



LatamCovidNewsCheck. Meta-classification of Fact Checking Platforms in Latin America During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Ignacio Balcázar¹, Angel Torres-Toukourmidis¹(✉), and Gabriela Balcazar²

¹ Universidad Politécnica Salesiana, Cuenca 010105, Ecuador
ibalcazar@est.ups.edu.ec, atorrest@ups.edu.ec

² Universidad de Cuenca, Cuenca 010107, Ecuador
gabriela.balcazar@ucuenca.edu.ec

Abstract. The COVID-19 disease hit the world, especially Latin America, unveiling another equally serious pathology, the virus of fake news, which spreads on a large scale thanks to the Internet, especially social networks, where thousands and millions of Internet users share information lacking scientific support. This work contributes to show and verify a dozen fact-checking agencies in Latin America, their regulations and operation. For this purpose, 12 agencies in Latin America were studied and verified for their review protocols, objectives and categorization of news, in order to establish a fact-checking format. The results obtained from this research show significant data, in terms of formal aspects the tendency was to clarify and verify the news, in the search objectives section, the agencies were linked to controversy, disinformation and public debate, going through their different categorizations or batteries used, the most common of which were true, false, misleading, among others, to end with a fact-checking model for Latin America.

Keywords: Fact-checking · Categorization · Covid-19 · News · Latin America

1 Introduction

During the health emergency, the proliferation of false news and rumors related to the situation produced by the virus has spread in an unprecedented way, so much so that this information intoxication was declared by the World Health Organization as one of the greatest risks produced by the digital communication ecosystem [1]. The viralization of this content through social networks, instant messaging services, among other spaces of virtual interaction is playing a relevant role in the democratic development of nations, compromising the principles of transparency and credibility [2].

This situation has attracted the special attention of the academic community, which has presented alternatives to solve the contingencies, highlighting long-term options such as the promotion of critical skills in citizens [3]; establishing media regulation policies without infringing free speech [4], while in the short term: incorporating campaigns to combat rumors [5]; promoting the dissemination of official spokespersonship [6]; and using fact-checking platforms [7].

Particularly, the first premise of this research is based on the analysis of fact-checking platforms, known as a journalistic practice dedicated to the verification of true facts to combat the dissemination of false news and thus mitigate its effect on citizens [8], which have been the subject of study during the pandemic. Among the most recognized research is the analysis of the narratives coming from informative disorders demonstrating the response capacity of the verifiers to detect false news [9]; the importance of professional journalism to perform news checks in digital communication [10]; practical recommendations to mitigate disinformation [11]; and linkage between typologies of disinformation with hoaxes intentionality and dissemination channels [12].

The following premise responds to the Latin American context on the use of these platforms during the pandemic, both general and specific case studies are presented. Regarding general studies, there is exclusively the presentation of a quantitative analysis of disinformation through Latam Chequea [13]; review of the degree of informative openness of Latin American governments regarding the coronavirus according to news verifiers in those countries with the highest number of infected people [14]. While referring to specific cases, there is Brazil in which the trends of the content reviewed by the platforms Aos fatos and Agencia Lupa in relation to political decisions are identified [15] and Ecuador performing an analysis of periodicity and sources of Ecuador Chequea to classify the veracity of the information [16].

Although there is extensive scientific literature devoted to the connection between verification platforms and Covid-19, two issues can be glimpsed that justify the innovative nature of this research. The first of these focuses on the symmetry of methodological parameters for classifying hoaxes, i.e., as a premise of this research, a review of procedures and evaluation categories used by news verifiers linked to Covid-19 is prescribed. The second problem is the lack of studies oriented to news verifiers in Latin America. In short, we seek to establish an assessment based on the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of the methodologies used by news verifiers from Latin America?
2. What review protocols do news verifiers from Latin America apply?
3. What type of categorization do Latin American news verifiers include on pandemic-related information?

The incorporation of the “Covid-19 pandemic” case serves the primary purpose of pre-selecting the news sampling, facilitating the localization and reiteration of protocols and categorization in news verifiers due to the over-saturation of the news [17]. Therefore, the following general objective is derived: to examine the methodological symmetry of the news checkers deriving the following specific objectives: to identify the purpose exposed by each Latin American fact-checking; to compare the categories presented by the Latin American fact-checking; and to design a common archetype of news verification on the classifications provided in Latin America.

