Debunking News as a Journalistic Genre: From the Inverted Pyramid to a Circular Writing Model

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This research identifies the common elements present in debunking news that define this sort of information as a new journalistic genre. For this purpose, after a standard literature review related to journalistic genres, fake news, fact-checking, and the state of journalism, a qualitative methodology consisting of a content analysis of 60 debunk news from politifact.com (the United States) and maldita.es (Spain) and interviews with editors (5) of the fact-checking platforms were carried out. Findings indicate a circular writing structure with common elements present in debunk news: A headline that points out and stresses the falsehood; a first paragraph that presents the origin of the disinformation; a body of the text that exposes the evidence found when analyzing the facts; and finally, a closing paragraph, that is the final verdict, that asserts whether the news is true or false, underlines the truth, and labels the credibility of the information.

Keywords: debunk, disinformation, fact-checking, journalism, journalistic genres

An important challenge for journalism today is to guide citizens in the process of discerning fake from real news. This new responsibility goes beyond traditional journalistic routines (Humprecht, 2019). The traditional duties of a journalist include providing society with reliable and unbiased information—regarding the six "W" of journalism: Who, what, where, when, why, and how—rather than spotting false stories and debunking them by supplying truthful sources and accurate data. Because of the new era of Internet hoaxes, information can be classified as either true or false (LaGarde & Hudgins, 2018) and, therefore, journalism not only denotes a set of practices for informing people but also monitoring strategies for digital information and the identification of fake news.

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Nevertheless, the social problem represented by these fabricated stories has long existed—they are as old as oratory—described as frequent initial modes of journalism, especially prevalent during times of crisis and unrest (Waisbord, 2018). So, although deceitful information has been disseminated before under different names and expressions, information disorders increase with the sophisticated technologies' evolution adopting new formats and purposes of deception: Satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false connection, false context and manipulated content, clickbait, online falsehoods, fake news, "junk news," rumors, myths and legends, and so on. This variety of tricks is multiplying and spreading harmful content faster than ever before (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), creating an intentional "War of the Words" (Tandoc & Seet, 2022) and manipulating the truth by cheapening its meaning to the point of doubting its original value and meaning (Gescinska, 2023). Moreover, these types of messages and stories have found social platforms to be the perfect place to perpetuate themselves as it is here where citizens share them and talk about them, which in turn forces the media ecosystem to pay attention to them (Mihailidis, 2022).

Hence, despite the classic, twofold understanding of journalism as a news-gathering and storytelling process, nowadays the core journalistic values have changed, and journalists must also commit to identifying and reporting fake news. This change stems from the current dichotomic nature of news as being true or false and the role of the mainstream media as arbiters of factuality (Bufacchi, 2021).

In this context, fact-checking journalism or verification journalism emerges, representing the rise of a new "X journalism" (Loosen et al., 2022), and it realized as a new business model (Echeverri, Rodríguez, & Rodríguez, 2018; Graves, Nyhan, & Reifle, 2015; Hermida, 2012; Shirky, 2014): Whereas some mainstream media have created a fact-checking unit to detect inaccuracies and lies—within their own media department—there are increasingly more specialized newsrooms oriented toward unmasking fake stories (Lowrey, 2017). Even some practitioners recommend certain models and praxis, as in the case of Lakoff (2018), who outlined his version of a structure for correcting misinformation and false claims: The Truth Sandwich structure. This design was presented so that journalists can create their own debunking news stories: Always frame the truth first because framing it first offers an advantage. When the lie is placed first, the lies win. Thus, start with the truth. Next, point to the lie. Then return immediately to the truth. The truth must always be repeated more than the lie.

However, Hodges (2018) argues that the rebuttal of news, as it is approached today by mainstream media, is wrong and inaccurate, and this happens for several reasons, including readers becoming familiar with certain misinformation pieces, excessively complex refutations, and the "defensive processing of facts at odds with partisan views" (p. 263). In this sense, Wojdynski, Binford, and Jefferson (2019) also warn, following Mihailidis and Viotty's (2017) approach, that "the mainstream press, in the process of reporting on the spread of the rumor and debunking its claims, may have contributed to legitimizing the hoax" (p. 167). Schwarz, Newman, and Leach (2016) agree, in that, ironically, "many correction strategies inadvertently make the false information more easily acceptable by, for example, repeating it or illustrating it with anecdotes and pictures" (p. 85). On the contrary, Vraga, Ecker, Žeželj, Lazić, and Azlan (2023) conclude that "debunking is unlikely to backfire, so should be encouraged in most scenarios. Corrections can be made more effective by using best practices," which they summarize in the acronym "REACT":

Repetition, Empathy, Alternative explanations, Credible sources, and Timely responses in any debunking efforts (p. 94).

