

Dolors Palau-Sampio

dolors.palau@uv.es

Professor. Language Theory
and Communication Sciences
Department. Universitat de
València, Spain.

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Fact-checking and scrutiny of power: Supervision of public discourses in new media platforms from Latin America

Abstract

Fact-checking has experienced substantial growth in recent years, as a technique aimed to monitor public discourse, at a time when the dissemination of fake news or the loss of media quality and credibility has reached worrying levels. This article analyzes nine projects launched since 2010 in half a dozen Latin American countries, representative of an emerging ecosystem in a region facing problems to achieve genuine media democracy. From a qualitative and quantitative approach, this research compares the work methodology and the evaluation models presented by the digital platforms, as well as the topics and actors that are subject to examination. The study highlights the aim of these projects, independent of traditional media, to evaluate statements on the most relevant issues of the sociopolitical agenda of their countries and public representatives. The importance of these platforms is reflected in the fact that only two in ten checks from the sample can be considered true, almost half of those identified as false and of those presenting some kind of inaccuracy. The analysis reveals significant differences when carrying out the verifications and presenting the results, with options for improvement in the number of sources, the inclusion of expert voices and audiovisual resources, or the interaction with readers. The Argentinian platform *Chequeado* appears as a reference model in this context.

Keywords

Fact-checking, public discourse, digital media, Latin America, quality journalism.

1. Introduction

Fact-checking projects have experienced substantial growth in recent years (Spivak, 2011; Stencel, 2016), as an essential tool aimed at monitoring and evaluating public claims and promises, and for holding speakers accountable for the reliability of the data and concepts they present, “a style of reporting dedicated to assessing the truth of political claims” (Graves, Nyhan & Reifler, 2016, p. 1). In this sense, fact-checkers

focus their attention specifically on claims based on verifiable facts (Amazeen, 2015, p. 4), in line with the argument posited by the American Press Institute:

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 (Elizabeth, 2014).

Spinsanity, the first fact-checking platform, was launched in the US in 2001 by three young graduates who presented their project as “a nonpartisan watchdog dedicated to unspinning misleading claims from politicians, pundits and the press” (Spinsanity, 2004), and as an attempt to counter growing political rhetoric. The nonprofit website *FactCheck.org* (2003) was established one year before *Spinsanity* disbanded, and in 2007 initiatives launched on two conventional media platforms: *The Fact Checker* (*Washington Post*) and *PolitiFact* (*St. Petersburg Times*, now *Tampa Bay Times*). Meanwhile, in 2005, UK's Channel 4 launched a blog to cover the parliamentary elections, which eventually spawned a fact-checking venture called *Fact Check*. In France, newspapers *Libération* and *Le Monde* embraced fact-checking initiatives –with the sections *Désintox* (2008) and *Les Décodeurs* (2009), respectively– and Germany's *Der Spiegel* introduced these practices in 2012, a year before the television programme *El objetivo* (La Sexta) set up the service in Spain. *Chequeado*, created in Argentina in 2010, pioneered fact-checking initiatives in Latin America and became a benchmark for the region, whose platforms are the focus of this study.

The report published by the Duke Reporters' Lab in June 2017 counted 126 active fact-checking websites and organizations (Stencel, 2017), suggesting a 24% increase compared to the previous year and twice the figure for 2015 (Adair & Thakore, 2015). Operating in 26 countries in Europe and in 8 in Latin American, these initiatives are spreading globally. In USA, fact-checking activities have increased by more than 900% since 2001, in written media, and by 2,000% in audiovisual media (Amazeen, 2013; Adair & Thakore, 2015; Adair & Sentencel, 2016). Beyond the data, the strength of this international fact-checking movement can be felt in the organization of international events, including Global Fact – which gathered almost 200 professionals from some fifty countries in July 2017 in Madrid for its fourth edition–, and the launch of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), in 2016.

2. Conceptual Framework

To certain extent, the rise of fact-checking seems paradoxical (López, Rodríguez & Álvarez, 2016), given its nature as a new-old professional specialization, in the sense that checking facts is the essence of journalism and a key element in guaranteeing quality and reliability (Gómez Mompert, Gutiérrez & Palau, 2013). However, in recent decades, fact-checking departments in legacy newspapers and magazines have been hit hard by the media crisis (Fole, 2012). The rapid spread of fact-checking can be explained by its ties to the core values of professional journalism. However, fact-checking also challenges its close connection to so-called *journalistic objectivity* and the regulations that call for a deliberate neutrality (Graves, Nyhan & Reifler, 2016), in the sense that it rejects the simplification of the “he said, she said” style (Graves, 2016), and attempts to interpret the context (Barnhurst, 2014; Fink & Schudson, 2014).

Fact-checking aims to contribute efficiently to the demand for accountability of political representatives and to provide better information for citizens, which is key to strengthening democracy (Nyhan & Reifler, 2014). Its viability largely depends on perception, on it being accepted as an impartial activity, “rendering judgment as to whether a claim is factually true” (Amazeen, 2015, p. 4). This verification is frequently presented as a

powerful tool to regenerate and reform the profession, a new approach to journalism “that fulfills its promise to help voters understand politics” (Nyhan & Reifler, 2014). Although activities skyrocket during electoral campaigns, fact-checking “clearly is not just for political campaigns anymore” (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012, p. 3) and has expanded well beyond the scope of politics (Amazeen et al, 2015, p. 20). In this sense, fact-checking “takes aim not just at campaign ads and formal debates but at speeches, interviews, emails, flyers, press releases, offhand comments—at any claims made in any forum by candidates, their staffs, or the wider political commentariat” (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012, p. 3). Researchers stress the importance of making a clear distinction between journalists and fact-checkers with a political agenda (2012, p. 6) and highlight that fact-checking has been embraced, particularly since 2008, by professional journalism (2012, p. 2) and operates by means of three specific mechanisms:

Changing people’s minds. To provide an effective counterweight to misinformation about any given issue, fact-checking must present the relevant facts to the right audiences in a way that encourages them to question misleading claims.

