

Social Media and Fake News in Ecuador's 2025 Presidential Election: A Netnographic Case Study of Cotopaxi Province

Redes sociales y *fake news* en las elecciones presidenciales de Ecuador 2025: netnografía y análisis de caso de la provincia de Cotopaxi

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Abstract

This research analyzes the impact of social media and fake news on the 2025 Ecuadorian presidential elections, based on a case study of the Cotopaxi province. Its objective was to identify the most frequent types of disinformation, the platforms with the greatest circulation, the actors who mediate or counteract fake news, and the observable effects on public debate and voting in

Resumen

La presente investigación analiza la incidencia de las redes sociales y las *fake news* en las elecciones presidenciales de Ecuador 2025; parte de un estudio de caso de la provincia de Cotopaxi. Su objetivo fue identificar los tipos de desinformación más frecuentes, las plataformas de mayor circulación, los actores que median o contrarrestan las noticias falsas y los efectos observables en

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tentions among different population segments, as well as the presence of agnotology, understood as the entire social process through which ignorance is produced. The methodology employed was qualitative, using focus groups with young communication students, retirees, and young people from indigenous communities, along with a netnographic approach focused on analyzing two emblematic cases of electoral disinformation: the substitution of a national news outlet to disseminate false information about Daniel Noboa and the circulation of a deepfake video attributed to Luisa González. In addition, documentary analysis of technical reports from electoral observation missions was incorporated. Among the main findings, it is noteworthy that disinformation circulated primarily on TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp, through fabricated headlines, manipulated videos, and posts that mimicked legitimate journalistic formats. A low rate of fact-checking was evident, as well as varying reception based on age, media experience, technological access, and community-based forms of trust. The research concludes that social media and disinformation did influence electoral decisions in Cotopaxi, not in a linear fashion, but by shaping public opinion, intensifying polarization, and altering the conditions for democratic deliberation. The study emphasizes the need to strengthen media literacy with a territorial, intercultural, and intergenerational approach.

Keywords: social media, fake news, electoral disinformation, Cotopaxi, presidential elections, Ecuador 2025

el debate público, en las intenciones de voto de distintos segmentos poblacionales, así como la presencia de la agnotología entendida como todo el proceso social mediante el cual se produce ignorancia. La metodología que se utilizó fue cualitativa con grupos focales de jóvenes estudiantes de comunicación, personas jubiladas y jóvenes de comunidades indígenas, junto con una aproximación netnográfica orientada al análisis de dos casos emblemáticos de desinformación electoral: la sustitución de un medio periodístico nacional para difundir información falsa sobre Daniel Noboa y la circulación de un video manipulado con deepfake imputado a Luisa González. Además, se incorporó el análisis documental de informes técnicos de misiones de observación electoral. Entre los principales hallazgos se destaca que la desinformación circuló principalmente en TikTok, Facebook y WhatsApp, por medio de titulares falsificados, videos manipulados y publicaciones que imitaban formatos periodísticos legítimos. Se evidenció una baja práctica de verificación y una recepción diferenciada según edad, experiencia mediática, acceso tecnológico y formas comunitarias de confianza. La investigación concluye que las redes sociales y la desinformación sí influyeron en las decisiones electorales en Cotopaxi, no de forma lineal, sino mediante la disposición de climas de opinión, la intensificación de la polarización y la alteración de las condiciones de deliberación democrática. El estudio recalca la necesidad de fortalecer la alfabetización mediática con enfoque territorial, intercultural e intergeneracional.

Palabras clave: redes sociales, *fake news*, desinformación electoral, Cotopaxi, elecciones presidenciales, Ecuador 2025

Introduction

The growing interconnection between digital platforms and electoral processes has transformed how citizens access political information, assess policy proposals, and decide how to vote. Across Latin America, electoral disinformation circulates within heterogeneous media ecosystems in which misleading videos, fabricated news stories, and other false content spread through both open social networks and closed messaging channels, challenging fact-checking practices and shaping public opinion. Electoral disinformation commonly relies on emotional manipulation and formats that imitate legitimate media, making it difficult for diverse audiences to distinguish authentic content from fabricated material and increasing the likelihood of perceptual and behavioral effects before, during, and after election campaigns (Escribano 2021).

This study focuses on Cotopaxi Province, located in central Ecuador, to examine how social networks disseminated fake news and contributed to agnotological processes during the 2025 presidential campaign, in which Luisa González and Daniel Noboa competed for the presidency. Agnotology is understood here as the field that examines how ignorance is produced, maintained, and disseminated within society. The analysis considers the perceptions of users from different ethnic and age groups in a province characterized by sociocultural, linguistic, and geographic diversity, as well as unequal digital access and distinct patterns of information consumption. This territorial specificity provides an opportunity to examine in detail how social-

media dynamics and disinformation interact with civic deliberation and voting intentions in a diverse regional setting.

Recent studies identify social media as key sites for the production, circulation, and consumption of false information that affects public perceptions and electoral behavior in Latin America. Ecuador is no exception. From the perspective of Scolari's (2012) media ecology metaphor, the country's media ecosystems are characterized by high social-media penetration and the presence of state, commercial, and community actors that shape agendas and produce counter-information (Caballero and Solá-Morales 2020).

Ecuador's 2025 presidential election was permeated by disinformation on social media and by candidates' strategic use of digital platforms—factors that may have had significant consequences for both the electoral process and democracy more broadly (Oleart and García 2022).

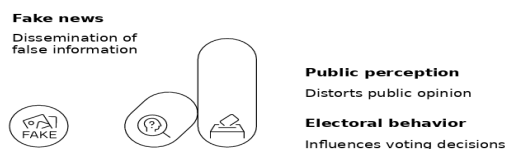
Cotopaxi was selected as the case study because it combines rural and urban-agricultural settings with heterogeneous levels of digital access and information consumption. Understanding its media ecosystem is essential for interpreting nationwide disinformation dynamics and identifying regional particularities that may remain invisible in studies centered on larger cities such as Quito or Ambato (Czerny and Czerny 2020).

This study investigates the relationship among social-media exposure, the circulation of disinformation, and electoral decision-making in Cotopaxi Province during the 2025 presidential campaign, while accounting for the region's sociocultural, linguistic, and geographic

heterogeneity. Specifically, it seeks to identify the types of disinformation that circulated most frequently in Cotopaxi and the platforms through which they spread; the actors—including local media outlets, opinion leaders, and social organizations—who mediated or countered false claims; and the observable effects on civic deliberation and the voting intentions of different population groups. The central research question is: How did social-media use and disinformation influence the electoral decisions of Cotopaxi residents during the 2025 presidential campaign?

Figure 1. Fake news, public perceptions, and electoral behavior. Author's illustration based on the study data, created using Napkin AI (2026).