2 Methodology

This research is prescriptively oriented towards an inductive approach, as it proceeds from a review of particular cases of fact-checking from Latin America to determine

a generic perspective towards finality, protocols, and categorization. Regarding the methodological design, content analysis is used. Although content analysis inherently resorts to quantitative studies, the qualitative approach to the subjective interpretation of textual and audiovisual data through the systematic classification process of coding and identification of themes or patterns is also evident [18]. Recognizing this argument, on this occasion, the data are sought from the official web pages attached to the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) of the Poynter Institute [19], specifically 12 agencies from Latin America, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Fact-checking agencies and country

Fact-checking agency	Country	Website
Agência Lupa	Brazil	https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/lupa/
Animal Político - El Sabueso	Mexico	https://www.animalpolitico.com/elsabueso-rss/
Aos Fatos	Brazil	https://www.aosfatos.org/
Bolivia Verifica	Bolivia	https://boliviaverifica.bo/
Chequeado	Argentina	https://chequeado.com/
Colombiacheck	Colombia	https://colombiacheck.com/
Cotejo.info	Venezuela	https://cotejo.info/
Ecuador Chequea	Ecuador	http://www.ecuadorchequea.com/
Estadão Verifica	Brazil	https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/estadao-verifica/
Silla Vacía	Colombia	www.lasillavacia.com
Agência Pública - Truco	Brazil	https://apublica.org/cheragem/
Grupo La Republica Publicaciones SA	Peru	https://larepublica.pe/verificador/

Three phases were established for the methodological procedure of the research. The first is a detailed review of the verification methodologies, protocols and verification exposed by the fact-checking agencies, where the formal characteristics of each website are observed, which can be found mainly on the home page. The second phase, instead, is located as axis the analyzed news about the Covid-19 pandemic limiting from April 2020 to April 2021 obtaining 749 pieces of news that were verified in the mentioned agencies, the purpose of this phase is to recognize the existing proportion on the exposed categories for each of the verification agencies, thus recognizing the implication of the assigned classification. The last phase or third phase of the procedure is to build a singular classification-LatamCovidNewsCheck-which seeks to establish review parameters extracted from the patterns evidenced.

The compiled information was compiled in an Excel document organized by each news verification agency, thus allowing the comparison of the formal aspects as well as the news about the pandemic. As for the coding of qualitative character applied content analysis, the so-called axial coding was used, defined as the determination of

connections and relationships between the codes [20], thus arranging the relationship between agencies and news obtained.

3 Results

3.1 Formal Aspects of News Verification Agencies

Regarding the first categorization in terms of the formal aspects of the 12 verification agencies in Latin America, it is evident that the value “mission” tends to clarify and verify political messages, proposals, and freedom of expression, as an example we have Ecuador Chequea with its objective: To lead processes that guarantee the freedoms of expression and association, it should be noted that among the most used words would be: politicians, corruption. As for the value “objectives”, the terms most used by the different agencies are polemic, disinformation, public debate, as an example we have Aos Fatos from Brazil: monitor power.

Finally, we have the value “protocols”, in this section the news agencies based their protocols of searches and alerts, in social networks, also, the severity, incidence, or “what noise it makes” within the social spectrum, as an example we show the Group La República Publicaciones of Peru: 1-Select a suspicious content of the social networks that are monitored. 2-Find its relevance. 3-Consult, when identifiable, the source. 4-Consult, if identifiable, those involved/affected in the disinformation. 5-Consult the official source. 6-Consult alternative sources. 7-Give context. 8-Confirm or deny the content.

In short, the most reiterated formal aspects are focused on clarification, trends and verification, polemic, disinformation and public debate within news verifiers in Latin America, this implies that verification agencies are aware of trends, debates and above all what is implied in terms of disinformation generated by these two aforementioned elements.

3.2 Categorization of News About Covid-19. *LatamCovidNewsCheck*

Parallel to the formal aspects and recognizing that this is an exploratory analysis focused on the pandemic, 749 verified news items were analyzed, which are organized as follows:

1. Ecuador Chequea: 176 news items.
2. Bolivia Chequea: 169 news items.
3. Chequeado de Argentina: 85 news.
4. Agência Pública - Truco from Brazil: 76 news.
5. Agência Lupa from Brazil: 57 news.
6. La Silla Vacía: 51 news.
7. Cotejo de Venezuela: 48 news.
8. ColombiaCheck: 26 news.
9. Animal Político - El Sabueso de México: 20 news.
10. Aos Fatos from Brazil: 16 news.
11. Grupo La República Publicaciones of Peru: 15 news.

12. Estadão Verifica from Brazil: 10 news.

Based on the number of selected news items linked to the Covid-19 pandemic and coming from the 12 Latin American verification agencies, the most reiterated categories were reviewed to formalize a classification oriented to this juncture.

In first place is Ecuador Chequea, in which 176 news items related to the pandemic were found, representing 23.4% of the sample, being the verification agency with the highest number of news items reviewed in Latin America on this situation. The news verification is organized in 4 categories:

1. True (8.4%): the statements of political subjects that are accurate.
2. Yes, but (3.9%): the statements are partially truthful data.
3. Unsustainable (3.1%): any expression that does not allow to directly identify the arguments.
4. False (16.4%): a statement that openly contradicts the objective data.

