The mirage of truth: the instrumentalization of fact-checking to spread an ideological discourse

María Díez-Garrido
University of Valladolid, Spain

Dafne Calvo
University of Valencia, Spain

Lorena Cano-Orón
University of Valencia, Spain

ABSTRACT

Fact-checkers have grown recently, facing the decline of journalism and the acceleration of disinformation flows on the Internet. Due to the recent scholarly attention to these journalistic outlets, some authors have pointed to diverse critics such as the political bias and the low impact of fact-checking initiatives. In line with the research approaching the weaponization of disinformation in politics, this chapter reflects on the instrumentalization of verifying practices as a fact to consider when studying fact-checking. The investigation applies a combined methodology to compare Bendita and Maldita initiatives. While the latter is internationally recognized as an entity of fact-checking, the second one arises as an imitation of it and lacks recognition and scholarly attention. Conclusions suggest that fact-checking implies more complex activities than refuting specific facts, while alt-right positions can instrumentalize fack-checkings for political objectives. The authors call the importance of definitions that exclude this type of misuse of verification.

Keywords: Disinformation, Alt-Right, Political polarization, Social media, Echo chambers, Journalism, Confirmation bias, *Maldita*, *Bendita*, Verification.

INTRODUCTION

Fact-checking is a relatively new term (Graves, 2017) that has reached a timely fashion in the last few years to the point that some authors consider it an innovative form of news coverage (Nyhan et al., 2020). Initiatives for verifying information have exponentially multiplied all over the world (Dias & Sippitt, 2020). Most of the countries, both from the North and the Global South, have active fact-checkers in the current times (Graves & Cherubini, 2016), and organizations that launch them are diverse, from media outlets to NGOs.

Although based on journalism practices and the verification values, fact-checkers differ from other media outlets (Signer, 2018, 2020), focusing on giving evidence about specific facts and claims (Amazeen, 2019). They can be embraced as a response to the recent disinformation context (Amazeen, 2019; Tuñón Navarro, Oleart, & Bouza García, 2019), tackling the existence of hoaxes and false news on the Internet. Their central visibility in political processes and media environment has attracted scholarly investigations that approach fact-checking from different approaches (Burel et al., 2020), compressing their dynamics, audience, and impact on public opinion.

However, fact-checkers are not free from criticism. Some studies have proved that one content could be differently verified (Lim, 2018) and recognize the need to evaluate their method of evaluation to gain effectiveness (Dias & Sippitt, 2020). Other authors have shown a minimal effect of their activity on the political behavior of citizens (Nyhan et al., 2020) and, in turn, have reflected whether users choose accuracy rather than ideological reinforcement (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Wardle, 2018).

This investigation aims to critically reflect on fact-checkers considering the weaponization of truth (Molina et al., 2019). That is, just as some political factions can construct their discourse pointing to the falsehood of political opponents' claims, the chapter suggests that fact-checkers could also be instrumentalized to expose certain viewpoints (i.e., alt-right ideologies), prioritizing the reinforcement of arguments over a journalism practice.

Combining qualitative and quantitative data, the investigation compares two initiatives that present themselves as fact-checkers: *Bendita* and *Maldita*. The latter is a verification project that has attracted interest from previous research (i.e., Magallón-Rosa, 2018; Bernal-Treviño & Clares-Gavilán, 2019) that identifies it as one of the central fact-checking platforms in Spain. *Maldita* presents international recognition as well as is a member of the International Fact-Checking Network. Moreover, *Bendita* is a newer initiative that has not seconded the principles of IFCN, and its activity is yet to be investigated in Spanish scholarly literature.

This chapter aims to analyze the structure and content of two entities that call themselves fact-checkers by seeing if they meet the values that characterize them. This goal includes five specific objectives: 1) Examine the aesthetics of *Maldita* and *Bendita*. 2) Explore their structure and organization, 3) Analyze their activities and topics of fact-checking, 4) Identify the scrutinized subjects and the sources employed in their verification practices. 5) Measure the engagement of each message in their Twitter profiles.

The chapter is structured as follows. The theoretical framework explores disinformation in the context of polarized alt-right discourse and fact-checking as a journalistic discipline with new responsibilities. Later, qualitative and quantitative analysis is explained in detail in the methodological section. The results are divided into two parts, with the qualitative and the quantitative data, respectively. Finally, conclusions suggest that the aesthetics of fact-checking can serve to disseminate an alt-right discourse. Comparing *Maldita* and *Bendita* proves that verification projects imply more comprehensive activities, deeper analysis, and more complex practices than merely reporting false information. This idea led the authors to suggest that media

profiles such as *Bendita* could undermine the truthfulness in fact-checks and make citizens resistant to them.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Disinformation in a context of polarized alt-right discourse

The spread of disinformation through social media has received a great deal of interest in academic studies, especially since the US Presidential Elections and the Brexit referendum in 2016 (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; Humprecht, 2020). Following the incredible popularity of the term 'fake news,' Tandoc et al. (2018) pointed out that it is a trendy concept that has generated a great deal of media and political attention, despite its not something new. According to these authors, fake news stories have two main motivations, which are ideological and financial. In their literature review, the same authors stated that the term 'fake news' had been used to define very different content, such as propagandistic or deliberately false:

"Earlier studies have applied the term to define related but distinct types of content, such as news parodies, political satires, and news propaganda. While it is currently used to describe false stories spreading on social media, fake news has also been invoked to discredit some news organizations' critical reporting, further muddying discourse around fake news" (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 138).

In contrast to the isolated concept of 'fake news,' Bennet and Livingston prefer the term 'disinformation,' defined as "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals" (2018, p. 124). There may be an intention to create social gaps and create debates that are not based on reason, as Bennet and Livingston (2018) stated.

Several studies have shown concern about the risks that the consumption of political communication on social networks poses to citizens as the content is biased (Hameleers, 2020). Disinformation threatens the democratic decision-making order because "citizens and politicians can no longer agree on factual information that forms the input for policymaking" (Hameleers & Van der Meer, 2020, p. 2). The current polarized context leads the population to consume content that confirms their beliefs. According to the same authors, this makes citizens potential victims of disinformation, as they are more likely to believe false information if it is in line with their ideological bias.

"Numerous studies support this statement by finding that individuals tend to recall more information that is in favour of their position and to evidence that confirms their hypothesis so that they require less hypothesis- confirming evidence to accept an idea than they need hypothesis-inconsistent information to reject it" (Spohr, 2017: 154).

The dissemination of false information has been fueled by the existing polarization in the political scenario and the existence of algorithms in social networks. The use of political bots contributes to the propagation of false and manipulated information, amplifying ideas that are marginal and receiving greater visibility in social networks (Resende et al., 2019). There are computational campaigns that promote false information with strategic objectives that endanger democratic systems. The algorithms present in social networks have led to the formation of the filter bubble and echo chambers (Spohr, 2017), which implies a selective exposure of users to opinions that validate their political convictions. Consequently, these technological features affect the political spectrum through the consumption of information, polarizing the population even more. These echo chambers can also influence political discourse and public information beyond what happens on social media.

Social networks can exponentially increase the effect of disinformation, but they can also mitigate it. Spohr (2017) argues that platforms such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook should be aware of their role and mission in public opinion, among many other technology companies. From his point of view, these large corporations should be aware of the potential damage they are doing in terms of spreading disinformation and should assume responsibility for it. Therefore, he suggests algorithmic changes in these platforms that decrease disinformation. In the author's opinion, this fact should be added to a conscious and exhaustive search for political information by citizens. By bringing all these factors together, we can combat misinformation and have a better informed citizenry that actively seeks out more sources of information and broadens public debate.

It is indeed this polarization present on the Internet that multiplies the virality of manipulated or false content. According to a study carried out by Vasoughi et al. (2018), it takes six times longer for the truth to spread than false information, which also gets significantly more reactions from users. This phenomenon takes advantage of the 'economy of emotions,' which uses emotions to increase advertising revenue through displaying content on the Internet. Machine learning feeds on and learns from people's feelings, and this can be put to malicious use in a context of disinformation. This technology may confirm already existing political positions through automated fake content (Bakir & McStay, 2017).

Disinformation threatens democracy, according to Bennet and Livingston (2018), as it happened with the Brexit campaign and Donald Trump's communication. These campaigns have taken advantage of a racist discourse, which discriminates against certain social minorities and uses alt-right speech. Thus, Nielsen and Graves (2020) assure that disinformation does not affect all ideologies equally but that the radical right has profited from the viralization of these discriminatory and false contents. In a report analyzing the results of a UK survey, Chadwick and Vaccari (2019) noted that right-wing supporters have a higher tendency to share false or incorrect messages.

The specific technological, structural conditions that increase disinformation have a more significant impact in propagating fake content favorable to the radical right. Ferrara (2017) suggested that there is a market for political disinformation bots. Specifically, this author found evidence in both the 2016 US Presidential Election and the 2017 French Presidential Election of bots that propagated far-right discourse. There is, therefore, an environment and several technical circumstances in social media that increase the dissemination of disinformation close to the radical right.

2.2. Fact-checking: a journalistic discipline with new responsibilities

In a new scenario dominated by disinformation and by the existence of a datified society (Van Dijck, 2014), journalism finds itself in a crisis of legitimacy (Tandoc et al., 2018; Steensen, 2019), which pushes information professionals to update their routines to the new challenges of society. Steensen (2019) points to a new and more constructivist epistemological approach that inquiries into the authenticity of information sources and make the journalistic product more transparent. These outcomes will foster information literacy adapted to the climate of disinformation present in social media.

"It is when audiences mistake it as real news that fake news can play with journalism's legitimacy. This is particularly important in the context of social media, where information is exchanged, and therefore meanings are negotiated and shared. The socialness of social media adds a layer to the construction of fake news, in that the power of fake news lies on how well it can penetrate social spheres" (Tandoc et al., 2019, p. 148).

Fact-checking appears as one of the possible solutions to this problem, through which journalists confirm or deny information through a verification process. One of the objectives is to educate the audience since journalists provide the data they demonstrate or disprove. This goal can influence how users consume information (Amazeen, 2017). Likewise, fact-checking can promote a political change and an improvement in journalism. Thus, fact-checking aims to alert society to false manipulated or inaccurate information and has a democratic and pluralistic approach.

Traditional fact-checking evaluates the accuracy of statements made by politicians. Still, disinformation events in recent years have transformed this discipline and focused it on false content propagated mainly through the Internet (Choi and Haigh, 2019). This raises the ambition to create a democratic, open, and pluralistic information verification system that is decentralized, as Choras et al. (2019) stated. According to these authors, this ecosystem should combine the latest technological advances –such as data mining and machine learning–, index information, cross-reference content, consider websites' the publisher websites, compare publications, other publications, and use semantic analysis to detect fake news.

The main objection to fact-checking focuses on its lack of effectiveness since the population is influenced by its prior beliefs and opinions (Hameleers & Van der Meer, 2020). These authors state that, even with the scientific potential of disproving false information and testing it, the population has an attitude rooted in its ideology that hinders the fact-checking efforts. There are two possible outcomes regarding fact-checkers' work, according to Nyhan et al. (2020). On the one hand, people may accept the fact-checks and adapt their beliefs to them. On the other hand, they may oppose believing in these works when the fact-checks are opposed to their ideological interests.

Fact-checking has shown the potential to reduce political polarization; however, Hameleers and Van der Meer (2019) point to a possible tendency for people not to expose themselves to fact-checkers that disagree with their previous opinions. Thus, communicators can take advantage of the credibility of fact-checking to spread more disinformation:

"This means that we have to place a critical side-note to the practical implications of fact-checkers. Although they may be extremely valuable tools to combat misinformation when in the right hands, communicators with the wrong intentions may profit from the legitimacy and perceived accuracy of fact-checkers and use their format to reinforce disinformation – hereby making falsehoods even more credible by allegedly verifying it with fake evidence" (Hameleers, 2020, p. 15).

This author warns that hoaxes using statistics, fake sources, and other false evidence are perceived as more accurate and confirm already existing opinions. This reason is why Hameleers (2020) advocates protecting the independence of fact-checking organizations.Dias and Sppitt (2020) also criticize that academic studies on fact-checking have focused predominantly on its persuasive capacity but not on its educational impact. This journalistic practice offers people information to think with their criteria. Therefore, these authors stress the importance of studying the contribution to the knowledge of fact-checkers and their ability to show who to trust and who not to trust.

Therefore, it is interesting to examine the effects of fact-checking, but Lim (2018) also highlights the importance of analyzing the performance of this discipline. This author found in a study that fact-checkers from different organizations rarely checked the same news, and when they did, they had a low match rate. In this line, Dias and Sippit (2020) criticize that academic studies assume that the role of fact-checking is persuasive and question its educational role. Thus, they ask whether fact-checks give people knowledge about who they should trust or not and help people develop critical thinking skills. They propose to delve deeper into the cultural changes that data verification can bring about. Therefore, Hameleers (2020) suggests combining verification with media literacy techniques.

METHODOLOGY

To analyze the *Bendita* case, it is performed along with an analysis of the fact-checker *Maldita*. It is picked this particular medium to compare their content and their activity because, first, *Bendita* clearly seems to imitate aesthetically *Maldita* (even its name - *Bendita* (blessed) - is the opposite of *Maldita* (damned), and second, because *Maldita* is one of the best-known fact chequers at the Spanish national level and internationally recognized.

Mixed methods are used to conduct the research. Firstly, a formal analysis is carried out, taking into account both communication portals as a whole (content, communication, and graphic identity). This factor is important because the aesthetics of the project already prepares citizens to doubt or not the information they consume. Thus, if an online portal appears to be a media outlet, the user will take its contents to be truthful journalistic pieces. Specifically, it is addressed: a) the aesthetics of the project -what it looks like-; b) the frequency of publication; c) the format of the contents - what aesthetics does the content follow to denounce it as a hoax-; d) the platforms on which they have activity -where are they present-; and e) the entities with which they have collaborated publicly or have a consortium. For this, it is performed a qualitative analysis that explores the dimensions of the projects on all their platforms to compare them.

Secondly, to be able to make a more profound comparison of the content that Bendita.eu and Maldita.es published, and to be sure that this is done in equal terms -e.g., in the same platform, in the same period of time-, it is collected a corpus of all messages from their Twitter account that were published during a month (from 15th February to 15th March). The period chosen contained several significant dates for Spain, such as the remembrance of the 11M attacks, which was already the subject of disinformation at the time, and the celebration of Women's Day on 8 March. This is a period in which we believe that the activity of fact-checkers can be intense.

The data was crawled with Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2019) from their main Twitter accounts (*@Maldita_*es and *@Bendita*puntoeu). Although both content creators have more than one Twitter account, they both have a generic account and thematically specific accounts, it was decided to analyze only their main account because both entities used that general account to support and promote all their content, as those tweets published in specific accounts (such as those specific to feminism or immigration) are also retweeted by the primary account to increase its amplification range. That is, more precisely, the corpus of tweets is composed of 34 tweets from *Bendita* and 551 from *Maldita*.

This content analysis carried out was focused on the variables shown in table 1. Categories were created *ad hoc* after a generic analysis of their contents made by the authors. The manual coding was carried out by two coders who, after several meetings and adjustments of the codebook, obtained an optimum result of their intercoder reliability. Krippendorff's alpha test for the variables was from 0,815 - 0,947. The agreements reached on various codification issues can be found in italics in each variable.

Table 1: Variables and categories of the content analysis performed. Own elaboration

Variable	Categories
a) the theme of the published hoaxes	1- Science / Health 2- Politics / Government 3- Migration 4- Feminism 5- Others

b) the origin of the source they refute	0-No refute 1-Government / Institutional 2-Parties or politicians 3-Media / journalists 4-Companies 5-International 6-Associations / activists 7-Famous people / influencers 8-Anonymous users 9-Others *When we find several in the same tweet several mentions or denials of entities belonging to different categories, the media takes precedence over the politician or party because it is understood that it criticizes a discourse disseminated by many actors.*
c) the source used to refute	0- Does not give source information / Not applicable 1- Official documentation / Official data 2- Consultations with experts 3- Media 4- Blogs / websites / social networks 5- Other *When there are several sources of information used for refutation, the most important or most frequently used source is used for refutation.*
d) the viralisation of the message	This is a quantitative variable. It is set regarding the engagement (RTs and likes)

RESULTS

Aesthetical analysis

Intending to explore the structure, aesthetics, and organization of *Maldita* and *Bendita*, we undertook a formal study of both cases, which began with an aesthetic analysis of the two platforms. It is evident the aesthetic imitation of *Bendita* to *Maldita*, starting with the name of the project –opposite words and meanings, which mean "damn" and "holy", consecutively–and the sub-projects since *Maldita* was created from its birth several sections and *Bendita* has reproduced it making, in turn, several blocks, many of them opposed (Table 2).

Table 2. Maldita and Bendita's accounts on Twitter. Own elaboration

Maldita / Damn	*Bendita / Holy*
Maldito Bulo / Damn hoax	- No equivalence --
Maldita Hemeroteca / Damn News Archive	- No equivalence --

Maldita Ciencia / Damn Science	*Bendita Ciencia / Holy Science*
Maldito Dato / Damn Data	- No equivalence --
Maldita Migración / Damn Migration	*Bendita Inmigración / Holy Inmigration*
Maldito Feminismo / Damn Feminism	*Bendita Igualdad / Holy Equality*
Maldita Tecnología / Damn Technology	
- No equivalence --	*Bendita Justicia, Bendita Internacional, Bendita Historia, Bendita Cultura / Holy Justice, Holy International, Holy History, Holy Culture*

The appearance is also very similar in both cases. *Maldita*'s logo is a capital "M" and *Bendita*'s logo is a capital "B". The sub-projects of both platforms use primary colors and similar typography and aesthetics, as can be seen in Figure 1. The frequency of publication, on the other hand, is very different. *Maldita* distributes around ten publications every day, while *Bendita* publishes one, and there are even some days when it does not publish any at all. This highlights the more professional nature of *Maldita*, which has a technical team that allows this publication frequency to be higher.

Figure 1. Corporative image of Maldita and Bendita and their subsections. Source: Maldita and Bendita accounts on Twitter.