Fake News Affect Elections in Cotopaxi



Electoral disinformation operates within complex media ecosystems in which multiple platforms, actors, and verification practices interact to shape public opinion. This study is grounded in media ecology theory, which conceptualizes information as an interdependent system of platforms, users, and technologies in which bots, communities, and algorithms shape narratives and emotions in ways that extend beyond conventional content analysis. The research aims to generate actionable evidence for

regional and national stakeholders—including fact-checking organizations, local media outlets, civil-society organizations, and universities—on how to design media-literacy initiatives and verification mechanisms suited to Cotopaxi's specific ecological conditions. As Alvarez et al. (2022) note, it is important to examine how technologies mediate the transfer between physical and digital spaces.

In Latin America, electoral communication 2.0 has enabled candidates to interact with voters immediately. However, the absence of genuine dialogue has produced communication ecosystems that are especially vulnerable to disinformation (Varea and Pérez-Gabaldón 2021, 245). In Ecuador's highly competitive electoral environment, strategies that manipulate information through fake news may play a decisive role in election outcomes. This study is therefore justified by the need to examine how global disinformation dynamics are reconfigured in territories marked by digital divides and cultural diversity, as is the case in Cotopaxi Province, Ecuador. Whereas previous research has often focused on major cities, a focused case study of Cotopaxi can reveal whether disinformation operates through local, proximity-based dynamics or responds to external algorithmic microtargeting, thereby providing critical evidence for electoral governance in highly diverse sociodemographic settings (López-López et al. 2022, 39).

The first section of this article reviews theories on social-media use in electoral campaigns and the presence of fake news. The second analyzes social-media data through an exploratory netnography—understood as an adaptation

of ethnography to the study of cultures and communities mediated by digital platforms (Kozinets 2015)—and through three focus groups involving university students, retirees, and young people from Indigenous communities. The study examines how users responded to widely circulated disinformation during Ecuador's 2025 presidential campaign, contested by Daniel Noboa and Luisa González, and analyzes the relationship between disinformation and electoral campaigning in Ecuador, with particular attention to the Cotopaxi context. The article concludes by presenting the principal findings.

Theoretical Framework

Ecuador's 2025 presidential election highlighted the growing influence of technology on political communication and the profound changes that have occurred in recent decades. In particular, the combined use of social media and the spread of fake news has emerged as a critical electoral issue. Analyzing these dynamics is essential because they can undermine the quality of political debate and affect voters' behavior and decisions.

Political campaigning has changed substantially: rallies and speeches now intersect with social-media networks that transform campaign and communication practices. Political parties and candidates can use digital communication strategies to deliver messages to specific groups of voters, while data-analytics tools allow them to segment audiences and tailor communications with a high degree of precision. This capacity reduces wasted resources

and increases the likelihood that messages will resonate with a diverse and heterogeneous electorate (Mula-Grau and Cambroner-Saiz 2022). However, personalization can also facilitate information manipulation by exposing voters to content designed to polarize and mislead, thereby threatening democratic processes and blurring the distinction between public opinion and published opinion. In Ecuador, the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) has limited experience in developing public policies capable of addressing digital disinformation effectively.

Research shows that false news is more likely to be shared than accurate information, placing voters in an environment in which disinformation may become normalized (Bovet and Makse 2019). Guadarrama (2024) argues that fake news should be distinguished from agnotology. In this account, agnotological practices are deliberately intended to damage or discredit a news story, public figure, or action, whereas a piece of fake news may also arise from outdated or inaccurate reporting.

Media Ecology and Disinformation in Latin American Electoral Campaigns

Media ecology conceptualizes information as an interdependent system of platforms, actors, technologies, and cultural practices that structures flows of attention, verification, and the dissemination of political narratives—in other words, an epistemology of networks, algorithms, and communities (Anzietta et al. 2021). From this perspective, Latin American election campaigns show that disinformation

circulates in formats that imitate established media and spreads through both open networks and closed messaging services. Media literacy and information governance therefore emerge as necessary, although partial, responses to these dynamics (Ramírez et al. 2023).

Fake news in the age of globalization is not confined to a single country; similar patterns have been observed during electoral processes worldwide. In Ecuador, limited regulation and weak oversight of content on digital platforms have enabled false information to spread without effective supervision by regulatory bodies (García-Galera, Del-Hoyo-Hurtado, and Blanco-Alfonso 2020, 15). The absence of institutional verification mechanisms is especially critical during elections, when disinformation can distort public perceptions of candidates and democratic institutions in territories with distinctive local information dynamics, such as Cotopaxi.

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is therefore a crucial element in this context because it helps citizens distinguish fact from fiction and strengthens their resilience to disinformation. As MIL increases, citizens become better equipped to identify and challenge false information (Wilderbeek 2020).

Users' tendency to accept information that is consistent with their existing beliefs represents a major obstacle to the effective use of reliable information. This psychological phenomenon has a strong effect on the spread of false news, undermining the quality of democratic debate within the broader context of the post-truth era (Salaverría et al. 2020).

By examining the role of social media and

fake news in the 2025 presidential election, this exploratory study contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary challenges in political communication and highlights the need for effective strategies that address disinformation and foster a more informed and participatory electoral environment.

Examining fake news in electoral contexts is particularly important because of its immediate effects on political attitudes and voting behavior. Such analysis also deepens understanding of the relationship between citizens and democratic processes, the role of technology in the public sphere, and the conditions required to build a more transparent and equitable political future.

The influence of digital media on contemporary political processes is especially relevant during elections. Ecuador's 2025 presidential election offers a distinctive opportunity to analyze how social-media strategies and advertising on platforms such as Facebook shape voters' political perceptions and behavior, particularly in Cotopaxi. It is therefore essential to examine the literature on the political use of these tools.

Influencers and Political Campaigns

Political campaigns now involve new actors commonly known as influencers, who have become opinion leaders within the digital ecosystem. The rise of social-media content creators has reconfigured political communication by positioning them as intermediaries between candidates and the electorate (Zheng 2022). Digital platforms enable these actors to reach mass audiences, initiate public conversations, and

encourage political participation more effectively than many traditional channels (Čiković 2023).

Influencers can facilitate forms of digital activism that are especially important in electoral contexts, where perceived authenticity and proximity to voters play a central role. Paid social-media advertising, particularly on Facebook, also allows political actors to segment audiences and distribute tailored messages to different demographic groups, potentially increasing campaign effectiveness (Bär et al. 2024).

Politics and Social Media

Social media has transformed presidential campaigning across Latin America, becoming a fundamental channel for outreach and communication between candidates and voters. Analyses of recent campaigns show that platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram allow candidates to disseminate messages and proposals while also facilitating direct interaction with voters, political activism, and social mobilization (García 2024; Restrepo 2023). During Colombia's 2022 presidential campaign, for example, social media was used increasingly as a space for debating ideas and organizing citizen movements, illustrating the ability of these platforms to amplify the voices of young people and traditionally marginalized groups (Restrepo 2023). The capacity to segment audiences and tailor messages has also encouraged more strategic social-media use, with emotion playing a central role in promoting participation and loyalty to candidates (Zumárraga-Espinosa 2017, 305).

