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Fact-checking in Venezuela. An analysis of fact-checking methodologies and public discourse on Cotejo.info and Espaja.com

Fact-checking en Venezuela. Análisis de las metodologías de verificación de hechos y del discurso público en Cotejo.info y Espaja.com

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Abstract
The following research is focused on the use of the *fact-checking* method in Venezuela, specifically on the digital platforms of Cotejo.info and EsPaja.com. This work was made using a mixed methodology: quantitative to identify and categorize the criteria of the *fact-checking* process in each platform and qualitative to describe the *fact-checking* method components. By going through a documentary review is determined the relevance of *fact-checking* in Venezuela and all the regions of the world, to counter the informational distortions with which we are struggling in the post-truth era. Later, the available data on the platforms about its methods allow us to identify the methodological similarities and distinctions between the two objects of study, adding the direct observation applied by following a checklist, these results are supported by semi-structured interviews with the EsPaja's Manager and Cotejo.info's editorial coordinator. Revealing that the mentioned platforms have a common explanatory methodology with other Ibero-American *fact-checking* enterprises, with the particular feature that these employ their exercise into an informational context characterized by censorship, the lack of public information, the hegemonic narrative, and the concealment of government information. This context drives these platforms to connect with NGOs and other international instances, who collect data about Venezuela. Other resources are the technological tools and open access for the *fact-checking* processes, which guarantees the labor's quality, applying the *International Fact-Checking Network*'s principles.

Keywords: Fact-checking, disinformation, pos-truth.

Resumen
La presente investigación se enfoca en analizar la metodología de *fact-checking* en Venezuela, específicamente en las plataformas digitales Cotejo.info y EsPaja.com. Para ello se emplea una metodología mixta; cuantitativa para identificar y categorizar los criterios del proceso de verificación de hechos de cada plataforma, y cualitativa para describir los componentes de su metodología de *fact-checking*. A través de una revisión documental se determina la importancia del *fact-checking* en Venezuela y el mundo para combatir los distintos desórdenes informativos que existen en la "era de la posverdad". Seguidamente, las informaciones sobre sus métodos publicados en las respectivas plataformas, permitieron identificar las semejanzas y diferencias metodológicas entre ambas iniciativas, las cuales se complementaron con la observación directa hecha mediante una lista de cotejo aplicada, cuyos resultados se respaldan en entrevistas semiestructuradas al director de EsPaja y a la coordinadora editorial de Cotejo.info. Al final se encontró que Cotejo.info y EsPaja tienen una metodología explicativa común con otras iniciativas de *fact-checking* iberoamericanas, con la particularidad de que ejercen su labor en un contexto informacional que se caracteriza por la existencia de censura, escasez de información pública, desinformación gubernamental y hegemonía comunicacional por parte del Estado. Estos elementos de contexto las llevan a crear alianzas con oenegés e instancias internacionales que registran datos sobre el país, y

a apoyarse en herramientas tecnológicas de uso abierto para sus procesos de verificación de hechos, a fin de garantizar la calidad de su trabajo aplicando los principios de la International Fact-Checking Network.

Palabras clave: Verificación de hechos, desinformación, posverdad.

Introduction

The verification of facts, or *fact-checking* as it is known in English (Jackson, 1991), is a journalistic practice aimed at countering disinformation and the spread of false or misleading content across digital platforms. It relies on a set of processes and draws on a range of computational and technological tools (Vázquez Herrero et al., 2019). The practice originated in the United States, where it was initially concerned with "assessing the veracity of public political claims" (Graves, 2018, p. 615).

The antecedents of *fact-checking* date back to the early 1980s, when several U.S. news outlets established internal units to correct their reporters' publications and transcripts and to cross-check the sources behind news stories (López Pan & Rodríguez Rodríguez, 2020). Another practice that laid the groundwork for *fact-checking* involved scrutinizing the accuracy of political advertisements, a form of monitoring that came to be known as "adwatch" reporting (Graves, 2018, p. 615).

Although *fact-checking* initially focused on verifying public discourse, specifically the truthfulness of public political statements, it has since expanded to encompass the scrutiny of viral or dubiously sourced content circulating on both social media and traditional news outlets, including statements made by public figures more broadly, not solely by government officials or politicians (Rodríguez Pérez, 2020).