We are also facing a paradigm shift in the approach to information: now the news is not what bursts into the news unexpectedly, but it is news that there has been a hoax, or a lie and the content is based on alerting public opinion of what kind of hoax it is and how it has been contrasted. And this new approach has in turn taken on new forms. Today we can see how the fact-checking media, beyond refuting political claims, verify popular content circulating on the Internet and have broadened the range of content offered by their media, thus creating a hierarchy of thematic sections to refutations, distinguishing refutations on health, feminism, science, migration, or economics, among others, and giving free rein to the evolution of refutation to consolidate it as a journalistic genre.

Overall, the main purpose of this research is to describe debunking news as a new journalistic genre. Debunked news is the content or the message (Lasswell, 1948) in the debunking process and as such is communicated through certain attributes and characteristics, has a concrete narrative structure, and implies new professional procedures and journalistic routines. From this central approach comes the objective of identifying the common elements and praxis present in debunked news that define this sort of information. To achieve this objective the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1:   Do the verification characteristics allow us to speak of a new journalistic genre?

RQ2:   What defines verification in today's media system?

RQ3:   What are the standard procedures and routines that professionals follow in the process of creating debunked news?

RQ4:   What are the main characteristics of debunked news that make this format different from other journalistic genres?

The Origins of Debunking News

During the early days of journalism, in the 16th century, information professionals developed their own processes for the treatment of sensitive information and designated their information as unconfirmed (Pettegree, 2014). The first women tasked with debunking information also quarantined their results until they were fully corroborated. However, this practice of trust toward the reader has somehow gotten lost. McNair (2017) reflects on how the post-truth era has redefined the concepts of objectivity and truth, characteristic of the 20th century presented by Schudson (2001). Bufacchi (2021) also emphasizes the danger of post-truth—as opposed to other concepts such as "lies" and "bullshit"—in having created an environment in which the value of objective facts has been deflated and scientific truth has no legitimacy.

It is precisely in a digital environment characterized by information disorder where journalism needs to develop a solid argumentative strategy to combat the variety of hoaxes and their intentions, which have been extensively defined by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017): Those that belong to the "misinformation"

sphere, which gathers those contents that arise from a bad praxis or inadequate execution of information—misleading information and false connections; those that belong to the category of "disinformation" and that, disguised as news, aim to deceive, disorient, or harm—false content, imposter content, manipulated content, and fabricated content; and lastly, those that belong to the category of malinformation—leaks, harassment, hate speech—whose objective is to berate someone. Moreover, there are other persuasive strategies that can lead to deceit, such as clickbait, biased information, propaganda, humor, satire, and irony, among others (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Part of the argumentative strategy adopted to spread the disproven must focus on the format, as Nyhan and Reifler (2014) pointed out a decade ago. This is related to "connecting with audiences" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 78). For example, these authors state that an experimental study found that content in video format was deemed more engaging and comprehensible when compared with text-based debunk stories (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). When they write debunks, they should explain to the audience how the process of verification was undertaken. In that regard, Kwan (2019) reckons that "while side-by-side visuals can be useful for informing audiences about popular disinformation, adding prominent graphics or a text overlay could increase a debunk's effectiveness, clearly distinguishing between the original and the manipulation" (p. 16).

In terms of content, Guallar and Codina (2018) believe that the discursive strategy must be sheltered by a critical labor of healing and documentation. On the other hand, Chan, Jones, Hall, and Albarracín (2017) consider that mistaken information must be fixed with new and detailed information and offer three pieces of advice on how to debunking in an effective way: "(a) reduce arguments that support misinformation; (b) engage audiences in scrutiny and counterarguing of misinformation; (c) introduce new information as part of the debunking message" (p. 1544).

Lastly, in terms of its structure, Magallón-Rosa (2018) states that disproven pieces have a particular communicative structure that follows certain reasoning: The inclusion of origin of the information—if it has been published before, where did it appear last and where was it disseminated; the creation of every disproven piece with a negation, with the risk of drawing a connection in readers' minds (Kwan, 2019); the organized reveal of every source that the debunking media have used to refute the information; and the declarations of the main characters of the disproven information.

On the other end, the audience proves to be an essential ally in the production of disproven pieces. Most of the media are equipped with spaces to ease the participation of their users so that they can share their doubts concerning suspicious information. This would respond to Shoemaker and Reese's (2013) theory of how the audience influences the media's production of the day's events and their routines, which, they stress, are not random but are adapted to their audiences and the technologies they demand. Iannelli and Splendore (2017) endorse this strategy when they state that those verification projects in which journalists involve their readers in the process of debunking fake news respond to a task that should be society's: to combat that which is false. This interaction with the public seems to encourage the battle against misinformation (Amorós, 2019; Jiménez, 2019). Indeed, the findings of Saldaña and Vu's (2022) work suggest that the journalist-audience relationship plays a central role in understanding debunking behaviors in online spaces.