Social media also enables new visual narratives

and innovative formats that capture voters' attention with increasing effectiveness (Wilches-Tinjacá et al. 2024, 220). During Ecuador's 2023 presidential campaign, TikTok emerged as a key means of connecting with Generation Z, demonstrating how candidates adapt to current trends by using dynamic and creative content to engage younger voters. This phenomenon extends beyond Ecuador: throughout the region, images and videos on social media have changed how political campaigns are conducted, making communication more immediate and personal (García 2024). The use of social media in presidential campaigns therefore reflects a broader paradigm shift in Latin American political communication, as digital interaction redefines strategies of mobilization and electoral participation.

Facebook has proved to be an important campaign tool in recent elections across Latin America, including Ecuador. Research has suggested that social-media advertising expenditure may predict candidates' electoral success (Curmi 2020, 115). Such advertising allows political parties not only to promote their messages but also to interact directly with audiences, increasing engagement and potentially influencing voting decisions (Bär, Pröllochs, and Feuerriegel 2025).

Effects on Voter Perceptions

The influence of digital communication on voter perceptions remains an important area of research. Well-designed social-media campaigns have been associated with increased

political awareness and electoral participation, highlighting the role of influencers in this process (Lubis and Efendi 2024, 112). These actors do more than transmit political messages: through accessible and engaging content, they also shape opinions and attitudes (Čiković et al. 2023).

In Cotopaxi's socially and culturally diverse environment, the strategic use of narratives by local influencers may substantially affect voter mobilization. Political figures can similarly use specific platforms to influence voting intentions, as observed in several Cotopaxi cantons where mayors, prefects, and governors have maintained influential digital presences.

These tools also raise ethical and practical concerns. The democratic legitimacy of personalized messages based on voters' beliefs must be questioned, particularly because such practices create risks of information manipulation and the spread of false news. Message saturation and disinformation may produce electoral confusion and even political apathy, presenting an additional challenge for campaigns seeking to encourage meaningful participation in democratic processes (Quarfood 2022).

Political actors must recognize the dual effects of digital communication. Although influencers may contribute positively to political mobilization and education, standards are also needed to regulate the accuracy of content and the ethical use of social-media advertising (Tereshchuk 2017).

As electoral campaigns become increasingly dependent on digital technologies, the dynamics of influence—and their possible effects on public opinion and voting behavior in countries such as Ecuador—grow more complex. The combination

of political-marketing strategies and the influence of opinion leaders may shape the future of electoral politics in specific territories. In Cotopaxi, published opinion may also be influenced by paid access to journalists or media spaces that privilege the agendas of candidates who purchase advertising. The role of influencers and Facebook advertising in presidential elections across the region therefore requires continued analysis.

Cotopaxi and Diversity

Located in Ecuador's central Andean region, Cotopaxi Province is characterized by considerable cultural, social, and biological diversity. This diversity is reflected in local practices and in interactions among Indigenous and mestizo communities, creating a distinctive setting in which to assess the effects of artificial intelligence and fake news on electoral behavior and to observe how these dynamics intersect with local particularities.

Cotopaxi combines Indigenous and mestizo influences, making it a particularly relevant setting for examining the effects of social media and fake news. Indigenous communities in the province have often been marginalized and underrepresented in electoral processes. Previous research shows that these communities mobilize to bring visibility to their demands and rights while confronting distorted, racist, and hegemonic narratives produced through media manipulation and traditional mass-media discourse (Mazzolini and Horsfield 1999, 56).

Cotopaxi is well suited to a case study of social media and fake news in the 2025 presidential

election because it enables examination of a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. The intersection of cultural diversity, biological richness, and political challenges creates a distinctive environment for understanding how modern technologies may influence electoral behavior in a multicultural context. The analysis therefore contributes to debates on inclusion and integrity in Ecuadorian democratic processes, including issues that may be overlooked even in reports produced by international election observers.

Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach and implemented a triangulation strategy combining three forms of data collection and analysis. First, a netnography was conducted, understood as an adaptation of ethnography to the study of communities mediated by digital platforms. The period analyzed covered posts published from January through April 2025, the phase of greatest campaign intensity, during which the National Electoral Council (CNE) organized the mandatory debates and the runoff election. Case selection focused on the two runoff candidates, Luisa González and Daniel Noboa, and on fake news involving them. The study was delimited to the local media-consumption ecosystem observable from Cotopaxi and prioritized visible reception and interaction on openly accessible platforms. Second, focus groups were conducted with diverse population segments—including university students, retirees, and young people from Indigenous

communities—to examine subjective experiences and mechanisms of local recirculation. This selection captured differentiated intercultural and intergenerational perceptions of the credibility of disinformation. Finally, the study incorporated a documentary analysis of technical reports issued by election observation missions, which provided an external perspective.

The study was conducted in Cotopaxi Province in central Ecuador, whose population includes both mestizo and Indigenous communities. It focused on the rural parish of Zumbahua in Pujilí Canton and the community of Planchaloma in Latacunga Canton, the provincial capital. These historically marginalized communities have experienced structural deficiencies in health care, education, and state presence. Internet coverage remains limited in remote areas, although paid access is available in some locations. In recent years, a growing movement of Indigenous youth has used social media—particularly Facebook—as a means of visibility and active political participation. This emergence of “Indigenous digital activism” is not an isolated development; it represents a strategy of resistance to historical exclusion, enabling rural youth to manage their own narratives and pursue community-led responses to local problems (Tomalá Medina 2023). This digital empowerment is reflected in the proliferation of community pages and public profiles through which deficiencies are reported and collective actions organized, challenging the conventional portrayal of rural communities as passive recipients of information. As research on Ecuadorian media ecologies has argued, rural sectors’ use of digital platforms breaks with

their dependence on traditional mass media and constitutes a form of counter-information that directly addresses the state and national public opinion (López-López et al. 2022, 42). Digital participation in Zumbahua and Planchaloma thus functions as a mechanism for asserting rights in territories where government support has historically been inadequate.

Research with young people from the Indigenous communities of Zumbahua and Planchaloma helps explain the intersection of cultural identity and social-media use within Cotopaxi's diverse population. These young people use digital platforms to communicate with family members and acquaintances, obtain political information, and articulate social and cultural demands related to issues such as territorial rights and cultural preservation. Radio Latacunga and dedicated Facebook pages provide spaces for these purposes. The inclusion of young mestizo communication students also helps explain how future communication professionals perceive the political effects of social media and assess their own capacity to produce content that resonates with a diverse population. Members of the Association of Retired Professionals, all of whom previously worked in the public sector, represent a generation that experienced different political and social contexts, making it possible to contrast historical perceptions with the realities faced by young people in an increasingly digital world. Cotopaxi's diversity is therefore not merely a demographic characteristic; it is a critical analytical dimension that enriches understanding of the social and political dynamics shaping electoral participation in the province.

