

Ibero-American fact-checkers on Instagram: analysis of the posts with the most successful interaction

Fact-checkers iberoamericanos en Instagram: análisis de los posts con mayor interacción

Fact-checkers ibero-americanos no Instagram: análise das postagens de maior interação

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ABSTRACT | Social media are one of the tools most used by fact-checking organizations to disseminate their verifications. Instagram has gained prominence and relevance in recent years, but studies on the activity of verifiers on this network have not. This research seeks to characterize the activity of Ibero-American fact-checkers on Instagram based on the content that has generated the highest interaction rate. We conducted a quantitative analysis of the 2021 posts by the fact-checkers belonging to the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) with the greatest interaction, with a resulting sample of 301 posts. The results show that fact-checkers maintained a fairly stable publication frequency throughout the year; considering the posts' intention, they published mainly fact-checks (72.8%) and, regarding the theme, political content (39.5%). As for the subject, posts on racism are the ones that obtain a better interaction ratio (12%) while in terms of format, the album reaches a substantially higher ratio than images or videos.

KEYWORDS: Instagram; interaction; engagement; fact-checking; Ibero-America.

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RESUMEN | Las redes sociales son una de las herramientas más utilizadas por las entidades de fact-checking para difundir sus verificaciones. Aunque Instagram ha cobrado protagonismo y relevancia en los últimos años, no es el caso de los estudios sobre la actividad de los verificadores en esta red. En esta investigación se busca caracterizar la actividad de los fact-checkers iberoamericanos en Instagram considerando los contenidos que han generado una mayor ratio de interacción. Se realizó un análisis de contenido de carácter cuantitativo de los posteos con mayor interacción publicados durante el año 2021 por los fact-checkers pertenecientes a la International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), con una muestra resultante de 301 publicaciones. Los resultados muestran que el conjunto de los verificadores mantuvo una frecuencia de publicación bastante estable a lo largo del año; considerando la intencionalidad de los posteos, se observa que publicaron principalmente verificaciones (72,8%) y, de acuerdo con la temática, contenidos de tipo político (39,5%). Respecto del tema, las publicaciones sobre racismo son las que obtienen una mejor ratio de interacción (12%) mientras que, en cuanto al formato, el álbum alcanza una ratio sustancialmente superior a las imágenes o vídeos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Instagram; Interacción; engagement; fact-checking; Iberoamérica.

RESUMO | As redes sociais são uma das ferramentas mais utilizadas pelas entidades de fact-checking para divulgar suas verificações. Embora o Instagram ganhou destaque e relevância nos últimos anos, esse não é o caso dos estudos sobre a atividade dos verificadores nessa rede. Esta pesquisa busca caracterizar a atividade dos fact-checkers ibero-americanos no Instagram com base no conteúdo que gerou maior taxa de interação. Foi realizada uma análise de conteúdo quantitativa das postagens de maior interação publicadas durante o ano de 2021, pelos verificadores ibero-americanos que fazem parte da Aliança Internacional de Checagem de Fatos (IFCN, na sigla em inglês), resultando em uma amostra de 301 postagens. Os resultados mostram que o conjunto de fact-checkers mantiveram uma frequência de publicação bastante estável ao longo de 2021. Considerando a intenção das postagens, observa-se que publicaram principalmente verificações (72,8%) e, conforme o tema, conteúdo político (39,5%). Com respeito ao tema, as publicações sobre racismo são as que obtêm melhor taxa de interação (12%), enquanto, em termos de formato, o álbum atinge uma taxa substancialmente maior do que imagens ou vídeos.

PALABRAS CHAVE: Instagram; Interação; Engagement; Fact-checking; Ibero-América.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, there has been a proliferation in many countries of fact-checkers, journalistic initiatives dedicated to the systematized verification of claims made by public figures and institutions (Walter et al., 2020), or of “anyone whose words impact others’ lives and livelihoods” (Elizabeth, 2014, par. 17), from a non-partisan position. Their main objectives are to educate the public, improve political behavior and journalism (Amazeen, 2017) and, to this end, they develop an important communicative activity in social networks. We can find different approaches in the research on the use that fact-checkers make of these tools: from the international mapping of their presence in different networks (Dafonte-Gómez et al., 2022b; Sánchez-González et al., 2022; Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2020) to analyses focused on specific projects or networks such as Twitter (Magallón Rosa, 2018; Margolin et al., 2018; Míguez-González et al., 2023), Facebook (Andersen & Søre, 2020; Dafonte-Gómez et al., 2022a; Garrett & Poulsen, 2019), YouTube (Ramahí-García et al., 2021), WhatsApp (Palomo & Sedano, 2018), or TikTok (García-Marín & Salvat-Martinrey, 2022).

