

Digital Native Fact-Checkers Around the World: Notes on their History, Main Features and Verification Models

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Digital Native Fact-Checkers Around the World: Notes on their History, Main Features and Verification Models

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Abstract. Although misinformation has existed as long as communication itself, its spread has become a common practice in today's communicative scene. Thanks to the ease of publishing through the internet, both users and organizations disseminate false content in order to get economic or political benefit. Thus, the fake news circulation is now a great concern for state governments and news media outlets. Nonetheless, over the last few years journalism has enforced verification, one of its core characteristics, to try to counteract this wave of false information. Under the name of fact-checking, journalistic verification has experienced a salient development over the 21st century, especially during its second decade. During the last few years, specialized fact-checking media outlets, and sections at consolidated journalistic brands try to debunk misinformation with different approaches. In this fight against the spread of fake news, journalists have to adapt themselves to diverse forms of false information, from the simplest ones like humorous fakes to those that use Artificial intelligence to create doctored videos, images, or audios. This chapter shows not only the evolution of digital native fact-checking media their presence around the world, but also the most common trends in terms of procedures and structure.

1. Falsehood as part of the communicative ecosystem

Although it may seem a cliché, falsehood has been with us for many centuries. It is part of our communicative processes as just another tool, in a way that some individuals use in order to achieve certain purposes. Some authors have found out examples of what we refer to as misinformation centuries ago in ancient Rome, or after the invention of the printing in the 15th century (Burkhardt, 2017). However, both technological progress and the ease of disseminating messages —both true and false— to larger audiences have become more important in our days. Nevertheless, despite the opportunities that technology opens up to us, many individuals have used it for harmful purposes such as the dissemination of false content. This has led us to speak about the current moment as the post-truth era (McIntyre, 2018, p. 1).

The meet between the advent of new methods of communication —especially those related to the Internet— and the strategies of some sectors, organisations or even individuals has deluged old and new spaces with false or non-entirely true messages. Even though falsehood can be used for humorous or satirical purposes (Molina, Sundar, Le, & Lee, 2019), the greater risk of its use is when the promoters try to deceive people by spreading ideas that can affect them economically or lead to the generation of hate speech. In view of this, researchers have therefore made some effort to identify the particularities of false content dissemination strategies. As a result, terms like ‘fake news’, ‘misinformation’, ‘disinformation’ or ‘mal-information’ are now part of our discourse. However, it is important to note some of the nuances that exist between these expressions, as they are key in understanding the objectives of those sharing these messages.

The term ‘fake news’ has become popular since Donald Trump’s political breakthrough in the 2016 U.S. elections (Quandt, Frischlich, Boberg, & Schatto-Eckrodt, 2019). From that time on, the use of the term has grown in line with the expansion of fake content itself. As authors like Allcott and Gentzkow —two of the first scholars in the field— have explained, fake news is “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (2017). In addition, others have enriched this approach by highlighting the motivations of their creators, resulting in forms like satire, propaganda, advertising, or false news (Nielsen & Graves, 2017).

Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2018, pp. 45–47) show also the nuances and particularities of other three concepts that participate in the construction of this new reality: “disinformation”, “misinformation” and “malinformation”. Despite the fact that these three terms could be seen —and often are— as synonyms, they have certain features

that make them different. Whereas misinformation is false information believed as true by those who share it, disinformation is also false information whose inaccuracy is well-known by their publishers. Finally, the idea of malinformation defines those strategies that seek to harm a person or group. They are based on real facts, but used as leaks or instruments for attacking certain targets. Examples of such practices could be leaks of private images or videos or some forms of hate speech that, without the support of a proper context could end with harassment or even violence in extreme cases.

Moreover, the present moment has witnessed an unprecedented circulation of false content. During the COVID-19 outbreak, thousands of fake news stories flooded spaces such as social media in what has been labelled as an ‘infodemic’ (Richtel, 2020), parallel to the existing global pandemic. The novelty and global nature of this disease led to the proliferation of fake news related to false remedies and medicines or supposed regulations and restrictions, among many other messages (Ceron, de-Lima-Santos, & Quiles, 2021). As a result, the idea of disinformation experienced a new growth, it was presented not only in a particular context, such as the 2016 U.S. elections, but also accessing a larger scale on a global stage.

