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Fact Checkers Facing Fake News and Disinformation in the Digital Age: A Comparative Analysis between Spain and United Kingdom

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Abstract: The current media ecosystem, derived from the consolidation of Information and Communication Technologies, shows a scenario in which the relationship between the media and their audience is being redefined. This represents a challenge for journalistic practice. In the digital age, the public actively participates in the construction and dissemination of news through social networks. Faced with this loss of control by the media, fake news and disinformation are emerging as one of the main problems of journalistic practice in a competitive business context, and with a high saturation of news content. In this situation, fact checkers emerge as key players in the information verification process. This research comparatively analyses the main fact checkers in Spain and the United Kingdom through content analysis applied to their corporate websites to understand their characteristics and working methodologies. The results underline that they are concerned with the concepts of transparency and honesty, along with showing their funding streams. The rigorousness of the verification process also stands out, as well as the importance of dialogue with the audience in their work. While in Spain they are featured by their non-profit nature and their international coverage, UK fact checkers focus on national information and are sometimes conceived as a business.

Keywords: social media and new challenges; journalism; fact checkers; fact-checking agency; disinformation; fake news; Spain; the United Kingdom

1. Introduction

Nowadays, journalistic practice is immersed in a context of huge transformations, motivated, among other factors, by the increasingly proactive role of the audience in the production and dissemination of news through the tools provided by Information and Communication Technologies [1]. Thus, the nature of journalism as a profession that has had to adapt and reinvent itself according to the different circumstances of each historical period is once again evident with the Internet and its new tools being decisive in the 21st century in the evolution of information consumption. In the current communication ecosystem, dominated by a hyper-connected society with high levels of information demands, new narratives and new professional profiles are required in order to examine content "critically to build a citizenry that is aware of its role in society" [2] (p. 1).

One of the great challenges facing the practice of journalism today is the spread of fake news through social media, which quickly goes viral if unchallenged and assumed to be the truth [3]. In addition to the necessary education and digital literacy, fact checkers are agents that identify, verify and evaluate the veracity of the news. It is one of the professional profiles required to foster a critical spirit in society in the digital era. It is a subject of research that arouses the interest of the scientific community due to its relevance and pertinence in contemporary society. Previous studies portray the current landscape of fact checkers in Spain [4,5], or in other countries such as China [6] or the United States [7]. However, the originality and contribution of this paper lies in offering a comparative

analysis of the defining characteristics and policies of the main fact-checking agencies of two European countries through content analysis applied to their corporate websites.

Fact-checking agencies from the UK and Spain have been analysed mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, because both countries have different media systems. Based on the relationship between politicians and journalists, there are three media systems: the polarised pluralist model, the corporative democratic model and the liberal model [8]. Depending on the country, and its earliest to latest development of press freedom, the media system will be more or less influenced by the government. This research has only considered two of the three explored models: the polarised pluralist (Spain) and the liberal (United Kingdom). The corporative democratic model was discarded as it is a fusion of the others and, therefore, no major differences between the two systems are expected.

On the other hand, fact-checking agencies in the UK and Spain were considered inte- resting for this research because both countries have been struggling with a growing amount of fake news, mostly related to important political topical issues such as Brexit or Catalonian's sovereignty issues. This situation puts democracy at risk, since it limits the freedom with which citizens shape their own opinions on matters of public interest or even purely political ones [9,10]. This would explain why different governments try to legislate to prevent the dissemination of fake news [11]. It is in this context in which news verification agencies become more important, it should be taken into consideration that a well-informed citizenry makes them free to form their own opinion and to vote without being influenced by false information [12,13].

The general objective is translated into the following specific objectives:

- Explore the particular characteristics of agencies at the level of legal identity and economic transparency;
- Identify the communication channels through which they interact with the audience, as well as the tone or style of communication they use;
- Determine the methodology and policy they apply in the process of verifying the information that they analyse.

This research aims to explore the possibilities and diversity of fact-checking agencies in two countries that are very relevant in this area. The collected data can be used for future creation and implementation of new verification agencies. Given the growing concern about the importance of fake news at a global level, this type of initiative will continue to expand and this research proposal can help to understand how they are constituted, how they work and their methodologies.

As a main hypothesis, it has been considered that these kinds of agencies are not-for-profit organisations in order to guarantee the honesty, quality and independence of their work.

1.1. Social Networks as a Source of Journalistic Information

For a long time, communicative studies have focused on mass media society [14]. However, since digital platforms are a reality, the interest has changed from the mass media to a Net society [15–17]. In this context, traditional journalism has to adapt itself if it wants to survive [18]. The Internet and the Net society appear as a new sphere with concrete characteristics that, to a greater or lesser extent, affect the audience [19–24].

