

# Fact-checking in Colombia: RedCheq in 2019 regional elections

## Fact-checking en Colombia: RedCheq en las elecciones regionales de 2019

### *Verificação de fatos na Colômbia: RedCheq nas eleições regionais de 2019*

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**ABSTRACT** | Globally, there is a social concern regarding the effects of disinformation in electoral processes; in fact, the community of verification journalists has evaluated contents and statements during elections. This research delves into fact-checking journalism in Colombia through the case study of the RedCheq platform during the 2019 regional elections. Through a quantitative content analysis, this article analyzes the geographic scope, the typology of verified information, the tools employed, and the characteristics of the checked actors. The results show the regional reach of RedCheq's fact-checking journalism practice in Colombia. The fact-checks on electoral matters, justice, and the economy predominated. Besides, there was a balance between verifying public statements and tracking social networks to identify misleading content. The analysis revealed ideological impartiality to assess the check of content propagated by the political parties that competed in the elections. The latter is relevant in order to provide institutionalization and legitimacy to fact-checking journalism, which faces accusations about following ideological bias.

**KEYWORDS:** fact-checking; journalism; misinformation; political communication; social networks; Colombia; RedCheq.

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**RESUMEN** | *En el contexto internacional, existe una preocupación social respecto de los efectos de la desinformación en los procesos electorales; de hecho, la comunidad de periodistas de verificación ha evaluado contenidos y declaraciones durante las elecciones. Esta investigación profundiza en el periodismo de verificación en Colombia mediante el estudio de caso de la plataforma RedCheq durante las elecciones regionales de 2019. Gracias a un análisis cuantitativo de contenido, se investiga el ámbito geográfico, la tipología de información verificada, las herramientas empleadas y las características de los actores verificados. Los resultados muestran el alcance regional del fact-checking de RedCheq en Colombia, en el que predominó la verificación a contenidos sobre asuntos electorales, de justicia y de economía. Asimismo, existió un equilibrio entre verificar declaraciones públicas y rastrear las redes sociales para la identificación de bulos. Se encontró imparcialidad ideológica al evaluar la veracidad de contenidos propagados por los partidos que concurren en las elecciones. Lo anterior es relevante para dotar de institucionalidad y de legitimidad al periodismo de verificación frente a ciertas declaraciones que lo acusan de seguir agendas ideológicas.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *fact-checking; periodismo; desinformación; comunicación política; redes sociales; Colombia; RedCheq.*

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**RESUMO** | *No contexto internacional, há uma preocupação social com os efeitos da desinformação nos processos eleitorais; de fato, a comunidade de verificadores de fatos avaliou conteúdos e declarações durante as eleições. Esta pesquisa investiga o jornalismo de checagem de fatos na Colômbia por meio do estudo de caso da plataforma RedCheq durante as eleições regionais de 2019. Por meio de uma análise de conteúdo quantitativa, se examinam o âmbito geográfico, a tipologia das informações verificadas, as ferramentas empregadas e as características dos atores verificados. Os resultados mostram o alcance regional da checagem de fatos da RedCheq na Colômbia. Predominaram as verificações a conteúdos sobre questões eleitorais, justiça e economia. Além disso, houve um equilíbrio entre a verificação de declarações públicas e o rastreamento de redes sociais para identificar conteúdos enganosos. A imparcialidade ideológica foi encontrada ao avaliar a veracidade dos conteúdos veiculados pelos partidos que participaram das eleições. Isso é relevante para proporcionar institucionalidade e legitimidade ao jornalismo de verificação diante de acusações de seguir agendas ideológicas..*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *verificação de fatos; jornalismo; desinformação; comunicação política; mídia social; Colômbia; RedCheq.*

## INTRODUCTION

There is growing social concern in Latin America about disinformation (Newman et al., 2021). This affects three dimensions of the democratic system: “*self-determination of polities by their own citizens; accountable representation through fair elections; and public deliberation promoting opinion and will formation*” (Tenove, 2020, p. 518).

From journalistic work, verification arises as a practice to evaluate contents or statements that acquire public relevance or social interest due to their scope, topic, or viralization (Singer, 2020). Fact-checkers –verification journalists– not only assume their social function to contrast data and report on the factual, but more and more verification media are organizing training courses and workshops in digital and verification skills. Thus, they play a remarkable activity to combat misinformation (Amazeen, 2019).

Verification journalism academic studies have developed as a result of the boom of this journalistic practice around the world. It has been incorporated by recognized media brands such as *AFP* or *EFE*, among others, and has sponsored the creation of new media, especially in Latin America, where they seem to emerge with their own voice within the media ecosystem (Palau-Sampio, 2018). Verification media are categorized into two models based on their dissemination capacity, resources, editorial constraint, and financial strength (Graves & Cherubini, 2016): one linked to consolidated journalistic brands (the newsroom model), and an independent one (alternative model), which predominates in Latin America with media such as *Chequeado* (Argentina), *Ecuador Chequea* (Ecuador), *Animal Político* (Mexico), or *Colombiacheck* (Colombia).

