



CORONAVIRUS:

HOW DISINFORMATION
DURING THE PANDEMIC HAS
TARGETED AND
STIGMATIZED MIGRANTS IN
SPAIN

"Please, don't let anyone go to Yaki's shop, absolutely no one.

Avoid as much as possible going to shops run by Chinese people," said an audio that was disseminated at the end of February 2020, during the beginning of the Pandemic of COVID-19 in Spain. In this voice note, broadcast in the Murcian locality of Totana (32,529 inhabitants, 2020), a man claimed that Yaki's wife, a Chinese food store trader, had COVID-19. In addition, he claimed that both Yaki and his wife were from Wuhan, a city in which SARS-CoV-2 originated, according [to the World Health Organization](#) (WHO). This hoax spread in a matter of hours through the municipality of Totana and even reached the merchant himself.

Given this situation, Yaki published a clarification on his social media stating that his wife was not infected. He also pointed out that his family had not travelled to that Chinese locality, contrary to what was claimed



This has hurt my son, me, my family and my business

Yaki, a Chinese trader affected by a hoax

in the audio message, but that his wife had visited a city located 1,000 kilometres away from it and that "by precaution" had rented a house on the outskirts of Totana to be under quarantine for one month.

mujer. Quiero desmentir esta información que está haciendo daño a mi familia y mi negocio.

Mi mujer ha llegado hoy de China, pero no de Wuhan, como dice el señor del audio. Mi pueblo está a 1000 kilómetros de Wuhan, es decir, como Andalucía de Barcelona. Mi mujer no está infectada, pero por precaución para mis propios hijos y los habitantes de Totana, he alquilado una casa de campo fuera de Totana para que pase un mes aislada.

Ella ha venido en el avión con mascarilla y guantes también por precaución. Antes de su llegada he consultado con Sanidad y me habían dicho que no hacía falta hacer cuarentena. Pero yo he querido tomar esta precaución. Si dentro de un mes ella no ha presentado ningún síntoma volverá a casa con sus hijos y conmigo.

Quiero que estéis tranquilos, porque yo estoy tomando estas precauciones por mis propios hijos, por mí y por los demás habitantes de Totana. Y si ella presentase algún síntoma se llamaría al 112 para que

Clarification by Yaki on his social media.



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A few hours after the broadcast, on February 28th 2020, the author of this audio was identified: A neighbour of the town [that appeared before the local media alongside Yaki](#) to explain that it was a hoax.

The author pointed out that it was an audio that he had sent to a trusted person without knowing "the impact that it could have" and that this person had forwarded this voice note, thus beginning the chain of viralization.

In these statements he asked for forgiveness from Yaki and all Chinese shops in Totana. "it was fake news and I did not want to harm anyone at all," he said.

"He has hurt my son, me, my family, and my business. We work well, we do everything right, we are healthy, we are all right," Yaki claimed.

This was one of the first hoaxes that circulated in Spain linking Chinese immigrants to the local transmission of COVID-19, but it was not the only one.



[Watch the video here](#)

Yue Fu, who at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was working as an intercultural mediator in Madrid's Usera neighbourhood, told Maldita: "Racist people have used the coronavirus to attack Chinese people". He claims that Chinese people or descendants of Chinese migrant families who lived in Spain or were Spanish were suffering attacks that placed them as virus-infectors: "The Chinese people in Spain are equally likely to have coronavirus as any other Spaniard."

In addition, some institutions, such as [the local Valencia Police](#) through their Twitter account or the Chinese Embassy in Spain, condemned the discrimination suffered by the Chinese community by linking them to COVID-19. "Some of our children in schools have been called 'coronavirus', declared the embassy's economic representative during a press conference.



PolicialLocalValència @policiallocalvlc · 5 feb. 2020

Front els prejudicis i la discriminació contra la comunitat asiàtica 🇪🇸:

Informació veraç.

#NoSoyUnVirus

#coronavirus 🙏

Ahir celebrarem la XV sessió formativa de #TAHCLE contra els delictes d'odi



Tweet published by the Local Police of Valencia.

As Eva Matarín, sociologist and professor at the Rey Juan Carlos University, explained to Maldita.es, the link established through disinformation between Chinese people and COVID-19 in Spain was caused by fear.

