

How Fact-Checkers Define and Apply “Objective Journalism”. Cases of Study of Italy and Spain

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The process of fact-checking has emerged as a specialised practice within the news media industry. This research aims to examine how fact-checkers contribute to the construction of “objectivity” through their verification practices, with a specific focus on the methods and sources that they employ. In addition, it analyses how fact-checkers distinguish themselves from traditional practices of legacy media in how they define themselves. To achieve this, we looked into two cases of study involving two fact-checkers from Italy and two from Spain. We conducted a qualitative analysis of the self-presentation of each media outlet and a content

analysis of the news they published over the course of a year. The findings reveal differences between the Spanish and Italian fact-checkers in terms of the topics covered and the sources used for debunking. Despite their perceived image as champions of “journalistic purity” and advocates of “truth”, we criticise this aspect, particularly with regard to their selection of information sources. We question how the fact-checkers’ image and identity directly impact journalism and the broader information ecosystem.

Keywords: *fact-checkers, objective journalism, fact-checking, disinformation, media ecosystem.*

Since the early 2000s, fact-checking has evolved into a widespread journalistic practice, with numerous active initiatives globally (Graves, 2018; Graves and Cherubini, 2016). In recent years, particularly after 2016, more practitioners have joined the movement in response to the perceived rise of disinformation in digital media. They aim to fulfil the social demand for reliable sources



that can address and debunk the wave of hoaxes and “fake news” widely discussed in mainstream media and academic research. In the early stages of this new phase, fact-checkers were mostly associated with political disinformation, and focused primarily on verifying claims made by politicians (Graves, 2016). This generation of fact-checkers generally operated independently from institutions and traditional media, focusing on verifying online facts and data using digital tools (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2019).

While fact-checkers perform verification tasks aligned with traditional journalistic practices, which ideally correspond to the principles of “good journalism” (Singer, 2018, p. 1070), they nonetheless tend to define their work as an improved, more objective, and transparent form of news media. They often present themselves as a reaction to the decline in quality and reliability of legacy media (Singer, 2021). This entails a distinctive approach to various practices inherent in traditional journalism, such as the use of sources and source material, historically linked to the rise of objectivity as a key norm in the Western context (Schudson, 2001).

However, the objectivity of fact-checkers has often been questioned (Lim, 2018), as have their evaluation procedures for determining what can be considered “truthful”, especially when applied to claims defined as inherently ambiguous, such as those emerging from political debates (Uscinski and Butler, 2013). Attempts have also been made to imitate the fact-checkers’ verification style to spread hoaxes or highly partisan discourse, further blurring the already grey areas surrounding the practice itself (Díez-Garrido *et al.*, 2021). Although the debate on fact-checking has grown over the last past decade, several questions remain open and in need of further research, particularly regarding the risks of bias and partisanship in the selection of sources and the use of institutional/governmental sources as “reliable” for verification purposes (Tsang *et al.*, 2022). As Singer (2021) argues, more independent studies are needed to provide rigorous and comparative analysis of the content published by fact-checkers.

This study aims to address how fact-checkers construct a discourse of objectivity through their published content and how they present themselves in their own dissemination platforms, forming their ideology or self-definition to distinguish themselves from traditional news media practices. In order to be able to study it, we operationalise these objectives in the analysis of its methods and sources.

To tackle this we use empirical data to reflect on the impact of fact-checkers on the media ecosystem and on the notions of truth and journalistic objectivity. The data collected comes from fact-checkers based in Italy and Spain, two countries where fact-checking is not as widespread and developed as in the North-Atlantic context —taking into account the number of initiatives and the stage of their development—, but that share a similar approach to the practice (Moreno-Gil *et al.*, 2022). Therefore these cases exhibit enough similarities to identify trends and differences between them while providing further insights into the approach to objectivity and truth-telling adopted by fact-checkers in the Mediterranean context.

This study inquires in an explorative way into the potential differences in fact-checking practices in Italy and Spain through the analysis of case studies.

Two countries that, in line with the global trend, have seen trust in the news drop over the last years (Newmlan *et al.*, 2022). In Italy, trust has fallen to 35%, although 41% of the interviewees still find the news they consume trustworthy. In Spain, only 32% of the population trusts the media, and 38% trust the media they consume (Newman *et al.*, 2022). This scepticism arises from the ongoing crisis in journalism, including structural, economic, and practical challenges (Cano-Orón *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, both the Italian and Spanish populations doubt the independence of the media from politics and the economy, with only 13% and 15% of Italians, respectively, considering them independent, and similar proportions in Spain (Newman *et al.*, 2022).

We have not found previous studies that have analysed the objectivity of these actors based on the methods and sources used to debunk hoaxes, neither in Spain nor in Italy. In a recent study, the objectivity of one Spanish fact-checker is questioned (and sort of assured), but the methodological way of approaching it has been through interviews to those workers and through a statistical analysis of the probability that hoaxes related to a certain political party follow a trend to be true or false (Fernández-Roldán *et al.*, 2023). We believe that our approach can complement the emerging line of research and contribute to the academic discussion.

FACT-CHECKERS IN THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Verification is an integral part of the journalistic routine, requiring journalists to perform fact-checking before publishing news. However, in recent decades, the debate surrounding the spread of fake news on the web, in particular for political purposes or to capture attention through emotional manipulation (Bakir and McStay, 2018), has led to the emergence of a specific journalistic practice, mostly developed through digital media, entirely devoted to verification. Progressively, fact-checkers have developed into self-sufficient media outlets specialising in publishing descriptive pieces of the verification process, with the main objective of debunking disinformation circulating in the public sphere.

The first fact-checking resource focusing entirely on online content was Snopes.com (USA), founded in 1994, followed by Slovo i dilo (Ukraine) and Efarsas (Brazil) in 2002. These media outlets emerged as specialised platforms independent of institutions and other media outlets (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2019). Shortly after the birth of these pioneer sites, other organisations followed the same trend adopting different formats.

According to Graves and Cherubini (2016) and Singer (2018), the organisational models of fact-checkers can be classified into two main categories¹:

1 Graves and Cherubini (2016) also point to a third category that overlaps with the two previous ones, which would be one that includes experts, similar to a think tank.

- A. the NGO model or entrepreneurial fact-checkers, which are independent organisations not structurally linked to institutions or media outlets. They may have agreements with media outlets to publish their content, but they are free from following editorial lines imposed by the media. This model notably applies to Pulitzer-Prize winning PolitiFact (USA), founded in 2007, which was originally affiliated with the Tampa Bay Times but has always worked as an independent organisation. Other cases include Pagella Politica (Italy), Maldita.es (Spain), Full Fact (UK), and Demagog (Slovakia).
- B. the newsroom model or affiliated fact-checkers, which operate as sections of legacy media organisations. These fact-checkers depend on the editorial interests and financial support of the media outlets to which they belong. This model emerged around 2007, with the first cases being News3 Reality Check of WISC-TV (USA), Les Observateurs of France 24 (France), and Fact-checker of The Washington Post (USA) (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2019).

Currently, the newsroom model seems to be prevailing, if we consider that in 2019 70% of global fact-checking initiatives were linked to a media outlet (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2019). However, despite the structural differences, both types of fact-checkers face precarious situations (Singer, 2018). Significantly, the main source of income for the 86 fact-checkers surveyed by the International Fact-checking Network report (IFCN, 2022) is Facebook's Third Party Fact-Checking Program, followed by donations and grants.

In terms of their impact on the media sphere, fact-checkers are viewed as both reporters and reformers, advocating for renewal or change in politics and/or the media (Graves and Cherubini, 2016). Fact-checkers consider themselves as an antidote to restore audience trust, which has been eroded by the way the traditional media operates (Graves, 2018). They see themselves as creators of more trustworthy content than other media, as their transparency, independence and accountability are an advantage over legacy media (Singer, 2021). Fact-checkers perceive their work as a valuable public service that fights misinformation and educates audiences.

This oppositional self-definition mostly relates to questions pertaining journalistic boundary work (Carlson and Lewis, 2015) and, above all, the definitions of objectivity and journalistic truth—although these three dimensions are strictly interrelated (Schudson and Anderson, 2009). Fact-checkers, in fact, subscribe to an understanding of the concept of “objectivity” that goes beyond its traditional interpretation: at the core of their methodology is the process of verifying the truth value of reported statements, rather than the objective and balanced reporting of what was said (Singer, 2018; Coddington *et al.*, 2014).

It is precisely in the attention to the evaluation and verification of the sources that the central normative tenets of the fact-checking practice emerge (Graves, 2017). Rather than simply objective, claims and facts need to be non-partisan, accurate and free from bias—an aspect that is notably included as the first point of IFCN's Code of principle, a series of commitments that all members of the network are required to abide by: “Signatory organizations fact-check claims using the same standard for every fact-check. They do not concentrate their fact-

checking on any one side. They follow the same process for every fact-check and let the evidence dictate the conclusions. Signatories do not advocate or take policy positions on the issues they fact-check².

