

Fact-checking in Mexican journalism: Analysis of *Verificado 2018* experience

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Abstract: This paper analyzes how fact-checking is incorporated into Mexican journalism taking into account the experience of *Verificado 2018*. In-depth interviews were conducted with journalists who collaborated in the project. The results indicate that *Verificado 2018* journalists conceive fact-checking as a part of traditional journalism and its democratic objective. However, they pointed out failures in the practice of journalism in Mexico and threats due to the growing phenomenon of fake news. In this context, *Verificado 2018* opted for alternatives in the performance of its fact-checking tasks, such as a more horizontal relationship with sources, interaction with the public, collaborative journalism and media literacy stories. They considered though that *Verificado 2018* does not have an activist mission. *Verificado 2018* fueled the discussion on the quality of Mexican journalism and how journalists can contribute to its improvement.

Key words: fact-checking, journalism, *Verificado 2018*.

Resumen: Este trabajo analiza cómo se incorpora el *fact-checking* en el periodismo mexicano, tomando en cuenta la experiencia de *Verificado 2018*. Se realizaron entrevistas a profundidad con periodistas que colaboraron en el proyecto. Los resultados indican que los periodistas de *Verificado 2018* conciben al *fact-checking* como parte del periodismo tradicional y su objetivo democrático. No obstante, señalaron fallas en la práctica del periodismo en México y amenazas por el creciente fenómeno de noticias falsas. En este contexto, *Verificado 2018* apostó por alternativas en el desempeño de sus labores de *fact-checking*, como una relación más horizontal con fuentes, interacción con el público, periodismo colaborativo y notas de educación mediática. Empero, consideraron que *Verificado 2018* no tuvo una misión activista. *Verificado 2018* avivó la discusión sobre la calidad del periodismo mexicano y de qué forma periodistas pueden contribuir a su mejora.

Palabras clave: *fact-checking*, periodismo, *Verificado 2018*.

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Introduction

The rise of the Internet and social networks has favored the dissemination of information about public issues. Messages through such channels spread very fast and have the potential to go viral. In addition, as access to these media has been democratized, there are fewer filters to disseminate information, so it is not always truthful. These two factors have facilitated the explosion of the phenomenon of fake news, news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and that can mislead the public (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017: 4).

In the political arena, such fake news can have dangerous normative ramifications, as voters are not only uninformed but misinformed (Kuklinski *et al.*, 2000: 792). In an information climate tainted by the presence of multiple information and intentionally false news, fact-checking has gained strength as a tool to corroborate or disprove information and verify public discourse.

This research studies the experience of one of the first efforts to do fact-checking in a systematic way in Mexico, which emerged in the context of the 2018 presidential election. *Verificado 2018* was a project of more than 80 partners, including media, universities and civil organizations. Its objective was to “verify, in real time, relevant information about the electoral process” (Khatib and Larrea, 2018), arising from the discourse of public actors or false notes. The unprecedented project brought together digital and traditional media with diverse editorial trends.

This article analyzes how fact-checking is incorporated in Mexican journalism, taking into account the experience of *Verificado 2018*. In-depth interviews were conducted with journalists who collaborated in the project. Specifically, the interest of the present work was to know the perspective of these journalists regarding how they conceive fact-checking, how it differs from traditional journalism and what was the impact of the project.

The results indicate that *Verificado 2018* journalists consider fact-checking as part of traditional journalism and its democratic purpose. However, they pointed out flaws in the practice of journalism in Mexico and threats due to the growing phenomenon of fake news. In this context, *Verificado 2018* opted for alternatives in the performance of its fact-checking work, such as a more horizontal relationship with sources, interaction with the public, collaborative journalism and media education notes. However, interviewees considered that the project did not have an activist mission. The conclusion discusses how *Verificado 2018* stoked the

discussion about the quality of Mexican journalism and how journalists can contribute to its improvement, as well as the limits derived from the rootedness to the values of the profession.

Literature review

What is fact-checking?