Changing journalism. A goal of many fact-checkers— and especially of media critics who factcheck news reports—is to encourage journalists to not just report competing claims but to assess them, and to challenge politicians who attempt to mislead the public.

Changing the conversation. By exposing political deception, fact-checkers and journalists in general may exert pressure on political figures to retreat from misleading claims—and perhaps discourage them from making such claims in future (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012, p. 3).

The landscape of fact-checking projects defies any attempt at categorization (Graves & Cherubini, 2016) and appears as a unique jigsaw puzzle, a combination of “divergent practices, missions and organizational forms, a broadly shared concern with promoting democratic discourse and accountable government unites various fact checking groups” that integrate “a transnational movement which includes journalists and non-journalists engaged in practicing and promoting an emergent form of accountability” (Graves, 2018, p. 14). Nevertheless, Graves & Cherubini argue that fact-checking takes two different forms: the newsroom model, which is a more professional model and associated with traditional media, and the NGO model, which is non-profit and operates independently. The former, incubated within media outlets themselves –especially in North Western Europe and the US– are able to draw on platforms and resources for its development, although they are limited by the constraints of the outlet’s editorial interests (2016, p. 8–10). The latter –which often partner with conventional news outlets to diffuse their activity– are free of corporate limitations and are typically backed by foundations and organizations that promote the development of democratic institutions. The NGO model is widespread in Eastern Europe (2016, p. 10–11) and Latin America.

Graves & Cherubini divide fact-checkers into three categories that sometimes overlap: reporters, reformers and experts. In fact, a survey performed among European fact-checkers revealed that 60% clearly identify as journalists, 30% with the role of reformer and 23% consider themselves experts or analysts in a specific field (2016, p. 12).

2.1. Assessment

The diversity of models has taken shape in a variety of practices that include long explanatory articles quoting multiple expert voices and others that resort to a concise style, eschewing explanatory context and the consideration of other perspectives (Graves, 2018, p. 625). Almost 80% of fact-checkers use some sort of truth scale (Stencel, 2016); although others consider it reductive and with little scientific substantiation (Graves, 2018, p. 626). Overall, the trend leans towards an icon-based classification as opposed to contextual

correction and, although there is no evidence that one format is more effective as a correction method, “the ability to choose did have at least one benefit: people who were given a choice of what type of correction to view evaluated the factchecking organization more favorably” (Amazeen et al, 2015, p. 18).

Both the number and legitimacy of fact-checking sites has grown in recent years (Lowrey, 2015, p. 15). However, Uscinski & Butler present some methodological challenges: “1) selection effects; 2) confounding multiple facts or picking apart a whole; 3) causal claims; 4) predicting the future; and 5) inexplicit selection criteria” (2013, p. 164-175). Given the lack of a normative procedure for fact-checking, Elizabeth & Mantzarlis (2016) put forward several suggestions that should be taken into account before publishing results. Authors underline the importance of not only including a link to the original source material, but also of being transparent with the audience: “Just as readers need to know the source of your facts, they also should know why you choose the statement you’re checking. Make it part of your fact-check format. Be specific in noting why the statement matters.” Transparency also depends on the steps taken – “procedures should be standardized and explained with every fact check” – and the justification of the topic subjected to verification: “You can’t fact-check an opinion. You can’t check a prediction (...) And it’s pointless to check a statement that’s unimportant, nitpicky, or simply a minor slip of the tongue.”

Among their recommendations, Elizabeth & Mantzarlis endorse an informative tone – “Be especially careful not to sound flippant or dismissive” – and a diligent attitude when following-up information and making corrections. They also emphasize the need to make sure communication flows both ways – “Ask your readers for feedback and suggestions, and let them know you’ve heard them” – and to continuously provide information on the methods used – “Let readers know that you have a standard, step-by-step methodology for conducting each fact check. No two fact checks are alike, certainly, but following the same set of guidelines for writing and publishing your fact check will help increase trust in the content and decrease accusations of bias” – and the code of ethics: “Your organization has a code of ethics or principles, right? (Right?) Publish it alongside your fact-checking content” (2016).

The International Fact-Checking Network is committed to a code of principles that includes many of these recommendations, summarized in five points: 1) A commitment to nonpartisanship and fairness; 2) A commitment to transparency of sources; 3) A commitment to transparency of funding and organization; 4) A commitment to transparency of methodology; and 5) A commitment to open and honest corrections (IFCN, 2016).

2.2. Reaction and impact

Despite the rapid spread of fact-checking, little is known about what society thinks about this activity (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012, p. 10; Nyhan & Reifler, 2014). Nevertheless, recent investigations – including research undertaken in the US to analyze the effects of exposure to fact-checking during the fall 2014 electoral campaign – show encouraging results: “Though many Americans are not familiar with the practice, the public generally holds very favorable attitudes (...) when people are randomly exposed to fact-checking, they not only come to view the practice even more favorably but they learned real information about politics” (Nyhan & Reifler, 2014, p. 13). Politicians also feel they are being held accountable: “The best evidence that politicians pay attention to fact-checkers may be how heatedly their staffs complain after a negative review” (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012, p. 11).

Trust in the format and willingness to accept the information that fact-checkers provide may differ under circumstances such as their political tendencies, state the authors. In this sense, in the US Republicans are more reluctant to accept fact-checking results than Democrats, particularly among people who have a better grasp of the political situation

(Nyhan & Reifler, 2014, p. 11-15). In contrast to critics such as Uscinski & Butler, Amazeen argues that fact-checking can be effective at correcting erroneous information and contributes to increasing trust in media that support this practice (2015, p. 16). Research by Amazeen et al. suggests that this technique promotes a better understanding of reality and that contextual explanations are useful, in topics other than politics (2015, p. 17-18). However, when fact-checking political issues, ideology plays a bigger role than correction: “[P]eople find fact checkers more credible when they correct the opposition and less so when they correct one’s own party and regardless the efforts to release new formats, partisans will complain” (Amazeen et al, 2015, p. 18).