Given this specific approach to the journalistic profession, and the issues that such approach raises regarding professional boundaries and the relation between fact-checkers and traditional journalism, this study asks the following question:

RQ1: How do fact-checkers define themselves in relation to the media ecosystem?

The monitoring role of fact-checkers also strictly depends on whether they operate inside or outside legacy media organisations. This fact has obvious consequences on the way they adopt different verification models, while still adhering to the same set of principles (Ferracioli *et al.*, 2022). Despite working as small groups, Mediterranean fact-checkers tend to have a broad thematic coverage, solid verification methodologies, and a wide range of information sources, among other characteristics (Moreno-Gil *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, fact-checkers in Spain and Italy place emphasis on cross-checking political statements and information circulating on social media (Ufarte-Ruiz *et al.* 2020).

As Graves (2017) argues, verification methodologies vary according to each topic and fact, depending on the logic behind the process of verification. Through a systematic content analysis, we can gain perspective on the most recurrent sources used by fact-checkers. Thus, this study ask the following question:

RQ2: How have they defined their methodologies for debunking hoaxes?

At the same time, however, studies such as the one conducted by Brandtzaeg *et al.* (2018), reveal that trust in the fact-checkers’ work among journalists and citizens remains ambivalent, especially regarding their supposed neutrality. The question of whether fact-checking can effectively respond to the perceived crisis of authority in the news media and democratic institutions has become crucial since the movement has gained global prominence (Amazeen, 2020). As of June 2022, the Duke Reporters’ Lab annual fact-checking census recorded nearly 400 active fact-checking initiatives in 105 different countries (Stencel and Ryan, 2022). Several studies have highlighted that this significant increase was sparked by the turning point represented by 2016 and the subsequent growth of a transnational debate on fake news and disinformation in both mainstream and digital news coverage (Silverman, 2016; López, 2016), as well as academic research (Tandoc, 2019; Anderson, 2021; Arqoub *et al.*, 2022).

These figures not only point to the globalisation of the fact-checking movement but also, potentially, to a process of globalisation of the norms recognized by fact-checkers as core values of the journalistic profession. Even before 2016, scholars of fact-checking had observed a clear convergence among

2 IFCN’s Code of principle is available at: <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/> (last accessed 13/10/2023).

practitioners from different geographical backgrounds and media ecosystems in terms of self-representation, methodologies, and day-to-day practices (Graves, 2018). The emergence of fact-checking as an independent practice could provide additional evidence supporting Waisbord's argument regarding the dissolution of traditional distinctions between geographically-based models of journalism in favour of hybrid and interconnected media systems where practices and norms are adopted independently of local professional cultures (Waisbord, 2013). According to Graves (2018), fact-checking could even be seen as one of the forces driving this process, rather than merely one of its manifestations.

In the realm of journalism and fact-checking, sources play a pivotal role in the gathering and verification of information (Yousuf, 2023; Wheatley, 2020). Wheatley (2020) further categorises these sources into: a) *routine sources*: promotional material from individuals or organisations, which aim to influence news coverage and often come at a low cost to news organisations; non-promotional material, while also provided by third parties, tends to be more neutral and includes information like official statistics or reports; other media sources involve the repurposing of content from rival organisations, providing a low-cost and low-risk way to access information but potentially raising credibility and attribution concerns; and predictable content, that includes scheduled events and requires interpretation, potentially resulting in similarity with other publications; and b) *non-routine sources*: unexpected events, involving unplanned incidents, with sources including official responses and eyewitness contributions; leaks, based on non-public information obtained through informal channels, offering prestige and exclusivity but demanding verification and legal scrutiny; enterprise, emphasising original story-gathering and independent sourcing, but requiring significant resources and offering no guarantee of publishable content; and, special reports, including features, analysis, and multimedia projects, providing prestige and exclusivity, but necessitating technical skills and resources.

The interplay between journalism and fact-checking is explored by Yousuf and Habib (2023), revealing that while powerful figures and elite sources may dominate stories, the objectives and practices of fact-checkers differ in essence. Fact-checkers, as described by Graves and Glaisyer (2012), embark on a quest to determine the truth rather than define a story, dissecting claims made by influential figures to thwart the public's misdirection.

