SPANISH-SPEAKING FACT-CHECKERS AROUND THE WORLD: PROFILES, SIMILARITIES, AND DIFFERENCES AMONG FACT CHECKING PROFESSIONALS

EL *FACT-CHECKER* EN ESPAÑOL ALREDEDOR DEL MUNDO: PERFIL, SIMILITUDES Y DIFERENCIAS ENTRE VERIFICADORES HISPANOHABLANTES

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ABSTRACT:

Professional fact-checkers are becoming essential for the control of information and disinformation flows. However, their profile has been scarcely studied both internationally and particularly, in the Spanish-speaking context. Fact-checking is now a global journalism movement, after being consolidated in Anglo-Saxon countries, and has become a key for understanding current mediated informative and communicative

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processes that take place in democracies around the world. Spanish-speaking fact-checking is growing exponentially in recent years, with an increase of more than 500% in the number of active platforms since 2018. Studying the profile of Spanish-speaking fact-checkers is crucial to understand the phenomenon in a context of constant convergence such as the Hispanic American. A survey (n=52) was conducted among Spanish-speaking fact-checkers to analyze their perception of fact-checking's link to journalism, the level of collaboration among platforms, as well as similitudes and differences between Spanish and Latin American professionals. After that, results are enriched through 13 in-depth interviews with fact-checking professionals and academic experts.

KEYWORDS: Fact-checking – fact-checker – journalism – platforms – disinformation – innovation – truth – Spain – Latin America

RESUMEN:

El del *fact-checker* es un rol profesional cada vez más relevante en el control de los procesos informativos contemporáneos. Sin embargo, su perfil ha sido poco abordado a nivel internacional, y todavía menos en el contexto hispanohablante. El fact-checking es un fenómeno que se sitúa al centro de los procesos informativos contemporáneos alrededor del mundo, convirtiéndose en un movimiento periodístico global en crecimiento desde su consolidación en el panorama anglosajón. Particularmente, la verificación de informaciones en español está viviendo un crecimiento exponencial en los últimos años con un aumento de más del 500% del número de plataformas desde 2018. Conocer el perfil de quienes desarrollan la verificación de informaciones en países de habla hispana es esencial para estudiar en profundidad el fenómeno dentro de un contexto de convergencia como el hispanoamericano. Para ello, se lleva a cabo una encuesta (n=52) entre verificadores hispanohablantes con el objetivo de conocer su percepción sobre la vinculación de esta actividad con el periodismo, así como el grado de colaboración que existe entre las distintas iniciativas y las similitudes y diferencias entre los *fact-checkers* de España y América Latina. En un segundo momento, se enriquecen los resultados con la realización de 13 entrevistas en profundidad a profesionales y estudiosos del fenómeno.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Verificación – verificador – periodismo – plataformas – desinformación – innovación – verdad – España – América Latina

O FACT-CHECKER EM ESPANHOL AO REDOR DO MUNDO: PERFIL, SEMELHANÇAS E DIFERENÇAS ENTRE VERIFICADORES DE FALA EM ESPANHOL

RESUMO:

O fact-checker é um papel profissional cada vez mais relevante no controle dos processos de informação contemporâneos. No entanto, seu perfil tem sido pouco abordado internacionalmente, e menos ainda no contexto da língua espanhola. O fact-checking é um fenômeno que está no centro dos processos noticiosos contemporâneos em todo o mundo, tornando-se um movimento jornalístico global crescente desde sua

consolidação no cenário anglo-saxão. Em particular, ao fact-checking em espanhol está experimentando um crescimento exponencial nos últimos anos com um aumento de mais de 500% no número de plataformas desde 2018. Conhecer o perfil de quem realiza a verificação de informações em países de língua espanhola é essencial para estudar em profundidade o fenômeno dentro de um contexto de convergência como o do hispano-americano. Para isto, foi realizado um inquerito (n = 52) a verificadores de língua espanhola para conhecer a sua percepção sobre a ligação desta actividade com o jornalismo, bem como o grau de colaboração existente entre as diferentes iniciativas e as semelhanças e diferenças entre fact-checkers na Espanha e na América Latina. Em um segundo momento, os resultados são enriquecidos pela realização de 13 entrevistas em profundidade com profissionais e estudiosos do fenômeno.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Verificação - verificador - jornalismo - plataformas - desinformação - inovação - verdade - Espanha - América Latina.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the fact-checker has become a key professional in the informative, communicative, and democratic processes that occur in contemporary society. However, research on information verification has mostly focused on the content analysis of hoaxes or fact-checking methodologies and not so much on the role of professionals who are dedicated to checking the veracity of public discourse. In general, fact-checking is an increasingly consolidated practice of checking the veracity of public discourse that, although born in the journalistic framework (Graves and Glaisyer, 2012), platforms of different kinds, from both the media and business sectors, have been implementing. Its journalistic roots have led Bill Adair, professor at Duke University and founder of the PolitiFact platform, to speak of fact-checking as "the most important variant of journalism in the digital age" (Adair, 2019) and the professor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Lucas Graves (2016, p. 2), to refer to fact-checking as "a rare example of a genuinely transnational journalistic movement".

The global crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic had a special impact on the increase in the circulation of disinformation, leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to speak of an "infodemic" and to call different actors to action to promote access to truthful information (WHO, December 11th, 2020). Despite being a global movement, fact-checking had been tackling disinformation from the particularity of local contexts. However, a truly global phenomenon such as the pandemic has favored an interconnection between fact-checkers that knows no borders. As a consequence of the increase in misinformation, during 2020, the number of verification platforms grew exponentially at the international level according to a report by the Reuters Institute (Brennen et al., 2020) and, specifically, it also did so in the Spanish-speaking world (Duke Reporters' Lab, 2020).

As we have been saying, disinformation control actions are developed both by

institutionalized media (Graves and Glaisyer, 2012) and by independent digital platforms or activist initiatives. This has generated a debate around the link between verification practices and traditional journalism. Graves and Cherubini (2016, p. 3) approach fact-checkers distinguishing between two categories: what they call "the editorial model", linked to the media, and the "NGO model", with a more activist vocation.

However, in recent years, more and more social networks and digital companies - such as Twitter, Facebook, Google, or YouTube - have been involved in controlling disinformation flows, thus blurring, in a certain way, the connection between verification practices and traditional journalistic work. This irruption has opened the door to new methodological proposals for informational control and the automation of fact-checking processes (Hassan et al., 2017; Cazalens et al., 2018; Graves, 2018), generating a debate around the opportunity to use artificial intelligence, the high complexity of social information processes, and the subjectivity of social reality. Graves (2018, p. 1) refers to the automation of verification as a way to "seek technological solutions to what is seen as a technological problem", a way to simplify the complexity of the informational reality and put aside the need for subjective filters.

While it is true that the need for skills related to artificial intelligence and digital tools are turning the fact-checking professional into an increasingly specialized profile (Vizoso et al., 2018), we also find that this shift towards automation serves to vindicate the relevance of human fact-checkers, capable of working to control disinformation in a democratic reality that frequently, as Uscinski (2015) argues, is not verifiable, or cannot be divided into black and white.

As we have seen, the perspectives that verification professionals have on their work have been little addressed by the academic literature at the international level (IFCN, 2016; Graves and Cherubini, 2016; Ginsberg and Gori, 2021), and even to a lesser extent in the Spanish-speaking context (Moreno Gil et al., 2021). Despite its journalistic nature, Cazalens et al. (2018, p. 566) distinguish fact-checking from the traditional processes of journalism by speaking of "a priori verification of information" - that carried out by journalists to control the veracity of their own information before publishing them - and of "a posteriori verification of information", or fact-checking per se, which aims to control the veracity of others' statements and information.

Indeed, the "a priori fact-checking" that Cazalens et al. (2018) speak out, is an essential practice of journalism since its birth (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007; Ciampaglia et al., 2015), which explains why it has been precisely in the journalistic sphere in which most of the a posteriori fact-checking initiatives have arisen and developed (Graves and Glaisyer, 2012). However, the distinction of Cazalens et al. (2018) seems relevant to us to understand how, despite its close relationship with journalism, fact-checking is a clearly differentiated phenomenon that, moreover, is spreading beyond the limits of the media and the journalistic platforms.