Pomares & Guzmán note that measuring the impact of fact-checking is challenging, but focus on quantitative and qualitative techniques to estimate the effect on three levels: the influence on political elites (based on interviews with advisers to find out if they build results into their strategies); media footprint and references to fact-checking by candidates; and surveys asking citizens if they are aware of and trust these practices (2015, p. 9-10). The complexity of the fact-checking process and the time and resources required are significant obstacles to the practice becoming universal:

Journalists have to spend hours going through transcripts of speeches, debates and interviews to identify claims they will research.

Also, fact-checking requires advanced research techniques. While ordinary journalism can rely on simple “on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand” quotations, a fact-check requires more thorough research so the journalist can determine the accuracy of a claim.

Fact-checking also requires advanced writing skills that go beyond “just the facts” to persuade the reader whether the statement was true, false or somewhere in between. Fact-checking is a new form that has been called “reported conclusion” journalism. (Hassan et al, 2015, p. 3).

The need to offer results as soon as possible –during an electoral debate, for instance– and to increase the number of statements checked forecasts an automation of fact-checking, as argued by researchers (Ciampaglia et al, 2015; Hassan et al, 2015) and initiatives carried out by *PolitiFact* (Adair, 2016), *Washington Post* and *Full Fact* (Davies, 2016; Babakar, 2017). Despite the advantages of fact-checking when providing durable content, reaching the audience and encouraging their participation in the public debate (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012, p. 10), Lowrey stresses that it is economically challenging and difficult to reconcile with more commercial options, “because rigorous fact-checking consumes considerable staff resources (...), and their declarative, non-neutral nature may not play well with advertisers” (2015, p. 15).

Taken as an innovative technique, some authors argue that the growth of fact-checking takes a cue from proposals implemented by legacy media and celebrated professionals, recipients of prestigious journalism awards (Graves, Nyhan & Reifler, 2016) or a willingness to deal with situations that involve rivalry and uncertainty (Boczkowski, 2010). However, alongside the increase in projects that have embraced fact-checking practices, the report from Duke Reporters’ Lab also reveals that one third of the initiatives launched in recent years –64 out of 190 (July 2017)– have closed their doors, suggesting that not every venture manages to keep up with the demanding nature of the practice. The initiatives that failed were not only affiliated with independent outlets, but also with established media platforms including *Le Nouvel Observateur (Les Pinocchios)*, *Der Spiegel (Münchhausen-Check)* or German channel ZDF (*zDFcheck*).

Future challenges include generating popular demand (Graves, Nyhan & Reifler, 2016), appealing to the voters that are less informed, and achieving effective communication, whilst minimizing the conditions that “undermine the perceived neutrality of the format and the credibility of its practitioners’ conclusions” (Nyhan & Reifler, 2014, p. 14). In

professional terms, this involves building fact-checking into conventional journalism: “Are there any good reasons for elite news institutions like the Post and the Times to keep reporting and fact-checking separate—to have one article about what was said at the debate, and another about whether it was true?” Graves & Glaisyer think that one of the reasons why fact-checking has evolved towards specialization is because “journalists who have to protect their relationships with officials don’t make very effective fact-checkers. But the reverse may also be true—that reporters willing to challenge political claims won’t be as good at getting inside information” (2012, p. 9).

3. ‘Fact-checking’ and the new media landscape in Latin America

In July 2017, the Duke Reporters’ Lab database included twenty fact-checking initiatives in Latin America, fifteen of which are still active. Most operate independently, outside conventional media,¹ and make up the region’s emerging journalism ecosystem (Mochkofsky, 2011; Huertas, 2013). They constitute a generation of projects born during the past decade, channeled through the Internet, with an alternative nature (Harlow & Salaverría, 2016), and who assert their political and economic independence (Palau, 2016).

These initiatives, which are mainly non-profit and financed through international foundations (Requejo-Alemán & Lugo-Ocando, 2014), have erupted in a region that has traditionally faced serious obstacles to achieving genuine media democracy (Hughes & Lawson, 2005, p. 9-10), given the commercial orientation and persistence of patronage and patrimonial dependency (Waisbord, 2012, p. 440), or “conglomerate mergers” and the “absence of public service” (Becerra, 2014, p. 72). This paper sheds light on fact-checking ventures that are not tied to media groups, and that aspire to become an alternative to conventional or mainstream outlets.

The eleven fact-checking platforms that are still active and are completely independent are located in half a dozen countries: Brazil (5), Colombia (2), Argentina (1), Uruguay (1), Mexico (1) and Guatemala (1). We have not included Brazilian outlets *E-farsas* and *Boatos*, which specialize in viral content and have a commercial structure, in our research because they diverge from the initiatives outlined below (Table 1). Half of the projects analyzed are integrated in new digital media outlets (*La Silla Vacía*, *Agência Pública*, *Animal Político* and *Plaza Pública*), whilst four platforms focus exclusively on fact-checking activities. *Agência Lupa* is an exceptional case, since although the venture is now hosted on the *Piauí* magazine website, the project launched as an independent effort. As regards the type of business model used by these fact-checking sites, most are backed by non-profit foundations and institutions (Echt, 2016), except for three, which formed corporations to carry out their activity.

¹ Three projects in Brazil and one in Chile are affiliated with traditional media outlets.

Table 1. Fact-checking projects

Platform	Associated outlet	Country/Year of launch	Business model
<i>Chequeado</i>	-	Argentina, 2010	Non profit
<i>Detector de Mentiras</i>	<i>La Silla Vacía</i>	Colombia, 2014	Blogosfera Producciones SAS
<i>UYCheck</i>	-	Uruguay, 2014	Non profit
<i>Truco</i>	<i>Agência Pública</i>	Brazil, 2014	Non profit
<i>El Sabueso</i>	<i>Animal Político</i>	Mexico, 2015	Elephant Publishing LLC & Printed Matter LLC (USA)
<i>Con pruebas</i>	<i>Plaza Pública</i>	Guatemala, 2015	Non profit
<i>Aos Fatos</i>	-	Brazil, 2015	Non profit
<i>Agência Lupa</i>	Hosted by the magazine <i>Piauí</i>	Brazil, 2015	Agência de Jornalismo e Checagem Lupa SA
<i>ColombiaCheck</i>	-	Colombia, 2016	Non profit

Source: Compiled by authors

The websites we have analyzed in this paper started operating as of 2014, largely thanks to support and advice from *Chequeado*, which contributed to the launch of web projects *Detector de mentiras*, *Truco*, *UYCheck*, *El Sabueso* and *ColombiaCheck*, the latter created in 2016. The Argentinian platform was spawned by Fundación La Voz Pública, with the mission of “strengthening democracy by defending the right to information and checking public claims as a vehicle to enrich the debate”, holding leaders and opinion makers accountable for their statements:

Our mission is to: a) Increase the cost of lies, b) Become an alternative source of information based on facts and data, c) Encourage citizens and our user base to produce content and monitor public statements, d) Build new technologies and new communication mechanisms into journalism (Chequeado, 2017).

4. Methodology

This research paper aims to analyze the alternative fact-checking projects that have launched in Latin America in recent years and understand their contribution to plurality and diversity in the local public debate. While North American and European platforms have been the object of several studies, Latin American projects have barely been analyzed. Based on a methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, the paper aims to explore how these fact-checkers select, process and assess the public claims that undergo evaluation. The study asks the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do platforms fact-check claims and communicate their findings, and how transparent are they in doing so?
- RQ2. Which topics and actors are held accountable? How accurate are they?
- RQ3. What sources do fact-checkers use to verify the claims?
- RQ4. How important are reader interaction and the use of audiovisual and graphic elements in the procedure?

The sample is based on the Duke Reporters’ Lab database and includes the initiatives outlined in Table 1. We decided to run the same number of checks so as to obtain a

homogeneous corpus for a comparative study², as detailed in Table 2, where the first column refers to facts checked from the launch of each project until July 15, 2017.

Table 2. Number of checks completed and analyzed in the sample

Platform	Total count from launch until 15/07/2017	1st selection: From 01/01/2016	2nd selection: From 01/10/2016	3rd selection: To 15/07/2017
<i>Chequeado</i>	1,288	4/01 to 1/02/2016	4/10 to 25/10/2016	13/07 to 15/06/2016
<i>Detector de Mentiras</i>	105	31/1 to 10/8/2016	27/10/2016 to 15/01/2017	15/07 to 12/05/2017
<i>UYCheck</i>	233	19/03 to 19/05/2016	3/10 to 21/11/2016	12/07 to 6/02/2017
<i>Truco</i>	71	26/02 to 28/06/2016	25/10/2016 to 21/02/2017	12/07 to 1/06/2016
<i>El Sabueso</i>	168	4/01 to 5/03/2016	31/10/2016 to 1/02/2017	7/07 to 27/04/2017
<i>Con pruebas</i>	42	14/01 to 6/04/2016	-	13/3/2017 to 20/6/2017
<i>Aos Fatos</i>	136	21/1 to 22/2/2016	17/10/2016 to 8/03/2017	14/07 to 19/04/2017
<i>Agência Lupa</i>	371	1/06 to 19/2/2016	1/10 to 18/10/2016	14/07 to 21/6/2017
<i>ColombiaCheck</i>	131	20/03 to 17/06/2016	2/10 to 1/11/2016	12/7 to 29/06/2017
TOTAL ANALYZED		260 checks		

Source: Compiled by authors

The initial selection included the first ten checks performed after January 1, 2016 – except *ColombiaCheck*, launched on March 20, the date used for the first sample–; the second focused on another ten performed after October 1, 2016; and the third reversed the process and analyzed the last ten checks published before July 15, 2017. This sample of thirty checks –except *Con Pruebas*³– per project (N=260) provides initial insight into the phenomenon, considering the diversity of models and publication calendar. In this sense, the sample represents an average of 18.3% of checks since activity was launched, except for *Chequeado*, whose volume of activity since 2010 drops the percentage to 2.3% of 1,288 checks.

5. Results

5.1. Methodology and transparency

One of the most important issues in fact-checking data and public claims is how transparent institutions are when detailing the process involved in each of the stages. However, despite the relevance of the information, one of the sites analyzed –*Con Pruebas*– does not explain how it operates and another two –*UYCheck* and *ColombiaCheck*– barely outline their methods. The process typically involves six to eight steps. *Chequeado* proceeds as follows: “1) Select a public claim; 2) Weigh up its relevance; 3) Check original source; 4)

² In cases that included a chain of statements, the study focused only on the initial statement.

³ *Con Pruebas* had only published 20 checks during the period analyzed. Enrique Naveda, general coordinator for *Plaza Pública*, which hosts the platform, noted it was a one-off situation caused by their web redesign.

Check official source; 5) Check alternative sources; 6) Place in context; 7) Confirm, qualify or debunk the claim; and 8) Rate” (Chequeado, 2017).

In parallel, it is important to consider the abundance of categories used by media outlets to offer an assessment after the analysis, which range from four (*Con Pruebas; Aos Fatos*) to nine options (*Chequeado*). This allows for a wide scale of greys between both extremes of the classification, as represented in Table 3. Similarly, there are multiple options for how these results are communicated, including: 1) explanatory articles featuring contextual information and a reasoning process; 2) articles featuring a concise explanation of the verdict; 3) a mixed format that combines the aforementioned models or includes intermediate options.

Table 3. Procedure and assessment

Project	Type of explanation	Type of article	Number of categories	Definition of the categories
<i>Chequeado</i>	Detailed	Explanatory	9	<i>Verdadero</i> (True); <i>Verdadero +</i> (True +); <i>Verdadero, pero...</i> (True, but...); <i>Discutible</i> (Disputable); <i>Apresurado</i> (Hasty); <i>Exagerado</i> (Exaggerated); <i>Engañoso</i> (Deceitful); <i>Insostenible</i> (Untenable); <i>Falso</i> (False)
<i>Detector de Mentiras</i>	Detailed	Concise	8(10) ⁴	<i>Cierto [Verdadero]</i> (True); <i>Cierto, pero...</i> (True, but...); <i>Apresurado</i> (Hasty); <i>Debatible</i> (Debatable); <i>Exagerado</i> (Exaggerated); <i>Engañoso</i> (Deceitful); <i>Falso</i> (False); <i>Inchequeable [Cierto+; Insostenible]</i> (Unverifiable [True+; Untenable])
<i>UYCheck</i>	Outline	Explanatory	7	<i>Verdadero</i> (True); <i>Verdad a medias</i> (Half true); <i>Ridículo</i> (Ludicrous); <i>Nini</i> (Neither...nor); <i>Inflado</i> (Inflated); <i>Falso</i> (False); <i>Engañoso</i> (Deceitful)
<i>Truco</i>	Detailed	Mixed	8 (7) ⁵	<i>Verdadeiro (Zap!)</i> (True); <i>Sem contexto (Istá certo, mas peraí)</i> (Without context); <i>Contraditório (Parlamentar em crise)</i> (Contradictory); <i>Exagerado</i> (Exaggerated); <i>Distorcido</i> (Distorted); <i>Discutível (Não é bem assim)</i> (Questionable); <i>Falso (Blefe)</i> (False); <i>Impossível provar</i> (Impossible to prove); <i>[Qué medo!, Truco!]</i> [How scary!, Trick!]
<i>El Sabueso</i>	Detailed	Explanatory	8	<i>Verdadero</i> (True); <i>Verdad a medias</i> (Half true); <i>Discutible</i> (Disputable); <i>No se puede probar</i> (Cannot be proven); <i>Engañoso</i> (Deceitful); <i>Casi falso</i> (Almost false), <i>Falso</i> (False); <i>Ridículo</i> (Ludicrous)

⁴ *La Silla Vacía* decided to cut back on the number of categories; eliminated categories appear in square brackets.

⁵ In 2017, *Agência Pública* modified their classification system. The previous version appears in brackets, alongside the update. The eliminated categories also appear in square brackets.

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<i>Con pruebas</i>	Not specified	Mixed	4	<i>Verdadero</i> (True); <i>Engañoso</i> (Deceitful); <i>Falso</i> (False); <i>Sin pruebas</i> (No evidence)
<i>Aos Fatos</i>	Detailed	Mixed	4	<i>Verdadeiro</i> (True); <i>Impreciso</i> (Imprecise); <i>Exagerado</i> (Exaggerated); <i>Falso</i> (False)
<i>Agência Lupa</i>	Detailed	Concise	8	<i>Verdadeiro</i> (True); <i>Verdadeiro, mas</i> (True, but); <i>Ainda é cedo para dizer</i> (Still to early to say); <i>Exagerado</i> (Exaggerated); <i>Contraditório</i> (Contradictory); <i>Insustentável</i> (Untenable); <i>Falso</i> (False); <i>De olho</i> (Guess)
<i>Colombia Check</i>	Outline	Explanatory	6	<i>Verdadera</i> (True); <i>Aproximada</i> (Approx); <i>Ligera</i> (Light); <i>Inflada</i> (Inflated); <i>Engañosa</i> (Deceitful); <i>Falsa</i> (False)

Source: Compiled by authors

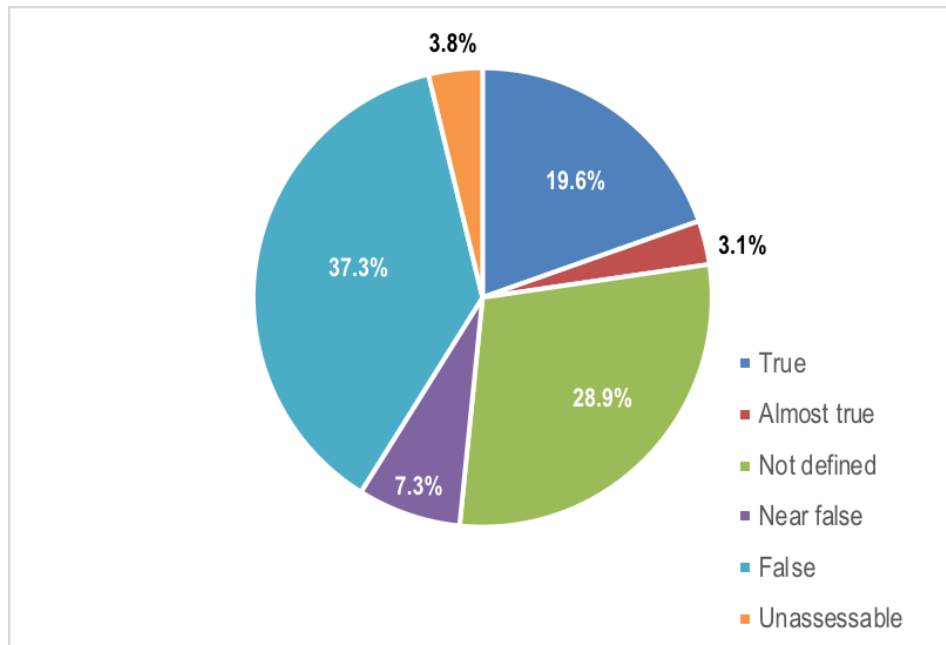
The results indicate that slightly more than half of the cases (57%) can be clearly rated as true or false –and their equivalents *cierto* and *zap!*, in the first case; and *blefe*, in the second–, whereas the rest are distributed among intermediate options or are not assessable (3.8%). An analysis of the verdicts suggests a tendency towards inaccuracy in the public claims that have been subject to fact-checking: while there were almost one hundred false claims, only fifty proved to be true. Furthermore, 39.3% of the checks cannot be subscribed to the aforementioned options, thus revealing that the bulk of claims fall outside a binary proposal. Given the multitude of categories –there are 16 denominations based on the findings of the checks included in the sample–, these options have been divided into three subgroups in an attempt to establish a second level of classification: *casí verdad* (almost true), *casí falso* (almost false) and *indefinido* (indefinite), which includes up to ten definitions (Table 4). Consequently, 80.4% of claims analyzed in the sample proved to be problematic.

