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## **Independent fact-checking platforms in Spain and Italy: Features, organisation and method**

### **Plataformas independientes de fact-checking en España e Italia. Características, organización y método**

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#### **Resumen**

*La verificación de la información es una de las actividades periodísticas que más relevancia ha adquirido en los últimos años, como consecuencia del incremento de la circulación de las noticias falsas y la facilidad para difundirlas a través de plataformas como las redes sociales. Esta investigación analiza la estructura, composición y funcionamiento de las plataformas independientes de verificación de la información que hay en España e Italia. Para alcanzar este propósito se han utilizado diferentes técnicas cualitativas, como el estudio de caso aplicado a cada una de las iniciativas, las entrevistas semiestructuradas en profundidad a sus cofundadores o responsables y el análisis de contenido web. Se trata de una triangulación de técnicas que ha permitido extraer conclusiones y aportar ejemplos de interés a la investigación. Los resultados revelan que estos proyectos cuentan con una amplia comunidad de seguidores en las redes sociales y se definen por una plantilla multidisciplinar que verifica principalmente las declaraciones políticas y las informaciones que circulan por la Red y cuyo modelo de negocio se aleja del convencional del periodismo.*

#### **Palabras clave**

Noticias falsas; desinformación; chequeo; verificación; fact-checking; periodismo

#### **Abstract**

In recent years, fact-checking has become an extremely important activity in journalism as a result of the increased circulation of fake news and the ease with which it can be disseminated on platforms like social networks. This study analyses the structure, composition and operation of independent fact-checking platforms in Spain and Italy. To this end, three different qualitative techniques have been used: the case study technique applied to each initiative, in-depth semi-structured interviews with its co-founders or managers, and website content analysis. This triangulation of techniques has allowed us to draw conclusions and provide examples of relevance to the research. The results reveal that the projects have a large community of followers on social networks, a multidisciplinary team of staff engaged mainly in checking political statements and information circulating on the Internet, and a business model that differs substantially from the conventional model in journalism.

#### **Keywords**

*Fake news; disinformation; check; verification; fact-checking; journalism*

## 1. Introduction

Technological evolution has transformed the map of media communications (Pavlik, 2000). Constant change has become a basic feature of the mass media (Vázquez et al., 2019), driven by the digitalisation of information processes. Digital technology has transformed the professional routines of journalists (Micó & Pérez, 2015), opened up new possibilities for content production (Hermida & Thurman, 2008) and consumption (Casero-Ripollés, 2012), and given rise to new business models in the sector (Breiner, 2013).

In the new media ecosystem, the monopoly on news communications has been broken up so that now newspaper, magazine and book publishers and the mass media are not the only ones with the capacity to bring news stories to the public (Casero-Ripollés & López-Meri, 2015). The existence of multiple sources of information has resulted in a veritable "information overload" (Martin, 2017), which is further complicated by the high degree of trust and credibility enjoyed by certain individuals on the new platforms (Choi, 2015), the huge quantity of information circulating on technological infrastructures and the strategies applied to exert the biggest impact on social behaviour (Berinsky, 2015; Currie & Boyd, 2018; Lopez, Vives & Badell, 2018).

The Internet and social networks are a hotbed of information and stories to tell, but at the same time they constitute a space with blurred boundaries where any user can reach a massive audience with content that is not necessarily very reliable (Bergström & Jervelycke, 2018). As a result, the new media ecosystem is a realm prone to erroneous, inaccurate, malicious, invented and unfounded information that can mislead readers and hinder the objectives of anyone who wants to know the truth (Zommer, 2014).

The expression "fake news" refers to distorted information (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016) presented as fact but highly misleading (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018) as it has been altered, lampooned or reinterpreted (Balmás, 2012) in pursuit of particular ideological or economic interests (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). For Rubin, Chen & Conroy (2015), this concept also covers news presented in the sensationalist press published with unverified and exaggerated headlines, large-scale hoaxes and humorous fake news stories. Tandoc, Lim & Ling (2018) suggest that the concept should also include satirical news, parodies, and false content presented in a journalistic style with no warning to the audience, the manipulation of images, advertising content with the appearance of news reports, and propaganda.

Derakhshan & Wardle (2017) stress intention as a crucial factor for understanding this phenomenon, while Zaryan (2017) argues that what is really important is that people are able to access this information and share it, in an age when the ways and means of obtaining information have changed, especially among young people (López, González & Medina, 2011). However, for Catalina-García, Sousa & Silva (2019) the issue lies in whether audiences are capable of differentiating fake news from real news, as people will often readily accept information that fits in with their world-view (Mihalidis & Viotty, 2017).

In any case, the consequences are invariably negative because truth is confused with lie, the credibility of misinformation is enhanced (Rapp & Salovich, 2018), and democratic discourse is undermined (Champy, 2011; Codeluppi, 2018; Fisher, 2018; McChesney, 2014). However, the phenomenon of false news is hardly unique to the current period (Burkhardt, 2017; Petroni & Anzera, 2017). It is in fact an old practice that has played a prominent role throughout the history of communication, especially in times of war and during interwar periods to promote particular interests (Bloch, 1999; Schudson & Zelizer, 2017). Nevertheless, it has taken a new turn in the contemporary era, especially with the rise of social networks (Haigh, Haigh & Kozak, 2017; Pavlik, 2013; Watts & Rothschild, 2017) and particularly since Donald Trump began questioning the veracity of the information of certain media sources during his 2016 electoral campaign (Jankowski, 2018; Greenberg, 2017).