A posteriori fact-checking goes beyond traditional journalism and appears where the verification methods of the media cannot cope with over-information (Ciampaglia

et al., 2015). In this ecosystem of information overabundance, verification is considered "the best tool" to counteract the power of fake news (Amorós, 2018, p. 154), and avoid the risk that its uncontrolled dissemination poses for democratic systems (Rose, 2017; Del Fresno, 2018). Along these lines, we understand that fake news is not only a media problem but, as indicated by Persily (2017), also a social phenomenon, so that the journalistic response to misinformation would not be exclusively a response to a problem of lack of credibility of media institutions (Algan et al., 2017, Persily, 2017), but rather a democratic problem, in essence (Rose, 2017; Del Fresno, 2018).

Disinformation no longer has exclusive media and political consequences but also consequences for public health, as has been verified through the infodemic that the WHO spoke about. The BBC made "*'Hundreds dead' because of COVID-19 misinformation*", the headline in an article that reflected on the impact of fake news that circulated during the first months of the pandemic (Coleman, 2020); an issue also addressed by science journals such as *Scientific American*, which denounced: "COVID misinformation is killing people" (Scientific American, October 11th, 2020). Disinformation about health, science, and vaccinations has been considered a risk for citizens and public health, as stated in a report coordinated by Professor Ramón Salaverría for the Ministry of Science of Spain (Multidisciplinary Working Group, February 20th, 2021).

In any case, the response to misinformation must be complex, as corresponds to a polyhedral (Guallar et al., 2020) and multifactorial phenomenon. Therefore, this response must come from the main news and media actors, but also social networks and other technology companies (Persily, 2017; Ungría, 2018). Developing it requires journalistic specialization (Graves and Glaisyer, 2012; Uscinski and Butler, 2013), but also new methodologies and tools adaptable to the demands of an increasingly complex information system.

Knowing the profile of the fact-checking professional seems to us an essential step in the process of approaching a complex practice in development and that is marking the evolution of the information flows. Although research on journalism and new media has extensively studied the adaptation of the journalistic role to new informational demands, the profile of the fact-checker —which, as we have seen, differs from the traditional journalistic role— has been little analyzed so far and continues to be poorly defined. Graves and Cherubini (2016) argue that the role of the fact-checker goes beyond journalistic practice by essentially talking about three profiles of fact-checkers: journalists, activists, and experts. Next, we propose an evaluation of the development situation of Spanish-speaking fact-checking from the perspective of its professionals.

Spanish-speaking fact-checking, developed in Spanish-speaking countries, is following the international pattern of exponential growth. The number of active Spanish-speaking platforms registered at the time of preparing this study (as of April 1st, 2021), is 46, which represents an increase of 557% compared to the 7 platforms registered in 2018 (Palau-Sampio, 2018), an increase of 142% compared to the 19 registered in 2019 (Vizoso and Vázquez-Herrero, 2019), and an 18% growth compared

to the census carried out in the framework of this research in June 2020, when 39 active initiatives were counted.

The research carried out on Spanish-speaking fact-checking (Palau-Sampio, 2018; Vizoso and Vázquez-Herrero, 2019) speaks of a particular ecosystem, which faces different challenges than those of Anglo-Saxon verification. Taking into account the informational, social, and political context is relevant for the study of fact-checking, especially in the Hispanic context, as stated by Moreno-Gil et al. (2021). Precisely, this context distances fact-checking in these countries from the American model that has traditionally been used to understand this phenomenon.

We consider it necessary to attend to different variables in the development of verification practices, considering language as a fundamental link. In a global world, disinformation knows no borders and the common language is a link between the different Spanish-speaking countries and their verification platforms. Thus, we understand the development of platforms such as *Latam Chequea*, which, since 2020, joins the efforts of initiatives from different Spanish-speaking countries in the fight against misinformation. As stated by Graves and Cherubini (2016), the context greatly conditions the ways of acting in the face of misinformation. This is why an analysis of the implementation of fact-checking in different scenarios is essential, overcoming the Anglo-Saxon perspective that, traditionally, has dominated research on information verification.

2. OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this work is to examine the figure of the fact-checker in the Spanish-speaking environment. From a more concrete perspective, the specific objectives are:

1. SO1: outline the features of the demographic and professional profile of the Spanish-speaking fact-checker
2. SO2: know their vision on the matter
3. SO3: examine the structure and collaboration networks that exist between the different fact-checkers, and
4. SO4: analyze what issues they have in common and what differentiates them when carrying out their work.

In line with these specific objectives, we pose the following 4 research questions, taking into account the exploratory nature of this work:

1. RQ1: What is the profile of fact-checking professionals in Spanish-speaking countries?
2. RQ2: What vision do Spanish-speaking fact-checkers have on the phenomenon?
3. RQ3: What level of collaboration exists between Spanish-speaking fact-checkers?
4. RQ4: What are the similarities and differences between Spanish and Latin

American professionals in the development of their work?

3. METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, we developed a mixed methodology that combined the quantitative technique of the survey with the qualitative technique of the in-depth interview.

3.1. Survey

First, we surveyed fact-checking professionals who work in Spanish. To do this, we prepared a census of active verification initiatives in Spanish from the existing bibliography (Palau Sampio, 2018; Vizoso and Vázquez-Herrero, 2019) and the databases of Duke Reporters' Lab (2021) and Latam Chequea (2021).

At the time we conducted the census (April 1st, 2021), the number of active fact-checking platforms in Spanish was 46: 41 of them were located in Latin America, 4 in Spain, and 1 –AFP Factual– had a multinational character.

We sent the questionnaire to all the registered platforms: where possible, we sent it individually to the workers of each of the platforms. When it was not possible to access their email addresses, we sent the questionnaire by email to each agency. After 3 reminder emails, we obtained a response from a total of 52 professionals, which implies a representation of 47% of the total of registered platforms (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Breakdown of responses received to the survey by platform and country*

Platform name	Country	Number of responses received
Maldita.es	Spain	7
Chequeado	Argentina	5
Newtral	Spain	5
ColombiaCheck	Colombia	4
Ecuador Chequea	Ecuador	4
Salud con Lupa	Peru	4
Fáctica (Agencia Ocote)	Guatemala	3
Chequea Bolivia	Bolivia	3
Bolivia Verifica	Bolivia	2
El Sabueso	Mexico	2
UyCheck	Uruguay	2
La Silla Vacía	Colombia	2
Mala Espina	Chile	1
PolétikaRD	Dominican Republic	1
Efecto Coyuco	Venezuela	1
DobleCheck	Peru	1
Fake News Report	Chile	1
Chequeando	Chile	1

De Facto (El Toque)	Cuba	1
EFE Verifica	Spain	1
Fast Check CL	Chile	1

Source: Self-made

For the design of the questionnaire, we used as a guide the set of posed specific objectives and research questions. Specifically, we designed the questionnaire from the following three blocks:

- In the first block, to answer the research questions RQ1 and RQ4, we introduced identifying questions of a demographic and professional nature (age, gender, country of birth, academic background, fact-checking platform in which you work, and professional role you perform in it).
- In a second block, seeking to answer the research questions RQ3 and RQ4, we included questions related to the professional activity of fact-checkers. Thus, in this block, the questions revolved around the skills necessary for fact-checking, verification techniques, collaboration networks, or the configuration of templates.
- In a third and final block, to answer the research question RQ2, we asked the respondents for their opinion and personal vision on the phenomenon of verification. To do this, we questioned their perception of the raison d'être of fact-checking, the need (or not) to establish collaboration networks, the difficulties encountered in the development of their work, and potential proposals for improvement.

Although most of the questions were closed -including the option "others" to avoid non-coverage errors- we interspersed these questions with other multiple-choice and scaled questions, used to know the degree of agreement with different statements. In designing the questionnaire, we took into account the criteria of clarity, brevity, and neutrality. As it is a self-administered survey, we also took into account the order, ease, and agility of the response.