Although Facebook and Twitter are the most used and studied networks, many of these institutions also have an Instagram presence. This social network has experienced significant growth, with a 21% increase in users globally between January 2021 and January 2022 (We are social & Hootsuite, 2022). Given its growing relevance and the scarcity of studies on the activity of fact-checkers on this network, this research focuses on the activity of Ibero-American fact-checkers on Instagram, analyzing the intentionality, formats, and topics of the most successful posts in terms of interaction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social networks as information platforms

Nowadays, social networks play a prominent role in news distribution (Newman et al., 2022) and in the traffic derived to digital media (Lawrence et al., 2018), so, when researching on the activity of fact-checkers, attention should also be paid to the activity they develop in social networks (Dafonte-Gómez et al., 2022b).

According to Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019), social networks are underpinned by the logic of virality, a process that gives an information item maximum exposure vis-a-vis its potential audience over a short period thanks to its distribution across many nodes (Nahon et al., 2011). The ability of an informational content to reach a wide audience organically depends not only on the follower base of the fact-checker who publishes it, but also on their active participation –and that of other contacted audiences– acting as re-disseminators of those contents that are most relevant to them (Margolin et al., 2018; Robertson et al., 2020).

Sharing is the elementary action that, within a social network, allows extending a content's reach (García-Perdomo et al., 2018) while pointing out its interest for the audience (Carlson, 2020). Despite its importance, it is not the only indicator of the content's relevance for a user; depending on each network, there are other interactions (such as comments or Likes) or indicators of attention (such as putting a video to full screen or viewing time) that determine the engagement or interest that a content has generated and that, in turn, are interpreted by algorithms as relevance signals. Engagement has thus become a strategic priority for many newsrooms (Lawrence et al., 2018).

On the one hand, algorithms are a series of logical instructions applied on a set of data to obtain a result, but in the context of social networks they also set rules of the game (Cotter, 2019; Petre et al., 2019), very rarely made explicit to participants, and in a constant state of flux (Hutchinson & Dwyer, 2022), which force content creators to adapt their activity to the demands of this technological infrastructure (O'Meara, 2019), trying to be algorithmically recognizable (Gillespie, 2017). This includes journalistic activity which, to achieve visibility on social networks, must adapt its forms, styles, and content to imposed criteria that limit the communicative formats available (Carlson, 2020). The latter serve, de facto, as authentic gatekeepers for users (Diakopoulos, 2020) and determine that one content is more visible than another (Hutchinson & Dwyer, 2022).

A significant number of fact-checkers in Spanish-speaking countries consider that they need to improve techniques for disseminating results - both through traditional channels and social networks - so that their fact-checks reach wider audiences (Herrero & Herrera-Damas, 2021) but, at the same time, this need for optimization has clear economic implications, given that, unlike in other regions, a large part of Latin American fact-checkers are independent media, non-profit organizations, or are linked to academic institutions (Palau-Sampio, 2018; Saldaña & Waisbord, 2021) with business models different from those of conventional media (Mesquita & de-Lima-Santos, 2021; Moreno Gil et al., 2021).

This makes it vital, both for fact-checkers and researchers in this field, to try and decipher which formal or content elements can generate greater audience interest in a post on social networks, and also to know to what extent the corresponding algorithm will reward or punish the characteristics of a post and the type of engagement generated.

Instagram's role in the information ecosystem

In his essay *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, Lev Manovich noted, "if Google is an information retrieval service, Twitter is for news and links exchange, Facebook is for social communication, and Flickr is for image archiving, Instagram is for

aesthetic visual communication” (Manovich, 2017, p. 41). These apparently well-defined boundaries between social platforms -according to specialization and business core- have been altered, both by strategic changes of the companies themselves and by user practices within them. Instagram was born as a social network focused on mobile photography in 2010 but, after being acquired by Facebook in 2012, it began a path of changes that led it to move increasingly into the field of video (Warren, 2013), significantly expanding its narrative possibilities and potential uses.

According to the 2018 *Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2018) only 6% of respondents claimed to have used Instagram to consume news in the last week, placing the app behind Facebook (36%), WhatsApp (15%), Twitter (11%), and Facebook Messenger (8%), although in certain markets its importance was greater (Brazil, 16%; Argentina, 13%, or Chile, 12%). In the *Digital News Report* of 2022, it had become 12% and already surpassed Twitter (11%) as a source of information – in regions such as Latin America and Africa it reached 28% and 29%, respectively– and was the social network most used by the population between 18 and 24 years of age, with 68% of people claiming to access it at least weekly (Newman et al., 2022).

The boom in video news consumption also explains Instagram’s figures as a news platform. Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, and Chile are among the eight countries in the world that claim to “watch” more news on social networks (as opposed to “read” them), a preference linked to video consumption on platforms such as YouTube, but also to the use by younger populations of networks like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (Newman et al., 2022). Instagram, specifically, is the favorite network among users aged 16-24 (23.2% of women and 22.1% of men) (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2022), making it a platform to monitor in the coming years.

Nevertheless, when investigating this network as a platform for the dissemination of information content, it is necessary to understand some issues of its architecture and interface, which differentiate it notably from other more studied networks such as Twitter or Facebook.