However, the empirical research landscape concerning sources in reports published by independent fact-check organisations remains relatively uncharted (Yousuf and Habib, 2023). Yousuf's (2023) analysis of legacy news media organisations involved in fact-checking underscores a stark preference for routine sources over non-routine ones, with the latter making up a mere 1% of the sources employed. Among routine sources, a select few individuals and organisations take centre stage, accounting for up to 40% of all sources. This pronounced reliance on powerful elites becomes evident as these organisations frequently turn to secondary sources like archived media reports and social media. Yousuf and Habib (2023) offer a more specific perspective, revealing that PolitiFact's fact-checking activities favour non-routine sources (50.6%) over

routine ones (39.9%), a distinction that sets it apart from traditional journalism practices.

Turning the spotlight to climate change fact-checking, Vu *et al.* (2023) conducted a cross-country analysis, finding authorities such as UNFCCC and IEA, alongside scientific studies and scientists, to be the most commonly cited sources across the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia. While some variations exist, with German and Australian fact-checkers leaning toward news media as corrective sources, these findings shed light on the diverse source landscape in climate-related fact-checking efforts.

Thus, this study asks the following question:

RQ3: What kind of sources do they recognise and legitimise as bearers of truth? Do those sources change regarding the topic fact-checked?

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the research objectives, we selected two case studies from Spain and two from Italy, in order to compare the performance of fact-checkers. These countries were selected based on their cultural affinity, similar fact-checking practices (Graves and Cherubini, 2016; Peña Ascacibar *et al.*, 2021) and political communication ecosystems (Sampedro and Mosca, 2018). Two fact-checkers were chosen from each country, based on their media structure explained before (Graves and Cherubini, 2016; Singer, 2018): one independent fact checker (a medium created solely for fact-checking purposes and independent of other media) and one structured as an integrated verification section within its own medium.

All selected media are verified signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) code of principles, a prestigious network that assesses the integrity of fact checking projects seeking inclusion. Being a part of this network holds a positive value of trust for the public. After reviewing all the initiatives from both countries that were part of the IFCN —each country has 4 initiatives within the network—, we selected from Italy *Facta* —independent— and *Open. online* —a section of a digital newspaper—; from Spain we chose *Maldita.es* —independent—, and *EFE Verifica* —a section of a digital media—. The latter is part of the *EFE* news agency, which is the closest initiative in Spain, which is part of the IFCN, which is a section within a media outlet. We select those initiatives on the basis of their structure and their main publication portal (in this case the website).

The study analysed two types of data for each fact-checker. First, a qualitative analysis was conducted on the self-presentation or “About” sections, where fact-checkers define themselves and explain their methodology for determining what is false and what is true. Three specific issues were considered: a) self-description; b) methods for distinguishing between falsehood and truth; and c) types of misinformation addressed.

Second, a content analysis was performed on news stories published during the study period. Specifically, articles dedicated solely to verifying facts and

providing a clear verdict on circulating hoaxes were selected for analysis. The study period spanned over a full year, from September 2020 to August 2021. The study sample was obtained using the constructed week technique, a statistically representative sampling that allows for the study of long periods of time by reconstructing complete weeks. It begins by selecting all publications from the first Monday of the study period, followed by selecting publications from subsequent days, allowing seven days to pass between each selection. This process continues until a full week has been constructed, including publications from each day of the week.

This sampling technique has been demonstrated to be effective in previous studies, with a minimum of two constructed weeks to analyse for valid results in traditional press analysis and five weeks for digital press analysis (Hester and Dougall, 2007; Wimmer and Dominick, 2011). In our study, a total of 49 days (seven weeks) were analysed, for a total of 362 pieces distributed as follows: *Maldita.es* (181), *EFE Verifica* (27), *Facta* (115), and *Open Online* (39).

To address the study objectives, the analysis considered the following variables: 1) classification of information content as true/false/in-between; 2) medium where disinformation is identified (social media/media/other/not specified); 3) topic (classified after preliminary qualitative insight); 4) geographical context of the content (national/international/not defined); 5) types of information sources used by the fact-checkers for verification. The last variable included the following categories: a) international sources —sources from abroad, such as official communications from other governments or international organisations; b) Institutional national data —data from official national databases; c) experts; d) media; e) another fact-checking website —origin of information previously published in another fact-checker; f) empirical data derived from advanced internet searches; g) other.

RESULTS

SELF DESCRIPTION AND PROTOCOLS OF SPANISH AND ITALIAN FACT-CHECKERS

While similar in their core values and basic practices, the fact-checkers included in our research still exhibit distinct characteristics as they belong to different categories of practitioners, either independent or affiliated with news outlets or agencies, and operate in two different countries. Their descriptions of their identity and methods provide insights into the core principles that guide their verification work, revealing shared assumptions about their mission, goals, and routines.