Definition and background

Fact-checking consists of assessing, in a systematic way, the veracity of politicians' assertions and news information that may impact public opinion (Graves, 2018: 615). For Amazeen (2017: 3), political fact-checking has three fundamental objectives: to inform the public, to improve political behavior and to improve journalism. It was in 2003 in the United States that the first organization dedicated precisely to this mission emerged, Factcheck.org. In recent years, fact-checking efforts have gained prominence not only in the United States, but around the world. Such success is partially due to the fact that these proposals arise in times of high distrust in public actors (politicians and media) and in a context of individualized mass communication where digitization has changed routines and techniques of information content production (López *et al.*, 2016: 2). Likewise, this expansion has been favored by the opportunity provided by social networks to distribute and viralize verified content (Echeverría, 2017: 11).

There are several aspects to consider when talking about fact-checking. While journalists follow certain fact-checking criteria internally before publishing certain information to eliminate possible errors, the form of journalism known as fact-checking refers to the activity in which statements that have been determined to be incorrect are publicized (Amazeen, 2017: 3). In addition, fact-checkers must be free of partisan or ideological tendencies in their practice, or else they are political actors (Graves, 2018: 616). In the United States, fact-checking is usually in the hands of journalists; however, in other parts of the world, activists or academics are also involved in these tasks (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill, 2018: 965; Mena, 2018: 4).

The effects of fact-checking on people's beliefs or attitudes are mixed, as some individuals hold on to misperceptions despite encountering corrections (Amazeen, 2017: 3). Some studies have found that fact-checking has moderate positive effects on correcting misinformation (Walter and Murphy, 2018: 432); such effects range from influencing the perception of

information presented in political propaganda (Fridkin *et al.*, 2015: 127), on the evaluation of political candidates (Wintersieck, 2017: 304), and on the level of knowledge about politics and political positions of candidates (Gottfried *et al.*, 2013: 1558).

On the other hand, Amazeen (2015) notes that the impact of fact-checking is mostly observed in political discourse, as politicians tell fewer falsehoods in their speeches knowing they are monitored. Likewise, fact-checking can have an impact on public trust in the media (Pingree *et al.*, 2018: 1).

Fact-checking and journalism

The emergence of fact-checking has been explained as a professional reformist movement by the same community of journalists (Graves, 2013: 1). Graves and Konieczna (2015: 1977) find that fact-checking projects reflect a critique of conventional political journalism that only broadcasts statements, thus appealing to journalism's democratic mission to focus on ways in which failures and threats in the profession can be addressed. Previous research has indicated that journalists perceive fact-checking to be congruent with traditional journalism ideals and that this linkage motivates journalists to engage in this type of work (Graves *et al.*, 2016: 102).

Despite differences in the procedures for executing this activity, there is broad agreement among fact-checkers about the main purpose of fact-checking: to inform the public (Amazeen, 2013: 5). Specifically, journalists consider that the objectives of this activity are to evaluate the veracity of statements made by public figures and to disprove fake news (Mena, 2018: 8). However, journalists involved in this work (at least in the United States) have expressed disagreement that fact-checking has a mission to promote a social cause, thus distancing itself from an activist purpose (Mena, 2018: 9).

On the other hand, some journalists have also shared their perspective on the impact of fact-checking. An important aspect to consider is how fact-checking impacts journalism. Research by Brandtzaeg *et al.* (2018: 1118) found that journalists value the potential of fact-checking services to raise awareness of facts that need to be verified.

More broadly, fact-checking can also influence journalism to move away from a more traditional he-said-she-said format and introduce a systematic fact-checking model (Amazeen, 2013: 14). Likewise, fact-checking is also characterized by an emphasis on practices involving data analysis (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill, 2018: 965). Regarding an impact beyond journalism,

Amazeen (2013: 8) points out that fact-checkers have few elements to determine how they influence the public and rely more on intuition and anecdotes. However, interviews conducted with fact-checkers revealed that they point out as consequences of their work: greater availability of information to the public and changes in the rhetoric of politicians (Amazeen, 2013: 12).

Although journalists do not have tools to measure the impact of fact-checking accurately, their perceptions of its effects are relevant, because their motivations to participate in fact-checking projects or to incorporate fact-checking sections in their media may depend on them.

