



POLITICS (ON WHATSAPP) IS DYNAMIC

Disinformation and the spread of political 'chains' in Colombia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This document explores the role of WhatsApp in the Colombian political debate in the context of the last presidential election. How does WhatsApp contribute to disinformation? To what extent? To do so, we conducted an investigation based on an online survey, and a series of interviews with WhatsApp users, political consultants and communications advisors from several presidential campaigns.
- Although we cannot generalize and say that all campaigns took steps to place problematic content on WhatsApp, the campaigns' infrastructure and operations offer powerful incentives for them to be a source of, or point for, reinforcing disinformation.
- WhatsApp is just one of the many platforms where we exchange content; it is complementary and parallel to open social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. In that sense, it is not necessarily the beginning or the end of the 'false chains.'
- WhatsApp reflects the decentralized interaction of both users with defined interests (campaign advisors, influencers, volunteers) and users whose engagement is occasional or intermittent (most citizens). Therefore, although some actions may be coordinated, the bulk of the spread of information is the result of spontaneous reactions and individual decisions.
- Most users are reluctant to share political content on WhatsApp with friends, family and acquaintances. This is due, among other reasons, to how this messaging system is typically used. We found two main reasons for this reluctance: one, politics is an intimate topic that is usually discussed in closed circles; two, there is distrust and a lack of credibility regarding the content that circulates on that platform. Even so, there are highly politicized people who share 'chains.' The system for spreading messages through groups gives them a wider degree of visibility, increasing the perception of the seriousness of the problem.
- The mass penetration of WhatsApp and its role as a platform for sharing content is a recent phenomenon. As a result, its setup and social incorporation are part of a process that is still under development.
- In the roadmap for this discussion, we propose some actions related to our context: (i) offering data packages that do not discourage searching for external content using other applications and services; (ii) rejecting proposals that violate user privacy and involve using data collection and surveillance practices, and (iii) developing public digital literacy policies that help to critically understand the content, spaces and types of interaction that devices and platforms provide.

INTRODUCTION

The omnipresence of WhatsApp

It's a common scene: you receive an alarming message claiming to reveal a truth that no one else knows about. "I want you to know about this," the text says in an intimate, trustworthy tone. Other times it is a dramatic situation, narrated in the voice of an anguished and indignant victim. And the others –most of the time– are simply a photo or video with a cheeky joke about a candidate or politician. At the end,

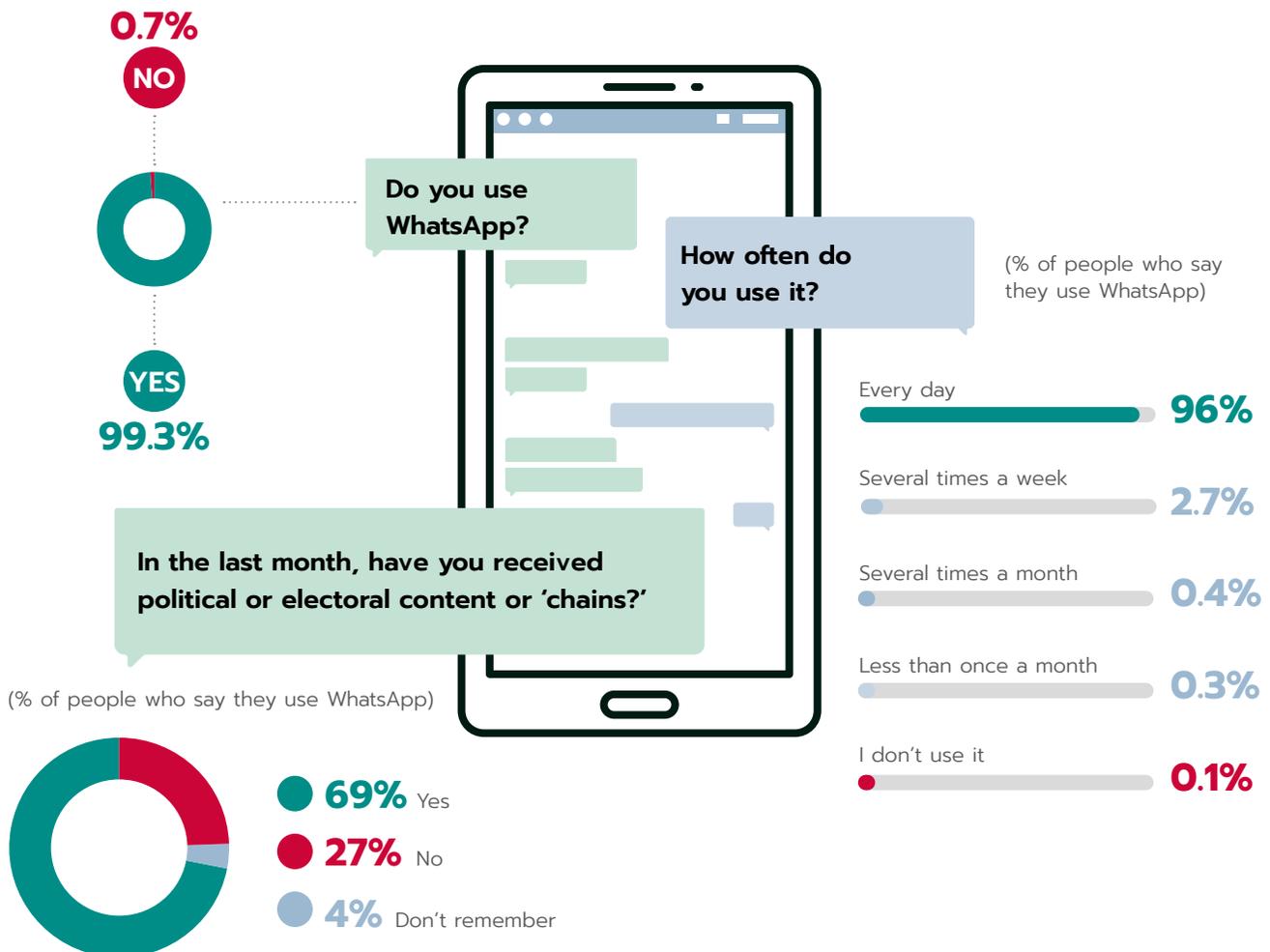
invariably, comes the request: "Share this with all your contacts!" It works. Otherwise, the message never would have reached our eyes.

These types of message are called 'chains' because of their dynamics of repetition: they are content that WhatsApp users forward successively to some of their contacts. The 'chains' have become increasingly common among WhatsApp



Graphic 1 · Use of WhatsApp and receipt of 'chain' messages

Source: own survey.



users, especially in countries where this messaging service dominates the market –like Colombia–.