Arising in response to this crisis of confidence in the news is fact-checking, a journalistic practice based on a *posteriori* confirmation of information published by the media and on the verification of statements or comments made by political leaders and other important figures (Mantzaris, 2018). For Amorós (2018), fact-checking is the best tool to counteract the power of fake news, as it has been developed by journalists to combat such misinformation and to give the public access to a version of events that faithfully reflects the reality.

The origins of fact-checking as an institutionalised practice can be traced back to 1913, when the newspaper *New York World* established the Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play, an agency dedicated to correcting oversights and eradicating falsehoods (Ayuso & Bauzá, 2018). The objective, in any case, is to contribute more effectively to the demand for accountable public representatives and a fully informed public—a key point for strengthening democracy (Gueham, 2017; Nyhan & Reifler, 2014).

In the contemporary era, this practice has become widespread and fact-checking initiatives have appeared in large numbers (Palau, 2015; Spivak, 2011; Stencel, 2016). Although the work of confirming and verifying facts has existed since journalism began, as a form of quality assurance (Ufarte, Peralta & Murcia,

2018), in recent years, many media outlets and independent platforms have created divisions, work groups or spaces for the verification of information published by other media sources and disseminated on social networks or announced by political leaders (Cherubini & Graves, 2016).

As of 1 September 2019, the fact-checking census developed by the Reporters' Lab at Duke University (Duke Reporter's Lab, 2019) identifies a total of 269 fact-checking initiatives in 62 countries, of which 195 are active and 74 inactive. That is 143 initiatives more than in June 2017, when the Lab had identified a total of 126 websites and organisations dedicated to this kind of work, which in turn represented a 24% increase on the previous year and double the figure for 2015 (Adair & Thakore, 2015). Vázquez, Vizoso & Lopez (2019) have also conducted a global exploration of fact-checking projects, finding that Europe is the continent that is home to the largest proportion (51 initiatives), although they also identified projects in North America, Asia, South America, Africa and Oceania. The authors found that the country with the largest number of fact-checking platforms is the United States (31 in total), followed by France, India, Brazil, Indonesia and the United Kingdom, each with at least 5 fact-checking organisations. However, according to Graves (2016) the world of projects associated with fact-checking defies any attempt at categorisation.

This practice has also given rise to a new professional profile (Ufarte & Manfredi, 2019) at a time when the demand for journalists is waning while the need for other types of professionals and specialists is on the rise (APM, 2018). This latter group includes fact-checkers, who are highly specialised in big data, i.e., they are experts at working with massive, complex volumes of information requiring computational methods to extract knowledge (Arcila, Barbosa & Cabezuelo, 2016; López, Toural & Rodríguez, 2016; Uscinski & Butler, 2013), and who provide services involving the analysis, interpretation and reconstruction of information (Amazeen, 2015; Renó & Flores, 2014). To put it another way, these professionals make use of technology to produce better journalism and facilitate understanding of published news (Casero & Cullell, 2013; Paniagua, Gómez & González, 2014).

The objective of this research is to analyse the structure, composition and operation of fact-checking platforms in Spain and Italy that are financially independent of conventional news corporations. The purpose of the analysis is to identify the corporate organisation of each project, their origins, the topics of the content that they check most, the techniques and methods they employ, their business models and their interactivity with users. The creation of these kinds of independent projects specialising in fact-checking is the result of the constant acceleration of the news cycle as a consequence of the dissemination of information online (Hermida, 2012). This study uses a qualitative method in order to test the following hypotheses:

H1. These initiatives are made up of multidisciplinary teams, and thus a cross-section of knowledge, skills and attitudes is involved in the fact-checking process.

H2. Political statements and information circulating on social networks constitute the type of content that is fact-checked the most, in keeping with the prevailing trend of soundbite journalism. The fact-checks are presented to the audience using textual explanations and identifying terms, visuals and colours.

H3. The main sources of financing for these independent initiatives are partnerships with different media companies, social networks and other platforms. This financing by affiliation is different from the conventional model in journalism, which is based on advertising and subscriptions.

H4. These projects have a large community of followers on social networks, who submit topics of dubious credibility circulating on these platforms so that they can be checked and verified. These communities of users constitute an active part of the project and are therefore quite different from the passive audience model that characterises traditional media.

## 2. Methodology

The objective of this research is to analyse the structure, composition and operation of independent fact-checking platforms in Spain and Italy. These two countries were chosen for convenience due to their accessibility and proximity to the research team. This is an important point in view of the pressing need to defend models of journalism based on excellence and quality against the invasion of models that place a higher priority on traffic than relevance of published content.

The methodological design adopted to achieve this objective is based on a review of the scientific literature, which forms part of the secondary research (Codina, 2017), and which allows us to identify the main contributions made to this area of research. We have also used the case study method, which, according to García-Avilés & González Esteban (2012), can help shed light on the transformations in the media industry as it provides the researcher with a variety of sources such as interviews, participant observation, questionnaires and bibliographical documents, facilitating a better contextualisation of the

phenomena studied.

