

# The handling of political disinformation in the TV series *Yes, Minister* (BBC, 1980-1984) and its impact on YouTube

Antonio M. Bañón Hernández

Universidad de Almería. CySOC

amhernan@ual.es



Submission date: March 2021

Accepted date: May 2021

Published in: June 2021

**Recommended citation:** BAÑÓN HERNÁNDEZ, A. M. (2021). “The handling of political disinformation in the TV series *Yes, Minister* (BBC, 1980-1984) and its impact on YouTube”. *Anàlisi: Quaderns de Comunicació i Cultura*, 64, 9-25. DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/analisi.3424>>

## Abstract

*Yes, Minister* is a series that has been part of the collective imagination of citizens in many English-speaking countries since the 1980s, in which disinformation is frequently used or mentioned by its main characters. Its enormous impact has been long-lasting, and in recent years it has gained special prominence on YouTube. The objectives of this paper are the following: a) to quantify the presence of fragments of the series *Yes, Minister* on YouTube, including their titles, the episodes to which they belong, their duration and the number of views and comments; and b) to analyse the processes, strategies and mechanisms of disinformation in these fragments. To this end, we first described the fragments with more than 200,000 views, of which there were forty. After this analysis, we chose the videos with more than 400,000 views and, in those, analysed the processes, strategies and mechanisms of disinformation. There were twenty-two such documents and they contained as many as 125 samples of disinformation: mostly associated with the process of concealment, followed by blurring and, thirdly, invention. We went on to check for the presence of the nine strategies linked to these processes (abolition, segmentation, deviation, saturation, alteration, divergence, impersonation, incorporation and transformation). Abolition and alteration predominated. Finally, we described the main mechanisms by which these strategies materialised, which included contradiction, confusion, ambiguity, exaggeration, interruption, separation and assignment. We conclude that the publication of the series fragments on the networks indicates public interest in political disinformation. Their use in formal educational contexts, based on analyses such as the one in this paper, is a valuable approach for dealing with discursive processes and mechanisms of disinformation in different areas of knowledge.

**Keywords:** political disinformation; disinformation strategies; TV series; *Yes, Minister*; YouTube

**Resum.** *El tractament de la desinformació política a la sèrie de televisió Yes, Minister (BBC, 1980-1984) i el seu impacte a YouTube*

*Yes, Minister* és una sèrie que forma part, des de la dècada dels vuitanta del segle passat, de l'imaginari col·lectiu dels ciutadans de nombrosos països de parla anglesa. La desinformació hi és freqüentment usada o esmentada pels seus personatges principals. El gran impacte d'aquesta sèrie s'ha mantingut al llarg del temps i en els últims anys ha cobrat un protagonisme especial a YouTube. Els objectius del present treball són els següents: *a)* quantificar la presència de fragments de la sèrie *Yes, Minister* a Youtube, incloent-hi el títol, el capítol al qual pertany, la durada i el nombre de reproduccions i de comentaris; i *b)* analitzar els processos, les estratègies i els mecanismes de desinformació en aquests fragments. Hem descrit els fragments de capítols inclosos en aquesta xarxa social que tinguessin més de 200.000 reproduccions. Després d'aquesta anàlisi, hem seleccionat els vídeos que superessin les 400.000 reproduccions i hi hem analitzat els processos, les estratègies i els mecanismes de desinformació. Hi ha vint-i-dos documents d'aquest tipus i incorporen fins a 125 mostres de desinformació associades, majoritàriament, al procés d'ocultació, seguit de la difuminació i, en tercer lloc, la invenció. A continuació, hem comprovat la presència de les nou estratègies vinculades a aquests processos (supressió, segmentació, desviació, saturació, alteració, desarranjament, suplantació, incorporació i transformació). Hi predominen la supressió i l'alteració. Finalment, hem descrit els principals mecanismes en què s'han materialitzat aquestes estratègies. Destaquen els següents: contradicció, confusió, ambigüitat, exageració, interrupció, escissió i cessió. L'exposició a les xarxes de fragments de la sèrie indica un interès social per la desinformació política. El seu ús en contextos educatius formals, a partir d'anàlisis com la inclosa en aquest treball, és una valuosa opció per tractar processos i mecanismes discursius de desinformació en diferents àrees de coneixement.

**Paraules clau:** desinformació política; estratègies de desinformació; sèries de televisió; *Yes, Minister*; YouTube

**Resumen.** *El tratamiento de la desinformación política en la serie de televisión Yes, Minister (BBC, 1980-1984) y su impacto en YouTube*

*Yes, Minister* es una serie que forma parte, desde la década de los ochenta del siglo pasado, del imaginario colectivo de los ciudadanos de numerosos países de habla inglesa. En ella, la desinformación es frecuentemente usada o mencionada por sus principales personajes. Su enorme impacto se ha mantenido a lo largo del tiempo y en los últimos años ha cobrado un protagonismo especial en YouTube. Los objetivos del presente trabajo son los siguientes: *a)* cuantificar la presencia de fragmentos de la serie *Yes, Minister* en Youtube, incluyendo el título, el capítulo al que pertenece, la duración y el número de reproducciones y de comentarios; y *b)* analizar los procesos, las estrategias y los mecanismos de desinformación en esos fragmentos. Hemos descrito los fragmentos de capítulos incluidos en esta red social que tuvieran más de 200.000 reproducciones. Tras ese análisis, hemos seleccionado los vídeos que superasen las 400.000 reproducciones y, en ellos, hemos analizado los procesos, las estrategias y los mecanismos de desinformación. Hay veintidós documentos de este tipo e incorporan hasta 125 muestras de desinformación asociadas, en su mayoría, al proceso de ocultación, seguido de la difuminación y, en tercer lugar, la invención. A continuación, hemos comprobado la presencia de las nueve estrategias vinculadas a esos procesos (supresión, segmentación, desviación, saturación, alteración, desacomodo, suplantación, incorporación y transformación). Predominan la supresión y la alteración. Finalmente, hemos descrito los principales mecanismos en los que se han

