shops, delivery services) rely significantly on immigrant labour, and
- (2) migrants are blamed to spread the virus.

The first is more common in the Philippines social media content considered in the study while the second is encountered more frequently in Honduras. Nevertheless, the three main claims of misleading content spread in social media and corroborated by the journalist respondents were similar in the two countries.

Claim 1. Composition of the migrant caravan and of the Filipino migrant diaspora

All the Honduran respondents recognized that WhatsApp and Facebook were used for spreading misinformation through reconfigured content about migrants which were part of the caravan in October 2020. These messages stigmatized migrants and created doubts about what they were going to do in countries of transit and destination. Some of the messages inferred that male migrants were criminals⁴ or reflected instances of intersectional discrimination:

What the f*** are they here for, and in wheelchairs... Who is going to end up paying for them, bunch of scoundrels [*Y que carajos vienen hacer y en silla de ruedas menos Kien los va a mantener bola de sinvergüenzas*] (Code FB HN 9. *Contracorriente*. Facebook Post Comment, 4 October 2020, author's translation).

Regarding the last caravan, one of the respondents explained how this kind of stigmatizing language used true elements to manipulate the whole message:

It is a huge manipulation of things which are real but distorted [...] When it was mentioned that some among them brought knives or machetes, it is quite possibly [true] as it as tool they regularly use, but that doesn't mean that "migrants bring weapons"... it is a truth which is told with malintent, and as such it becomes a lie [*Es una manipulación tremenda de cosas que son reales y se tergiversan. [...] Cuando se dijo que alguna gente traía cuchillos o machetes, que puede ser cierto, porque es una herramienta que usan, pero no que los "migrantes traen armas" y, entonces, un hecho real pero contado de una forma malintencionada ya se convierte en una mentira*] (respondent 3, man, Honduras, (author's translation)).

It is important to note the concept of "aporophobia" (Cortina, 2017), referring to fear of poverty and of poor people, that not only transpires in comments on Facebook posts, but also in WhatsApp memes and messages about the migrant caravan.

Economic inequality is also one of the underlying factors for the spread of misinformation about the repatriation of Filipinos, most of whom were displaced from work and forced to return home following the shuttering of economies. According to the comment below, aphorophobia is manifest as part of a xenophobia narrative in which Chinese workers in the Philippines steal national's jobs:

I remember what katay said in the campaign, when he seems to be president by 2020 he will send all OFWs [Overseas Filipino Workers] home to work because there is already a lot of labour to do. Now 2020 it is true that there are many jobs, for the Chinese and the OFWs / *dds na budol iyang nga nga!!! [Na alala ko ung sinabi ni katay digong nung kampanya, pag sya daw naging pangulo by 2020 pauuwiin nya daw lahat ng ofw pra dto na magtrabaho kasi marami na raw trabaho dto.now 2020 nagkatotoo nga at marami nga trabaho, pra sa mga intsik nga lng at ang mga ofw/dds na budol ayun nga nga!!!]* (Code FB PH 6. *Rappler*. Facebook Post Comment, 26 July 2020, author's translation).

⁴ Since 2018, some claimed on their personal social media accounts that people from different terrorist groups were among the Honduran migrants, including from the Central American maras or groups from the Middle East, such as ISIS terrorists, although no evidence does corroborate this.

Several studies show that increasing unemployment may be associated with more negative opinions about migration, implying a tendency for polarization (Mcginnity and Kingston, 2017; Hatton, 2016; Finseraas et al., 2014).

Claim 2. Migrants bring diseases to transit and destination countries

All the Honduran journalist respondents considered that there existed a general perception that migrants were spreading the virus during the last caravan.⁵ The same claim was made in several comments about the COVID-19 outbreak traced back to a Sabah detention centre in Malaysia, that reportedly housed undocumented migrants from the Philippines.

If you had returned the island to the Philippines. Malaysia should have no problem of Covid in Sabah. (Code FB PH 1. *Rappler*. Facebook Post Comment, 7 October 2020).

This claim of migrants as COVID-19 spreader was unfortunately also relayed by some politicians who blamed migrants for COVID-19, which has stigmatized migrants and impacted on public opinion. In order to respond to this infodemic, *Rappler* reminded its readers in one of its articles of the risks of heightened xenophobia and informed them about media verification process:

Rappler has sought the Philippine embassy in Malaysia for more information about the recent spike in Sabah, such as whether Filipinos were among those infected there. The embassy has yet to reply to our messages via email and Facebook Messenger as of posting time (Esmaque II, 2020).

Claim 3. Journalists spread misinformation

Journalists at both *Contracorriente* and *Rappler* have come across criticisms of their work which would accordingly be helping to spread inaccurate information at speed in social media. These two media have implemented different strategies to raise awareness of misinformation, xenophobia, racism and hate speech.

