(Re)constructing Professional Journalistic Practice in Mexico: Verificado's Marketing of Legitimacy, Collaboration, and Pop Culture in Fact-Checking the 2018 Elections

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Although fact-checking websites for political news such as FactCheck.org, Politifact, and ProPublica are common in the United States, they are new in Mexico. Using textual analysis, this study examines the strategies used by Verificado 2018, a crowdsourced political fact-checking initiative generated during the largest election in Mexican history by news organizations, universities, and tech companies. Verificado 2018 emphasized legitimacy, collaboration, and critical humor to promote and engage users in fact-checking and viralizing reliable information.

Keywords: Verificado, misinformation, Mexico, elections, fact-checking

Presenting accurate depictions of news has always been central to journalism (see Schudson, 2011). However, modern journalists are trained to present competing statements as "equally viable truth claims" (Durham, 1998, p. 124). This practice can create a "flight from the truth" in service of objectivity and balance (Muñoz-Torres, 2012; Rosen, 1993, p. 4949). Although both strategies serve to legitimize news outlets by making them appear impartial (McChesney, 2004), fact-checking organizations operate within a separate institutional logic, necessitating journalists to judge the veracity of public statements (see Lowrey, 2017, for a review). Lowrey (2017) contends this violates traditional journalistic norms, eroding the legitimacy of fact-checking. With this context in mind, we examine the case of Verificado 2018—a temporary, collaborative, and decentralized fact-checking newsroom—and its communication strategy in the run-up to the 2018 Mexican campaign season. Specifically, we aimed to answer Graves' (2018) call to examine how fact-checking practices cross national and cultural boundaries. Furthermore, we explore how Verificado positions itself as a legitimate fact-checking organization in a context where journalism is not independent and largely suspected of being corrupt or coerced.

The fact-checking movement began in the United States with the founding of FactCheck.org in 2003, Politifact in 2007, and *The Washington Post*'s Fact Checker in 2007, but it has since grown into a

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global movement (Graves, 2016). Indeed, the 2017 Global Fact-Checking Summit hosted 188 attendees from 53 countries (Ramos, 2017), a remarkable increase from the first summit in 2014, which hosted 50 journalists (Kessler, 2014). Additionally, the Duke Reporter's Lab found a three-fold increase in fact-checking organizations between 2014 and 2018 (Stencel & Griffin, 2018). The rise of fact-checking is welcome news in a post-truth era where reporters treat politicians' "alternative facts," which are merely falsehoods by another name (Jackson, 2017), as equally valid representations of events in an effort to achieve professional, journalistic objectivity (see McChesney, 2004).

Repackaging falsehoods as another version of reality is not a uniquely American phenomenon, nor is it a novel one. Indeed, fake news has existed in some form since before the creation of the printing press (see Burkhardt, 2017). Although misinformation and propaganda have been used by states in the past, such as in the Cold War (see Peters, 2018), they are now weaponized for the modern era (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, for a comprehensive overview; Peters, 2018). For example, in addressing one of the biggest public scandals of Enrique Peña Nieto's presidency, Mexico's attorney general, Jesús Murillo Karam, attributed the 2014 disappearance of 43 students in Guerrero to local police in the pay of a drug cartel. He described his account of how the drug cartel incinerated the students' bodies in a landfill as *la verdad histórica*, or the historical truth (Arce, 2016; Pérez-Salazar, 2015), despite evidence to the contrary (Ahmed, 2018; Semple, 2016). Fact-checking government sources is especially important in Mexico for two reasons. First, independent journalism serves as a check on government and the powerful, but it is made difficult by a lack of journalistic autonomy in Mexico. Low wages, a lack of institutional authority, and unstable employment all serve to diminish journalists' independence in Mexico (Hughes, Garcés, Márquez-Ramírez, & Arroyave, 2017). Furthermore, journalists are often dissuaded from covering certain stories through threats of violence (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017) that when carried out are often overlooked by law enforcement (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014), allowing organized crime to operate with impunity against journalists. Second, media enterprises in Mexico tend to be systematically biased in favor of the government (Echeverría Victoria & Bañuelos-Ramírez, 2017), especially among publicly operated outlets (Hughes & Lawson, 2004).

We address Graves' (2018) call to examine how fact-checking practices have crossed state boundaries and have been subsequently adopted and adapted. Although fact-checking organizations tend toward isomorphism (Lowrey, 2017), much like organizations in other fields to convey legitimacy (Carroll & Hannan, 2000), the methods by which fact-checking is executed are not likely constructed irrespective of broader institutional or cultural influences. Journalism and politics in Mexico are highly corrupt (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017); therefore, the organizers of Verificado may not have wished to couple themselves to established "professional" media and instead differentiated the project from extant norms. By examining Verificado, we were able to study how a novel fact-checking organization negotiated these professional and cultural complexities.