According to figures from the ICT Ministry in 2017, 87.3% of citizens use WhatsApp, largely motivated by two related factors:¹ first, nearly 80% of Colombians have prepaid mobile phone packages.² Second, most of these plans include free access to applications such as WhatsApp through a billing scheme known as *zero rating*, where data usage for these services is not deducted from the total package.³

There is a perception that the circulation of these ‘chains’ takes off during election season, and that much of its content is disinformation. *La Silla Vacía*, a media outlet specializing in politics that set up a project in 2017 to verify information from WhatsApp –known as the ‘Lie Detector’– recorded 33 ‘chains’ during the first round of presidential elections. *Colombiacheck*, a media outlet that is part of the Poynter organization’s International Fact Checking Network, published 91 information verifications between March 12 –the day after the legislative elections– and June 17. More than six per week. And *El Poder de Elegir*, an initiative that seeks to specifically verify WhatsApp ‘chains,’ received 133 potentially fake pieces of content between March 12 and May 27.⁴

In October 2016, opponents of the peace accord between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrilla won the plebiscite that sought to endorse the negotiations at the polls. Although some polls predicted the ‘yes’ vote would win by more than thirty points, in the end the ‘no’ won by less than 0.5%. The result was surprising, to say the least.⁵ Coupled with the statement by one of the leaders of the ‘no’ vote, saying that they had campaigned by exploiting people’s indignation, the conventional conclusion was

that the promoters of the ‘yes’ vote had lost the plebiscite on WhatsApp.⁶ Following that line of thought, the disinformation that had been disseminated through this platform flew under the radar of the social networks and ended up being decisively influential on the people. The first point seems clear: disinformation is spread on WhatsApp. However, the second point is remarkably difficult to prove. Andrei Gómez- Suárez, for example, says that “WhatsApp and Facebook became spaces for promoting rage, fear, deceit and uncertainty, through [the dissemination of] uncontrolled lies (...) that circulated in silence and whose origin was impossible to determine.”⁷ For this academic, the messages that circulated during the plebiscite campaign fed a political strategy that unjustifiably simplified the complexity of the agreements and emotionally manipulated the public.

It is very difficult to find evidence of both the strategy and the impact of this phenomenon. Beyond having uses similar to those of a social network, WhatsApp is not one. A social network basically allows an individual to do three things: (i) build a public or semi-public profile within a defined system; (ii) put together a list of other users with whom they communicate, and (iii) view and navigate their list of contacts and those with whom they are connected to.⁸ In contrast, WhatsApp is a mobile instant messaging service with an expectation of privacy even greater than that of a telephone call. The messages that circulate are anonymized and encrypted to preserve user privacy, and the platform does not store metadata that makes it possible to determine the source or path of the contents.⁹ In other words, the messages exist, but we do not know anything about their circulation and reception dynamics– in contrast to what happens in a social network environment where we do have that visibility–. As

1. Ministry of ICT, “First major ICT survey” (Bogotá, 2017).

2. That is, they pay in advance for a limited amount of data usage. GSMA Intelligence. Available at Internet Monitor: www.thenetmonitor.org

3. Karisma Foundation, “Women’s Rights Online. Country Report: Colombia” (Bogotá, 2015).

4. According to figures provided to one of the researchers by the media.

7. Andrei Gomez-Suarez, “Peace Process Pedagogy: lessons from the no-vote victory in the Colombian peace referendum,” *Comparative Education* 53, num. 3 (July 3, 2017): 467

8. Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B Ellison, “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, num. 1 (December 17, 2007): 210–30.

9. That is, data that records the origin, circulation or , in general, any information about the life and use of data.

a space for interaction and exchange, WhatsApp 'offers' a kind of use that enables disinformation. But this is by no means the only factor that generates it.

With this perspective in mind, we set out to research WhatsApp's role in the Colombian political debate. In essence, we did not want the presidential elections to pass by and be left with conclusions that were as speculative and vague as those from the plebiscite. Yes: WhatsApp contributes to disinformation in campaigns, but how? To what extent? Our initial idea was that if we followed the trail of some 'chains', selected through interviews with related users, we could reach some points of origin of the disinformation. 'The Salmon Project,' someone suggested; swimming against

the tide. However, we realized very quickly that information was slipping through our fingers like water. It was impossible to create a map of that magnitude with the time and resources we had.

However, the 42 interviews that we conducted did provide an interesting context about the social incorporation of WhatsApp.¹⁰ In addition to this input, we had two others: ten 'off-the-record' conversations with political consultants and members of some of the presidential campaigns, and an online questionnaire answered by nearly 1,000 people (see methodology at the end of this document). Based on this work, we attempted to answer several questions:

How is disinformation produced on Whatsapp?



What factors influence whether disinformation is shared or stopped?



What is the relationship between the campaigns' activities and this disinformation?



What is the relationship between the users' organic activity (i.e., the one that is not the result of any coordination or incentive) and the concerted actions by the campaigns?



How independent is WhatsApp from social and political dynamics?



This research is not statistically representative nor does it seek to provide an exhaustive diagnosis. It is also limited by being mainly focused on Bogotá. However, it does offer some clues to better understand the problem of disinformation on WhatsApp, which we hope will be useful in future work by civil society. The examples we provide do not aim to point out any one campaign over another. We wanted to focus on the associated practices that most political actors have used one way or another.

Finally, we would like to thank the Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa (FLIP) for its institutional support in executing this project; Jaime Arteaga y Asociados for helping us in structuring and executing the research methodology, and the Open Society Foundations for supporting this initiative. All of the content published here, however, is the exclusive responsibility of Linterna Verde.

¹⁰ The survey was limited to Colombian citizens, and interviews were conducted in person or by telephone and were limited to Colombian citizens living in Bogotá. However, if one respondent referred us to another who lived in another city, we included them in our research.

THE BIRTH OF A 'CHAIN'

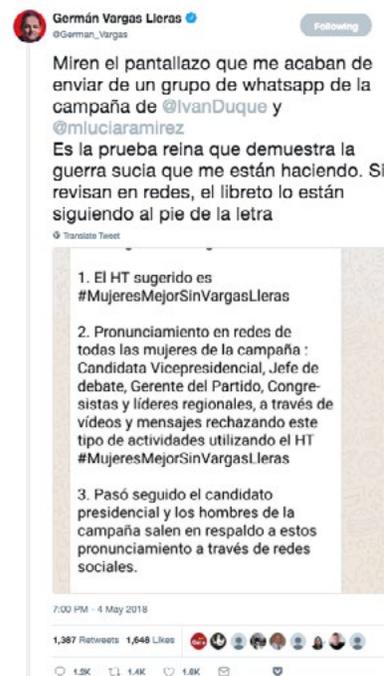
Like virality and trends on social networks, 'chains' on WhatsApp are not usually the result of a spontaneous response by individuals. Although there are messages that undoubtedly generate a natural desire to share, in the context of a political campaign it is more likely that this organic movement had its origin in a planned and coordinated action. Predictably, none of the campaigns we contacted acknowledged directly that they were spreading attacks or disinformation

on another candidate. In one case, however, we were able to document and confirm this process. As we have already noted, we cannot generalize from this, or conclude that the campaign involved was the only one that executed these types of actions. However, this example does provide clues to how these contents originate and circulate. These tactics do not arise in a vacuum: they require pre-planned infrastructure and constant monitoring of activity on social networks.