The first stage of the research involved locating all the platforms identified in the two countries in the global census of fact-checking projects compiled by Duke University's Reporters' Lab. This research centre maintains a regularly updated website with a map showing the geographical location of 269 fact-checking initiatives around the world (Duke Reporter's Lab, 2019). Of that number, 195 were still active as of 1 September 2019 while 74 were inactive.

As a result of this initial search, seven independent fact-checking initiatives were found. Four of these were in Spain: Ministerio de la Verdad (Miniver.org); Maldito Buló; Newtral Media Audiovisual; and Polétika. The three Italian initiatives were: Pagella Política; Agenzia Giornalistica Italia (AGI); and Lavoce.info.

First of all, any projects associated with an existing media corporation were removed from the study sample. This was found to be the case for AGI and Lavoce.info: AGI's fact-checking activities are operated by an Italian news agency focusing on the economy and industry; while Lavoce.info is controlled by the economic magazine of the same name. Therefore, these two initiatives were excluded from the object of study.

Secondly, we ensured that all the projects for study are signatories to the Code of Principles of the International Fact-Checking Network, a division of the Poynter Institute, whose objective is to bring together journalists working in the area of fact-checking all over the world. In this case, Polétika and Ministerio de la Verdad were found not to be signatories and were therefore also excluded from the study. Polétika is the product of a coalition of activist groups led by Oxfam Intermón and CIECODE (Spain's Research Centre on Policy Coherence and Development) created to monitor the political promises made in the campaigns prior to the Spanish general elections in 2015 and 2016. Meanwhile, Ministerio de la Verdad (Spanish for "Ministry of Truth") was Spain's first fact-checking website, founded in 2006.

The most recent activity on each of the projects was also analysed, and any initiatives that had not updated their websites with fact-checked news in the last three months were also excluded. This was the case, for example, of Ministerio de la Verdad, whose last update was on 1 April 2019, and Lavoce.info, which had its last update on 27 June 2019.

The exclusions described above left a sample made up of only three projects, despite the increasing importance of these initiatives and the huge impact they have begun having on journalism, politics and society in general in recent years. The fact-checking initiatives studied were Maldito Buló, Newtral Media Audiovisual and Pagella Política.

Having defined our study sample, we developed an analysis template that was then applied to each of the initiatives in the sample. This template was initially filled out based on a website content analysis (Herring, 2010), considering elements unique to an online environment like links and multimedia features to complement the analysis of traditional content (Bardin, 1977; Krippendorf, 2004). The variables analysed included the description, fact-checking methodology, business model and user interactivity of each of the three projects (Table 1).

**Table 1: Analysis parameters**

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| Description               | 1) Name of company; 2) Type of company; 3) Year of creation; 4) Origins of initiative; 5) Number of employees; 6) Staff profile; 7) Services offered; 8) Main objectives.        |
| Fact-checking methodology | 1) How the facts are checked; 2) Type of content most commonly checked; 3) Fact-checking techniques employed; 4) How results are presented.                                      |
| Business model            | 1) How revenues are generated; 2) Main sources of financing; 3) Partnering with media companies.   |
| Interactivity             | 1) Profiles on social networks; 2) Ability to submit feedback; 3) Ability to share; 4) Ability of users to submit topics for fact-checking; 5) Possibility of correcting errors. |

Source: Compiled by authors.

This exploratory study has been complemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews with co-founding members of Maldito Buló (Clara Jiménez) and Pagella Política (Pietro Curatolo). In the case of Newtral Media Audiovisual, an interview was conducted with Marilín Gonzalo, coordinator of the platform's digital area. The interview questions were grouped into the following subject blocks: contextual aspects of the creation of the initiative, organisation, format, type of content, and business strategies. The answers obtained were used to develop a detailed description of each of the case studies.

These initiatives play an important role in the industry. However, studies in the field of the news industry tend

to focus on big media corporations with large editorial teams, ignoring the fragmentation of the industry today. As a result, an increasing number of authors are pointing out the need to liberate academic research from the centralist notion of news production and to focus on aspects of the sector that fall outside traditional forms of journalism (Deuze & Witschge, 2017).

### 3. Case studies

#### 3.1. Maldito Bulo

This independent project, founded in May 2014, debunks fake news appearing on social networks and in the press. It was created by the journalists Julio Montes and Clara Jiménez Cruz and is incorporated as an association. According to Clara Jiménez, Maldito Bulo was founded with the aim of "cleaning hoaxes and manipulations out of the news ecosystem." To this end, its main objectives focus on monitoring and verifying political discourse, fighting against disinformation and promoting media literacy and technological tools that can create a community capable of defending itself against disinformation wherever it appears. For its work, it was nominated in 2017 for the European Press Prize, and it is the only Spanish media service to form part of the High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation set up by the European Commission in 2018.

In addition to its two co-founders, the Maldito Bulo team is made up of 22 professionals: David Fernández, Rocío Pérez, Nacho Calle, Laura del Río, Laura Chaparro, Stéphane M. Grueso, Bea Lara, Andrés Jiménez, Fermín Grodira, Natalia Díez, Yuly Jara, José Molina, Adela Vived, Sergio Sangiao, Laura García Merino, Luisa Bernal, Rubén Díaz, Cindy Catherine Erazo, Carmen García, Mario Vera, Antonio Maestre and Carlos Hernández. Most are journalists with extensive professional experience with major Spanish media companies.