materializado esas estrategias. Destacan los siguientes: contradicción, confusión, ambigüedad, exageración, interrupción, escisión y cesión. La exposición en las redes de fragmentos de la serie indica un interés social por la desinformación política. Su uso en contextos educativos formales, a partir de análisis como el incluido en este trabajo, es una valiosa opción para tratar procesos y mecanismos discursivos de desinformación en distintas áreas de conocimiento.

**Palabras clave:** desinformación política; estrategias de desinformación; series de televisión; *Yes, Minister*; YouTube

---

## 1. Theoretical framework

*Disinformation* is the spreading of misleading or false information that leads to personal or collective gain if it is believed to be complete and true by others. If the message received is believed, the recipients may then become purveyors of the same disinformation. This is *how disinformation is propagated*. Deconstructing disinformation consists of decrying this attempt at manipulation and putting forward truthful and not just credible information alternatives. Education is the main deconstructive tool and, in this regard, the value of *media literacy* (literacy in and through the media) must of course be mentioned (Pérez Tornero, Tayie, Tejedor and Pulido, 2018; Aguaded and Romero, 2015). There are three primary *areas* of disinformation. The first is related to the *characteristics of the actors* (identity and responsibility, among others) (Bañón, 2010). The second is associated with the *content of the message* and is the most obvious. The third and final one is related to *contextual factors* (which must be spatio-temporal).

The disinformant is the actant or agent who devises the disinformation and the disformer is the actor who appears as the person or representative of a group who puts this disinformation into the public domain. The addressees will be the potentially disinformed. The hierarchical relationship between the disinforming and disinformed actors is undoubtedly relevant in the political sphere. As such, we can speak of vertical and lateral disinformation; and, as part of the former, ascending or descending. Citizens trying to understand what policy-makers are doing are unlikely to identify the more implicit messages of disinformation. Indeed, there are many political interactions that remain 'out of the public eye' (Crowder, 2010: 72). Feeling disinformed does not mean having been intentionally led to that state by another interlocutor. Moreover, there are cases where, out of convenience or fear, one prefers to be disinformed or even appears to believe the disinformation.

We can speak of three major *processes* of disinformation, first identified decades ago (e.g., Durandín, 1995). The first is *concealment*. Information is hidden so that others do not learn about a reality which, whether immediately or not, the concealer thinks may be harmful, to a greater or lesser degree, to themselves or their own people. The main concealment *strategies* are the following: a) the *removal* of actors, content or contextual factors; b) the *segmentation* of these same elements; and c) the *deviation* of responsibilities or iden-

tities of actors, or of content and spatio-temporal indicators. These strategies also allow us to identify new subtypes of actors, agents or actants that disinform: removers, segmenters and deviators.

The second basic process of disinformation is *blurring*. Information related to the characteristics of the actors, the message or the context reaches its recipient in its entirety, but with associated strategies that make it difficult to identify or interpret. Among these strategies, we consider the following to be the most important: (a) *saturation*, which entails disinformation through the accumulation of actors, information overload or excessive diversification of contextual references; (b) *altering* the proper pace of information, for example by bringing forward or postponing the presence or absence of actors, the presentation of content, or the spaces and times in which an interaction takes place; and (c) *divergence* which consists of the use of a paraphrastic or inaccessible communicative style, useful for blurring responsibilities or identities, content or the spatio-temporal framework itself. Actants, agents and actors can be blurring and therefore saturating, altering or diverging.

The third process is *invention*. In terms of the strategies associated with invention, we believe, based on Riker (1986: 34), Sorlin (2016: 109) and De Santiago-Guervós (2020: 111 and 126-127), that the main ones are a) the *impersonation* of identities and responsibilities, or of contents and spatio-temporal elements; b) the *incorporation* of actors that should not be present, as well as of themes or contextual factors; and c) the *transformation* of characteristics of the actors, the message or the context, falsified in a convincing way. Agents, actants and actors can therefore be impersonators, incorporators or transformers.

Alongside processes and strategies, there needs to be a final relevant discursive level: the verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal *mechanisms* used to express disinformation multimodally. Special attention should be paid to the mechanisms that serve to attenuate or intensify the image of actors, as well as the arguments and their essential parts. This is done by manipulating opinions and evaluations, justifications or demonstrations. Some of these mechanisms will be mentioned and exemplified in section 4.3 of this paper.

Television series help to educate viewers on socially relevant issues (Gil and Gil, 2020). Indeed, they have masterfully captured political contexts of disinformation (*House of Cards*, Andrew Davies and Michael Dobbs, 1990; *The West Wing*, Aaron Sorkin, 1999-2006). They serve as literacy educators on this topic, featuring models and anti-models (del Campo, Puebla and Ivars, 2016: 16-17). However, sometimes humour is also used to express these disinformative strategies in, seemingly, softer tones (*Veep*, Armando Iannucci, 2012-2019). It has been argued that humorous fiction can be a very useful method for examining the behaviour of individuals in political interactions (Considine, 2006: 57) and, in general, for broadening the contexts and intensity of criticism (Condren, 2017).