However, these journalistic projects generate several doubts about their financial viability (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017), their impartiality, how can fact-checkers disprove a myth without reinforcing their message (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012), or "the problematic lack of standardization among platforms' policies for identifying and labelling misinformation, which can complicate news work routines" (Bélair-Gagnon, Larsen, Graves, & Westlund, 2023, p. 1180). Some believe its main drawback is its workflow, virality, and the effectiveness of a fictional story due to its effect on consumer emotions (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

Is Debunking a Journalistic Genre?

Journalistic genres are linguistic tools and narrative strategies that combine several rules, codes, and regulations agreed on and shared. Hence, the selection of information and the organization, order, and assessment of the material gathered are also implied in a journalistic genre (Armentia & Caminos, 2003). "Journalists write their stories according to genre conventions and are aware readers are also familiar with them. [. . .] They structure the reception of news by the public and they make it possible to understand what is written" (Deuze, 2008, p. 25).

Overall, journalistic genres contain a series of characteristics and a specific structure that define each genre and make it different from the rest of the genres (Casasús, 1995; Martínez-Albertos, 1974). Broersma (2007) argues that there are many defining attributes while considering a new genre, such as for example: creativity, form, style, and deep concern by critical reflection, while Silverblatt (2007) talks just about "order":

> A type, class, or category of representation that shares distinctive and easily identifiable features. The under view of Richardson, Parry, and Corner (2013, p. 9) is more practical; they point out genres provide "basic" templates both for media practice and for media use. (p. 3)

However, Crowston and Williams (2000) specify that the "definition of genre relies on social acceptance, it is impossible to define the exact point at which a new genre emerges from the old one. Acceptance may take many years" (p. 203). The history of journalism clearly proves that the origin of this profession is situational. Bazerman (1994) defines the concept of genres as "structured discursive fields" that may be taken in a set of circumstances (p. 79). Genres are typified texts that "allow us to create highly consequential meanings in highly articulated and developed systems" (Bazerman, 1994, p. 79). Østergaard and Bungaard (2015) consider "genres as text types that co-emerge with and, therefore, shape the situations in which they are used" (p. 98). Hence, "genres emerge as amendments, accommodations or suitable modifications of already existing text types with a view to provide an adequate discursive response to a novel kind of situation" (Østergaard & Bungaard, 2015, p. 124).

In the same line of thought, Yates, Orlikowski, and Okamura (1999) describe genres as "socially recognized types of communicative actions [. . .] that are habitually enacted by members of a community to realize particular social purposes. A genre may be identified by its socially recognized purpose and shared characteristics of form" (p. 84). Swales (1990) explains that a "genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purpose. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre" (p. 58).

Drawing on theories about journalistic genres, these "textual forms or patterns which organize a story" and "articulate a journalistic style" (Deuze, 2008, p. 25) have evolved, conditioned by the design of the media, their ideology, technology, and user participation. Nowadays, journalistic "genres become increasingly unstable, ambiguous and dynamic [. . .] in a new dynamic and unstable communicative environment" (Rulyova & Westley, 2017, p. 989) in which news has gone from being a product to becoming a process of iterative social actions, leading to the appearance of contemporary news genres. In general, in the light of the foregoing, debunking news is framed as a "spontaneous" genre, an unpublished digital genre; a new genre that emerges "without clear antecedent genres in non-electronic form," in which "users play an increasing role in determining genre" (Rulyova & Westley, 2017, p. 990). According to these authors, the birth of debunking news would correspond to an unstable communicative environment (the post-truth era), in which users are finding it increasingly difficult to clearly discern the hybrid forms that information is taking, which in turn affects their level of trust in these news products (Rulyova & Westley, 2017).

Journalistic genres are also presented as cultural answers to social demands, which originate in a certain historical context, are born to fulfill a need, and reflect society's own evolution. If we apply this theory by Martínez-Albertos (1974), Rulyova and Westley (2017), and Salaverría and Cores (2005), in the case of disproven information, the context would be the spread of online misinformation, considered as the main global risk for the next two years according to the World Economic Forum (2024), and its social role would be to develop a narrative that can counter this phenomenon and raise awareness about the importance of citizens in the spreading of suspicious content.

Graves (2013) realized that disproven news has been a genre on its own since the 20th century. The only thing that has changed is its focus. In the beginning of the fact-checkers' initiatives verification and disproving activities were dedicated to the detection of errors in press. Nowadays, they focus on correcting others' mistakes. This can be observed in the theory by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), who showed the existence of disproven pieces within media, which originated from a bad praxis—misinformation—such as the disproven news from politifact.com and maldita.es. These media often refute inaccurate information from other media—disconnected digits, wrongly interpreted data, and incomplete or ill-informed sources. There are also debunked news that report malicious information distributed by third parties, such as hoaxes related to celebrities or slander of political figures.