"As the coronavirus came out of China, a simple speech was chosen," and she added that it was also linked to economic uncertainty and fear of losing jobs. She also pointed out that it was a change in the anti-immigration speech: "Before COVID-19, immigration news were not related to the Chinese population."

Newly arrived immigrants targeted by misinformation about COVID-19

The Chinese community has not been the only migrant group to be misinformed about with false positive alerts. “Girls, I am saying it for your safety, as I understand it, by people close to me and who are related to the political world, there is a meeting to see whether or not they confine the island of Fuerteventura because of the 33 immigrants who tested positive for COVID-19, 9 of them have escaped from the confinement zone and are located somewhere between Puerto and Corralejo.”

This message also circulated in audio format through WhatsApp, in this case in the Fuerteventura Island (Canary Islands), at the end of June 2020.

The voice note stated that these supposedly escaped and positive people were in “the Lidl area”, where the so-called [Nave del Queso](#) is located, where the authorities isolated immigrants who arrived to the Majorera coasts in June.

Given the diffusion of the hoax, The Cabildo of Fuerteventura [denied it on Facebook](#), assuring that this type of disinformation “generates a serious damage to the tranquillity of the inhabitants” of the island and that “the spread of these lies seriously damages the image of Fuerteventura and damages its economic and social recovery”. The Government Delegation in the Canary Islands also told Maldita.es that it was a hoax.

As in the Totana case, the author of this audio was identified, according to the Cabildo, and the case was “handed to the Prosecutor’s Office for the possible commission of various crimes, hate and social alarm”, according to the Government Delegation in the Canary Islands.

In addition, the Government Delegation assured that a trader from Puerto del Rosario was also identified as the one who disseminated another version of the hoax, stating that a deputy inspector of the Police had informed him of the escape of migrants.

“We got that hoax. We have been in the Nave del Queso and it was a bunker: no one could get in or out.



[Listen to the audio here](#)

It was permanently guarded by Police," María Greco affirmed, migration office from the organization Entre Mares, a foundation of Fuerteventura that works to improve coexistence on the island.

According to Greco, June was the key month for disinformation linking irregular immigration with coronavirus. She claims that the hoaxes about immigrant people are based on "fear of one another," and points out "if we add it to the fear produced by COVID-19, it is the perfect storm."

"Immigrants have been stigmatized with COVID," says a worker from the Refugee Care Centre (CAR) in Vallecas, Madrid. This center is temporarily home to people seeking asylum in Spain, a situation that is said to have been particularly complicated during the pandemic.

During the first few months of confinement, residents of this centre were to stay in their rooms all day without being able to use corridors or common areas; they could only go out in turns to the dining room for the three daily meals or to the toilets.

“

Hoaxes about immigrant people are based on “fear of the one another, and if we join it to the fear produced by COVID-19, it is the perfect storm”

María Greco, Entre Mares

Sometimes they stay in 8 square meter rooms with their families and sometimes, when they arrive alone in Spain, they share a bedroom with two other unknown people, a situation that generated "quite tension" among residents, according to the workers.

"If the coronavirus had been originated by an immigrant, we would have been expelled," says Serigne Mbaye, Senegalese immigrant and street seller (*mantero*). He explains that the pandemic and confinement during the first state of alert were very complicated situations for immigrants in an irregular situation and claims that they have suffered twice for not being able to work because of their administrative situation.

"We depend on what we earn every day."

False “massive regulations” supposedly caused by the pandemic

According to Mbaye, people like him in the Mantero Trade Union in Madrid have not been so much subjected to hoaxes and stigmatization because there were no cases of infections among its members and, he points out, because they belong to the “neighbourhood of Lavapiés that is very mestizo”.

However, they have identified some of the following hoaxes on immigrants during the pandemic: “there were many rumours of immigrants regularization, It was said that the Government would regularize all immigrants”.

He explains that because of COVID-19, during the first months of confinement a hoax returned, stating that the current Government had adopted a special procedure for the regularization of immigrants, a content based on publications from 2005, 2006 and 2018.

But it is not the only hoax about regularizations that has been spread during the pandemic.

“

I am in WhatsApp groups from Senegal, and there are hoaxes they circulate here that reach there

Serigne Mbaye, Senegalese immigrant

An audio was disseminated stating that the Government had a treaty “with the King of Morocco” to regularize the immigrants who were coming to Spain.

“All these people are going to be regularized and will become future voters for them to stay in power,” the audio said.