Eyes everywhere

The campaigns constantly monitor other campaigns' activities. We are not referring here to illegal activities –such as intercepting communications, stealing information or breaching computer security– but rather to the information that they collect through sources close to them. To do so, as one member of a campaign team explained to us, they had 'community managers' that had infiltrated rival campaigns. An investigator from a civil society organization added that this is something "very normal."

WhatsApp is an important instrument in this work, both in terms of reception and distribution. Ideally, the sources are part of, or have access to, groups on the platform where sensitive issues are discussed. As with any organization, campaigns are organized in networks that grow smaller and smaller as their members become more senior. Because of the specific dynamics of a campaign, the formation of these groups does not necessarily follow a planned process, and often there are redundancies –several people who are part of more than one group– and blind spots –the identities of all the people in the conversation are not clear–.



Graphic 2. Tweet by Germán Vargas Lleras accusing Marta Lucía Ramírez's campaign in a screenshot.

In this scenario, a campaign can have several accidental sources from the competition at different points of the communication and interaction. Of course, the rings closest to the candidate will be the most difficult to penetrate. It is not an efficient process for gathering information. As the administrator of a group of young people explained to us, “a lot of news from other campaigns circulated” in his group. However, it is important to keep your eyes open: no one knows which piece could be used to attack their opponent. This monitoring activity is accompanied by the usual work by the communications area of keeping track of the conversation on social networks. Last May an incident occurred that serves to illustrate this point:

Presidential candidate Germán Vargas Lleras reported on Twitter that a WhatsApp group supporting Marta Lucía Ramírez was coordinating actions to accuse him of being responsible for the episode where women in bikinis in Santa Marta were distributing political advertising for his campaign (graphic 2).¹¹ The striking part was that Vargas Lleras showed a screenshot of the group as proof of his point. The tweet by itself does not prove anything, but it does show the flow of information between campaigns and is related to the testimony of the sources we consulted. And, above all, it is related to the strategies that guide the creation of the ‘chains.’

The recipe for a lie

The infiltration and monitoring tasks make two inter-related activities possible: on the one hand, identifying susceptible narratives and points to attack the opposition, and on the other, finding valuable material to promote in the digital public debate. For now, let’s focus on the latter point. Disinformation does not come exclusively from WhatsApp or social networks. These are two intertwined spaces that complement each other and provide constant feedback. The source of a false ‘chain’ may be a group conversation, but its origin can be determined by the discussions or exchanges that take place in open spaces. Or, as we will see in this example, the construction of a ‘chain’ can simply be a matter of styling.

In early April, false information began to circulate in different formats on social networks and WhatsApp groups, according to which the candidate Iván Duque had proposed eliminating the so-called ‘pension substitution,’ a right of pensioners to leave their monthly payments to their spouse or children under the age of 25 once they pass away. Note the amateur appearance of the format and style of the two pieces: a photo of the candidate accompanied by text with spelling and grammar mistakes (see graphics 3 and 4).



Graphics 3 and 4. Examples of the piece that circulated on WhatsApp and social networks saying Iván Duque was going to eliminate the ‘pension substitution’.

¹¹ As you may recall, this episode generated heavy criticism of Vargas Lleras for allegedly resorting to a chauvinistic and sexist publicity strategy.

One of these pieces reached the communications group of a rival campaign. The debate then turned on whether this information could be used to attack Duque and, if so, how to do it. “Someone told us they had checked this ‘chain’ and that it was false,” said Ana,¹² who has first-hand knowledge of the conversation. “But some people said that regardless of that we should capitalize the rumor,” she added. “So we added some context, put in some statements by Uribe, improved the piece and gave it a narrative thread.”

By going to the link included in footnote 5, you can see the entire video (see graphic 5 with some screenshots).¹³ The central message of the ‘chain’ remains the same, but has been given a new look. It includes, in addition to the text of the alleged statement by Duque, an excerpt from a community council meeting by then-president Álvaro Uribe saying that “laziness is killing Colombia” (and encouraging longer work hours and fewer vacations and holidays); another statement by the former president regarding the need not to lower the retirement age, and some information about a past labor reform that raised the retirement age. These additional elements are true, and they provide context and credibility to Duque’s statement. Additionally, the video includes a strong, focused call to action: “If you are a female head of a household, you will lose your pension. It’s up to you to decide!”

It’s no coincidence that the piece maintains the ‘amateur’ style of the original messages: part of the success of these ‘chains’ is that they convey informality and closeness. The style is not, nor should it be, official or sophisticated.

Felipe,¹⁴ a consultant who advises political campaigns on what he calls ‘vote management,’ explained the strategy as “the 90-10 technique”: 90% truth and 10% ‘poison’ to viralize the content. The logic is simple: the element of truth with a twist toward a fact that is false or taken out of context is more likely to deactivate recipients’ defenses than a more blatant lie. “Direct lies don’t work as well as exaggerations.”



Graphic 5. Screenshots of the video created by another campaign.

“When you play with feelings of people, when you make a story or exaggerate one to make them feel something, that does much better,” said a Mexican ‘fake news’ writer.¹⁵

When it comes to creating ‘dirty’ content for WhatsApp, just as it is important to make sure that the piece has the right messages, it is important to make sure people –or at least the target audience– believe in it and share it. The 90-10 technique is not the only one to attract people’s attention. Another one that is very common –especially in ‘chains’ with audio– is the ‘testimonial’: the core of the impact is the voice of someone close to you, or a friend of a friend, telling you in first person something that happened to someone they also know. The testimony is revealed as a secret or privileged information. The following audio ‘chain’, falsely saying that voters needed to request the anti-corruption consultation card in the congressional election, combined both of these strategies:

¹² We changed the name of the source so as not to expose them.

¹⁴ We changed the name of the source so as not to expose them.

(...) Listen *'papi,'* you have so many friends, so many friends there in your contacts that you can forward this audio message to. Can you believe that my kids, who are in college, got called to be election judges for the elections on Sunday for Congress, and it turns out that at the training they went to, they gave them strict orders not to give out the card to vote to lower the salaries for congressmen. That if people asked for it, they could give it to them. If not, there was no way they should give it to them (...).¹⁶

An economy of scale

As we said at the beginning of this chapter, all the campaigns we consulted denied being involved in disinformation strategies. The example we saw, however, contradicts that statement. Although it is not easy to document, it is possible that most campaigns supported, facilitated or incentivized these actions in some way. Ana works at one of the agencies that advised one of the presidential campaigns. In that campaign, misinformation and 'black' propaganda activities were handled by least important agency that worked for that candidate.

The 'chain' about Iván Duque's pension substitution was not distributed through the campaign's official channels. This seems obvious: the content had to move organically without being associated with any of Duque's competitors. The way that these types of messages are distributed, Ana explained, is through a group called 'blacklist': some contacts that the campaign's community managers had that helped them inject certain content into WhatsApp and social network groups. This is an important point: the infrastructure and operation of a campaign generate economies of scale that facilitate the production and dissemination of disinformation. Just like someone who has a bakery that sells bread can also make cakes or donuts, a campaign that produces official communications can also produce disinformation.