Journalists are looking constantly for new stories to write about. Journalism has always been strongly linked to looking for people's stories and making reports about them. Nonetheless, with the advent of social media, all that has changed is the place to find these conversations and, therefore, where stories are created [25,26]. On social networks, where there are a lot of people telling their stories and expressing their opinions about something that has already happened, they find a source of stories. It is like a "market", where media professionals will find wonderful "ingredients" to "cook" a new "recipe". Nowadays, journalists can obtain enough resources to build a complete story on social media [27]. In fact, social networks are generating such interesting new stories with the huge flow of user activity involved, where otherwise it wouldn't attract media attention.

Currently, journalists not only find sources of information for a story that they are working on, but they also find stories to potentially become a report [28–30]. By using social media, journalists are able to find sources of information that are quite useful to their reports, because "consumers can report immediately on what is going on at any given place on the globe" [31] (p. 306). It could happen that when journalists, reporters or bloggers are assigned a new story by an editor or producer, they may not have the contacts necessary to obtain that information in a quick manner [32]. So, by asking for information about that story on social networks, they can find the information that they were looking for [33].

Before the social media era, "the web [provided] journalists with enhanced abilities for composing accurate and complete stories. Adding in newsworthy material to complete or 'filling-out' a story [became] possible in an intertextual digital media environment, which encourages viewers to explore layers of stories" [34] (p. 543). This is possible because it is feasible to "disseminate an information request to a large number of public relations practitioners" which nowadays, in the social media era, definitely "produces multiple responses which can serve as sources for the story" [32] (p. 258), and also because social media provides a platform where passive witnesses can become active and share their eyewitness testimony with the world, including with journalists who may choose to enrich their reports [35].

Therefore, journalists use the information that is published on social networks to develop their news [36]. For example, to obtain the statements of public figures or ordinary people that are eyewitness to disasters, riots or incidents. Hence, the advent of social media platforms allows journalists to find new sources of information as a consequence of their constant monitoring activities, or also from a request made by news media professionals through social networks, but without forgetting the importance of verifying the authenticity of the obtained information in a story.

1.2. Fake News and Disinformation in the Digital Age

Social networks are framed in the context of consumption motivated by information, entertainment and fun, conceived as digital leisure spaces [37]. In this scenario, the current conversational communication paradigm [38] makes it possible for the user to become the protagonist of content management [39,40]: the user can participate, disseminate or cooperate through the different emerging digital tools made possible by social networks, and all kinds of virtual sites for communication and exchange. Social networks therefore facilitate a participatory culture [41,42], and have a great capacity to influence an individual's behaviour [43]. In this sense, they mark a before and after in human behaviour [44]. Thanks to technology, anyone that has an account on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram is able to publish anything and add any multimedia resources, such as photos or videos. In these digital spaces, citizens freely express their feelings, beliefs, opinions, etc., on certain topics, which are given prominence and visibility due to the amplifying nature of social networks [45]. This clearly implies a change in audience conduct, which also has a direct effect on journalism. A shift towards where the hub of the news is produced has been clearly observed. The increasing importance of the online audience in news production [46] has also meant that by using social networks, journalists are able to hunt for interesting stories and also to publish information with multimedia material due to the cooperation of users that provide that material. In this way, "social media platforms are dominant players in a highly-concentrated online news market" [47] (p. 261). The major advantage of this digital ecosystem is the feedback and interactivity that all these platforms permit [48]. However, despite their intensive use, social networks as sources of journalistic information raise doubts and mistrust [49] as the credibility and reliability of the information is questioned.

In the digital age, the public actively participates in the construction and dissemination of news through social networks, with the consequent loss of control by the media [50,51]. In these circumstances, fake news proliferates [52,53]. It is one of the issues with the greatest impact on public opinion today, due to its special significance in various fields such as politics, science, society, communication in general and journalism in particular.

At the same time, previous studies indicate that this is a thematic area of great impact in the scientific community of Social Sciences, with Communication being the area with the greatest presence of this type of research project [54].

The democratisation of communication, facilitated by the Internet, leads to the spread of hoaxes and lies that undermine democracy in the digital age [55], and young people are intensely exposed to fake news [56]. The immediacy, the desire for new information and the possibility of viralisation of content make fake news a massive international phenomenon, with great persuasive power motivated by the linguistic and visual resources of manipulation that are adopted so that users will share them [57]. Added to this is the importance of the effect of strangers on the Internet. Recent studies show how people mentally represent and perceive strangers online. In this sense, there is evidence that on the Internet we tend to trust strangers more than we reasonably should because we implicitly represent/treat them as having a good reputation [58].

This reality has a significant impact on the processes of information disorder, disinformation and infoxication that leave aside the veracity and contrast of information [59,60]. This makes it increasingly difficult to choose truthful and correct information [61]. Preliminary research shows that fewer and fewer people are checking the information they receive through social media, which contributes to the faster spread of fake news in the digital landscape [62]. In this way, fake news and the processes that result from it pose a great challenge to democracy and journalism [63].