Debunk Journalism

The debunking of false or inaccurate news, hoaxes, or rumors is a scrupulous activity of selection, assessment, treatment, and distribution of a new information unit that has been growing progressively (Harsin, 2018), attracting since its inception the attention of the audience and other stakeholders (Clavero, 2018; Graves & Glaisyer, 2012; Iannelli & Splendore, 2017). This is evidenced by stabilizing figures from the Duke Reporters' Lab's fact-checker census of 417 media outlets in 100 countries worldwide and in 69 languages in 2023 (Stencel, Ryan, & Luther, 2023). Most have evolved according to their contexts and business logics; some were born with an ephemeral character, to temporarily report on an electoral process, and then consolidated by specializing in the refutation of all kinds of informational disorders but always maintaining an unequivocal mission: To stop the spread of disinformation of all kinds (Urzúa, 2017). All are in turn characterized by the following of common and transparent verification routines that has contributed

to the credibility of these media (Humprecht, 2019). Moreover, among their staff of verifying journalists, none of their members may have ever belonged to a political party.

However, and despite the fact that experts believe in the effectiveness of refutations (Kumar & Shah, 2018), the activity of these media is disputed by the following questions: How to ensure that the refutation arouses the same interest of the audience as the hoaxes and rumors and reaches a greater number of people? How to make it spread faster than those? What would be the most effective narrative? (Amorós, 2019; Jiménez, 2019). Should we focus our efforts on discrediting the content, those who create it, those who propagate it, or the platforms where it circulates? (Kwan, 2019). And, above all, and the most elementary, how to report deception without contributing to its perpetuation in the common imaginary (Jerit, 2008, as cited in Chan et al., 2017; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Urbani, 2019).

Debunkers: Specialized Journalists

The flow of fake news and misinformation, in the last years, has been so prominent that it has led to a new sort of journalist: The debunker. Although this phenomenon began to consolidate especially in 2016, when in the political scene the speeches of public figures and mandarins became "wilder" (Graves, 2013), the roots of verification that give rise to a new professional profile, that of the fact-checking journalist, are located in the presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan, between 1979 and 1980, according to Dobbs (2012), when journalists began to assiduously practice fact-checking the Republican candidate. Since then, authors like Graves and Cherubini (2016) have identified a blog from Channel 4 as the first debunking case in the current digital ecosystem.

After this case, the appearance of journalistic media skilled in debunking has become common. For that reason, a new kind of journalist specializing in verification and debunking has emerged. This professional, who works for media platforms such as politifact.com, Pagella Politica, FactCheker.org, and maldita.es, among others, has been attracting the attention of academics for several years. Debunkers are "committed to publicizing errors or falsehoods regardless of the source" (Amazeen, 2015, p. 3).

Along the same line, Jane Elizabeth (2014)—from the American Press Institute—asserts that debunkers "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" (para. 18). And this author explains that these professionals seek verifiable facts and their "work is free of partisanship, advocacy and rhetoric" (Elizabeth, 2014, para. 18).

The characteristics of this new profile have been studied from different points of view. Authors like Graves (2017) and Brandtzaeg, Følstad, and Chaparro (2017) have been interested in the methodology debunkers apply. For that reason, Brandtzaeg et al. (2017) have analyzed the tools and the methods that are administrated in the "process of authenticating online content items such as text, images and videos" (p. 2). There are even studies that indicate that debunk journalism will further evolve due to its connection with information technology (Ciampaglia et al., 2015) as well as automated verification although this is a field with important limitations (Graves, 2018).

Beyond studying the techniques, tools, and skills of debunkers, it is also relevant to understand their motivations and the business model that comes with this new kind of journalism. A small number of companies have set the rules and codes that verification companies around the world must follow. Therefore, it is important to go beyond analyzing the reasons that explain why they adopt some concrete standards and reject others to know whether there are economic or community service interests behind this new journalistic business model.

For example, Graves (2013) studied the three main verification organizations in the United States and concluded that their professionals "offer a reformer's critique of conventional journalism, rejecting what is now often called 'false balance' or 'he said, she said' reporting" (p. 128). Regarding motivations, Graves (2018) claims, "We find compelling evidence that fact-checking spreads primarily because it appeals to the professional values and status concerns of journalists" (p. 121). This interest in getting back to journalism in its purest and most useful form is the origin of many projects, like Pagella Politica in Italy, maldita.es and Miniver in Spain, and FirstDraft in the United Kingdom.