Verified 2018 and the Mexican context

Prior to *Verificado 2018*, few fact-checking efforts existed in Mexico in journalism or outside of it. A census of fact-checking initiatives in Spanish (Vizoso and Vázquez-Herrero, 2019: 138) identifies only two such projects in Mexico: Animal Político's El Sabueso, operating since January 2015, and Milenio's El Polígrafo, which is currently inactive. This is despite the fact that fact-checking of political statements is of particular importance in Mexico, due to the history of journalistic coercion and political clientelism that prevails in the media system in the country (Martínez-Carrillo and Tamul, 2019: 2598). Against such scenario, citizen trust in Mexican media prior to the 2018 election was low and fake news was identified as a potential risk for decision making in the country (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018). In addition, during previous elections, efforts to manipulate public opinion on social networks through the purchase of bots (Martínez, 2018) and political propaganda disguised as celebrity opinions on Twitter (Redacción Animal Político, 2015) had been identified. These conditions, coupled with the global trend of fact-checking initiatives, underpinned the birth of *Verificado 2018*.

On July 1, 2018, elections were held in Mexico in which the president of the Republic, 128 senators and 500 deputies were voted; in addition, state and local elections were held in 30 states of the country. *Verificado 2018* operated from March 12 to July 5, 2018, with the objective of "combating fake news and denouncing the misleading use of information" (Verificado 2018, 2018a) during the pre-campaign and election campaign. The initiative was led by Animal Político and AJ Plus en Español, as well as Pop Up Newsroom, an organization dedicated to supporting collaborative journalism. The project had a total of 80 allies, among them important Mexican media, universities and non-governmental organizations.

Verificado 2018 conducted more than 400 notes and 50 videos. The notes consisted of verifications of public discourse, for example, the note regarding the statements of the candidate of the Morena Party entitled “Inaccurate, López Obrador’s calculations to measure the penetration of mobile telephony” (Díaz, 2018); and verifications of false notes, for example, the one that disproved a rumor circulated in social networks regarding the PAN candidate, entitled “The false family ties between Ricardo Anaya and the Salinas” (De la Torre, 2018).

Their videos had educational content about how to verify information or reported on how digital disinformation campaigns work (*Verificado 2018a* and *2018b*). In addition, real-time verifications of the presidential debates were made. These publications attracted around five million visits to its Internet portal and some of its videos reached up to one million views (*Verificado 2018, 2018b*). The verifications were distributed through its website and the social networks of *Verificado 2018*, which in a matter of months reached more than 200 thousand followers on Facebook and Twitter, which is significant if one observes that sites consolidated for years such as Factcheck.org have 157 thousand followers on Twitter (Martínez-Carrillo and Tamul, 2019: 2599). The provision of engaging content designed to be shared on networks and high audience interaction and inclusion are considered to be the keys to the success of the project platforms (Flueckiger, 2019). In view of these results, *Verificado 2018* is considered an example of collaborative journalism worldwide, which positions it as a case to imitate and study in many countries (Magallón, 2019: 259).

Considering the characterization of fact-checking as a reform movement of the profession, in order to explore how *Verificado 2018* is incorporated in the Mexican context, the following research questions were established.

PI 1. According to *Verificado 2018* participants, how do they conceptualize the fact-checking work carried out in the project and how does it relate to traditional journalism?

PI 2. According to project participants, was there an activist component to the work carried out by *Verificado 2018*?

PI 3. According to the perception of the project members, what is the impact of *Verificado 2018*?

Method

The interview provides the possibility of entering into another person's perspective, allowing the subject to explain their experiences in their own terms (Patton, 1990). In this way, this method allows us to delve into the ideas, thoughts, opinions, attitudes and motivations of others (Berger, 2000: 113). To answer the research questions posed, stakeholders involved in *Verificado 2018* were interviewed to learn more about the motivations and practices of those who were involved in the project. Between November 2018 and January 2019, 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted via telephone or Skype for between 25 and 65 minutes. The interviewees (6 male and 7 female) were journalists who performed different roles in the *Verified 2018* project. Table 1¹ specifies who the interviewees were and what their role was in the project.

An interview protocol was established with some topics and questions to follow during the interaction, such as, for example, reasons why *Verificado 2018* was created, differences with traditional journalism and the scope of the project. The interviews were transcribed in their entirety and a thematic analysis was conducted based on the participants' responses. Thematic analysis is a process of coding qualitative information in order to identify themes from the data (Boyatzis, 1998: vi). In order to determine these themes, procedures of the constant comparative method were applied, that is, the information was reduced by coding and recoding until reaching theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 111).