The types of content checked by this team are mainly statements made by political leaders and hoaxes reported by its community of users. Its fact-checking process involves three stages. First, the staff investigate the disinformation to be debunked and put together an initial description of the hoax. This process involves contacting primary sources, checking the origin of the information, comparing it against data from official sources and performing technological processes of image, video or audio identification if necessary. In the second stage, via a Telegram group, the rest of the team raises questions about the fact-check: for example, what sources the information has been checked against, how a given conclusion has been reached, and what technical processes have been followed to debunk it. Finally, after verifying the fact-checker's work, the whole team votes on the result. If there is no vote against it, it is posted with a simple majority, while if there is a dissenting vote, the fact-checking process has to be repeated from the beginning.

The fact-checks are presented to the audience by means of brief, concise textual commentary, either confirming or debunking the facts that have been checked. The initiative also uses a colour scale ranging from soft colours like green or blue to stronger ones like red or black. This colour coding indicates the reliability of the content that has been subject to fact-checking. In addition, fact-checked stories are presented in a news article format, with a headline, subheading, boxes containing the most relevant data and a body of text explaining the information that has helped determine whether the statements or data in question are true or false. These articles are also generally accompanied by documentary evidence like videos or photographs of the real content, the fake content or even a composite of both so that the user can compare the differences. Debunked information is also presented with labels like the word "BULO" ("hoax") in large red letters (Image 1). "With all of this, we create content that gives citizens greater certainty about what is real and what isn't," explains Jiménez.

Image 1. Information fact-checked by Maldito Bulo



Source: <https://maldita.es/>

As a business, Maldito Bulo's multiplatform news content is produced mainly with volunteer support, and its main sources of financing are the partnerships it maintains with different media operations, including: the radio show *Julia en la Onda*, on Onda Cero; the programmes *Las Mañanas de RNE* and *Gente Despierta* on the Spanish national radio network RNE; *El Detector de Mentiras* on the news website *eldiario.es*; and the public television network Telemadrid. For Jiménez, these partnerships are essential to keep up the fight against disinformation and ensure the viability of the initiative, and, she adds, "we are open to exploring new synergies."

The project has also received three grants from three different institutions: the European Journalism Centre's Engaged Journalism Accelerator; the Data Transparency Lab Call for Tools 2018; and the International Fact-Checking Network Crowdfunding Match. It also partners with Facebook to combat fake news on the platform. "We check messages, images and videos posted on this social network as part of its external fact-checking programme. To do this, we follow the same methodology that we use in our own daily work, maintaining independence and scientific rigour," adds Jiménez.

In terms of interactivity, Maldito Bulo offers users the possibility of contacting the team via email ([contacto@maldita.es](mailto:contacto@maldita.es)). The team is also present on Twitter (225,804 followers), Facebook (98,442 followers), and Instagram (28,700 followers). These social networks, together with a direct WhatsApp service (655198538) provide ways for users to submit potential fake news to its journalists so that it can be fact-checked. On this point, Clara Jiménez points out that the platform receives more than 250,000 WhatsApp messages per day from users requesting fact-checking of information circulating on social networks. They have also developed innovative formats specifically designed for social networks and the creation of a community of followers committed to the project who contribute to the initiative.

For the correction of errors Maldito Bulo has a rectification policy that establishes an obligation of transparency in the correction of their own mistakes, publicly acknowledging them on their website and on social networks.

### 3.2. Neutral Media Audiovisual

Neutral Media Audiovisual is a media content start-up founded in January 2018 by the journalist Ana Pastor, who is the company's sole shareholder. It is incorporated as a single-member limited partnership and it offers three different types of services: the production of TV programmes and digital storytelling on social networks; innovation in journalism through fact-checking; and research based on artificial intelligence protocols. Its value proposition thus includes the use of a format and language that targets the people who use its services most: people aged 20 to 45.

The initiative was established to "knock down lies and hoaxes" on the Internet, on the basis that "journalism, if it is done well, is an irreplaceable instrument that requires verification and technology to disseminate our reality and to help us detect whether a photo is fake or a video has been manipulated," explains Marilín

Gonzalo, who adds that "the team's aspiration is to serve as a benchmark in fact-checking." Newtral Media Audiovisual was awarded the "Best Audiovisual" award at Global Fact V, held in Rome in 2017, and the international Digital Jove award for innovation, technology and digital storytelling.

The project team is made up of a total of 66 individuals, including journalists, engineers, researchers, programmers, producers, directors, graphic artists and documentalists. More specifically, the team includes: Ana Pastor, journalist, founder; Tomás Pastor, CEO; Joaquín Ortega, content manager; Esperanza Martín, production manager; Maribel Sánchez-Maroto; project manager; Rubén Míguez, innovation manager; Javier Dale, managing editor; Marilín Gonzalo, digital area coordinator; Alfred Camarote, technical department; and the graphic artists Nacho Mozos, Carlos Palanca and Gonzalo Gómez. Also on the team are the documentalists Antonio Prado, Yolanda Gaviro, Vanessa Pozo, and Patricia Gallego, and the journalists Inés Calderón, Míriam Ruiz, Javier Guzmán, Lorena Baeza, Javier Nadales, María Blanco, Brenda Valverde, Jesús Espinosa, Marisa López, Mar Tomico, Paloma Corbí, Luis H. Rodríguez, Antonio Contreras, Álvaro Lorenzo, Fátima González Donado, Lara Monrosi, Olga Gutiérrez, Alba Martín, Remedios Maroñas, Sara González, Borja Rodrigo, Nahiara S. Alonso, Ana Gómez Parra, Mario Viciosa, Noemí López Trujillo, Roberto Álvarez, Beatriz Nogareda, Jacobo Pedraza, Yaiza Oliva, María Díez, and Adriana Silvente. Other team members are Alejandro Olvera, scriptwriter; Noelia Hidalgo, office manager; Ximo Fernández, camera operator; Paula S. Jimeno, Paula Cruz and Juan Manuel Rocha in production; María Benavente, developer, and David Marcos, programmer. In filmmaking are Marisa Lafuente, Andrés Garvía, Ignacio Vilela, Rafael Sánchez, Ruth Carreras, Pepe Jiménez and Mario Caballero, while Pablo Álvarez is technology lead and Hugo Casero is NLP engineer. Finally, Luis Pintado is software engineer and Itziar Bernaola is director of education.