What we know about Instagram’s algorithms

On Instagram there are four spaces for accessing other people’s content which, in turn, are also preferentially related to certain types of formats: feed, stories, explore, and reels. Each one offers different possibilities in terms of content format and possible interactions, but also has different algorithms.

In 2016 Instagram announced the replacement of the feed in reverse chronological order that it had used so far by one selected by the platform, based on popularity data and previous interactions of each user (O’Meara, 2019). It was the beginning of algorithmic criteria to determine a content’s visibility on Instagram, which

meant that, from that moment on, following a profile did not necessarily mean being exposed to all the content published on it.

On June 8, 2021 Instagram introduced, for the first time, some of the elements that its algorithms value when displaying content to its users (Mosseri, 2021). It first clarifies that each section of the application –feed, stories, explore, and reels– uses a different algorithm because it is interpreted that users utilize each of them in a different way. Feed and stories are considered places where users search for content from their family and friends, while reels and explore are entertainment sections to discover new content and profiles. In each of these spaces, different signals are prioritized –according to their own terminology– that define what is considered relevant content for the user.

In feed and stories, the most relevant items are: popularity of the post and content data (date of publication, duration, and location); relevance of the person publishing (for example, interactions received); user activity (such as Likes on similar posts), and the level of previous interactions between sender and user. Regarding interactions, the most valued within the feed are five: “how likely you are to spend a few seconds on a post, comment on it, like it, reshare it, and tap on the profile photo” (Mosseri, 2021, p. 12). There is also an explicit warning that content that has been labeled as misinformation by the fact-checkers affiliated to their program –in essence, members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)– will be penalized in terms of visibility.

As far as explore is concerned, the first criterion that defines what is shown to each user are the contents with which they have previously interacted (Like, save, or comment); once this first selection has been made, the hierarchy responds to a higher estimated probability that the user will interact with these contents, mainly through Likes, saves, and shares. The indicators used to determine this are the publication’s popularity (how many people and how fast it receives likes, comments, shares and saves); the history of interactions between the user and the profile that published it; the user's previous activity on explore; and the popularity of the profile that published it. In the case of reels, the signals are similar, although the prioritization of the criteria varies slightly: recent user interactions with other reels; user interactions with the author; information about the content (audio track, video compression, or popularity) and popularity of the profile that published it. In addition to these indications, some visibility penalty criteria are added, among which the following stand out: low resolution or watermarked content, reels without sound, that are mostly text or contain borders, or that focus on political issues. No further clarification is provided on this last aspect, which makes it impossible to assess its effective scope.

On a general level, it should also be noted that, unlike other networks such as Twitter or Facebook where the hyperlink is a fully standardized format, in the case of Instagram it has always been limited. Currently, Instagram does not allow adding a link to a post made in the feed and only from 2021 introduced this possibility in stories for any user (previously only businesses and featured creators could do so) (Eulenstein, 2021) so, for a long time, the only chance to add a hyperlink was in the biography of each profile. This limitation imposed by the platform suggests “an attempt to maximize interactions within the platform, rather than with third-party spaces” (Hermida & Mellado, 2020, p. 16), and turns it into a self-enclosed support that does not facilitate traffic to an extension of the contents on an external website. This circumstance constitutes an obvious limitation when it comes to presenting informative content, whether as an image, as an album of images, or as video in its different modalities. In addition, the basic architecture of Instagram makes it difficult, as a matter of principle, for content to be shared outside the application and for the preview generated to be useful for the recipient. This orientation towards personal and private interaction constitutes for Larsson (2018) a disadvantage compared to other networks such as Facebook or Twitter, since the virality processes are more complex.

One last element that deserves mention, when talking about the items that favor the diffusion of content on Instagram, is hashtags. According to Adam Mosseri, on Instagram hashtags help classify content and help a publication to be shown within a theme, but they are not a way to achieve greater distribution (Golob, 2022).

The aforementioned review of the criteria that favor the dissemination of content within Instagram’s different spaces allows us to observe the importance of achieving interactions both to reach new audiences and –even– for followers to see the content. Therefore, this research seeks to characterize the activity of Ibero-American fact-checkers on Instagram, considering the contents that have generated the highest interaction ratio.

The specific objectives are:

- To identify the posts with the highest interaction made by Ibero-American fact-checkers in 2021 on Instagram, determining their weight in relation to the total number of posts for each month.
- To identify which types of content are more successful in terms of interaction according to their intentionality.
- To identify the predominant topics in the publications with the most interaction.
- To identify the formal characteristics of the posts with the most interaction.

- To assess the possible relationship between the variables analyzed and the variations in the interaction ratio.

METHODOLOGY

To address these objectives, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of the posts with the most interaction published by Ibero-American fact-checkers in 2021.