1.3. Fact Checkers

There are various initiatives advocated by journalism from the frame of reference of digital communication, cyber media and the challenges it faces; among these challenges, one of the most important is to fight against misinformation and hoaxes spread through social networks. Thus, there is a need for transversal, general and specific competencies that take advantage of the potential that the Big Data society offers to the profession of investigative and precision journalism [64]. Along with the mastery of new technologies for content production, there is a demand for professional profiles such as the data journalist [65,66], capable of exploring and extracting useful information from the huge amount of data present on the Internet. There is also a demand for new forms of storytelling for multimedia [67], or through virtual reality and immersive journalism [68]. In addition, numerous fact-checking platforms and initiatives have been developed as key figures for data verification [69].

Fact checkers were born in the United States and have spread globally. They are one of the most important trends in journalism in the digital age, arising from technological advances and socio-political conflicts [70]. The rules of the Internet, governed by competitiveness and immediacy, have affected the verification of information circulating on the Net [71]. The task of fact checkers is "to carry out all the necessary processes to determine whether a news item (or piece of information) corresponds to reality, has been manipulated or is outright false" [5] (p. 6). In this way, the role of fact checkers is not limited to being an extension of traditional journalism, but they are agents that even correct some of its deficiencies [72]. Fact checking is conceived as an emerging journa- listic milestone that has the potential to promote healthier public debate in the contemporary media environment [73]. It is argued that fact checkers can only succeed and fulfil their mission if they gain the trust of the audience through the transparency of their practices [74] and their political neutrality [5]. In Europe, the activity of fact checkers is part of the Action Plan against Disinformation presented by the European Commission in 2018, which, among other measures, promotes the work of fact checkers as a reference for obtaining accurate information.

2. Materials and Methods

A descriptive empirical study was carried out with the aim of portraying the picture of the main fact checkers in Spain and the United Kingdom. For this purpose, the technique of content analysis was used as a way of approaching the object of study, complemented

by an exhaustive qualitative analysis of the information contained in the fact checkers' corporate websites.

Content analysis is conceived as a technique that considers the context as the frame of reference in which the message under study is developed, and which can lead to certain objectives or others [75]. It is a sociological research technique that analyses social reality by combining observation and documentary analysis [76]. It is defined as "a research method that allows for the exploration of any type of message" [77] (p. 180) and has special significance for media messages, as is the case in this research. In fact, media message content analysis has a long history in the field of Social Sciences [78–80].

In this way, it made it possible to analyse the form and content of the selected contents through the quantification of different variables related to them, guaranteeing the scientific nature of research in the Social Sciences [81].

2.1. Units of Analysis

The choice of the units of analysis examined was based on the criteria of recognition and prestige from verification agencies; the agencies selected are those that are members of the IFCN (*International Fact-Checking Network*), a unit of the Poynter Institute founded in 2015 to bring together international fact-checking journalists [82]. It is the world's leading organisation of fact checkers, whose core principles are balance, non-politicisation, transparency and honesty. In Spain, *Newtral*, *Maldita.es* and *EFE Verifica* were analysed, and in the UK, the corporate websites of *Full Fact*, *Logically*, *Fact Check NI* and *The Ferret* were examined.

2.2. Variables to Be Studied

Following the objectives defined in the introduction, an analysis template was developed to serve as a data collection instrument to systematise the recording of variables. This dimensional analysis sheet (Table 1), which records and systematises the variables, was drawn up by considering the following categories of analysis:

Table 1. Variables to analyse.

Corporate Identity			
Legal Identity		**Economic Transparency**	
Date of establishment Property Type of ownership Name Professional profile Team		Funding Balances and results Profit motive	
Corporate Communication			
Visibility	**Contact**	**Others**	**Team**
Social media profile Newsletter	Contact details	Tone Design	Who
Fact Check			
Content		**Methodology**	
Thematic focus Subject of analysis Where (media) Formal resources		Consulted sources Citing sources Verification process Information classification Right of rectification option Others	

Source: own elaboration.

3. Results

3.1. Fact Checkers in Spain

3.1.1. Newtral

In terms of identifying the characteristics that make up its identity, *Newtral* is an audiovisual startup whose origins date back to 2018. In terms of ownership, it has a sole owner who is a natural or physical person with great media impact: Ana Pastor, linked to the channel *La Sexta*. Professionally, she has a degree in Journalism. As for the team that surrounds it, the website specifies in detail each of the people who are part of *Newtral*, a team composed of 74 members, most of whom are female (39 women and 35 men). In addition to their names, their positions are specified, and each of them is introduced with a brief, informal descriptive paragraph about their mission on the platform. This section is complemented by photographs of all of them, an aspect that conveys closeness and confidence. These are images with casual clothes and a broad smile, which move away from an excessively serious and rigid vision of their work. It is one of the largest fact-checking companies in Spain. Due to its relevance as a verification agency, it is part of Facebook's data verification programme.