All four fact-checkers emphasise the pursuit of truth and objectivity as their primary purpose, often employing metaphors of combat or conflict against an “enemy”. This emphasis is particularly explicit in the Spanish cases. *Maldita.es* aims to “verify and fight against disinformation”, similar to *EFE Verifica*, which vows to take action against “disinformation that threatens citizens and polarises

public opinion”. The fact-checking section of the Italian online newspaper *Open* takes a more pedagogical approach, stating that their objective is to “provide accurate information (...) to recognize hoaxes, disinformation, misinformation, and all other falsehoods that undermine society and the democratic process”. *Facta*’s slogan is a call to action for the readers: “choose who you can’t trust”.

These claims clearly indicate that the fact-checkers perceive their role as “guardians” of democracy against the spread of inaccurate or false information “that generate[s] confusion and division in society” (*EFE Verifica*). This perspective is closely linked to an explicit educational commitment toward the public. All the fact-checkers emphasise the vital importance of promoting media literacy and providing their readers with tools to become well-informed citizens (Schütz, 1946) and “defend [themselves] from misinformation that can be found everywhere” (*Maldita.es*). Trust, truth, and neutrality emerge as key concepts in the construction of the fact-checkers’ identity, forming the foundation for their claim to legitimacy. “Our credibility is our main value”, states *Maldita.es*, drawing a direct connection between this claim and the “neutrality and non-partisan character of the journalistic content that we produce”³. Similar declarations of impartiality can be found in all four websites, with *Facta* even requiring its staff members not to be actively involved in any political group, party, or movement.

The four analysed fact-checkers feature a section on their websites where they aim to provide transparency by explaining their methods. They all claim to verify only “facts” and quantitative data, refusing to analyse opinions. The process of selecting hoaxes, however, is less clear. Spanish fact-checkers explain that the main criteria for deciding which hoaxes to debunk are virality and the level of “damage” they may cause. Italian fact-checkers declare that they mostly verify claims or news flagged by readers but also actively search for content to debunk on social networks and traditional media. The specific methods employed to identify hoaxes are not detailed, and *Open* even claims that they “select the content to be examined on the basis of readers’ reports and on the basis of what is covered in the public debate, regardless of its importance and ideology”.

Regarding the verification methods used, some differences can be observed among the fact-checkers. *Facta* and *Open* do not provide specific details about their verification procedures. *Open* states that “only the evidence determines the conclusions of the analysis. The effort is constant, limited by the resources available and the staff employed for the analyses. For specific topics, such as medicine, we try to contact competent people and organisations to provide the reader with accurate and professional information”.

The Spanish fact-checkers demonstrate more transparency and follow nearly identical methods. First, whenever possible, they contact the original source to check their version and the context. They consult databases of official sources and reach out to experts for specialised subjects. If the origin of the hoax is unknown, they employ technical analyses of images, videos or audio content to identify it,

3 <https://maldita.es/politica-de-neutralidad>

also determining whether the material has been fabricated or doctored. *Maldita.es* is the only outlet that incorporates a pedagogical approach in their verification process, offering tutorials⁴ for users to learn how to verify digital content through advanced searches and tools for analysing audiovisual material.

Moreover, only *Maldita.es* reports the criteria used to decide whether or not to publish the verification on their website. They conduct an audit of the verifier's work refuting the hoax, and publication requires an unanimous decision by all eligible team members. This approach fosters trust and credibility, indicating that what they publish is routinely reviewed by the entire team, ensuring higher quality in their content.

In the explanatory sections found on all the fact-checkers' websites, they claim to publish the sources and tools they have used and provide links when possible, allowing readers to check the verification work performed. This demonstrates their commitment to transparency in the assessment process and supports their claim to objectivity and truth-telling.

A common practice among fact-checking outlets is the use of a rating system to label each claim according to its truthfulness (Graves and Cherubini, 2016). Among the fact-checkers analysed here, three out of four —*Open*, *Facta*, and *Maldita.es*— employ some form of rating method. The only outlet that rejects the use of labels is *EFE Verifica*, arguing that a labelling system runs the risk of oversimplifying issues that can be characterised by ambiguity and nuance.

Regarding the three fact-checkers that employ a rating system, they use different methods to assess the accuracy of the claims they verify. *Maldita.es* categorises the fact-checked stories into “Bulo” (hoax) and “No hay pruebas” (not verified). *Facta* is the only outlet that also labels claims as “true” and employs a seven-point scale ranging from “Real news” to “False news”, with intermediate degrees such as “Old news”, “Inaccurate news”, “Out of context”, “Manipulated image”, and “Satire”. *Open*, on the other hand, uses various labels without organising them into a formal scale, indicating different types of errors or fabrication in each claim, including “False”, “Hoax”, “Disinformation”, “Manipulated”, “Missing context”, and “Conspiracy theory”.