The literacy benefits of series can nowadays be measured not only by observing the national and international impact of the original broadcast, but

also by looking at their inclusion on video-on-demand platforms such as Netflix, HBO, Amazon Prime, Apple TV or Filmin, as well as their presence on social networks specialising in videos, such as YouTube.

Ruth Wodak has elaborated on the idea of *fictionalising* politics through the media (2009: 19 and 185). This process inevitably leads to manipulative and disinformative communicative behaviour. Television series set in arenas of political management often illustrate these types of behaviour well. Sandrine Sorlin (2016) demonstrated this with *House of Cards*. Staci Beavers, for her part, highlighted the value of using excerpts from the political fiction series *The West Wing* to illustrate certain concepts related to political communication and to stimulate analysis and discussion of relevant issues in the field by students and teachers (2002: 213). We agree with this literacy function, whose impact in less formal settings increases if the fragments appear on social networks such as YouTube, where textual fragmentation is not only unsurprising, but actually forms part of their communicative identity. The chosen fragment has a galvanising force and can act as a vehicle for knowledge transmission. The same is true of our series, *Yes, Minister*. The rebroadcasting of fragments from this 1980s series on YouTube allows us to reflect, accordingly, not only on transmediation (from television to networks, in this case), a basic process in the shaping of socially shared content (Lacalle, 2011; Berrocal, Campos-Domínguez and Redondo, 2014: 66), but also on the transnational and transgenerational character of public debate about politicians. Similarly, it serves to multiply the number of participants (prosumers, one might say), in what Tomás Albaladejo, referring to political discourse in digital environments, calls the ‘extension of polyacrosis’ (2012). Ultimately, it involves a revitalisation of the power of ironic dialogue between characters as a tool of criticism in the face of political disinformation. Such irony fits well with *politainment* on YouTube (Berrocal et al., 2014) and with the literacy value of the analysis of anti-models. However, the following remain unclear: on the one hand, “the level of feedback that online citizen debate generates regarding the political class” (Gil-Ramírez, Gómez-De-Travesedo-Rojas and Almansa-Martínez, 2020: 6), and, on the other, how vigorously civic participation is encouraged as a result of the activity generated by the debate on YouTube. In fact, it is well known that there is still a large difference between the number of video views and the number of comments posted for each fragment (Berrocal et al., 2014: 70).

## 2. *Yes, Minister*

The series was created by Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn. It was recognised not only for its success in terms of viewership, but also for winning several BAFTA awards. It is also a series that is part of Britain’s collective imagination (Bonaut and Grandío, 2009: 4). It was even a favourite of Margaret Thatcher (Borins, 2014: 64), who had only come to power a few months earlier, in 1979, at a time in international politics when the *conservative revo-*

lution (then also led by Reagan in the USA and Köhl in Germany) was taking place. Carmelo Moreno (2012: 172) says that this new climate set the scene for the appearance of a political comedy series on television, with *Yes, Minister* being “the first political comedy series in history” (2012: 169). *Yes, Minister* went far beyond just being a pioneering series combining humour and political criticism: it was the first to use and mention examples of political disinformation to British viewers and therein lies its socio-educational value. Its uses have the power to teach literacy through exposure to disinformative interactions, while its mentions do so through the direct (and often ironic) reflection of the characters themselves, unsurprising since it was broadcast in more than 85 countries (Valbuena, 2010: 125). The title sequence of the series included three caricatures of the three main characters by the cartoonist Gerald Scarfe, with their very elongated noses. Disinformation is therefore being hinted at from the outset.

Among the series’ main qualities, viewers have highlighted both its “visual verisimilitude” and its “authenticity” regarding the discourse of the leading characters (Crowder, 2010). That may well be because it fits well with the mental constructs that these viewers already had and still have about political-administrative activity (Borins, 2014: 63), or because they are persuaded that what is happening resonates well with what could actually be happening. It was revealed early on, by the creators of the series themselves, that there were advisors who had previously been carrying out political tasks around Westminster and Whitehall (Kamm, 2015: 115), which increased the credibility of the dialogue and the plots, regardless of the hyperbole that any comedy series may employ (Granville, 2009: 316).

The series is based on intelligent dialogue and brilliant performances by Paul Eddington (as Minister Jim Hacker), Nigel Hawthorne (as Sir Humphrey Appleby, the Permanent Secretary) and Derek Fowlds (as Bernard Woolley, Hacker’s Private Secretary). While Appleby is the master of disinformation, Hacker and Woolley are the keen apprentices. All three, however, have extensive experience in political management and public administration. The plotlines on which the episodes were based were simple. Most of them followed one of three scenarios: a) the minister decides on a measure, the secretary tries to dissuade him by pointing out its catastrophic consequences and, in the end, the minister gives in; b) the minister is in a difficult situation and Humphrey is at first unwilling to intervene, but Hacker finds a way to win his permanent secretary over; and c) the minister and Humphrey work together to try to solve a problem that may affect them both (Botti, 1996: 13-14).