Since its inception, fact-checking has been linked to political journalism and the evaluation of public discourse with social impact. The development of this journalistic specialty is intrinsically related to the evolution of electoral political communication, in a political climate of great affective polarization and in a context of crisis of the traditional intermediation mechanisms and media. Precisely, the rise of disinformation finds its turning point in the 2016 US presidential election campaign. Therefore, fact-checking initiatives acquire notoriety and greater prominence during election periods, generating synergies and collaborative projects between different media (Nyhan et al., 2019). For instance, we find initiatives in the United States (Electionland), in the European Union (Crosscheck), in Asia (Checkpoint), and in Latin America, where these projects have fought electoral disinformation in Argentina (Reverso), Brazil (Comprova), Mexico (Verificado), Uruguay (Verificado) and, recently, in Colombia (RedCheq). In this context, the aim of this paper is to analyze the journalistic production

of RedCheq, a network that favored the transformation of partner media and journalists, training them in new skills and also awakening a regional coverage independent of political power (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2021). Redcheq is the name of the initiative led by *Colombiacheck* and made up of regional media, independent journalists, associations, and universities. RedCheq had a national scope with a focus on verifying information in the regions.

Linked to electoral and political journalism, RedCheq was born in mid-2019, to improve citizens' knowledge of public affairs in regional contexts and address electoral disinformation during the Colombian regional elections held in October of that year. *Colombiacheck*, a verification media that adhered to the Code of Principles of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) led this initiative which involved regional media (*Vanguardia*, *El Colombiano*, or *La Cola de Rata*, among others), independent journalists, civil associations such as the Electoral Observation Mission, and universities (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Universidad Santiago de Cali, Universidad de Manizales, among others). Redcheq received financial and training support from Facebook, Google, and The National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

The regional elections, held on Sunday, October 27, 2019, were the first since the 2016 peace agreements with the FARC. Colombians elected a total of 1,101 mayors, 32 governors, 12,063 councilors, 418 deputies, and 6,814 councilors; this implied 3,306 elections of local authorities, which took the baton from the 2015 elected officials. The sociopolitical context was marked by dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy, greater skepticism towards institutions, and a high perception of corruption in the country (DANE, 2019b).

RedCheq was created to fight disinformation, because in Colombia social networks and WhatsApp influenced democratic processes thanks to the combination of polarization, disinformation, and emotions (Dajer, 2021). During the Peace Referendum (Medina-Uribe, 2018) or in the elections for the presidency of the Republic (Cortés & Peñarredonda, 2018), the influence of disinformation in political processes was proven. Dajer (2021) explains that disinformation not only generates misperceptions, but also infringes on the rights of candidates (right to honor or good name) and voters (privacy of their data).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Journalism reacts to the disinformation phenomenon with fact-checking as a journalistic practice to evaluate the (in)accuracy of contents, data, or statements

released by actors with public impact, either through public speeches, the media, or social networks (Mena, 2019).

In the case of political journalism, assessing content to disprove falsehoods and counter political disinformation is a practice of accountability and civic responsibility (Graves & Konieczna, 2015; Graves, 2018). It is linked to recovering journalism fundamentals and professional values (Graves et al., 2016; Mena, 2019) from a journalistic discourse based on objectivity and factuality (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018). An electoral process, being a mechanism of guarantees of the democratic system, needs freedom of expression and certain journalistic autonomy (Josephi, 2013), hence the importance of keeping the topics of the public agenda free of disinformation. In this regard, fact-checking journalism is engaged in scrutinizing political discourse and viral information shared on social networks and messaging apps, in order to provide truthful information for decision-making. However, it should be mentioned that most media and fact-checking initiatives focus their efforts on national contexts and capital spheres in which political power is concentrated, leaving aside disinformation from the local and regional level (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019).

Although this practice began in the United States in 1992, it is still developing and needs to be legitimized within the media system (Lowrey, 2017), including references to the fact-checking work in traditional media (Graves & Konieczna, 2015) and complying with the principles promoted by the IFCN. Transparency in the selection of content, in the methodological process and in the sources' selection, as well as in safeguarding the independence of the organizational model, are key both for the institutionalization and credibility of fact-checking journalism and for deserving the trust of the public (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Humprecht, 2020).

Nevertheless, verification should not be confused with the traditional work of the media before publishing, as it evaluates content (data, facts, multimedia content) once they have been disseminated because of their social impact, subject matter or notoriety (Zommer, 2015).

Focusing on the actor issuing the disinformation, Nyhan and Reifler (2014) found that the presence of fact-checkers reduces the likelihood of political actors making misleading or false claims, as they perceive a reputational cost. Nevertheless, the presence of fact-checkers does not reduce media coverage of these actors. In electoral debates, recurrent spaces for fact-checking journalism, it has effects on the candidate's performance, either reinforcing honesty links when his/her statements are true or penalizing him/her when they are evaluated as false (Wintersieck, 2017). Evidence indicates that fact-checking reduces misperceptions, but has minimal effects on candidate evaluations or voting decisions (Nyhan et al., 2019).

Fact-checking gains greater relevance when it occurs during electoral processes due to the great importance and transcendence of campaigns in political life (Marchal et al., 2018). The practice of fact-checking implies that the journalist has a good knowledge about the functioning of public administrations (Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2022) and a series of skills: data journalism and handling of digital tools to identify disinformation in multimedia content (Thomson et al., 2020).