A number of scholars argue that *fact-checking* now functions as a direct response to the phenomenon of disinformation (Mayoral et al., 2017; Rodríguez Andrés, 2018; Guallar et al., 2020), which the Comisión Europea (2018) defines as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (para. 2).

Disinformation is a phenomenon that thrives within the broader context of the post-truth era, one in which "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Diccionario de Oxford, 2016).

Along these lines, the *International Fact-Checking Network* (IFCN) established a Code of Principles for fact-checkers in 2016, setting out the criteria from which each *fact-checking* platform develops its own verification methodology.

In Latin America, the Argentine digital outlet *Chequeado*, founded in 2010, is widely regarded as the pioneer of *fact-checking* in the region, and its methodology continues to serve as a reference point for initiatives established across the continent in subsequent years.

In Venezuela, *fact-checking* began with Cotejo.info, a journalistic platform created by the civil association *Medianálisis* in 2016. In 2019, the non-governmental organization *Transparencia Venezuela*, with support from the European Union, launched the *fact-checking* platform EsPaja, staffed by journalists dedicated to verifying potentially false content and public discourse.

Fact-checking projects in Venezuela emerged not only to counter disinformation and falsified content but also to push back against the communicational hegemony that the national government has pursued as a political model since 2007 (Cañizález, 2014).

Puyosa (2018) notes that government-driven disinformation is one of the defining features of Venezuela's information policy. "Since 2012, disinformation campaigns and the fabrication of news have been a constant feature of the political communication landscape in Venezuela" (p. 146).

While the practice of *fact-checking* has traditionally relied on searching for data through open-government websites, public databases, and digital libraries (Echt, 2014), the growing availability of information online now makes it possible to obtain data already verified by other sources and process it quickly. Even so, this remains a challenge for fact-checkers in Venezuela and across Latin America, where the quality of public data and statistics often falls short (Chequeado, 2018).

Given the Venezuelan government's tight control over information and its active promotion of disinformation as a means of monitoring the digital sphere, the practice of *fact-checking* has become simultaneously more difficult and more indispensable for upholding the right to truthful information enshrined in Article 58 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. *Fact-checking*, which entails validating or debunking information of public interest, constitutes a necessary contribution to public understanding of social reality and the present moment in which people live (*La construcción social de la realidad*, Berger & Luckmann, 1968; *Teoría del periodismo*, Gomis, 1991), providing the basis on which citizens engage with matters of public concern and make decisions in both their individual and civic lives.

Taking into account Venezuela's communicational and informational context, this study sets out to analyze *fact-checking* methodology in Venezuela, focusing specifically on two case studies: Cotejo.info and EsPaja.com. Both platforms share a commitment to independent *fact-checking* and to producing thorough, detailed explanations of the content they verify, characteristics that determined their selection as objects of study over other possible candidates.

Building on the issues outlined above, this study's central objective is to understand how Cotejo.info and EsPaja carry out *fact-checking* within Venezuela's complex communicational and informational context. Achieving this requires an examination of disinformation and the other forms of information disorder (Wardle & Hossein, 2017) that give rise to hoaxes and false news, as well as an analysis of *fact-checking* itself as a journalistic practice and its distinguishing features among pioneering platforms and organizations working to systematize this process. Equally essential is an analysis of the Venezuelan communicational and informational context in which the two selected case studies emerged.

The relevance of this study is further underscored by its social significance. Understanding how content that may result from disinformation strategies is verified benefits both journalists and the public at large, since belief in and the spread of hoaxes and falsified news negatively shape public opinion and contribute to decision-making grounded in false information.

Research has shown that disinformation poses a threat to press freedom and freedom of expression (Amnistía Internacional, 2021), to democracy (Fundación Gabo, 2021), and even to public health, as the World Health Organization warned when its director, Tedros Adhanom, pointed to the growth of an infodemic amid the Covid-19 pandemic (Adhanom & Ng, 2020).