However, this willingness to improve the situation of the journalistic profession is not the sole motivation for these new projects, there are also economic interests behind it, however, not all these companies are thriving businesses. Ufarte-Ruiz, Peralta-García, and Murcia-Verdú (2018) have identified, by exploring the business models of some of these new companies, their weaknesses, and Singer (2018) has pointed out the difficulties in generating. incomes reflected by some of these fact-checking projects. In addition, Graves (2013) explains that these new business models "are openly partisan" and hide political interests: The progressive Media Matters is focused on monitoring and combating "claims made by Republican pundits and politicians" (p. 2). On the other hand, he adds that the Right-leaning NewsBusters is a "conservative media watchdog group" that controls and refutes statements made by their political opponents (Graves, 2013, p. 2). This is why, later, Graves (2017) has doubts "about the effectiveness of fact checking" and wonders whether or not fact-checking projects can objectively evaluate the veracity of political claims (p. 519). Nyhan and Reifler (2014) and Shin and Thorson (2017) have studied political bias in the fact-checking process, emphasizing their doubts about the capability of verification platforms to maintain objectivity and neutrality in debunking political information.

In this scenario, debunkers respond to a new professional profile that is not only strongly engaged with traditional journalistic values but also permanently connected with technological progress as well as political and social change. Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018), in their work on the impact of fact-checking in Africa, noted that these organizations would pose a challenge to traditional journalistic practice with a renewed journalistic discourse, new data-driven practices, and their potential influence on the social development of certain geographical contexts. Today it is artificial intelligence technology that is gaining weight among journalistic verification practices for its ability to streamline certain processes (Simon & Isaza-Ibarra, 2023).

Methodology

This research, descriptive in nature, uses qualitative methodology divided into two parts to achieve the main objective and answer the research questions.

Part 1: Experts' Questionnaire

First of all, after the standard literature review, we designed as the research instrument an in-short, structured questionnaire with the following questions:

1. Do you think debunked news is a new journalistic genre?
2. Regarding the previous question, if yes, what sort of characteristics and features define debunked news as a journalistic genre?
3. Do the content and news that your media platform publishes adopt a concrete structure?
4. Do your journalists follow specific professional processes or routines?

This is a recommended method to obtain and gather individuals' opinions and understanding (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Sjøvaag, Owren, & Borgen, 2021). Editors' insight is of interest in this study because their perceptions provide professional guidance and expert perspectives to determine whether debunked news should be considered a new journalistic genre.

Questionnaire Procedure

We sent the questionnaire by e-mail to the census of Duke Reporters' Lab (Durham, North Carolina). After a few months of waiting for responses and after sending reminders, we just obtained responses from five editors of some fact-checking sites, members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN): Pagella Politica (Italy); EFE Verifica (the Spanish national news agency), Newtral (Spain); ghanafact.com (Ghana); and dubawa.org (Nigeria).

Despite the limited sample size (five editors as interviewees), the sample was heterogenous and encompassed a variety of editor profiles. The editors worked in different social, political, cultural, and economic settings, but all of them had journalistic experience.

Interviews Results

Editors from fact-checking media outlets agreed that debunk news represents a journalistic genre: "Debunking in itself is a kind of content that comes as a commentary to an original claim" (Pagella Politica). This genre has the required characteristics: "Debunk has very well-defined routines, different from any other type of journalism" (EFE Verifica). In terms of transparency, it "is the most verifiable version of the truth" (Dubawa.org). In that sense, ghanafact.com editor confessed, "We like to report the facts but at the same time we like to paint a comprehensive picture of what we are reporting."

All of them referred us to a specific section on their websites, where they publish the verification process followed by their journalists, the decisions they make to verify or not the content, the peer review to which the denial is submitted before publication, and the labeling of the information. It is precisely the open explanation of this methodology that has led them to be recognized as verification

media, with the quality seal of the IFCN, the Duke Reporters' Lab census, or the European Fact-Checking Standards Network Project.

Regarding the way of making and telling the debunk, presenting the Truth Sandwich of Lakoff as an example, the experts explained how controversial this structure is and what they do in their newsrooms:

> We find it pretty difficult to put in practice the Truth Sandwich in normal debunking activities. Therefore, the false information needs to be stated somewhere in the beginning of the article, if not in the title, then at least in the lead. (Pagella Politica).

ghanafact.com also criticized this structure:

> A critique of the claim review schema as compared to the Lakoff genre is that it first projects the original claim being made by whomever and this could possibly be False or True. Even though a verdict would be pronounced on the claim, when the lie is framed first, it wins. It would be interesting how the two writing genres or structures can be blended to effectively debunk disinformation. But it remains a challenge for fact-checkers and social media companies to find a middle ground as to how to effectively work together in projecting the truth and effectively flagging disinformation.

For Pagella Politica, it would be ideal if

> the fact-checking article came with the debunk and the analysis connected to the original fact/claim, so any reader that arrives at the bottom of the article will be exposed for sure to a—hopefully thorough—analysis of the veracity of the claim.