The elections are also notable as an object of study because they decided 3,400 races across federal, state, and local levels—an unprecedented number. The elections served as a referendum on the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which governed Mexico from 1929 to 2000 when the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) won the presidency (Instituto Nacional Electoral, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Semple, 2018). The PRI won back both houses of Mexico's congress and the presidency in 2012. Widespread corruption

and an inability to curtail drug violence—vividly illustrated by the government's response to the Guerrero students' disappearance—has since led to widespread dissatisfaction with the party (Semple, 2018; Vice & Chwe, 2017). The election resulted in heavy losses for the PRI from the federal to local levels (see Instituto Nacional Electoral, 2018b). Verificado's work is also worth examining given the country's history of journalistic coercion (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017). A decentralized effort to challenge public statements by and about politicians may insulate journalists from such intimidation.

Literature Review

Modern Fact-Checking

We recognize the modern fact-checking movement was enabled, in part, because the Internet weakened journalism's role as an informational gatekeeper. Similar to how television substituted fragmented and spectacularized imagery for actionable information (see Chomsky & Ramonet, 2002), the erosion of journalists' gatekeeping may afford propaganda systems greater flexibility and efficacy in maintaining the status quo through the deliberate spread of misinformation through journalistic channels by elites. Indeed, journalists are motivated to engage in fact-checking because it appeals to professional values (Graves, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2016), indicating fact-checking as a practice is spreading throughout the industry as a form of field repair (see Graves & Konieczna, 2015). Graves and Konieczna (2015) offer a comprehensive review of how fact-checking serves as field repair, but in summary, fact-checking preserves journalism by challenging its problematic practices such as letting falsities stand in the service of neutrality. This then forces news organizations to cover criticism of their own industry (Carr, 2012), such as fact-checking. Fact-checking efforts are therefore a form of metajournalistic discourse that is both a reaction to the failings of modern journalism and generative of new practices (Carlson, 2016), incentivizing journalists at other outlets to fact-check their sources (Graves, 2016).

Long-form fact-checking can potentially realign audiences' beliefs with reality (Gottfried, Hardy, Winneg, & Jamieson, 2013). Indeed, a comprehensive meta-analysis of fact-checking's effects categorized their effect as "moderate, positive, and significant" (Walter & Murphy, 2018, p. 432). Fact-checking enterprises can also have positive effects on discourse beyond correcting misperceptions. Indeed, fact-checking seems to be effective at reducing future misinformation spread by political elites (Amazeen, 2013), particularly if it poses a threat to their political aspirations by generating critical media coverage (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). The existence of fact-checking efforts, then, is of great importance in the Mexican context where a history of political clientelism (i.e., journalists receiving funding in exchange for favorable coverage; Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017) has allowed for false claims from members of the political elite to go unchallenged in traditional media (Guerrero, 2014).

Despite the growing literature on the global expansion of the fact-checking movement, scholarship on fact-checking is mostly focused on the U.S. context (Graves, 2018; Nieminen & Rapeli, 2018), although Amazeen's (2017, 2018) work does examine how fact-checking is developing globally. Importantly, Amazeen (2017) indicates that fact-checking organizations are most likely to develop when democratic institutions, such as press freedoms, are under threat. In Mexico, it is particularly relevant to study how Verificado's discourse positions fact-checking in a media environment that has been widely

understood by the public to be both partisan and corrupt, especially during a historical election (Freedom House, 2017). In this context, Verificado faces an uphill battle to establish itself as being distinct from the journalism status quo and a reliable source of political information.

Verificado 2018

Fact-checking news accounts, rumors, and misinformation related to the elections through Verificado involved more than 100 journalists from about 60 media partners and was spearheaded by reporters from AJ+ Español, *Newsweek*, and Animal Político (Rodriguez, 2018; Trewinnard, 2018c). Between March 11 and July 19, the website garnered more than five million views, not including indirect exposure to Verificado's content viewed in other media outlets (Verificado 2018, 2018a). Verificado published more than 400 fact-checking notes and about 50 videos across more than 80 outlets (Verificado 2018, 2018b). Several videos individually registered more than one million views (Verificado 2018, 2018b). Finally, Verificado had a deep social media following: The organization's Facebook and Twitter accounts each have more than 200,000 followers (Verificado 2018, 2018b). For comparison, FactCheck.org has had a Twitter account since 2009 and has 157,000 followers. Verificado's public WhatsApp account also had more than 10,000 contacts (Hazard-Owen, 2018; Verificado 2018, 2018b).