Maldita and *Bendita* do not publish their information on the same platforms. *Maldita* has a complete website (*Maldita*), from where the user can access all their channels where they disseminate their contents. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram are the main networks where *Maldita* communicates, although they also publish content in a channel on YouTube, TikTok, and Linkedin. It should be noted that *Maldita* has an essential presence in other Spanish media.

Bendita, on the other hand, has fewer channels. This platform acquired the domain *Bendita*, which directly redirects the user to their Twitter account, where most of their activity takes place. From this account, users can access their Facebook and Instagram accounts, where they post precisely the same material as in their tweets (e.g., they only post screenshots of their tweets on Instagram).

The format of the fact-checks is similar since formally *Bendita* resembles *Maldita*'s tweets, although it has some limitations. In this sense, they use red crosses emojis to indicate that it is false information, they include the inscription "BULO" (hoax) in capital letters and then they deny it. In the case of *Maldita*, they also include a link to their website where the fact-check is explained, and sources are provided for each case. On the other hand, since they do not have a website, *Bendita* justifies itself through images and external links instead of giving a more detailed explanation, as *Maldita* does. In this sense, *Maldita* is more transparent in terms of its sources and methodology than *Bendita*.

Figure 2. Samples of hoaxes were denied by Maldita and Bendita on Twitter. Source: Maldita and Bendita accounts on Twitter.

We also conducted a review of the entities with which *Maldita* and *Bendita* have publicly collaborated or have a consortium. In this regard, *Maldita* is a signatory of the International Fact-checking Network Code of Principles since 2018. Therefore, they belong to this international fact-checking organization. *Maldita* also belongs to other international organisms, such as FactcheckEU (https://factcheckeu.info/es/), a European initiative that emerged to disprove hoaxes during the European Parliament Elections in 2019, and LatamChequea, which collaborates with Latin American media to fight against disinformation related to the coronavirus. It also collaborates with other entities and organizations, such as Oxfam Intermón. As mentioned above, *Maldita* also collaborates with various Spanish media, such as Ondacero and Radio Nacional de España. Regarding *Bendita*, there are no known collaborations with other media or organizations. Moreover, as they do not have a website, they do not have a section to get to know the team and its activity, so nothing is known about who or what organization is behind this platform.

As a consequence, we observed that Maldita not only is transparent with their fact-checking journalism content, sharing their sources and methodologies, but also they are accountable to their audience about their financing. their collaborations and their personnel. In contrast, *Bendita* demonstrated opacity at all these levels, as we do not know what entities may be behind this organization, how they are financed, and what people constitute this organization.

Content analysis

Quantitative data showed significant differences between the two profiles in Twitter in all the categories of the content analysis. In general terms, *Maldita* published more posts of a wider variety of themes and with various objectives. Between 15th February and 15th March, *Maldita* wrote 550 messages, while *Bendita* only had 34. Despite *Maldita* presented activity all the days of the month, *Bendita* showed discontinuity. For instance, this last profile did not tweet between 1st and 10th March, and in total, it was inactive during 12 out of the 29 days analyzed (Figure 3).

Both accounts displayed peaks of activity during the month, partly matching key events in the Spanish agenda. Thus, *Maldita* remembered the Spanish coup d'état of 23rd February during those days. In mid-March, three events came together: the Womens' Day's celebration (8th March) and the call for elections in the Community of Madrid (10th March), and the anniversary of the terrorist attack (11th March). Both events pushed *Maldita*'s activity on Twitter: "❌ '11th March [attack] was ETA' was the most widespread hoax about the attacks for 17 years: we refute it and other hoaxes and conspiracy theories in #*Maldita*LaHora, our weekly podcast 📻 Listen to it now! 👇 https://t.co/Ud4RRYwiBL."

Figure 3: Tweets frequency of Maldita and Bendita. Own elaboration
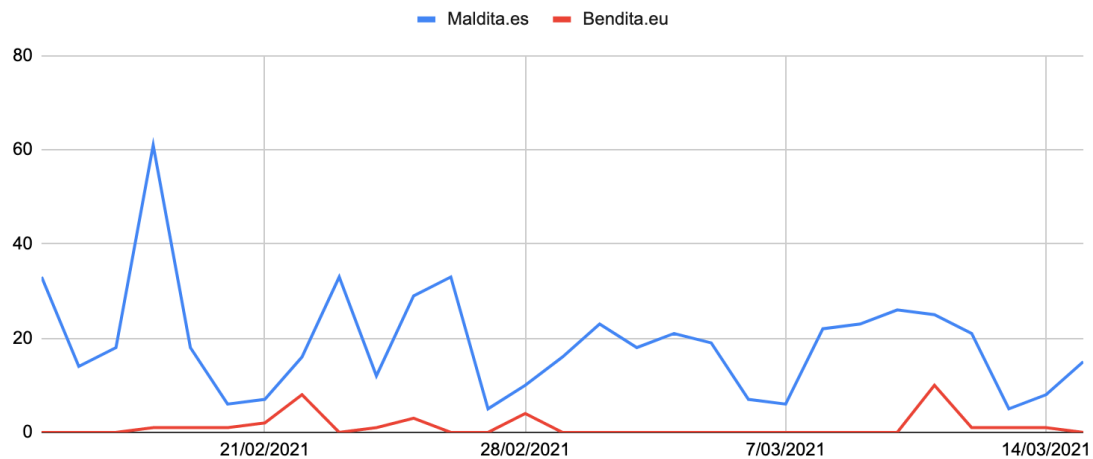
Both profiles expressed a similar interest in approaching politics and political parties. 23.59% and 23,53% of tweets by *Maldita* and *Bendita*, respectively, were linked with this topic. Both profiles were mainly centered on national politics, although *Maldita* mentioned a more diverse set of parties (Table 3). Although in an exploratory fashion, we also identified a biased selection of the parties in the case of *Bendita*: almost all of the tweets cited left-wing political organization Unidas Podemos. Only one tweet mentioned right-wing party Partido Popular, in order to note the veracity of one of its claims.