2. Technology changes the rules of the game

Over the last few years, we have attended to a major technological development in areas like Artificial Intelligence, automation or robotization, among others. These changes have affected almost all the fields of our daily life, and communication was not an exception. The combination of this evolution in terms of tools and systems with the purposes of those with harmful objectives has resulted in the emergence of a new form of disinformation called ‘deepfakes’, “highly realistic and difficult-to-detect digital manipulations of audio or video” (Chesney & Citron, 2019). The neologism is the result of the combination of ‘deep learning’ and ‘fake’ (Westerlund, 2019). It refers to the modification of audios, videos or images of famous or relevant people —artists, political leaders, or sport personalities— by swapping their faces and their voices from another context and adapting it to the fabricated materials. These strategies chase different goals, deepfakes can be pieces for entertaining, but can also be made with noxious objectives (Maras & Alexandrou, 2019). The opportunity in this field is that the algorithms that makes possible the elaboration of these fake productions could also be beneficial for the development of face recognition systems for law enforcement, or even for psychologists, contributing to

the construction of synthetic identities for voiceless users (Akhtar & Dasgupta, 2019; Zhu, Fang, Sui, & Li, 2020).

Notwithstanding, it is also important to keep in mind that disinformation and its producers are almost always one step ahead of those that try to counteract it (Galston, 2020), even despite their efforts to incorporate the most up-to-date technologies (Nakov et al., 2021). This is one of the critical issues of this communicative phenomena, and also one of the most difficult to resolve. Thus, the efforts of the media, Internet companies and regulators are focused in two poles. Firstly, identification, verification and correction of fake news in all its forms within the journalistic practice of fact-checking (Geham, 2017, p. 7). Secondly, in the field of regulation, with an increasing number of initiatives, sanctions and legislation against the spread of any form of the so-called misinformation (X. López-García, Vizoso, & Pérez-Seijo, 2019).

Furthermore, it exists a third way which has been gaining relevance. This is the enhancement of media literacy education (Adjin-Tettey, 2022). As it occurs with technologies and devices, this trend of thought defends the need of educating audiences not only in the structure, features or main actors of the news, but also in the identification of these characteristics in the fake news.

3. Information verification and journalism in what we nowadays call fact-checking

Even though there is no doubt that the verification processes should be inherent to almost all communicative processes and especially journalism (Graves, 2018), the above-mentioned expansive stage in the spread of fake news has led to a major development of what we nowadays call ‘fact-checking’.

It is difficult to think of publishing news content that has not gone through the mandatory verification processes. However, the progressive erosion of public confidence in the information system, the ease of dissemination of false content by almost anyone via the Internet and the disinformation strategies of many actors have led to this new journalistic trend. Fact-checking is nowadays a core activity for monitoring the functioning of society, thus joining the trend of the many movements that pursue this objective within the framework of the Internet (Feenstra & Casero-Ripollés, 2014). Its relevance is currently justified by the great impact of fake news, disseminated mainly through spaces such as social media, where its creators take advantage of the human preference for contents or

stories that connect with one's own opinion. This circumstance has led to an increase in hate speech and the rejection of certain groups on these platforms. Similarly, the high impact of fake news leads to great difficulties in ensuring that the verifications carried out achieve the same level of penetration on citizens' beliefs (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Polage, 2012).

The aim of fact-checkers is to discover and identify false discourses, to follow the course of this disinformation and to alert the population to the doses of falsehood—and reality, if any—in them (Graves, 2016a). With the development of this activity, a new professional profile becomes important in the context of journalism: fact-checkers. These professionals seek to counteract the power of those broadcasters who, within the media landscape, broadcast information that does not meet the criteria of truthfulness (Graves, 2016b, p. 9). Through the combination of journalistic knowledge and the use of technological tools—simple or even high-tech—, these professionals identify original and truthful materials that serve to counteract the discourse of fake news.

As noted above, the evolution of disinformation has shifted towards increasingly technological forms such as deepfakes. This means that fact-checking teams must integrate profiles trained in Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence, which coexist with those that are purely journalistic and more focused on transmitting verified facts to audiences.

