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Fact-checking platforms in Spanish. Features, organisation and method

Abstract

Fact-checking has become one of the most relevant activities of recent years, as a result of the increase in the flow of fake news and of the ease to spread news through platforms such as social media. The goal of the research is to assess the task of fact-checking developed by initiatives that use Spanish as a vehicle for comparing inaccurate and false information. We carried out a case study of 19 international projects that use Spanish as the main language to materialise their fact-checking actions and the analysis of contents published aims at understanding where these companies develop their activities, how are them internally organized and which methods they use to translate the data obtained to the audience. Results show that most of fact-checking projects in Spanish –launched most of them in the period 2014-2016– remain active. In South America, these organizations have more weight. Most of them have a journalistic nature, although there is a large number of civic and independent projects. Among strategies for verification, text is the preferred formula, although some innovative methods to present the degree of accuracy of assessed contents have been found.

Keywords

Fact-checking, misinformation, misrepresentation, fake-news, hoaxes.

1. Introduction

Over the last years, we have witnessed the strengthening of fact-checking, linked to the roots of journalism. According to the principles of journalism, there has always been –or should have been– a widespread concern about the contrast of data and messages communicated. However, in the eyes of the audience, mass media have quitted the habit due to ideological reasons, pressures of different nature and a constant struggle in accelerating production tempos and rhythms.

Also, a new player has come to scene in communication. The Internet and social media are, undoubtedly, incubators of data and stories to tell but, at the same time, are spaces of blurred boundaries where any user can reach massive audiences with contents that are not necessarily contrasted (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018). It is within this context where

fake news emerge, that is, contents that do not make reference to reality and make it up deliberately based on ideological and economic interests (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). All this taking advantage of another feature of the present context: the existence of multiple sources of information and news that may become a true “deluge of information” (Martin, 2017) and the trust placed in certain individuals who enjoy a high degree of credibility in new platforms (Choi, 2015).

The situation is not new, as, throughout history, there have always been cases of information production in the benefit of certain interests. However, in recent years, it has taken on a new dimension. As a response, journalism has waved the flag of fact-checking, considered as the best tool to counteract the power of fake news (Amorós, 2018, p. 154).

The present article aims at offering a general overview of fact-checking initiatives that use Spanish to transmit reviewed and compared contents to audience, connecting with similar projects focused on areas such as America Latina (Palau-Sampio, 2018). Understanding the concept of platform as a project or initiative, in contrast to other meanings such as space that serves as a container for the software (Tiwana, 2015), the study will put at light fact-checking techniques used in these spaces, but also their business organisation and their location. 19 projects in 12 countries comply with the characteristics defined by the research. The oldest fact-checking project started its activity in 2010, while most of them were launched between 2014 and 2016.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Past and present of misinformation

While at present the concepts of fake news and misinformation are very much present in society, they are not an exclusive and inherent feature of present moment (Burkhardt, 2017). Throughout history, there have been numerous strategies based on misinformation. In general, they have been linked to armed conflicts, either with the purpose of creating trends of opinion favourable to military intervention or to soften its negative impact by underestimating the enemy or attributing atrocities not always linked to real events (Chomsky & Ramonet, 1995, pp. 8-9).

While governments have used misinformation strategies with the aim of obtaining citizens' approval for certain activities, there have been times when the intention to confuse and modify reality has started from the media. Marc Amorós (2018, p. 38) tells how, in the middle of the sales war between Joseph Pulitzer y William Randolph Hearst, the latter decided to tell his readers about the explosion in the boilers of the warship Maine as an attack from the Spanish army to the American ship through the use of a series of powerful and novel explosives. This was a determining factor for the beginning of the Cuban War and the subsequent independence of the Caribbean country. This was, in part, thanks to the fake news created purposely to shape reality to the *New York Journal's* editor liking.

Fake news, therefore, have existed for as long as true news (Boczkowski, 2016). These hoaxes are “objects produced with a specific purpose: having an impact on the public opinion, obeying an order or embellishing a story” (Bloch, 1999, p. 182). Throughout history, it has been in periods of war when this type of information has been more present (Tucho, n.d.), as these stages require citizens' approval through the justification of the need of actions carried out as well as the losses suffered and the damages caused.