Nonetheless, for dubawa.org,

> We have found tackling misinformation to be far from a "one-size-fits-all" mechanism. In some instances, we found emphasizing the truth to be highly effective; this has been the case with medical hoaxes. However, this also varies across the titles and contents. On occasion, we would frame the title as a question addressing the lie or a statement to the truth. It is our understanding that a big influential window is missed when one side of the coin is overemphasized/left out. Generally, our goal is to educate our readers by providing such a heuristic frame that "fake news" is recognized from its "real" counterpart. By just focusing on one aspect, one may inadvertently undermine or overlook pertinent issues. . . . This has been the case with respect to more economy/political-related claims. In summary, we would advise a healthy balance between truth and false and a case-by-case approach to debunking "fake news."

Part Two: Content Analysis

The second part of the research consisted of analyzing a series of debunk news items from politifact.com and maldita.es. The main reason for choosing these platforms is because they are two of the most important media outlets that have marked a turning point in the media industry. These fact-checkers play an important role in the changing landscape of journalism and news reporting, and both are the most internationally acknowledged platforms dedicated to fact-checking and verification by the IFCN. These media have introduced and consolidated the fact-checking process in the United States and Spain, respectively, thus becoming a model for the public, media outlets, and fact-checkers around the world. Both are nonprofit foundations, consolidated, focused on monitoring political speeches and information spread on social media, and with similar transparency (both check the accuracy of information using data journalism), membership, and advertisement policies. They are also dedicated to the training of journalists, education, and providing content for third parties.

Content Analysis Procedure

The selection of the sample—finally composed of 60 debunks—responds to the idea of saturation by Eisenhardt (1989), which upholds that "researchers should stop adding cases when theoretical saturation is reached" (p. 545), and for that reason asserts that there is no ideal number of cases. Drawing on this statement, after analyzing 30 debunks from politifact.com and 30 from maldita.es websites from 2019 to 2023 to check the soundness of the genre, we reached "the point at which incremental learning is minimal" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 545). Thus, we observed that the same phenomenon repeatedly and the new information was not adding to or modifying the existing information, we decided to stop the collection of data.

We resorted to qualitative analysis of the debunks using ATLAS.ti content analysis software. This intelligent coding tool makes the hard work of analyzing and tagging content easier for researchers as it learns from the coder so that it can offer classification suggestions or point out any forgotten tags.

In order to label the content of the debunks, their structure, and formal characteristics, we follow a process of coding and sub-coding, previously agreed considering: the research objectives, the literature reviewed, the answers from the in-short interviews with the fact-checking editors, and the standard verification processes comparing how this process develops in the verification media.

Coding Results

After the process of coding the content of the debunked news published in politifact.com and maldita.es (see Figure 1), we obtained as a result a clear writing structure and an elaborated narrative with a series of elements that are repeated in each debunking, in such a way that the reader immediately becomes familiar with those codes that make it possible to speak of a journalistic genre with very specific characteristics.
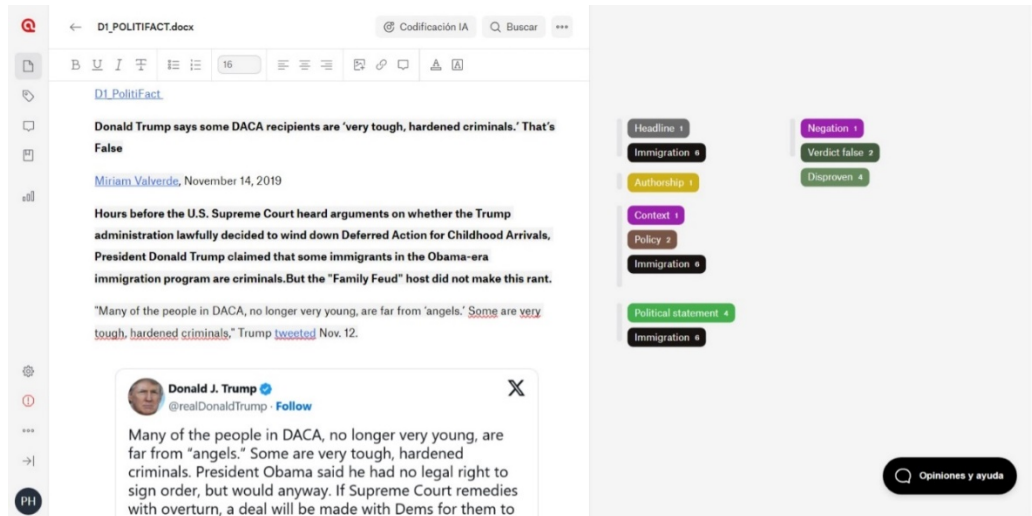
Figure 1. Screenshot of one of the debunks coding with ATLAS.ti: "Donald Trump says some DACA recipients are 'very tough, hardened criminals.' That's false" (Valverde, 2019).