The aim of this initiative is to foster knowledge and talent in this field of study among future media professionals: "In university classrooms, students aren't taught fact-checking, which is why we are implementing projects like this one. We've also launched several initiatives with universities," explains Gonzalo.

The types of content most commonly fact-checked are statements by politicians and institutions and hoaxes circulating on social networks. The methodology adopted by the Newtral team involves several stages. The first is daily fact-checking of statements by politicians of different parties and governments in newspapers, radio and TV interviews, as well as on social networks and any other public platform. They identify claims of interest or importance from a purely journalistic perspective and assess the significance of the statement and the person who made it. They then consult the public and official data available with the aid of different sources and experts to contextualise and understand the information. They also contact the press offices of the politicians concerned to seek clarifications or additional information that may help determine the origin of a potentially dubious or confusing piece of data. This whole verification process goes through three different filters within the team before being published. If any error has occurred in the fact-checking process, the team rectifies it transparently as promptly as possible. "Information is the basis of all our work and we're convinced that its use, through innovation in journalism, is needed more than ever in the era of the battle against fake news," suggests Gonzalo.

After the fact-checking process, Newtral Media Audiovisual presents the degree of veracity of the statement on a grading scale consisting of four points: 1) True. The information is accurate and not lacking in context or significant additional data. 2) Half-truth. The assertion is correct, but requires clarification, additional information or context. 3) Misleading. The information contains correct data but it ignores some very important aspects or is combined with incorrect data to give a different, inaccurate or false impression. 4) False. The assertion is false (Image 2). The information presented is also accompanied by videos, graphics or other visual elements.

## Image 2. Information fact-checked by Newtral Media Audiovisual



Todas las verificaciones de datos, fact-checks a políticos y fake-news que desmentimos están en la zona de verificación. Bulos y mentiras newtralizados.

**TRANSPARENCIA**

EL BUSCADOR DE DINERO PÚBLICO

Busca a un político...

ENVÍA TU PREGUNTA

**XX FALSO**

Source: <https://www.newtral.es/>

Newtral Media Audiovisual generates revenue from production services for media groups, social networks and other platforms. It is also financed by production contracts established with the television programmes *El Objetivo* and *Dónde Estabas Entonces*, both broadcast on the laSexta network, and with Telemadrid. It thus benefits from the promotional capacity of these documentary programmes, as both its brand name and its team members often appear on these programmes, although it maintains independence from the TV network. Newtral does not sell advertising or charge its users a subscription fee; its only alternative source of revenue is a contract with Facebook to fact-check news stories suspected of being fake. Gonzalo sums up the company's income sources as follows: "We have one essential source of financing that comes from television. With that revenue we could choose to get rich or to reinvest it to explore new territories, and we have done the latter. We are also now looking at self-financing the digital and technical side through various models that are being tested in Europe, because we believe we could reach agreements with companies."

In terms of interactivity, this project has an email address ([info@newtral.es](mailto:info@newtral.es)) that users can write to with their feedback and questions. It is also present on Twitter (104,706 followers), Facebook (7,961 followers), and Instagram (13,700 followers). In addition, aware of the reach of WhatsApp, the team provides responses on this application (682589664) to enquiries, questions and submissions by any member of the public wanting to check information, even including ordinary everyday matters. "Since we launched the initiative, we've responded to more than 4,000 fact-check requests via our WhatsApp service. Sometimes the fact-checking takes a while, but we try to respond to everything we can," explains Gonzalo. The initiative has a rectification policy and is committed to checking information as often as necessary.