This study draws on thirteen (13) key works related to the practice of *fact-checking*. Among them, Rodríguez Pérez's study, *Una reflexión sobre la epistemología del fact-checking journalism: retos y dilemas* (2020), stands out for its relevance, as it examines the methodology of six Ibero-American, Spanish-language verification outlets, laying out the elements involved in the verification, dissemination, and reception processes, including the role citizens play in verification. The study also examines discrepancies in data across the two leading *fact-checking* directories and the *International Fact-Checking Network*.

Likewise, the undergraduate thesis *Análisis de la metodología del fact-checking: Caso de Chequeado y Ecuador Chequea* (2018), submitted by Dols Hernández at the Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche in Spain, represents another relevant precedent for this research. The author conducted an in-depth study of the *fact-checking* methodology used by two leading Latin American outlets: the Argentine *Chequeado*, a pioneer in the region, and *Ecuador Chequea*, the first *fact-checking* platform in Ecuador.

The work by Rodríguez and Rangel Barroeta (2021), titled *El fact-checking como práctica de verificación del discurso público en América Latina y Venezuela. Un estado de la cuestión*, catalogues and describes the main characteristics of platforms engaged in *fact-checking* public discourse across Latin America and Venezuela, drawing on a mixed-methods approach combining documentary and content analysis. The authors identified four categories for analyzing the 36 platforms found: the country in which each operates, its year of founding, its current operational status, and the *fact-checking* method it employs.

Finally, and most directly relevant to the present study, is the precedent titled *Cotejo.info: Estudio y análisis de la experiencia en Fact Checking* (Torrealba, Palacios, & Paz, 2021). This work offers a two-step descriptive analysis: first, a systematic account of the platform's history and guiding philosophy, and second, a characterization of its *fact-checking* methodology. Its findings provide an important foundation for identifying the methodology of one of the two case studies selected for this research.

This study set out to analyze the *fact-checking* methodologies employed by the digital platforms Cotejo.info and EsPaja. Doing so required categorizing the overarching methodological principles of *fact-checking* as a practice, identifying how these principles are applied by Cotejo.info and EsPaja specifically, and determining the particular *fact-checking* methodologies used by each of the two case studies.

Methodology

Given its object of study and the sources consulted, this research qualifies as pure or basic research, as it contributes new knowledge to the broader field of study surrounding this journalistic practice. It is also documentary in nature, since it examines the origins and evolution of *fact-checking* in order to establish the current state of the practice, its stages, and its distinguishing features. Additionally, it constitutes field research, as information was gathered directly from the two case studies (Cotejo.info and EsPaja).

In terms of approach, this study follows a mixed-methods design, combining the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data through "a set of systematic, empirical, and critical research processes (…), together with their joint integration and discussion, in order to draw inferences from the full body of information gathered (metainferences) and achieve a fuller understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2008, as cited in Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014, p. 534).

The quantitative method helped identify and categorize the criteria underlying each platform's *fact-checking* process, through the collection of data on the methodology each case study designed, applied, and published on its website. The qualitative method, in turn, made it possible to explore these characteristics and elements in greater depth, in order to describe the components of Cotejo.info's and EsPaja's *fact-checking* methodologies.

In terms of design, this is a non-experimental, cross-sectional descriptive study. Non-experimental research is characterized by the absence of variable manipulation; instead, data on the phenomenon under study are gathered and analyzed through observation within its natural setting (Ortiz, 2003).

A cross-sectional descriptive design, meanwhile, is one that "examines the incidence of the modalities, categories, or levels of one or more variables within a population" (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014, p. 155). Studies of this kind offer a general overview of one or more variables or indicators at a specific point in time and allow the researcher to draw comparative descriptions between them (Toro Jaramillo & Parra Ramírez, 2006).

Population

The target population comprised the digital *fact-checking* platforms Cotejo.info, the pioneer of this journalistic practice in the country, created by the civil association *Medianálisis* in 2016, and EsPaja, an initiative founded in 2019 by the NGO *Transparencia Venezuela*. For the purposes of this study, however, two distinct types of samples were used.

Sample

Selecting the sample required a non-probability sampling technique, since it depended on the researcher's judgment (Ortiz, 2003), shaped by the particular characteristics of the study.