The organizations that make up the sample are the Ibero-American fact-checkers that as of February 7, 2022 were verified by the IFCN or in the process of verification and that had their own active Instagram account. We used the Crowdtangle tool to download all the publications generated in the Instagram feed by the 13 selected fact-checkers, throughout the year 2021 (Crowdtangle does not provide data on reels or stories, as they are ephemeral in nature), obtaining a total of 6,008 posts. To study the characteristics of the most successful posts in terms of interaction, minimizing the effect of possible variations in the number of followers, the 5% of posts with the highest interaction ratio of each fact-checker were selected using the following formula: $(\text{Likes} + \text{comments}) \times 100 / \text{followers}$.

This selection criterion aims to ensure the presence of all the fact-checkers, so that those who publish the most and therefore contribute the most to the object of study as a whole obtain greater representation. On the other hand, insofar as the criterion for selecting publications is based on a ratio that considers the number of followers, success is measured according to the possibilities of each one and not in absolute terms. A sample of 301 publications was obtained.

The content analysis focused, in the first place, on the posts' intentionality and topic. To establish the categories related to these variables, we opted for a mixed procedure (deductive-inductive). We adopted the classification of content types according to their intentionality and to their topic as proposed by Míguez-González and Dafonte-Gómez (2022) for the analysis of fact-checker content on Facebook. In a first work session, the three coders jointly analyzed 10% of the posts, applying the categorization of content according to its intentionality.

This led to the partial modification of the analysis model to incorporate the subcategory of verification set and the categories of newspaper library and opinion detected in the process. In the aforementioned session, we also proceeded to catalog the contents of 10% of the posts according to their topic; in this case, the coders based their decisions on the activity of some of the fact-checkers who, on their web pages, have sections in which they include their contents, and the classification proposed by Míguez-González and Dafonte-Gómez (2022) remained unchanged.

Fact-checker	Country	Instagram account	2021 posts	Posts %	Sample posts
Agência Lupa	Brazil	https://www.instagram.com/agencia_lupa/	808	13.4	40
Aos Fatos	Brazil	https://www.instagram.com/aosfatos/	714	11.9	36
Bolivia Verifica	Bolivia	https://www.instagram.com/boliviaverifica/	19	0.3	1
Chequeado	Argentina	https://www.instagram.com/chequeado/	313	5.2	16
Colombiacheck	Colombia	https://www.instagram.com/colombiacheck/	278	4.6	14
Cotejo.Info	Venezuela	https://www.instagram.com/cotejoinfo/	194	3.2	10
Ecuador Chequea	Ecuador	https://www.instagram.com/ecuador_chequea/	686	11.4	34
Fast Check CL	Chile	https://www.instagram.com/fastcheckcl/	538	9.0	27
Mala espina Check	Chile	https://www.instagram.com/malaespinachek/	325	5.4	16
Maldito Bulo	Spain	https://www.instagram.com/malditobulo/	141	2.3	7
Newtral	Spain	https://www.instagram.com/newtral/	392	6.5	20
Polígrafo	Portugal	https://www.instagram.com/jornalpoligrafo/	1478	24.6	74
Verificat	Spain	https://www.instagram.com/verifi_cat/	122	2.0	6

Table 1. Sample conformation*Fuente: Elaboración propia.*

Subsequently, each coder individually analyzed the remaining 90% of the posts. After this process, the results were pooled; Cohen's inter-rater reliability test yielded positive results ($K=0.983$ for the intentionality variable and $K=0.819$ for the thematic variable). Discrepancies (produced mostly by agreement of two researchers and disagreement of one) were discussed and resolved jointly, resorting, once again, to the support of the verifiers' web pages.

Categorization of content types according to their intentionality

Míguez-González and Dafonte-Gómez (2022)	Category adaptation
Literacy: content created to help users fight misinformation or to provide them with clear and reliable information on controversial topics about which there is confusion.	Literacy
Self-promotion of the fact-checker or advertisements of his/her sections, programs, videos, etc.	Self-promotion
Debunking: verifications of content that turns out to be totally or partially false or misleading.	Verification, with three subcategories: - Debunks - Positive verifications - Verification sets (including several verifications in the same publication)
Positive verification: verifications of contents that turn out to be true.	
Information: news or reports on a current or interesting topic.	Information
Others	Newspaper library
	Opinion
	Others

Categorization of content types according to topic (Míguez-González & Dafonte-Gómez, 2022)

Science
Gender issues (machismo, feminism, homophobia, gender-based violence)
Culture
Sports
Ecology and environment (environmental quality and assessment, climate change, water, biodiversity...)
Economy and finance
Education
International
Politics and legislation
Racism and xenophobia
Health (health, medicine, cancer, COVID-19, nutrition/food, tobacco, vaccines...)
Events (accidents, catastrophes, natural disasters, terrorism, crimes...)
Technology (Internet, social networks, messaging...)
Others

Table 2. Content categories according to their intentionality and their topic

Source: Own elaboration based on Míguez-González and Dafonte-Gómez (2022).

In addition to the topic and intentionality of the posts, the following elements were also considered in the analysis, based on data provided by Crowdtangle: date and time of publication, number of followers at the time of publication, format (album, single image or video), number of Likes and comments and, in the case

of videos, number of views. We also analyzed the presence of three resources in the publications with the highest interaction: hashtags, real images, and graphic verification indicators, understood as an iconic element (symbol, highlighted word, etc.) that the verifier uses to clarify visually whether a content is true, false, doubtful, etc. Regarding the last objective, considering that comments are a less frequent and more difficult type of reaction to generate than Likes (Larsson, 2018), in addition to the interaction ratio, the ratio of comments and Likes was calculated separately. Statistical processing was performed with R Commander software.

RESULTS

Publication frequency

The fact-checkers as a whole maintained a fairly stable publication frequency throughout 2021, ranging from 397 posts published in February to 559 published in September, with a coefficient of variation of 9.8%. February is the month that contributes the least number of posts to the sample of publications with the highest interaction (5%), while May and July contribute 11%.

Figure 1 shows the number of posts published per month, with those included in the sample of publications with the highest interaction being shown at the top.

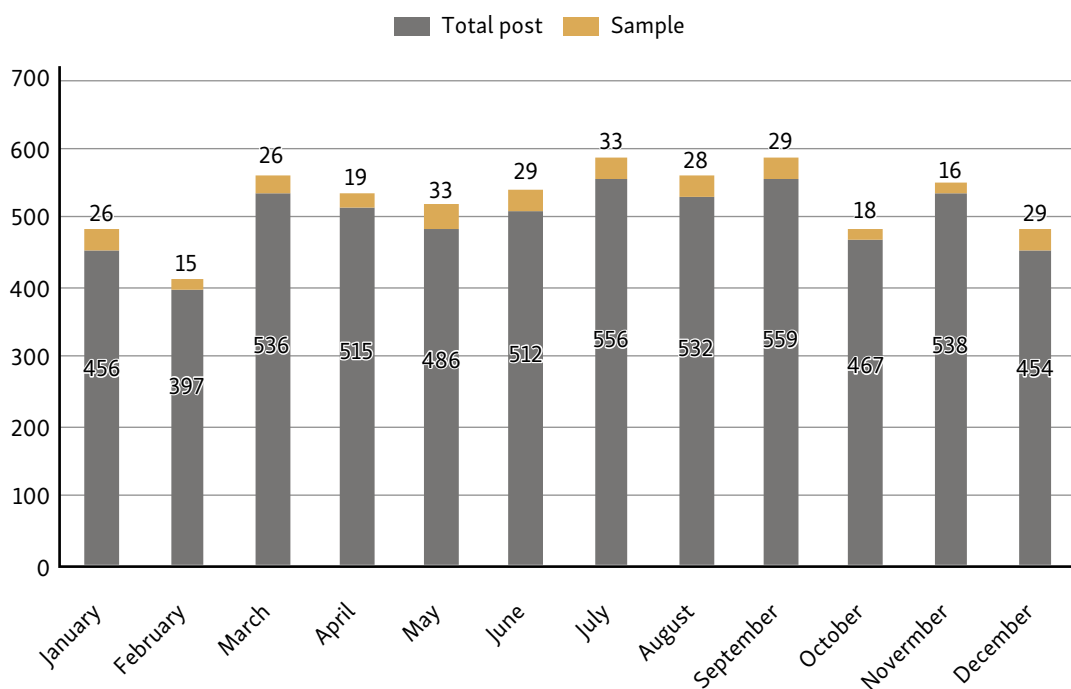


Figure 1. Monthly publication frequency

Source: Own elaboration.

Type of publications according to their intentionality in the posts with the highest interaction ratio

The majority of the 301 posts in the sample are verifications (72.8%), either positive (30.6%), debunks (28.2%) or verification sets (14%). Informational content accounts for 14%, while only 6.3% and 5% of the posts are devoted to literacy and self-promotion, respectively. The presence of newspaper library or opinion content is residual.

The verification sets are those that generate the highest interaction ratio, while opinion and self-promotional contents are those that arouse the least interest. These differences are determined, above all, by the number of Likes, since the variations in the comments' ratio are smaller, although in this indicator the informative contents and the sets of verifications stand out slightly from the rest.

The breakdown of data by fact-checker shows some relevant differences. All Polígrafo posts are verifications and 91.9% are positive verifications, an exceptionality that only occurs, although to a much lesser extent, in Fast Check Chile (59.3% of positive verification posts).

Other fact-checkers (Colombia Check, Maldito Bulo, Agencia Lupa, or Aos Fatos) also give priority to their verification work, with a higher number of verification publications than the sample average, but in almost all of them debunking publications prevail, which account for the total number of verification publications in the case of Colombia Check; only Aos Fatos opts for offering mainly verification sets.