Corporately, this fact checker is non-profit and advocates economic transparency as its hallmark, providing information about its funding and its balance sheets and results. They are independent journalists with no connection to any political party, private lobby or similar organisation. Revenues are generated through the services provided to different customers and therefore the financing of the company is maintained from the own resources generated.

Newtral has a profile on different social networks: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Telegram. It offers anyone interested with the possibility of subscribing to its newsletter as a way of being informed of its news, and has various tools for contacting them in case you want to send them any information of dubious veracity: email, landline phone and WhatsApp. As indicated on the website, theirs is the first on-demand verification service via WhatsApp in Spain. In all cases, they address their audience with a tone or style of communication that is always personal and direct, but at the same time formal and rigorous.

The website has a Verification Zone. Its verification team is made up of 9 people, again mainly women (6 women and 3 men). The youth of all of them is striking, with an average age of 32 according to their profiles. The main subject of its verification work is the political sphere. Thus, it focuses mainly on verifying the truthfulness of statements made by politicians. These statements are made in a variety of media (press, radio, television and social networks). Formally, the statements appear on the website with the name and position of the politician, the phrase in question in quotation marks and a photograph of the person making the statement. By clicking on the statement, the information is expanded and explained in great detail and the sources for the verification work are cited. At the methodological level, they specify that the sources consulted are of three types: public and official data, experts in the field and the communication offices that advise politicians. In relation to their procedures, in order to try to mitigate the biases of the journalist or verifier, a verification process is carried out that consists of three filters within the team. After this, they classify the information in a traffic light system with four levels of veracity:

- "True" (green)
- "Half-true" (yellow)
- "Misleading" (orange)
- "False" (red)

As part of its policy, it provides the right to rectify the information catalogued as a result of its verification process.

3.1.2. Maldita.es

Maldita.es, together with *Newtral*, is the fact-checking platform with the highest levels of notoriety in Spain. It is a project that emerged from *Maldita Hemeroteca*, a brand that

journalist Clara Jiménez Cruz developed in her spare time, and that would be the seed of this platform. *Maldita.es* was constituted as an association in 2018, and has Clara Jiménez Cruz as founder and director and Julio Montes as co-founder and deputy director. Despite a professional past linked to *La Sexta*, *Maldita.es* has always been featured as an independent and non-profit project. The team is made up of 29 people, 16 women and 13 men, and on their website they state that they do without consultants because they do not use them. The team is distributed among *Maldita Hemeroteca*, *Maldito Bulo*, *Maldita Ciencia* and *Maldito Dato*, each of the subdivisions of *Maldita.es*. Due to the diversity of its contents, the team of professionals of this fact-checking agency respond to varied profiles that complement journalistic work: engineering, computer science, biology, graphic design, etc. In all cases, they present themselves through the website with their photograph, name, position, contact email and a brief CV. As in the case of *Newtral*, the presentation of the team is characterised by their proximity and informal tone.

From an economic point of view, the website has "Our accounts", where they explain the origin and destination of the platform's income. They base their credibility on transparency and this is what they say. Thus, their funding comes from collaborations with media and platforms, workshops, grants, prizes and voluntary donations from the community to maintain the platform. They provide links to their statutes, and specify each of their sources of income and expenses in detail. At the same time, they encourage the audience to ask questions in case of doubt.

In terms of corporate communication, they build brand identity through the word "Maldito", which establishes lexical cohesion between most of the concepts on the website. This word gives a direct and very colloquial tone of communication. These characteristics are transferred to all the words used on its website and also to its graphic design style. The platform is present in social networks such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Telegram and TikTok. As a method through which the audience can contact *Maldita.es*, it has an app *(Maldita App)* and encourages audience participation through registration (with or without financial contribution), the sending of dubious news and the "Toolbox" for the public to learn to verify information by themselves.

Its fact-checking methodology depends on the referent of the information, which depends on whether it is a fact or a hoax. Thus, *Maldito Dato* focuses on politicians' statements about documents, statistics or data that are made publicly, through the media, at events or through social networks. In order to verify they search open sources, contact experts and carry out specific searches in ordinary search engines and on the deep web. The person who has made the statement or their team is always contacted. The news goes through three filters or levels of verification and classifies the content as:

- "False"
- "True but..."
- "False but..."

The information analysed is presented in the style of a news item. It has a headline, a photo illustrating the information and a verdict on the information. The resources used for the verification process are indicated and an extensive explanation is given. If they make a mistake, they rectify it and communicate it. *Maldito Bulo*, on the other hand, has a much more complex multiple verification process that involves the collaboration of the entire team, always insisting on teamwork and transparency.

Like *Newtral*, it is part of Facebook's external verification programme.