SPANISH AND ITALIAN FACT-CHECKERS IN NUMBERS

The choices made by fact-checkers regarding methodology and objectives directly impact the content they provide and the claims or stories they select for verification. Through content analysis and the identification of five main variables, the most relevant elements of their coverage and the process of construction of their agenda were observed.

Firstly, the rating methods used by three of the four fact-checkers differ greatly. However, by categorising the final verdicts given by each outlet into three main categories —true, false, in-between (misleading or containing some

4 <https://maldita.es/herramientas-de-verificacion>

degree of fabrication like lack of context, inaccuracies, satirical content, etc.)—conclusions can be drawn regarding the overall assessment of the selected claims. In total, 70% of the corpus consists of claims flagged as completely false, while 28% are identified as in-between. Only 6 claims are recognized as true, as only *Facta* chooses to publish the analysis of claims with positive verification.

Differences also emerge when comparing them based on different variables and characteristics. By comparing them by country, it is observed that Spanish fact-checkers cover a higher number of false claims (almost 80%), while the Italian corpus tends to present a more balanced coverage between false (57%) and misleading claims (40%). In particular, *EFE Verifica* almost exclusively covers false claims (92%), while *Open* selects a higher percentage of claims flagged as misleading on average (59%).

Regarding the sources of the checked claims, results unequivocally point to social networking sites (SNS) as the main digital platforms where disinformation is shared or even originally produced, according to the four fact-checkers (Table 1). Social media, either as a general category or as individual platforms, are identified as the source of the assessed claims in 74% of cases, with little difference between Italy and Spain. However, while *EFE Verifica* (78% of cases) and to some extent *Maldita.es* (44%) and *Open* (35%) tend to consider SNS as a general source without specifying a platform, *Facta* overwhelmingly identifies Facebook as the original source of the claims it chooses to assess (60% of cases). Twitter emerges as the main source of disinformation for *Open* and *Maldita.es* (13% in both cases). Other SNS are rarely mentioned, except for WhatsApp, which is particularly recurring in the *Maldita.es* corpus.

Other types of digital sources, such as blogs, websites, or video sharing platforms, are covered in 12% of cases, indicating overall attention to the digital media landscape beyond SNS. Traditional media, such as TV, radio, and the press, only represent 8% of the total sources of disinformation, raising questions about the fact-checkers’ selection routines for claims and issues. *Maldita.es* is the only outlet that regularly covers claims made in the press, while TV content is checked in only 4 instances in the entire corpus, and radio is virtually absent.

Table 1. Medium where disinformation is identified by country (%) (n=362)

Source of disinformation	Italy	Spain	Both
Social Media	76,62	72,60	74,31
Facebook	45,45	5,29	22,38
Twitter	9,09	11,54	10,50
WhatsApp	2,60	5,29	4,14
Instagram		0,48	0,28
TikTok		0,96	0,55
Doesn't specify platform	19,48	49,04	36,46

Source of disinformation	Italy	Spain	Both
Media	10,39	6,73	8,29
Press	3,90	4,81	4,42
TV	1,30	0,96	1,10
Radio		0,48	0,28
Doesn't specify	5,19	0,48	2,49
Other (blog, etc.)	11,69	11,54	11,60
Doesn't say	1,30	9,13	5,80
Total	100,00	100,00	100,00

Source: Own elaboration.

When it comes to the topics of the stories published by fact-checkers in both countries (Table 2), the COVID crisis, as well as international and national policy issues, were the most frequently verified subjects. The difference between countries is most noticeable in the coverage of fake news about the coronavirus, with Italy publishing a greater number, and in the coverage of immigration and gender issues, where Spain leads in the number of verifications. The proportional differences in thematic coverage between the different media outlets are not relevant. *EFE Verifica* focuses more on international political issues (33% of its content), *Maldita.es* covers immigration (16%) and technology (12%) issues, and *Open Online* places the highest emphasis on COVID and vaccination issues (79% of its content).

Table 2. Reported stories by topic (%)

Topic	Italy (n=154)	Spain (n=208)	Both countries (n=362)
Science (not COVID)	0,65	1,92	1,38
Coronavirus and Vaccination	54,55	21,15	35,36
National Politics	12,34	16,83	14,92
International Politics	11,69	17,31	14,92
Immigration	1,95	14,42	9,12
Gender issues		4,33	2,49
Technology	16,88	13,46	14,92
Other	1,95	10,58	6,91
Total	100,00	100,00	100,00

Source: Own elaboration.