Although most of Verificado's work was done in a virtual environment, Universidad de la Comunicación provided a physical space (Rodriguez, 2018; Universidad de la Comunicación, 2018). Mexicans Against Corruption and Impunity (Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad), Open Society, and Oxfam provided Verificado's funding (Funke, 2018; Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, 2018a, 2018b; Montalvo & Moreno, 2018). Universities, nonprofits, and tech companies also participated in the organization, with Facebook, Google, and Twitter providing financial backing (Gutiérrez-Rentería, 2018; Lichterman, 2018). A nonprofit company, Meedan, and a fact-checking software developer, Dig Deeper Media, provided tools such as Pop-Up Newsroom and Check (Lichterman, 2018; Trewinnard, 2018b). Pop-up Newsroom is a combination of training and design tools that assist journalists in creating their own collaborative workflow for temporary, decentralized newsrooms. Meedan's Check is designed specifically for verification. Check is an open-source platform that streamlines collaborative sourcing and verification work for journalists (see Meedan, 2017). Together, the Pop-Up Newsroom framework and Check's collaboration software enabled participating journalists to build and implement a customized editorial and technological verification processes for their temporary, virtual newsroom (Lichterman, 2017, 2018). This process was also transformative in some sense as Verificado sought for participating journalists to both design "a collaborative reporting workflow, and to learn new digital newsgathering and verification skills" (Trewinnard, 2018c, para. 2; VerificadoMX, 2018h). In that sense, Pop-Up Newsroom projects like Verificado may have an influence on journalistic discourse after they disperse.

Although Verificado was the first time journalists collaborated on fact-checking in Mexico, it was not the first crowdsourced fact-checking operation either domestically or abroad. For instance, Electionland saw about 1,100 journalists from across the United States fact-check the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the largest journalistic collaboration centered on an individual event in history (Klein, 2017). Electionland is also remarkable in that it touted a 60-minute turnaround between the time a claim

was flagged to the time it was verified (Mina, 2016). CrossCheck (n.d.) similarly fact-checked the 2017 French presidential election. Domestically, a citizen-led collaboration of about 250 volunteers—Verificado19S—had successfully fact-checked disaster-related information and organized aid distribution after a 7.1 magnitude earthquake struck Mexico City (Funke, 2017; Hernandez, 2017; Verificado19S, n.d.). Volunteers compiled, verified, updated, and shared information through the use of Google Maps, Facebook, Twitter, and their website (Funke, 2017, 2018; Hernandez, 2017; Verificado19S, n.d.). Readers could submit help requests and offer assistance through Verificado19S's social media accounts, specifying the type, amount, and location of aid available or requested (Hernandez, 2017). Verificado19S had volunteers in the areas affected by the earthquake fact-checking information from submissions by investigating rumors and reports in the city and giving updates about damages and availability of resources (Funke, 2017). After two or more independent fact-checkers verified the information, it was posted across the Verificado19S platforms alongside the Verificado19S logo and a time stamp (Hernandez, 2017).

Mexican Context

This election was also the first time in Mexico's history that most people had access to the Internet. In the 2012 presidential election, only 39.8% of the population used the Internet (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2012). Just six years later, 63.9% of Mexicans had Internet access, and 96.9% intended to seek out information using it (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2018; Semple & Franco, 2018). This intersected with stronger regulations on political advertising in traditional media that did not apply to digital media (Valdés-Zurita, 2007). Even with the small percentage of Internet users in the 2012 elections, these regulations pushed political discourse, and particularly "rough-and-tumble politicking," to the online arena (Semple & Franco, 2018, para. 20).

Furthermore, the election took place within a post-truth political culture and the proliferation of weaponized misinformation in social media (Semple & Franco, 2018). These developments intersected with a rising distrust in Mexican institutions and the political system in general (Verificado19S, n.d.; Vice & Chwe, 2017). In fact, only 13% of Mexicans were satisfied with the state of the country, the lowest percentage since 2007 (Vice & Chwe, 2017). Crime, cartel violence, a widening income gap, and political corruption were some of the main concerns for Mexicans (Vice & Chwe, 2017). That Verificado was distributed online through various platforms is also important because although mainstream media in Mexico are influential (Beltrán, 2007; Guerrero, 2014), they tend to be progovernment and controlled by elites (Guerrero, 2014; Hughes & Lawson, 2004). Verificado's use of social media may have bypassed gatekeepers and directly accessed this audience.

With this in mind, we began our analysis with two broad research questions:

RQ1:   *How and what did Verificado communicate with its stakeholders before the start of the 2018 campaign season?*

RQ2:   *How did Verificado use its online presence to legitimize itself before the start of the 2018 campaign season?*

Method

We analyzed Verificado's self-promotion efforts between the project's opening on March 10 until March 31 to examine how the project positioned itself within the public eye before the beginning of the 2018 campaign season. During this time, after political precampaigns and before campaigns, Mexico's Instituto Nacional Electoral curtails political parties' and candidates' activities and advertising (Consejo General del Instituto Nacional Electoral, 2017; Instituto Nacional Electoral, 2018a). As such, Verificado was likely more invested in establishing a discourse about journalism and its relationship with extant journalistic and political practices to position itself as a reliable source of information. Although Verificado was actively fact-checking claims during this "off-season," they were doing so at a much slower rate than later. The project made 55 fact-checking notes during this time, or about 18 per week compared with about 35 per week later.

We manually collected the 55 fact-checking notes from Verificado.mx and identified 47 about misinformation and eight about political claims. We also collected 431 tweets and retweets from the @VerificadoMX account on Twitter. