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Chapter

Fake News against the Spanish Second Republic: The ABC as a Collaborator and Agitator of the Coup of 1936

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Abstract

This research proposes to analyze the role of the Spanish newspaper ABC as a collaborator and agitator of the coup d'état of 1936 in Spain by publishing false, exaggerated, or unverified information in order to create a climate of opinion favorable to the uprising against the republican regime. The chosen methodology is the case study and the content analysis of 177 news, editorials, opinion articles, electoral propaganda, and political speeches published in this Spanish newspaper from the 6th of February to the 19th of July 1936. Throughout the research, we confirm that the ABC used different strategies to justify the coup d'état, which led to Franco's dictatorship.

Keywords: ABC, Spanish civil war, propaganda, Second Republic, violence, fake news, media

1. Introduction

In Spain, throughout the spring of 1936, coinciding with the political victory of the Popular Front on February 16, right-wing leaders took it upon themselves to spread a story according to which Spain was mired in an atmosphere of unbridled violence, and there was an imminent risk that a communist coup d'état took place. This catastrophic speech, constructed with the aim of demonstrating the illegitimacy of the republican regime and obtaining the necessary mobilization to carry out the coup d'état, was repeated incessantly by the Spanish right-wing parties, who made the parliament a place contrary to argumentation, and they found, in the monarchical press, a loudspeaker where they could spread their propaganda. Thus, as the journalist and professor, José María Calleja explains in his latest book: “Propaganda has always been a weapon for war. Throughout history, propaganda has preceded war, sustained it while it was ongoing, and remained when the conflict was over” [1].

This research aims to verify the role that the ABC newspaper, the one with the largest circulation at the time, during the last period of the Spanish Second Republic
in times of peace—from the elections of February 1936 until the coup d’etat of July 18 of that year—as a mobilizing agent for monarchist groups and the army, and to what extent it contributed to the coup.

It is based on the hypothesis that a large part of the right-wing press, and specifically the ABC, published false, unverified, magnified, or incomplete information with the aim of supporting the monarchist sectors, which were conspiring from the moment of the proclamation of the Republic. The intention was to mobilize the army, demonstrate to society that the sociopolitical environment had drifted toward violence and, in this way, justify military intervention to straighten out the situation by boycotting any attempt at democratization in Spain.

2. Methodology

The method followed is the ABC case study, which has been projected using the content analysis technique of 177 news, editorials, opinion articles, electoral propaganda, and political speeches published in this newspaper between February 6 and July 19 of 1936. Strictly speaking, the case study is not a methodology, but rather a technical approach to a specific object chosen for its uniqueness and representativeness in which the application of various methodological techniques is feasible [2]. According to Yin, the case study is “an empirical investigation that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not shown precisely” [3].

Thus, it has focused on a particular situation, event, or case to study it in depth, the ABC during the violent spring of 1936, and through inductive reasoning, principles, and generalizations that emerge from the analysis of data have been obtained. Ironically, during the Second Republic this newspaper—which was the editorial flag of the Monarchy—was the one with the largest print run in Spain, since it exceeded two hundred thousand copies, and, consequently, was of great influence. For this reason, it is considered that this header is representative of the ideological tendency and political objectives shared by other conservative headers.

Regarding the various methodological techniques, it has been decided that content analysis is the most appropriate, since, according to Berelson, it is a “research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communications” [4]. The complexity of content analysis lies in the fact that it combines the observation and production of data and the interpretation or analysis of the same. However, in a text it manifests, obvious and direct content can be perceived, but also the latent, hidden, and indirect meaning that the author intends to convey can be interpreted. Both express and latent data make sense within a context and, therefore, the text and the context are two fundamental aspects in content analysis. Krippendorff adds “context” to his definition of content analysis: “a research technique designed to formulate, from certain data, reproducible and valid inferences that can be applied to their context” [5].

In summary, Figure 1 shows the percentages of the different established categories, corresponding to what we have considered strategies developed by the newspaper. Thus, it is found, first, that the “exaltation of violence” (32.76%) is the most repeated. The second category is the “incitement to rebellion against the government” of the Popular Front with a 28.16% presence. In third place is the “demonization of the opponent,” present in 15.52% of the articles. Later it will be explained what each one consists of.
3. Historical framework

During the interwar period—in Spain and internationally—there was a politicization of the press, which stood out for its political and propaganda content over those of strictly journalistic interest. It should be noted, therefore, that the propagandistic interest and the tone of agitation were not exclusive to the right-wing press, but they had an important and substantial advantage over the left: it was solid and had financial, powerful, and tactical support.