Table 4. Grouped values

Type of verdict	ID
<i>Verdadero</i> (True); <i>Cierto</i> (Reliable); <i>Zap!</i>	True
<i>Cierto con matices</i> (True with nuances); <i>Aproximada</i> (Approx); <i>Verdad a medias</i> (Half true); <i>Verdadero, pero</i> (True, but...)	Almost true
<i>Exagerado</i> (Exaggerated); <i>Inflado</i> (Inflated); <i>Ridículo</i> (Ludicrous); <i>Distorcido</i> (Distorted); <i>Nao é bem assim</i> (Questionable); <i>Engañoso</i> (Deceitful); <i>Impreciso</i> (Imprecise); <i>Contradictorio</i> (Contradictory); <i>Debatible</i> (Debatable); <i>Ligera</i> (Light)	Indefinite
<i>Insostenible</i> (Untenable); <i>Casi falso</i> (Almost false)	Almost false
<i>Falso</i> (False); <i>Blefe</i>	False
<i>No se puede probar</i> (Cannot be proven), <i>Apresurado</i> (Hasty); <i>Ainda é cedo para dizer</i> (Still to early to say); <i>Ista certo mas perai</i> ; <i>Sem contexto</i> (Without context)	Unassessable

Source: Compiled by authors

Chart 1. Fact-checking results



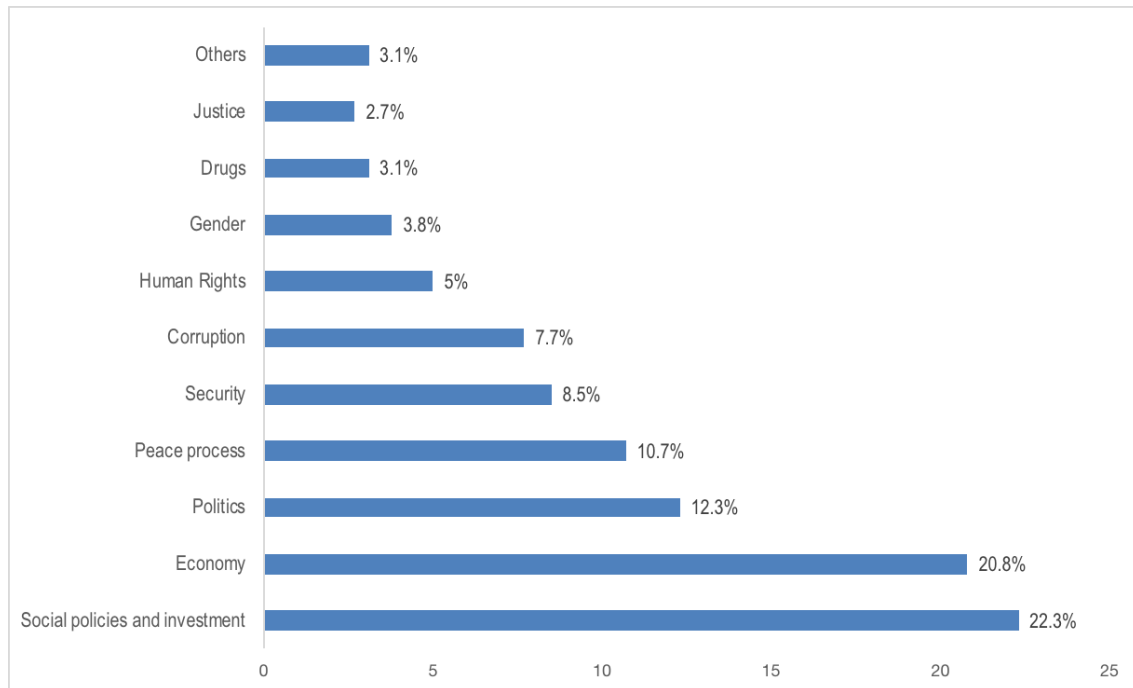
Source: Compiled by authors

5.2. Topics, social actors and truthfulness

The fact-checking outlets that we analyzed for this research effort focus primarily on the hottest topics on the political agenda, particularly issues that directly affect citizens, such as social policies for education, health or poverty reduction, which represent 22.3% of the total. The aforementioned issues are featured prominently in fact-checks run by *Chequeado*, *UYCheck*, *El Sabueso* or *Agência Lupa*, among other outlets. The economy, in the widest sense of the term, and specifically debt and unemployment take second place (20.8%) of facts checked, particularly on *Chequeado*, *UYCheck* and Brazilian platforms *Truco* and *Aos Fatos*. Political issues, in the sense of keeping checks on the work of the government, play a smaller role (12.3%) on most ventures, although they did feature regularly on the three Brazilian platforms due to the political climate, marked by the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff.

Research results show how important political agendas are compared to other topics in each of the countries selected. In this sense, the peace process in Colombia takes fourth place, as indicated by fact-checking carried out by *ColombiaCheck* –created by the Consejo de Redacción (Editorial Board) to monitor the issue– and, to a lesser extent, by the other national platform included in the sample, *Detector de Mentiras*. Brazilian projects focus their attention on corruption (7.7%), whilst for Mexican outlet *El Sabueso*, attached to digital newspaper *Animal Político*, security is by far the most important issue.

Chart 2. Topics of the claims that were fact-checked



Source: Compiled by authors

Other issues, such as human rights (5%), gender issues (3.8%) or drugs (3.1%), do not have an impact on the global tally, but are subjected to checks in certain regions depending on the problems affecting the countries in question. The former is relevant for Colombian platform *Detector de mentiras*, Mexican outlet *El Sabueso* and Guatemalan project *Con Pruebas*, whilst gender issues are a priority for Brazil's *Aos Fatos* and drugs are a major focal point for both of the Colombian platforms. Legal affairs represent 2.7% of the checks included in the sample.