3.2. In-depth interviews

In parallel, we conducted 13 in-depth interviews with some of the main voices of Spanish-speaking fact-checking[3], both from a professional and an academic

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[1] The 13 interviewees were:
1. Laura Zommer (founder and coordinator of Chequeado, Argentina)
2. Clara Jiménez-Cruz (co-founder of Maldita.es, Spain)
3. Desirée García (head of EFE Verifica, Spain)
4. Eliana Álvarez (co-founder and director of UyCheck, Uruguay, and coordinator of the Verificado initiative)
5. Ramón Salaverría (at that time, Vice Dean of Research at the Faculty of Communication of the Universidad de Navarra, Spain; auditor of the International Fact-Checking Network for Spanish-speaking initiatives and expert in the field)

perspective. To select the professional interviewees, we took into account both their links and their positions of responsibility in the main Spanish-speaking platforms. In the case of academic interviewees, we considered their experience and academic publications related to fact-checking as selection criteria.

We adapted the guide to the two selected profiles: on the one hand, we elaborated a model for the professional interviewees and the other for those of an academic nature. Taking into account the subsequent exploitation of results, we organized both models in equivalent blocks. Specifically:

- Block 1: Profile of the interviewee.
- Block 2 (RQ2): Questions related to disinformation and its impact on contemporary societies.
- Block 3 (RQ3 and RQ4): Questions related to fact-checking, its difficulties, and its opportunities in the Spanish-speaking panorama.
- Block 4 (RQ1 and RQ4): Questions related to the need for specific training in fact-checking professionals.
- Block 5 (RQ1): Questions related to the profile of Spanish-speaking fact-checkers.

4. DISCUSSION

Throughout this section, we will answer the research questions that we posed at the beginning of this work through the data collected through the survey and in-depth interviews. The following table can serve as a guide (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Research questions, general variables, and sources*

Research question	General variable	Source/technique that answers the research question	Section of the discussion in which it is addressed
PI1: What is the profile of fact-checking professionals in Spanish-speaking countries?	Profile of professionals in Spanish-speaking countries	Bibliographic review, survey, and in-depth interviews	4.1
PI2: What vision do	Perception of fact-checking	Survey and in-depth	4.2

6. Myriam Redondo (professor and specialist in fact-checking; author of the book *Verificación digital para periodistas*)
7. Raúl Magallón Rosa (Universidad Carlos III of Madrid, Spain; author of the books *Unfaking News* and *Desinformación y pandemia: la nueva realidad*)
8. Jorge Vázquez Herrero (Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Spain; he studies the phenomenon)
9. María José Ufarte Ruiz (Universidad de Castilla La-Mancha, Spain; she studies the phenomenon),
10. Miguel Carvajal (Universidad Miguel Hernández, Spain)
11. Leonarda García Jiménez (Universidad de Murcia, Spain, and Colorado State University, USA)
12. Luis Miguel Pedrero Esteban (Universidad Nebrija, Spain), and
13. José Luis Rojas Torrijos (Universidad de Sevilla, Spain).

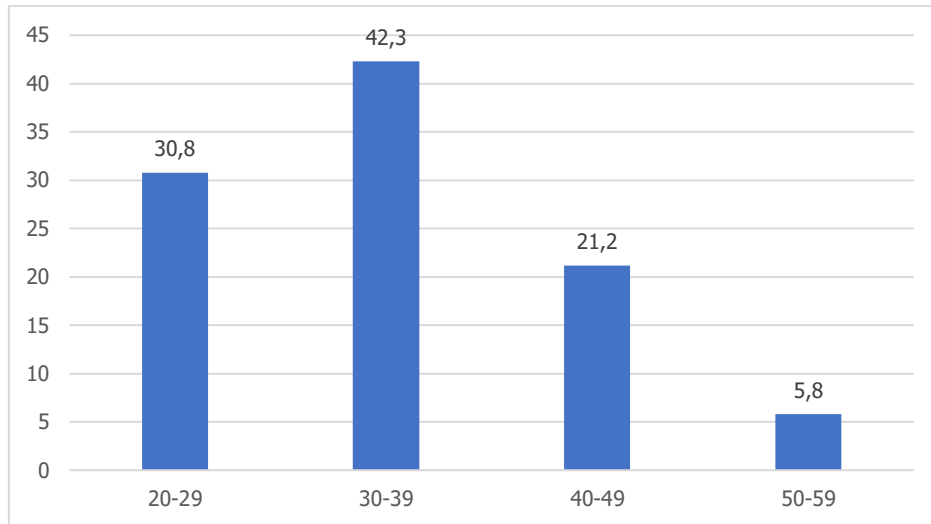| Spanish-speaking fact-checkers have on the phenomenon?	professionals on the verification of information	interviews	
PI3: What level of collaboration exists between Spanish-speaking fact-checkers?	Collaborative initiatives developed between fact-checking platforms in Spanish	Survey and in-depth interviews	4.3
PI4: What are the similarities and differences between Spanish and Latin American professionals in the development of their work?	Similarities and differences in their job performance	Survey and in-depth interviews	4.4 y 4.5

Source: Self-made

4.1. The profile of Spanish-speaking fact-checkers

Taking as a reference the previous bibliography on the subject (Palau Sampio, 2018; Vizoso and Vázquez-Herrero, 2019) and the databases of verification platforms consulted for this research, we have seen that fact-checking in Spanish is a booming phenomenon, as is its global equivalent (Graves, 2016). This is demonstrated by the initiatives collected in our census and the interviews carried out with different professionals. Surveying Spanish-speaking fact-checkers has allowed us to know the profile of the Spanish-speaking fact-checking professional. We present, below, their most outstanding features:

4.1.1. Demographic profile of Spanish-speaking fact-checkers

Regarding the age of the fact-checkers, we appreciate that the professionals are eminently young. The majority (73.1% of the total respondents) are under 40 years of age (see Chart 1), with the majority (42.3% of the total) being the group between 30 and 39 years old. Indeed, this young profile fits in with the statements of the interviewees about fact-checking as a new professional outlet for journalism, a phenomenon on the rise linked to social networks, digital journalism, and new technologies.

Chart 1: *Age of Spanish-speaking fact-checkers (of the total % of the sample)*
Source: Self-made

Regarding gender, we see that there is an equitable distribution: 53.8% of those surveyed are men and 46.2% are women. Regarding the country of birth, we appreciate that fact-checking is a fairly widespread phenomenon in Spanish-speaking countries; that is, its development is not limited to a few countries: professionals from 19 of the 21 Spanish-speaking countries (90.5%) are represented in the sample.

We have also been interested in the training and specialization of fact-checking professionals. Understanding fact-checking as a journalistic phenomenon (Graves, 2016), we consider it relevant to know the relationship of those who are professionally engaged in fact-checking with the academic programs of journalistic and communicative training.

In this way, regarding academic training, we can see that the fact-checker is a qualified profile in the Hispanic context: all respondents indicate that they have higher degrees. Looking particularly at the specialization in fact-checking, we see that 48.1% of the total respondents, state that they have also received some type of specific training in this regard.
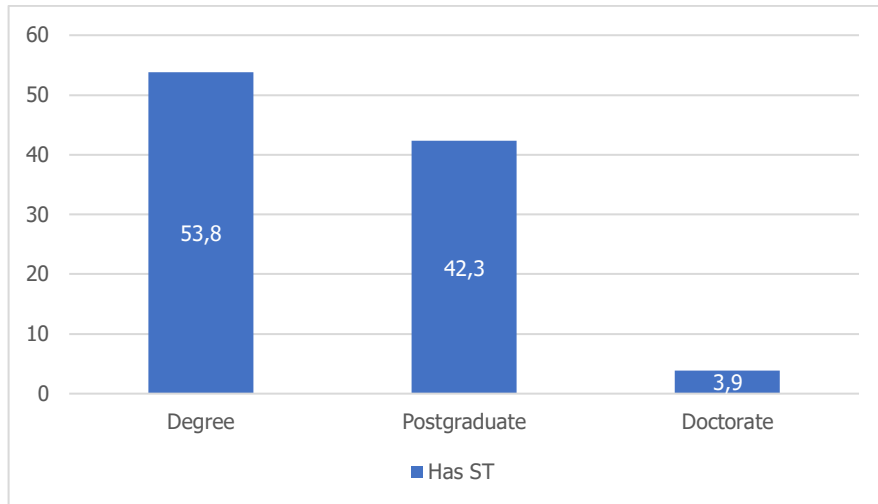
Chart 2: *Academic training of fact-checkers (of the total % of the sample)*
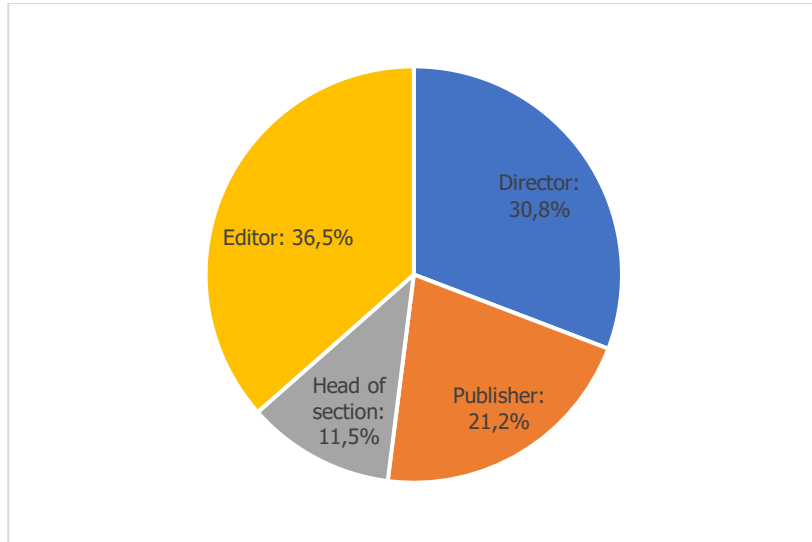**Source:** Self-made