Politics aside, *Maldita* and *Bendita* differed in their topics of attention. *Bendita* is mainly interested in feminism, to the point that 76.47% of its tweets dealt with gender's questions. The profile was mostly dedicated to denying institutional data on gender violence. For example: "⛔ HOAX by @IreneMontero. 'Consent has to be at the heart of our Penal Code.' ❌ FALSE: Consent is already covered in the Penal Code (Article 181). https://t.co/kEpR46jYpW".

In the case of *Maldita*, engagement with feminism involved only 5.99% and was mainly related to the Women's Day call. More relevant for this fact-checking was science and health, which filled 37.93% of the sample. In this case, most of the tweets were related to COVID-19, although health is a frequent theme. *Maldita* was dedicated to debunking myths related to remedies to cure diseases ("Does it help to leave a hole in the middle of food when microwaving it? https://t.co/wCTV8Tfd6P") or to address issues of general interest, such as mental health ("🧠 Mental health on Twitch: How do you get out of depression? Why do you need to ask for help? When to seek help?"). 👇 https://t.co/NDU79mownA").

30.13% of *Maldita*'s tweets are categorized as "Other." In this case, its activity is dedicated to advertise its activity or ask support from its readers: "We need you more than ever to fight the hoax pandemic ❌ How? Two ways: 💪 Donate us your superpower. 🗳 Become an ambassador. Log on to https://t.co/xriDiskJgt and help us win the battle against misinformation https://t.co/rDJStHFYJ2."

In the previous question lies the main difference between *Bendita* and *Maldita*. *Bendita* presented a fact-checker aspect as usual: it was dedicated to pointing out the falsity or truthfulness of certain information. In the case of *Maldita*, however, its activity extended beyond verification. The latter published informative articles shared its appearances in other media, and very frequently announced its lives on Twitch, which included interviews: "So much for the 23-F special of #*Maldita*Twitcheria! At 14:00h we'll be back to talk about Nutriscore with @*Maldita*_ciencia and its coordinator @galatea128, don't miss it 👉 https://t.co/xtz3rY5ado".

Table 3: Tweets from Bendita and Maldita regarding the topic addressed. Own elaboration

Theme	*Bendita*	*Maldita*
Science and health	0,00%	37,93%
Institucional politics and government	23,53%	23,59%
General politics and political parties	0,00%	0,73%
Migration	0,00%	1,63%
Feminism	76,47%	5,99%
Others	0,00%	30,13%

This fact explains that in 81.67% of cases *Maldita* did not deny certain hoaxes, while in the case of *Bendita* this percentage dropped to 32.35% (Table 4). *Maldita* never refuted any group in more than 4% of the occasions, and *Bendita* focused on political parties and media. Together with Unidad Podemos, *Bendita* mainly referred to progressive television channel La Sexta: "🚫 BULO de @laSextaTV. "Ayuso manipula cuando dice que los hombres sufren más agresiones que las mujeres." ❌ FALSO: Los datos demuestran que la mayoría de víctimas de homicidios y agresiones son hombres (Source: INE and Interior Minstry). https://t.co/D77UindiYO https://t.co/wrgjEYqpiN.

This last tweet also demonstrated another of *Bendita*'s practices identified in the content analysis: the demagogic use of data to delegitimize arguments. In this particular case, INE's data showed that the perpetrators of aggressions against men are other men, so there was no structural violence from women to men in this sense.

Table 4: Bendita and Maldita tweets regarding who they refute. Own elaboration

Refute	*Bendita*	*Maldita*
Government / Institutional	0,00%	0,54%
Not Refute	32,35%	81,67%
Parties or politicians	35,29%	2,54%
Media or journalists	32,35%	0,18%
Famous people or influencers	0,00%	1,45%
Anonymous users	0,00%	3,27%
Other	0,00%	10,34%

When verifying, *Maldita* used a variety of sources in a balanced manner: blogs, websites, social networks (5.44%); official documentation (5.26%); Consultations with experts (2.90%), and the media (2.00%). In contrast, *Bendita* handled primarily official documentation (47.06%) as opposed to blogs, websites, social networks (11.75%), and the media (5.88%). This data would prove that *Maldita* executed a broader journalistic work, while *Bendita* retrieved the more available data as they were quicker to obtain. Additionally, data proves that *Maldita* adapts the type of source to the examined subject, employing blogs and social networks when approaching anonymous users and media organizations to verify political parties and politicians' statements. In the case of *Bendita*, official documentation always remains as the principal source of verification although, the official sources used by *Bendita* were not always the most appropriate.