“Popular Front” is the name—of communist origin but soon acquired universal use letter of nature—that was extended to baptize the electoral coalition between the center-left Republicans led by Azaña and Martínez Barrio on the one hand, and the different forces political and trade unionists of the left on the other, who signed the famous pact/program the 15th of January 1936 with which they planned to go to February 16th elections. It was the desire to dislodge the right wing from power that ended up overcoming obstacles.

With the proclamation of the Republic, the greatest social and political mobilization in contemporary Spain took place. Political violence had an internal component—the breakdown of the conservative social order and the arrival of mass politics—and another external one—the fascism versus anti-fascism struggle—in Europe between the wars, which arrived late in Spain and further exacerbated the tensions. In these circumstances, the conflict was exaggerated by the conservative press and the radical left, which conveyed the idea of permanent social instability.

The *ABC* hit the streets daily for the first time on June 1, 1905. Its director, Torcuato Luca de Tena, set out to create a newspaper that would stand out for being, at the same time, graphic, informative, literary, and, in addition, easily manageable [6]. One of his hallmarks was the monitoring of royal activity, along with a pure conservatism that soon won the sympathy of the aristocracy, the upper bourgeoisie, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and part of the army. With the proclamation of the Republic, *ABC* reaffirmed the editorial line maintained since its inception, showing its full
support for the monarchy: “We continue and will remain where we were: with the constitutional and parliamentary Monarchy, with freedom, with order, with the right [...] The Monarchy is the sign of everything we defend; it is the history of Spain.”

4. Discussion and results

After carrying out the content analysis of 177 news, editorials, opinion articles, electoral propaganda, and political speeches published in the monarchist newspaper ABC, between February 6 and July 19, 1936, the results obtained confirm the fulfillment of the well-known “Decalogue of Josef Goebbels Propaganda” written; however, by the psychologist Leonard W. Doob [7], who from the diaries of the Nazi Minister of Propaganda wrote an article summarizing the basic principles of Goebbels propaganda. Among the characteristics of the decalogue is the location of an enemy to turn into an object of hatred, the exaggeration and disfigurement of any anecdotal event to transform it into a serious threat, or the continuous repetition of ideas or slogans, so that they are considered true.

In the case of ABC, it is observed how its journalists and collaborators stirred up public opinion using various strategies — demonization of the opponent, dissemination of the myth of the communist revolution, disturbance of public order, exaltation of violence, appeal to political fraud, allusion to the unconstitutionality of the Republic, and incitement to rebellion against the government—for carrying out and justifying the Francoist coup d'état of July, 1936.

A comparison has been made between the different strategies used and their appearance in the analyzed genres. For example, it is observed that electoral propaganda mostly uses the technique of “demonization of the opponent” and “exaltation of violence.” The latter is also the most used in the news that, in turn, incites “rebellion against the government” and deals with matters of “public order” and “political fraud.” Likewise, in most parliamentary speeches, right-wing leaders exalt violence and promote rebellion against the government, just as in opinion articles.

Next, each of the categories corresponding to the strategies indicated and clearly revealed in the content analysis is explained in more detail.

4.1 Demonization of the opponent

Prior to the elections of February 16, 1936, the ABC published numerous electoral propaganda daily in favor of right-wing candidates. The strategy used in articles, images, and covers was what we have called “the demonization of the opponent” through the incessant repetition of disqualifications to present him as the personification of evil. Propaganda builds the enemy, and fills it with evils based on prejudices and mental frameworks rooted among the recipients of that propaganda [1]. In this way, voters or supporters of the Popular Front candidacy were called “Bolsheviks,” “atheists,” “revolutionaries,” “communists,” “separatists,” or “anti-Spaniards,” and, therefore, posed a threat to the integrity and values of the “real” Spain. On February 6, 1936, ABC published the following electoral propaganda:

“If you don’t vote for Spain, don’t complain later if the immense misfortune happens that Spain falls into chaos, disintegration, and atheism. Leftist revolutionaries do not lie: they say that they aspire to repeat the Russian revolution in our Motherland and that

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1 ABC, 4/15/1931, p. 23.
“October” was nothing more than a rehearsal. Vote against the revolution and against its accomplices and accessories!"  

The political discourse used by the extreme right in the electoral campaign and maintained during the war and after the war was based on the Manichaean opposition of symbols: “Civilization or barbarism,” “for Spain or for Russia,” “peace or revolution,” “Christians or atheists” [8]. This stereotyping of the enemy through argumentative procedures of simplification, exaggeration, and distortion of reality sought to leave out of his conception of “Spaniards” all those who did not share his ideals: “Everything that constitutes Spanish nationality is in danger: unity, the economic system, religious feeling, civilized life, the future. Foreign powers subsidize and organize the revolution of extremists in our country. The next elections with the first stage to tear Spain apart and turn it into a conglomerate of tiny Soviet states. You can oppose with your vote. Vote for Spain!."  