Regarding RQ3 and taking as a reference the inverted pyramid classic structure elements, we can standardize a fact-checking writing structure such as a routine procedure (Table 1):

Table 1. Debunk News Writing Structure.

Structure	Cycle
Headline	Negative: Displays the hoax in the heading and the disproven in the form of a negation at the beginning or the end.
First paragraph or lead	Hoax framing: Description, origin, and context. Its origin is explained, the last source it came from is identified, its motif is contextualized, and the way it has spread is analyzed.
Body text	Display evidence: Relation of physical and documentary sources.
	Verification results: Level of affiliation of the sources accessed, official document databases, online trackers, secondary testimonies, and rectifications.
Last paragraph	Verdict (and labeling): The information that has been verified is retaken to determine if it is true/false or its level of reliability.
	The truth is presented, and suggestions, advice, and conclusions are laid out to avoid future hoaxes.
	Most of the media have their own labels (from less to more reliable) to qualify the credibility of the information (true, false, mostly true, mostly false, misleading, etc.).

This analysis drove us to concretize the singular characteristics of debunked news to answer RQ4, (Table 2).

Table 2. Debunk News Characteristics.

Characteristics	News Type
	Debunk news
Breaking news connection	Non-regular news
Time reference	Timeless
Linguistic style	Teaching and relaxed
Topics variety	Statements (from politicians/celebrities), viral digital content
Sources number	Unlimited
Sources identity	Opened reference list
Authorship	Journalist specialized in verification: Fact-checker
Objective	To verify to alert audiences or avoid future hoaxes
Transparency	Research process explained
Labeling	Information credibility is rated (from less to more reliable)
Structure	Cycle

Based on these results, we added two more features: Transparency and writing structure, to update them. Given that media debunkers are characterized by an explanation of the verification process, they have followed to disprove fabricated content and by the form they present the content at the beginning and take up at the end, this research proposes representing the writing structure of debunk news like a cycle through the following model (Figure 2):
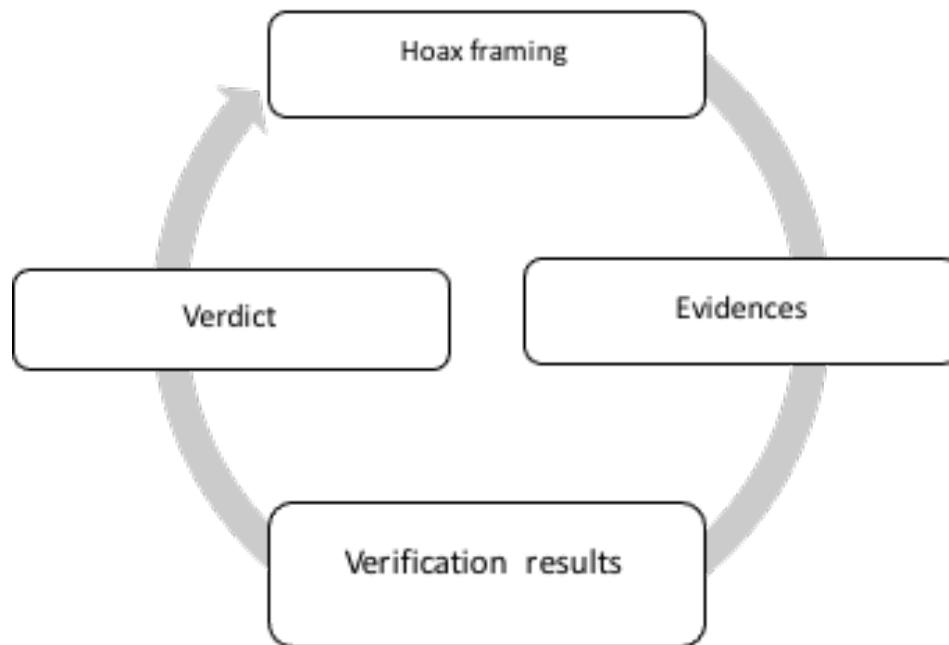
Figure 2. Debunk news writing structure model. Source: Own elaboration.

Conclusions

The main contribution of this study is to frame debunk news as a new journalistic genre that implies concrete professional routines, a specific structure, and characteristics different from those of other journalistic genres.

Responding to RQ1, debunk news is a new genre—within the family of informative ones—aimed at contrasting, confirming, or denying a suspicious message due to its misleading, inaccurate, or deliberately uninformative content. Its communicative function is to avoid its propagation among the public. It also has a pedagogical purpose since it offers the key to recognizing and identifying where the deception or error lies, whether in an image, a graphic, or a text.