3.1.3. EFE Verifica

EFE Verifica is the most recently created fact checker of all those analysed in the Spanish context, originating in 2019. Its owner is a legal entity, as *EFE Verifica* defines itself on its website as a tool of the *EFE Agency* against growing disinformation. Thus, it is part of the well-known *EFE Agency*, an important multimedia news company and leading international agency in Spanish. Its team is made up of a small number of people, four journalists in total, with a majority of men (one woman and three men), although the

woman is the head of the team, and has a Latin American background. Despite this small number of members, it is explained that the team is supported by the synergies that come from being part of an international network such as the *EFE Agency*. The presentation of the team is characterised by its seriousness and brevity. There are no photos or e-mails, only the names, surnames and a few lines about the professional profile of the staff members. All of them have journalistic training and an extensive professional career. This design and this description lend rigor and formality to the presentation of the team.

Financially, there is a short explanation of its funding: they explain that the *EFE Verifica* team is financed from the general budget of the *EFE Agency*. The agency receives compensation from the state for providing a Service of General Economic Interest as well as for the sale of services to clients. Some data on turnover figures are given, and reference is made to the annual accounts of *EFE Agency* for any kind of economic information. Specifically, on *EFE Verifica*, it is mentioned that in 2020 it signed a paid agreement with Facebook to fight disinformation on its platform.

Corporately, it builds its brand identity around the *EFE Agency* brand, linking it to its notoriety and its image characteristics, which are positively valued as a journalistic reference. *EFE Verifica* has its own profile on many social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Telegram, Pinterest...), and its main channels of contact with the audience are email, WhatsApp, social profiles on Twitter and Facebook and a form on the website. Their communication style is practical, they use little informative text and always rely on the tone of the *EFE Agency* as the driving force behind their work.

In terms of their working methodology for the fact checking, their principles are rigour, accuracy, transparency, impartiality and independence. They do not focus on a specific type of content but deal with a diversity of topics, such as health, education, politics, science, environment, technology, security or human rights. These contents are identified in videos, audios, photos, texts or memes that circulate on the Internet and that meet at least one of the following requirements: they are widely disseminated, they are a danger to public opinion and/or they provide useful information for the citizen. In the verification process, they contact the original source, use official and public data from alternative sources and consult academic and technical experts if necessary. For each of the aspects to be verified, a sentence is presented as a summary of the news item being verified and a photo. Then, a text answering two questions: "What do we check?" and "Conclusion". At the end are the sources consulted for the verification. The verification is reviewed by at least two members of the *EFE Verifica* team, and an editor from *EFE Agency*. Unlike other fact checkers, *EFE Verifica* does not use labels or verdicts on the facts, as they are considered reductionist, but a conclusion. In case they have to rectify, they publish a correction of the original article with the identification "Correction".

3.2. Fact Checkers in United Kingdom

It should be noted that, although the *International Fact-Checking Network* verifies four fact-checking agencies in the United Kingdom, just two of them check information that might be of interest to all citizens in the UK. The others are focused only on the country where they are located, these are: *Fact Check NI* (Northern Ireland) and *The Ferret* (Scotland).

3.2.1. Full Fact

This fact-checking agency located in the UK was founded in 2008. Surprisingly, they do not deal with information that only concerns Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. They assert that they check claims that are of national interest in areas where they have expertise.

They are a registered charity, so they are supposed to be a non-profit organisation. Their CEO is Will Moy, an expert on Marketing. They assure that they are impartial and that their board includes representatives of different political parties and viewpoints.

This fact-checking agency is made up of 41 people: 23 men and 18 women. Any staff member has a photo and a brief and informal description of their background. All photos

are in black and white. In addition, they have a network of volunteers, although their website does not specify who they are.

One of its main values is transparency and, therefore, *Full Fact* publicises their funds. However, although this organisation offers their annual accounts and reports, they do not openly show them on their webpage. All that they share is the shortcut for the Charity Commission website. According to their webpage, their incomes come thanks to the support of people and organisations, and they also add more information about their benefactors. Their main funder is Facebook, with more than £500,000. In fact, they work for Facebook as an independent fact checker under its Third Party Fact-Checking initiative. It is interesting to note that both WhatsApp and Google appear on the list of supporters, even though their donations are not very high.

All their information is free and shared on social media: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. *Full Fact* also offers the possibility of subscribing to their newsletter in order to be updated on their latest reports. This agency offers two different ways of contact: for the public and for the press. Those who want to contact them as a reader have a section on their webpage with a form, while the media is offered a phone number and an email address.

Full Fact checks statements made by politicians, public institutions and journalists as well as viral online content and news on both the media and social networks. Two things should be noted regarding their methodology. On the one hand, how they check the facts. Firstly, they contact the claimant to ask them about the issue —unless the claim's source is obvious—, then they check that information with a wide range of sources, even with experts if necessary. They assert that they ask people for a correction when they get things wrong, although they do not clearly explain how they achieve this. After doing their research, they publish their information featured by the use of descriptive headlines with a picture. They use a formal language but it is also easy for people to understand.