In this study, both Sample One and Sample Two fall under purposive or judgmental sampling, given that "elements are selected based on criteria or judgments predetermined by the researcher" (Arias, 2006, p. 85), with the aim of obtaining samples representative of typical groups within the broader sample (Ortiz, 2003).

Sample One

The first sample consisted of the *fact-checking* methodologies of Cotejo.info and EsPaja, as described on their respective websites. This sample formed the basis of the study's quantitative analysis.

Sample Two

This sample consisted of EsPaja's director and Cotejo.info's editorial coordinator, who described the working components and *fact-checking* methodology of each platform. This sample made the study's qualitative analysis possible.

Study categories

Despite its mixed-methods approach, this study is predominantly qualitative in orientation (Arias, 2006; Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014). Accordingly, the variables under study are qualitative or categorical in nature, expressed through words rather than numerical values. Each variable considered also has more than two categories, making them polychotomous. In terms of complexity, these are considered complex variables, since each can be broken down into two or more dimensions that, in turn, determine its indicators (Arias, 2006).

Data collection techniques and instruments:

Document review

Given that *fact-checking* is a relatively recent journalistic practice in Venezuela, and that the country's university libraries, both physical and digital, are not consistently updated, the documentary review was conducted using the Google Scholar search engine, drawing on the study's key terms, along with consultations of academic web repositories and peer-reviewed social science journals.

The documentary review made it possible to establish the current state of *fact-checking*, to understand the concepts underpinning this journalistic practice, grounded in existing theory, and to examine the methodologies employed by various Ibero-American outlets dedicated to verifying information and public discourse, taking into account both the informational and communicational obstacles they face and their contributions to the practice.

Direct observation

For the purposes of this study, a structured observation was conducted. A checklist was designed for this stage, which made it possible to collect quantitative data on the *fact-checking* methodologies of Cotejo.info and EsPaja, in order to verify the presence of the criteria set out in the IFCN's Code of Principles for each case study. This instrument was organized into four columns:

- The left-hand column lists the aspects associated with each methodological principle of the IFCN's Code of Principles.
- Two central columns: one provides space to mark the presence of a given aspect, while the other allows for marking its absence.
- The right-hand column provides space for recording observations on each aspect, where necessary.

The instrument was applied by the researchers themselves, who, after closely examining the *fact-checking* methodologies of Cotejo.info and EsPaja as published on their respective websites, indicated the presence or absence of each methodological principle for every case study.

Interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted for this study, using a question guide as its primary instrument. In this type of interview, however, the interviewer retains the flexibility to pose additional questions not specified in advance (Arias, 2006).

This technique made it possible to gather qualitative data and to expand on the information needed to meet the study's objectives. The interview guides were designed with reference to the *fact-checking* methodology used by the Argentine platform *Chequeado*, given its status as a pioneer in Latin America and a model for later initiatives. They also drew on Dols Hernández's undergraduate thesis, *Análisis de la metodología del fact-checking: Caso de Chequeado y Ecuador Chequea* (2018), given its similarity to the present study.

The interview guides nonetheless differed for each case study, having been tailored to each platform's structure and methodology, and were organized around the following areas:

- The organization's principles and objectives.
- The *fact-checking* methodology the organization employs.
- Its correction policy.
- The structure of its website and the formats and channels it uses for dissemination.
- Audience receptiveness and participation.
- The organization's limitations and scope.

In EsPaja's case, the interview was conducted with Victor Amaya, its founder and director, via the videoconferencing platform Jitsi Meet, since geographic distance made an in-person interview impossible. In Cotejo.info's case, the interview with Mariángel Durán, the platform's editorial coordinator, was conducted in writing, at her request and owing to the geographic and scheduling distance separating the researcher and the interviewee.

Data processing and analysis methods

Once the quantitative and qualitative data had been collected, they were reviewed, organized, and analyzed, so as to identify the relevant units of analysis and code them, assigning categories and codes accordingly (Hernández-Sampieri, 2014, p. 423).

Meta-coding was used as the data-processing technique, a method that involves examining "the relationship between the categories suggested by previous studies [the theoretical framework] in order to uncover other, potentially new, categories and themes" (Hernández-Sampieri, 2014, p. 440). This technique was chosen because the categories guiding the data analysis are already established in the IFCN's Code of Principles for fact-checkers and in the *fact-checking* method used by the Argentine platform *Chequeado*.

The collected data were analyzed manually, given that both samples drawn from the population under study were small and did not require the use of specialized software.

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Results and discussion

The results are presented across sections organized around the indicators established to examine the methodological principles of Cotejo.info and EsPaja and to identify the *fact-checking* methodologies each employs.

An analysis of the *fact-checking* methodologies used by Cotejo.info and EsPaja, both of which draw on other established Ibero-American *fact-checking* initiatives, shows that both organizations provide a detailed account of their own verification methods on their respective websites. Cotejo.info's method comprises six steps, within which EsPaja's procedure can also be situated, although the latter has not laid out its process in a similarly structured format.

When considered alongside *Chequeado*'s eight-step method, used in this study as a reference point for the *fact-checking* process, it becomes clear that the methodologies adopted by Cotejo.info and EsPaja show no particular idiosyncrasies; rather, they align with the five-step *fact-checking* process described by Rodríguez Pérez (2020) in her analysis of six leading South American and Spanish verification outlets.

Even though the *fact-checking* methodologies of Cotejo.info and EsPaja fit within the steps outlined above, one important variable sets Venezuela's informational context apart for *fact-checking*: the prevalence of informational opacity, censorship, and state communicational hegemony, circumstances to which journalists and outlets alike must adapt in carrying out their *fact-checking* work.

Drawing on the steps identified by Rodríguez Pérez (2020), the following section describes the *fact-checking* process used by Cotejo.info and EsPaja.

Selecting the phrase, claim, or statement made in a public setting or on social media

Guided by the journalistic principles of relevance, social interest, and rigor, these organizations prioritize statements that carry weight in Venezuelan public opinion, whether made by government officials, social or political actors, media outlets, journalists, academics, or other figures of public standing in Venezuela, provided the claims are verifiable and of public interest.

In EsPaja's case, content selection also takes into account statements made by individuals who become part of public discussion, in which case verifying the accuracy of their specific claim is considered important. The organization additionally monitors, on a daily basis, recurring requests from its audience to verify information on a given topic, submitted through its public contact channels.

Although Cotejo.info likewise maintains these contact channels for topic suggestions, the working agenda for verifying public discourse is generally proposed by the team's journalists, following the information-selection protocol that governs their biweekly editorial meetings. The same holds for verifications of social media content (Facebook and Instagram), whose agenda is set daily by a team of four journalists who rotate weekly shifts aimed at detecting falsified content through a technological tool provided by *Meta Platforms, Inc.*, accessible only to the team.

A notable feature shared by both case studies is that *fact-checking* inquiries are not limited to information currently in circulation; they also stem from audience questions about topics on which insufficient information exists. In other words, gaps in available information prompt audiences to turn to these organizations with specific questions, which in turn generates internal discussion about the possibility of producing content to meet that demand.

Assessing relevance, social impact, and repercussions in public debate or social virality

The relevance of a given piece of information is determined according to each team's journalistic criteria, based on what matters most to everyday public conversation and collective decision-making, in light of the country's news agenda or the extent to which a given piece of content has gone viral, while also weighing the potential societal consequences of disinformation.

A crucial element in verifying public discourse is that the statement under review must have been made in the media, on social media, or in some public setting. To this end, each organization's team continuously monitors government officials and society at large across social media and news outlets, primarily to determine which issues are shaping public opinion. Both organizations prioritize information or content from individuals whose statements warrant verification given their degree of influence in society.

It is worth noting that how often a given topic comes up for verification depends on the social, political, and economic circumstances of the moment. Even so, both organizations place particular importance on verifying content tied to the primary interests and concerns of Venezuelan society, among them migration, electoral processes, and economic hardship. In short, the topics they cover track closely with the country's information needs.

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Consulting sources: the claim's author, official and expert sources, alternative sources, and public and official databases to support verification

Understanding this step requires distinguishing the original source according to the type of fact-check being conducted. To that end, Cotejo.info and EsPaja attempt to consult the author of a statement directly when it involves a public claim, or to trace the origin of a piece of content by contacting the primary sources that created or disseminated the text, video, image, or audio in question.

Access to official sources, meanwhile, is one of the main obstacles both *fact-checking* teams face, since the absence of official information and general opacity are common in Venezuela, owing to a lack of publicly available records of collective interest and outdated or missing data, annual reports and sector accounts, epidemiological health bulletins, population figures, up-to-date economic statistics, and other data essential to *fact-checking*.

Likewise, the failure of public figures, including private companies, to respond, together with the limited engagement of news outlets wary of state reprisals, consistently restricts access to information sources needed for *fact-checking*.

As a result, to substantiate their verifications, Cotejo.info and EsPaja cross-check information against alternative sources, which must have an established track record on the subject being verified and must produce information that is public and transparent. These sources are typically drawn from documents and research produced by civil society organizations, universities, reliable news outlets, research centers, or international bodies that regularly track data on Venezuela.

Even so, identifying alternative sources does not guarantee access to them, since a VPN is often required to reach national or international news and organizational websites that publish data relevant to the topics under review, as some of these sites are blocked within the country by government order.

As previously noted, Cotejo.info uses an AI tool provided by *Meta Platforms, Inc.* to detect content that may warrant verification. It is also worth noting that, given the country's informational opacity and communicational hegemony, Cotejo.info works to build its own databases from its fact-checks, making them available to its audience.

Contextualizing the claim through explanatory journalism

The analysis of the *fact-checking* methodology used by both case studies indicates that this step applies only to the verification of public discourse. In EsPaja's case, although this step is part of its stated method, the platform's website offers no specific information about how it is carried out. For Cotejo.info, by contrast, establishing a documentary grasp of current events is essential to cross-checking data, since such sources "make it possible to piece together official data points that some government officials release only in isolated fragments" (Durán, 2022). The organization accordingly insists on corroborating every detail with precision, particularly historical facts and dates, in order to contextualize its verifications of public discourse.

In addition, as part of the broader effort to provide sources and supporting data, every fact-check published by Cotejo.info and EsPaja takes the form of an explanatory article that includes hyperlinks and multimedia resources such as videos, audio recordings, documents, databases, images, and maps. These videos and audio clips typically feature the exact statement under review or another piece of testimony that helps substantiate the verification's argument.

For both organizations, contextualizing information involves a rigorous process of reviewing and confirming every source used, with the aim of ensuring the accurate publication of figures and data calculated by the editorial team while drafting the piece, and of conveying the significance of that information within its present-day context.

Assigning a rating based on established categories

The categories used to rate the outcome of a given fact-check differ between Cotejo.info and EsPaja. Despite being specific to each organization, both share the feature of pairing their verification scales with textual, visual, and color-coded elements in every fact-check, in order to convey the different levels of accuracy.

Accordingly, both organizations use terms denoting "true" content (marked in green) and "false" content (marked in red). Cotejo.info uses "Verdad" (True) and "Mentira" (Lie); EsPaja uses "EsVerdad" (It'sTrue) and "EsPaja" (It'sALie).

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Each platform's scale also includes intermediate shades. Cotejo.info's scale includes only one such category, "Media-verdad" (Half-Truth), marked in blue, used when a piece of information has some correspondence with the available facts but lacks sufficient verifiable evidence to determine its overall accuracy.

EsPaja's rating system, for its part, originally included five levels, three of which were intermediate: EsEngañoso (It'sMisleading), used when the data are ambiguous; EsUnaManipulación (It'sManipulated), used when information has been altered; and EsUnMisterio (It'sAMystery), used when a claim cannot be verified. The system now comprises seven levels, reflecting the complexity of disinformation in Venezuela, following the addition of two further categories: EsCiertoPero… (It'sTrueBut…), used when the data cited are presented without context, and EsDiscutible (It'sDebatable), used when the available evidence does not support classifying a claim as either true or false, broadly comparable to Cotejo.info's Media-verdad category. EsPaja marks these intermediate levels in orange.

A comparison of the rating systems used by Cotejo.info and EsPaja against *Chequeado*'s method shows that EsPaja's categories are similar in meaning, number of gradations, and color scheme.

Cotejo.info likewise applies a separate set of categories to rate its Facebook verifications, which follow the standard framework used by all participants in the *Meta Platforms, Inc.* program. Unlike the ratings used for verifying public discourse, a Facebook verification rated as True, Not Applicable, or Not Rated carries no consequences within the program, meaning the verification is not published and Facebook takes no further action, since the program's goal is to reduce disinformation by flagging content that is false or potentially misleading to users.

Accordingly, the *Meta Platforms, Inc.* program acts only on fact-checks rated as False or Partly False (marked in red with an X), Missing Context (marked in green with an exclamation point), or Altered (identified in orange with a warning symbol).

As part of their visual elements, every piece published by Cotejo.info and EsPaja marks its cover image with the corresponding word and color. All of these elements, applied to the rating of each fact-check, are designed to signal the outcome to the audience at a glance while also reinforcing the reliability of the content being referenced.

Conclusions

In light of the findings obtained from analyzing *fact-checking* methodologies in Venezuela through the case studies of Cotejo.info and EsPaja, it can be inferred that their procedures fall within a *fact-checking* methodology shared with six other South American and Spanish verification outlets, including *Chequeado* (the pioneering outlet of *fact-checking* in Latin America and a key reference for this study) as established by Rodríguez Pérez (2020).

Following the documentary review of the theories and concepts that shaped this study's thematic approach, it is worth returning once more to Gomis (1991), who defines journalism as a practice that reveals social reality through the news and regards it as a method of interpretation that activates society, prompting people to take an interest in engaging with the very social reality that the media itself brings to light.

In light of these considerations regarding the relevance, social impact, and repercussions of information in public debate, it can be inferred that *fact-checking*, through the validation or refutation of information of public interest, constitutes a necessary contribution to public knowledge of social reality and the present in which people live and interact (Berger & Luckmann, 1968; Gomis, 1991). At the same time, the practice of *fact-checking*, through its processes of selection, cross-checking, and verification, brings a new dimension to newsmaking theory, since fact-checkers offer society an evaluation of an event that is either part of the news agenda or a piece of viral content, selected not by a traditional gatekeeper but by members of the verification team or by the audience itself.

Likewise, the principles of universality and neutrality that Gomis (1991) sets out in his theory of journalism find their counterpart in the methodological principles of impartiality and fairness that guide these *fact-checking* organizations. Their fact-checks are shaped by the social impact a given claim or piece of information has on public opinion and civic decision-making, always with an eye toward each organization's shared mission of combating disinformation and informational opacity in Venezuela.

Even so, these *fact-checking* organizations must contend with the obstacles created by the irresponsible and poorly informed use of ICTs, including the tendency of some individuals to believe all manner of content circulating online and to share it without verification, thereby amplifying the reach of hoaxes and disinformation. The cognitive biases and post-truth dynamics defined in this study's theoretical framework further shape how readily people believe false content.

Despite all the limitations and obstacles that *fact-checking* faces in the country, it remains an indispensable journalistic practice given the oversupply of content and claims that fuel information disorders, not only in Venezuela but around the world, one made all the more necessary within an authoritarian governmental context that promotes communicational hegemony and restricts freedom of expression and of the press, to the detriment of democracy.

The growing importance of *fact-checking* in Venezuela is evident in the increasing number of such initiatives across the country. The study of Rodríguez and Rangel Barroeta (2021) identified only two *fact-checking* initiatives operating in the country in 2019: Cotejo.info and Cocuyo Chequea (a unit of Efecto Cocuyo). Today, approximately seven *fact-checking* projects operate in the country, in addition to the Coalición Informativa contra la desinformación "C-Informa," founded in November 2022.

This research aims to contribute to future work on *fact-checking* in Venezuela and Latin America, as it maps out the methodology and general processes used by outlets dedicated to *fact-checking* within a distinct informational context, one that demands alternative procedures to those standardized in countries with greater access to information, sources, and public databases. This study also underscores the importance of disseminating fact-checks, recognizing the difficulty these face in gaining traction within a new digital media ecosystem, where users not only consume information but also reproduce and generate it.

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