Paying attention to the last decade, topics associated to fake news are not anymore of a war nature and with the aim of creating opinion trends favourable to military interventions. These have turned towards the political terrain due, in part, to the high number of electoral processes and the controversy surrounding them or the candidates, which have taken place in countries such as France, the UK, Germany, Spain and, especially, the US (Lowrey, 2017). In the months leading up the 2016 US elections, the campaign and the start of Donald Trump's

termed were marked by the finger-pointing between the president and some mass media, due to the dissemination of fake data and information.

Thus, fake news and misinformation are inherent to human communication that have been developed through different periods. They have existed before the invention of the printing press and the emergence of the first news' publications. However, thanks to the development of new technologies and the ease of disseminating content through new platforms, the concept has acquired a new dimension (Burkhardt, 2017).

2.2. Fake news

Fake news are, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, “false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018). Another dictionary of reference, the *Collins Dictionary*, includes a new variable in the concept, defining it as “false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting” (Collins Dictionary, 2018). When talking about fake news, then, we refer to contents deliberately produced as false, that can be verified and are aimed at confusing readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The same authors note two reasons to create and disseminate fake news: ideological and economic (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Ideological because, thanks to the confusion created, it is possible to damage political opponents and benefit from the misinformation produced. The emergence of fake news is also due to economic reasons because the promoter can benefit from misinformation and the transmission of wrong data in his economic activities or, directly, profit from its publication.

So much so that many people make huge amounts of money from the creation of websites based on fake news (Kirby, 2016). This kind of sites –generally online– mimic the appearance and even the name of news companies of reference. This way, their authors take advantage of the high pace of users when surfing the Internet, so that they can confuse the fake site with the real one. In the same way, the production of news, distribution and complementary materials follow apparently journalistic criteria, but hide behind them the intention to confuse people (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Amorós (2018, pp. 65-66) points out three “key pieces” in fake news that make users to fall into the trap of misinformation sought by promoters:

1. A stunning headline.
2. A revelation that reaffirm us or that make us feel outraged.
3. A legitimate and reliable appearance.

Fake news attract those who read them through the visual perception, as they seem a piece of news of reference, but they also benefit from the ongoing polarization in society and our “nature as humans” (Amorós, 2018, p. 93), that lead us to look for those affirmations and ideas that connect with our interests and that activate the feeling of approval with respect to our beliefs.

This kind of contents have found a place in the network and, especially, in social media. *Facebook* and *Twitter* are platforms where fake news have proliferated to a greater extent (Waisbord, 2018). Through social networks, just as on video platforms such as *YouTube* and blogs, an anonymous user can initiate a rumour that, thanks to the cascade effect (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018), can reach massive audiences, making contents viral and spreading them through the network to impact on the ideas of millions of users. According to Boczkowski (2016), this kind of online spaces have led to “an information structure with an scale, reach and horizontality in information flows without precedent in the history.” The same author notes that, at present, citizens have within their reach the chance to create contents that compete in popularity with those produced by, a priori, more powerful structures. The citizen is no longer a mere consumer of information but, increasingly, has tools at their disposal that make the circulation of content possible. This new scenario gives voice to previously silenced

people and groups, but it is also a way to disseminate fake contents (Boczkowski, 2016). Thus, a rumour based on misinformation, created by an individual, can reach higher levels of attention than media of reference (Berinsky, 2015).

As regards existing *fake news*, Rubin, Chen and Conroy (2015) differentiate three typologies:

1. News prepared by the tabloid press, using non-contrasted headlines and hypes aimed at capturing public's attention, in order to try to capture large masses of audience through the Internet –clickbait–.
2. Large-scale hoaxes produced deliberately to deceive audience. They are prepared following the principles of traditional news, so they manage to mask their real intention of misinformation and to be considered as true.
3. Humorous fakes that are not intended to confuse the audience, but to appeal to their sense of humour. The public is, in general, aware of the satirical nature of these contents, although their format and appearance are similar to the pieces of news found in any media of reference. Although this type of news is produced and intentionally shaped to what they want to communicate, it should not be confused with the first typology, as the intention is different.

Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2018) are the authors of a classification that deepen in the particularities and presentation formulas of fake news. Thus, from a scientific research on this matter between 2003 and 2017, they identify the following typologies:

1. News Satire. The most common formula to present fake news. It is based on the use of humour and the exaggeration to present audiences with news updates.
2. News Parody. Although it shares some characteristics with news satire, news parody does not refer to current contents, but fictional elements produced for the occasion.
3. News Fabrication. This typology refers to those contents with no factual basis that are published in the style of new articles in order to give them legitimacy. Unlike parody and satire, the audience is not warned that the contents are fake, reason why misinformation is incurred.
4. Photo manipulation. Creation of fake narratives derived from the manipulation of real images or videos. This practice is increasingly common due to the development of digital photography and video and technological tools that make it easy the edition of this kind of contents.
5. Advertising and Public Relations. Dissemination of advertisement contents in the guise of genuine news reports.
6. Propaganda. News stories created by a political party with the aim of impacting on citizenry's perceptions.

It can be noticed how fake news use available tools, platforms and technologies to meet their objectives –humour, satire or the creation of trends of opinion built around fictitious elements–. These types of contents are, besides, a real problem in the eyes of citizens. According to the data collected in the study “Fake News and Misinformation Online” (Eurobarometer, 2018), 85 per cent of Europeans consider that fake news are a real problem in their country of origin. Also, 83 per cent consider that fake news has a direct impact on the development of democracies within the framework of the European Union. All this in a context such as the current one, where the loss of trust in traditional media has been added to the rise of radical ideologies that make use of the distribution of misinformation, mainly through the network (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

2.3. Fact-checking as a path to end fake news

Fact-checking is the formula adopted by journalism to try to combat the proliferation of fake news and to mitigate their effects in citizenry (Geham, 2017). Jane Elizabeth (2014) defines the journalistic practice as:

Fact checkers and fact-checking organizations aim to increase knowledge by re-reporting and researching the purported facts in published/recorded statements made by politicians and anyone whose words impact others' lives and livelihoods. Fact checkers investigate verifiable facts, and their work is free of partisanship, advocacy and rhetoric.

Although fact-checking is an essential practice in any process of news production, over the last few years this activity has taken a new turn as a response to the proliferation of fake ones. Thus, there are many media and civic platforms that have set up sections, working groups and spaces aimed at verifying information published by other media, disseminated through social networks or proclaimed by the main political leaders. In 2014, the map created by the Reporters' Lab from the University of Duke collected 44 organizations and initiatives based on the fact-checking (Stencel & Griffin, 2018). Today, four years later, the number has risen to 149 platforms that remain active in 53 countries around the world (Funke, 2018). Graves (2018) links this growth to the existence of a "a genuinely transnational movement in journalism, one that brings together practitioners from many different media systems and journalistic cultures, as well from academia and the civil/political sphere." Graves also points to the web *Snopes.com* as the first site specialised in fact-checking (Graves, 2016, p. 28). This cybermedia, launched in 1995 by Barbara and David Mikkelson, two entrepreneurs without journalistic training, has become one of the reference headers when talking about fact-checking, thanks to its more than 6 million monthly visitors.

The emergence of this kind of independent media, specialised in fact-checking and in the implementation of sections devoted to this task in media with more experience (Cherubini & Graves, 2016) is the result of the constant acceleration experienced in the cycle of news production as a consequence of the dissemination of information through the Internet (Currie Sivek & Bloyd-Peshkin, 2018; Hermida, 2012). This increased speed has cast doubts on the time devoted by media professionals to investigate the particularities and deeper data of the topics addressed as well as the quality of the verification process (Brandtzaeg, Følstad & Chaparro Domínguez, 2017). In the same way, the increase in the acquisition of information through social networks by the audience (Marchi, 2012; Zubiaga, Liakata, Procter, Hoi & Tolmie, 2016) and the high volume of contents of dubious origin circulating on these platforms, has led to the proliferation of spaces of reference in the verification of information, such as the aforementioned *Snopes.com*, *PolitiFact* and *FactCheck.org* in the US, *Les Décodeurs* in France, *BBC Reality Check* in the UK, *Pagella Politica* in Italy and *Maldito Bulo* in Spain, among others.

The relevance of fact-checking is justified nowadays due to the proliferation of fake news, mainly through social media. Also, when talking about this type of fake contents, it is necessary to take into account that, due to its appearance and the aforementioned human preference for those contents that agree with their opinion, the correction of errors or even the fact of refuting them, do not have the expected effect on the audience (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Polage, 2012). Fake producers benefit from this, often taken advantage of anonymity, publishing facilities and the credibility provided by the network (Berinsky, 2015). All this makes it increasingly necessary to include a fact-checker in newsrooms.