Results

The objectives of Verificado 2018 and its relationship to traditional journalism

Fact-checking: Journalism 101

When referring to how they conceive fact-checking, the answers of the members of *Verificado 2018* coincided with the trend of fact-checkers worldwide, relating this activity to the traditional duty of journalism. Interviewees argued that this activity is a key element in all types of journalism, calling it "the most basic of journalism" (De la Torre, personal communication, January 8, 2019) or "pure journalism" (Plascencia, personal

1 This table can be found in the Annex at the end of this article (Editor's note).

communication, November 29, 2018), emphasizing that its execution did not imply a technique different from what any journalist does when publishing information (Montalvo, personal communication, December 13, 2018). That is, from their perspective, reviewing the veracity of the information published is a duty of every journalist. In addition, they emphasized that in carrying out this activity they were guided by the principle of objectivity, the cornerstone of modern journalism (Muñoz-Torres, 2012: 566). That is, the interviewees pointed out that in the verifications they maintained as a priority to be neutral and review all types of information, regardless of ideological positions.

When speaking about the objectives of this activity, the interviewees reiterated the project's mission to combat misinformation. They pointed out the purpose of informing citizens and thus helping them to make decisions in the election. This was explained by Diego de la Mora, Methodology and Data Coordinator of the project.

The ultimate goal was that whoever arrived at the polling station would have made the decision of who to vote for with as much true information as possible, with freedom to vote for whomever they decided and not influenced by fake news (De la Mora, personal communication, January 9, 2019).

Thus, the motivations for fact-checking in *Verificado 2018* are linked to a traditional objective that defines journalism: the intention of providing information for a public capable of self-governance (George, 2013: 493). The practice of this activity is not understood as outside the traditional work of the profession.

Differences with conventional journalism

Although they identified objectives consistent with the ideals of journalism, interviewees did acknowledge that there were differences between the journalism of *Verificado 2018* and that which is typically practiced in Mexico. On the one hand, the interviewees mentioned logistical differences in the way of working, first of all because they did not make notes of the day. Their work also differed, as they had little time to make notes that required detailed analysis and emphasis on data (which is why some collaborators were even called "dateros"). Another difference in the way of working was the relationship maintained with other *Verificado 2018* collaborators, non-governmental organizations and academics who served as expert sources. Although these collaborators usually contributed as sources in the traditional manner, on occasion they also wrote stories in conjunction with reporters.

This is how reporter Ana Karen De la Torre explains it.

For example, with Oxfam I had to do a verification and it was like bouncing the text back to us, right? They would make the proposal and I would edit it, and then I would pass it on to them and so it was bouncing around [...] And also the debates, they were there with us (De la Torre, personal communication, January 8, 2019).

The relationship with the public was also different, because while most of the media have interaction with their audience nowadays, *Verificado 2018* paid special attention to this communication, keeping its community managers abreast of the requests for verifications that came through networks and opening a line through WhatsApp for that same purpose. This particular WhatsApp strategy was significant, as it established a one-to-one relationship with the most loyal readers.

On the other hand, journalists mentioned differences derived from the shortcomings of journalism commonly practiced in Mexico. Aldo Nicolai, reporter for *Verificado 2018*, lamented the lack of rigor and additional verification in certain expressions of Mexican journalism.

I do not want to generalize, because obviously there are all kinds of newsrooms in Mexico, but I think that many of them lack, in normal journalism, the rigor of fact-checking, whether it is a chronicle, a report, whatever. Sometimes they give you figures, journalists take them, they take them for granted because they are said by such and such a deputy, such and such a governor, and they do not take the time to corroborate if those figures are actually true (Nicolai, personal communication, January 13, 2019).

Thus, the interviewees agreed that although fact-checking should be present in all types of journalism, in many cases it is not, due to lack of time, low salaries, few personnel or lack of specialization in certain sources. The interviewees maintained a cautious stance when referring to the work of other journalists, arguing that they could not generalize about these problems in the quality of the work done in other media and stressing that it was not up to them to give classes on how to do journalism.