Figure 4. Sources employed to refute diverse subjects. Source: Own elaboration
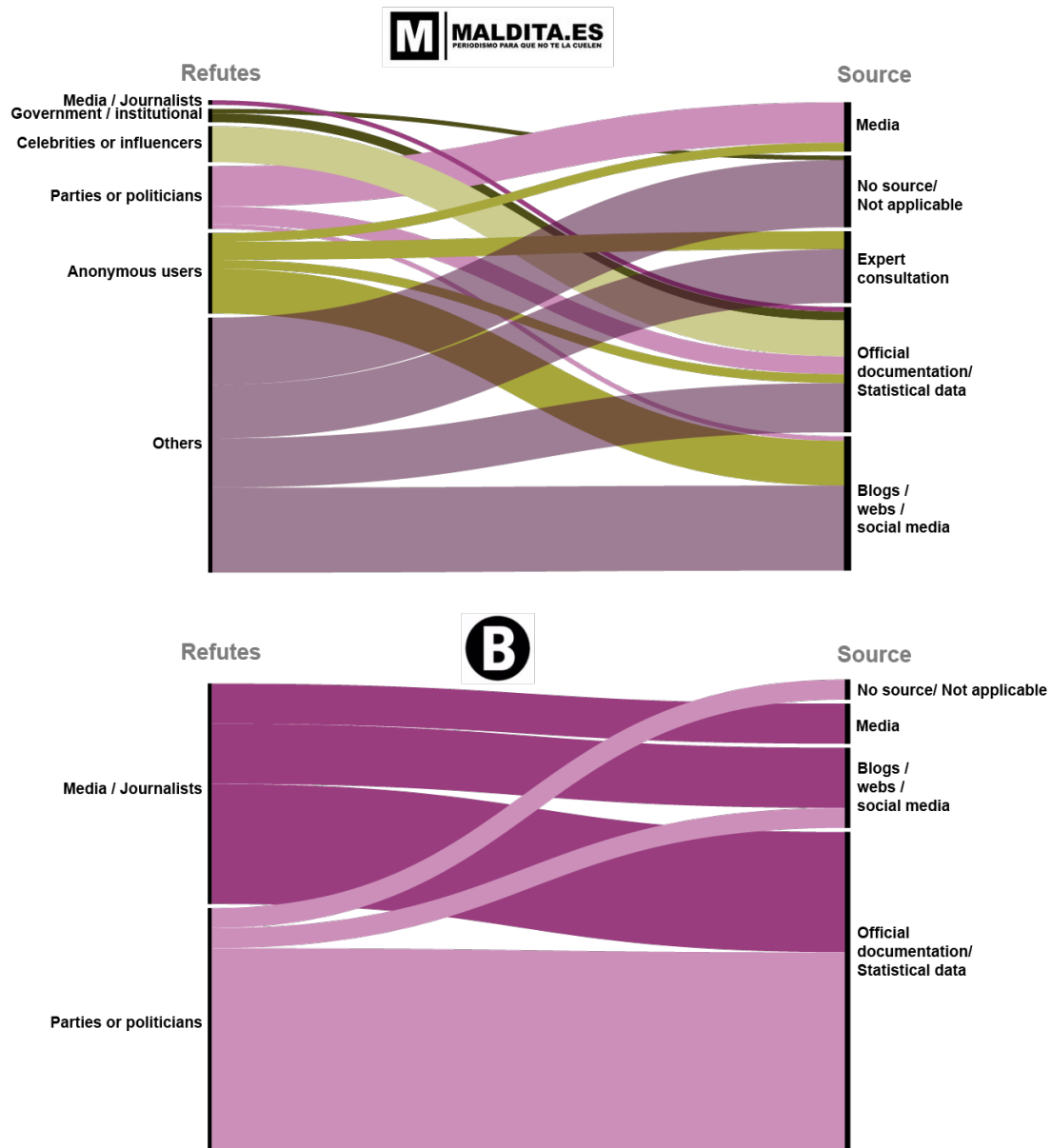
The partisan approach to *Bendita*'s activity on Twitter results in higher engagement: on average, their messages received 171 reactions. The publication with more interactions proclaim hoaxes

of statements about gender equality. Thus, this interest in undermining the feminist movement pointing out the false information distributed by it generates large polarization in social networks. Indeed, the tweets with the highest number of interactions in Bendita's timeline belonged to BenditaIgualdad and get more than 300 retweets and 500 favorites. Users who support these viewpoints share them to reinforce their arguments.

Engagement in Maldita's account is remarkably lower, reaching nine reactions per message. The diversity of its activity may explain this tendency since not all the tweets are susceptible to being viralized, for instance, if it asked for financial support, report media appearance, or announce an online event. No message surpasses 200 interactions, but recollected data also shows that hoaxes' publication frequently gets more interaction than the content with different goals. "Victoria Abril's false or unevidenced claims about the COVID-19 vaccine. https://t.co/5sEVEuVf5l", for instance, had 53 retweets and 173 favorites. Again, the data demonstrates the ability of the disinformation to be shared on social networks, even when the publications debunk it.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this research work, we aimed to compare two Spanish platforms that describe themselves as fact-checkers (*Maldita* and *Bendita*) to determine if they can be considered such or use the characteristics of fact-checking organizations to propagate an ideological discourse. In this regard, we wanted to explore whether these platforms are non-partisan and transparent with their methodology. We have investigated the information sources they use to debunk hoaxes and correct errors or manipulative information. We also examined the topics most frequently addressed by these organizations in their publications, as well as their viralisation. To this end, we conducted a formal aesthetical analysis of the two platforms and a content analysis of their Twitter accounts for one month.

After the formal analysis, we observed an evident imitation of all the aesthetic aspects of *Maldita* by *Bendita* (Objective 1). This imitation is transversal, as observed in the name itself (which is the opposite word), even in the subsections, in the corporate aesthetics (similar colors, typography, and images), and also in the way of expressing themselves on Twitter when they try to deny information (matching structure of the tweets, with similar sentences). This illustrates *Bendita's* intention to have an image of a reliable fact-checking organization and to stand up to *Maldita*.

Also, *Maldita* has many more platforms where their content is disclosed. They do not only use their social media (such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, among others), but they also publish their content in a website where *Maldita* expands the information shared in social media and provides sources to ensure the transparency of its journalistic content and offer information with greater credibility (Objective 2). On the other hand, *Bendita* only publishes the text in the tweets and, subsequently, dumps the same content on its Facebook and Instagram accounts. Therefore, it does not expand the information to offer sources of information with which it has contrasted the news, so this content is less transparent.

We also could observe that *Bendita* published far fewer verifications, as we only collected 34 tweets from this organization and 551 from *Maldita*. In fact, there were a total of 12 days out of the 29 days analyzed in which *Bendita* did not update the Twitter account. These data may indicate an absence of personnel and organization on this platform. Personnel and entities which may be behind *Bendita* are unknown, as they are not transparent about their structure or how they are organized. Therefore, we doubt the presence of professional journalists in *Bendita*. On the other hand, we do know the people behind *Maldita*, its economic independence, and its structure in general (Objective 2).

Furthermore, the activity of *Maldita* goes beyond verifying the veracity of hoaxes, as it also offers extensive information on different types of topics, such as detailed reports and Twitch.tv

programs where they discuss some issues (Objective 3). We also concluded that *Bendita* is highly politicized and tends to promote radical right ideas so that its contents try to damage the image of left-wing political parties and media. Thus, *Maldita* mentioned more parties in its fact-checks than *Bendita*, which focused more on those who they wanted to harm with their content by presenting them as manipulators. These concerns are well-justified. Some research indicates, for instance, that people can be highly resistant to journalistic fact-checks (Nyhan et al., 2020).

In terms of the tweets' subject, it was very striking that 76.47% of the tweets on *Bendita* had to do with feminism. Simultaneously, in Maldita*,* there was a greater variety, with Science and Health as the most discussed topic (37.93%), since they were primarily related to the pandemic due to COVID-19. These results also demonstrate *Bendita*'s intention to highlight what they considered "lies" perpetrated by the feminist movement (Objective 4).