### 3.3. Pagella Politica

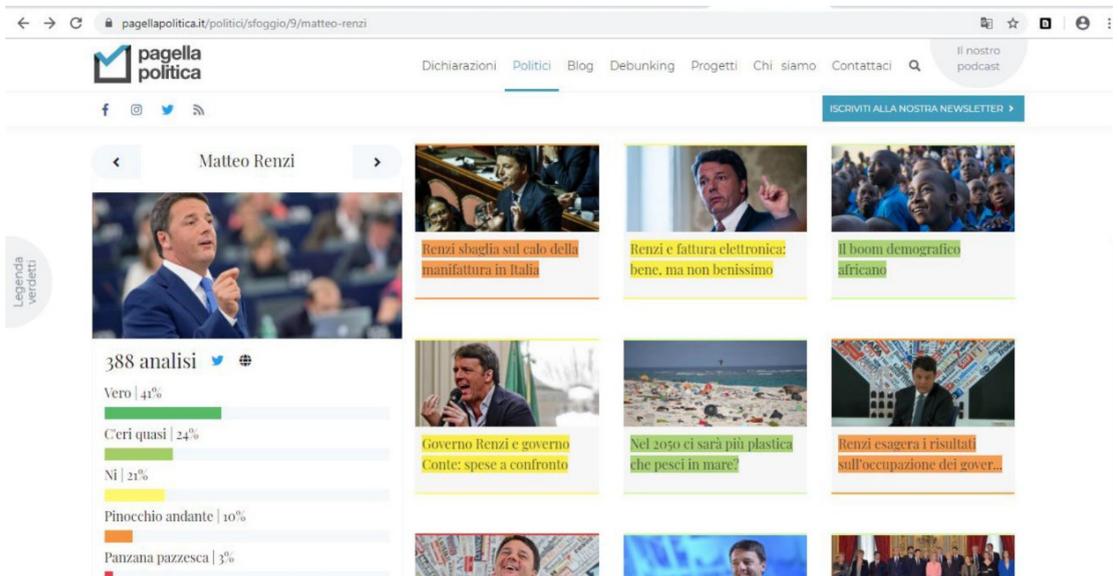
This platform was established in October 2012 as an online service specialising in fact-checking. It is described on its website as "the only Italian website dedicated to political fact-checking", whose objective "is to inject a dose of objectivity into the Italian political dialectic." It is incorporated as an independent limited partnership, operating under the business name Pagella Politica Srls.

The initiative was created as a voluntary, self-financed project by its 10 founders: Pietro Curatolo, Daniele De Bernardin, Federica Fusi, Giorgio Gagnor, Amerigo Lombardi, Alexios Mantzarlis, Flavia Mi, Andrea Saviolo, Silvia Sommariva and Carlo Starace. None of these members has a background in journalism, as their professional experience has been mainly in areas of the social sciences, such as law, political science, economics and international relations. Seven other people also currently form part of the project: the company's director, Giovanni Zagni, full-time editors Carlo Canepa, Tommaso Canetta, Silvia Cavasola, Alessandro Ciapetti and Camilla Vagnozzi, and two contributors, Davide De Luca and Andrea Zitelli, who are assigned specific projects. "Our team is cross-functional, diverse and of all ages," explains Pietro Curatolo.

The most common types of news that are fact-checked by Pagella Politica are election promises, interviews and debates, statements by politicians and public figures, and data cited in the media or in speeches. They also fact-check content disseminated on social networks that is submitted by users. Along with their regular activity, the company also participates in a number of international partnerships. "We are an active part of an international fact-checking community and we're recognised for not supporting any political candidate or taking sides in political and economic issues," asserts Curatolo.

With respect to their work method, the team analyses statements made by public figures by means of enhanced texts with supports like original sources and graphics. "We compile statements by constantly monitoring Italy's major newspapers and magazines, both in print and online, as well as the most important news agencies, politicians' websites and Twitter accounts, the websites of the national political parties, ministries and government departments, and YouTube. We choose only those statements based on verifiable facts or numbers," adds Curatolo. The team includes all the links to the article or video in question to allow anyone to verify what was said. In confirming the information as true or false, they always cite the sources on which they base their assessments. "In this way, nobody can tell us that we've misinterpreted the available data," he adds. The fact-checks are presented on a five-level colour-coded scale, beginning with dark green ("vero", or true), followed by a lighter green ("c'eri quasi", or kind of true), while third and fourth place are yellow ("Ni") and orange ("Pinocchio andante"). The final level is indicated with the colour red, for content labelled as "Panzana pazzesca" (wild, outrageous lie) (Image 3).

**Image 3. Information fact-checked by Pagella Politica**



Source: <https://pagellapolitica.it/>

Pagella Politica's financing model involves partnerships with newspapers, radio and television networks and training institutes, which "has made it possible to hire employees to look after other more specific projects and services," explains Pietro Curatolo. Moreover, the members and partners continue contributing voluntarily to managing the site and drafting the fact-checks published on it. Since 2015, Pagella Politica has also been engaging in crowdfunding campaigns on the Kickstarter website. And in 2018, the Italian television network RAI, the AGI news agency and Facebook represented approximately 70% of its revenue.

The remaining 30% came from financing obtained through the EU's SOMA project, for winning a call for proposals under the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme. Pagella Politica is one of five members of this project, which also includes Aarhus University (Denmark), the Athens Technology Centre (Greece), LUISS Guido Carli University (Italy) and Ecosistemas T6 (Italy).

The initiative is currently involved in weekly collaborations with programmes on RAI2, and it conducts five fact-checks a week for the Italian journalists' agency (Agenzia Giornalistica Italia). It also provides Facebook with support to combat the dissemination of fake news on the platform and writes a fact-checking column for the bimonthly magazine *La Pagella di Bruxelles*. "Thanks to our clients, we keep the political reporting system alive by spending nearly all our earnings on company salaries and administration," explains Curatolo.