Next, Bolivia Verifica presented 169 articles related to the pandemic, which represents 22.5% of the sample, organized in 5 categories:

1. True (4.8%): contrasted with the most serious and reliable sources and data.
2. False (14.1%): the affirmations lack support and are not coherent.
3. Undoubtedly (2.2%): no explanation is needed.
4. Misleading (1.2%): the statement may partially coincide with certain data, but -intentionally or unintentionally.
5. Explanatory (0.2%): clarification by the person who exposed the news.

On the other hand, Chequeado from Argentina, which has 85 (11.3%) news items, maintains two rating systems, one for the verification of the discourse to leaders, and the other for viral misinformation, in this case, we stick to the second system, obtaining 4 categories:

1. True (3.4%): the entire shared content has proven to be true, by being contrasted with the actors involved and the most serious and reliable sources and data.
2. Deceptive (2.2%): part of the shared content may coincide with certain true data, but -intentionally or not- was manipulated to generate a particular message.
3. False (5.1%): the entire content shared has proven to be false when contrasted with the actors involved and the most serious and reliable sources and data.
4. Unsustainable (0.4%): the claim arises from research with a lack of evidence or serious methodological errors, or is impossible to verify.

The Agência Pública - Truco of Brazil, ranked fourth in terms of the number of news items related to Covid-19 with 10.1%, representing 76 news items. For this, the categories assumed by this checker have been these 7 categories:

1. True (2.9%): analysis of the data and other sources shows that the statement is true. Rounded data are also considered true.

2. No context (0.8%): The statement contains correct information or data, but lacks the context that is important for understanding the facts.
3. Debatable (0.6%): The conclusion about the statement varies according to the methodology adopted.
4. Exaggerated (0.3%): The statement carries inflated data or is an exaggerated statement about a true fact or trend.
5. Understated (1.5%): The statement contains understated data or is an understated statement about a true fact or trend.
6. Unprovable (0.7%): At the time of testing, there are no reliable published data or studies to support this statement.
7. False (3.3%): Analysis of data and other sources shows that the statement is false and does not correspond to reality.

The news checker called Agência Lupa from Brazil gathers a total of 57 articles related to the pandemic, representing 8.1% of the sample, being the fourth agency with the highest amount of news related to the pandemic, evidencing 8 categories of news:

1. True (2.1%): the information has been proven to be correct.
2. True, but (0.7%): The information is correct, but the reader deserves more detail.
3. Still early to say (0.4%): The information may turn out to be true. not true.
4. Exaggerated (0.1%): The information is on the right track, but there was an exaggeration.
5. Contradictory (0.5%): The information contradicts other information.
6. Unsustainable (0.4%): There is no public data to prove the information.
7. False (3.7%): The information is proved incorrect.
8. And of eye (0.2%): Follow-up label.

La Silla Vacía with 51 articles (6.8%) place the articles on the pandemic in the section called lie detector, configured in 8 categories:

1. True (1.3%): reflects recent and reliable information on the issue.
2. True but (0.8%): reflects recent and reliable information on the subject but leaves out a relevant aspect to understand it.
3. Rushed (0.5%): the statement refers to an event that has not yet culminated and therefore anticipates its conclusions.
4. Debatable (0.2%): the statement corresponds to a position of a fact that has solid foundations, but other alternatives also have strong foundations.
5. Exaggerated (0.3%): the statement reflects a true trend or fact but takes it beyond what is shown by the most recent and reliable information on the subject.
6. Misleading (0.5%): the statement is an argument that starts from a true fact to reach an incorrect conclusion.
7. False (2.5%): the information is false in the light of the most recent and reliable information on the subject.
8. Uncheckable (0.7%): the statement cannot be checked either because there is no recent and reliable information on the subject or because it is an opinion.

Cotejo de Venezuela contains 48 verified news items represented by 6.4% of the Covid-19, aligned to 3 categories:

1. truth (2.1%): the evaluated speech or data is true, it is real, it is true.
2. Half-truth (0.7%): the speech or data evaluated is a manipulation of the facts or data presented or an omission of relevant information that does not allow the evaluation to be classified as truth or lie.
3. Lie (3.6%): the evaluated speech or data is false, unreal, uncertain.