Alongside verification practices arises the debate about the epistemology of this journalistic exercise (Amazeen, 2015; Uscinski & Butler, 2013; Uscinski, 2015). “Besides its primary goal of informing the public with accurate information, an ancillary aspiration of fact-checking is to improve political behavior” (Amazeen, 2019, p. 556). As a reporting practice, fact-checkers perceive a risk linked to political misinformation caused by media fragmentation and partisanship, lack of quality and journalistic principles in news coverage (Amazeen, 2019; Graves & Konieczna, 2015), and the rise of information disseminated by blogs, social networks, and alternative websites (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018).

To this end, the fact-checker, in accordance with professional principles, becomes a neutral, nonpartisan, and independent arbiter of truth (Humprecht, 2020) who conducts his/her activity without the constraint of political and economic interests (Graves, 2018). The IFCN Code of Principles establishes nonpartisanship as a standard when conducting verifications.

The delicate issue of partisan or ideological impartiality is frequently used as a shield or as a weapon given the position of arbiter on the (in)accuracy of the contents assessed, as well as on the reasons that support such selection of contents. At this point, several critical postulates emerge regarding the verification practice: the criteria for content selection, the journalist’s nonpartisan position, the methodological process that ends in the assessment, and the consistency between verification media that check the same content and that should reach the same conclusion.

In the first place, verification journalism assesses the accuracy of factual events. However, disinformation is often linked to post-truth dynamics where facts respond to discursive logics in which feelings, emotions, and previous beliefs are embedded (Carrera, 2018). With this approach, truth would be to some degree malleable and reality would be understood from emotionality and prior beliefs (opinions and predictions), which are subject to verification as Bernhard (2021) found in a study on the work of verification journalism in Switzerland. Uscinski and Butler (2013) state that content is often selected based on opinions and ideological postulates and not on factual events, colliding with the methodological postulates of verification.

Secondly, Uscinski and Butler (2013) argue that fact-checkers place themselves in a false equidistance, by equally checking parties or candidates that do not have the same public incidence as a protection and shield mechanism to avoid being accused of political preferences. Likewise, a sensitive aspect is the boundary that separates fact-checking from activism (Mena, 2019), and the preferences of journalists as citizens.

Thirdly, the methodological process and the clear identification of the documentary, technological, and analytical evidences conducted by official or expert sources becomes a credibility guarantee of the check so that the citizen reaches the same conclusion as the fact-checker (Humprecht, 2020). Moreover, if two verification media independently perform a verification on the same content, they should reach the same conclusion, a key aspect to gain credibility in the eyes of the audience. “Consensus helps to validate their claim to be objective, and fact-checkers admit that disagreements cause discomfort” (Graves & Konieczna, 2015, p. 1975).

On the one hand, Amazeen (2015), in response to Uscinski and Butler’s criticisms, studied the consistency of three organizations (*FactCheck.org*, *The Fact Checker*, and *PolitiFact.com*) during the 2008 US presidential campaign, observing a high consistency in qualifications and topics. Recently, in Brazil, consistency was found between two Brazilian verification media (*Aos Fatos* and *Agência Lupa*), adherents to the IFCN Code of Principles, in qualifications issued in 2019 (de Rezende-Damasceno & Patrício, 2020).

Among the studies that found inconsistencies, it is clear that these discrepancies in the fact-checking exercise hinder the processes of citizen understanding and deepen dilemmas about truth (and interpretations of truth) (Graves, 2017) in the discursive logic of facts. Marietta and colleagues (2015) analyzed three US media (*PolitiFact*, *The Fact Checker*, and *FactCheck.org*) and concluded that there were differences in thematic selection (agenda-setting) and qualification on certain topics. Also in the United States, Lim (2018) researched the degree of consistency between *The Fact Checker* and *Politifact* when evaluating the same content, with the discrepancies being greater when the content was rated as partially true or partially false. Disagreements were higher when the topics were confined to social policy, healthcare, or the 2016 Hillary Clinton email controversy. Thus, as Lim (2018) argues, topics related to political debates or public policy often offer different interpretations, frames of cognition, and even opinions, which brings the epistemological debate of verifying public discourses to the table.

Having set out the conceptual framework of this work, the following are the specific objectives of the research.

### Specific objectives:

SO1. To understand the penetration of fact-checking in regional environments and its journalistic output.

SO2. To identify disinformation topics, formats, and dissemination channels, as well as to analyze which emitters were prioritized by the fact-checkers, i.e., whether they gave priority to the scrutiny of public discourse or to the verification of viral content.

SO3. To know what was the level of use of digital instruments as verification tools to support the qualification of the check-up.

SO4. To analyze whether RedCheq complied with the commitment to nonpartisanship and impartiality promoted by IFCN.

### **METHODOLOGY: QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS**

This study follows a quantitative approach to address the following research questions:

RQ1. Did RedCheq, as a national network, achieve a reach and coverage that introduced verification journalism in the regions?