2.4. *The tasks of the fact-checker*

When we refer to fact-checkers, we are talking about a professional profile of journalism that emerges as a result of the existing fragmentation in the media landscape with multiple voices and actors that do not always comply with the main precepts of journalism (Graves, 2016, p. 9). The mission of fact checkers is, therefore, to clarify and shed light on all that information constructed in an inappropriate or false manner. To do this, they use verification techniques and procedures that take them to the origin of the news. The ability to adapt is, therefore, an inherent and essential feature in their daily work, as due to the diversity of topics and actors and their complexity, a constant acquisition of knowledge is necessary (Stencel, 2015).

Another of the main characteristics of fact-checkers is that their work is based on objectivity (Graves, 2016, p. 77). While this is an inherent quality of journalism, be it of any kind, it acquires a new nuance when we refer to verification of information. Occasionally, professionals performing this kind of tasks, act as proof-readers of news published by the media in which they work and other media outlets. This kind of verifications can be as simple as “exchanging an uppercase letter for a lower case letter” (Fole, 2012), or going further and forcing a change in the focus or the analysis of a piece of news due to an inadequate representation of narrated facts.

Thus, the main mission of fact-checkers is to discover discourses, reconstruct and follow the course of their propagation (Graves, 2016a). To do so –and due to the high volume of data in the contents analysed by these professionals–, fact-checkers use technological tools that make their daily work easier. This kind of tools act as “the process of authenticating online content items such as text, images and videos” (Brandtzaeg *et al.*, 2017). Thus, following the research by Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spanenberg, Rath-Wiggins and Følstad (2016), in which journalists from all over Europe were consulted about their verification habits, it is possible to see how they use different tools for fact-checking throughout the day. These include practices such as the search of images in *Google Images* to see if they have been taken from the search engine or they are original. Also, they use apps such as *Topsy*, *TinEye* and *Tungstene*, which are also designed to check images. When it comes to verifying the features of a video, the study shows how journalists use *Street View* from *Google Maps*. Thanks to this tool, it is possible to verify that the scenarios in the videos provided by sources match with the location. In the same way, they use *Storyful*, a service to verify contents from social networks that was created by journalists with the aim of giving context and verifying data from these platforms, in which it is so easy to spread fake news (Storyful, 2017).

Fact-checkers also use tools and services that provide raw transcriptions from discourses, radio and TV speeches, the legal corpus. (Graves, 2016b, p. 110). This kind of services make the work of fact-checkers easier, as they eliminate the transcription phase of discourses –whose existence is vital for the development of the fact-checking process–, leaving more time to the process of checking and contrasting. Thanks to the use of these tools, therefore, speed is gained, an aspect that the media take into account in the context of the 24/7 news production cycle. To a lesser extent, fact-checking is also somewhat subject to time pressures of dissemination of contents through the Internet (Currie Sivek & Boyd-Peshkin, 2018).

Another relevant aspect related to the impact of technology in the task of fact-checkers is the progressive incorporation of automated tracking and verification techniques based on the triangulation of the work of fact-checkers, programming companies and researchers in artificial intelligence (Graves, 2018b). It is, for the moment, a field in development in which great advances have been made, such as *Google News’ fact-check tag*, that the technological giant has made available to users to identify those articles that contain verified information by news companies and fact-checking organizations, separating it from contents of dubious origin and truthfulness (Kosslyn & Yu, 2017).

Fact-checking has also had an impact on citizenry. Thus, more and more media and independent fact-checking platforms try to involve their audience in the process of contrasting information (Currie Sivek & Boyd-Peshkin, 2018; Haigh, Haigh & Kozak, 2017). Therefore, although citizens have the power to produce fake contents and disseminate them with relative ease through spaces such as social networks, media of reference and independent fact-checking initiatives put at their disposal the possibility of exercising as fact-checkers, either by providing their testimonials and original documents or being they who look for the origin of the contents published. Citizens are given the option of being a relevant part of the fact-checking process, and this is added to the many civic and political monitoring initiatives developed within the framework of the Internet (Feenstra & Casero-Ripollés, 2014).

These new channels of control and attachment to reality have resulted in a transformation of the formulas of political and social participation, achieving a great influence on the change and democratic regeneration (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017).

3. Method

The method used to carry out the study has been the methodological triangulation of qualitative and quantitative techniques (Gaitán & Piñuel, 1998, p. 286). The starting point has been place in a longitudinal study of different academic texts and reports whose subject matter is focused on the study of the diffusion of fake news and verification processes included in the framework of a Systematic Literature Review (Ramírez-Montoya & García-Peñalvo, 2018) on the thematic trends in communication research in the last ten years.