Monitoring social networks and creating and distributing content involves time and money, and an active campaign offers that possibility.

We have also said that campaigns can end up encouraging those actions. We're not talking about political incentives, but rather operational ones. One of the campaigns that was interviewed relied mostly on the use of volunteers to produce content on social networks. "There are community managers who come to us as volunteers. They're not networks organized by the campaign," the source explained. These community managers did not have just one responsibility, and they did not coordinate with each other, and even though they were not formally part of the campaign, they did follow the lines that came from it. Under these conditions, volunteers could develop disinformation, on their own or following instructions from middle managers.

Less active and specialized than this volunteer 'workforce', but just as important, was the participation of citizens who created and shared content to support a candidate. Organic favorable expressions were not only desirable; as a source from one of the campaigns explained, they monitored them to see when they could be used for amplification: "We contacted celebrities

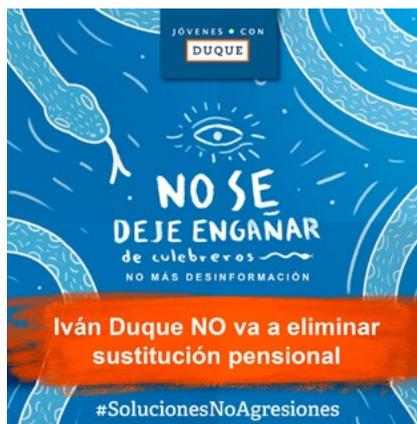
based on the spontaneous ‘likes’ they gave us. We capitalized on those signs; columnists surprised us and we went around putting it all together. And we planned to deploy the endorsements.” The opportunity to influence public opinion was managed meticulously. A gray area of these types of actions included paid support; mercenaries who offered their communities to support a candidate’s message.

This general dynamic is related to what Jenkins calls the ‘convergence culture’: messages and content no longer flow in a single direction, from the media or the candidates, but rather they also come from actors who did not used to create them, such as audiences or citizens.¹⁷ The loss of control over the message and decentralization –both by decision and configuration– have an influence on the spread of information.

Distract your rival

For Felipe, the key to using disinformation against another candidate was to get them to go off script; distract them and force them to change their message, even momentarily. “Social networks are a psychological war,” he said. Other sources agree on this point. In effect, this is what happened with the case we have been describing. Faced with a fake story, Iván Duque’s campaign decided to respond to the pension substitution rumor (see graphic 6). It’s impossible to know how much damage that attack inflicted, but it is clear that it achieved its objective of getting the candidate to talk about that issue. Furthermore, trying to counteract a rumor by repeating it can strengthen it: by reiterating the myth, the recipient becomes familiar with it and not necessarily with the correction.¹⁸

Another campaign that frequently took on the fake news against it was Gustavo Petro’s (see an example in graphic 7). Through his Twitter account, Petro himself responded and counter-attacked. According to a senior source from that campaign, that candidate’s communications strategy began and ended with him. Petro controlled the message. In contrast, the directive on Sergio Fajardo’s campaign was not to respond to any attack. “At first I thought we should do it,” explained a campaign source. “Later I realized that it kept us on message,” they added.



Graphic 6. Response by the Democratic Center party to the video shared by another campaign.



Graphic 7. Gustavo Petro’s response to the rumor that he had a daughter he hadn’t taken responsibility for.

¹⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Stephan Lewandowsky et al., “Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13, num. 3 (September 17, 2012): 106–31.

POLITICS ON WHATSAPP

In the previous chapter we described the life of a WhatsApp 'chain' in the creation and dissemination stages. We saw how these messages are not an isolated phenomenon or completely spontaneous: on the one hand, they are related to interactions on open social networks –Facebook and Twitter,

specifically-; on the other, in the campaigns they find an operation that gives them strength, power and scope. Having made that clear, in this part we expand our focus to understand 'chains' in the broader context of WhatsApp use and interactions with content of a political nature.

More coordination than message

"The campaigns work on three levels", Felipe explained: "Air, land and underground." Air is all the open content that moves through social networks and the media; land is the candidate's work on the street: their proselytizing activity and the campaign activities; and underground, which gathers and feeds from the previous levels, refers to the networks controlled by the campaign: the communities that support it, the influence it has on people and structures. This is the most important level.

"If you have worked in the underground level, the message on social networks will not affect you", said Felipe, who believes the true focus of a campaign must be on terrain, regardless of the strength of the internet or messaging services. If the ground is not fertile, the message will have no impact. The director of a communications agency puts it another way: "WhatsApp does not work on a network that does not exist." From that perspective, communications work on WhatsApp serves to oil the machine: the bases are kept constantly informed, conversations are organized and structures are aligned so they can be ready when the time comes to act. "You

always have to be campaigning, and the campaign also has to see itself as micro-campaigns", Felipe concluded.

Sergio Fajardo's campaign used this same approach: more than a platform for disseminating content, WhatsApp was a tool to coordinate and mobilize. Along the same lines, Iván Duque's campaign used the messaging service as a means of contacting its base. According to one volunteer, they constantly received instructions and plans for each week from the campaign.

Using WhatsApp to coordinate does not mean it can't also be used as a communication channel –as we have already seen–. On the contrary, they can be complementary uses. However, one factor does seem to depend on the other: without constant, parallel coordination and mobilization, in physical and digital environments, any information (o disinformation) strategy will remain in a vacuum. Effectively disseminating a message through a service such as WhatsApp requires those social structures, which are heterogeneous and fragile: it is in this day-to-day practice and those everyday moments where the message is received and its effectiveness is defined.

WhatsApp as a space for human relations

“WhatsApp is like your living room”, said the director of the agency we consulted. The metaphor is illustrative in more than one way. On the one hand, unlike what happens on social networks such as Twitter, on WhatsApp people can set up spaces with different levels of intimacy and trust: there is a prior physical relationship that brings two or more people together to have a conversation. The groups on this platform “are bound to particular kinds of collective encounters and relationships in the real world, whether these are housemates, groups of friends or specific familial relationships.”¹⁹ WhatsApp extends and enables social relationships; conversations do not have a specific beginning or end, but rather they take place depending on the characteristics of that link. For example, a group may be formed related to an event, in which case the interaction will be intense for a few days and then it will tend to fade away. A family group, meanwhile, will remain over time, with exchanges at different times.

The messages and content exchange on WhatsApp have an expectation of privacy. To different degrees, these exchanges belong to that context and not to any other. This expectation is formal and social: technology prevents third parties from monitoring these conversations, and it is generally not expected that participants will share the contents outside of that space.

Intimacy and social interaction on WhatsApp takes place in an environment of relationships that tend to be nomadic and physically distant. The fact that it is a mobile application makes use of the platform into an extension of the person. Cell phones are “a distinctive kind of medium that is close to, and complementary to, human bodies.”²⁰ Chats, ‘selfies’, voice messages and music, among others, are communication acts that do not replace, but rather complement what happens in the physical world.