On the other hand, it should be taken into consideration that while some fact-checking agencies rate the validity of claims or people, *Full Fact* does not. They claim on their webpage that this can be reductive in certain contexts, and do not always fully communicate the nuance behind their findings.

In the event that users consider that a report is incorrect, they can claim for a correction by using a digital form.

3.2.2. Logically

Logically was founded in 2017 and is located in the United Kingdom. *Logically*, together with *Full Fact*, are two of the most important fact-checking agencies in the UK which cover topics of national interest, not just those located in a specific area of the UK, which is the case for *Fact Check NI* and *Ferret Fact Service*. They describe themselves as a technological company which combines human resources with advanced artificial intelligence and machine learning in order to fight against misinformation and disinformation.

The company was founded by engineer Lyric Jain, and is made up of 49 people (23 men and 26 women). Its employees are not allowed to be a member of any political party or even support or be involved somehow in anything related with political parties or politics. It is a fact-checking agency (free), as well as a company which offers their services to others (not-free). They help individual citizens to national governments with the tools they need to identify and disarm damaging and misleading information being shared online. Because of this double aspect, their team is formed by professionals from different fields: engineers, business management, journalists, lawyers, etc.

In short, *Logically* is a company which sells its services as a fact-checking agency to governments, public sector entities or private sector organisations. Therefore, it is a profit-motivated organisation. Their main aim is to identify possible threats and analyse, identify and mitigate the spread of misinformation and disinformation for their clients.

Logically's website states how the company was founded, however, it does not offer information regarding their financial accounts, probably due to the reason that it is a profit-making company.

They focus on politics, public figures statements and news overall. They also research fact checks as a request made by users through *Logically*'s app. According to their webpage, they will investigate, verify and adjudicate any suitable claim submitted by users which is adequate, in consonance with their claim publication policy.

A suitable claim for them to investigate could be any statement made in a public or publicly accessible forum, properly assessed as more or less reasonable, or simply true or false, and adjudicated on the basis of publicly available evidence and commonly held standards of reasoning.

As it has been said before, all their information offered as a fact-checking agency is free, and it is also shared on social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram). Those who want to contact them have a section on their webpage with a form. They use at least two sources of information to confirm a judgement on a claim such as expert consensus, expert opinion, non-expert journalistic investigation, and eyewitness accounts, among others. Their news is featured by being brief and concise, with short and simple grammatical structures, and also by having at least one picture for each news item. It is also interesting to note that every piece of information is rated by five classifications:

- "True"
- "Misleading"
- "Unverifiable" (not enough evidence to judge its veracity)
- "Partly true" (misleading in some insubstantive respects, but is still helpful in understanding the point at issue)
- "False"

Those users who consider that a report is incorrect can claim for a correction by filing out a form.

3.2.3. Fact Check NI

Fact Checker Agency is a non-profit Northern Irish fact-checking agency founded in 2016 by Orna Young and Allan Leonard. *Fact Check NI* is formed of 10 people: five women and five men. On the agency's webpage, each staff member is presented with a brief descriptive paragraph in a formal way about their mission on the platform. This section is accompanied by photos of all staff. They are images with formal clothing and a wide smile.

Although it is not one of the largest UK agencies inside the *International Fact-Checking Network* (IFCN), this agency was awarded a grant from Horizon 2020 (a programme at the European Commission) and also joined Facebook's Third-Party Fact-Checking programme. This agency's funds also come from charitable trusts and individual donations. They claim to be transparent in three ways: about their funders and accounts, their sources of information and how they make their investigation. In fact, in every piece of information they clearly show their sources, and they also publish their financial accounts.

This agency shares their information on Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn, and also tries to engage its users by using a newsletter. They also encourage their readers to contact them by email, or to submit a claim by email or by using a Google Form available on their webpage. The *Fact Check NI* team decides to verify information by asking themselves these two questions: firstly, "Is it important?" They assess the potential impact of a piece of information going unchecked; and secondly, "Is it fact-checkable?" As it is explained on their website, the claim must be a statement made in public, which can be attributed to a specific person (not limited to politicians nor campaigners) or organisation (perhaps a press release or a report), an assertion or allegation that can be validated or refuted, or based on past or present actions (but not speculative about the future).

The style used in all its communications is formal but personal, brief and concise and very well structured, which makes it more readable. Their webpage has a section called "fact checks" where all the checked information is uploaded. The most topical topics are those related with politics and public issues concerning Northern Ireland. In all their reports they include three sections which allow them to identify clearly if a fact is true or not: "Claim" (here the issue is briefly explained), "Conclusion" (in two or three lines they

cast light on whether or not it is true) and "Infographics" (always used in the same creative style with short information to sum up the investigation).