Notwithstanding, within the framework of this trend in the area of communication, it is necessary to pay attention to another of the realities that make it up. This is media literacy, which is always necessary when it comes to favouring the correct consumption and the correct relationship between audiences and the media (Gutiérrez & Tyner, 2012). This training in the knowledge and correct use of the media, as well as in the identification of the characteristics and patterns that give reliability to content published online is more relevant than ever today. It is no coincidence that the producers of disinformation take advantage of the formal and stylistic codes of what we have historically assumed to be true information in order to mix false content. And all of that in a context where falsehood is disseminated faster than the truth (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

4. Fact-checking: A development closely linked to the Internet

When addressing the features of the media specialised in fact-checking, it is necessary to talk about the Internet as a stand for the type of activity they carry out. The path of media outlets fully focused on fact-checking began with the founding of *Snopes.com* in 1994. As highlighted by Graves (2016b, p. 28), the project developed by Barbara and David P. Mikkelson is part of the initiative of two "amateur" citizens, without any training in the field of journalism. However, the daily work of this American website in debunking hoaxes and fake news for almost three decades, not only makes it a historical reference for this activity, but it is still today one of the most recognised brands in the field of fact-checking.

The case of *Snopes.com* is one of the best examples of how information verification has benefited enormously from the advent of the Internet. As explained above, the dissemination of disinformation is an activity closely linked to the online context. Taking into account these circumstances, as well as the ease of initiating this type of projects online, over the last few years we have witnessed the flourishing of multiple online fact-checkers, media outlets that are committed to the verification of information as their main subject.

The emergence of media outlets specialised in fact-checking has been progressive since the mid-1990s, both in the case of digital natives and those present in the newspapers, radio, television and news agencies. However, it is possible to identify some moments of particular expansion during this period. The first of these took place between 2014 and 2017—and especially in 2016 and 2017—, when the debate on post-truth and the idea of fake news came to play a leading role in society's discourse (Vázquez-Herrero, Vizoso, & López-García, 2019). Despite the fact that during these years this activity showed a remarkable growth (Stencel & Griffin, 2018), the census carried out by the Duke Reporters' Lab (2022) shows that between the beginning of 2018—156 active fact-checkers—and the first weeks of 2022—353 active fact-checkers— there was an increase of 126 per cent.

Furthermore, what is clear is the great importance of the internet as a space for verification. The ease of distribution of misinformation and hate speech online (Claussen, 2018) has provided a fertile ground for the development of these initiatives. In this framework, the ability to reach mass audiences through the verification of fake news from almost anywhere in the world has made it possible to identify specialised experiences in this type of communication in media contexts that we could identify as not as strong as

the European or American ones. Thus, there are projects such as *PesaCheck* (2022) with a presence in Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Niger, Tanzania or Uganda, where thanks to the possibilities offered by the network, both the verification work and the dissemination of their verdicts are possible.

5. Media outlets and sections. Journalistic and independent projects

Another key factor in describing the reality of fact-checking in our days is the diverse nature of the active initiatives in the verification landscape around the world. When classifying these projects, it is possible to do so by looking at their typology in formal terms or regarding their origin.

5.1. According to their formal features

If we look only at the form that specialised fact-checking media take, it is possible to find two possibilities. Firstly, there are those projects that operate completely autonomously, i.e. as independent media outlets fully focused on working with fact-checking information. Examples of this trend include projects such as *PolitiFact* (United States), *Pagella Politica* (Italy), or *Maldita.es* (Spain), among many others. All of them are journalistic brands whose sole purpose is the fight against disinformation.

The second approach would be for those fact-checkers who carry out their activities as a section or division within an established journalistic brand. This could be the case of renowned projects such as BBC Reality Check (*British Broadcasting Corporation*), Fact Checker (*The Washington Post*), AFP's Factual (*Agence France Presse*), or ZDFheuteCheck (*Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*). In this case, verification has its own space within the discourse of the medium -as in the case of The Washington Post or Agence France Presse-. However, it can also make verification a transversal element in the different news options of the group, as is the case of the BBC and ZDF, where verification, in addition to having its own space, is integrated into the general news story.

5.2. According to their foundational criteria

Notwithstanding, if we look at the reality of autonomous or independent information verifiers from the perspective of their origins, we find a new duality. On the one hand, it

is possible to find projects with a fully journalistic nature, which arise from the joint efforts of professionals in the sector who, from the outset, seek to tackle misinformation. In this group we can mention initiatives such as *FactCheck.org* (United States) or *Newtral.es* (Spain), which operate in a similar way to any other news company, except that the cornerstone of their work is the verification of information.