On February 14, the monarchist header was published on its front page: “Either you vote for Spain or for Russia.” As can be seen in Figure 2, the electoral propaganda said: “There is no longer any room for error or confusion. The rights shout on their propaganda posters: 'Vote for Spain'. The so-called Popular Left Front, in this poster that we reproduce, declares that voting for him is voting for Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky."  

4.2 Myth of the “communist revolution”

Although the political and media campaign of the “communist danger” had already been carried out previously, during the electoral process of February 1936 the conservative press gave new impetus to the anti-communist maneuver denouncing the Popular Front policy as a Soviet “Trojan Horse.” According to González Calleja [9], one of the justifying trump cards of the July military coup was the affirmation of the existence of an insurrectionary plan that was to explode on August 1. This falsehood was the result of an extensive intoxication maneuver by the Spanish right and its press, obsessed with spreading rumors of a revolutionary threat that would encourage and justify the uprising.

Thus, the conservative intellectuals who usually wrote for ABC warned of the Bolshevik threat that Spain and, specifically, Madrid were suffering, because according to collaborator Álvaro Alcalá-Galiano, after the elections the leftists “turned Madrid for 2 days into a branch of the Soviets.” Following this line, Lázaro Fabre—pseudonym with which José Gómez de la Serna signed—maintained that the future of Spain, “far from being a horizon of freedom and honor, like that of Italy, is a horizon of servitude” country fascist with Mussolini at the forefront—propitiated by “the Bolshevism to which the revolution that began in 1931 wanted to take us.” Likewise, the monarchist newspaper in its editorials influenced the manipulative strategy by warning of the intention of the communists and socialists to destroy the bourgeois Republic “and replace it with the Soviet-type Republic.”

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5 ABC, 02/06/1936, p. 38.
6 ABC, 02/13/1936, p. 22.
7 ABC, 02/14/1936, Cover.
8 ABC, 03/13/1936, p. 3.
9 ABC, 04/18/1936, p. 4.
10 ABC, 05/15/1936, p. 17.
As González Calleja states [9], the Bolshevik threat campaign was perfectly in tune with the parliamentary catastrophism of the spokesmen of the extreme right. On April 16, Calvo Sotelo, after a speech in which he denounced public disorder, providing data of dubious veracity, stated that “those forces are going to establish communism in the political form of a dictatorship of the proletariat.” [8], and assured that, if parliamentary democracy fails, “it will not inevitably lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat, because Spain will also be able to save itself with a formula of a corporate and authoritarian State.” [9]

However, on July 11—2 days before his assassination—Calvo Sotelo offered a very different view of the risk of the communist revolution to the Buenos Aires newspaper La Nación. According to him, despite the increase in strikes, he believed there was less risk of another leftist insurrection than there had been in February:

“Today, I sincerely say it, only through a criminal betrayal by some ruling party could Marxism rise to power. And even then, success would be fleeting. Significant Marxists are the first to doubt it and even to silently hope that it does not occur.”

It was a group of monarchists, among whom was Antonio Goicoechea, leader of the Spanish renewal, who organized the conspiracy to end the Republic. His party became, from its foundation, the cover for the organization of a military plot and Goicoechea was outlined as the political leader of the Alfonsine conspiracy. As Viñas has shown in Ref. [10], on March 31, 1934, together with other representatives of monarchist groups, he signed an agreement with Mussolini for financing, sending weapons, training personnel, and collaboration for the restoration of the monarchy.

Undoubtedly, the political and media strategy on the Bolshevik threat penetrated the restless spirit of the conservative classes, laying the necessary psychological foundations to support a “saving reaction”—as the Count of Rodezno expressed in the Congress—and justify the intervention of the army during the Spanish Second Republic.

4.3 Public order

One of the great problems that the Spanish Second Republic had to deal with was the deterioration of public order, which ended up being an argument to question the legitimacy of the regime and give it an aura of anarchy and misgovernment [11]. During the spring of 1936, the ABC published daily fixed sections that magnified all kinds of disorders and altercations and denounced the lack of authority due to the absence of a strong government. Before the elections, this section was entitled “social unrest and disturbance of public order in Spain,” and later other sections appeared: “social issues and labor conflicts,” “social issues and public order” or “the implementation of secularism in Spain.”

The said news with biased headlines or manipulated information was intended to alarm the political “persecution” suffered by members of right-wing parties by opponents. On February 8, a piece of news was published with the title: Assault on the Spanish Falange in Vigo. One dead and several wounded. In the body of the news, it is explained:

“The boys from the Falange Española, instead of being frightened, faced the assailants, and, at that moment, the light went out, starting a heavy firefight. [...] Inside the premises, one dead and five wounded were picked up; a trade unionist and four from the Falange [...] The dead man has not been identified, but it seems that he is a trade unionist. A CNT number was found in his pockets.”