The study reveals that fact checks usually target key public figures who play a prominent role in society and are more likely to be held accountable for their claims. In this sense, four in ten checks focused on government officials (40.4%), whilst a quarter of the checks analyzed claims by members of parliament and senators (26.2%). On this scale, claims by governors and mayors, as leaders of regional and local government, take third place (17.7%) and judicial representatives make up 4.2% of assessments. Furthermore, 11.5% of the checks targeted a group made up of political and union leaders, journalists and anonymous authors, based on *whatsapp* messages, as analyzed by *Detector de Mentiras* or *Truco*, whereas the percentage of false claims is higher than that of true ones in the *Others* group.

Can a link be traced between the type of issuer and the trustworthiness of their claims? The data we have analyzed has shed light on some interesting trends, especially among representatives of Congress and the Senate, which present an index of false verdicts that is almost eight points below the number of claims analyzed. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the percentage of true verdicts for local and regional governors is eleven points below the number of claims checked, and the number of false verdicts is over three times that of true claims. Legal representatives stand out for the number of true claims, whereas the group *Others* increases the percentage of false claims.

Table 5. Political and social actors

Position	%	% of false claims	% of true claims
Presidents, VPs and ministers	40.4	42.3	43.1
MPs and senators	26.2	19.6	31.4
Governors, mayors	17.7	20.6	5.9
Others (politicians and union leaders, etc.)	11.5	15.4	7.8
Legal representatives	4.2	2.1	11.8

Source: Compiled by authors

5.3. Sources checked during the procedure

The sources used to verify that a claim is true or false play a major role when evaluating the activities undertaken by fact-checking platforms, given that the final verdict and their credibility depend largely on the variety and reliability of sources. First and foremost, it is important to note that half of the cases included in the sample (49.6%) used three or more sources of information to check the claim. However, the other half issued a verdict based on two or fewer sources, and almost a third of them relied on one or no sources to back their conclusions.

Although it is difficult to define the optimal number of sources required, the use of a single option is very limited, especially in divisive cases such as those subjected to fact-checks. However, the situation is far from homogeneous. For instance, an outlet like *Chequeado* relies on an average of 6.8 sources and backs 93% of checks on three or more sources. Aside from the Argentinian platform, only *ColombiaCheck* and *Con Pruebas* implement double checks on more than half of the claims in the sample.

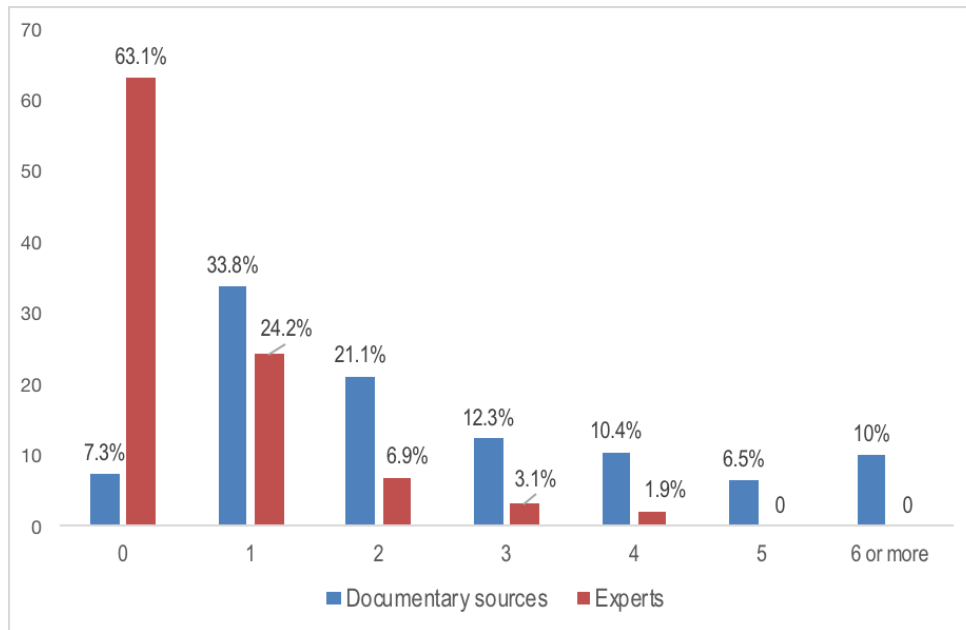
Table 6. Resources used in fact-checks

Platform	Average of sources	More than three sources	With expert sources
<i>Chequeado</i>	6.8	93%	90%
<i>Detector de Mentiras</i>	3.6	16.7%	30%
<i>UYCheck</i>	4.7	40%	3.3%
<i>Truco</i>	4.3	43.3%	30%
<i>El Sabueso</i>	4.3	46.7%	30%
<i>Con pruebas</i>	3.7	55%	60%
<i>Aos Fatos</i>	4.7	46.7%	6.7%
<i>Agência Lupa</i>	3.6	40%	33.3%
<i>ColombiaCheck</i>	4.2	73.3%	56.7%

Source: Compiled by authors

A second element that is factored into the assessment is the type of source cited in the fact-checks. Documentation, primarily reports, official statistics and studies, and legal or administrative information, is relied on heavily. This translated into a low reliance on personal sources: under a third of checks included in the sample (36.9%) complement the activity with an expert opinion. This option is, again, used by the outlets that referred to three or more sources in most of their checks. *Chequeado*, *ColombiaCheck* and *Con Pruebas* studied the claims with analysts and specialists from different fields of knowledge.