RQ2. Did content categorized as disinformation increase as the elections approached? What type of information was subject to verification? Was priority given to scrutinizing public discourse (statements) or viral content?

RQ3. Were content verification tools implemented as evidence to reinforce the qualification category? If so, on what type of content?

RQ4. Were there differences in qualifications based on the ideology of the verified political actors?

The sample (n=134) gathers the fact-checks published on the RedCheq website on the occasion of the regional elections (multiple checks were excluded, i.e., verification news that qualify several contents within the same information). These informative contents were published between April 10 and November 18, 2019, a period comprising the pre-electoral phase, the electoral campaign that had its voting day on October 27, 2019, and the post-electoral stage. All analysis units were extracted directly from the RedCheq website and coded following a codebook created by the research team with 19 variables delimited in four blocks: descriptive and control, typology and format of disinformation, verification tools, and profile of the verified actor.



Variable	K's alpha	Number of encoders
Descriptive and control variables	.756 < k < 1	3
Typology, formats, and channels	.667 < k < .931	2
Tools	.84 < k < 1	3
Political actors	.793 < k < .83	2

**Table 1. Inter-coder consistency**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

1. Control and identification variables. Each unit of analysis was identified according to its relationship with the electoral context, date of publication, topic, place of impact, and geographic scope.
2. Content variables. The rating category, the type of information verified, the format, and the propagation channel were coded.
3. Variable on verification tools. Given the growing production of misinforming content and the complexity of qualifying it, we identified the reference in the verification news of some of the tools most used by encoders to provide evidence and justify the verdict; among them, Google, Yandex, TinEye, Fotoforensics, Waybackmachine, and Invid.
4. Variables on the political actor checked. Data were collected from the checks that analyzed contents attributed to political leaders considering their political responsibility, their gender, and the party to which they are attached.

Before conforming the final version of the codebook, encoders were trained (two for some questions and three for others) to ensure adequate reliability in the process of collecting and interpreting the analysis categories. Subsequently, a pretest was conducted to measure inter-coder reliability on 15% of the randomly selected sample (n=20) with Krippendorff's alpha coefficient.

This states that if the  $\alpha$  value is  $>.8$  it is considered good inter-coder reliability; if  $.667 < \alpha < .8$  the results are considered suitable for tentative conclusions. Lower  $\alpha$  values are considered inappropriate. The obtained values, suitable, are shown in table 1.

The data analysis process used univariate and bivariate frequency analysis and statistical analysis techniques (correlations and comparison of T-test and U-test means) for which the distribution of the data series was accounted for by means of the Shapiro Wilks W test.

## RESULTS

### RedCheq’s coverage and scope

We analyzed 134 verifications published between April 10 and November 18, 2019 by RedCheq, the national network of fact-checking journalists with a regional focus. 95.5% of the fact-checks were directly related to the electoral campaign and, therefore, aligned with RedCheq’s mission to combat the proliferation of false and misleading information, monitor public discourse, and the malicious use of information during the Colombian regional elections. The thematic agenda of the fact-checks was dominated by generic electoral issues (39.55%), such as disclosure of opinion polls or surveys, information on electoral alliances, and endorsements of political candidates. In second place, verifications related to the economy and infrastructure (19.40%), with content on taxes, mobility policies, or infrastructure development. In third place were the checks on justice, events, and public safety (13.43%), which group information related to candidates with judicial processes or disqualifications, homicides, drugs, and immigration. Contents on education (6.72%), peace process (5.97%), corruption (5.97%), and environment (5.97%) had less presence.

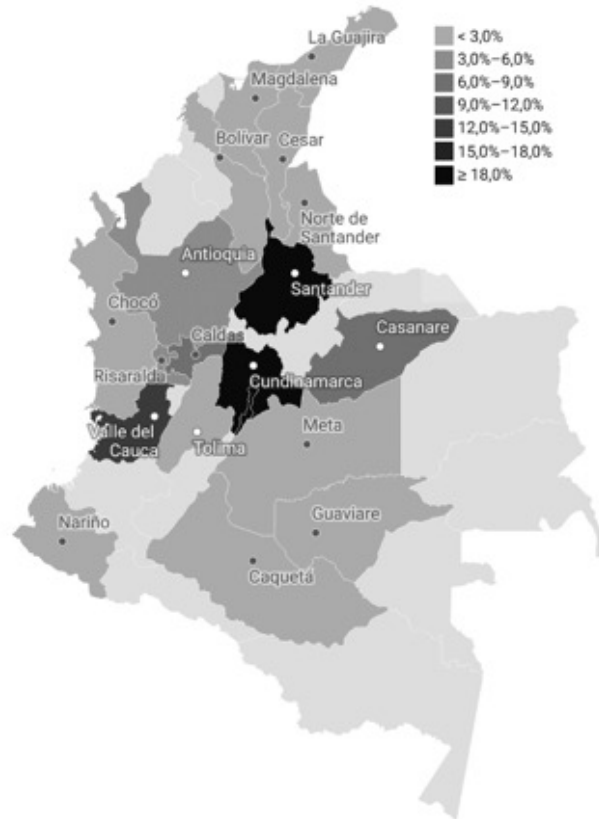


Figure 1. Regional coverage of verifications in Colombia (by department)

Source: Own elaboration.