On the other hand, if we look at thematic specialization, we appreciate that 40.4% of those surveyed state that they are not specialized in a specific subject, while 21.2% indicate that they are specialized in more than one subject. This high percentage shows us the interdisciplinary and multi-thematic nature of fact-checking, despite its indispensable link with political communication, political journalism, and the verification of public discourse (Uscinski and Butler, 2013; Luengo and García-Marín, 2020). Precisely, 23.1% of those surveyed indicate that they are specialized in these topics. Other minority specializations are those related to gender, economy, migration, health and environment, or communication issues.
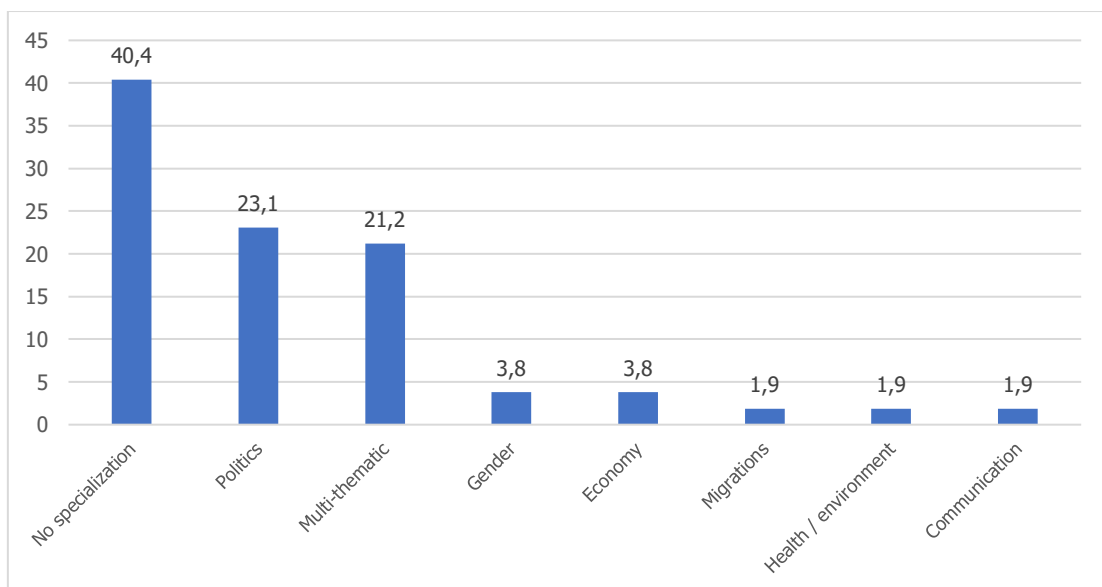
Chart 3: *Type of thematic specialization of the fact-checkers (of the total % of the sample)*
Source: Self-made

## 4.1.2. Professional profile of Spanish-speaking fact-checkers

The results of the survey revealed that 30.8% are directors or founders of the platforms; 21.2%, publishers; 11.5%, section heads, and 36.5%, editors.

Chart 4: *Professional category of the respondents (of the total % of the sample)*
Source: Self-made

The high rate of directors compared to other professional categories could be explained by the small size of the workforce that most Spanish-speaking fact-checkers have in Latin America, mentioned as a characteristic element of Latin American fact-checking by the founder of Chequeado, Laura Zommer. In this sense, we see that 44% of Spanish-speaking fact-checkers work on platforms with fewer than 6 workers. 25% do so on medium-size platforms (between 7 and 15 workers); 19% on medium-large platforms (between 15 and 30), and just 12% on large platforms (more than 30).
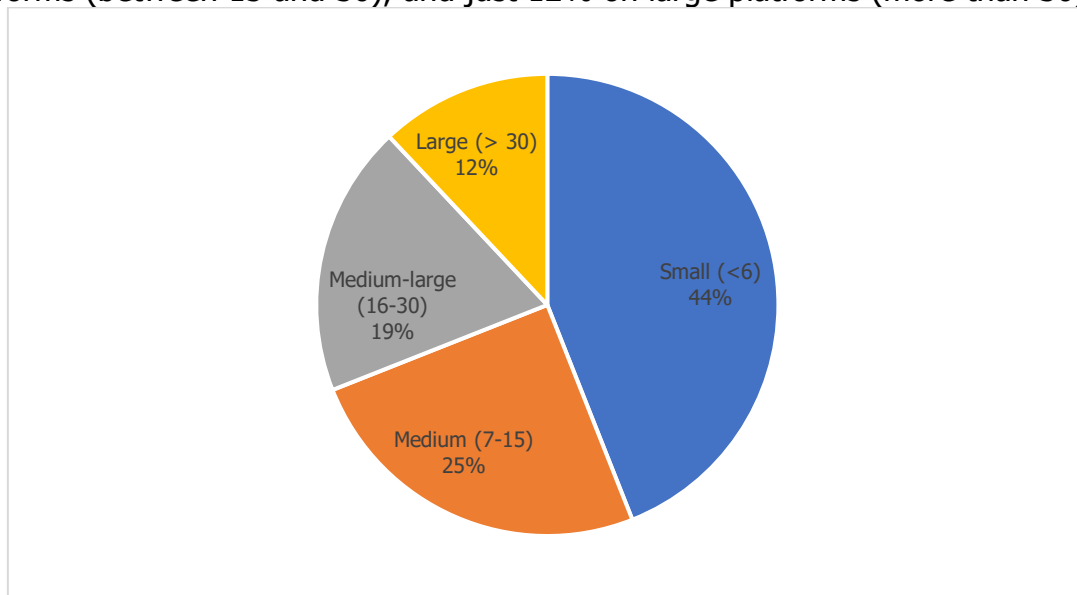
Chart 5: *Size of Spanish-speaking fact-checking platforms according to their number of workers*
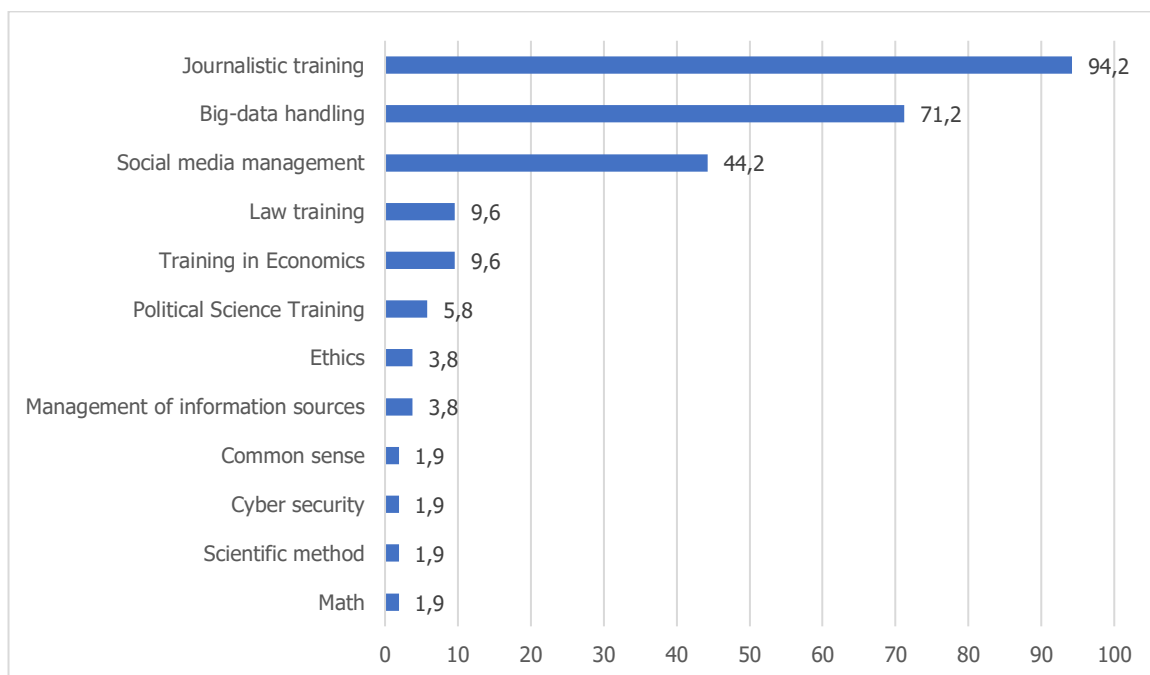**Source:** Self-made