How politics gets into the living room

The use of WhatsApp to share political content through campaign coordination and mobilization groups seems fairly obvious: they are designed for that purpose. But how does this content move in WhatsApp groups with a different purpose (family, work or social relationships)? What makes

it possible for them to spread and what causes them to stop? Our findings show that the context and rules of interaction in these groups complicates their relationship with political content. There is no one answer or recipe for ‘virality’. To begin with, users that share ‘chains’ are in the minority (see graphic 8).



Graphic 8 · People who have circulated WhatsApp ‘chains’

Source: own survey.

In the last month, have you shared political content that you received through WhatsApp with other people?



¹⁹ Kenton O'Hara et al, “Everyday dwelling with WhatsApp,” in CSCW '14 Proceedings of the 17th ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work & social computing (Baltimore, MD: ACM, 2014), 1137.

²⁰ K B Jensen, “What’s mobile in mobile communication?”. Mobile Media & Communication 1, num. 1 (2013): 28.



What allows 'chains' to circulate?

Affinity and closeness

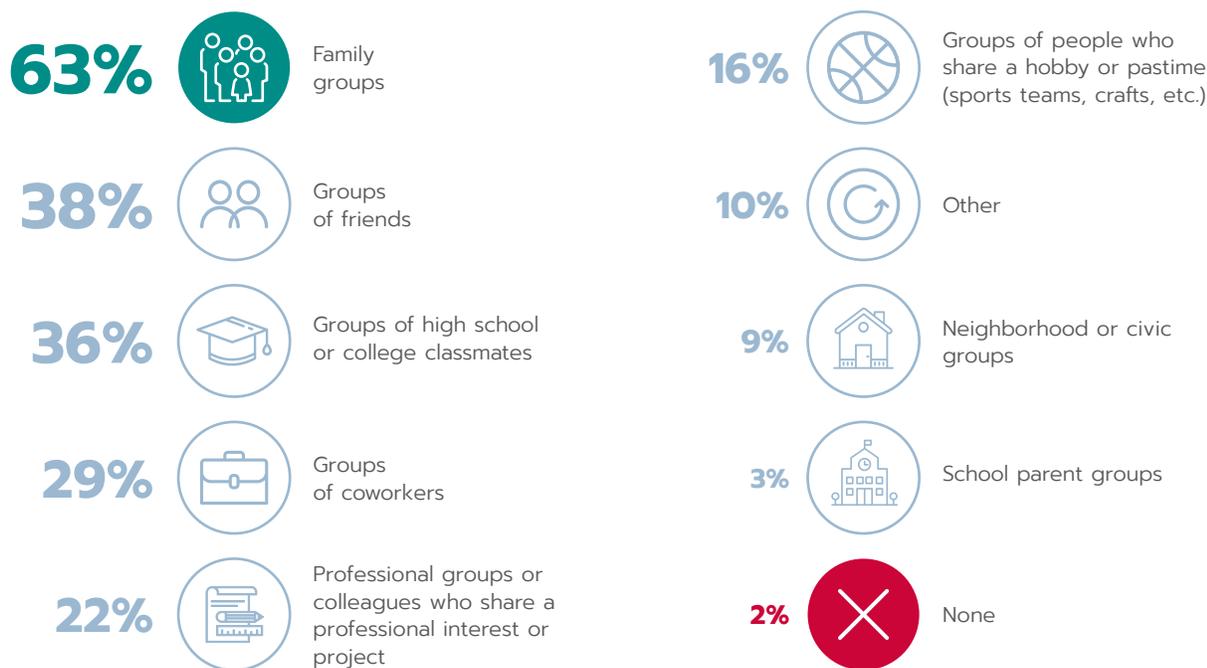
The most intimate spaces –specifically, groups of family and friends– are where we find most political content is shared. That is where these types of 'chains' circulate and are discussed (see graphic 9). The affinity and closeness among the people in the group is a primary factor that favors the circulation of political content. "I have a group with three friends, we've been friends our whole lives, and I

do share 'chains' with them", explained one interviewee. This was a frequent response. Closeness, moreover, usually brings some level of ideological affinity; they share things they agree with. And this same social and familial closeness lets people know when it's better not to share this kind of content, since it will undoubtedly lead to an unwanted discussion.



Graphic 9 · Groups that receive WhatsApp 'chains'

Source: own survey.



Note: the percentages add up to more than 100% because the question was multiple choice

Political interest and humor

To decide to share political content on WhatsApp, there is usually some interest in politics. To that extent, the more interest a person has in politics, the more likely they will be to share these kinds of 'chains,' and that they will start to move from specific groups –campaigns and volunteers- toward general groups. Additionally, a person's level of politicization is not static: it naturally increases during

election season and, therefore, people's attitudes toward politics change previously established relationships and dynamics on WhatsApp.²¹ Just like in family gatherings where an uncle spouting radical positions often causes discomfort in the other people present, on WhatsApp politics often becomes a dissonant note in the interaction.

21. Midas Nouwens, Carla F Griggio, and Wendy E Mackay, "WhatsApp is for Family; Messenger is for Friends: Communication Places in App Ecosystems," in Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, CHI '17 (New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2017), 727–35.

Even though sharing a 'chain' expresses a certain level of interest in politics, most people who do so have no explicit intention of defending their position. According to the results of our survey, they do it simply because they believe it is relevant information that other people should know about (39.7% of people who share them), or because they think they are funny or humorous (25.7%). On this point, one of the interviewees explained to us that his friends know he likes to joke around, and sharing 'chains' is one way of doing this. Another one spoke of 'chains' as a way to make fun of his friends for their political convictions. Those who have more politicized positions mentioned two main motivations: they identify with

"the positions expressed in the 'chain'" (19.2%), or they think that "they're lying" and they want to "correct them for other people" (12.9%).

Those who said they had created 'chains' have a more political objective. While the main reasons are still that they believe that they are relevant (66.6%) or funny (44.4%), nearly half of them (42.2%) said that they circulate them because they agree with their content (see graphic 10). The level of interest and involvement in political issues explains the motivation for creating WhatsApp 'chains', even assuming the risk that doing so will affect their social and family relationships.



Graphic 10 · Reasons for sharing 'chains' among all respondents vs. people who have created 'chains'.

Source: own survey.

Why have you shared 'chains' with your acquaintances? (check all answers that apply).

People who have ever shared a 'chain' ● **36%**

People who have ever created a 'chain' ● **4.6%**

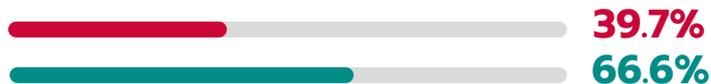
I identify with the positions expressed in the 'chain'.



I think they're lying and I want to correct them for other people.



I think they have news or information that other people should know about.



I thought they were funny or humorous.