In short, the Falangists killed a man who, it seems, was a trade unionist, a fact about which there is no detailed information. That same day we found another piece of news entitled “Some individuals try to disarm the civil guard, one of them being killed”:

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10 ABC, 07/15/1936, p. 22.
11 ABC, 07/02/1936, p. 27.
12 ABC, 02/08/1936, p. 43.
“In Cortes de la Frontera, Malaga, some incidents were recorded this morning due to work issues. This night, the Benemérita entered the El Círculo Mercantil café with the purpose of arresting, it seems, an individual with leftist affiliations who had distinguished himself in the incidents in question, and unexpectedly some subjects pounced on the guards, trying to disarm them. Then some of their companions fired several shots, resulting in Antonio Vázquez being killed on the spot, and his cousin, nicknamed Chiveles, seriously wounded.”

Despite the ambiguity of the headline, the information is that the civil guard killed a young leftist and wounded another.

The manipulation of information was common by the media and the leaders of the right in their parliamentary speeches, which made no allusion to the leftists killed at the hands of the security forces or Falangist groups. The ABC, far from complying with the journalistic ethics of disseminating truthful information, published falsified information to thus contribute to the sectarian treatment of the issue of public order in Spain.

Although censorship existed throughout the Republic to a greater or lesser extent, rumors of a military uprising further increased control of the press. However, the parliamentary debates were the only section not subject to censorship, so “the right-wing leaders used them to address public opinion, presenting with apocalyptic overtones the conflicts of public order that the conservative newspapers were in charge of airing” [12].

On April 16, 1936, the monarchist newspaper published the full speech of José Calvo Sotelo, who had become the most influential spokesman for the anti-revolutionary right, and one of the conspirators of the coup against the Republic, along with Ignacio Luca de Tena. During the parliamentary debate the day before, the former minister of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship presented the issue of public order in a markedly sectarian manner, extensively recounting alleged social clashes deliberately mixed with social and labor conflicts and even common crimes:

“From February 16 to April 2 - my data does not cover the subsequent period - there has been the following: Assaults and destruction: in political centers, 58; in public and private establishments, 72; in private homes, 33; in churches, 36. Fires: in political centers, 12; in public and private establishments, 45; in private homes, 15; in churches, 106, of which 56 were completely destroyed. General strikes, 11; shootings, 39; aggressions, 65; robberies, 24; injured, 345; dead, 74.”

The ABC, like the main conservative newspapers, published 2 days later a story about the same alleged violent incidents carried out by the left that Calvo Sotelo had detailed before the Cortes. Once again, in his role as spokesman for the extreme right, he uncritically collected this tendentious and deliberately exaggerated data to publish it as truthful and objective information.

On June 16, 1936, in another historic debate on public order, the leader of the CEDA, José María Gil Robles, read another statistic of violent acts carried out by the left that Calvo Sotelo had detailed before the Cortes. Once again, in his role as spokesman for the extreme right, he uncritically collected this tendentious and deliberately exaggerated data to publish it as truthful and objective information.

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13 ABC, 02/08/1936, p. 43.
14 ABC, 04/16/1936, p. 23.
15 ABC, 06/17/1936, p. 15.
On July 15, 1936, 3 days after the assassination of Calvo Sotelo and just a few days before the coup d'état, in the last parliamentary debate on the extension of the state of alarm, Gil Robles again shared some information of doubtful veracity about the leftist violence in the streets. To the figures that he had provided in his last parliamentary speech on June 16, he added 61 dead and 224 wounded. In his speech, published in its entirety on ABC, the Cedista leader warned of the atmosphere of violence that was growing in Spain: “what you have come to call fascism in generic terms, but which is nothing more than the desire to free oneself from a yoke and an oppression.” Immediately afterward, Gil Robles blamed the Popular Front government for the death of Calvo Sotelo and for promoting violence:

“You have the enormous moral responsibility to sponsor a policy of violence, which arms the murderer’s hand; of having, from the blue bench, excited violence; of not having disavowed those who from the majority benches have spoken words of threat and violence against the person of Mr. Calvo Sotelo. [...] Rest assured that the blood of Mr. Calvo Sotelo is on you, and you will never take it off.”