4.2. Vision on fact-checking of Spanish-speaking fact-checkers

Regarding the particular vision of fact-checking that Spanish-speaking professionals have, we have analyzed two types of issues: first, those related to the skills necessary to verify; and, secondly, those related to the perception of the extent to which fact-checking is linked to the current social and media context.

4.2.1. Competencies required for fact-checking

For 94.2% of those surveyed, journalism training is the main competence. To a lesser extent, the domain of big data (essential for 71.2% of the sample) and the management of social networks (necessary for 44.2% of those surveyed) are also cited. The data for the entire sample can be seen in the following chart:

Chart 6: *Perception of skills necessary for fact-checking (out of the total % of respondents)*
**Source:** Self-made

In this sense, and as already stated by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) or Amorós García (2019), some of the interviewed professionals also point to the intrinsic link between fact-checking and journalism: "Unquestionably, fact-checkers are journalists, but, above all, that journalists are fact-checkers" (Jiménez-Cruz, 2020); "[Fact-checking] is now closely linked to journalism, but it will be increasingly linked to artificial intelligence" (Redondo, 2020).

Academic experts in fact-checking also point to this link with journalism: "It is a task that has always been done in the history of journalism and is natural to journalistic work" (Carvajal, 2020); "It is something that has always existed, which is called verification and which is a substantial part of what should be understood as one of the obligations of any journalistic medium" (Rojas-Torrijos, 2020).

4.2.2. Linking fact-checking with the current social and media context

Asked about the link between fact-checking and the current social and media ecosystem, the respondents mostly agree with the need for fact-checking to deal with the problems unleashed in the new media communication processes. Respondents consider that fact-checking has positive effects on the quality and veracity of political discourse and information flows. They also declare, in a majority way, that they understand fact-checking as a useful tool in times of crisis.
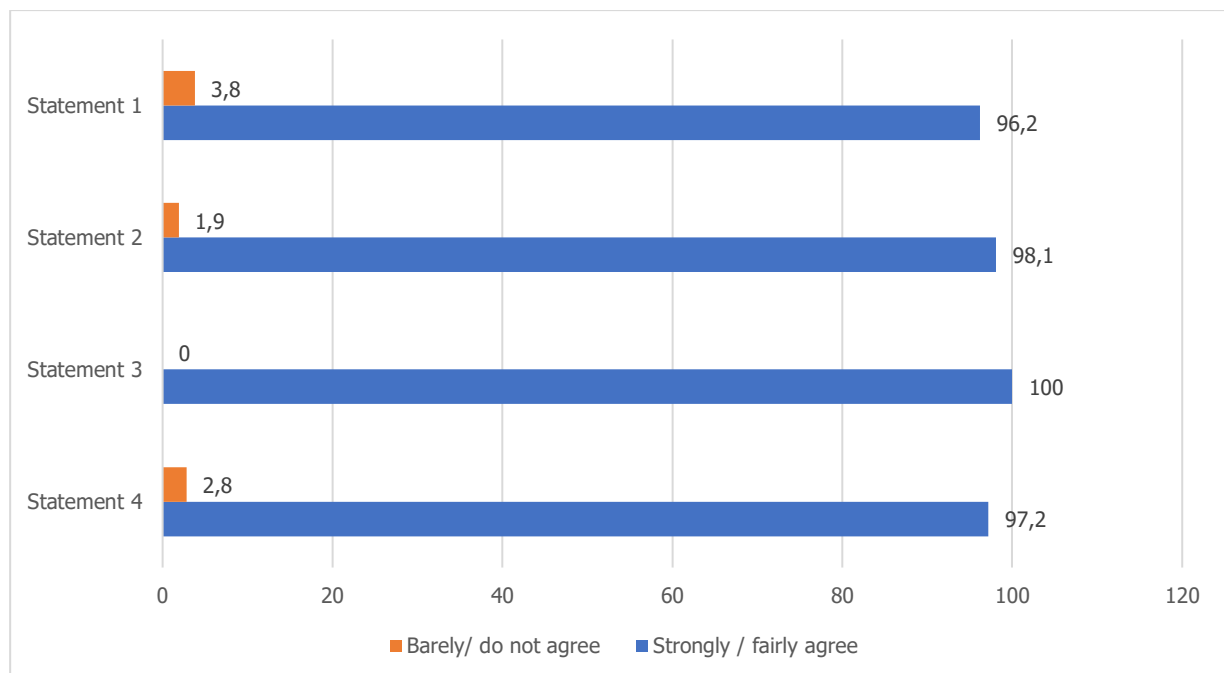
Statement 1: "Fact-checking increases the costs of lying in politics"
Statement 2: "Fact-checking improves the quality of public discourse"
Statement 3: "Fact-checking improves the quality of information that citizens receive"
Statement 4: "Fact-checking controls the quality of public discourse in times of crisis (natural disasters, pandemics, attacks...)"

Chart 7: *Percentage in agreement with statements about the relevance of fact-checking in today's society (in % of the total sample)*
Source: Self-made

This idea that fact-checking is a key tool in controlling political information, public discourse, and, in general, the information that reaches audiences, is shared by the interviewed experts. Thus, Clara Jiménez-Cruz (co-founder of Maldita.es) points to the relevance of fact-checking as a tool at the service of citizens:

> The reality is that, with the new forms of information consumption, through a mobile device, the internet... the transmission of information has been facilitated but also disinformation and, therefore, it is necessary to relearn how to do that consumption. While we are re-learning how we have to consume and identify what is information and what is not in these new platforms, it is good that we have someone to help us, to give us information about what is real and what is false, and from there, each one makes the decision they make about what they want (Jiménez-Cruz, 2020).

This idea is shared by Eliana Álvarez (co-founder of UyCheck) who points to fact-checking as a journalistic response to a problem of over-information generated by new technologies:

> We are at a time where fact-checking is necessary because much more information circulates and at a much greater speed than it did before. Although disinformation and politicians lying, or saying false things, have always existed, now the speed and scope are much greater, but at the same time, it is also relative. It is especially important now because we have the channels and information available to make this verification, before it may not have been so simple (Álvarez, 2020).

Academic experts such as Ramón Salaverría (Universidad de Navarra) point out that fact-checking certifies, on the other hand, some of the deficiencies of current journalism:

> I think that fact-checking is actually evidence that we are not doing journalism as well as we should be doing it, because if the journalism carried out by professional media had the professional excellence that is desirable and the Internet platforms had the filters to eliminate the indiscriminate dissemination of fictitious content, fact-checking platforms would not be necessary (Salaverría, 2020).

Along the same lines, Amazeen had pointed out that fact-checking "could be a symptom of the decline of reference journalistic institutions" (2017, p. 5).

On the other hand, we have been interested in knowing the vision that Spanish-speaking fact-checkers have on the link between fact-checking and social networks, an issue that, as we have seen (Cazalens et al., 2018; Graves, 2018), has been studied by the academic bibliography and it is fundamental when it comes to understanding the potential automation of the verification processes.

In this sense, the majority perception that respondents have (98.1%) about the relevance of users as a means of access to hoaxes that circulate on closed social networks, stands out. As the interviewees stated, the Spanish-speaking media context stands out for the use of closed (encrypted) social networks, such as WhatsApp, which is not so common in the Anglo-Saxon world. This was expressed by the co-founder of

Maldita.es, Clara Jiménez-Cruz (2020): "Disinformation, in Spanish-speaking countries... is on WhatsApp." Respondents also position themselves in favor of both open social networks (Twitter, Facebook…) and closed ones (WhatsApp, Telegram…) collaborating with verification platforms.
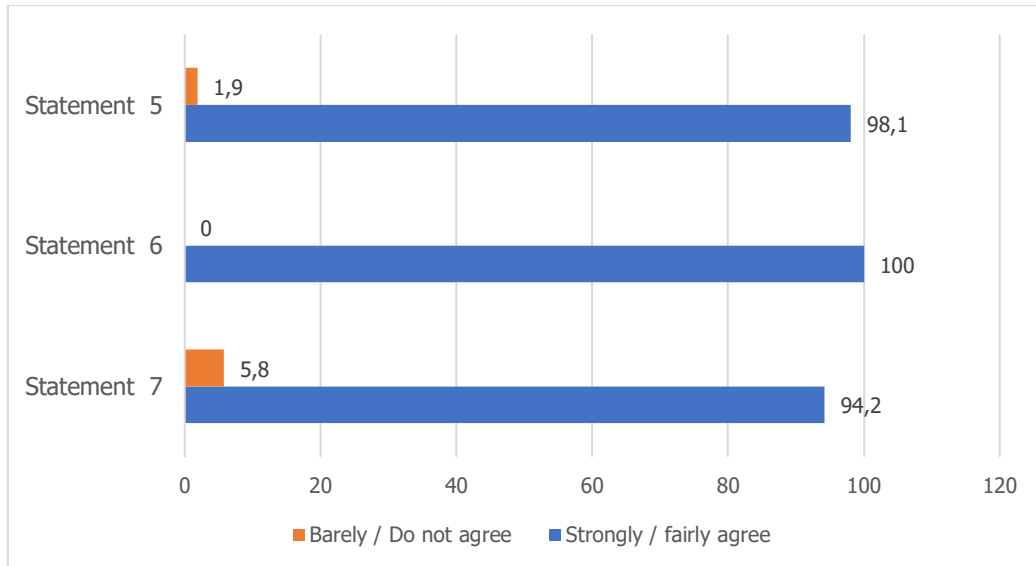
Statement 5: "Users are an important source of access to hoaxes, especially those circulating through closed social networks"
Statement 6: " Open social networks (Twitter, Facebook...) must collaborate with fact-checkers to filter the content that circulates in them or to warn users of the existence of misinformation"
Statement 7: " Closed social networks (WhatsApp, Telegram...) must collaborate with fact-checkers to filter the content that circulates in them or to warn users of the existence of misinformation"

Chart 8: *Percentage in agreement with statements about the link between fact-checking and social networks (in % of the total sample)*
Source: Self-made

The relevance of user collaboration in controlling disinformation is mentioned repeatedly. Jiménez-Cruz herself commented in a seminar for Reuters in May 2020, that "if you want to fight a battle, you need an army", so that "when we started doing this kind of strategy, we needed to give them a name. We called them '*malditas'* and '*malditos',* and at a certain point, we realized that they had started engaging with us"[2]. Thus, the initiatives of different Spanish-speaking platforms to establish direct contact channels with their users stand out, such as the *ChatBot* of Maldita.es (Maldita.es, June 2020) or the possibility of becoming a Chequeado "checker" (Chequeado, 2021).

4.3. Level of collaboration between Spanish-speaking fact-checkers

Regarding collaboration between platforms, the co-founder of Chequeado, Laura

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[2] Literally, "If you want to fight a battle, you need an army … when we started doing this kind of strategy, we needed to give them a name. We called them 'malditas' and 'malditos' and at a certain point we realized that they had started engaging with us".
Cfr. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHBdpmb9kMI&feature=youtu.be (min. 14.09).

Zommer, comments that the birth of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in 2014 is closely linked to this need:

> The IFCN… arose at the initiative of the checkers themselves who started to meet informally in 2014… it arose a bit as a need to exchange good practices and also errors. Many organizations had the same challenges, in different countries and with some different contexts, but also with some very common points, because in all countries there are leaders who are not accurate or who do not always tell the truth (Zommer, 2020).

Indeed, there seems to be a certain consensus that disinformation tends to follow a common path in countries with sociopolitical contexts as parallel as those in Latin America. This is also stated by the head of UyCheck, Eliana Álvarez, who goes on to point out that, in many cases, in Latin America, "it was the fact-checking sites that already existed that were promoting the emergence of [initiatives] in other countries" (Álvarez, 2020). Álvarez also affirms that "although there are things that are local, in reality, much of the misinformation that circulates is the same in all countries" (Álvarez, 2020). Something that Laura Zommer (Chequeado) agrees with, indicating that her platform, Chequeado, founded the Latam Chequea network in 2020: "It is an even more informal network than IFCN because it does not have a legal construction. It is a network of practices of organizations that fact-check... in a particular context, in the countries of Latin America" (Zommer, 2020). Zommer herself mentions that the sociopolitical, informational, and communicational framework of Latin America has common difficulties that do not appear in other countries:

> In general, in Latin American countries, there are some extra difficulties that are not necessarily found in, in quotation marks, "first world countries". Not all countries have access to information standards that are properly implemented, or, if they do, they have very large gaps between what the standard says and implementation. Not all countries have good quality data... Additionally, there are some cases where, in certain countries, there is direct persecution of anyone who dares to tell a president, or minister, or official that he is not telling the truth to the citizens... So, we generate this space to exchange some challenges typical of the region (Zommer, 2020).

In Latin American countries, says the director of Chequeado, "not only language unites us, but also some of the particularities of our states, such as greater institutional weakness of our democracies, which we found interesting to be able to articulate to strengthen ourselves" (Zommer, 2020). In general, Eliana Álvarez (UyCheck) adds, "knowing what others are working on greatly alleviates the local work process because it is possible that this hoax or that information that circulates in Uruguay has already been in Argentina, Chile, and Ecuador"; and she comments that "when information is key, it knows no borders, at least in Latin America" (Álvarez, 2020).

If collaboration is essential in the Latin American context, it is also essential for Spanish fact-checkers. Latin American collaborative networks, such as Latam Chequea, also have the participation of Spanish platforms, such as Newtral or Maldita.es (Latam

Chequea, 2021), a cooperation that is especially necessary for contexts of global disinformation, such as the coronavirus pandemic, just like Zommer mentioned.

From the Spanish perspective, the co-founder of Maldita.es, Clara Jiménez-Cruz, indicates that collaborative work is essential for new journalistic media, in general. Fact-checking services, like new media, also benefit from cooperation:

> Within the world of fact-checking, cooperation is assumed and understood, especially because it is a bit how modern journalism works. With newsrooms being decimated, and when specialized media are getting smaller and smaller… in that environment in which the media are specialized and small, collaboration is necessary to be able to do everything: do big jobs and large-scale research. (Jiménez-Cruz, 2020).