When possible, they try to contact the person/organisation the claim is about in order to verify the accuracy and double-check the given explanations with any sources of information that the claimant provides, as well as look into reliable statistical information and primary sources. In all of their published articles, they give information about their sources.

After that, the reports are classified in this 5-level rating:

- "Accurate"
- "Accurate with considerations"
- "Unsubstantiated"
- "Inaccurate with considerations"
- "Inaccurate"

If readers need to claim for a correction in an article, they can do it by email.

3.2.4. The Ferret

The Ferret is a Scottish fact-checking agency launched in 2015 and founded as a non-profit organisation by freelance journalist Alastair Brian. Their staff is formed of 12 people: four women and eight men, and most of them are journalists, activist or political writers. This agency has a section on their webpage where they explain briefly, but in a descriptive way, their previous experience. Each description has an informal photo of the employee concerned. This low-sized number of staff might be explained due to the fact that *The Ferret* focused only on information regarding Scotland and its topical issues. They check statements from politicians, pundits and public figures which come from viral claims, hoaxes or memes shared on social media.

The Ferret asserts on their webpage that they are the first agency in Scotland to be regulated by Impress, an organisation who fight for high-quality journalism. In addition to this, none of their directors are members of a political party, and they also are committed to taking a non-partisan approach to everything they do. As they explain, all stories are reviewed by experienced journalists before publication and checked by lawyers, when required.

Their funders are member subscriptions, grant funding, training fees and story sales to other media organisations. They offer their financial accounts on their webpage.

In terms of how they verify information, they decided to investigate the information based on these questions:

- Is it verifiable? They don't check opinions which are subjective value judgements, entirely speculative, or based on moral or philosophical argument.
- Is it likely to be widely seen? They aim to check the veracity of claims which may have an impact on the public debate.
- What is the source of the claim? They are more likely to check claims from those who have a significant voice in public debate, such as politicians and public figures.
- Is it newsworthy? They want to fact check things which are part of the current conversation, so will focus on current issues as they come up.

The Ferret verifies the information found as part of its daily media and social media monitoring tasks, as well as at the suggestion of its readers. Those who want to contact them have a section on their webpage with a form, Telegram, email, post, SMS or by a call. It is interesting to note that they offer an anonymous option to contact them. This fact-checking agency asserts that when they decide on a statement to check, they follow several steps. Firstly, they go to the person or entity who made the original claim to ask for evidence where possible. Secondly, if that person or entity provides them with evidence, they double-check to determine how accurate the statement is. And, thirdly, they look at information on-the-record, publicly available and from authoritative sources. They also claim to speak with experts in the relevant field to help them.

Some of their information offered requires a subscription: standard membership (£3, per month) or Gold membership (£9, per month). However, the information shared on social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) is free. They use social networks as a way to drive traffic to their webpage and also to create engagement with their current and potential audience. Their reports are written in formal language although with a personal tone, they use descriptive headlines where they also add whether the information is true or not. On all occasions, they seek the participation of their audience, either by requesting donations or inviting them to send the information they want to verify. *The Ferret* also rates their fact checks by using a 7-degree scale:

- "True"
- "Mostly true"
- "Half true"
- "Mostly false"
- "False"
- "For Facts' Sake (FFS!)"
- "Unsupported"

When a correction of a report is required, users can contact *The Ferret* by email or by dropping a message on the agency's Facebook or Twitter accounts.

3.3. Comparative Analysis between Fact Checkers in Spain and United Kingdom

A wide description of Spanish and UK fact-checking agencies has been seen. Although both have their similarities between each other they also have differences. Therefore, a comparison of the most remarkable findings will be made in this section.

Fact checks' ratings. Almost all the analysed agencies in both countries used a type of scale in order to categorise their obtained results regarding an investigated fact. There are two exceptions: one in Spain *(EFE Verifica)* and other in the UK *(Full Fact)*. Surprisingly, both point out that labels or scales are not accurate at all, and can even be reductive in certain contexts.

Free or paid service? While in Spain none ask for subscriptions or other alternative types of payment, in the UK it was found that two out of the four agencies are not completely free. In the case of *The Ferret*, to read all their reports a subscription is needed, and *Logically* offers reports for free but their bigger 'business' is their paid services as a company, which helps individual citizens to national governments to identify and disarm damaging and misleading information.

Team and identity. It is interesting to note that Spanish agencies verify national and international information, while in the case of UK they only focus on topical issues that are of national interest or located in the country where they are settled *(Fact Check NI and The Ferret)*. Regarding their staff, with the found information we can assert that in both cases the majority of their members are young (between 29and 44 years old per average) and most of them are journalists, although they have different professional backgrounds inside their teams. Almost all the organisations analysed have been founded in the last five years—which might explain their teams' youth—, except for *Full Fact*, the oldest agency of all (2008) and nearly all of them publish a photo and description of each employee, with the exception of *EFE Verifica* which does not show any pictures of their members. Concerning the level of equality, Spanish agencies tend to have higher parity levels rather than UK ones. In fact, all the fact-checking agencies located in Spain are ruled by women, meanwhile in the UK, only one is co-chaired by a woman *(Fact Check NI)*. With respect to their funders it should be noted that in all Spanish agencies Facebook is an investor, perhaps as a part of its research program regarding misinformation, while in the UK, Facebook is only mentioned in *Full Fact* and *Fact Check NI*.