Likewise, it highlights that *Verificado 2018* did not perform verifications of notes from other media, since the intention, according to them, was to verify information, not media. Thus, when it came to allied media, any problem identified with the information of a note was handled internally, and they only denounced and verified Facebook pages that generated intentionally false news to mislead the population.

This position with respect to other media makes sense if we consider that fact-checking and verification services operate in symbiosis with traditional media, who promote their work (Graves, 2013: 257), as happened in the case of *Verificado 2018*, which used allied media to disseminate the information it produced.

Media education and boundaries with activism

In most of the *Verificado 2018* notes, political discourse was verified or false notes were disproved. However, some notes –which interviewees called explainers or explicadores– presented basic information about the elections, for example, aspects concerning voter identification or how to exercise the right to vote.

In addition, *Verificado 2018* published other stories that journalists interviewed referred to as media literacy by AJ Plus reporters. Out of the 66 videos produced by *Verificado 2018* that are posted on its social media accounts, around 24 present content that directly refers to problems that impact the information available on social media, such as the phenomena of fake news, use of bots in political campaigns, manipulation of images and videos, or other videos that contain tutorials for readers to review for themselves the information they receive and share on social media.

We have to consider that not all people have access to the same tools, so this [these notes] was a little bit a way to try to bring people closer to those tools that are very close at hand and that you can use, with your own cell phone you can make a verification [...] I mean, a little bit so that people could also do it themselves, and so if they saw information, they would start to doubt and this critical sense would be born, right, when it comes to consuming information (Plascencia, personal communication, November 29, 2018).

Verificado 2018 journalists insisted on the need for information of this nature for citizens to critically reflect on the news and information they consume and be aware of the consequences of sharing false information, in a context where misinformation prevails.

The problem of disinformation is something we are going to have to live with on a daily basis, in other words, it is an issue that started a few years ago, but it is not going to end. It is very easy to do it [misinformative notes], it is very effective, then it is important to teach people to discern what is true, what is false (Escamilla, personal communication, December 19, 2018).

The explanations journalists gave about the need for this type of educational notes are consistent with the definition of media literacy –the ability to access and evaluate media (Media Literacy Project, 2015)– a concept that has gained attention for the need to help people protect themselves against the multiple possible negative effects that exist from media consumption (Potter, 2010).

We knew that *Verificado* was not going to be forever, so we said, so what is going to happen, or many people said, what is going to happen next, what are we going to do

after they are no longer there, fake news is going to continue [...] We also have to have this civic culture in quotation marks of verifying the information we see on the Internet (García, personal communication, December 19, 2018).

However, most interviewees did not align these efforts with an activist cause, but considered it as part of journalism. Tania Montalvo explained it as follows:

I don't think it is a matter of activism, I mean what we are doing is journalism, I was telling you that I don't think anything we do in Verificado is different from what we would have to do as journalists every day [...] What we are doing as journalists is giving people tools to have an informed, active public participation or however they want to have it (Montalvo, personal communication, December 13, 2018).

The Impact of Verificado

Implications for public opinion and political rhetoric

The members of *Verificado 2018* were satisfied with the work carried out, recognizing that, from their perspective, the project had positive consequences on public opinion and the development of political rhetoric, thus fulfilling the traditional democratic objective of journalism. An important consequence was that Verificado 2018 was able to quickly position itself as another actor that figured as part of the public debate during the electoral period and was a reference for the public.

An example that many mentioned as an indicator of the magnitude of their work was when, after the first presidential debate, a note verifying figures provided by the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) candidate, Ricardo Anaya, went viral and generated the hashtag #mientocomoAnaya.

Respondents felt that *Verificado 2018* became the trustworthy one to which the public could turn if there were disputes about election information. Besides the fact that citizens took them into account to verify the information, they also gained the attention of at least some important political actors, who sent them detailed information about the sources of the data they used and modified their rhetoric when they learned that they would be monitored by *Verificado 2018*.

[In past elections] they could enjoy in their discourse complete impunity and now they do not, this exercise did make them kind of realize that they have to be more careful of what they were saying, that making defamations, or false accusations, was not going to be such an easy path (Avila, personal communication, December 17, 2018).