Data-Collection Techniques

The following principal techniques were used to collect information and capture participants' discourse:

1. Netnography, or digital ethnography, involving systematic observation of closed Facebook groups associated with the parishes of Zumbahua in Pujilí Canton and Planchaloma in Latacunga Canton. This technique was intended to identify information flows that were not visible in public posts and to analyze how fake news was consumed in real time.
2. Focus groups, used to develop a deeper understanding of how voters perceived electoral information and how those perceptions were influenced by social media and fake news. The groups included different population segments in order to capture a broad range of perspectives, including those of young adults, older adults, and members of rural Indigenous communities. This methodology draws on studies of public perceptions of disinformation, which emphasize that repeated exposure to false content can influence audience attitudes and beliefs (Pennycook and Rand 2019, 39).

This qualitative approach captured the complexity of public opinion and its relationship with disinformation in the local context. Guided discussions allowed focus-group participants to share their experiences with fake news and describe how such content influenced their electoral behavior. Participants were also asked about their perceptions of candidates' digital strategies, their ability to recognize manipulated

content, and the role that social media may have played in shaping electoral narratives.

A semi-structured interview guide was designed for each focus group according to its sociodemographic, cultural, and media characteristics. This approach made it possible to examine situated patterns of information consumption, levels of media literacy, and perceptions of electoral disinformation during Ecuador's 2025 presidential campaign. The methodological decision reflected the need to recognize that the relationship among social media, false information, and political behavior is not homogeneous, but is instead shaped by prior patterns of use, cultural capital, technological access, and socially constructed interpretive frameworks.

For the focus group of university communication students, the guide examined the digital sources used to obtain political and electoral information; participants' ability to recognize and distinguish false news from verified information; their perceptions of influencers' role in shaping political judgment; and their self-assessment of their media-literacy skills in responding to digital disinformation. Although this group had greater formal familiarity with media languages, its members were not necessarily exempt from the accelerated consumption, emotionalization of public debate, and information overload that characterize the contemporary digital ecosystem.

For the focus group of Cotopaxi retirees, the questions addressed participants' preferred sources of electoral information, the reliability they attributed to social media relative to traditional media, the barriers they encountered

when seeking accurate information online, and the effect of disinformation on their trust in the electoral process. This component examined how a group whose media trajectories were historically anchored in conventional formats reconfigured its reception practices within a hybrid environment in which traditional media, digital platforms, and informal circuits of political information converge.

For the focus group of young people from Indigenous communities, the guide examined the digital platforms they most frequently used for information; how access—or limited connectivity—conditioned political participation; the role of social media in preserving, representing, or contesting cultural identity during the electoral process; and participants' perceptions of the presence or absence of political messages in their own language and from the perspective of their worldview. Including this group reflected a fundamental analytical and intercultural principle: the appropriation of digital political content cannot be separated from the territorial, linguistic, and community conditions through which information is received, validated, or questioned.

The methodological design included documentary analysis of technical reports prepared by election observation missions, which were treated as specialized sources offering an external, systematic, and comparative perspective on the conduct of the election, its institutional conditions, the behavior of political actors, and the information dynamics surrounding the campaign. These documents allowed the evidence obtained through focus groups and netnographic observation to be contrasted with assessments

produced by international organizations applying technical criteria related to electoral integrity, process monitoring, and democratic standards. This triangulation strengthened the consistency of the study's interpretations, broadened the analytical framework, and reduced the risk of an exclusively internal reading of electoral disinformation in Cotopaxi Province.

Documentary analysis of technical reports issued by election observation missions was also incorporated into the methodological design because these specialized sources provide an external, systematic, and comparative perspective on the electoral process, its institutional conditions, the behavior of political actors, and the surrounding information environment. Such documents made it possible to compare the netnographic observation of digital content and reactions with assessments prepared by international organizations that apply technical standards of monitoring, electoral integrity, and democratic practice. This comparison strengthened the study's interpretive validity and reduced the risk of an exclusively endogenous account of the phenomenon.

Ethical Use of Reports and Institutional Documents

This study followed ethical principles in its use of reports prepared by national and international organizations, fact-checking outlets, and specialized institutions. These materials were used exclusively for academic purposes. Although the documents are publicly

accessible, their authorship was acknowledged through appropriate citation and referencing in accordance with APA standards, and extensive or decontextualized reproduction of their contents was avoided.

Selective use of data or excerpts that could alter the original meaning of the documents was likewise avoided. Where reports differed, those differences were presented transparently, without suppressing information that contradicted the study's interpretations. Data derived from sources were clearly distinguished from the researchers' interpretations and analytical inferences.

Participation in the focus groups was voluntary and preceded by a clear explanation of the study's objectives, the topics to be discussed, the approximate duration of the activity, the method used to record the information, and the academic use of the findings. Each participant was required to provide informed consent before the discussion began.

Results

Netnography

Four criteria guided case selection for the netnographic analysis: (a) documented circulation identified by Ecuadorian and international fact-checking organizations; (b) a direct connection to the two leading candidates; (c) evidence of technical manipulation or media impersonation; and (d) the possibility of observing user responses in openly accessible spaces. According to Lupa Media, 76.92% of the campaign's viral disinformation focused on

Daniel Noboa and Luisa González, 42% of the items analyzed appropriated logos, styles, or materials belonging to media outlets, institutions, or public figures, and 23% incorporated artificial-

intelligence components (Lupa Media 2025a).

On the basis of these criteria, two types of content were selected (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1. A fraudulent webpage or portal impersonating the newspaper El Universo and linking Daniel Noboa to an alleged cryptocurrency platform, reproduced below



Source: Lupa.com (2025).

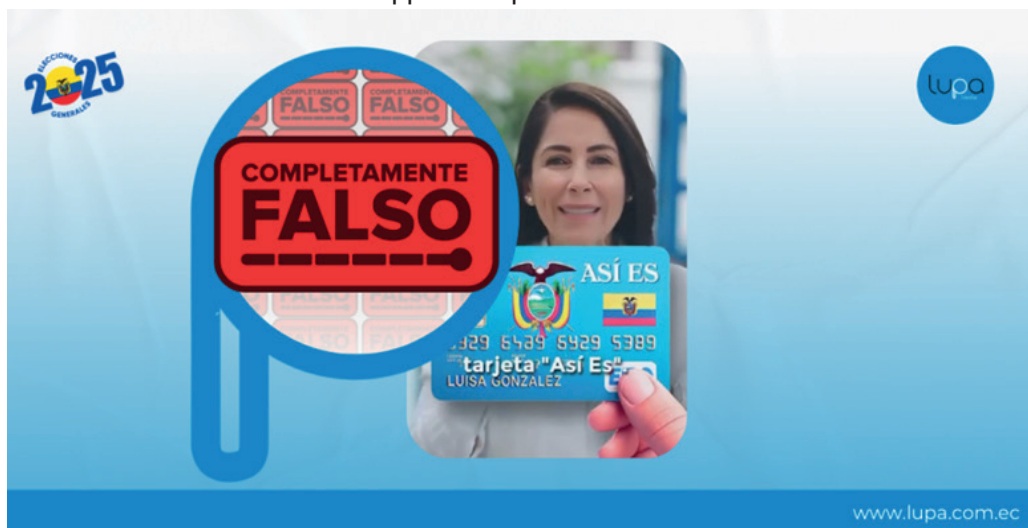
The first case involved a falsified website that imitated the visual identity of the newspaper El Universo and published a fabricated headline claiming that Daniel Noboa had been sued for recommending an investment platform called Denoxix Trader. Lupa Media verified that the story was entirely false, that the “Bank of Ecuador” mentioned in the post did not exist, and that the content was clearly intended to redirect users to