Similarly, *Maldita* used a wide variety of sources to verify or deny information, something that did not happen in the *Bendita* organization, which demonstrates their lack of professionalism (Objective 4). On the other hand, *Bendita* uses official data in a demagogic and unprofessional way to refute arguments against its ideology. This organization mainly tried to disprove information from left-wing political parties and media, while *Maldita* verified information from many different sources, including social networks. Therefore, *Maldita* carried out objective verification journalism to select the fake news, while *Bendita* chose the hoaxes strategically to provide a misinformative perception to specific sectors of society.

The polarization of the messages published by *Bendita*, which will be explained in detail later, resulted in their messages having a higher engagement on Twitter, with an average of 171 reactions per tweet (Objective 5). However, *Madlita* had a more subtle level of engagement.

The messages that obtained the most reaction in the form of retweets and favorites were those of Bendita's subsection called *BenditaIgualdad*, which focused on posting messages against feminist discourse. *Maldita*, on the other hand, posted messages in which they not only denied hoaxes but also reported on the organization's activity, among others. The verification of information did get more reactions on Twitter than other content less likely to be viralized.

All these data confirm that disinformation, whether disproved or not, gets more engagement on social networks than other information. Therefore, fact-checking organizations can take advantage of this viralization to spread their message (Objective 5).

The first conclusion of this study is that *Bendita* cannot be considered a fact-checking organization like *Maldita*, despite multiple efforts by the first one to imitate the structures and aesthetics of the latter. It is simply to acknowledge that such scenarios eliminate the uncertainty that attends fact-checking work in practice. In the face of uncertainty, being objective consists of more than applying flawless reasoning to unquestioned facts. It also consists of using sources and methods that by consensus are seen as reliable and rejecting those that aren't; it consists of becoming a source that can be taken for granted in this way and all kinds of work that entails (Graves, 2017).

Again, the professionalization of *Maldita* versus *Bendita* is one of the most exciting aspects that can be concluded from this study. This can be appreciated in the scarce sources of information used to carry out the verifications, the lack of objectivity in selecting the hoaxes they disprove and the hypocritical use of the data to transmit far-right ideas. In this sense, this organization could benefit from already existing attitudes and opinions in its audience to confirm them, as suggested by Hameleers and Van der Meer (2019). As a result, they can take advantage of the tendency of some users to expose themselves to fact-checkers that are sympathetic to their political ideas.

In short, we can conclude that *Bendita* uses the aesthetics and structure of a fact-checking organization to propagate a political discourse linked to the radical right. We can affirm that they instrumentalize the fight against disinformation by fact-checking journalism to spread a radical discourse. This practice may imply a great danger, as it could increase the already existing political polarization. Moreover, the audience could be manipulated more efficiently, as

this organization could capitalize on the formal aspects of fact-checking to gain greater credibility.

Hameleers warned in 2020 that specific organizations and individuals could use elements necessary to combat disinformation, such as fact-checking, for a harmful purpose and with the advantage of appearing more professional than anonymous users on social networks. As mentioned above, we do not know what entities may be behind *Bendita*, due to its lack of transparency. Therefore, we have a suspicion that they use an imitation formula of a fact-checking organization to make their publications appear more credible to their target audience. Moreover, their polarizing messages make them go viral more easily.

Furthermore, Bendita's superior engagement compared to *Maldita* also suggests that their polarized and less professional messages are more likely to have a higher chance of going viral. Therefore, the use of a fact-checking aesthetic coupled with the dissemination of a polarized political message could have a strong and dangerous impact on their audience.

Therefore, it is essential to evaluate the work of fact-checkers to examine whether they are really trying to stamp out disinformation, verify or disprove information or, on the contrary, are trying to reaffirm beliefs already held by their audience for political purposes. In addition, fact-checking organizations should be objective in selecting the information they verify, using appropriate methodologies, and sharing the sources used to refute and correct information to demonstrate their reliability. Lastly, they should be transparent and accountable, not only in their journalistic processes but also in their structure and funding to demonstrate their integrity and be trustworthy to their audience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

REFERENCES

Amazeen, M. A. (2017). Journalistic interventions: The structural factors affecting the global emergence of fact-checking, *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917730217.

Amazeen, M. A. (2019). Practitioner perceptions: Critical junctures and the global emergence and challenges of fact-checking. *International Communication Gazette*, *81*(6–8), 541–561. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048518817674

Bakir, V., & McStay, A. (2018). Fake news and the economy of emotions: Problems, causes, solutions. *Digital Journalism*, *6*(2), 154–175. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1345645

Bennett, W. L. & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions, *European Journal of Communication*, *33*(2), 122–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317.

Bernal-Triviño, A. & Clares-Gavilán, J. (2019). Uso del móvil y las redes sociales como canales de verificación de fake news. El caso de *Maldita*, *El Profesional de la Información*, *28*(3), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2019.may.12.

Burel, G., Farrell, T., Mensio, M., Khare, P., & Alani, H. (2020, October). Co-spread of Misinformation and Fact-Checking Content During the Covid-19 Pandemic. In *International Conference on Social Informatics* (pp. 28-42). Springer, Cham.

Chadwick, A. & Vaccari, C. (2019). *News sharing on UK social media: Misinformation, disinformation, and correction*. Loughborough: Online Civic Culture Centre, Loughborough University.

Choi, W., & Haigh, M. (2019). Analyzing divergent methodologies for political fact checking: United States and South Korea. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, *56*(1), 627–628. https://doi.org/10.1002/pra2.112.

Choraś, M., Pawlicki, M., Kozik, R., Demestichas, K., Kosmides, P., & Gupta, M. (2019). SocialTruth project approach to online disinformation (fake news) detection and mitigation. In *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on Availability, Reliability and Security*.

Dias, N. & Sippitt, A. (2020). Researching Fact Checking: Present Limitations and Future Opportunities, *Political Quarterly*, *91*(3), 605–613. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12892.