The researchers who have mentioned the series, from a wide range of disciplines, have not been sparing in their assessments of the characters, often using language that reveals the somewhat disinformative profile with which the latter are perceived (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Language used by researchers to describe the characters

James Hacker	<p>"timidity and unwillingness to voice politically unpopular opinions" (Granville, 2009: 325)</p> <p>"hapless but ambitious minister" and "beleaguered" (Borins, 2014: 63)</p> <p>"a malleable, spineless minister" (Evans, 2013: 58)</p> <p>"hapless government minister" and "the pawn of [...] Sir Humphrey Appleby" (Smith, 2009: 209)</p> <p>"relativement honnête, mais benêt, auto-satisfait, incompétent, indécis, toujours en quête de publicité personnelle" (Botti, 1996: 15)</p>
Humphrey Appelby	<p>"simultaneously wily, obscure and over-clever, but never quite dishonest" (Granville, 2009: 324)</p> <p>"cynical, self-serving, manipulative civil servant" (Wall, 2008)</p> <p>"smoothly manipulative high-level", "imperturbable" (Borins, 2014: 63 and 65)</p> <p>"clever", "recalcitrant" (Teodoro, 2011: 198)</p> <p>"slick and conniving" (Botti, 1996: 15)</p> <p>"an effortlessly superior civil service mandarin" (Evans, 2013: 58)</p> <p>"prétentieux", "condescendant", "arrogant", "anti-européen", "anti-français" and "raciste" (Botti, 1996: 16)</p> <p>"bureaucratic doublespeak, boilerplate, dissimulation, and nonsense delivered with unflappable aplomb" (Borins, 2014: 64)</p> <p>the quintessential self-interested bureaucrat" (Considine, 2006: 55)</p>
Bernard Woolly	<p>"candide", "respectueux" / "pédanterie maladive" (Botti, 1996: 17)</p> <p>"decent, perennially torn" (Borins, 2014: 63)</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

There are, then, five ways to describe Humphrey: cynical, manipulative, egotistical, arrogant and intelligent. 'Cynical' is defined in the RAE Dictionary as one who acts falsely or shamelessly. Humphrey strives to keep his efforts to a minimum, an attitude he encourages in others (Considine, 2006: 59). He is the guardian of this classic model whose most obvious immobilism lies in foreign policy, the same as it has been for decades as he himself points out, a statement that has even been adopted by those who have studied the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union (Thody, 1997: 5). The terms 'Sir Humphrey-ism' (Granville, 2009: 329) or 'Sir Humphrey Appelby-ization' (van den Berg et al., 2019) reflect his immobile, elitist and manipulative spirit; as does the reference to his character as the epitome of the 'Mandarin scheme' of management: 'impenetrable', 'stagnant' and 'conservative' (Granville, 2009: 325). He handles language very well, combining arrogance and intelligence. Even his seemingly polite phrases can conceal an attack, as the minister himself discovers.

The minister is portrayed as both unhappy and ambitious at the same time. Pressed by events that seem to overtake him, he shies away from public opinion, unwilling to deal with it. Manipulable (especially by Humphrey) and indecisive, if anything his profile leans towards the "disinformable" (tendency to be disinformed) or disinformed participant. It has to be said that, as the series progresses, he gradually learns the basic techniques of disinforma-

tion. Bernard, for his part, is respectful and decent, but with an almost pathological pedantry. Nevertheless, he also understands and sometimes uses these techniques well.

Simon Chesterman (2011) revisits one of the most iconic dialogues from the first episode of the first season of *Yes, Minister*, entitled “Open Government”. Bernard, Sir Humphrey and Sir Arnold (Cabinet Secretary) reflect on information transparency. The latter tells Bernard about it being contradictory to argue that it is necessary to both govern and be transparent at the same time. Bernard retorts that citizens of a democratic state have a right to know. Humphrey adds, in line with Arnold: “No, they have a right to be ignorant”. The choice is clearly for secrecy and keeping government routines away from public scrutiny. Arnold himself also advocates secrecy, not only regarding the government’s stance towards the people, but also that of the civil service towards politicians, as Orange and Turner (2013: 6) recall.

### 3. Objectives and methodology

Below are our main objectives:

1. To understand the *Yes, Minister* series in its historical context and relate it to political disinformation, based on the theoretical framework described previously (see section 2).
2. To delve deeper into the impact of the series on YouTube by identifying the most viewed fragments. Political action is often accompanied by disinformation. Given its characteristics, the Internet can propagate it exponentially and at great speed (Bañón, 2017). *Yes, Minister* has had an extraordinary impact on the social networks (Marrón, 2020) (Section 4.1)
3. To analyse the mentions and uses of processes, strategies and mechanisms of disinformation in a selection of the most viewed videos of the series. The uploading of these videos to this social network demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of the series on the part of those who have edited these fragments and the ability to create themes for the clips by using titles that, occasionally, coincide with those of the full episodes (Sections 4.2 and 4.3).

In order to fulfil the objectives, we used a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodological approach. For the archiving and coding of documents, as well as to obtain quantitative data, we used the text analysis programme *Atlas.ti 8*. We recorded all the types of processes, strategies and mechanisms mentioned in the theoretical framework, as well as the duration of the video, the number of views and also the associated comments. Qualitatively, apart from consulting scientific databases to compile a relevant bibliography on disinformation and the *Yes, Minister* series, as a starting point, we focused on three key areas for the critical analysis of discourse, in general and for the



study of disinformation processes and strategies, in particular: superstructure (related to contextualisation and the representation of relevant actors), macrostructure (regarding thematic-informative dynamics) and microstructure (oriented towards the identification of specific discursive mechanisms) (Bañón, 2017).