a fraudulent investment scheme (Lupa Media 2025b). From a netnographic perspective, the item derived credibility from brand recognition, elicited ideologically confirming expressions of indignation, and circulated rapidly because of its scandalous framing. Users therefore interacted not merely with a claim, but with the appearance of journalistic authority. Public comments associated with this type of content and related

electoral posts repeatedly displayed certainty without prior verification, accusations between political camps, and immediate assumptions of corruption or fraud. These patterns reinforced polarization and reduced willingness to compare

sources. Participants who did not encounter corrective information believed that the candidate was involved in cryptocurrency fraud and reported considering this claim when deciding how to vote.

Figure 2. A video posted by a viral account and circulated on TikTok and other platforms, in which a deepfake attributed to Luisa González appears to promote a card called “Así Es”



Source: Lupa.com (2025).

This manipulated video began circulating on January 19, 2025. Artificial intelligence was used to alter a Luisa González campaign video so that she appeared to promote a purported social-benefits card called “Así Es.” According to Lupa Media, forensic analysis indicated a 96% probability of facial manipulation, while EFE Verifica confirmed that neither the audio nor the promotional content belonged to the candidate or her official campaign material (Lupa Media 2025c; EFE

Verifica 2025). Netnographically, user reactions to this format differed from those observed in the first case. Responses were predominantly rapid, emotional, and performative, including ridicule, support, suspicion, and hope of receiving benefits through the advertised card; reasoned discussion was largely absent. The short video simulated proximity and conversational speech, encouraging a less analytical mode of reception. Its persuasive power depended less on the coherence

of the message than on its visual plausibility and the rapid consumption patterns characteristic of TikTok and Reels. As in the first case, participants who viewed the video without recognizing it as false reported taking it into account when deciding how to vote.

Comparative User Behavior

Comparison of the two formats shows that user behavior was not homogeneous.

Nevertheless, both cases shared a common feature: limited verification before users commented on, shared, or incorporated the content into their own interpretations of political events. Ecuador Chequea described the campaign as an environment in which disinformation expanded alongside electoral confrontation, and the European Union Election Observation Mission reported that social media lacked effective regulation capable of containing it (Ecuador Chequea 2025; EU EOM 2025).

Table 1. Netnographic comparison of the two observed forms of disinformation

Analytical category	Case 1: False webpage impersonating El Universo (Daniel Noboa)	Case 2: Viral video/account featuring a deepfake of Luisa González
Medium and deceptive logic	Falsified portal or webpage using journalistic aesthetics to create an appearance of legitimacy.	Short video circulated on TikTok and other platforms, supported by AI-enabled audiovisual manipulation.
Core false claim	Noboa is falsely attributed a cryptocurrency recommendation and a nonexistent lawsuit.	González is falsely attributed the promotion of a nonexistent social-benefits card.
Credibility mechanism	Recognition of the media brand and a design resembling that of a national newspaper.	Appearance of bodily and vocal authenticity; audiovisual proximity to the candidate.
Predominant user behavior	Lengthy comments, indignation, allegations of corruption, and partisan interpretations.	Rapid reactions, ridicule or support, expectations of benefits, and less developed argumentation.
Verification practices	Limited; some users debate the claim, but few compare it with the original source.	Very limited; rapid consumption encourages acceptance or forwarding before verification.
Political-communication effect	Reinforces scandal narratives and weakens institutional and journalistic trust.	Mobilizes emotion, normalizes deepfakes, and blurs the boundary between propaganda and deception.

Note. Categorization of the impact of disinformation in Cotopaxi Province. Author’s own work.

The two cases demonstrate that electoral disinformation circulates not merely as inaccurate information, but as a sociotechnical practice that organizes emotions, political identities, and forms of participation. Within the media ecosystem used by Cotopaxi residents, these items circulated under favorable conditions because they resonated with preexisting polarization, selective trust, and accelerated content consumption. User responses to false news therefore cannot be explained solely as individual naivety; they must also be understood as outcomes of platform architectures that reward speed, emotional impact, and visibility. From this perspective, netnography reveals that commenting, reacting, and sharing are themselves forms of co-producing disinformation and, potentially, direct agnotological practices. Agnotology examines the deliberate production and dissemination of social ignorance, particularly for purposes of governance; in contemporary contexts, it can be understood as the construction and viral dissemination of politically motivated narratives designed to conceal or distort reality (Torres et al. 2025). This conceptual framework has been used to analyze how fake news operates strategically to generate uncertainty and distrust in political and electoral settings.

Focus Groups

Three focus groups were conducted in Cotopaxi Province to gather perspectives on the influence of social media and fake news during the 2025 election. The groups comprised eight communication students aged 19–24, eight members of the Cotopaxi Retirees' Association

aged 65 or older, and eight young people from the Indigenous communities of Zumbahua and Planchaloma.

Participants were selected according to qualitative methodological criteria designed to ensure diverse perspectives on the influence of artificial intelligence and fake news during the 2025 election. The primary purpose was to collect views from population sectors whose characteristics reflected different experiences of digital-media and social-media use and perception.

Inclusion criteria and social, cultural, and age-based segmentation were applied to obtain balanced representation of the groups that make up Cotopaxi's communication environment. The principal criteria were:

- Age and stage of life: university students, older adults, and Indigenous youth were included.
- Digital-media experience: each group represented a different level of media literacy.
- Social and cultural context: participants were drawn from urban, rural, and Indigenous settings.

The focus groups provided a comprehensive perspective on social-media use and its effects in Ecuador's electoral context. As a qualitative technique, focus groups allow researchers to explore perceptions, meanings, and communication practices through participants' own experiences (Morgan 1997). Communication students represent one of the generations most connected to digital tools, making it possible to analyze how they use platforms to obtain information, form opinions, and participate in online political discussions (Pew Research Center 2018). Positioned at the intersection of higher

education and professional training, this age group is particularly important for understanding the role of social media in constructing political discourse and promoting civic participation (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014). Their familiarity with digital media also makes it possible to examine the limits of presumed digital competence. The inclusion of retired teachers from the Cotopaxi Retirees' Association provided a historical and critical perspective that contrasted with that of younger participants. Finally, young people from Zumbahua and Planchaloma—among the province's largest Indigenous communities and recognized as important sources of Indigenous leadership—brought cultural and regional dimensions that may be absent from dominant narratives. Their participation shed light on how social media serves not only as a means of communication but also as a space for preserving and promoting cultural identity during an election, while reflecting and questioning the social and political realities in which these communities are situated.