Graves, L. (2017). Deciding What's True: Fact-Checking Journalism and the New Ecology of News. Columbia University. https://doi.org/10.7312/grav17506-006

Graves, L., & Cherubini, F. (2016). The Rise of Fact-Checking Sites in Europe (Reuters Institute Digital News Report). Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Ferrara, E. (2017). Disinformation and social bot operations in the run up to the 2017 French presidential election. *First Monday*, *22*(8). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i8.8005

Hameleers, M. & van der Meer, T. G. L. A. (2020). Misinformation and Polarization in a High-Choice Media Environment: How Effective Are Political Fact-Checkers?, *Communication Research*, *47*(2), 227–250. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218819671.

Humprecht, E. (2020). How Do They Debunk "Fake News"? A Cross-National Comparison of Transparency in Fact Checks, *Digital Journalism*. Routledge, *8*(3), 310–327. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1691031

Jünger, J. & Keyling, T. (2019). *Facepager*. Source code and releases available at https://github.com/strohne/Facepager/.

Lim, C. (2018). Checking how fact-checkers check. *Research and Politics*, *5*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018786848

Magallón-Rosa, R. (2018). Nuevos formatos de verificación. El caso de Maldito Bulo en Twitter, *Sphera Publica*, *1*(18), 41–65. http://sphera.ucam.edu/index.php/sphera-01/article/view/341/14141417.

Molina, M. D., Sundar, S. S., Le, T., & Lee, D. (2019). "Fake News" Is Not Simply False Information: A Concept Explication and Taxonomy of Online Content. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 1-33. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219878224

Nielsen, R. K., & Graves, L. (2017). *News You Don't Believe: Audience Perspectives on Fake News*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Nyhan, B., Porter, E., Reifler, J., & Wood, T. J. (2020). Taking Fact-Checks Literally But Not Seriously? The Effects of Journalistic Fact-Checking on Factual Beliefs and

Candidate Favorability. *Political Behavior*, *42*(3), 939–960. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09528-x

Resende, G., Melo, P., Sousa, H., Messias, J., Vasconcelos, M., Almeida, J., & Benevenuto, F. (2019). (Mis)Information Dissemination in WhatsApp: Gathering, Analyzing and Countermeasures. In *WWW' 19: The World Wide Web Conference*, 818–828. New York Assoc. Comput. Lit. (ACM) https://doi.org/10.1145/3308558.3313688

Singer, J. B. (2018). Fact-Checkers as Entrepreneurs. *Journalism Practice*, *12*(8), 1070-1080. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2018.1493946

Singer, J. B. (2020). Border patrol: The rise and role of fact-checkers and their challenge to journalists' normative boundaries. *Journalism*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920933137

Spohr, D. (2017). Fake news and ideological polarization: Filter bubbles and selective exposure on social media, *Business Information Review*, *34*(3), 150–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382117722446.

Steensen, S. (2019). Journalism's epistemic crisis and its solution: Disinformation, datafication and source criticism, *Journalism*, *20*(1), 185–189. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918809271.

Tandoc, E. C., Lim, Z. W. & Ling, R. (2018). Defining "Fake News": A typology of scholarly definitions, *Digital Journalism*. Routledge, *6*(2), 137–153. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143.

Tuñón Navarro, J., Oleart, A. & Bouza García, L. (2019). Actores Europeos y Desinformación: la disputa entre el fact checking, las agendas alternativas y la geopolítica. *Revista de Comunicación*, *18*(2), 245-260.

van Dijck, J. (2014). Datafication, dataism and dataveillance: Big data between scientific paradigm and ideology, *Surveillance and Society*, *12*(2), 197–208. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v12i2.4776.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, *359*(6380), 1146-1151.

Wardle, C. (2018). The Need for Smarter Definitions and Practical, Timely Empirical Research on Information Disorder. Digital *Journalism*, *6*(8), 951–963. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1502047

ADDITIONAL READING

Allcott, H., Gentzkow, M. & Yu, C. (2019). Trends in the diffusion of misinformation on social media, *Research and Politics, 6*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019848554.

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.

Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2018). Challenging truth and trust: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation. *The Computational Propaganda Project*, *1*.

Chesney, R., & Citron, D. (2019). Deepfakes and the new disinformation war: The coming age of post-truth geopolitics. *Foreign Aff.*, *98*, 147.

Daniels, J. (2018). The Algorithmic Rise of the "Alt-Right", *Contexts*, *17*(1), 60–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218766547.

Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H. & Cook, J. (2017). Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the "Post-Truth" Era, *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*. Society for Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, *6*(4), 353–369. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008.

Rodríguez-Pérez, C., Paniagua-Rojano, F. J., & Magallón-Rosa, R. (2021). Debunking Political Disinformation through Journalists' Perceptions: An Analysis of Colombia's Fact-Checking News Practices. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 264-275.

Stella, M., Ferrara, E. & De Domenico, M. (2018). Bots increase exposure to negative and inflammatory content in online social systems, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *115*(49), 12435–12440. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1803470115.

Waisbord, S. (2018). Truth is what happens to news: On journalism, fake news, and post-truth. *Journalism Studies*, *19*(13), 1866-1878.

Walter, N., Cohen, J., Holbert, R. L., & Morag, Y. (2020). Fact-checking: A meta-analysis of what works and for whom. *Political Communication*, *37*(3), 350-375.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Bot: A computer agent that is designed to perform different tasks in the digital ecosystem, from sending automated messages to creating fake social interactions.

Confirmation bias: The tendency to believe the information that reinforce previous beliefs and viewpoints.

Disinformation: False information, disseminated especially on the Internet, which aims to destabilize society and/or increase the profits of the issuer.

Echo chambers: Environment in social networks in which Internet users find content that reinforces their previous opinions through confirmation bias.

Engagement: Aptitude to mobilize the digital audience to interact in different ways with a piece of content and help create an online community, through social media responses, likes or shares.

Fact-checking: Journalistic practice that tries to verify or deny information whose task is to detect false content.

Media literacy: Education and awareness of the population on the media and social networks, recognizing their influential role in society.

Political polarization: Division of opinions related to politics into opposing extreme positions, which strengthens ideological tensions.

Selective exposure: Predisposition of some individuals to follow the information that confirms their opinions and discard those that do not, especially in the media and social networks.

Viralisation: Ability of a digital content to spread quickly, especially on social networks, and get a large number of people to share the content to reach a wide audience.