Variable	Verifications	Demographics	GDP
Verifications	1	.45**	.53**
Demographics		1	.89**
GDP			1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral).

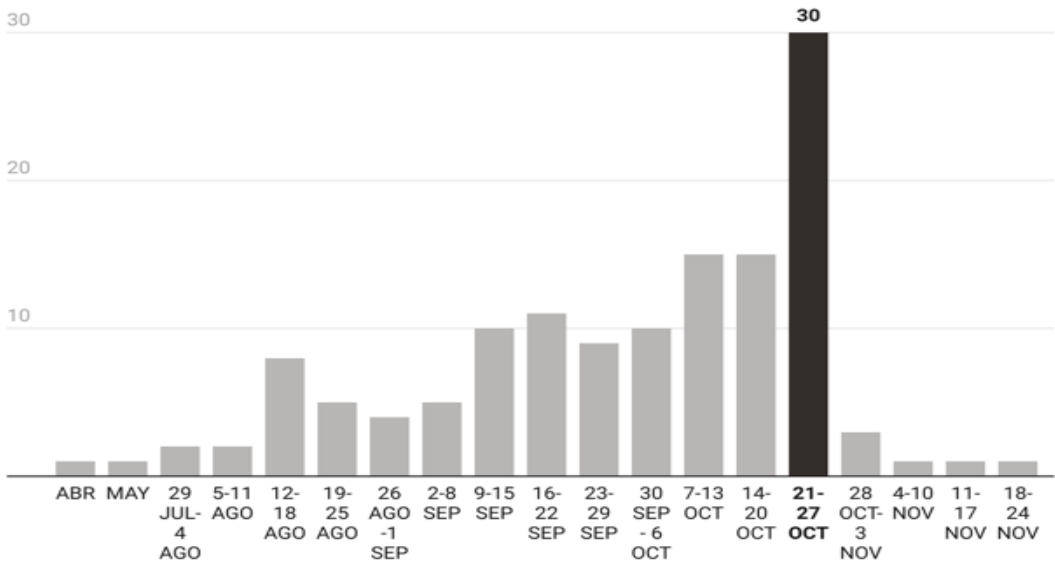
**Table 2. Spearman's Rho correlations**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

Within the framework of RedCheq's regional work, the majority of its journalistic production coverage was local/municipal (72.39%), followed by departmental impact (21.64%), contents with national scope (5.22%), and international scope (0.75%). In terms of geographic distribution, RedCheq produced verifications for the five regions of Colombia; the Andean region was the area that received the most attention from RedCheq verifiers, with 67.46% of the contents. In second place comes the Pacific region, with 15.87%, followed by the Orinoco region (8.73%), the Caribbean region (3.97%), and the Amazon region (3.97%). Considering Colombia's political division, which consists of 32 departments, RedCheq verified content that directly impacted 18 of them. The departments that received most attention were Cundinamarca (including Bogota D. C.) (22.39%), Santander (18.66%), and Valle del Cauca (13.43%). In a second group of departments are Caldas (8.96%), Casanare (6.72%), Risaralda (4.48%), and Antioquia (4.48%). A total of 5.97% of the contents were catalogued as Colombia, because they had repercussions throughout the country or because the place of impact was not expressly mentioned.

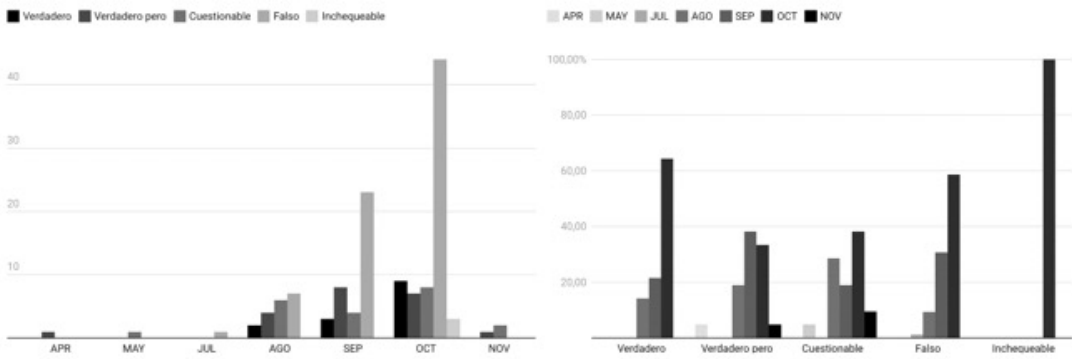
Fact-checking information coverage ( $W\text{-stat}=.606; p<.001$ , where  $W$  indicates the type of data distribution) had an implementation significantly correlated with the economic weight ( $W\text{-stats}=.498; p<.001$ ) ( $\rho=.53$ ), and with the population distribution ( $W\text{-stats}=.607; p<.001$ ) ( $\rho=.45$ ) recorded by DANE (2019a, 2019c), so that there were more verifications in those regions with greater contribution to GDP and with greater population weight, respectively.