The results reveal that 69.2% of those surveyed claim to have collaborated with other platforms. Of these, 100% have done so with Spanish-speaking platforms, as can be seen in the following chart:
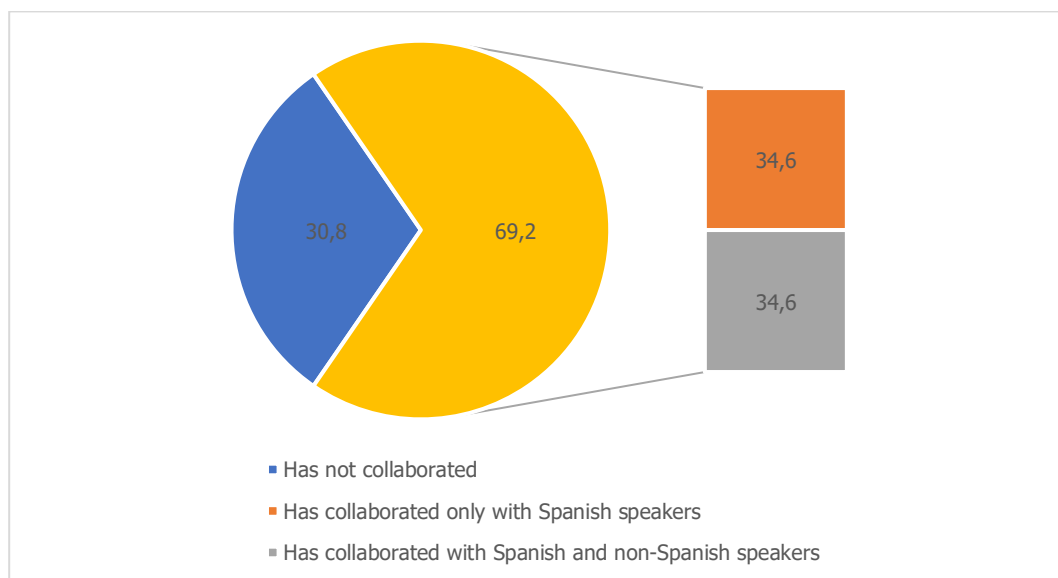
Chart 9: *Collaboration with other platforms according to their language (in % of the total sample)*
Source: Self-made

Regarding the elements that favor cross-platform collaboration, the respondents especially point to working with similar fact-checking techniques, sharing the same perception about the raison d'être of fact-checking, or belonging to the same international organizations. For 48.1% of those surveyed, sharing the language is relevant when collaborating. Other issues such as geographical proximity, on the other hand, are hardly highlighted.
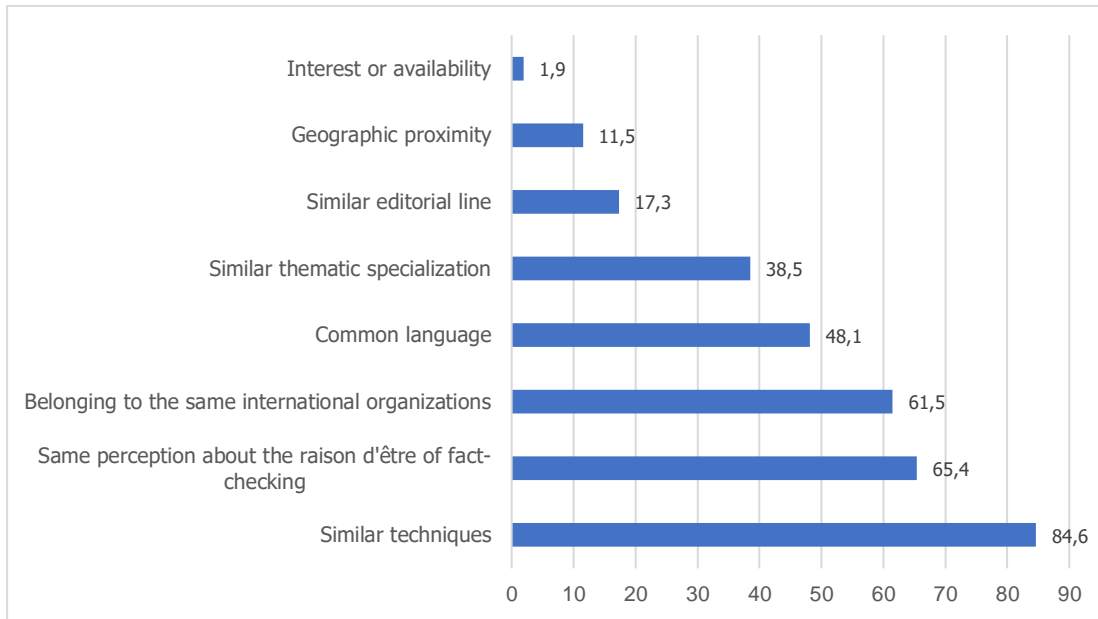
Chart 10: *Elements that favor collaboration between platforms (in % of the total sample)*
Source: Self-made

4.4. Similarities between Spanish-speaking fact-checkers

To know in-depth the profile of the Hispanic fact-checker, and taking into account previous reflections on the different socio-political contexts –Spanish and Latin American– that divide Spanish-speaking fact-checking (Moreno Gil et al., 2021), we have set out to compare Spanish and Latin American Spanish-speaking fact-checkers.

We found similarities, fundamentally, around two axes: the demographic profile and the view on the raison d'etre of fact-checking. In general, in both contexts, we see that the fact-checker is a young and qualified profile, a trend that also fits with the features of fact-checking at the international level (Graves and Cherubini, 2016). Spanish-speaking verifiers also share a vision of fact-checking as a global journalistic movement that responds, in turn, to an international media and informational need (Graves, 2016). This axis of similarities allows us to understand, in a particular way, the phenomenon of Spanish-speaking fact-checking as a relevant object of study that, despite the logical differences between two different social and political spaces –Spain and Latin America–, maintains a common core that materializes, as we have seen, in the possibility of collaboration and the development of international cooperation initiatives such as Latam Chequea, among others.
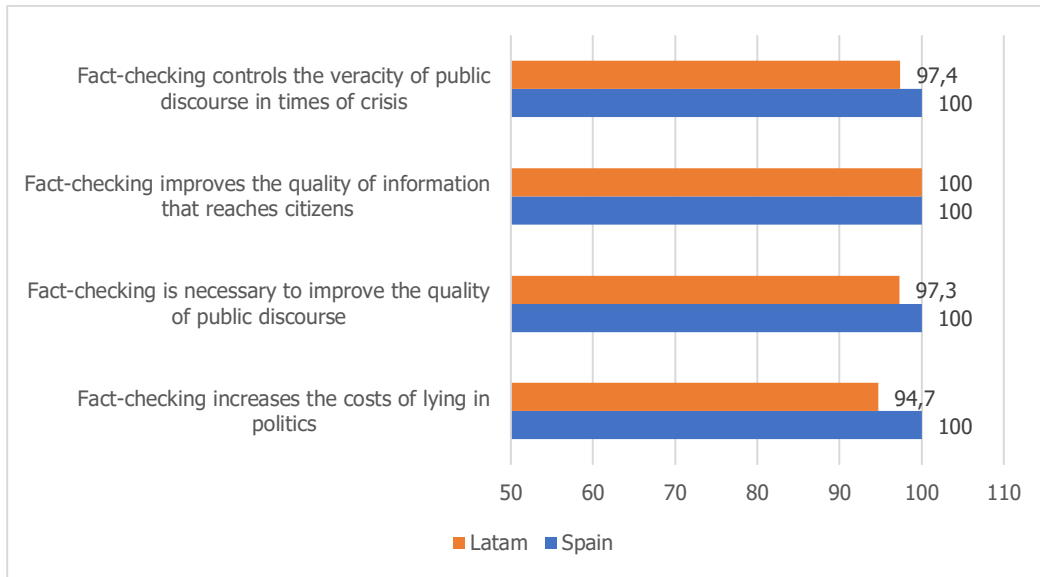
Chart 11: *Percentage in agreement with statements about the raison d'etre of fact-checking (% of respondents of the total sample who state that they are "very" or "fairly in agreement")*
Source: Self-made

4.5. Differences between Spanish-speaking fact-checkers

In the same way, we have been interested in knowing what are the main differences between Spanish and Latin American fact-checkers.