Chart 3. Use of documentation and expert opinions



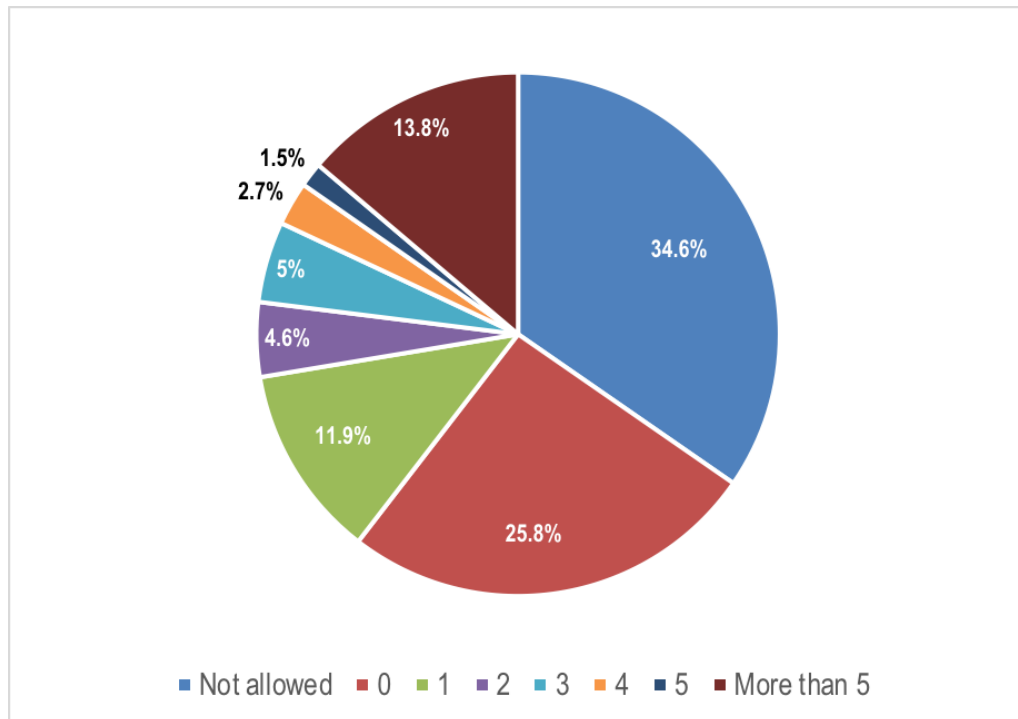
Source: Compiled by authors

5.4. Audiovisual elements and interaction

The platforms analyzed in this study employ a limited number of audiovisual resources, and only as a means to explain fact-checking procedures. Whilst a third of the checks include charts, 66.1% do not include them. In fact, only *UYCheck* (28) and *Aos Fatos* (15) use charts in at least 50% of the checks in the sample, and *Chequeado*, *El Sabueso* and *Con pruebas* provide between nine and twelve. The rest of the outlets barely include charts in their procedures. Videos are hardly ever used to back up a conclusion, and use is below 4% in checks.

Despite the relevance of the issues tackled in the checks and the importance of options for interaction in the public debate, their use is quite limited. A third of the platforms included in the sample has disabled comments –Brazil’s *Agência Lupa* and *Aos Fatos*, as well as *ColombiaCheck*– and in all other fact-checking efforts user participation is not common. Of 170 checks that allowed comments, almost 40% had no interactions, 18.2% had one comment and 14.7% had two or three. Again, differences were noted when looking into each of the platforms independently. For instance, 83.3% of the checks performed by *Chequeado* received two or more comments, and the same applies in four in ten checks performed by *Detector de mentiras* and *Truco*.

Chart 4. Reader comments



Source: Compiled by authors

6. Conclusions

This report has allowed us to take an in-depth look at the work dynamics of a group of fact-checking outlets operating in different Latin American countries and their contribution to the communication ecosystem of the region. In the first place, results indicate the decision to focus on issues that have an impact on the social and political landscape, as revealed in the selection of topics and actors that are targeted in the fact checks. This demonstrates a willingness to consolidate a public service that grants priority to a civic agenda and the accountability of political powers (in Graves, 2018) in a communicative context marked traditionally by corporate concentration, commercial inclinations or patronage (Hughes & Lawson, 2005; Waisbord, 2012; Becerra, 2014). Despite operating independently from large media groups, their focus of attention and methodology prove that, instead of playing a bit part, these outlets aspire to become key elements in the public debate. Particularly at a time when the increase in fake news and post-truth threaten the standards of quality and credibility of both the media and journalists (Anderson & Rainie, 2017; Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Their common characteristics and the collaboration between the platforms led by *Chequeado*, backs the thesis of a media ecosystem undergoing a process of change in the region (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014).

Secondly, the fact that most claims present some sort of inaccuracy –eight out of ten– that prevents them being classed as true reveals the importance of fact-checking public claims and the relevance of the work undertaken by these platforms, especially since, as mentioned above, the number of claims deemed false practically doubles the number of true claims. In addition, it is important to note the nature of the claims that are subject to scrutiny, which tackle key issues such as social policies, poverty, economy and the monitoring of the government agenda or which are made, in most cases, by public representatives elected by the citizens. Furthermore, in four out of ten cases the results of

the checks are considered indefinite, which opens the door to new studies that attempt to better understand the strategies used to manipulate and mask the public discourse. It would also be interesting to take a closer look at the results to try and understand why there is such a significant difference between the number of true and false verdicts in claims made by parliamentary representatives and local and regional governors.

Thirdly, the analysis reveals that beyond a set of common standards, there are multiple proposals for how to assess checks, implement procedures and publish findings, in line with fact-checking platforms in other parts of the world (Graves, 2018). This leads to a consideration on the level of definition the verdicts can have when determining the distance from the truth, how useful they are to the readership or the extent to which they capture the subtleties among a vast range of conclusions. In this sense, it would be interesting to establish a universal classification. As regards the verification process, the analysis of sources used in each check indicates there is room for substantial improvement, both in the number of sources and also in access to experts and researchers that can enrich results with documentation, along the lines of the procedure implemented by Argentinian platform *Chequeado*. Furthermore, the use of audiovisual resources could contribute to making arguments and results more accessible.

The social impact of fact-checking is one of the key points of this investigation. Although this paper has not looked at the issue directly, results have revealed that there is very little interaction with readers, other than in exceptional cases. This indicates how difficult it is to have an open conversation with citizens, which can also be explained by the relatively limited exposure of these projects or by the fact that three of these platforms have comments turned off. Alongside a discursive analysis of the comments, future research could explore the formulas used to implement and promote interaction, particularly given the explicit aim of these initiatives, which is to involve citizens in the task of monitoring the public discourse (Caeiro, 2014).

The methodology used to analyze results can be replicated in other studies that compare the work dynamics of fact-checking platforms located in other latitudes or attached to conventional media, so as to establish similarities and differences in how they operate.

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