The Italian initiative is present on Twitter (11,934 followers), Facebook (31,624 followers) and, since December 2018, on Instagram (850 followers). Via these platforms users can submit feedback and content for fact-checking. In addition, its website offers the facility to fact-check a statement using the "submit a statement" button, and there is an RSS subscription service that allows users to receive alerts. At the end of each post there is a unique feature that allows users to share the fact-check in question on social networks. The initiative also has a policy on corrections, adjustments and updates, which allows it to modify and update any of its publications.

## **4. Analysis of results**

### **4.1. Features, professional profiles and work methodology**

The interviews conducted for this research support the assertion in the academic literature that these types of initiatives have been created in response to the constant acceleration of the news cycle as a consequence of the dissemination of information online. The objectives of these projects also reflect their design and capacity for scalability (Carvajal, 2015). Marilín Gonzalo, coordinator of the digital area at Newtral Media Audiovisual, remarks that "the team's aspiration is to serve as a benchmark in fact-checking" while Maldito Bulo's scalability is revealed in its objective to promote media literacy and technological tools that can create a community capable of defending itself against disinformation. Pagella Politica also has a clear vision of the role it seeks to play: to inject a dose of objectivity into the Italian political dialectic, as it affirms on its website.

Another phenomenon given considerable attention in the academic literature and supported by the case studies analysed here is the profile of the professionals who perform these tasks. On this point, all three projects analysed support the argument that the success of these initiatives requires a flexible, multidisciplinary team with specific technological skills that enable them to implement their business plan. At Maldito Bulo, for example, data journalists, IT engineers and developers of web platforms and mobile applications all work together. At Newtral Media Audiovisual there are journalists, engineers, researchers, programmers, producers, filmmakers, graphic artists and documentalists, while at Pagella Politica there are journalists and specialists in law, political science, economics and international relations. The profile of the journalist is redefined in these projects as a flexible professional with a multitude of specialisations and skills and with the capacity to work alongside others with very different profiles to pursue their work objectives. All of this is combined with an open, innovative attitude that views the changes affecting the media industry as opportunities rather than potential threats. It is worth noting that a common trend in recent years among news professionals has been to leave traditional media for digital native projects, and then to leave those projects to launch their own news media start-ups (Valero & González, 2018). This points to a shift in the professional profiles and structures of these initiatives towards one of the essential features of successful media companies: the flexibility to embrace constant evolution while minimising risks and costs, with multidisciplinary work teams (Küng, 2017).

The initiatives analysed here are all similar in terms of the type of content they fact-check. All three projects focus on political statements, information circulating on social networks and suggestions submitted by users. All three also employ similar methods for fact-checking the information in terms of the features of the content published and the media used to disseminate it. All three organizations also refer to primary and official sources to begin their fact-checking processes. On the other hand, the techniques and materials used vary from one company to the next. Newtral Audiovisual Media, for example, employs experts who help to contextualise and understand the information, while at Maldito Bulo and Pagella Politica nobody outside the team participates; instead, it is the team members themselves who vote and decide whether the checks made should be published or not.

There are also differences in the formulas used to indicate the degree of accuracy of the information checked. Maldito Bulo and Newtral Media Audiovisual both use a textual explanation and a scale of accuracy based on the independent or combined use of terms, colours and symbols to present their fact-checking to the public. On the other hand, Pagella Politica only combines two elements in its fact-checking: a textual explanation and a term-based and colour-coded scale, without the use of any other visual elements.

### **4.2. Business model and user interactivity**

The initiatives studied here were all created in the context of what is known as "entrepreneurial journalism" (Manfredi, Rojas & Herranz, 2015; Prenger & Deuze, 2017), as they advocate a return to the traditional values of the trade, principles like truth, rigour, ethics, public service and independence, through the creation of

models that differ substantially from traditional media models. They also involve a massive reduction in the level of investment needed for news production (Manfredi & Artero, 2014). In view of this, it could be argued that not only do these companies pursue individual profit for their creators, but also, in their quest for a model that will help them to generate and capture value, they are compelled to heed community demands to meet certain needs. They are innovative projects because instead of trying to maintain the existing analogue model, they are digital by nature, which means greater flexibility, dynamism and speed in their capacity for adaptation to change.

All three projects constitute clear examples of the business and production strategies employed in the field of fact-checking. They are organisations that operate as independent media companies, despite the fact that their employees are increasingly partnering with other media outlets. Maldito Bulo partners with the radio networks Onda Cero and RNE, the news service eldiario.es and the TV network Telemadrid, while Newtral Audiovisual Media works with the laSexta and Telemadrid networks, and Pagella Politica with Agenzia Giornalistica Italia (AGI) and the Italian television network RAI. Other sources of revenue include grants (Maldito Bulo) and assistance from EU projects (Pagella Politica).

In relation to sources of revenue, it is also important to highlight the fact that Maldito Bulo, Newtral and Pagella Politica have all been hired by Facebook to combat fake news on its platform, giving them the mission to review content (texts, photos and videos) that users or the platform itself has determined may potentially be false or manipulated or contain information that is misleading or presented out of context. The projects work independently of Facebook in checking this content, although they are paid for the service. Diversification of revenue sources is therefore possible in entrepreneurial journalism, but a business plan or "lean canvas" (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2009) is needed to deal with issues like cost structure and initial financing.