In short, according to the figures provided by Calvo Sotelo and Gil Robles in the parliamentary debates, from February 16 to July 13, inclusive, there were a total of 1511 injured and 330 dead in Spain. In addition to the data count carried out by other researchers —Cibrián, Payne, Cruz Martínez, Blázquez [13–16]— the most current and precise of González Calleja [11] collects a total of 272 incidents and 384 fatalities due to sociopolitical violence produced between February 19 and July 17, 1936. Although the number of this count is higher than that handled by parliamentarians at that time, González Calleja has denied the myth of the persecution of the right through statistical studies: 42.85% of the dead were people related to the left—mostly day laborers and workers—29.64% were militants or sympathizers of the right-wing formations, and 5.4% police or military, some of them leftists.

Although, as has been shown in the investigations of numerous authors, the spring of 1936 was one of the bloodiest stages in the democratic history of Spain—only surpassed by the revolutionary situation of October 1934—the violence was not exercised by left-wing groups on the rights, nor was it born in the Popular Front stage, nor was it directly responsible for the serious conflicts that sought to be resolved through a coup d'état. Most of the disturbance of public order did not originate in a supposedly great political conflict but was due to multiple, atomized, and multifaceted confrontations of social, economic, and labor overtones.

4.4 Exaltation of violence

Political violence between gangs of young militants of different ideologies for the possession of public space had been frequent since 1934, but these clashes reached their peak in the spring of 1936. Falangist violence in the form of provocation or self-defense destabilized the democratic regime and polarized public opinion in one direction or another.

On March 12, the Falange organized what would be its most resounding violent act to date: an attack against Luis Jiménez de Asúa,—law professor, first vice-president of the Cortes and defender of the socialist Largo Caballero—who, after a shootout, managed to get out unscathed. However, the agent escorting him, the police officer,
Jesús Gisbert, was shot dead. In the ABC newspaper of March 13, we find a news story that tells in all kinds of detail how the attack occurred, but no allusion is made to the ideology of the culprits, who are always referred to as “aggressors.”

The strategy of provocation and tension, in which the Falangist specialized, led to the calling of general protest strikes and demonstrations by left-wing groups that sometimes led to the assault and destruction of the premises of right-wing organizations and clashes with law enforcement. Thus, the attack against Jiménez de Asúa began a spiral of violence: after the burial of agent Gisbert on March 13, a crowd, historians do not determine their ideology, but it can be deduced that they were leftists, assaulted the premises of the Calvo Sotelo’s newspaper La Nación in Madrid, looted the Café del Norte after a provocative shot, and the churches of San Luis and San Ignacio —on Montera and Principe streets— were set on fire.

When the Falangists saw that an attack against an influential personality generated such a response, the group of conspirators knew how to activate “the strategy of tension.” On March 14, José Antonio Primo de Rivera and almost the entire political board of the party were arrested. In response to this harsh blow, on March 16, some gunmen—whose Falangist or traditionalist affiliation was not clear—shot up Largo Caballero’s home located on Madrid’s Viriato street.

As several studies have shown, while the altercations provoked by the left generally took place in the context of conflict socio-labor, political protest strikes, or meetings with militants from the other end of the political spectrum, the right-wing organized attacks against the public or influential personalities among the enemy ranks, or actions aimed at destabilizing the situation and promoting coup calls.

Thus, Falangism, disdained in the early days by broad sectors of conservatism, began to be considered and the elites close to Calvo Sotelo and Catholics began to finance the Falange while inciting it with their political strategy of “the worse, the better” [17]. Therefore, in their parliamentary speeches, the spokesmen of the conservative parties denounced the lack of authority by exalting political and social violence. In this line, after the altercations of April, Gil Robles recalled that “violence can only be answered with violence, and revenge is very tasty,” and added in a civil war tone: “There is a state of excitement that in some translate into aggressiveness and aggression, and panic among others. All this leads to a real civil struggle.”

This political and media campaign in which the different types of violence were extolled while at the same time emphasizing the lack of authority on the part of the government, was constant until the army carried out the coup d’etat. The issue was not that the right-wing did not cooperate with the government in the search for ways of understanding that would contribute to relaxing the tension, but that they transmitted an amplified image of it, which they justified as a product of chaos, anarchy, and lack of respect for the custom and tradition that the Republic represented. ABC never hid its collaboration to end “the uncomfortable, unbearable, and dramatic situation in the country,” as an editorial maintained. In short, it was about making the disorder profitable, presenting it as the ultimate and determining cause in precipitating the crisis that led to the military uprising.

19 ABC, 03/13/1936, p. 32.
20 ABC, 04/16/1936, p. 18.
21 ABC, 04/16/1936, p. 29.
22 ABC, 06/13/1936, p. 15.
4.5 Political fraud

On February 17, 1936, ABC reported the “absolute calm” with which the general elections of February 16 had been held:

“No strike, no attacks, no scandals. Everyone voted as they wanted, with absolute freedom. Point out this important detail in honor of the Spaniards, because the same thing that happened in Madrid in all of Spain.”