In order to carry out this research, we have consulted the census of fact-checking projects prepared by the Reporters' Lab of the Duke University. This research centre has an updated website in which, using a map, identifies 220 fact-checking initiatives in the world (Duke Reporter's Lab, 2018). Within these, 156 were active on September, 25, 2018, while 64 were inactive.

The used selection criteria to determine the sample has been the communication language employed by the media and fact-checking projects. The revision of the census allowed for the exclusion of projects developed in languages different from Spanish. There are 19 initiatives in Spanish. At the time of analysis, 14 of them remained active, while 5 of them were not updated and so identified as inactive.

Once selected the media that meet the selection criteria, an analysis sheet was applied to all of them, taking into account the following parameters: name of the publication, country, platform, type of media, promoter of the initiative –journalists or citizens, media or independent–, years of foundation, website, state –active or inactive–, user verification formula and other comments.

Thus, the methodological techniques used to prepare this research are the case study – as an analysis of the particularities of each of the studied fact-checking initiatives– and the content analysis –by paying attention and identifying the communication characteristics of the information verified by the media reviewed.

4. Results

4.1. Fact-checking in Spanish

Attending to the geographical distribution, fact-checking initiatives in the world have shown that Spain is the country that hosts most projects of this kind –four–. Other Spanish-speaking countries such as Argentina, Colombia and Mexico have two –although not all of them are active. The only platform belonging to a country whose majority language is not Spanish is *Detector de Mentiras*, a fact-checking space of the TV channel *Univisión*. Regarding to this space, although the map of the Duke Reporters' Lab places it between the projects with activity, the last verification made through its website was in April 1, 2018, so at the time of analysis almost six months have passed since the last publication. Something similar happens with *La Chistera*, promoted by the online newspaper *El Confidencial*. In the objectives set at its foundation in March 2016, the project emerged with the aim of bringing the audience a weekly verification. However, the last verification dates from June 13, 2018, and no activity is registered from then on. Table 1 shows the list of fact-checking initiatives in Spanish, as well as the degree of activity monitored by the Duke Reporters' Lab.

Table 1: Fact-checking initiatives in Spanish, origin and activity level.

Name	Country	Founding	State
<i>Chequeado</i>	Argentina	2010	Active
<i>Macrimetro</i>	Argentina	2015	Inactive
<i>ChileCheck</i>	Chile	2017	Active
<i>El Polígrafo</i>	Chile	2013	Active
<i>Colombia Check</i>	Colombia	2016	Active
<i>Detector de Mentiras</i>	Colombia	2014	Active
<i>Rete al Candidato</i>	Costa Rica	2014	Inactive
<i>El Objetivo</i>	Spain	2013	Active
<i>La Chistera</i>	Spain	2016	Active
<i>Maldito Bulo</i>	Spain	2014	Active
<i>Polétika</i>	Spain	2014	Active
<i>Detector de Mentiras</i>	US	2016	Active
<i>ConPruebas</i>	Guatemala	2015	Active
<i>El Polígrafo</i>	México	2015	Inactive
<i>El Sabueso</i>	México	2015	Active
<i>OjoBiónico</i>	Peru	2015	Inactive
<i>Polítgrafo</i>	El Salvador	2015	Inactive
<i>UYCheck.com</i>	Uruguay	2014	Active
<i>Cotejo</i>	Venezuela	2016	Active

Source: Own elaboration from data of the Duke Reporters' Lab.

At the geopolitical level, it is in South America where we can find a higher number of fact-checking initiatives in Spanish. So much so that of the nine countries in which Spanish is the main language –Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay– only three of them –Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay– do not have initiatives whose mission is fact-checking. Eight of the 19 projects found are framed in this territory, being the area with the greatest weight in this sense.

There is also a high number of fact-checking initiatives in Central America. Considering that this area is constituted by Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panamá, and that the main language is English, three of the six countries have fact-checking initiatives whose main language is Spanish.

Looking to North America, there are fact-checking initiatives in two countries: the US –*Detector de Mentiras*– and Mexico with the projects *El Polígrafo* –inactive platform whose archive is not accessible– and *El Sabueso*.

In Europe, Spain is, as expected, the only country with fact-checking platforms in Spanish because, in this case, the language is a key factor. However, it is important to note that it is in Spain where there are more media, sections and spaces devoted to fact-checking: *El Objetivo*, *La Chistera*, *Maldito Bulo* and *Polétika*.