The journalistic production rated 87.31% of the contents as partially or totally inaccurate. RedCheq adopted *Colombiacheck's* rating scale in which hoaxes reached 55.97% of the verified content, followed by questionable content (15.67%), and true but (15.67%). True contents were 10.45% and the remaining 2.24% was evaluated as unverifiable.



**Figure 2. Number of verifications in the period analyzed**

Source: Own elaboration.



**Figure 3. Ratings of the verifications in absolute frequencies (left) and relative frequencies (right)**

Source: Own elaboration.

The production of fact-checks increased as the regional elections approached. Particularly noteworthy was the week of the elections (October 21-27), when RedCheq reached its peak of verifications with 30 fact-checks published. This positive trend up to election day can be seen both when grouping production by month and by week (figure 2). Of the 30 checks performed, 76.67% were deemed as false. Among the debunks of the last week, published in RedCheq (<https://redcheq.com.co/>), we found information around false polls (“Encuesta de CNC en la que lidera Miguel Uribe es falsa” (23/10/2019); “Encuesta en la que gana Hollman Morris es falsa” (27/10/2019)), false information about candidates “Claudia López

no ha renunciado a su candidatura a la alcaldía de Bucaramanga” (22/10/2019); “Capturas de pantalla de la conversación entre Oscar Barreto y José Barreto no son verdaderas” (24/10/2019); “Héctor Rangel no sufre de ‘leve retraso mental’” (25/10/2019)), disinformation attributed to public institutions (“Procuraduría no trizó que estaría en Villavicencio formulando cargos contra Alexander Baquero” (24/10/2019); “Los montajes de decisiones del CNE que se difunden en redes” (26/10/2019); “Es falso que Policía haya decomisado 80 millones de pesos junto con publicidad de Jorge Iván Ospina” (27/10/2019)) and media impersonations (“Vanguardia no ha publicado que el candidato Jaime Andrés Beltrán impondrá impuestos a iglesias católicas” (25/10/2019); “Revista Semana no informó sobre supuestos apoyos del narcotráfico a Carlos Maya” (27/10/2019); “El Tiempo no ha publicado que Carlos Caicedo no podrá participar en las elecciones por una inhabilidad” (27/10/2019)).

It is also observed that, as the elections approached, the contents classified as false and true increased both in absolute and relative numbers (figure 3).

All RedCheq verifications included a textual check indicating the rating category defined by *Colombiacheck* (true, true but, questionable, false, or unverifiable). It is observed that the checks were shorter when the (in)accuracy of the totality was confirmed (True:  $M=567.29$ ;  $SD=297.84$ ;  $W=.83$ ;  $p=.012$ ; False:  $M=532.01$ ;  $SD=262.10$ ;  $W=.85$ ;  $p<.001$ ), than when inaccuracy was rated to some degree (True but:  $M=904.81$ ;  $SD=517.16$ ;  $W=.72$ ;  $p<.001$ ; Questionable:  $M=856.86$ ;  $SD=310.70$ ;  $W=.92$ ;  $p=.079$ ). The contents that the fact-checkers concluded were unverifiable ( $n=3$ ) were the most extensive ( $M=1125.33$ ;  $SD=244.73$ ;  $W=.78$ ;  $p=.082$ ). We note that the differences in the mean values of the length of the checks are statistically significant and show the need to include more explanations and evidence when only part of the content is rated as (in)accurate. The clustering of the categories true but and questionable (U-test:  $p=.61$ ,  $\alpha=.05$ ) with non-parametric distribution ( $W\text{-stat}=.79$ ;  $p<.001$ ) compared to those rated in their entirety as true or false (U-test  $p=.80$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ) and non-parametric distribution ( $W\text{-stat}=.85$ ;  $p<.001$ ) offers statistical significance in the extent of the checks between those classified in their entirety as accurate or inaccurate with respect to those that are partially accurate (U-test  $p<.001$ ,  $\alpha=.05$ ).

### Formats and distribution channels

In Colombia, as occurs in the Latin American context, social networks and WhatsApp are commonly used as sources of information on political issues (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2018). Social networks (Twitter and Facebook) were the main channel from where the community of regional journalists identified the contents to be verified as the dissemination channel (55.97% of

the verified contents). This was followed by traditional media (19.40%), digital media, which integrate the web versions of traditional media (9.70%), and instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp (5.97%). The Other category accounted for 8.96%.

Regarding the type of information verified, RedCheq emphasized the scrutiny of political discourse, as statements were the most verified type of information (33.58%), followed by the publication of images or pictures (28.36%), textual publications (26.87%), texts published by media or web portals (6.72%), videos (3.73%), and other content (0.75%).

As for the format of the content verified, short statements or verbatim quotes accounted for 41.79%, followed by verification of documents (23.13%), and edited images or videos (23.13%). Non-edited images and videos accounted for 9.70% and Others, for 2.24%.

Both the verifications of edited and unedited images and videos had their dissemination channel in social networks. This was the channel identified for 92.31% of the Unedited images and videos and for 90.32% of the Edited images and videos. On the other hand, short statements or textual quotes were located either from threads on social networks (39.29%) or from appearances in traditional media (44.64%), mainly. The documents were spread both in social networks (35.48%) and digital media (32.26%), although a relevant percentage (19.25%) is included in the Other category, e.g., when it comes to the analysis of government programs, but without indicating where they were identified, or with electoral proposals without specifying the origin.