As Mbaye notes, these hoaxes increase the rejection toward immigrants and confuse immigrants residing in Spain:

“the hoaxes attack from both sides.” “I am in WhatsApp groups in Senegal and there are hoaxes circulating here that reach there,” he says and states that he had to deny this hoax so that families did not pressure immigrants in Spain.

77% of the news about immigrants during the first months of pandemic were negative

[The report 'Immigration and COVID-19: Analysis of television news programmes during the pandemic'](#) carried out by the sociologist Eva Matarín, points out that between January 5, 2020 and September 6, 2020 “the news considered negative for the immigrant collective were the most numerous (77.4%).”

The author also states in this report that “the discursive treatment of television news broadcasts sets off from the differentiation between the local and immigrant population”.

In addition, and according to Matarín's statement to

Maldita.es, “When the talk was about immigration and COVID, the discussion was not so about much people who had gotten sick, but about infected people who could infect others,” and adds that “whenever there was a reference to refugee centres, it was all about infections.”

Care work and COVID-19: Exposure, essential work and stigmatization

“There has been stigmatization of care workers, mostly women,” says one of the Refugee Care Center workers who has spoken to Maldita.es. Some relatives of people cared for by immigrants during the pandemic, he explains, accused them as a possible source of contagion. Marianela, Colombian, asylum seeker in Spain (we will only give her first name for protection), is one of the people who worked in the months of confinement caring for the elderly.

She reportedly went to work in April, in full confinement. This was shortly after recovering from coronavirus,



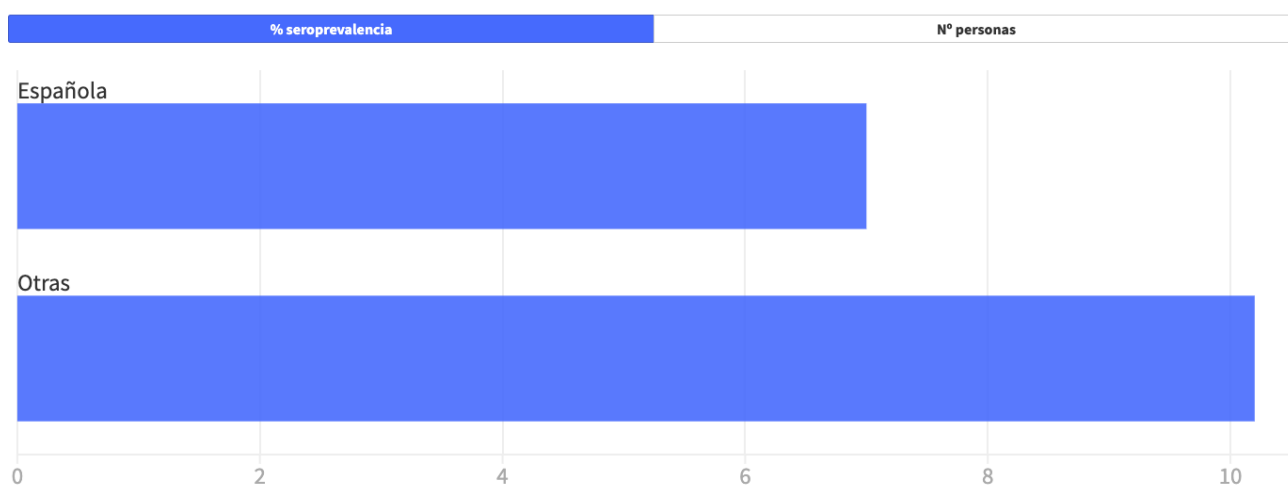
Migrants, especially those of Latin origin, have jobs that involve caring for other people, so they have been very exposed

Pedro Gullón, epidemiologist

which caused her no after-effects, contrary to her husband, who was admitted to the ICU for 7 months and that to this day has difficulty breathing.

She says that in the house where she worked, the woman she cared for did not let her use the items of common use and that she had to buy her own masks.

Porcentaje de seroprevalencia por nacionalidad



Fuente: Estudio ENE-COVID. Cuarta ronda • Instituto de Salud Carlos III

Epidemiologist Pedro Gullón believes that “very rarely data are disaggregated by country of birth and when it has been done it has been with the intention to blame people.” It notes that contagion data in Madrid have been used to blame “the immigrants to be the great transmitters because of their lifestyle”.