Colombiacheck gathers a total of 26 news items, which represents 3.5% of the total number of news items reviewed, occupying the fourth place according to the number of articles related to the pandemic with 5 categories:

1. True (0.8%): when, upon verifying the data of a statement, we find that these correspond exactly with the reality of the facts.
2. True, but (0.5%): the information follows the most recent available data, but leaves out some important part of its context.
3. False (1.3%): the information presented is completely contrary to the reality of the facts.
4. Questionable (0.2%): uses more recently available data, but is used to reach erroneous conclusions, or there is no consensus on what is the correct interpretation.
5. Unchallengeable (0.7%): there is no reliable data to determine its veracity, or that the data corresponds to an opinion.

Animal Político - El Sabueso de México, only 20 news items referring to the pandemic have been found, which is close to 3% of the total number of articles consulted, with 7 categories.

1. Misleading (0.4%): the information shown may be biased.
2. False (1.3%): the information is not true.
3. Inaccurate (0.3%): it maintains a frivolity in its content.
4. Lying with the truth (0.1%): information misrepresented or taken out of context.
5. True (0.6%): real news.
6. Ridiculous (0.2%): focused on sensationalism or sensationalism.
7. Debatable (0.1%): maintains parameters that can be edited for better understanding.

Regarding the number of news items examined for the Aos Fatos Agency of Brazil, 16 news items related to the pandemic were observed, corresponding to 2.1% of the total, which are distributed in 7 categories:

1. False (0.8%): incorrect information is available.
2. True (0.6%): the information is validated with the truth from a reliable source.
3. Contradictory (0.2%): the information is presented in the direction of recurrent information to the refutation.
4. Incorrect (0.2%): has confusing information that is not clarifying.
5. Exaggerated (0.1%): responds to yellowish information.

6. Distorted (0.1%): information with clear signs of inflation of the facts.
7. Unsustainable (0.1%): there is no information to corroborate the news.

On the other hand, Grupo La República Publicaciones S.A. from Peru, with 15 news items (2%), presents 4 categories:

1. False (0.9%): it is oriented to lack of veracity.
2. True (0.6%): implies clarity and reality concerning a statement or event that has occurred.
3. Deceptive (0.2%): it is based on certain elements to support a conclusion that does not coincide with reality.
4. Imprecise (0.3%): the information is unsustainable or there are not enough elements to qualify it as true or false.

Finally, Estadão Verifica from Brazil, represented by articles, is the agency with the lowest number of news items associated with the pandemic, representing only 1.3% of the total sample, in which there are 4 categories.

1. True (0.3%): Real news or statement.
2. False (0.8%): Incorrect news or statement.
3. Misleading (0.1%): News or statement with a degree of fraud or inaccuracy.
4. Out of context (0.1%): News took out of context.

After reviewing and cross-checking the information from the 12 agencies mentioned above, it was determined that an efficient system for discarding and clarifying false news from real news would be to categorize their batteries as follows: 1°true/true, 2°false/lie, 3°misleading, 4°unsubstantiated, 5°true, but, 6°contradictory, 7°unaccurate for pandemic news. In the case of review protocols, it is evident that an optimal fact-checking format would be: 1°monitoring and observation of news, 2°popularity or viralization of social networks, or politicians, 3° search for information (sources, documents, publications) expert analysis, 4°contextualization, 5°classification of the content according to the established categories (Table 2):

Table 2. LatamCovidNewsCheck criteria

Criteria	Points
1°- False/Lie	12 points
2°- True	9 points
3°- Deceptive	4 points
4°- Unsustainable	3 points
5°- True, but	2 points
6°- Contradictory	2 points
7°- Imprecise	2 points

4 Conclusions

After analyzing 12 news verification agencies in Latin America, the need to study and verify the different aspects, both formal and categorical, was reaffirmed to finally establish a fact-checking model.

The first objective was oriented to review the formal aspects of news verification agencies, and three subcategories of analysis emerged: mission, protocols and objectives. Regarding the subcategory called mission, the clarification and verification of political messages, proposals and freedom of expression were observed, followed by the protocols being the tendency to search and alerts in social networks, as well as the seriousness and incidence within the social aspect that generates the different news. As for the objective aspect, the term most used by the different agencies was controversial, disinformation and political debate.

The second objective corresponds to review the categories presented by the 12 agencies studied, of which different positions were found, for example, Bolivia Verifica has different working standards, Chequeado from Argentina has a double categorization system, one of them being the public verification method, and the second the method of verification of speech to leaders. It is worth mentioning that in two verification agencies a specific categorization was not found, I looked for it both on their website and in their social networks.

The third objective was oriented to establish a news verification format after all the information gathered in the two previous objectives, which allowed to establish a format and guide for subsequent journalists or media outlets to take and apply it in their different facets of journalism or information. It should be emphasized that although this categorization comes from an exploratory analysis oriented towards Latin American verification agencies and that at the same time there were limitations referred to the time analyzed, it is intended that future researchers apply the model called LatamCovidNewsCheck to optimize the evaluation and automation in the news review process.

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