### **Complexity and tool use**

From the verifications textual analysis, it is observed that specific verification tools (advanced searches or reverse image of Google, TinEye, Invid, Fotoforensics, Yandex, Waybackmachine) were not explicitly incorporated in the verification news. Out of the total sample, 85.82% of the checks did not allude to these. 11.94% of the checks used at least one and 2.24% used two.

When the fact-checker resorted to these tools, in 72.73% of the cases it was to verify and conclude whether an image or video was edited (59.09%) or not edited (13.64%); in 18.18% to verify documents and in 9.09% to verify statements.

### **Fact-checking as an unbiased journalistic practice**

Political actors accounted for 43.28% of the actors checked. Within this category, 65.52% correspond to local candidates, followed by departmental candidates (10.45%), and congressmen and senators (10.45%). Mayors (2016-2019) represented 5.17% and governors (2016-2019), 1.72%. Focused on the verifications made to

politicians, hoaxes do not predominate. 15.25% were verified as true and 30.51% as true but. On the other hand, 23.73% were evaluated as false and 25.42%, as questionable. 5.08% were unverifiable.

The breakdown, considering the party affiliation of the political actors, reveals that 37.29% of the verifications on political actors was associated with independent movements or electoral coalitions between several parties; 20.34%, with politicians of the Partido Alianza Verde; 10.17%, with politicians from the Centro Democrático; 8.47%, with representatives of Colombia Humana; 5.08%, with politicians from the Partido Conservador, Partido Liberal, and Polo Democrático; 3.39%, with politicians from the MAIS party and the Partido de la U, and 1.69%, with Cambio Radical.

Most of the verifications of political actors were statements or quotes (79.66%), followed by documents (electoral programs, for example) with 10.17%; unedited images and videos, 8.47%, and edited images and videos, 1.69%.

### Fact-check analysis

Related to the objectivist postulate about the impartiality of verification journalism (Lim, 2018), the question of purported neutrality is framed as a position of impartiality, equidistance, or balancing by assuming that all candidates have the same impact on public opinion (Amazeen, 2015; Uscinski & Butler, 2013; Uscinski, 2015), or that their speeches have similar proportions of verifiable facts.

From this standpoint, it is pertinent to statistically analyze the qualifications according to the parties' ideological affiliations. RedCheq followed the *Colombiacheck* methodology, which establishes a scale with five evaluations that we transformed into a metric scale from 0 to 3: false (=0), questionable (=1), true but (=2), true (=3). The category unverifiable (n=3) was excluded from this analysis due to the intrinsic epistemological doubt of publishing a check whose conclusion is that it is impossible to verify (unverifiable).

The average (n=131) is equal to 0.80. If we analyze the rating evaluation according to political (n=56) and institutional (n=1) actors (n=57; M=1.42; SD=1.05; W-stat=.87;  $p<.001$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ) and other types of actors (n=74; M=.32; SD=.79; W-stat=.46;  $p<.001$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ), the difference is statistically significant (U-test  $p<.001$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ). This allows us to affirm that in the Colombian regional elections, the contents disseminated by users or anomic accounts in networks, or by public actors, are deemed as false or more inaccurate in a higher proportion than when such contents are propagated by politicians or institutions.

Political party	Mean	Fact-checks	Ideology
Cambio Radical	2	1	Right
Partido MAIS	1.5	2	Left
Movimientos independientes	1.53	19	Miscellaneous
Centro Democrático	1.67	6	Right
Colombia Humana	0.40	5	Left
Partido Conservador	0.67	3	Right
Partido de la U	1	2	Right
Partido Liberal	0.67	3	Center
Partido Alianza Verde	1.67	12	Center
Polo Democrático	2	3	Left
Izquierda	1.1	10	
Centro	1.47	15	
Derecha	1.33	12	
Miscelánea	1.53	19	
Total de la muestra	1.39	56	

**Table 3. Analysis of qualification and party affiliation**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

The data presented in table 3 shows the fragmentation of the Colombian party system, as well as the presence of a high number of outsiders who emerge in politics grouping in their candidacy different independent political movements in a context of high political personalization and weak party system (Duque-Daza, 2019). The Colombian party system is weakly rooted due to the loss of citizen trust, corruption, and the perceived lack of representation by citizens.

The political parties that have sprung up are reinforced from ethnic, religious, or community identities (Duque-Daza, 2014). Remarkable variations are observed when analyzing the qualifications according to party affiliation. The two traditional parties of the Colombian political system (Partido Liberal and Partido Conservador) had qualification averages ( $M=0.67$ ) close to very inaccurate contents; besides, we observed differences between the Centro Democrático ( $M=1.67$ ) or the Partido Alianza Verde ( $M=1.67$ ), and the Colombia Humana party ( $M=0.40$ ). In the subsequent analysis, we preferred to group the different political parties in the traditional scheme of ideological ascription to increase the sample sizes.