Although, as we have seen, the demographic profile of fact-checkers is similar, we found a fundamental difference in terms of the size of the platforms on which they work. Latin American platforms are more numerous and smaller, while in Spain more than half of the platforms are consolidated and have a high number of workers. This is reflected in the census of initiatives that we have prepared, the results of the survey, and in-depth interviews. This difference, which we have outlined above, is reflected in the results of the survey as follows: only 5.3% of Latin American fact-checkers declare that they work on large platforms (30 or more workers), compared to 28.6% of Spanish respondents. The data regarding the group of respondents is expressed in the following chart:
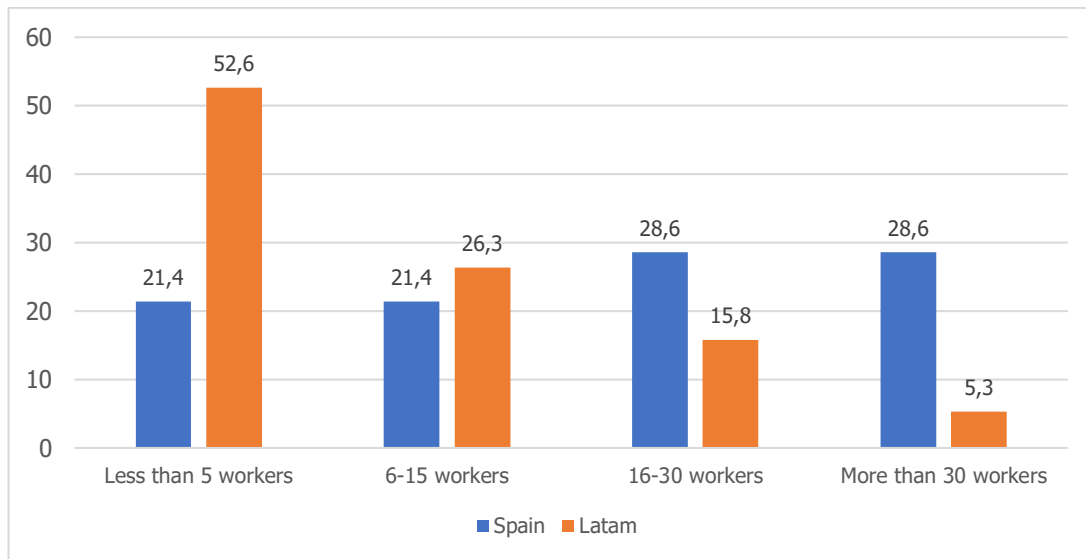
Chart 12: *Size of fact-checking platforms according to number of workers (in % of the total sample)*
Source: Self-made

As we have seen, this difference is a characteristic element of Latin American fact-checking. In an interview for this research, Laura Zommer (director of Chequeado, Argentina) explained that, in the Latin American context, most of the platforms are very small: "In Latin America, it happens that most of the organizations are organizations of less than five or six people, those who dedicate themselves exclusively to fact-checking" (Zommer, 2020). Indeed, we see that two of the four Spanish platforms surveyed for this research (Newtral and Maldita.es) are among the largest in the number of workers on the Hispanic scene. In this group of platforms with the largest number of workers, there would also be the Argentine Chequeado, which is an exception among the platforms in South America.

On the other hand, we find a fundamental difference in the perception of what requirements are necessary for greater collaboration to take place between the different initiatives. The results of the survey and the in-depth interviews refer us to two contexts of collaboration organized around different axes. Although collaboration between Spain and Latin America is essential, it is also true that the organization and belonging to collaboration networks is much more consolidated in the Latin American context than in the Spanish one (21.1% of Latin American respondents consider these networks fundamental for collaboration, compared to 7.7% of Spaniards). In Spain, among other things, sharing the same work techniques and methodologies is privileged (84.6% of Spaniards consider the similarity of techniques and methodologies as essential to collaborate, compared to 55.3% of Latin Americans). In this regard, Clara Jiménez-Cruz points out:

When we are in a normal situation [not in a pandemic], much of the misinformation is unique to Spain. Then, there is a part that has to do with Europe, in general... it is disinformation that we share because we see the same

types [of hoaxes] as our European partners... Usually, [Spanish] political disinformation has nothing to do with Latin America (Jiménez -Cruz, 2020).

In this sense, the collaboration of Spanish fact-checkers is carried out in two directions: on the one hand, within the European framework, with which political and geographical issues are shared; on the other, although to a lesser extent, in the Spanish-speaking context, with which issues of linguistic similarity are shared. This is how the co-founder of Maldita.es puts it:

> With the coronavirus, we are seeing a lot of things with Latin America that make a lot of sense, and, in fact, we are in a collaborative project called Latam Chequea with Spanish-speaking and Brazilian fact-checkers in Latin America. And we are in a European project that FullFact and Maldita are coordinating, with the countries most affected [by the coronavirus] in Europe right now (Jiménez-Cruz, 2020).

Indeed, Spain's collaboration with European fact-checking in the framework of the coronavirus pandemic has materialized in initiatives such as the report by AFP, CorrectITV, Pagella Politica, FullFact, and Maldita.es on the circulation of health hoaxes in Europe[4].

From the Latin American perspective, Laura Zommer (Chequeado) indicates that collaboration with Spanish platforms in Latam Chequea, within the framework of COVID-19, is understood because "the virus reached Europe earlier than Latin America. For Latin America, it was very relevant that much of the misinformation that was reaching our countries had already passed through Europe, or Asia, or the United States" (Zommer, 2020). Collaboration with Spain, in this case, was of interest because:

> Beyond the international network of fact-checkers... not all of our audiences read English, so it seemed important to us that we also generated something to have our response faster every time misinformation appears. We know that time, especially in viral disinformation, is a critical factor: the sooner we react to disinformation, the less chance it has to go further (Zommer, 2020).

Desirée García (EFE Verifica) explains that language is a key factor: "Many contents, by circulating in the same language, go viral very quickly both in Latin America and Spain" and, despite this, she agrees that the Spanish disinformation is especially linked to Europe:

> We are also subjected [in Spain] to another type of misinformation that, perhaps, Latin America does not suffer as much, which is the one that comes mainly from actors that the European Union itself has identified as destabilizing (García-Pruñonosa, 2020).

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[4] Cfr. https://covidinfodemiceurope.com/?lang=es

5. CONCLUSIONS

Taking as reference the research questions posed at the beginning, throughout this work we have outlined the profile of fact-checking professionals in Spanish-speaking countries. In this way, we have seen that it is a profile considered essentially journalistic and closely linked to journalistic logic.

Spanish-speaking fact-checkers are mainly young and qualified, although only 50% of them have received specific training in information verification. As a growing phenomenon, academic training in fact-checking is still under development, and sometimes it is the platforms themselves that are carrying out training initiatives for future professionals in the area, a trend already consolidated in the Anglo-Saxon world (Graves, 2016). In Spain, Newtral and Maldita.es collaborate with different universities: Newtral offers a master's degree in digital verification, fact-checking, and data journalism together with the Universidad CEU San Pablo; Maldita.es, for its part, offers from the 2021/2022 academic year a master's degree in journalistic research, new narratives, data, fact-checking, and transparency together with the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos.

As it is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is not particularly consolidated in the Spanish-speaking context where most platforms are small. However, agencies such as Chequeado, Maldita.es, and Newtral, with a large staff, are becoming reference models at an international level and are, at the same time, contributing to the development of fact-checking in the Hispanic scene through cooperation initiatives such as Latam Chequea.

Regarding collaboration, we found that, precisely because of the small and volatile nature of many of the Latin American platforms, inter-platform cooperation is a necessity. In Spain, however, collaboration occurs in two directions: at a socio-political and geographical level, Spanish platforms tend to collaborate more with other European agencies; However, the language shared with Latin America makes Hispanic collaboration an increasingly relevant reality, especially in contexts of global crisis, such as the health crisis of COVID-19.

The similarities between Spanish and Latin American fact-checkers are evident: the demographic profile of the workers, the perceptions about fact-checking, and about collaboration are common elements that make Spanish-speaking fact-checking a relevant phenomenon to understand the development of verification beyond Anglo-Saxon limits. However, we find some differences that respond to the different socio-political contexts we are talking about, especially differences around the elements necessary for collaboration, the need for international cooperation platforms, or the size and consolidation of fact-checking agencies.

In any case, we present here an approach to this phenomenon, hardly addressed until now from the perspective of those involved. We understand that, from now on, it will be necessary and relevant to understand the dynamics of collaboration,

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interrelation, and cooperation that occur among Hispanic countries, regardless of their particular contexts.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

Despite being a descriptive work of a barely-explored area so far, the present research is limited by the small size of the sample and by the impossibility of delimiting a universe of Spanish-speaking fact-checkers. The conclusions reached serve to outline a terrain yet to be explored, such as the verification of information in Spanish. Besides, the rapid growth and development that Hispanic fact-checking is experiencing make it difficult to obtain a still photo of the phenomenon.

Future lines of work could expand this sketch by addressing in greater depth aspects considered relevant by those involved, such as the collaboration networks between platforms, the differences and similarities between professionals at the national level, or the idiosyncrasy of Hispanic fact-checking compared to other more studied ones, such as the Anglo-Saxon.

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