However, it seemed that the free exercise of democracy did not matter to those who had decided to put an end to the Republic since its proclamation. As soon as the victory of the Popular Front in the elections became known, the monarchist newspaper published an editorial alluding to the unconstitutionality of that government:

“Since yesterday there has been a left-wing government [...] It has come in this irregular way, without having yet legitimized its title, due to the irrevocable resignation of the Portela Government.”

In addition to referring to the political fraud by which the Popular Front would have come to power, and which would justify a coup against that “unconstitutional” government, with that news the ABC published false information since the new government was not spotty.

It is often said that, compared to 47.2% of the Popular Front, the right obtained 45.7% of the votes, with the intention of showing a situation close to a technical tie or the injustice of the electoral system [18]. But this only occurs if the votes of all the coalitions in which the CEDA was present are added up, thus equating its centrist allies, the radicals, or the Lliga with its monarchist and authoritarian allies and uniting all those votes in a coalition. That it did not exist because there was no counterrevolutionary front that appeared in all of Spain with a pact and a government program, for which those data would be justified.

Although reality shows that without the support of the center-right or moderate liberal Republican parties, the anti-republican right-wing alone won only 15 constituencies, the subsequent discourse of the conservative leaders, amplified by the press, was based on the fallacy that the Popular Front did not democratically win the elections, but they were rigged. Currently, this idea has been repeated by authors, such as Fernando del Rey and Gonzalo Álvarez Chillida [19], who review the course of the Republic from the opposition of “representative democracies” versus “anti-democratic ideocracies.” Also, the work of Manuel Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa García [20] it is intended to be the definitive demonstration of a “ribbling” that would destroy the myth of the clean and incontestable victory of the left in 1936. These authors speak of the fact that “more than 10% of the total number of seats in the new courts, more than 50, was not the result of an electoral competition in freedom.”

However, they do not provide a figure of how many seats the Popular Front should have kept from the absolute majority if the alleged electoral fraud had not occurred.

To clarify the total data of the electoral victory and refute the arguments of these historians, González Calleja and Sánchez Pérez [21] conclude that, in the worst case, the Popular Front would have obtained 243 deputies —six above the absolute majority— and the opposition 230 seats. In other words, accepting the assumption that “the Popular Front did not even win the minorities in Cuenca, lost in Granada, La Coruña, Cáceres, Tenerife, two deputies in Valencia province, another in Málaga, another in Lugo, tied in Castellón, and would not get anything in Álava and Guipúzcoa” [21]. Therefore, assuming that all the doubtful or adjusted cases were unfavorable to him.

23 ABC, 02/17/1936, p. 13.
24 ABC, 02/20/1936, p. 17.
...and that the minutes commission had not challenged any act in favor of the Popular Front, the latter would have obtained, even so, an absolute majority. However, these same authors affirm that this does not mean that there was no corruption, abuses by the authorities, political clientelism, and rural caciquism in the electoral trajectory of the Second Republic.

Following the line of disinformation that it had adopted especially during the spring of 1936; the ABC published the following false information:

“The most important point of the embassy is the one referring to the situation of violence in the Courts. We are not referring to the material order, to the incidents and clashes typical of the condition and style of a part of the majority. [...] It is about another type of violence: the arbitrary spirit and the abuse of power by the majority openly willing to impose the number against reason and the law, and to capriciously grant or deny the proclamation of the deputies according to their ideas and their affiliations. It is about snatching clean and indisputable acts from the right, such as those of Salamanca and Orense, and revalidating for the left those that are scandalously dirty, such as those of Coruña, Cáceres and Pontevedra. It is intended that Messrs. Gil Robles and Calvo Sotelo not be deputies.”

The reality, however, was far from being an electoral fraud strategy to gain power. After the elections, there was a series of individual challenges that changed the order of the elected deputies in some provinces due to the annulment of tables and sections or the non-compliance by a candidate with the requirements to be elected. The most serious examples of irregularities took place in Salamanca, Cáceres, Cuenca, and Granada. In fact, these last two had to be partially and totally annulled, respectively, due to coercion, cacique violence during the campaign, and electoral fraud with suspicious final counts in favor of the right. In short, of the thirteen challenges, six benefited the Popular Front, a figure that does not seem decisive to change the landscape of the chamber.

As a result of these investigations that have studied the electoral irregularities of February 1936, it is known that there was no fraud, but that this argument, repeated by right-wing leaders and magnified in conservative newspapers such as ABC, is one more element of the black legend of the spring of 1936.

4.6 Unconstitutionality of the republic

With the continuous allusion to the political fraud of the Popular Front and the political use of fear by arguing the escalation of violence, the right-wing tried to make the republican government unconstitutional to incite the army and pressure groups to mobilize against it. They had the perfect argument: it was illegitimate.