Contracorriente decided to promote a multinational team of journalists which accompanied the caravan during a part of its journey to ensure that all their sources were verified. On its part, *Rappler* created a fact-checking team.

The practice of investigative journalism followed by *Contracorriente* and *Rappler* recalls the four moves of the “SIFT” approach when looking at a source (Caulfield, 2019 cited on IOM, 2020b), which calls to:

- S**top
- I**nvestigate the source
- F**ind better coverage
- T**race claims, quotes and media to the original context

⁵ This narrative about disease transmitted by members of the caravan is not new. As La Silla Rota reported, there is no report known about the disease spread by members of the caravan. Indeed, an IOM survey (2018b) demonstrated that only 11 per cent of the people interviewed manifested the need of some sort of medication and 8.8 per cent of all groups included some who suffered from a disease which they considered to be particularly serious.

Conclusions

This paper has scrutinized misinformation about migrants in two under researched countries during the first eight months of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 11 March to 11 October 2020: the migrant caravan which started in Honduras and was blocked in Guatemala in the beginning of October; and the situation of the Filipinos overseas, which showed that a more nuanced understanding of information and misinformation about migrants is needed.

Existing research supports that Facebook and WhatsApp are seen as primary conduits for misinformation all over the world. Taking into consideration the sub-types of reconfigured content, this paper focused on the infodemic about migrants in Honduras and the Philippines and how investigative media are implementing good practices to fight against it.

Studying misleading content from different viewpoints though a multimethod process contributes to a nuanced understanding, which is especially important in the three claims identified in countries of origin, transit and destination:

- (1) the composition of the migrant caravan in Honduras and the Filipino diaspora overseas;
- (2) the risk of migrants spreading the COVID-19 in origin, transit or destination countries; and
- (3) stigmatization of media which covered this information, such as *Contracorriente* and *Rappler*.

Journalism is key to provide accurate information and combat myths and rumors during the infodemic, including concerning migrant populations (UNESCO, 2020). Considering these three claims also highlights the need to support international fact-checkers alliances that are essential to improve public opinion about migrants and to reduce misinformation, even more harmful during the pandemic. Indeed, investigative journalism is key to disseminate verified facts and advice from trusted sources.

Finally, this paper clearly shows the need to analyse misinformation related to migrants and migration through the notion of aphorophobia. New approaches are needed if we are to fully understand the multifaceted factors that enable infodemic about migrants in under-represented countries taking into consideration their own national peculiarities.

Appendix A. Questionnaire in Spanish for the Honduran respondents

¿Cree que **existe desinformación** o noticias falsas referidas a los miembros de la caravana de migrantes que se ha realizado durante la COVID-19?

- Si es así, ¿se criminaliza a la caravana en redes sociales?
- ¿Se dice que los miembros de la caravana pueden portar el coronavirus?

Facebook y WhatsApp son los principales métodos de difusión de este tipo de desinformación en el mundo, ¿**Qué tipo de información** se difunde en el caso de Honduras?

- (a) Contenido engañoso: Alguna información verdadera, pero los detalles se reformularon, seleccionaron y recontextualizaron de manera que los hacían falsos o engañosos.
- (b) Malinformación: Incluye imágenes o videos etiquetados o descritos como algo diferente a lo que son.
- (c) Falsificaciones baratas: Utiliza técnicas convencionales como acelerar, ralentizar, cortar, reorganizar o recontextualizar el metraje.

¿**Por qué** cree que se genera esta desinformación con respecto a la población migrante, solicitante de asilo y refugiada que forma parte de las caravanas?

¿**Existe alguna particularidad** de esta caravana en comparación con las anteriores en términos de desinformación?

Medios como **Contracorriente** están intentando responder a la contaminación del ecosistema informativo, ¿conoce alguna práctica que estén desarrollando para que la opinión pública no adquiera la desinformación como información veraz y contrastada?

Appendix B. Questionnaire in English for respondents from the Philippines

Do you think there is **misinformation** or false news regarding migrants in the Philippines?

- If so, what kinds of statements are made about the Filipinos overseas?

Facebook and WhatsApp are the main methods of spreading this type of misinformation in the world. What kind of information is spread in the Philippines?

- (a) Misleading content: Some true information, but details were reformulated, selected and recontextualized in a way that made them false or misleading.
- (b) Malinformation: Includes images or videos labeled or described as something other than what they are.
- (c) Cheap fakes: Use conventional techniques like speeding up, slowing down, cutting, rearranging or recontextualizing the footage.

Why do you think this misinformation is generated with respect to the Filipinos overseas?

Is there any particularity of this pandemic period (since 11 March 2020) compared to the previous ones in terms of disinformation about migration?

Media such as *Rappler* are trying to respond to the contamination of the information ecosystem. Can you describe any positive practice so that public opinion in the Philippines does not acquire disinformation as truthful and contrasted information on migrants?

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