Focus Group with Young Communication Students

The first focus group was conducted with communication students. The discussion showed that participants were aware of influencers' effects on public opinion. They specifically identified Lourdes Tibán, Prefect of Cotopaxi, and Alexandra Moyano, an independent journalist from Cotopaxi—both active on TikTok—as figures who shape local political discourse. They also mentioned accounts associated with

“El Chochólogo,” run by Andrés Durán, an Ecuadorian journalist educated in Argentina, and with Lavinia Valbonesi, the wife of presidential candidate Daniel Noboa.

Participants stated that many young people did not clearly distinguish false news from accurate information. Participant 3 noted that Facebook was no longer a primary source of campaign news or propaganda for him and that TikTok posts had a greater impact. Participant 8 said that users did not stop to consider whether a story was false; they simply consumed the content presented to them. Participant 1 emphasized that Luisa González's advertising on YouTube was excessive and produced the opposite of its intended effect because it interrupted almost every video: “It was extremely annoying to have to hear her all the time.” Six other participants agreed. Most participants acknowledged that social-media claims influenced their vote, including assertions that Ecuador would abandon the U.S. dollar if González won and that she was aligned with Venezuela, although they never verified whether those claims were accurate. They also mentioned a photograph of Daniel Noboa with U.S. President Donald Trump. Participant 5 explained that the image reassured families in Ecuador who depended on remittances from relatives living in the United States, although participants likewise did not verify whether the photograph was authentic.

The focus group revealed substantial limitations in media literacy within the digital environment. Although participants understood the importance of verifying sources, they perceived reliable information as difficult to access, which

hindered informed electoral decision-making. The discussion also indicated that young people were moving away from Facebook toward platforms such as TikTok.

Focus Group with Cotopaxi Retirees

The second focus group involved members of Cotopaxi's retired community. This group presented a different profile in terms of connectivity and access to information. Most participants reported consuming online content but stated that fake news had not significantly affected them because they preferred traditional information sources such as radio and television. Nevertheless, they expressed concern about their limited ability to evaluate social-media content. Although they recognized that disinformation existed, they found it difficult to determine whether individual stories were false.

Eight participants took part. Although they received information about both candidates, they preferred traditional media, unlike younger users who relied more heavily on Facebook and WhatsApp chains. Participant 7 explained: "My son told me not to believe what people were saying on Facebook and not to forward WhatsApp messages because they could be scams, so I prefer to get information from official channels." Participant 1 was initially surprised that viewers could comment live on Facebook during the debate, but soon stopped watching because there were too many hateful comments. Participant 5 recalled receiving a claim that Noboa had reached an agreement with drug traffickers: "I immediately shared it with all my WhatsApp

groups, and many people scolded me because it turned out to be false. Now I am afraid to forward anything." Participants generally said that false news had not influenced them because they had limited access to these digital spaces. Participant 2 stated: "It is awful for us to have to ask for help all the time. I wrote a Facebook message incorrectly and did not know what to do, so I went to a computer center and asked them to delete my account so that I would not embarrass myself. I would rather see my friends in person." Like the previous group, these participants demonstrated a need for media-literacy education.

Focus Group with Young People from Indigenous Communities

The third focus group was conducted with young people from Indigenous communities in Cotopaxi. This group faced distinctive conditions regarding internet and social-media access. Many participants reported poor connectivity in their communities, which limited information exchange and interaction with digital platforms. Despite this barrier, they indicated that they trusted other social-media platforms more than Facebook and clearly preferred TikTok as their principal source of information about the election and the candidates. The accounts that influenced them most were those of Lourdes Tibán, the Prefect of Cotopaxi, and Leónidas Iza, who at the time was president of Ecuador's Indigenous movement and was originally from Planchaloma. Participants explained that both figures were recognized community leaders.

All eight participants stated that they lacked

free internet access and had to purchase mobile data, limiting the amount of time they could remain online. When connected, they preferred online games, music, and communication with relatives who had migrated to other Ecuadorian cities or to countries such as Spain and the United States.

Participant 1 reported receiving excessive YouTube advertising from Luisa González. He could not determine whether it was false, but said the message was repeated constantly: "I did not like it much because as soon as I turned on YouTube to listen to music, Luisa's advertisement appeared." Participant 4 stated: "I did not even know there were false stories on the internet. I am learning that from you. I thought everything on the internet was true," indicating substantial vulnerability to manipulation. Participant 8 said: "I pay for data to play Free Fire. It is a good game. I do not want to know anything about the candidates because no one does anything for us; they never help us. Why should I waste my data on those things?" Most participants agreed and noted that neither their schools nor their communities had taught them how social media worked. Participant 6 added: "On TikTok, only Lourdes says anything. No one thinks about the fact that we speak Kichwa in our communities. No candidate advertised in our language; everything was in Spanish. That is a form of discrimination." When discussing the influence of social media on voting, participants explained that the Andean worldview emphasizes collective decision-making; they therefore vote in accordance with guidance from community leaders and parents. Participant 4 stated: "Here we meet in an assembly

and decide whom the community will support. We do not make individual decisions. We were told here to vote for Luisa, and that is what we did."

Participants explained that their voting dynamics differed from those of other groups, but acknowledged that false information attacking their culture or Pachamama—the Earth—could lead them to reject a candidate.

The focus-group findings show that, despite differences in experience and context, participants broadly recognized the influence of digital opinion leaders on political discourse. They also demonstrated limited capacity for critically distinguishing fake news, a particularly serious concern in communities with restricted access to reliable information. These findings underscore the urgency of media-education strategies that strengthen voters' ability to identify accurate information and engage critically with disinformation, thereby contributing to a more informed and equitable electoral process.

Reports by the European Union and the Organization of American States

The European Union and the Organization of American States issued reports on Ecuador's election. For confidentiality and in accordance with the study's ethical principles, the identities of individual contributors were kept anonymous. Their observations were incorporated through a critical analysis of the political and institutional discourse contained in the election observation reports. Anonymity was also maintained because some individuals privately expressed concern

about possible reprisals involving Ecuadorian institutions. This approach makes it possible to examine how international missions interpreted the democratic quality of the electoral process, political rights, institutional transparency, and citizen participation.

The European Union report indicates that influence in Cotopaxi was not concentrated in a single, monolithic space. Instead, it identified an ecosystem of opinion leaders who played important roles in local social and political dynamics, particularly in mobilizing citizens during elections. The report grouped these actors into several categories. Local political leaders, including former mayors of Latacunga, used their social-media presence to maintain contact with their constituencies. Public figures such as former footballer Agustín “El Tin” Delgado, who became involved in local politics, illustrated how recognition in sports and entertainment can be converted into political influence.