Profile of 'chain' creators

4.6% of survey respondents said they had created a political 'chain' on WhatsApp. It is a small fraction of respondents, who also showed a clear contrast to other survey participants (see graphic 11). 'Chain' authors are usually male, one out of four is subscribed

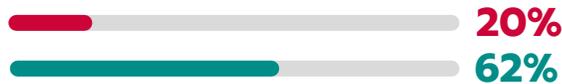
to an official political campaign group, and most of them have shared negative 'chains.' However, this study is merely illustrative; it does not allow us to conclude whether age and gender are determinant in creating disinformation.



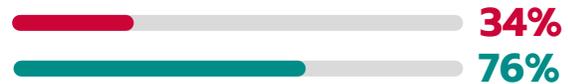
Graphic 11 · Profile of 'chain' creators vs. survey aggregate

Source: own survey.

Has shared negative 'chains'



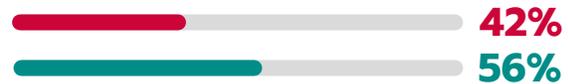
Has shared 'chains'



Is subscribed to an official campaign group



Older than 45



Male



● Total survey aggregate

● People who have created 'chains'



What stops 'chains'?

As graphic 8 shows, 64% of the people surveyed do not share WhatsApp 'chains'. Many people don't want to talk about politics, have tacit or explicit agreements not to share these types of messages, and prefer to avoid conversations that could affect their social relationships. The

sample from our survey indicates, then, that the spreading of disinformation through WhatsApp depends on a small group of participants: most do not share 'chains' and only a small minority produce them. But what else can we say about what stops the dissemination of this content?

Politics is a sensitive subject

The most common reason given by our interviewees for not sharing political ‘chains’ on WhatsApp was the contentious and personal nature of political issues. Most said that being very open or assertive with their political positions in family or professional groups could be frowned upon and have negative consequences. “Everyone believes that they are right and don’t like to feel like they’re wrong”, said one interviewee. The possibility of conflict leads to pre-emptive silencing; it’s better not to delve into certain types of discussions. Other interviewees believe that politics is a personal issue on which unsolicited opinions can be disrespectful: “Your vote is something completely personal. I’m not the right person to tell anyone who to vote for”, said one of them.

The rule of not talking about politics in WhatsApp groups is very common and, as relationships evolve in these types of spaces, it becomes more and more explicit. “I’m part of a group for a sport I like to play, and we’re not allowed to talk about politics or religion, and even so we still get those kinds

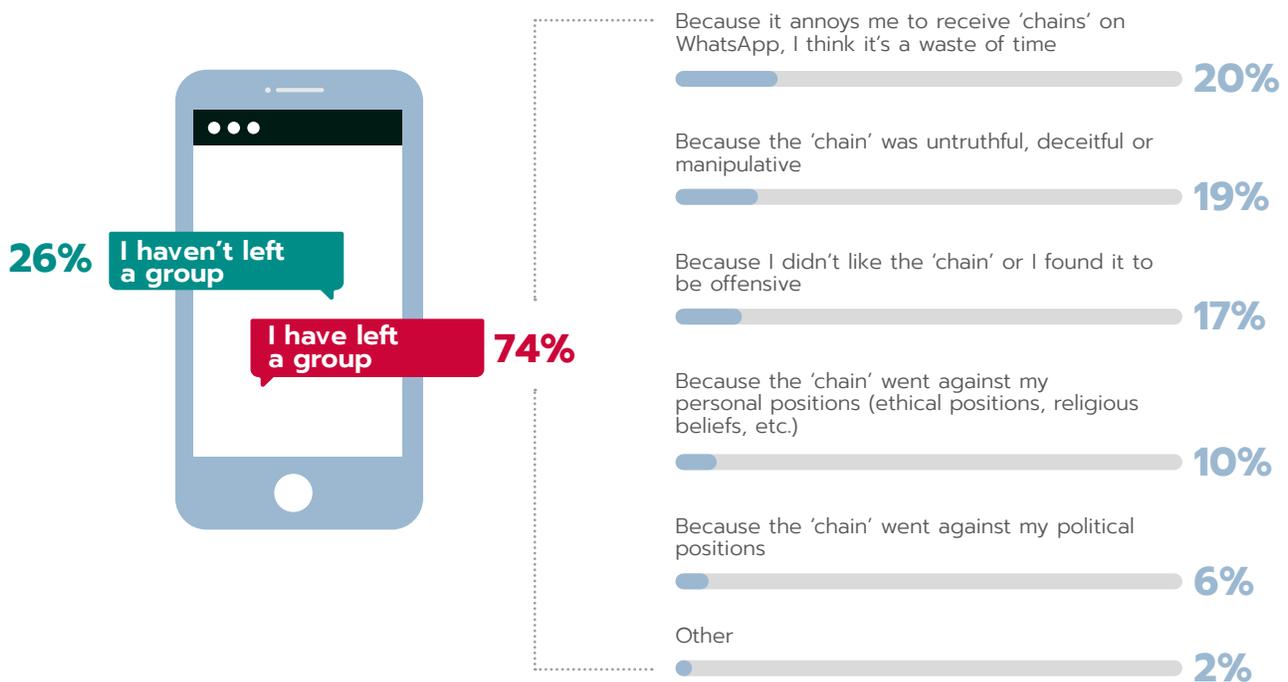
of messages”, one interviewee explained. 74% of WhatsApp users surveyed said they had left a group because they were receiving these kinds of messages. They find it inappropriate to receive unsolicited ‘chains’, and they prefer to avoid the emotional impact of the message on participants (graphic 12).

One way to understand the fact that most people would prefer to leave a group than receive ‘chains’ is because these types of content violate users’ expectations about the groups in which they participate. Sending these ‘chains’ was described by several of our interviewees as “annoying” or “irritating.” Additionally, several interviewees said that politics is a “personal” or “intimate” issue and that discussing it breaks the rules –explicit or implied– of groups where members do not expect to be exposed that way. In essence, there is disagreement among users about the way the space is to be used; friction is created that makes users “constantly try[ing] to negotiate between the communication place they desire and the environment imposed on them.”²²



Graphic 12 · Have you ever left a group, or blocked a contact on WhatsApp, after receiving a ‘chain’ message? (Percentage of WhatsApp users)

Source: own survey.



²² Ibid., 730.

'Chain' of disbelief

In general, people read WhatsApp 'chains' with skepticism. In spite of their apparent strength, their credibility seems to be in decline. On this point, the most common response was that "you have to check the source" and "you need to be careful." "People are 'over it' and don't believe in that", said one interviewee. That skepticism was summed up by one interviewee as follows: "I usually take them and look at them and sometimes you start to think, could this be false? could this be true? (...) Then you say, 'yes, this is true,' 'this is a lie,' 'this could be true,' 'that couldn't be true.'"