Ideology	Center	Right	Miscellaneous
Left	.413 (-.835)ii	.635 (-.482)ii .629i	.290 (-1.079)ii .293i
Center		.757 (.312)ii .762i	.865 (-.171)ii .843i
Right			.642i

Notes: i Man-Whitney test. ii Student's t-test for equal variances. In parentheses the t-statistic.

**Table 4. Comparison of means between ideological ascriptions**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

Considering the distribution of the data according to ideological affiliation (right:  $W\text{-stat}=.86$ ;  $p=.048$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ; center:  $W\text{-stat}=.89$ ;  $p=.064$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ; left:  $W\text{-stat}=.86$ ;  $p=.067$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ; miscellaneous:  $W\text{-stat}=.89$ ;  $p=.034$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ) we proceeded to statistically determine whether there were significant differences in the evaluation of the ratings according to ideological affiliation. Given that we worked with parametric and non-parametric data, the statistical techniques enabled for each distribution were applied: t-Student's t-test for equality of variances given that Levenep's F-test showed values of  $.588 < p < .917$ , and the Mann-Whitney test (U-test).

When comparing a parametric and a non-parametric distribution, we applied both procedures. By comparing means, we concluded that there were no significant differences in the qualifications according to ideological affiliation, as shown in the results of table 4.

Subsequently, we compared whether there were differences in the qualifications according to gender (male or female) or political responsibility, i.e., whether they held public office or not, as was the case of the candidates. There were no differences in qualifications regarding gender (t-test  $p=.705$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ; U-test  $p=.667$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ) or political responsibility (U-test  $p=.885$ ;  $\alpha=.05$ ).

## Discussion

As a collaborative media network headed by *Colombiacheck*, RedCheq adopted a regional approach to cover territorial elections in Colombia, a distinctive feature considering that regional news verification is a minority. If in the international context we see a progressive disappearance of local newspapers and their effects on communities (Mathews, 2020), in Colombia the context is configured by the zones of silence (Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa, 2019): often peripheral populations, which do not have local media, such as the Orinoco and the Amazon, geographic areas where RedCheq released less verified news coverage.

In a scenario of limited independence of the Colombian local press (Valencia-Nieto et al., 2019), the consumption of information through alternative media and social networks becomes a real option. This may explain why most of the verified content comes from these channels, which are a source of disinformation. Therefore, a greater involvement of Facebook or Twitter, which are not mere interfaces but political actors (Helberger, 2020), is essential, as they interfere in the formation of political opinions and influence the voters' electoral behavior.

On the other hand, this research allows us to expand studies on verification journalism that assess the compliance with journalistic principles that champion this journalistic practice to select and verify content (Amazeen, 2015; Marietta et al., 2015; Lim, 2018; Bernhard, 2021). This paper studies the fact-checker's commitment to nonpartisanship and neutrality, a relevant epistemological component still little explored from the academy despite its relevance in the interest of providing institutionalism and legitimacy to this journalistic practice in the face of statements that accuse it of following ideological agendas. The analysis allows affirming that RedCheq complied with the commitment of impartiality or nonpartisanship as no significant differences were found in the evaluation of the qualifications according to the political actors' ideologies. However, one of the study limitations lies in the reduced sample of verifications by political party given the existing fragmentation, which made it necessary to carry it out by ideology.

To consolidate the process, there must be a commitment to the journalistic principles of nonpartisanship, transparency, and methodological rigor. One of the challenges of fact-checking is that credibility is linked to the level of perceived independence and nonpartisanship of the journalistic work and, therefore, it is essential to apply a methodologically rigorous process (Amazeen, 2019). Humprecht (2020) found that the methodological rigor and transparency of the IFCN adherent media was higher than in those that were not part of the network.

Consequently, fact-checking journalism has to pay attention to audience perception. This challenge is important, since that, in the United States, for example, this practice is perceived to be skewed towards liberal discourses and news consumption patterns in liberal/democratic media (Robertson et al., 2020); likewise, less positive attitudes were found on the part of conservatives in both the United States and European countries (Lyons et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to analyze a collaborative exercise of verification journalism in Colombia to learn about the formats, typologies, and authors who disseminate disinformation during a regional electoral process, as well as the fact-checking work and its commitment to impartiality. First, RedCheq complied with the verifications' regional coverage, although it was lower in those geographic regions that require more local information because they are in the periphery. Secondly, there is a balance between checking public statements and viral content in social networks. The dissemination of disinformation in multimedia format (video, photo, or audio) requires reinforcing and training the community of journalists in new skills and tools that serve as evidence of verifications. The results show that when only part of the content is validated or refuted, the length of the verification is significantly greater, which evidences the need to incorporate reasoned explanations, testimonies from expert sources, and data to justify the qualification within the framework of discursive logics. With regard to the topics, the contents to confuse in procedural aspects about elections and in matters of justice and economy stand out.

Finally, this research provides empirical evidence on the commitment to ideological impartiality of verification journalism. The results show that RedCheq's evaluations were balanced across all ideological affiliations. Future lines of research should comprehensively analyze the processes related to the selection of content, sources, qualifications, and consistency between media, in order to provide greater clarity on the process of news production, key to its legitimization within the media ecology.

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