The steps followed to carry out our analysis were as follows:

1. Viewing of *Yes, Minister*. This series, like others from previous decades, has greatly increased its current popularity thanks to its availability on Filmin. All three seasons (21 episodes) are available on this platform.
2. Reading the book *The Complete Yes Minister* (Lynn and Jay, 1989) in Kindle format. One of the merits of this volume is that it helped its two creators to make the portrayals and intentions of the characters explicit, whereas in the series they were shown rather implicitly (Valbuena, 2010: 125). In the manner of a diary or notebook, the main characters narrate in detail what happens in each chapter.
3. Search for audiovisual fragments of the original version of the series appearing on YouTube. This search was based on the title, *Yes, Minister*, and the results were filtered, avoiding the inclusion of full episodes, as well as, by mistake, in our sample, clips from the series that succeeded it: *Yes, Prime Minister*. Another selection criterion was that of videos with a total of more than 200,000 views. The search was last updated on 15 December 2020.
4. Quantification, systematisation and interpretation of the data obtained, taking into account the following variables: title, number of views, duration, and number of comments posted for each fragment, plus identification of the episodes to which the fragments belong.
5. Analysis of the mentions and uses of disinformation processes, strategies and mechanisms in the videos on the list with more than 400,000 views. The analysis was preceded by the transcription of the dialogues. This screening of the total number of videos identified was done to help adjust the length of the paper.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *The videos from the series with the greatest impact on YouTube*

The information regarding the fragments of the series to be found on YouTube with more than 200,000 views is presented systematically in Table 2 as follows; title (T), season (S) episode (E) to which it belongs, duration of the video (D), number of views of the video (V) and comments associated with each one (C). There are forty in total:

**Table 2.** Detailed description of the videos with the highest impact on YouTube

Nº	T	D	V	Nº	T	D	V
	S/E		C		S/E		C
1	Yes Minister explains the EEC (EU)	03'59"	3,197,162	21	Explanatory note	01'46"	414,207
	2/5		1,561		2/7		183
2	Why the UK is in the EU	03'30"	3,025,963	22	Planes, trains and boats	01'54"	407,797
	1/5		3,517		3/5		88
3	You're a banker	03'07"	2,103,301	23	How to discredit a report	06'48"	393,615
	2/6		748		2/4		334
4	Sir Humphrey Appleby on the proper function ...	05'30"	1,743,491	24	Hushing up a mistake	03'25"	372,315
	3/6		879		1/1		141
5	Sir Humphrey explains Brexit	01'37"	1,656,608	25	Pension calculations	01'57"	362,303
	1/5		990		3/1		76
6	The Rhodesia solution	02'54"	1,545,742	26	Reshuffle rumours	02'21"	347,440
	3/6		592		2/5		60
7	Earn Your Honors	03'07"	1,130,119	27	Mr Haig calling	02'23"	315,759
	2/2		396		3/4		118
8	Sir Humphrey and Jim Hacker discuss art subsidies	03'29"	1,033,719	28	The Napoleon Award	04'15"	300,398
	3/7		522		1/5		131
9	Positive discrimination	03'04"	982,883	29	Is this highly confidential?	01'42"	298,231
	3/1		506		3/6		37
10	How's the environment?	03'01"	934,895	30	A scandal!	04'18"	287,795
	1/6		288		1/7		110
11	English customs	02'44"	819,133	31	How to run a hospital	04'19"	286,191
	3/4		252		2/1		224
12	It wasn't me!	03'00"	699,391	32	A phone call from the Prime Minister	03'56"	264,593
	3/3		162		1/1		72
13	The empty hospital	02'01"	690,647	33	The Civil Service in short	00'40"	253,261
	2/1		122		3/1		106
14	One minister, two ideas	02'10"	580,634	34	Jim's TV announcement	04'02"	242,089
	3/2		163		1/4		125
15	Get some patients	02'10"	580,351	35	Local Council	01'29"	240,449
	2/1		347		3/2		31
16	The five standard excuses	01'22"	570,162	36	Humphrey sets up a dinner	04'13"	222,887
	2/7		161		2/2		113
17	The six diplomatic options	04'01"	542,391	37	Jim's going to Europe	04'05"	212,243
	1/2		226		2/5		122

18 Government policy	01'48"	529,528	38 Jim's worst meeting	04'07"	208,576
2/7		225	1/3		93
19 Coffee at the university	01'40"	465,817	39 Getting the better of Humphrey	3'34"	207,125
2/2		164	1/4		79
20 The whisky priest	04'50"	452,989	40 Redrafting the Redraft of the Redraft	4'16"	203,091
3/6		257	1/5		101

Source: Own elaboration.

#### 4.2. Processes and strategies of disinformation in the most viewed videos

There are twenty-two videos with more than 400,000 views, as can be seen in Table 2. In the following table, we see the presence of processes and strategies related to the three areas pointed out in the theoretical framework: thematic-informative content (T), characteristics of actors (A) and management of contextual factors (F). We also show the number of occasions in which processes and strategies are shown (C), as well as the number of the fragment in which such processes and strategies appear (N):

**Table 3.** Processes and strategies in the most viewed videos

Concealment					
Strategies	Areas	C	N	Subtotal 1	Subtotal 2
Abolition	T	14	2, 4, 6, 12, 13, 14, 20	23	48
	A	8	2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11, 20		
	F	1	13		
Segmentation	T	1	6	13	
	A	12	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 20		
	F	0			
Deviation	T	3	4, 18, 20	12	
	A	9	2, 3, 4, 6, 13, 18		
	F	0			
Blurring					
Strategies	Areas	C	N	Subtotal 1	Subtotal 2
Saturation	T	3	2, 13, 21	5	43
	A	2	17, 22		
	F	0			
Alteration	T	17	1, 2, 4, 5, 3, 9, 13, 15, 22	20	
	A	3	1, 5, 7		
	F	0			
Divergence	T	17	1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 18, 20	19	
	A	1	8		
	F	1	6		

Strategies	Areas	Invention		Subtotal 1	Subtotal 2
		C	N		
Impersonation	T	2	1, 5	7	34
	A	5	1, 2, 3, 5, 14		
	F	0			
Incorporation	T	6	7, 11, 12, 15, 16	19	
	A	13	1, 4, 5, 9, 13, 14		
	F	0			
Transformation	T	6	7, 11, 12, 15, 16	8	
	A	1	10		
	F	1	3		

Source: Own elaboration.

#### 4.3. The mechanisms of disinformation in the most viewed videos

Thematic alteration finds an essential mechanism in the appearance of *contradictions* with respect to the issues addressed. The minister is supposedly a defender of the European ideal, but does not hesitate to criticise the European model whenever his interests are affected by EU initiatives. The permanent secretaries, when they talk about equal opportunities for women and men, say they agree with the idea, but then use justifications and demonstrations to the contrary. At the minister's meeting with the transport representatives, the same thing happens: even though there is seemingly an agreement to bring the meeting to an end, the reality is quite different. With regard to pace as an element of disruption, it is worth noting the cases of *postponement* of decisions or initiatives as a tool to avoid dealing with conflictive issues, for example, by setting up external or internal committees that end up not deciding anything. Several actors try to convince the minister of the need to wait a couple of years to officially open the hospital, which has already been finished for more than a year, to the public. This despite the fact that it already has hundreds of administrative and maintenance workers. These delaying tactics are widely used by Humphrey, sometimes in the form of a simple request for patience when it comes to making decisions. Similarly, the pace of information can also be altered by *anticipating* possible conclusions. Humphrey argues that one should only investigate something if one knows the outcome of the investigation in advance.

Divergence plays an important role in the fragments of *Yes, Minister*. This is not surprising, since we understand that the characters know how to use language to generate mechanisms of *uncertainty*, *confusion*, *ambiguity* or *exaggeration*. The Tower of Babel is mentioned as an illustration of daily life in Europe. The minister says that Humphrey lives in an ivory tower. When something is said to be "officially impossible" it means that it is possible, if it falls outside the official boundaries. And of course, long sentences or cryptic administrative language are used by both Humphrey and Bernard to protect or flatter themselves. There are also examples of dressing up information to

make it more acceptable to the public, or answering questions by first analysing the wording of the questions so as to evade them. Exaggeration seems to be the exclusive property of the permanent secretaries, who respond to the minister's initiatives by alluding to the fact that, if what he proposes is done, we would be on the verge of a catastrophe and even the fall of the monarchy.

Abolition is expressed in mechanisms involving the *exclusion* of actors who are intentionally not informed, as happens with Humphrey in certain meetings or with the minister himself, who is not invited to relevant meetings. It also happens when the minister participates in a diplomatic meeting during which a trade agreement is reached with bribes, but he does not know anything about it. He is the only one who is disinformed because he has been excluded from these "negotiations". The same is true when it is stated that the Prime Minister is not to be informed about arms sales to terrorist groups. The actors are also in the process of being excluded when it emerges that the department to which the Minister, Humphrey and Bernard belong is about to be abolished behind their backs. Similarly, abolition is expressed in the confidentiality of alleged sources. As far as the abolition of content is concerned, this takes place, for example, through the flow of information being *interrupted*, as is the case when the minister has not been properly informed of the European intention to launch the Europass (a European ID card), which is, precisely, a key piece of information (there is even talk that it would be "political suicide" for Hacker). Or when a journalist from *The Mail* informs the minister of his suspicions regarding the destruction of part of the documentation he wants access to in order to investigate mismanagement carried out decades ago by Humphrey. Bernard also leaves out relevant information on occasion, when he briefs the minister on sensitive issues (such as the number of civil servants and health staff in a London hospital).

The mechanisms of actor segmentation are the *separation* of identities, the *division* of actors and the *splitting* of functions. Thus, for example, the minister confesses to being both pro-European and anti-Brussels, and believes that his Permanent Secretary acts more like a civil servant than a citizen on moral issues. Humphrey says that ministers are like impulsive toddlers and goes on to argue that if he had listened to the eleven governments that have come and gone in his thirty years of experience, he would have ended up schizophrenic. This idea fits well with his maxim when it comes to contentious issues: "This is not my problem". The segmentation of actors is also shown to be a relatively hidden objective of the UK in its policy on Europe, as – reportedly – it has always wanted to divide the partners in order to gain the upper hand.