4.2. Formal characteristics and platforms

The proposed analysis also includes data on the main platform through which organizations analysed disseminate their verified contents, as well as the used communication formula – independent presentation through a cybermedia, blog, section within a media, etc.

In this regard, it should be noted that almost all the initiatives have websites. Only *El Polígrafo* from the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* is an exception to this trend. Other four projects –the fact-checking test in *El Objetivo* from the TV channel *La Sexta*, the *Detector de Mentiras* from *Univisión*, the *Detector de Mentiras* from *La Silla Vacía* in Colombia and *ChileCheck* in *CNN Chile*– carry out their activities in other platform: television. These four initiatives combine content verification in specific sections and programs –the case of *ChileCheck*–, although they publish and verify information through online spaces.

When it comes to the formula adopted by online initiatives, we have found three formats:

- The most used formula is the presentation of contents in a similar way to any cybermedia. Verifications are presented as a piece of news with headline, subtitles, highlights and a body where they explain data that contribute to the veracity or misrepresentation of information. Also, these texts are usually accompanied by supporting documentary evidence, videos and pictures, either true, false or even comparative analyses to help the user to understand differences. We can find examples of these practices in media such as *Maldito Bulo* –Spain–, *ColombiaCheck* –Colombia–, *ConPruebas* –Guatemala– and *Chequeado* –Argentina– among others. The last two examples are committed to a greater comprehensiveness, reaching true reports based on the verification of the published events.
- *El Confidencial*' space, *La Chistera*, uses another format more similar to a blog. It presents a more colloquial language, accompanied by graphics and images slightly altered so that they resemble the caricatures of the statements' protagonists. This format uses different backgrounds –green, yellow, orange and red– according to the degree of veracity of statements.
- There is a case –the Spanish platform *Polétika*– where the online platform works as a repository of verifications of statements and proposals carried out by candidates to the presidency of the Spanish government during the electoral campaign. It also acts as a watchdog for the fulfilment of these proposals and, to do so, it publishes different documents that analyse the degree of application of the ideas raised by political parties, as well as their impact on child protection, health, gender equality and fight against climate change, among others.
- A concept similar to *Polétika* is the Argentinian space *El Macrimetro*, in which users can discuss 265 proposals of the President, Mauricio Macri. The goal is, therefore, to create a discussion forum on the ideas and promises of the president and eventually evaluate the compliance with these promises. This concept is also used by *Rete al Candidato*, from Costa Rica.
- The most differentiated format is the one adopted by *Polítígrafo*, promoted by the Salvadoran cybermedia *El Faro*. Besides having an online section with fact-checked contents, they have an app for mobile devices with the same purpose. However, both initiatives are inactive at present, making it impossible to access the archive of contents.

4.3. Organization and funding

This section pays attention to the organizational characteristics of the 19 fact-checking initiatives in Spanish, with the aim of observing their integration within media groups and media and their possible independent character built from private and associative initiatives. We will also look at the authorship of verifications published in these media, since, as could be seen in the section dedicated to the state-of-the-art of fact-checking, there are more and more options for the coexistence of professionalised options and initiatives –launched by journalists– and citizen ones.

At the business level, 10 of the reviewed projects belong to big or small media and news groups, while 8 of them are independent, as seen in Table 2. Some of them are formed by two

or three people, as the Argentinian *El Macrimetro* and the Spanish *Maldito Bulo*. Others are the result of the association of different groups –*Polétika*– or a group of journalists. This would be the case of *ColombiaCheck*, resulted from the union of more than a hundred journalists aimed at strengthening investigative journalism in the country through this initiative. The only exception is the Guatemalan space *ConPruebas*, whose membership corresponds to *Plaza Pública*, a media sponsored by the University Rafael Landívar.

Table 2: Fact-checking initiatives in Spanish, belonging and components.