Financial information. All but *Logically* are non-profit organisations. It should be taken into consideration that it seems this company uses their fact-checking reports as a way to engage with their potential customers. However, all the analyses agencies provide information about their balance sheet and their funders perhaps as a way to prove their

concern with transparency. *Logically* does not offer as much detail as the other agencies, this is probably due to being a profit-making company.

Communicative practices. In all the analysed organisations, the communicative style used is formal but personal and colloquial, with descriptive headlines, photographs and clear explanations of whether a piece of information is true or not (regardless of the use of rankings). Their Web designs are clear and structured, making it easy for a user to navigate them. All of them also have a presence on social media and ask their audiences to participate on them. Furthermore, they offer their users several ways to establish contact with them, except for *Logically*, which only offers a form as a contact option.

Methodology. The comparison between the UK and Spanish cases shows that, overall, these organisations tend to focus on politics and statements regarding political issues, although they also verify other concerns, particularly those involving hoaxes, memes or viral content. All the sources consulted are quoted in their information. Furthermore, they widely explain how they do the fact checking, as well as how they make their conclusions. Almost all of the organisations analysed use a ranking system to determine how accurate the analysed fact is. The only exceptions are: *EFE Verifica* (Spain) and *Full Fact* (UK). Interestingly, all the agencies analysed have an option to request the rectification of information in the event that users consider it to be incorrectly verified.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The reality of the fact-checking agencies analysed shows the decisive role of this new journalistic agent, taking into consideration the active role of citizens through social networks. Thus, in the digital era, we can speak in terms of the proactivity of the audience, as well as the journalistic profession which, through fact checkers, offers its response to the dissemination, consumption and interpretation of the media by the public in today's society.

The mission of fact checkers and their relevance in the field of journalism transcends the specific events or phenomena they investigate, such as the COVID-19 pandemic [83], to promote themselves as important and necessary actors involved in certifying the veracity of news and facts in different fields of activity, with politics being the most common [84] but not the only one they focus on. It is estimated that the proliferation of fake news leading to disinformation will continue to increase, to the point that half of all the news circulating by 2022 will be fake. This is mainly due to the low cost of producing fake news compared to the enormous cost of making real news produced through rigorous journalistic work [85]. Alongside the fundamental role of fact-checking agencies, other initiatives or solutions have recently been proposed to deal with the problem of fake news. This is the case, for example, with the idea that proposes a computational approach to extract features from social media posts of users to recognise who is a fake news spreader for a given topic [86]. In this respect, it is also worth noting the interesting initiative of providing consumers with a "nutrition facts" style of information for online content as a way of protection from fake news [87].

In this sense, the role of fact checkers goes beyond its understanding as a simple extension of journalism, as they even complete and allow to correct some of its drawbacks [72]. There is even talk of fact checking as a new journalistic genre capable not only of monitoring the information disseminated on social networks, but also of its capacity to transform complex information into knowledge that can be assumed by citizens [88].

These agencies serve as a platform or meeting point between journalistic reality and citizens, with whom they strive to maintain close and collaborative contact. In this way, they aim to promote a healthier public debate in today's media environment [73], and contribute to the development of a critical spirit in the face of information saturation derived from conventional media and social networks, which represents a key educational challenge [89].

At the European level, and in relation to the comparison between Spain and the United Kingdom, news verification agencies strive to show their transparency and usefulness to the public. However, the initial hypothesis is partly confirmed, as although non-profit agencies

are the norm, one of the agencies analysed *(Logically)* is a for-profit agency. Regardless of their profit motive, they base their efforts on combating and tackling the dissemination of false news, with the clear objective of having a free and well-informed society. To this end, all of them work under three fundamental perspectives: firstly, verifying and checking information suspected of not being real and considered to be of public interest based on their founding criteria; secondly, explaining whether the fact analysed is real or not through a clear and concise report; and finally, telling readers where they have obtained the information and offering them the possibility of contact if they consider the result of their investigation to be inaccurate.

A possible limitation of this research is the analysis of two European countries, a circumstance that could be remedied in possible future research with the aim of carrying out comparative analyses between the reality of fact checking in more countries, both European and from other continents, to see if there are significant differences in their journalistic work. On the other hand, possible future research on fake news could delve deeper into the sociological reasons behind the spread of fake news, and its relationship to the belief systems of the communities in which people are embedded, such as membership groups and reference groups.

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