Another issue analysed is the interactivity these initiatives offer their communities of followers. All three have a large number of followers and users on social networks. Twitter is the social network where they have the biggest numbers of followers: Maldito Bulo with 225,804, Newtral Media Audiovisual with 104,706 and Pagella Politica with 11,934. The professionals working on these projects exploit their active participation on social networks to project their personal brand of journalism to thousands of followers in the new global media environment, using it as a means of promotion (Manfredi, 2015). These communities of followers, meanwhile, also provide the initiatives with content, as they use these instant messaging tools to submit topics for fact-checking.

**Table 2: Features of the study sample**

|                               | <b>Maldito Bulo</b>  | <b>Newtral Media Audiovisual</b>                                   | <b>Pagella Politica</b>  |
|-------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Professional profile          | Multidisciplinary, flexible and with specific technological skills | Multidisciplinary, flexible and with specific technological skills | Multidisciplinary, flexible and with specific technological skills |
| Main topics for fact-checking | Political statements   | Political statements   | Political statements   |
|                               | Information circulating on social networks                         | Information circulating on social networks                         | Information circulating on social networks                         |
|                               | Submissions by users   | Submissions by users   | Submissions by users   |
| Fact-checking methods         | Textual explanation  | Textual explanation  | Textual explanation  |
|                               | Scale based on terms, colours and symbols                          | Scale based on terms, colours and symbols                          | Scale based on terms and colours                                   |
| Financing model               | Partnerships with other media companies                            | Partnerships with other media companies                            | Partnerships with other media companies                            |
| Interactivity                 | High number of followers and users                                 | High number of followers and users                                 | High number of followers and users                                 |

Source: Compiled by authors.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

This research has effectively met its proposed objective to analyse the structure, composition and operation of independent fact-checking platforms in Spain and Italy. The fact that only three initiatives qualified for study—Maldito Bulo, Newtral Audiovisual Media, and Pagella Política—reflects the reality that despite the growth of interest in the practice of fact-checking in recent years, many of these kinds of projects have not enjoyed the continuity needed to grow.

All three projects studied were established between 2012 and 2018, during the greatest boom in the fact-checking phenomenon. Since then, they have continued to personalise their services in order to generate and capture value and respond to the demands of media companies and users who want news stories that have been checked against reliable sources, official documents and sound research results, at a time when the journalistic profession is seriously affected by job insecurity (Fole, 2012; Gómez, Gutiérrez & Palau-Sampio, 2015; Álvarez & López, 2016; López, Rodríguez & Álvarez, 2016).

These findings provide evidence of the interest in consolidating this service to the public, which prioritises the civic agenda and the monitoring of public authorities, in a post-truth era when fake news is undermining the quality standards and credibility of the media and of journalists (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017). Indeed, Gómez, Roses & García (2017) argue that the most promising employment niches for the near future are those related to the new possibilities offered by the digital environment, as these new spaces offer a context for a hybridisation of elements of traditional journalism with virtual tools.

Based on this study, it is possible to conclude that the fact-checking process involves a hybridisation of profiles and a cross-section of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Hypothesis 1). This situation points to a need to develop new skills adapted to the impact of technological innovation, as suggested by Besalú, Schena & Sánchez (2017) and by Casero-Ripollés, Ortells & Doménech (2013). Fact-checkers need to be proficient in multimedia communication and in different formats, as they may have to deal with data and information of different kinds—video, audio, photographs, text—that they will have to know how to integrate into their news production.

The political statements and information circulating on social networks constitute the kind of content that is fact-checked the most by all three organisations studied. Thanks to the use of traditional techniques like searching documentary archives and the use of technological applications (Brandtzaeg *et al.*, 2018), it is possible to check and verify data, images or other documents providing information. The objective of all this is to confirm that information or, if applicable, debunk it by clarifying where the inaccuracies are and furnishing original data that support an accurate representation of the facts. This fact-checking is presented to the audience in the form of textual explanations and verification scales based on terms, visual elements and colours (Hypothesis 2).

These companies help revitalise the news industry with their quest for new business models, and thus represent a radically different view from the approach of traditional companies in recent years in terms of the information products they offer the market. The main sources of financing for these initiatives are partnerships with different media companies, social networks and other platforms (Hypothesis 3).

Hypothesis 4 has also been confirmed by this study, as the fact-checkers, like professionals working in other areas of journalism, have adopted social networks as tools to support their daily work activities, using them for checking facts and accessing original sources as well as disseminating the information products resulting from their fact-checking processes and for subsequent contact and discussion with their followers and with the general public. In line with these observations, Bremer (2013) notes that proficiency in the use of social networks can enhance the employability of future journalism graduates, as many young people have difficulties finding work due to the mismatch between their qualifications and the needs of the labour market.

This first study does not represent an exhaustive examination of the issue examined here; on the contrary, the study itself underscores the fact that it is an active and evolving topic for discussion. Although this research has confirmed all four of its starting hypotheses, it suffers from certain limitations and leaves a number of questions open for further research. A wider sample would have facilitated the identification of more features that could be extrapolated to the market as a whole, while the inclusion of initiatives from other parts of the world could allow for a comparative study between the Spanish case and those of other countries. This is not to suggest that the results of this research are invalid, as it is essentially a qualitative rather than quantitative study. Finally, with respect to future research in this area, there is considerable room for the development of similar studies in order to analyse the particular features and tendencies of fact-checking initiatives. The performance of further research could result in a better understanding of this practice and serve to assess the value of organisations and individual researchers working in the field of fact-checking.

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