The main mechanism of actor deviation is the *assignment* of responsibility. In the Europass dispute, the Foreign Office passes the problem on to the Home Office, which in turn does the same to Hacker's Department of Administrative Affairs. Hacker himself and his two advisers devise the most appropriate way to pass the buck to the Prime Minister's office regarding the information obtained about the sale of arms to terrorists, in such a way as to

prevent this from eventually coming to light. And Hacker himself surrenders responsibility for the welfare of a group of Cuban refugees arriving at the Treasury in London. As for Humphrey, he even goes as far as shifting responsibility for his department's underspending onto the minister himself when he is questioned in a parliamentary committee.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The European Union published a *Code of Practice on Disinformation* in 2018. One of its objectives was to "reduce the visibility of disinformation". On occasions, though, it seems to hold true that it is also advantageous to make it more visible, to deconstruct it and thus teach citizens about the processes, strategies and mechanisms on which disinformers rely. Although very important, it is not enough to offer media literacy "focused solely on the verification of discourses", but more ambitious models of "critical thinking" and "humanistic and civic values" must be proposed (Pérez Tornero et al., 2018: 229 and 231).

Since *Yes, Minister's* original broadcast, many millions of viewers have learned about the main processes, mechanisms and strategies of political disinformation. It has often been considered a manual for political strategy, in which manipulation plays a leading role. In our view, however, it is a brilliant representation of the ways in which disinformation occurs in the political sphere and is then applied to diverse geographical contexts (Considine, 2006: 58).

In total, the forty videos chosen amount to 124 minutes, 56 seconds. The exact number of views is 29,125,291. This clearly illustrates the impact of the series, as well as its influence on the shaping of a shared mental model of political disinformation. Add to this the 14,422 comments: a low figure in proportion to the number of views, as is generally the case on YouTube (Gallardo and Jorge, 2010). All the seasons and all the episodes feature in this collection, with the exception of episode three from the second season. The episodes with the greatest impact, as can be seen, are "The Writing on the Wall" (1/5) and "The Whisky Priest" (3/6), with four fragments each. In third place, with three videos, are the following episodes: "The Devil You Know" (2/5); "Doing the Honours" (2/2), "Equal Opportunities" (3/1), "A Question of Loyalty" (2/7) and "The Compassionate Society" (2/1).

Disinformation strategies are used, mentioned or appear 125 times in our sample. Indeed, this is true for all the videos (except for 19, which shows a direct and unabashed interaction at Baillie College, where the dean and the bursar complain about the minister's projects). That means millions of YouTube users have been made literate in a certain way about this complex communicative macro-process. This is the case regardless of whether they have seen the clips for entertainment purposes or as a way to avoid being part of a politically disinformed society. Concealment is the most frequent process, followed by blurring and, lastly, invention. The most frequent strategies were, in descending order: thematic alteration, thematic divergence, thematic abolition, actor segmentation, actor deviation and actor abolition. Due to

lack of space, we describe only the mechanisms that fit these strategies: contradiction, confusion, ambiguity, exaggeration, interruption, separation and assignment.

The one hundred comments from users of the ten most popular videos confirm that for many of them this is a series that reflects reality (26%) and one of the best in history (18%). Some are written by civil service workers. But, most importantly for us, 9% explicitly state that these fragments have served as material for learning about political theory and practice. On one occasion, one of the users is actually a person who claims to be uneducated and yet demonstrates that they have been able to understand, in depth, the messages about political disinformation conveyed in the series. In general, it is common to read messages that highlight some of the key phrases in the videos, about which brief observations are made that demonstrate a knowledge of the strategies and mechanisms identified in this article: postpone-ment, disturbance, contradiction or exaggeration, among others (30%). Without a shadow of doubt, *Yes, Minister* would serve as an ideal basis for the development of a specific media literacy project on political disinformation.

### Bibliographical references

- AGUADED, I. and ROMERO, L.M. (2015). "Mediamorfosis y desinformación en la infoesfera: Alfabetización mediática, digital e informacional ante los cambios de hábitos de consumo informativo". *Education in the Knowledge Society*, 16 (1), 44-57.  
<<https://doi.org/10.14201/eks20151614457>>
- ALBALADEJO, T. (2012). "Retórica política y comunicación digital. La ampliación de la poliacroasis". In: E. DEL RÍO, M.<sup>a</sup> C. RUIZ and T. ALBALADEJO (eds.). *Retórica y política. Los discursos de la construcción de la construcción de la sociedad*. Logroño: Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 49-66.
- BAÑÓN, A.M. (2010). "El debate político-electoral. Una aproximación desde el análisis del discurso". En M.<sup>a</sup> J. MARÍN et al. (eds.). *Discurs polític i identitats (trans) nacionals*. València: Universitat de València, 99-131.
- (2017). "Critical Discourse Analysis and New Media". In: K. BEDIJS and Ch. MAAB (eds.). *Manual of Romance Languages in the Media*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 203-244.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110314755-011>>
- BEAVERS, S. (2002). "The West Wing as a Pedagogical Tool". *Political Science and Politics*, 35 (2), 213-216.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096502000537>>
- BERROCAL, S.; CAMPOS-DOMÍNGUEZ, E. and REDONDO, M. (2014). "Prosumidores mediáticos en la comunicación política: El 'politainment' en YouTube". *Comunicar*, 45, 65-72.  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.3916/C43-2014-06>>
- BONAUT, J. and GRANDÍO, M.<sup>a</sup> M. (2009). "Los nuevos horizontes de la comedia televisiva en el siglo XXI". *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 12 (64), 753-765.  
<<https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-64-2009-859-753-765>>