Consequences for journalism

According to journalists, *Verificado 2018* also had an impact on Mexican journalism. On the one hand, interviewees argued that this initiative contributed to generate debate about the quality of journalism in the country. Thus, these conversations could lead to remember the original mission of journalism that goes beyond the commercial aspect, as there is a social work when practicing this profession.

Furthermore, in addition to revisiting the objectives of journalism, this debate on quality could revisit the key elements to achieve this quality, such as corroboration of information and transparency in how it is obtained.

Another important impact of *Verificado 2018* was that it demonstrated the need and potential for collaborative journalism projects in the country. The interviewees emphasized that the success of the project was in part due to the fact that it was a collective effort of a large group of media, academic and civil organizations. Montserrat Maldonado, reporter for *Verificado 2018*, explained how the allied media contributed.

The allies helped us to know how each state was doing first hand [...] This distribution of media does help you to better cover the electoral panorama and collaborative journalism is something that Animal [Político] believes in a lot, that we all go together and not only I will fight for the story and I will not give it to you, but it was a very, very big team. I think that's also why it had the impact it had (Maldonado, personal communication, December 13, 2018).

Among other advantages, this way of working allowed gaining credibility, because far from seeing competition, the audience recognized “that it was not an effort to sell, it was an effort to share true information and to help the country’s democracy” (Escamilla, personal communication, December 19, 2018). In addition, the collaboration made it possible to break down barriers generated by the information bubbles that arise in the current media context. The support of media with different editorial cuts allowed *Verificado 2018* to reach different audiences, an important aspect to bring accurate information to all types of audiences. Thus, according to participants, the collaborative structure of *Verificado 2018* could be taken into account for future projects “to be able to continue surviving and evolving and adapting to something new that people are indeed demanding” (González, personal communication, December 18, 2018). In the context of the credibility crisis that the media is going through worldwide and in Mexico, this alternative way of doing journalism can serve as an example for fact-checking or other journalistic projects.

I think there is an interest, not only from the media to commercialize this type of products, but also from the people, there is a demand, I would say there is a brutal demand for this type of verified information. We cannot deny that people have a lot of distrust towards traditional media, there is a lot of questioning from people, well yes, obviously there have been mistakes, but there is also distrust in general, and this type of projects give back credibility to the media (Larraz, personal communication, December 18, 2018).

Discussion

This paper analyzes the *Verificado 2018* fact-checking project from the perspective of the journalists who were part of it, recognizing the need to listen to the voices of the actors involved in journalism in order to build better theories about it and its contribution to democracy (George, 2013: 497). In such a way, the present work contributes to our understanding of how journalists conceive fact-checking and how this practice is developed and incorporated in Mexican journalism, considering that before being effective in informing the citizen, fact-checking must be established within a structure (Amazeen, 2017: 1).

The results of this analysis indicate that *Verificado 2018* journalists frame their activities of fact-checking and disproving false notes as part of the regular work of journalism. Consistent with previous research (Amazeen, 2013; Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill, 2018: 969; Graves, 2013; Mena, 2018), the journalists interviewed noted that their mission in this project was to present information to citizens to make informed decisions when voting in the presidential election. In that sense, doing fact-checking does not take journalists away from their traditional roles, such as serving as watchmen or watchdogs, gathering and publishing information of interest to the audience (Christians *et al.*, 2009), in order to shape an audience capable of self-governance (George, 2013: 493). That is, as Graves *et al.* (2016) found in the U.S. context, fact-checking appeals to the Mexican journalist because it is associated with values of the profession and the notion of practicing good journalism.

However, the interviewees acknowledged that there are differences between the journalism they did in *Verificado 2018* and conventional journalism in Mexico. The journalism they carried out at *Verificado 2018*, according to their collaborators, required more data analysis and research in less time, as they were not dedicated to covering the day's stories. Also, another important difference was the relationship of journalists with their

sources, so that collaboration with them was more horizontal and closer. Likewise, a close and loyal relationship with the reader was fostered through social networks and, in a new way, with a WhatsApp account.

More importantly, interviewees noted that they found differences between Mexican journalism and the fact-checking conducted by *Verificado 2018*, due to the poor quality of journalism in some media in Mexico. The informants attributed these deficiencies to lack of personnel, lack of time, lack of specialization. They were also careful to point out that this criticism was not valid for all media and journalists. However, the collaborators of *Verificado 2018* pointed out practices such as “declaracionitis”, the publication of statements by public figures without analysis, considering that this way of proceeding implies forgetting a basic element in journalism: corroborating the information that is published.