Name	Country	Ownership	Authorship
<i>Chequeado</i>	Argentina	Independent	Journalists
<i>Macrimetro</i>	Argentina	Independent	Citizens
<i>ChileCheck</i>	Chile	Turner Chile	Journalists
<i>El Polígrafo</i>	Chile	<i>El Mercurio</i>	Journalists
<i>Colombia Check</i>	Colombia	Independent	Journalists
<i>Detector de Mentiras</i>	Colombia	<i>La Silla Vacía</i>	Journalists
<i>Rete al Candidato</i>	Costa Rica	<i>El financiero</i>	Journalists
<i>El Objetivo</i>	Spain	<i>La Sexta</i>	Journalists
<i>La Chistera</i>	Spain	<i>El Confidencial</i>	Journalists
<i>Maldito Bulo</i>	Spain	Independent	Journalists
<i>Polétika</i>	Spain	Independent	Citizens
<i>Detector de Mentiras (Univisión)</i>	US	<i>Univisión</i>	Journalists
<i>ConPruebas</i>	Guatemala	Universidad Rafael Landívar	Journalists
<i>El Polígrafo</i>	Mexico	Grupo Milenio	Journalists
<i>El Sabueso</i>	Mexico	<i>Animal Político</i>	Journalists
<i>OjoBiónico</i>	Peru	Independent	Journalists
<i>Polítgrafo</i>	El Salvador	<i>El Faro</i>	Journalists
<i>UYCheck.com</i>	Uruguay	Independent	Journalists
<i>Cotejo</i>	Venezuela	Independent	Journalists

Source: Own elaboration.

If we observe the organization or business belonging of the fact-checking proposals, it is possible to find some cases of collaboration between associations and institutions. In this regard, one experience stands out above the others. It is the Chilean space *ChileCheck*, in which four entities participate. Two of them –*Chilevisión* and *CNN Chile*– belong to the same media group, Turner Chile. The independent study centre Espacio Público and the Instituto de Estudios de la Sociedad also participate. These four organizations –three if we take into account that two of them belong to the same group– have allied to launch this initiative that has a specific space in the Chilean television.

Regarding the authorship of the works published in the spaces reviewed, there is a full control by information professionals, as just two initiatives –*El Macrimetro* and *Polétika*– are not the result of journalists' work. However, most of fact-checking projects collected in Table 2 have experts in data analysis, economy and programming that, by working closely with journalists, carry out the task of verification of information.

We therefore witness a duality between spaces promoted by citizens with more or less know-how in journalism, and those where the fact-checking production is carried out by

newspeople in collaboration with technical profiles, essential to manage and understand the large volume of data to be reviewed in the context of content verification. *Chequeado* is the oldest project within the sample selected –2010. Also, between 2014 and 2016, 15 new projects in Spanish have been launched, although not all of them remain active at present.

4.4. Checking method

When we talk about fact-checking we refer to the rating of contents according to the degree of accuracy of fact-checking spaces analysed in this study. There are some works that have made an in-depth study of the efficiency of different fact-checking techniques. One of them was conducted by Michelle A. Amazeen, Emily Thorson, Ashley Muddiman and Lucas Graves (2015), who created an online fictional fact-checking space where they asked users on the efficiency of the different fact-checking techniques –visual and text veracity scales, proof-reading and textual analysis of data, etc. Among the findings of the study, it was found that users show a certain preference for corrections that include some kind of veracity scale, as they are easily understandable and accessible.

Table 3: Fact-checking methods.

Name	Fact-checking method			
	Textual description	Checking scale		
		Text	Visual	Chromatic
<i>Chequeado</i>	✓	✓		
<i>Macrimetro</i>		✓		✓
<i>ChileCheck</i>	✓	✓	✓ (TV)	✓ (TV)
<i>El Polígrafo (Chile)</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Colombia Check</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Detector de Mentiras</i>	✓	✓		
<i>Rete al Candidato</i>				
<i>El Objetivo</i>	✓	✓	✓ (TV)	✓ (TV)
<i>La Chistera</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Maldito Bulo</i>	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Polétika</i>			✓	✓
<i>Detector de Mentiras (Univisión)</i>	✓	✓	✓ (TV)	
<i>ConPruebas</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>El Polígrafo (México)</i>	*non-accessible			
<i>El Sabueso</i>	✓	✓		✓
<i>OjoBiónico</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Politígrafo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>UYCheck.com</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Cotejo</i>	✓			

Source: Own elaboration.

As it can be seen in Table 3, a division has been made between two verification methods: text explanation and the use of verification scales –sub-divided into text, visual or symbolic and chromatic scales.