Publication type	N° posts	%	Interaction ratio	Likes per 100 followers	Comments per 100 followers
Literacy	19	6.3%	5.16%	4.96	0.201
Self-promotion	15	5%	3.94%	3.756	0.180
Verification set	42	14%	7.27%	7.012	0.258
Debunks	85	28.2%	5.08%	4.898	0.212
Newspaper library	4	1.3%	5.96%	5.762	0.193
Information	42	14%	5.54%	5.264	0.273
Opinion	2	0.7%	3.19%	3.058	0.135
Positive verification	92	30.6%	4.83%	4.629	0.205

Table 3. Ranking of the most successful posts according to their intentionality

Source: Own elaboration.

Other organizations, on the other hand, prioritize their informative nature; such is the case of Verificat, with 83.3% of informative content, and of Newtral, with 20% of content devoted to debunking as opposed to 55% to information and a high 25% to self-promotion. Chequeado, on the other hand, balances informative and verifying content (37.5% in each case) and presents the highest percentage of content dedicated to literacy (25%) of the entire sample. Ecuador Chequea (17.6%), Maldito Buló (14.3%), Colombia Check (14.3%), Agencia Lupa (10%), and A os Fatos (5.6%) also include some posts aimed at literacy.

Publications topics

39.5% of the posts in the sample deal with political issues, although in the case of some fact-checkers this topic accounts for a much higher percentage (81.5% in Fast Check Chile or 75% in Mala Espina Check). Health, with 23.9% of the contents, is the second most relevant thematic area, especially abundant in Ecuador Chequea (52.9% of its contents) or A os Fatos (50%); of the 72 posts on health, all but three have to do with the COVID-19 pandemic. Far behind the figures for publications on politics and health are the posts that have to do with other topics such as gender issues (7.6%) or economic issues (6%).

Topic	N° posts	%	Interaction ratio per post	Likes per 100 followers	Comments per 100 followers
Culture	6	1.99%	3.18%	3.062	0.123
Sports	1	0.33%	1.10%	1.083	0.016
Ecology	5	1.66%	3.93%	3.857	0.073
Economy	18	5.98%	3.65%	3.489	0.165
Education	4	1.33%	3.32%	3.195	0.121
Gender	23	7.64%	4.61%	4.394	0.216
International	5	1.66%	3.56%	3.421	0.143
Other	27	8.97%	4.83%	4.676	0.155
Politics	119	39.53%	6.33%	6.095	0.262
Racism	9	2.99%	11.64%	10.995	0.646
Health	72	23.92%	4.51%	4.326	0.186
Events	12	3.99%	3.53%	3.398	0.135

Table 4. Ranking of the most successful posts according to their topic

Source: Own elaboration.

Considering the relationship between the topic and the intentionality of the posts, it should be noted that 85.7% of the posts on political topics are verifications, either debunks (39.5%), positive verifications (33.6%), or verification sets (12.6%), and most of them deal with statements made in debates or electoral contexts; only 9.02% is informative content and a residual 0.8% corresponds to literacy content. In the case of posts on health, on the other hand, the percentage weight of verifications is reduced (61% in total), with 23.6% of debunks, 25% of verification sets, and 12.5% of positive verifications; on the other hand, the percentage of informative content (18.1%) and literacy content (15.3%) increases.

As for the interaction ratio by topic, it should be noted that the nine posts on racism generate an interaction ratio close to 12%, much higher than that of any other topic (both in Likes and comments), and the interaction ratio of the posts on politics is slightly higher than that of the rest of the content.

Posts' formal characteristics

This variable compares the sample of posts with the highest interaction ratio with the total number of posts published in 2021. In the set of posts published in 2021, 43.6% of the contents are presented in album format, 43.2% are images, and 13.3% are videos. However, in the sample of the 301 most successful posts, the percentage presence of albums increases, to the detriment of images and, above all, videos, which account for only 6.9%. This greater presence of album-type content in the sample of posts with the highest interaction ratio is generalized, with the exception of the cases of Cotejo.info, Fast Check Chile, and Polígrafo; only these last two fact-checkers have a higher percentage of posts with a single image in the sample than in the total set of 2021.

The album format posts in the sample consist of sequences of between two and 10 images, although most are composed of three or four and follow a similar structure: a first image presenting the topic or cover, followed by the image of the hoax and its verification, the explanation or explanations justifying its falsehood, and a closing image of self-promotion of the fact-checker.

Considering videos, in 2021 the fact-checkers in the sample published 797. The fact-checkers that generated the most videos were Polígrafo (22.2% of the total number of videos), Ecuador Chequea (21.2%), and Newtral (20.8%). However, only 21 videos (2.63% of the total) are in the sample of most successful posts; none of them are from Polígrafo and only two are from Ecuador Chequea. Newtral is the fact-checker that contributes the most videos to the sample (eight), followed by Chequeado (five), and Cotejo.info (four). Most of them are short videos (less than four minutes) or even very short (less than one minute). There are only three long videos (40 - 80 minutes), and one of intermediate length (22 minutes).