Martínez-Carrillo and Tamul (2019) identified the communication strategies of *Verificado 2018* to position itself as a legitimate source of information, for example, with transparent management about its funding and methodology, partnering with *Verificado 19s* (the initiative that emerged to verify information after the earthquake of September 19, 2017), and encouraging interaction with the public. Thus, such a study found that *Verified 2018* conducted remedial work in the field of journalism, whereby it seeks to address a fundamental flaw or threat in an occupational field through new alternatives, undertaking reform to protect journalism (Graves and Konieczna, 2015: 1969).

The findings of this paper indicate that for the journalists who worked on *Verificado 2018*, these risks to journalism not only come from external threats such as the current abundance of intentionally false news and information, but are also due to an internal flaw in how journalism is practiced in Mexico, as it is common for statements by public actors to be published without a corresponding verification of the information.

In this sense, the results agree with Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018: 970), who found that journalists practicing fact-checking seek to fill a current gap in news journalism by focusing on the use of hard data as a source of information. Indeed, previous studies (Reyna, 2019: 18) have pointed out that the design of the work and the logic of the news production model under which Mexican media operate are responsible for a disqualification that reduces journalists to statement gatherers, as they have no control over their work. For the collaborating journalists, *Verificado 2018* represented an opportunity to work under a different model of news production and with different objectives. Faced with the failures identified, Mexican journalism

opted as an alternative for a fact-checking project, which also introduced unconventional ways of practicing journalism, such as maintaining closer and more horizontal relationships with their sources and with the public.

When reflecting on the consequences that *Verificado 2018* had, the interviewees expressed feeling satisfied with the work they did, because, from their point of view, *Verificado 2018* managed to position itself as a reference when discussing information generated during the election, both before political actors and the public. These achievements were consistent with the mission of journalism with respect to its impact on democracy. Furthermore, these reflections on the consequences of the project highlight the impact they consider the project had on Mexican journalism.

The journalists highlight the debate about journalism that arose thanks to their work. As an alternative to the current situation of journalism, they support the collaborative journalism structure adopted by *Verificado 2018*. That way of working allowed for better coverage of the election, greater reach to more diverse audiences and greater credibility with the audience regarding the work they did.

This experience may serve in the future as an example for journalistic projects, particularly in an adverse scenario where the media and journalism are struggling to recover their credibility and survive in an environment of multiple information and misinformation. However, it should be noted that *Verificado 2018* was a project considered to operate only during that year's election; in other words, this model of collaborative journalism operated under a temporary format.

While the genre of fact-checking in alliance with traditional media appears to be well adapted to feed the production of news in such media (Graves, 2013: 261), as happened with the case under study during the election, a long-term collaborative journalism in Mexico would have to reconcile the commercial interests with which the media operate in the country and the tendency to compete for information with the democratic and reformist impetus of journalism that encourages cooperation. However, as the journalists of *Verificado 2018* pointed out, putting this democratic mission of journalism first through collaboration with other media can also be a strategy to confront the economic pressures that the media are currently facing.

On the other hand, although the collaborators of *Verificado 2018* identified problems in the practice of Mexican journalism and put into action alternatives to practice it, the journalists interviewed denied that the objective of the work they carried out went beyond journalism and had

an activist mission. Several of the informants pointed out that there was no activism component in the work they performed, since generating a critical audience regarding the information consumed is part of the journalist's job; that is, as has been found in other studies (Mena, 2018), journalists, even fact-checkers, wish to maintain a distance from activism.

However, the interviewees did state in their explanations that the notes, which they called media literacy, had an objective beyond informing and generating reflection on the information content. These notes, mostly videos produced by the AJ Plus team, distinguished themselves from verifications of politicians' statements or fake news by referring directly to issues affecting the media and information environment, or by instructing readers on how they could check for themselves the veracity of the information they receive and share. This content aligned with the goals of the concept of media literacy, which include encouraging individuals to think critically so that they understand how media impacts culture and society, and are able to identify biases and misinformation in the content they consume (Media Literacy Project, 2015).