The report also found that digital figures and media organizations were becoming increasingly important. Some digital influencers and communicators had substantial reach. Cristina Reyes, for example, was based in Guayaquil but influenced audiences in several provinces, including Cotopaxi, through her media work. The report further noted the growing impact of local YouTubers and content creators who addressed culture, gastronomy, and traditions and connected with audiences across age groups. Local journalists working for outlets such as *El Comercio Cotopaxi* and *Radio Latacunga* were established opinion leaders who used Facebook and X to disseminate reporting and analysis.

The report emphasized Cotopaxi’s strong cultural and community identity, within which community leaders and organizations were fundamental actors. These groups functioned as collective influencers, mobilizing residents in both rural and urban areas. The Cotopaxi Indigenous Movement, for example, used social media to organize activities and publicize demands related to community rights. Cultural leaders—including artists, musicians, and content creators—also played a central role by promoting Andean music or addressing social problems through visual art, thereby contributing influential voices to public debate.

The page “Ecoresponsable” was highlighted as an example of how social media could be used to influence public opinion. Although it presented itself as a news site and initially published content on nature and ecology, it gradually introduced political and electoral material, combining information from verified sources with disinformation or fake news. Some posts specifically campaigned in favor of Luisa González by exploiting this mixture of content.

The advertisements contained opinions, campaign news, and, importantly, false claims. Most were designed to attack representatives of the ADN alliance and certain Indigenous leaders aligned with it. Examples included headlines such as “Marco Olmedo, ADN candidate for the National Assembly, says women belong in the home, not in politics” and “Camila Cueva, ADN candidate for the National Assembly in Cotopaxi, creates and sells adult content.” A more detailed analysis of the advertisements, however, suggested that the page administrator may have

supported the Pachakutik movement rather than Luisa González.

The scale of digital advertising increased markedly during the runoff. Facebook's Ad Library was used to identify the largest advertisers supporting each side over a 30-day period. The spending gap was substantial: pro-ADN advertisers spent almost three times as much as pro-RC5 advertisers. Among the highest-spending pages analyzed, total expenditure was USD 1,499,864 in support of Noboa, compared with USD 418,522 in support of González. Pages such as Santo Domingo TV and Hora 25 each spent more than USD 100,000 in support of ADN.

The document also reported a significant escalation in disinformation. Several RC5-aligned pages that made extensive use of misleading content, including Videos Ecuador and Visión Ecuador, were subsequently removed by Facebook. On the ADN side, the analysis identified direct-attack pages such as “¿Dónde estaba Luisa?” (“Where Was Luisa?”), which focused on the candidate's actions during her previous service as a minister. According to the source, institutions did not undertake adequate analysis or intervention to prevent these irregularities.

There was a perception that ADN's massive increase in advertising likely contributed to Daniel Noboa's vote gains. One notable finding concerned the gender distribution of the vote: Luisa González received nearly equal support from men (50.53%) and women (49.47%), whereas Daniel Noboa received significantly more votes from women (53.06%) than from men (46.94%), a difference of more than six percentage points. This pattern may reflect highly specific audience

segmentation. Analysis of the “NOBOA” page, one of the campaign's largest advertisers, showed that 12.6% of its budget was directed exclusively toward women, whereas no expenditure was directed exclusively toward men. This suggests that the Facebook advertising campaign was deliberately targeted at female voters.

The Organization of American States Election Observation Mission (OAS/EOM) report on Ecuador's April 13, 2025 presidential runoff stated that election day proceeded peacefully and that turnout increased from 82.03% in the first round to 83.76% in the runoff. Despite a challenging context, citizens reaffirmed their commitment to democracy and clearly expressed their preference regarding the country's leadership. The report praised the professionalism of National Electoral Council (CNE) staff and the civic commitment of polling-board members who made the election possible. It should be noted, however, that several individual reports did not fully align with the general report.

Observers identified several conditions that affected the fairness of the contest. A central issue was whether the President of the Republic should have requested unpaid leave to campaign, as required by Article 93 of the Code of Democracy. The failure to request leave affected electoral equality and weakened institutional legitimacy. Uncertainty was compounded by the absence of clear rulings from electoral authorities on this and other matters, increasing public distrust. The situation of Vice President Verónica Abad was also a matter of serious concern, as she faced restrictions on the exercise of her functions and actions seeking her removal from office.

The report emphasized that social media was not included in the state-funded Electoral Promotion Fund, placing political organizations with fewer private resources at a disadvantage. Civil-society monitoring estimated substantial private expenditure on social networks; one political organization reportedly spent nearly ten times the amount of public funding assigned to it. Although the CNE is authorized to oversee private social-media spending, its control mechanisms were inadequate because they relied on reports submitted by political parties after the election. The mission therefore recommended including social media in public electoral financing and providing the CNE with sufficient resources for effective monitoring.

Discussion

The focus-group and netnographic findings indicate that electoral disinformation during Ecuador's 2025 election operated not only through the circulation of false content, but also as a practice that connected emotion, political bias, digital-consumption habits, and weaknesses in media literacy. Cotopaxi's experience should therefore be understood within what Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017) call "information disorder": an ecosystem in which disinformation gains strength through interactions among platforms, users, and polarized social contexts.

The communication students had greater academic familiarity with media analysis than the other groups, yet they still experienced difficulty distinguishing verified content from disinformation and audiovisual manipulation.

This finding confirms that proximity to media environments does not necessarily produce well-developed critical competencies. Similarly, Pérez-Escoda and Pedrero-Esteban (2021) argue that young generations consume information in settings characterized by message overabundance, fragmented narratives, and distrust of the media—conditions that can weaken verification practices and encourage rapid consumption.

This pattern becomes especially clear when compared with the netnographic findings. The two forms of disinformation differed substantially in both their deceptive strategies and the responses they elicited. The false webpage impersonating El Universo and linking Daniel Noboa to cryptocurrency and a nonexistent lawsuit relied on journalistic aesthetics to construct legitimacy. By contrast, the viral deepfake of Luisa González, circulated on TikTok and other platforms, exploited audiovisual proximity and the apparent authenticity of the candidate's body and voice. Both cases communicated false claims through formats designed to appear credible within the expectations of their respective platforms and audiences. As Salaverría et al. (2020) argue, contemporary disinformation is strengthened by highly emotive formats that are easy to consume, quick to share, and difficult to verify in real time.

The netnography further demonstrates that user behavior varied according to format, consumption speed, and the type of credibility activated. The false El Universo webpage generated longer comments, indignation, allegations of corruption, and partisan interpretations. The deepfake attributed to Luisa González generated faster reactions—including ridicule, support,

and expectations of material benefit—with less argumentation and even lower levels of verification. Thus, the format of disinformation conditioned how users processed it: journalistic aesthetics encouraged polarized deliberation, whereas short-form video favored rapid, affective, and minimally reflective responses. Verification was limited or virtually absent in both cases, confirming that commenting, reacting, and sharing can constitute forms of co-producing disinformation.