Overall, the proportion of stories with national coverage is higher (52%), but the difference with stories set in international context is not relevant (39%). From a thematic perspective, the distinction between national and international context articles is primarily observed in news on national and international politics, immigration and technology. In the case of Italian fact-checkers, the proportion between national and international context pieces is closer (national coverage stories: 42%; international: 45%). However, in the Spanish case, there is a much greater focus on the national level (60%) compared to the international level (34%). Among the outlets, *EFE Verifica* and *Facta* stand out for verifying more international content than national content.

Regarding the sources used by the four fact-checkers (Table 3), the Digital Debunking process, which involves empirical data derived from advanced web searches, stands out (54%), followed by institutional sources of information (43%) and the media (29%). When comparing the data between the two countries, it is found that the most commonly used source of information for verification in Italy has been the Digital Debunking process (used in 63% of cases), followed by information published by the media (34%). In Spain, the main source of information was institutional sources (used in 52% of the analysed verifications) and the Digital Debunking process (48%). Noticeable differences exist between the fact-checkers in some categories. *EFE Verifica* uses institutional sources more often (78%) than its Spanish counterpart *Maldita.es* (49%). Both *Facta* (33%) and *Open Online* (23%) use them moderately. Regarding the use of expert sources, *EFE Verifica* (41%) and *Open Online* (21%) use them more than the other fact-checkers in the country (*Maldita.es*, 11% and *Facta*, 11%). Another difference lies in the use of other fact-checking websites as a source of information: the media outlets use them less frequently (*EFE Verifica*, 4%; *Open Online*, 15%) compared to the independent fact-checkers (*Maldita.es*, 19%; *Facta*, 30%).

Table 3. Type of sources of information used to verify (%)

Type of sources	Italy (n=154)	Spain (n=208)	Both countries (n=362)
International sources	5,19	3,85	4,42
Institutional Sources	30,52	52,88	43,37
Expert sources	13,64	14,90	14,36
Media	34,42	25,00	29,01
Fact-checking websites	25,97	16,83	20,72
Empirical data from the web	62,99	48,08	54,42
Other	3,25	22,12	14,09

Source: Own elaboration.

Looking at the use of sources of information according to the verified subject (Table 4), the most commonly used sources of information include empirical data through the Digital Debunking process, institutional sources, and the media. Only in the case of verifications on gender issues and national policy

issues, the main source of information has been institutional. Similarly, when verifying scientific matters, experts have been the most frequently used sources.

Table 4. Use of information sources to verify by topic (%)

Colour scale: red = most used; green = least used.

Source	Empirical data	Expert	Fact-checking web	Institutional	International	Media	Other sources
Coronavirus and Vaccines	26,69%	13,94%	15,54%	20,32%	3,98%	14,74%	4,78%
Gender issues	21,05%	5,26%	5,26%	42,11%		15,79%	10,53%
Immigration	33,33%	6,67%		31,67%		10,00%	18,33%
International Politics	38,38%	1,01%	21,21%	16,16%	2,02%	18,18%	3,03%
National Politics	28,89%	2,22%	2,22%	34,44%		22,22%	10,00%
Other	26,97%	6,74%	11,24%	25,84%	3,37%	14,61%	11,24%
Science (not COVID)	12,50%	37,50%	12,50%	12,50%		25,00%	
Technology	45,95%		2,70%	21,62%	2,70%	16,22%	10,81%

Source: Own elaboration.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings reveal a considerable degree of convergence among fact-checkers analysed from Italy and Spain regarding their claimed mission, methodology, and sources used for verification.

In addressing RQ1, we delve into the ways in which fact-checkers establish their identities within the broader media ecosystem. Spanish and Italian fact-checkers studied strongly emphasise that their work provides a necessary public service, protecting citizens against the threats posed by disinformation and misinformation that undermine democracy itself. In response to these dangers, they uphold a set of shared values such as objectivity, reliability, balance, transparency. These values form the basis of their conception of journalistic professionalism, closely linked to the professional boundaries established by traditional journalists, are also based on the conviction that fact-checking can provide an improved version of journalism that addresses the perceived shortcomings of contemporary legacy media. In a way, they are portraying themselves as an enhanced version of journalism, which, in turn, implies their role as an external agent to it. These results are in line with previous studies on fact-checkers from other countries (Graves and Cherubini, 2016; Graves, 2018; Singer, 2021). This, in turn, makes sense, as all the fact-checkers examined are

part of the IFCN and its code of principles mandates such objectivity. However, by positioning objectivity as the hallmark of fact-checking, and even incorporating it as a separate section within a media outlet, it does journalism a disservice, potentially undermining its reputation as a rigorous discipline.