- BORINS, S. (2014). *Governing Fables: Learning from Public Sector Narratives*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- BOTTI, N. (1996). *Yes Minister et Yes Prime Minister. La satire au service de la politique ? Un exemple britannique*. Strasbourg: Université Robert Schuman.
- CHESTERMAN, S. (2011). *One Nation under Surveillance: A New Social Contract to Defend Freedom without Sacrificing Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CONDREN, C. (2017). "Yes Minister, Yes, Prime Minister: The Theoretical Dimension". In: MILNER DAVIS, J. (ed.). *Satire and politics. The Interplay of Heritage and Practice*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 227-250.  
<[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56774-7\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56774-7_8)>
- CONSIDINE, J. (2006). "Yes Minister: Invaluable Material for Teaching the public Choice of Bureaucracy". *Economic Affairs*, 26 (3), 55-61.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0270.2006.00650.x>>
- CROWDER, M. (2010). "Reading Political Comedy: Yes, Minister and Discursive Contexts". In: N. BOSE and L. GRIEVESON (eds.). *Using Moving Image Archives*, Published by Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies, 64-81.
- DEL CAMPO, E.; PUEBLA, B. and IVARS, B. (2016). "Las series de televisión: 'multiverso' objeto de estudio en comunicación". *Index Comunicación*, 6 (2), 13-19.
- DE SANTIAGO-GUERVÓS, J. (2020). "La orientación ideológica en los medios de comunicación social y la eficacia persuasiva de la desinformación". *Discurso & Sociedad*, 14 (1), 107-141.
- DURANDÍN, G. (1995). *La información, la desinformación y la realidad*. Madrid: Paidós.
- EVANS, E. (2013). *Thatcher and Thatcherism*. London: Routledge.
- GALLARDO, J. and JORGE, A. (2010). "La baja interacción del espectador de videos en Internet: caso Youtube España". *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 65, 421-435.  
<<https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-65-2010-910-421-435>>
- GIL, J. and GIL, S. (2020). "Series de ficción como medio de coeducación para la adolescencia. Estudio de caso: Las del Hockey". *Fonseca. Journal of Communication*, 21, 65-86.  
<<https://doi.org/10.14201/fjc2020216586>>
- GIL-RAMÍREZ, M.; GÓMEZ-DE-TRAVESEDO-ROJAS and ALMANSA-MARTÍNEZ, A. (2020). "Debate político en YouTube: ¿revitalización o degradación de la deliberación democrática?". *El Profesional de la Información*, 29 (6), e290638.  
<<https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.nov.38>>
- GRANVILLE, S. (2009). "Downing Street's Favourite Soap Opera: Evaluating the Impact and Influence of Yes, Minister and Yes, Prime Minister". *Contemporary British History*, 23 (3), 315-336.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/13619460903080135>>
- KAMM, J. (2015). "Ignorant Master, Capable Servants: The Politics of *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*". In: J. KAMM and B. NEUMAN (eds.). *British TV Comedies. Cultural Concepts, Contexts and Controversies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 114-135.  
<[https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137552952\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137552952_8)>
- LACALLE, CH. (2011). "La ficción interactiva: televisión y Web 2.0". *Ámbitos*, 20, 87-107.  
<<https://doi.org/10.12795/Ambitos.2011.i20.05>>
- LYNN, J. and JAY, A. (1989). *The Complete Yes, Minister*. London: BBC Books.



- MARRÓN, M. (2020). "La escena de ficción que resume a la perfección la respuesta de los gobiernos a la crisis del coronavirus". *Nius Diario*. Retrieved from <[https://www.niusdiario.es/vida/visto-oido/coronavirus-escena-viral-serie-yes-minister-predijo-respuesta-gobierno\\_18\\_2914020301.html](https://www.niusdiario.es/vida/visto-oido/coronavirus-escena-viral-serie-yes-minister-predijo-respuesta-gobierno_18_2914020301.html)> [Consulted: 15/12/20]
- MORENO, C. (2012). "Humor, política y series de entretenimiento. El fenómeno 'Yes, Minister'". In: I. MARTÍNEZ and C. MORENO (eds.). *De Anatomía de Grey a The Wire. La realidad de la ficción televisiva*. Madrid: La Catarata, 68-192.
- ORANGE, R. and TURNER, B. (2013). "Introduction". In: B. TURNER and R. ORANGE (eds.). *Specialist Journalism*. London/New York: Routledge, 1-10.
- PÉREZ TORNERO, J.M.; TAYIE, S. S.; TEJEDOR, S. and PULIDO, C. (2018). "¿Cómo afrontar las noticias falseadas mediante la alfabetización periodística? Estado de la cuestión". *Doxa Comunicación*, 26, 211-235.  
<<https://doi.org/10.31921/doxacom.n26a10>>
- RIKER, W.H. (1986). *The art of political manipulation*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- SMITH, J. (2009). *The Presidents We Imagine: Two Centuries of White House Fictions on the Page, on the Stage, Onscreen, and Online*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- SORLIN, S. (2016). *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards. A Pragma-Stylistic Perspective*. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan.
- THODY, P. (1997). *An Historical Introduction to the European Union*. London: Routledge.
- TEODORO, M. (2011). *Bureaucratic Ambition: Careers, Motives, and the Innovative Administrator*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- VALBUENA, F. (2010). "El humor en la Comunicación Política". *Cuadernos de Información y Comunicación*, 15, 123-164.
- VAN DEN BERG, C.; HOWLETT, M.; MIGONE, A.; HOWARD, M.; PEMER, F. and GUNTER, H. (2019). *Policy Consultancy in Comparative Perspective: Patterns Nuances and Implications of the Contractor State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WALL, S. (2008). *A Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WODAK, R. (2009). *The Discourse of Politics in Action: Politics as Usual*. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan.