In relation to RQ2, drawing on Martínez-Albertos' (1974) approach to define journalistic genres, debunked news represents a journalistic genre because the community of journalists has agreed to follow a set of rules and standards in this new form of storytelling. Similarly, Steense (2009) maintains that "genre assigns a recognizable form of social practice to these perspectives" (p. 15). In the same line of thoughts, McQuail (1994) expresses that genre is "an identity recognized by producers and consumers, both of whom require obedience to the repertoire of themes deemed appropriate to the genre" (p. 263). According to Gomis (1989) and Salaverría and Cores (2005), journalistic genres emerge in accordance with the needs of each period and society, but it also depends on the industry, different technological factors, and the public demand. In this vein, Hurcombe, Burgess, and Harrington (2018) conclude that "by conceptualising social

news as a genre, we have highlighted the existence and the necessity of a plurality of news forms and journalisms" (p. 13). In our case, the plurality of news forms entails considering debunk news as a new journalistic genre.

Therefore, debunk news is a new ad hoc informative commodity created to disprove any kind of misinformation—without the pressure of immediacy that traditional media are submitted to. In this digital ecosystem, characterized by the post-truth—in which emotions are overlaid with the real facts—debunked news fulfills a significant social function, like other journalistic genres (Salaverría & Cores, 2005).

On the other hand, following Casasús (1995), each journalistic genre has different effects on the audience. Drawing on this approach, we observed that debunked news is an effective genre in terms of eliminating the lie in the public mind. Debunked news also enhances the critical thinking skills of consumers or, at least, encourages high-level logical reasoning.

Also, in response to RQ2, debunked news requires a mental effort to understand relationships and absorb many sources and data to unmask the fabricated content. Most media that specialize in debunking invite and motivate users to report or communicate suspicious information, and then the media check that content (Magallón-Rosa, 2018). Hence, it is also a question of will and attitude since the debunking process depends on whether citizens want to find the truth and fight the lie as well.

Answering RQ3, we have identified that debunk news follows a specific structure: First, a headline from which we can identify the falsehood; second, a first paragraph that presents the origin of the suspicious information; third, the body of the text reflects the evidence that refutes false content; and finally, the closing of the news piece is a verdict that not only stresses the truth and assesses the level of credibility of the information but also contributes to creating a new and alternative narrative that counteracts misinformation. This strategy is the most effective discrediting strategy, as Silverman (2015) suggested. The results of this study demonstrate that this structure—and its variations—is more frequent than the design proposed by Lakoff's (2018) theory called The Truth Sandwich structure. However, Lakoff's (2018) structure is perfectly adequate to understand the shape of this new journalistic product.

Regarding RQ4, debunking is a journalistic activity that not only rises above the more traditional routines (like verification, fact-checking, and information cross-checking) but also consolidates itself as a novel and distinguishable informative phenomenon that has a concrete narrative structure and characteristics that make this format different from other journalistic genres, even other media.

Finally, we believe it is necessary to continue narrowing down this genre with the main purpose of avoiding some problems arising from the spread of misinformation. Many experts (Kwan, 2019; Urbani, 2019) believe that some debunking practices have a harmful effect: Dealing with false information could contribute, in fact, to reinforcing this spread unintentionally or to arousing greater skepticism. Despite this, other research points to the pedagogical power of expert verifiers to teach users how to combat online misinformation through news literacy messages (Vraga, Bode, & Tully, 2022). For example, in the case of health information, media information literacy can help emphasize users' understanding of this content and teach them to evaluate it to make better decisions about their physical well-being (Vraga et al., 2022). Or,

as Frau-Meigs (2022) states, "specially during elections and other important democratic moments," these competences can "increase critical thinking skills and provide tools and strategies for debunking and prebunking misinformation" (p. 457).

Understanding verification as a genre facilitates its standardization and, therefore, its use, learning, and the pedagogy it requires. In this way, fact-checking becomes an argument that reinforces media literacy methodologies, in line with what has been proposed by authors such as Tekoniemi, Kotilainen, Maasilta, and Lempiäinen (2022), who consider that "digital literacy teaching practice may encourage learners to practice with digital fact-checking tools and to identify information in the digital platforms. This integration was the core task to explore in the workshop on fact-checking" (p. 4). This reinforcement of media literacy will also contribute to curbing problems such as those detected by Fowler-Watt and McDougall (2019), who warned that "media literacy education is not providing the critical thinking skills that we need to verify, and fact check for ourselves" (p. 66). In short, giving verification the structure of a newfangled news genre will be a boost to the pedagogical task carried out by verifying organizations. As Çömlekçi (2022) points out, "the expected result of Media and Information Literacy projects of fact-checking organizations is to raise awareness in society and build resilience to false information flow" (p. 4578), and this is precisely where we hope our contribution will prove useful.

The limitations of this work open new lines of future research such as the fact that debunking is acquiring new hybrid forms because the verification media are also investing in correcting misinformation such as myths and legends circulating on the Internet or popular beliefs and adapting the content to social platforms' narratives.

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