In terms of interaction, the album format achieves a substantially higher ratio (both in the total number of posts published in 2021 and in the sample) than the single image or video format. However, in the case of the sample, the ratio of comments per 100 followers is higher for videos than for the other formats. Another interesting fact is that the videos in the sample that have a timer (the user knows their duration) achieve more than double the interaction ratio per post than videos that do not (5.51% vs. 2.37%).

84.7% of the sample includes hashtags, a percentage very similar to that of the total number of posts in 2021 (85.2%). The posts in the sample that use this resource include between one and 18 hashtags, with an average of 7.2 per publication. Its presence is frequent in all types of posts, although it stands out in positive verifications (95.6% contain hashtags).

On the other hand, 75.4% of the posts with the highest interaction use real images. Their use is predominant in verification content: 94.57% of the positive verifications, 88.24% of the debunks, and 88.10% of the verification sets include them.

	% album posts		% image posts		% video posts	
	2021	Sample	2021	Sample	2021	Sample
Fact-checker						
Agencia Lupa	78.3	95	15.2	5	6.4	0
Aos Fatos	71	97.2	25.8	2.8	3.2	0
Bolivia Verifica	0	0	57.9	100	42.1	0
Chequeado	51.1	62.5	20.8	6.2	28.1	31.2
Colombiacheck	19.1	42.9	70.9	57.1	10.1	0
Cotejoinfo	42.8	30	34.5	30	22.7	40
Ecuador Chequea	6.1	26.5	69.2	67.6	24.6	5.9
Fast Check CL	92.9	81.5	6.1	18.5	0.9	0
Mala Espina Check	30.5	56.2	63.4	37.5	6.2	6.2
Maldito Bulo	90.8	100	2.1	0	7.1	0
Newtral	48	55	9.7	5	42.3	40
Polígrafo	8.5	5.4	79.5	94.6	12	0
Verificat	81.1	83.3	13.1	0	5.7	16.7
All fact-checkers	43.6	52.5	43.2	39.9	13.3	6.9
Likes per 100 followers	1.674	6.395	0.827	3.672	0.384	3.454
Comments per 100 followers	0.061	0.258	0.027	0.149	0.023	0.396
Interaction ratio	1.735	6.634	0.854	3.82	0.407	3.845

Table 5. Percentage of posts according to format by fact-checker

Source: Own elaboration..

	Interaction ratio	Likes per 100 followers	Comments per 100 followers
<i>With hashtag</i>	5.08%	4.84	0.22
<i>Without hashtag</i>	6.83%	6.59	0.23
With real images	5.37%	5.17	0.21
Without real images	5.76%	5.56	0.2
With graphic verification indicators	5.45%	5.24	0.22
Without graphic verification indicators	5.16%	4.9	0.19

Table 6. Interaction data in terms of other formal resources

Source: Own elaboration.

In contrast, the percentages of use are much lower for news (35.71%), literacy (26.32%), and self-promotion (20%).

Finally, while 97.8% of the positive verifications provide graphic indicators of verification, in the verification sets or denials this percentage drops to 78.6% and 76.5% respectively, indicating that verification is expressed in a less clear or visible way.

The use of hashtags and real images does not seem to positively affect the interaction ratio. The interaction ratio is slightly higher in posts that include graphic verification indicators. As with other variables, the comment ratio is very stable, regardless of the resources used, and the variations occur mainly in the number of Likes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the first objective, the timeline of publications shows regular and constant activity by fact-checkers, with no significant peaks of activity that could be associated with politically or socially salient moments that occurred in 2021. This result coincides with that noted by Míguez-González and colleagues (2023) for the activity of fact-checkers on Twitter in 2021. This could be the result of organized and methodical work dynamics on the part of the fact-checkers, with careful planning of publishable content that is not subject to variations due to external circumstances, an issue that could be corroborated in subsequent studies with a diachronic analysis of the activity of the fact-checkers or a qualitative analysis in which this fact is contrasted through in-depth interviews.

Concerning the second objective, the data on the type of publication per fact-checker according to its intentionality, similar to those obtained by

Míguez-González and Dafonte-Gómez (2022) for Facebook, corroborate that, while most fact-checkers prioritize the publication of verifications, some, such as Newtral, take on a fundamentally informative function, competing, to a certain extent, with the traditional media in the news offer. From this point of view, it could be understood that the traditional fact-checker model is evolving, giving rise to hybrid organizations between a pure fact-checker and a media outlet.

It may also be surprising that about one third of the content published by the fact-checkers are positive verifications. In this regard, it should be noted that many of the fact-checkers analyzed respond to requests from users to verify content that they consider doubtful but that may, in the end, turn out to be true; since the verifiers do not clarify whether or not the object of analysis comes from a user, it is not possible to determine whether this factor influences the sense of verification, which is a limitation for this and other studies. Similarly, some fact-checkers such as Polígrafo or Fast Check Chile, to a lesser extent, prefer positive verification; these results are similar to those obtained by Míguez-González and Dafonte-Gómez (2022) for Facebook, so they could be considered consolidated trends or preferences of verifiers. Considering the above –and it could be the subject of future research– the reasons why a fact checker prioritizes the corroboration of truths over the refutation of falsehoods could be asked. In the case of Polygraph, we could suggest that this high content of positive verifications is due to its selection method of the contents subject to be checked, based on verifying the truthfulness of publicly relevant interventions of known characters (politicians, commentators, influencers, artists...), and different from that applied by other fact-checkers, which also consider other types of content, such as news published in the media or social networks.