In this context, the right-wing parties—some of whose formations were close to interwar fascism,—which had pressed from the beginning to end the Second Republic, became in the eyes of public opinion the defenders of Republican law. However, they did not hesitate to threaten the government with the adoption of “a definitive resolution” if their will was not respected. With the discussion about the acts, the monarchist minorities, and the CEDA decided, as part of their political strategy, to withdraw from Congress to strengthen the argument of the invalidity and unconstitutionality of the cortes and, therefore, of the government. The ABC published it this way in a news item: “We are facing a parliament that, before being

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25 ABC, 03/25/1936, p. fifteen.
26 ABC, 03/24/1936, p. 15.
Fake News against the Spanish Second Republic: The ABC as a Collaborator and Agitator...
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constituted, has lost its virtuality. It is a parliament without opposition, as the major-
ity has wanted.27

After the events that occurred on April 14, 1936, during the commemorative
parade of the fifth anniversary of the Republic, the government sent a law that
deprived retired soldiers of passive rights who supported illegal leagues, associa-
tions, organizations, or participated in disturbing acts of public order. In addition,
he ordered the dissolution of all fascist leagues, which were declared illegal. The
conservative forces did not take long to show themselves against the approval of the
law. Specifically, Calvo Sotelo denounced in Congress the anti-democratic attitude of
the government regarding the new norm:

“The law prohibits campaigning against the republican regime […] This law is dictato-
rial, even if it comes out of Parliament. With it, the executive branch has the same powers
that a dictatorship could assume.”28

As the months passed and the plan for the coup d’état was consolidated, the con-
servative politicians made greater allusions in their speeches to the unconstitutional
nature of the regime. The ABC published these speeches in full, riddled with manipu-
lated or directly false information. However, it was not only right-wing leaders who
repeated the fallacy that the republican government was not democratic. This header
published daily opinion articles written by different intellectuals of the time where, in
one way or another, they repeated the conservative ideology of the time. Thus, Lázaro
Fabre wrote in the monarchist newspaper:

“The [Popular Anti-Fascist] Front is not a sincere alliance, but use of democracy and
republican governments as access and disguise, to destroy as soon as they have rendered
their service. […] The Governments of the Popular Front are no longer parliamentary and
liberal democracy; they are, in fact, a pre-Bolshevist dictatorship.”29

Among the ABC publications, there are also editorials with which the header, in
tune with its own ideology, intended, by disseminating false or exaggerated infor-
mation, to point out the inability of the Republic to solve public disorder and other
problems and, thus, bring about a regime change:

“Parliament shows signs of exhaustion, of impotence […] There is a majority that […]
only remains compact to insult and attack the adversary. When it is not a question of tear-
ing down, but of building, the discrepancies and antagonisms between the various groups
of the Popular Front are exposed.”30

4.7 Rebellion against the government

Of the different tactics and arguments that were used to end the Republic men-
tioned above, the promotion of a coup is the most direct. In an editorial on February
21, the header shared the hope that the Popular Front would not last long in govern-
ment, encouraging “good Spaniards” to action:

“Spain is not such a weak body that it cannot resist the attacks of a political group
without responding vigorously to its offensive […] The episode now will also save Spain. It
is not necessary for it more than one thing: that the good Spaniards want it to be like this.”31

27 ABC, 04/01/1936, p. 15.
28 ABC, 04/19/1936, p. 44.
29 ABC, 06/14/1936, p. 31.
30 ABC, 06/19/1936, p. 19.
31 ABC, 02/21/1936, p. 23.
As the spring of 1936 progressed and the presence of news about the social and political instability of the moment increased, so did the virulence of the attacks on the Republic. On April 9, ABC criticized in an editorial the “ups and downs” that the republican political regime essentially entailed and, following its monarchical and conservative ideology, called for “a nation that is organized based on continuity and stability as the substance of the government regime. As far as we know, Monarchy, and nothing else, is called that figure.”

According to González Calleja [9], the July coup was not only the result of the vulnerability of the republican regime or the organizational capacity of the right but also the fruit of the cultural construction of the counterrevolution. Specifically, in March 1936, the ABC published an opinion article in which the writer Ramiro de Maeztu, with a conservative ideology, commented: “I have been convinced for some time that all this period of confusion and hesitation will end up generating an overwhelming counterrevolutionary movement, from which the salvation of Spain must come.”

Here we see how the rhetorical rupture of normality through the dissemination of a catastrophic discourse turns the rebellion against the democratic government into a necessary and urgent task.