On the other hand, there would be projects whose origins lie in civic initiatives or are derived from NGOs' actions. In this area, we find products that reinforce the monitorization character of the political and social discourse that was mentioned earlier when talking about the development of fact-checking over the last few years. These types of groups, as they do not carry out their activities in connection with an existing media or linked to large corporations, tend to consider that it is possible for them to carry out their verification activities in a freer and more autonomous way. Within this typology, we see projects such as *Chequeado* (Argentina), *FullFact* (United Kingdom) or *E-farsas* (Brazil). These three initiatives, as well as many others like them, are not only the result of the commitment of foundations and non-profit organisations, but also the joint effort of citizens in terms of collaboration to obtain the necessary funding for their implementation.

6. Joining forces for debunking misinformation

One of the main milestones of fact-checking is that it has served as an element of cohesion between different media. The objective pursued by this type of project—truthfulness and repairing the damage caused by disinformation—has meant that the work of fact-checkers is not carried out individually, but that they join forces when it comes to counteracting the effects of fake news

To this effect, over the last few years there have been several initiatives that, to varying degrees, have sought to bring together the work of fact-checkers. A clear example is the International Fact-Checking Network, a unit of the Poynter Institute, whose mission is to unite all those fact-checkers who wish to do so under a series of codes of good practice common to all of them. These principles are focused on five areas (International Fact-Checking Network, 2022): “A commitment to Non-partisan and Fairness”, “A commitment to Standards and Transparency of sources”, “A commitment to Transparency of Funding & Organization”, “A commitment to Standards and

Transparency of Methodology”, and “A commitment to Open & Honest Corrections Policy”. In addition, these five principles include a series of ideas that all associated verifiers must comply with. The result of the fulfilment of these criteria is the integration in the network, and the obtaining of the initiative's badge, with which the aim is to guarantee a quality fact-checking, based on best practices and with a positive impact on citizens. Such groupings are positive in that they convey to society the idea that the fact-checkers through whom they receive the fake news verifications strive to meet certain criteria of quality and transparency.

Another interesting initiative in this field is the permanent or temporary partnerships of fact-checking media outlets. As highlighted by Palau-Sampio and Carratalá (2021, p. 110), the convergence between the polarized political climate and the social media actors at the centre of the current scenario provide a fertile ground for the dissemination of fake news. Thereunder, over the past years, it has been possible to see how fact-checkers have joined forces within the so called Cross-Check or Cross-Checking projects. Thus, it is possible to find examples of this strategy in events such as the French elections in 2017, where the CrossCheck France network brought together 37 media —and which will be repeated again in 2022 (AFP Factuel, 2022)—; the Brazilian elections the following year, where the Comprova project joined the efforts of 24 verifiers (Palau-Sampio & Carratalá, 2021, p. 111) or the Spanish network Comprobado, with 16 partners that monitored the dissemination of hoaxes during the 2019 Spanish election campaign (Vizoso & López-García, 2020, pp. 91–94).

On balance, it is possible to notice how the verification of information introduces a change in the traditional competition between the media. Since the main mission of this type of journalistic brands is to tackle disinformation, the necessary resources and efforts are devoted to try to limit its damage. In this regard, due to the large amount of false content circulating on the web and the high speed at which it spreads, fact-checkers have understood that working together in the verification and publication phases helps to meet the objectives of fact-checking initiatives.

7. Final thoughts

Looking ahead to the coming years, it will be interesting to understand how the landscape of fact-checking could evolve. There is no doubt that the shift of forms of communication

and information has also brought with it a parallel development in terms of disinformation. The production of hoaxes has been growing not only in number, but also in complexity. This contributes to the introduction of the great obstacles to the task of fact-checkers, who must not only have the necessary tools to verify the information in terms of information, but also regarding their technical abilities.

Looking at the strategies adopted nowadays and seeking to understand their future application, it seems clear that fact-checking will no longer be an individual task. The formation of teams with expertise from disciplines such as Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence and their combination with journalism professionals is being strengthened as the most common and effective formula in the fight against fake news.

Similarly, the high disinformation rates in some events and processes make it necessary unity against this type of practices. With that in mind, it seems that examples such as networks of verifiers or cross-checking campaigns will not be mere anecdotes or one-off projects, but will take on greater importance in the fight against disinformation in all its forms.

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