Text verification is a formula used by all the projects analysed, with the exception of the two that seek to encourage the citizen debate as it happens in opinion forums: *El Macrimetro* and *Rete al Candidato*. These two proposals are aimed at commenting on the main ideas of Mauricio Macri in Argentina and the candidates for the elections in Costa Rica in 2014 in the case of *Rete al Candidato*. Nor it can be checked the online archive of *Polígrafo*, belonging to the Mexican group *Milenio*, so this quality is not attributed to it. Both spaces are inactive today. For those initiatives that use the textual comment at the time of making their verifications, different formulas have been found, since there are media that produce extensive textual reports accompanied by multimedia elements such as images, text or infographics –this would be the case of *Cotejo* in Venezuela and *OjoBiónico* in Peru–, while others use shorter texts that verify or deny the information published. This would be the case of *Maldito Bulo* in Spain and *El Polígrafo*, which belongs to the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio*.

Considering the presence of verification scales, their use is quite widespread among the analysed media. Three possible routes for presentation of scales have been found, and can be complementary to each other. In this way, the different degrees of veracity can be presented in a textual, visual and chromatic way.

As regards the textual way, the most used formula is “true” or “false,” including a series of intermediate nuances such as “debatable” –*El Polítgrafo*, El Salvador–; “deceptive” –*Chequeado*, Argentina–; “ni ni” –*UYCheck.com*, Uruguay– and “inaccurate” –*La Chistera*, Spain. Also, there are formulas to note the impossibility of contrasting or finding the data of a certain statement with expressions such as “unprovable” –*Polítgrafo*, El Salvador– and also for those contents with a higher level of falseness. That would be the case of “unsustainable” and “ridiculous,” concepts used by *La Chistera* and *El Sabueso* –Mexico– to define those statements that, after verifying the data, show a high degree of falseness.

At the visual level, there are proposals that include emojis in which the face expression is the one that determine the degree of veracity of investigated contents–*Polétika*, Spain–; symbols such as *check* from *UYCheck.com* that, depending on the shape and colour show the veracity of information and concepts such as “hoax” in red and large size such as the case of *Maldito Bulo*. Naturally, the four fact-checking initiatives with a presence in TV –*El Objetivo*, *Detector de Mentiras* (Univisión, US), *Detector de Mentiras* (Colombia) and *ChileCheck*–, also include visual elements in their verification tests.

Finally, another of the elements used to communicate the veracity of the content is the colour. Through a colour palette that starts with soft colour such as green or blue and travels to stronger ones such as red or black, it is possible to warn the audience of the reliability of contents refereed in the test. The method is used by 12 of the 19 reviewed projects, although this formula is combined with others described above.

5. Conclusions

After carrying out the study on the 19 fact-checking initiatives in Spanish, indexed in the database of the Duke Reporters’ Lab, we have found that, even 14 of them appear as active, not all of them show recurring activity. Some of the reviewed projects showed no activity during the five months prior to the research.

When it comes to the geographical distribution of initiatives, there is a strong presence of this type of media in South America. So much so that there are fact-checking projects in six of the nine Spanish-speaking countries of the area, with a total of eight projects (7 of them remain active).

The most frequent method of organization is integration within a media as a section or an autonomous organization but linked to companies grouping different media. However, the number of independent projects launched by anonymous citizens and social groups amount to eight.

The first project of these characteristics in Spanish arose in 2010, being the period between 2014 and 2016 the time with the largest creation of fact-checking initiatives –15.

Within these, the presence of newspeople is the general trend, although they are not the only members of the fact-checking spaces. There is a great variety of professional profiles within the production teams of this type of contents, thanks to the incorporation of experts in data management and analysis, computer science, statistics and economy, among others.

Finally, the analysis also paid attention to the formula used to communicate the audience the veracity or inaccuracy of contents by this type of organization. It has been possible to verify that, except for two projects, all of them use textual explanations to explain the veracity or falsity of published information and to make clarifications. Many of them also use formulas based on verification scales that, as a general rule, place the topics between “true” and “false,” including nuances depending on the publication. As a complement to this way of contrasting information, visual and even chromatic scales are used, through which the audience can easily understand the nature of verified contents.

Among the limits of the research, it is necessary to highlight that it is useful to know and frame the activity carried out by fact-checking initiatives in Spanish, as the study includes in the sample all the existing projects with these characteristics. However, due to differences in the economic, linguistic and social realms, it is not possible to extrapolate the results obtained to all the media and working teams devoted to this activity.

All in all, this leaves a door open for future research, as it will be interesting to understand in a general way the processes and methods present in those media that have the objective of verifying information.

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