The retirees displayed a different relationship with the information ecosystem. They remained more attached to traditional media such as radio and television, but also acknowledged exposure to misleading content through social networks and digital message chains. Electoral disinformation therefore circulated within a hybrid environment: messages did not remain confined to a single platform but moved among Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, family conversations, and local debates. Vulnerability to false news cannot consequently be explained by age alone; it also depends on how each social group combines information sources and establishes criteria of trust.

The findings for young people from Indigenous communities reveal a decisive territorial and intercultural dimension. Despite connectivity limitations, participants used platforms such as TikTok and recognized the influence of community leaders in shaping political opinions. The circulation of disinformation therefore depends not only on technological access but also on social forms of mediation that legitimize or reproduce it. Carlos A. Scolari (2012) argues that

media should be understood as ecosystems of interaction in which platforms, cultural practices, users, and narratives coexist and transform one another. From this perspective, false information becomes influential when it is embedded in preexisting networks of selective trust, collective identity, and interpersonal validation.

Integrating the focus-group and netnographic evidence clarifies the political and communicative effects of the two cases. The content impersonating El Universo reinforced scandal-based narratives, weakened institutional trust, and eroded journalistic credibility by appropriating the visual codes of professional journalism. The deepfake of Luisa González mobilized emotions, normalized audiovisual manipulation, and blurred the boundaries among propaganda, parody, and deception. This distinction is important because it shows that disinformation both undermines trust in the press and public institutions and trivializes falsification, making the difference between authentic and fabricated content increasingly difficult to discern. In both cases, the political consequences were substantial: polarization intensified and the possibility of electoral debate based on verifiable information diminished.

Technical reports by international election observers support this interpretation. In its final report on Ecuador's 2025 election, the European Union Election Observation Mission stated that the campaign was characterized by digital disinformation, intensive social-media use, and the circulation of misleading content, including material manipulated with artificial intelligence. The patterns observed in Cotopaxi therefore appear to represent a local manifestation of

a broader electoral dynamic. Documentary analysis of these reports complements the study's empirical evidence and strengthens its interpretive validity by situating the findings within a national framework observed by international organizations.

Taken together, the findings indicate that user responses to false information cannot be reduced to individual naivety or a lack of Media and Information Literacy skills. They must also be understood in relation to platforms that reward speed, emotional impact, and visibility, and to social contexts marked by polarization, fragmented trust, and accelerated consumption. The study's principal contribution is to show that electoral disinformation is also a participatory practice: users become targets of deception and then comment on, reinterpret, and amplify misleading content within their own networks.

These findings demonstrate the urgent need for Media and Information Literacy (MIL) policies grounded in territorial, intercultural, and intergenerational approaches. Citizens should be encouraged to verify information, but effective interventions must also address how different social groups construct trust, interpret informational authority, and interact with platforms whose logics privilege virality over accuracy. In this case, the netnography and focus groups show that electoral disinformation reshapes both the communication ecosystem and forms of political participation by influencing emotions, reinforcing identities, and normalizing new grammars of digital deception.

Conclusions

The findings show that during Ecuador's 2025 presidential campaign, disinformation in Cotopaxi circulated most frequently through high-speed, emotionally charged social networks, especially TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp. False content gained visibility because of its brevity, affective intensity, and capacity for rapid sharing. The most common forms included impersonation of recognized media outlets, AI-enabled audiovisual manipulation, deepfakes, fabricated headlines designed to resemble journalism, and messages involving promises, scandals, or accusations intended to damage candidates' reputations. Electoral disinformation thus operated as a strategy of symbolic contestation that adapted to the distinctive logic of each platform.

Cotopaxi's information ecosystem was hybrid and unequal in terms of the actors who mediated or countered fake news. Opinion leaders, influencers, community representatives, and close personal contacts served as important intermediaries whose legitimacy was based more on social trust than on professional verification standards. Local media outlets, social organizations, and critically aware users also provided fact-checking and counter-information, but their reach was insufficient relative to the speed at which false content spread. Informational authority therefore remained partly anchored in journalistic media while also shifting toward digital and community actors who decisively shaped the interpretation of circulating political information.

The observable effects on civic deliberation were substantial. Misleading content did not

strengthen debate grounded in arguments and verifiable evidence; instead, it deepened polarization, stimulated immediate emotional reactions, and weakened trust in institutions, media organizations, and political actors. Public deliberation in Cotopaxi was marked by partisan comments, unverified accusations, ridicule, expectations of benefit, and forms of support rooted more in emotion than in critical reflection. Disinformation therefore reduced the quality of democratic exchange by replacing programmatic debate with narratives of scandal, fear, indignation, or artificially induced hope.

The effects of social media and disinformation on voting intentions were not homogeneous but varied across the population groups examined. Young people—particularly those most exposed to TikTok and rapid audiovisual formats—were more vulnerable to emotionally appealing content and less inclined to verify information. Older adults retained greater trust in traditional media but were nevertheless exposed to false news through hybrid circuits such as Facebook and WhatsApp. In Indigenous communities, misleading content interacted with local systems of trust and community mediation, demonstrating that limited connectivity does not prevent disinformation from having an effect; rather, it gives that effect specific local characteristics. Electoral decision-making therefore resulted from interactions among digital platforms, local political cultures, networks of trust, and differing levels of Media and Information Literacy.

The study concludes that social-media use and disinformation influenced the electoral decisions of at least part of Cotopaxi's population during

the 2025 presidential campaign. Although these factors did not directly or uniformly change every citizen's vote, they conditioned the climate of opinion, reinforced preexisting predispositions, amplified favorable or unfavorable perceptions of the candidates, and affected how different groups interpreted political reality. Rather than producing a linear manipulation of voting behavior, disinformation shaped how voters evaluated Daniel Noboa and Luisa González through emotion, suspicion, identity-based affiliation, and selective trust in particular sources.

The findings also suggest that governments will need to develop public policies and legal frameworks addressing social-media governance, platform content, media harassment, and the nonconsensual use of images. Such regulation will also need to confront difficult boundaries among hyperbole, satire, harmful manipulation, and freedom of expression.

The study confirms the need for sustained strategies to strengthen media literacy, community-based verification, and local journalism through territorial, intercultural, and intergenerational approaches. Cotopaxi demonstrates that electoral disinformation cannot be addressed solely by urging citizens to "be better informed." It requires educational processes that develop critical thinking, verification skills, and collective capacity to recognize new forms of digital deception. The study therefore contributes to understanding that contemporary democratic contestation no longer occurs only at the ballot box; it also unfolds in digital environments where political perceptions, emotions, and decisions are shaped.

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