On the other hand, compared to verification and information, content dedicated to literacy is relegated to third place (6.3%), a similar result obtained by Míguez-González and Dafonte-Gómez (2022) for Facebook (4.08%). Thus, although some data verifiers in the sample have a training offer for different user profiles or offer digital literacy resources (Dafonte-Gómez et al., 2022a), this aspect of their performance is not transferred to their communication strategies in social networks.

As for the third objective, politics and health are the two main focuses of the publications. In the case of politics, this result is not surprising, since the origin of fact-checkers is closely linked to this field (Graves & Cherubini, 2016) and several studies highlight their role in improving political behavior (Amazeen, 2017) or curbing lying in this field (Haigh et al., 2018; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Young et al., 2018); thus, electoral processes set the agenda, and the statements of politicians and parties during these periods are the priority object of verification, although other hot topics of the national politics of each country also have a strong presence.

In contrast to the localism of political content, in the case of health the topics are more universal: the pandemic caused by COVID-19 is the health topic most frequently dealt with, not only with verifications of the hoaxes that were generated - especially regarding vaccines - but also with informative content and, to a lesser extent, literacy. These results coincide, in most categories, with those obtained for Facebook (Míguez-González & Dafonte-Gómez, 2022), consolidating in both cases politics and health as priority topics for Ibero-American fact-checkers.

For the fourth (formal characteristics) and fifth objectives (relationship between variables and interaction) it can be observed that, although in the set of publications in 2021 the verifiers opt in equal measure for the album or single image format, to the detriment of videos, in the sample of the most successful posts the album format is the most abundant, since it is the one that generates the highest interaction ratio, mainly due to the importance of Likes. This data is consistent with the benchmarks for business profiles on Instagram in 2021 (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2022) which also point to the album as a prominent format in terms of engagement ratio with percentages (3.15%) that clearly exceed that of photos (1.18%) and videos (1.50%). However, the videos in the sample stand out for a higher ratio of comments per follower than images and albums, which could suggest that users willing to invest more time -the time required to watch videos- would also be more inclined to interact actively, through comments.

Other frequently used formal characteristics do not seem to have an impact on the interaction ratio. This happens, for example, with hashtags, endorsing the words of Adam Mosseri, director of Instagram, on the limited usefulness of this resource to generate more views (Golob, 2022). It also happens with real images, of priority use in verification posts. In the case of graphic verification indicators, a hallmark of several verifiers, their slight positive influence on the interaction ratio could be linked to their undoubted value in quickly clarifying the truthfulness or falsehood of a piece of content.

Regarding the interaction ratio according to topics, it is observed that posts on racism generate a higher interaction ratio than any other content, both in terms of likes and comments. Thus, despite the fact that fact-checkers focus their attention on health and politics, topics that probably set the media agenda, it is shown that there are other issues that may arouse greater interest and greater reaction from users, although it would be necessary to have a larger sample and an analysis of the comments to assess the causes of this phenomenon.

As a limitation, it should be considered that the chances of a post being seen by a user (and, therefore, being likely to generate interaction) depends on the algorithms that Instagram applies to determine the visibility of content for users in the feed,

which include, according to Mosseri (2021), aspects such as information about the publication (time, type of content, duration if it is a video, etc.), information about the person who publishes it in relation to the user who receives it, the user's activity, and his/her history of interactions. Thus, any reflection on the influence of any formal or narrative element on the interaction that a content can generate will always be conditioned by these characteristics of the social network.

Another important limitation of this research -and of any research that takes Instagram as a platform of study- is related to the available data. Although Crodwtangle is the most complete data source for research on Facebook and Instagram, in the case of the latter it only offers interaction metrics on comments and Likes (public reactions) of posts in the feed. This implies, on the one hand, that there is a large pool of ephemeral publications (stories) for which historical data cannot be obtained and, on the other hand, that there are other interactions relevant to determine the visibility of a content that are completely hidden, among them - and unlike other social networks- the number of times a content has been shared.

Thus, although Instagram is a relevant social network in the information consumption of millions of people around the world, it is more opaque in its data and more complex to study than other social networks that are more widely used in academic research, such as Twitter or Facebook. Therefore, to deepen our knowledge of the use of this platform by fact-checkers, it would be useful to develop future research to contrast these data through in-depth interviews with managers, to determine whether posting patterns respond to strategies determined by the organizations, and through a content analysis of comments that provides information on the perception of users and explains the interest in certain topics.

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