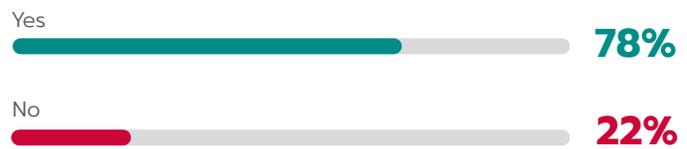
This distrust slows the dissemination of the 'chain,' even if the person agrees with the political position of the content. Some people cite ethical reasons: "Sharing lies simply isn't right. There is damage to a person, to a group of people, it leads people to base their opinions on lies instead of the truth, and that is wrong." This attitude was also revealed in our survey, in which most people who received 'chains' said they had tried to confirm their veracity at least once (see graphic 13).



Graphic 13 · Credibility of WhatsApp 'chains'

Source: own survey.

Have you ever tried to confirm the statements you have received in a WhatsApp 'chain'?



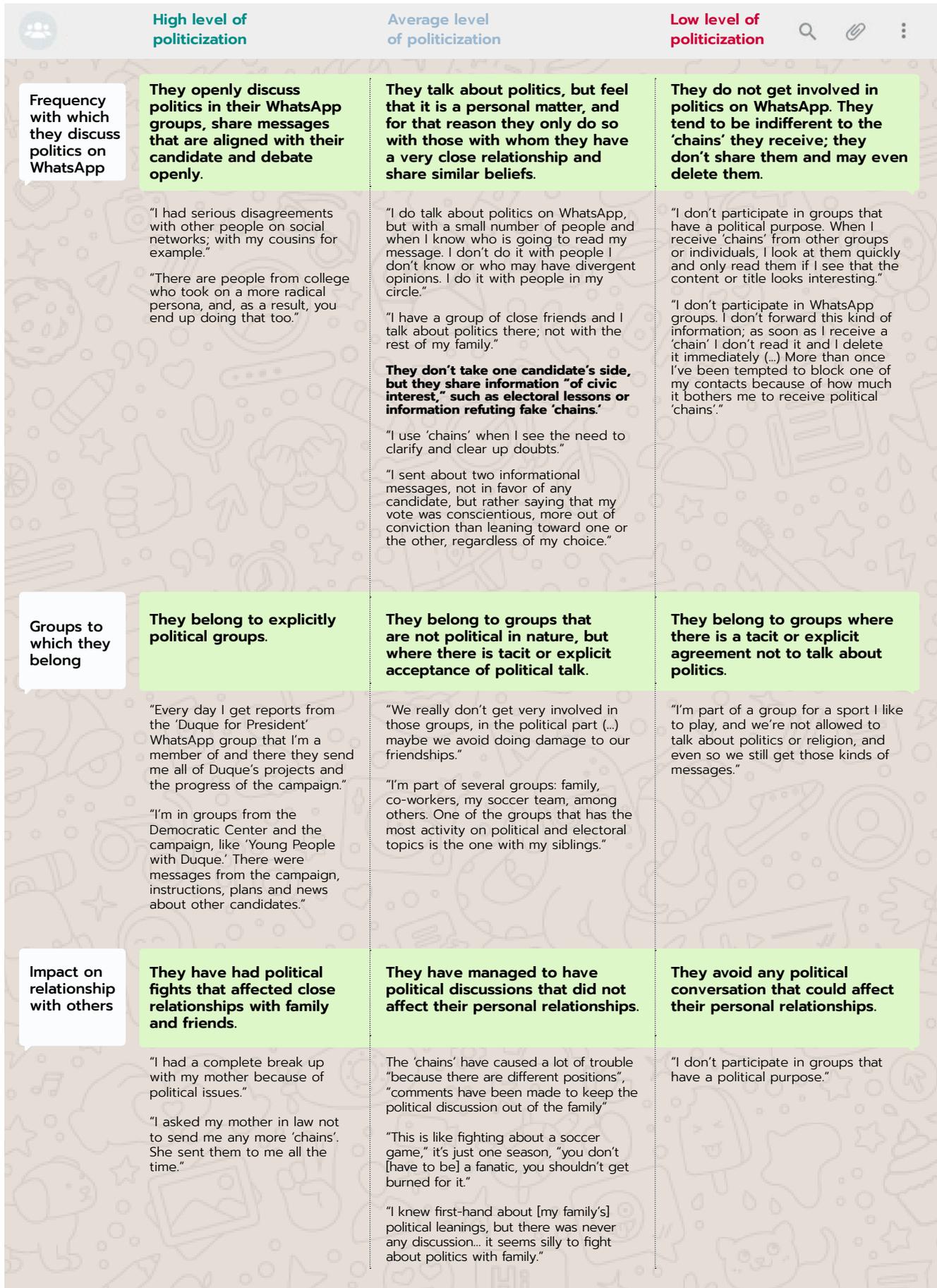
There is, however, some nuance to that majority skepticism. It seems that people have less faith in attacks on their candidates than in attacks against their opponents. First, there is a greater willingness to disprove lies that affect their preferred political choice. One interviewee, for example, wrote back to his mother, when she sent him 'chains' against Gustavo Petro, "that she had to distinguish between communism and progressivism." Another interviewee, a supporter of the Democratic Center, said that he contradicted his contacts about 'chains' that included inaccuracies about former president Álvaro Uribe.

The 'chain' format also influences users' suspicions. Some interviewees said that while they did not trust text or audio messages, in the case of videos people can "see for themselves" and "draw their own conclusions." This distinction, of course, does not prevent disinformation from being transmitted. In spite of its apparent credibility, the video can be taken out of context and manipulated, just like written text –recall the example of the 'chain' about Duque's pension substitution–. All of this is in addition to the growing technological ability to falsify voices and images in a video.



Graphic 14 · Politicization profiles of WhatsApp users based on some characteristics found in our research

Source: own survey.



CONCLUSIONS

The objective of the false ‘chains’ is to construct perceptions and interpretations of reality through incomplete contexts, falsehoods and manipulation. Doing this requires a narrative that allows the sender to create a story that matches their convictions. This mixture of facts and lies, as testimonials –voices– and evidently unobjectionable formats –videos, photos–, find in WhatsApp an environment for self-containment. The user does not have the keys for interpretation and differentiation. “The former distinction between the circulation of facts and the dissemination of opinions has been erased in such a way that they are both graduating to the same type of visibility,” says French anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour.²³

This confusion also extends to sources. Our initial idea of mapping WhatsApp ‘chains’ to understand their logic soon bumped up against reality: the disinformation that circulates through this platform has diverse origins, both in terms of space and actors. In terms of the former, is just one of many platforms where we exchange content; it is complementary and parallel to open social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and in that sense, it is not necessarily the beginning or the end of the false ‘chains’. In terms of the actors involved, WhatsApp reflects the decentralized –and disorganized– interaction both among users with defined interests (campaign advisors, influencers, volunteers) and users whose engagement is occasional or intermittent (most citizens). Therefore, although some actions may be coordinated, the bulk of the spread of information is the result of spontaneous reactions and individual decisions.