As [the latest seroprevalence report](#) showing the fourth round of the study indicates, the number of foreign people who had passed COVID-19 was higher (10.2%) than that of Spanish people (7%).

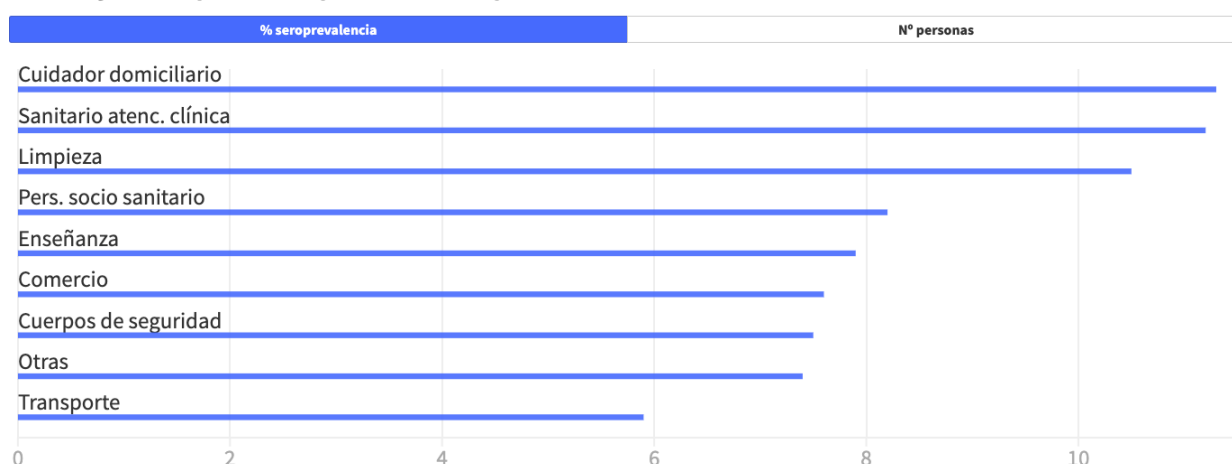
This is due, as Gullón explains, “to a socio-economic bias in the spread of COVID-19.” “Migrants, especially those of Latin origin, often have jobs that involve caring for other people, so they have been very exposed”,

he explains. The profile of this person who was exposed to a higher risk during the first wave of COVID-19 “is a woman, of Latin origin, with a low salary and working irregularly, without being able to go on a leave.”

As [the latest seroprevalence report](#) reflecting the fourth round of the study shows, people working as home carers were the sector with the highest positive rate (11.3%) followed by health care providers (11.2%).

“The axis that determined who was exposed or not during the first wave was related to whom had an essential job or not,” Gullón says. Marianela worked throughout the first wave and the second wave, until October, when she was fired for having to complete a week of quarantine as a mandatory measure to access the CAR.

Porcentaje de seroprevalencia por sector de ocupación



Fuente: Estudio ENE-COVID. Cuarta ronda • Instituto de Salud Carlos III

Nayeiri, a 33-year-old Venezuelan asylum seeker, did not work during the first wave. She arrived in Spain at the end of December 2019 and she did not have time to get the work permit. She claims that she has not received any direct pointing with respect to COVID-19, but she has received other accusations linked to the economic situation caused by the pandemic: "that we come to steal jobs or that the Government gives us all the COVID-19- related subsidies".

"I'd rather use the subway in silence, we never know which person is least tolerant to immigrants." For some months, since she obtained the work permit, Nayeiri has been working answering citizens' questions about COVID-19 through the [telephone of the Madrid Community Health Council](#).

Eva Matarín states that "when we talk about immigration [in the media], we don't talk about the entrepreneur and working immigrant person"

Both Maria Greco (Entre Mares), the workers of the CAR and Matarín agree on the media's responsibility for the stigmatization of immigrants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The media have not valued the importance of immigration during the pandemic and in the essential sectors," says Matarín. Greco also adds the lack of organization by the authorities and the socio-economic situation as an aggravating factor to this stigmatization and the rejection towards immigrants.

"We must start talking about migrants with their own name and not as a homogeneous group," says Matarín as a solution to this stigmatization.

She also claims that the media must show greater diversity in the immigration discourse and not give such importance to anti-immigration speeches.

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