In short, the monarchists proclaimed themselves the most effective and radical group to save Spain from falling into a revolution, thanks to Calvo Sotelo, Goicoechea — the one in charge of the negotiations with fascist Italy — and Sáinz Rodríguez in a joint civic-military plot [10]. Along these lines, the head of Renovación Española did not hide his support for those who wanted to put an end to the Republic:

“There is no need to say that we monarchists would collaborate with a common design together with those who do not have the same conviction; but harbor ideas similar to ours regarding a transformation of the State in a corporate, hierarchical, Catholic, and national sense.”

Similarly, in a parliamentary debate published in full on ABC, Calvo Sotelo alluded to the “military duty, which consists of serving loyally when commanded legally and in service of the Homeland, and reacting furiously when commanded illegally and in detriment of the country,” and barely a month before the Francoist coup d’état, the leader of the National Bloc promoted a military uprising in the Cortes: “I think that the military man who, at the forefront of his destiny, would not be willing to rise up in favor of Spain would also be crazy and against anarchy, should it occur.”

5. Conclusions

The ABC, instead of informing, explaining the meaning of events, educating its readers — the three classic functions of the media described by Lasswell as “surveillance,” “correlation” or “transmission of cultural heritage” [22] — or serve as entertainment — the fourth function added by Lazarsfeld and Merton [23] — used persuasion and manipulation as communication techniques with the aim of influencing public opinion, building myths and, ultimately modifying behavior.

32 ABC, 04/09/1936, p. 31.
33 ABC, 03/26/1936, p. 3–4.
34 ABC, 05/16/1936, p. 19.
35 ABC, 05/20/1936, p. 26–27.
After classifying the results into different categories, it is verified that the monarchist newspaper carried out a defamation campaign, published false or unverified information, and omitted relevant information to mobilize public opinion and thus justify a coup d’état that was already planned by the monarchists since the beginning of the Republic. Also, the investigation confirms the initial hypothesis that the ABC served as an amplifier of the catastrophic speeches repeated by political bosses and conservative intellectuals even though there was no real threat of a communist revolution, nor was their unstoppable violence as a direct cause of the lack of authority of the Popular Front government.

Behind the different strategies used by the ABC during the spring of 1936 and analyzed in this work, the political use of fear to destabilize the Republic is found as a common denominator. According to González Calleja [8], “fear can mobilize when the source and potential of the threat is known, and it is thought that it can be eliminated through the use of preventive violence.” Thus, the agitation of fear in the face of the threat was a political resource that conservative media, such as ABC used to accelerate events.

As has been seen, the monarchist and fascist right-wings always identified republican democracy with communist revolution and foreign invasion. Therefore, through the demonization of the opponent and the construction of the “myth of the communist revolution”, the monarchist newspaper instilled fear and fueled hatred toward those who voted for the leftist candidates. This, in turn, accelerated a process of polarization in society and gave rise to a dynamic of preventive violence by some and a defensive response by others. The ABC promoted the exaltation of violence through the publication of deliberately manipulated figures and parliamentary debates that alluded to the lack of public order. The fear of revolution and irrepressible violence, together with the continuous accusations of political fraud in the February elections—which fed the fallacy of the unconstitutionality of the Republic—it was intended to highlight the inability of the government to maintain order and peace in Spain. Thus, the conservative leaders made constant appeals to the need to solve political problems through force and the use of authority, encouraging the achievement of the coup. With the outbreak of the civil war, “the fear of ideological adversaries gave way to terror against political enemies, aimed at their physical elimination.” Conservative leaders made constant appeals to the need to solve political problems through force and the use of authority, encouraging the achievement of the coup. With the outbreak of the civil war, “the fear of ideological adversaries gave way to terror against political enemies, aimed at their physical elimination.” Conservative leaders made constant appeals to the need to solve political problems through force and the use of authority, encouraging the achievement of the coup. With the outbreak of the civil war, “the fear of ideological adversaries gave way to terror against political enemies, aimed at their physical elimination” [8].

Ultimately, the goal of ABC, in line with the conservative parties and forming part of the political, military, and media framework that ended up overthrowing the republican regime, was to present the rebellion against the government and, therefore, the civil war as an inevitable trigger for the political violence suffered during the Republic. However, the violence of the spring of 1936 should not be interpreted as the direct cause of the civil war, but rather as the immediate manifestation of a state of social unrest and political struggle that is connected to the dynamics of confrontation between reactionary, reformist projects and revolutionary, typical of the interwar period throughout Europe. In this context, the press did not remain on the sidelines, but rather played a fundamental role in each of these political projects, agitating public opinion to opt for one.
Thanks

To my grandfather Carmelo, because when he was young earnt a living selling the newspapers that I have now studied. Thanks for being the best example to follow.
To my parents, for their effort, trust, and love. My achievements are yours.
To my sister, for her company and her infinite laughter.

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