The campaigns are, undoubtedly, one variable in this equation. Although we cannot generalize and say

that all took steps to insert problematic content on WhatsApp, the campaigns’ very infrastructure and operations offer powerful incentives for them to be a source of, or point for, reinforcing disinformation. This, of course, does not happen in isolation. The candidates’ discourse, the amplification of the media and the polarization between followers of opposing sides make up the social environmental in which disinformation is produced and consumed.

This relationship between analog and digital spaces is fundamental to understanding the real impact of WhatsApp. By itself, this platform does not coordinate or mobilize. Its true force is in the way it supports and strengthens ongoing social and political processes. Several of the campaign advisors interviewed are clear on this issue. Even though it is impossible to determine the impact of a WhatsApp ‘chain’, the evidence of its strength is on the ground.

This does not mean that the dissemination of content on this platform does not move the needle in highly polarized contexts. Elections are very specific moments in time: “You know exactly when the electorate makes its decision”, explains professor Mark Ritson.²⁴ To that extent, if a timely, close, personal message convinces a small percentage of people, it will have an impact. Think about the 2016 plebiscite. If we extrapolate our findings, we could say that the strength of the ‘no’ campaign was undoubtedly in the flesh and blood communities, so

the ‘yes’ vote did not lose on WhatsApp. But we could also say that in such a close election, the spreading of problematic content on that platform could have been decisive.

²³ Bruno Latour, “Beware, your imagination leaves digital traces,” Times Higher Literary Supplement, April 6, 2007

We don't know if the credibility of the 'chains' at that time is the same as it is today –nearly two years later– but at least at present we do see that people view them with skepticism. This conclusion seems counterintuitive: the communication via groups, where one person can have their message seen by many recipients, creates the impression that many people are involved in some way in the creation and dissemination of that content. However, what we found was that in daily practice there is reluctance to share 'chains.'

In particular, the social spaces that form within WhatsApp groups generate dynamics that are adverse to sharing political content. The political debate comes with tensions and resistance, especially in settings where this dialogue is not part of people's expectations. And just like in physical environments, on WhatsApp the individual begins to be aware of the limitations imposed by the social environment when it comes time to share information –which does not necessarily happen on an open social network–. One interviewee explained that she "would feel really intense" if she shared 'chains'. For her, doing that would be equivalent to sending mass emails a decade ago; something that is frowned upon today.

This last point is important. The mass penetration of WhatsApp and its role as a platform for sharing content is a recent phenomenon. As a result, its configuration

and social incorporation are part of a process that is still under development. In an effort to combat disinformation, the company itself announced recently that it will label forwarded messages and limit the number of groups where they can be shared.²⁵ It would be premature to evaluate this measure, which should also be part of other additional steps. The point, however, is that it is an open discussion in which our region should participate with proposals to prevent disinformation from flourishing on WhatsApp. On the roadmap we should include, in addition to the general elements, the following points related to our context:

- Offering data packages that do not discourage searching for external content using other applications and services.
- Rejecting proposals that violate user privacy and involve using data collection and surveillance practices.
- Developing public digital literacy policies that help to critically understand the content, spaces and types of interaction that devices and platforms provide.

Linterna Verde hopes that this first input serves to focus the discussion and encourage debate.



METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Due to WhatsApp's particular restrictions, the research was proposed based on an exploratory study of a descriptive nature. The expectation was that, based on those results, it would be possible to pose hypotheses to be evaluated in subsequent research. In this sense, this study is a starting point. The project was based on mixed research methods (qualitative and quantitative); however, due to budget and time restraints, we did not seek statistical representativeness for the quantitative component.

The research that supports this document was then conducted in three stages with the support of Jaime Arteaga & Asociados:

- 1 An online survey about WhatsApp use and people's attitudes toward political 'chains'. The survey was completed by nearly 1,000 people, and allowed us to collect information, among others, about participation in WhatsApp groups, the frequency and intensity of interactions in these collective spaces and the creation and dissemination of political content.

The fact sheet for the survey is as follows:

- **Entity that commissioned it:** Corporación Linterna Verde.
- **Company that conducted it:** Jaime Arteaga & Asociados SAS.
- **Type of sampling:** not probabilistic.
- **Target universe:** Colombian citizens, residing any where in the world.
- **Instrument for gathering information:** online survey shared on the Linterna Verde and FLIP's social networks.
- **Application dates:** May 15, 2018 – June 25, 2018.
- **Number of valid answers obtained:** 930.
- **Number of questions:** 33.
- **Margin of error and confidence level:** not applicable.
- **Type of questions:** closed, multiple choice.

The demographic profile of the people who responded to the survey is as follows:

- **Gender:** male 52.7%; female 46.6%; other 0.7%
- **Age:** under 18, 2%; between 18 and 25, 18.7%; between 26 and 35, 33.1%; between 36 and 45, 24.9%; between 46 and 60, 16.7%; 61 and older, 4.5%.
- **Education level:** high school graduate, 12.6%; technical or technological degree, 9.6%; professional degree, 34%; specialized degree, 16.6%; mater's degree, 23,3%; doctorate: 4%.
- **Reside in Colombia:** yes, 92.8%; no, 7.2%.

2 A series of semi-structured interviews with WhatsApp users to try to delve into uses and people's motivations for creating or sharing political 'chains'. In these interviews, we also inquired about users' personal and emotional closeness to the two candidates who went to the run-off of the presidential election: Iván Duque and Gustavo Petro.

To select the interviewees, the snowball methodology was used, in which a certain number of people were selected, and these people were asked to refer others, who in turn could be interviewed. Initially, four people were chosen who lived in Bogotá and met the following criteria: (i) they were active in use of WhatsApp, (ii) they had political ideas and an affinity for one of the two candidates with the highest intention to vote at the time of the start of the study (Iván Duque and Gustavo Petro), and (iii) they were part of different socioeconomic strata (1-4 and 5-6). Thus, a starting point was a Petro supporter from strata 1-4 and another from 5-6. The same was applied for Iván Duque. In total, we conducted 42 interviews.

3 Ten interviews with confidential sources with knowledge about or decision-making power over the presidential campaigns' political and communication strategies. The goal of these chats was to understand the role of the campaigns themselves in the creation and dissemination of political content: what creation and dissemination logics they followed, what types of content were shared and through which channels, and what is the role that WhatsApp ultimately plays in the campaign's political strategy.

The quantitative information was initially analyzed to obtain a depiction of WhatsApp use among the people who answered the survey, and a second analysis sought to identify and develop different use profiles based on the indications we received about the respondents' political involvement.

The qualitative information (the semi-structured interviews and interviews with confidential sources) were analyzed by establishing three basic categories of analysis, which then shaped the structure of the report: (i) causes for creating the chains, (ii) causes for disseminating the chains, (iii) causes for not disseminating the chains. Subsequent analysis resulted in the categories of political involvement that can be seen in graphic 14.

This study has no relevant geographic limitation. Although the online survey was answered by people throughout the country, the interviews took place in person or by telephone with people living in Bogotá. If an interviewee referred us to a person who lived in another city, we included them in the research. However, there were only a few cases where this happened.

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