Turning our attention to RQ2, we examine the methodologies employed by fact-checkers in shaping their approaches to debunking hoaxes. While the Spanish websites provide detailed descriptions of their verification procedure, no such information is evident in the Italian cases even though all four fact-checkers have been verified for inclusion in the IFCN. Furthermore, both Spanish fact-checkers demonstrate a degree of self-reflexivity and what has been termed “source criticism” (Steensen *et al.*, 2022), by incorporating a review of the final piece and various stages of verification for both sources and source material. These practices help avoid the pitfalls of applying a strictly binary distinction between accurate/inaccurate material or reliable/unreliable sources, while acknowledging the potential nuances and complexities associated with each truth claim.

A similar tendency is detectable in the scales of “truthfulness” used by each of the four fact-checkers. They employ multiple categories to articulate truthfulness, thus avoiding a simplistic true/false dichotomy. *EFE Verifica* even explicitly rejects the notion that objectivity and accuracy can be rated on a scale, indicating a critical perspective towards the positivist concepts of fact and truth often associated with fact-checking practices (Waisbord, 2013). This follows the trend appreciated also in the German agency *Correctiv* (Ferracioli *et al.*, 2022). However, our findings also indicate that a vast majority of verified claims are ultimately flagged as completely false.

Notably, all four fact-checkers identify platforms and social media as the primary channels for the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation. Italian fact-checkers primarily focus on content circulating on Facebook, while Spanish fact-checkers find that disinformation is mainly identified in Twitter. This follows the trend identified by Peña Ascacibar *et al.* (2021) in the months preceding this study. The four fact-checkers have moved away from the original “watchdog” role associated with the earlier wave of practitioners, who primarily focused on the truth value of public political claims (Ferracioli *et al.*, 2022). Instead, in line with the latest international discourse on fake news, they tend to address claims spread through social media platforms, whether disseminated with malicious intent or originating from unverified sources.

At the same time, it appears that fewer resources are dedicated to verifying content identified in mainstream or digital news media: according to our data, some fact-checkers even use the news media, digital or otherwise, as one of the main sources of information to debunk certain claims. Still, and paradoxically, both Spain and Italy are characterised by widespread loss of trust in the media’s independence from economic or political influences (Newman *et al.*, 2022). This aspect also raises relevant questions about the interaction between fact-checkers and traditional news media in terms of agenda-setting. To what extent do fact-checkers rely on mainstream media in their selection process of claims, and what are the implications of this dynamic? For example, our case-studies indicate that

the Covid-19 pandemic was the initial topic addressed by both countries, and over one third of the material used to debunk claims was sourced from other media or institutional sources.

Focusing on RQ3, our investigation delves into the types of sources that fact-checkers acknowledge and endorse as purveyors of truth (Yousuf, 2023), and assesses whether their recognition of these sources varies in relation to the subject matter being fact-checked. In the Italian case studies, the primary sources of information are web-based, encompassing empirical data gathered through advanced searches (for instance, seeking to verify if an image is potentially manipulated, identifying the sender, context, and any alterations), as well as articles from media outlets. In the case of Spain, institutional and governmental sources, along with advanced web searches, are the most frequently utilized. These trends are consistent across most of the topics examined. These findings align with research conducted on other fact-checkers (Yousuf and Habib, 2023).

The (ab)use of institutional sources as bearers of truth raises questions about the interpretation of objectivity. Fact-checkers often treat information published by the government, such as statements by ministers or official databases, as unquestionable truth, leaving no room for doubt or interpretation, or for the investigative work typically associated with journalism. In some ways, the work of fact-checkers is limited to checking information circulating on the Internet against the assumed “truth” published by governments. This raises questions about the extent to which objective journalists rely blindly on these sources, i.e., the establishment.

The limitations of this encompass the constraints posed by the narrow time frame under examination and the relatively small number of selected case studies. Conducting a comprehensive analysis involving all active fact-checkers in each country over an extended time period would represent the logical next step in order to discern prevailing trends across nations. Nonetheless, the results obtained are robust. This study reopens the longstanding debate on the neutrality of journalism in an era where “data” and “facts” appear to have a singular interpretation.

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