As explained by the interviewees, these notes were motivated by a pedagogical interest and to leave a legacy in the public regarding how to use the media when *Verificado 2018* ended its activities. Although they represented only a small portion of the content they generated, the notes with this media literacy intention can also be considered as an alternative strategy through which to repair the field of journalism, to counteract the great threat posed by the creation and circulation of false information in digital media. However, it highlights that although journalists recognized the value of this type of content, they do not assimilate media literacy as an activist cause to be incorporated into their journalistic work.

In that sense, Graves (2013: 233) asserts that fact-checking exposes the implicit tension in the practice of objective journalism, because it approaches a reformist rhetoric and objectives. This tension manifests itself in the journalists of *Verificado 2018*, who on the one hand, have no problem incorporating fact-checking, as it aligns with the traditional ideals of journalism that appeal to the values of their profession, but refuse to consider their activity as a form of activism even when it also involves a pedagogical objective that, in view of the media environment flooded with disinformation, becomes more relevant today.

While a fact-checking project such as *Verificado 2018* contributes to public discussion merely with its journalistic work and need not have an activist mission, future verification projects should question how traditional

values of journalism may limit the scope of its mission (Graves, 2013: 25). Likewise, the media and journalism should reflect on their responsibility to participate in media literacy processes in order to, if necessary, articulate it concretely and incorporate it into their work.

This article presents two main contributions to the study of fact-checking in Mexico. First, building on previous work (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Martínez-Carrillo and Tamul, 2019), it establishes the strategies used by *Verificado 2018* as part of the global fact-checking movement to repair and reform journalism: 1. Use of fact-checking as a basic element of journalism and emphasis on data analysis; 2. More horizontal relationships with sources; 3. Emphasis on interaction with the public, which is involved in the verification processes; 4. Collaborative journalism; 5. Incorporation of media education notes.

Each of these strategies set the tone for continuing the discussion that *Verificado 2018* has been stoking with its activities during the presidential election about the quality and future of journalism in Mexico. While some of these strategies are aligned with traditional journalism values, others expand journalistic discourse (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill, 2018). In that sense, the second contribution of this paper is to establish in the Mexican context the tension pointed out by Graves (2013) and manifested in the fact-checkers journalists of *Verificado 2018* between staying within the normative values of journalism and incorporating practices and discourses to counteract the phenomenon of disinformation and fake news, which are oriented more towards a pedagogical vision and public empowerment.

Like any academic research effort, this study has limitations. The views collected come from journalists who were involved in the **Verificado 2018** project, so the perception of Mexican journalism about the practice of fact-checking and verification cannot be generalized from these results to all journalists in the country. Likewise, although the interviewees offer their perspectives on the impact of *Verificado 2018* during the electoral campaign, the effect that this work had on public opinion during the elections cannot be inferred from these opinions. Future studies should focus on delving deeper into such aspects of this phenomenon in order to have a more complete perspective of its scope.

Fact-checking and verification initiatives are one of the most concrete tools to counteract the advance of phenomena such as fake news and the explosion (and exploitation) of disinformation on digital platforms. After *Verificado 2018*, other journalists and media have chosen to develop projects of this type in Mexico, although with different characteristics and scope. This

analysis of the *Verificado 2018* experience shows that journalists recognize failures and threats in the practice of journalism in the country and are willing to bet on alternatives that contribute to improving the profession, which serves as an exploration of the potential and possible challenges for these projects in the future.

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Annex

Table 1

Names of interviewees and their roles in *Verificado 2018*

Interview	Name	Role in <i>Verificado 2018</i>
1	Ángel Plascencia	Reporter
2	Syndy García	Reporter for an affiliated media outlet to <i>Verificado 2018</i>
3	Tania Montalvo	Coordinator
4	Montserrat Maldonado	Reporter
5	Yuriria Ávila	Data analyst and reporter
6	Oscar González	Data analyst
7	Irene Larraz	Reporter
8	María José López	Community Manager
9	Santiago Escamilla	Community Manager for Whatsapp
10	Adolfo García	Community Manager
11	Ana Karen de la Torre	Reporter
12	Diego de la Mora	Methodology and Data Coordinator
13	Aldo Nicolai	Reporter

Source: Own elaboration.

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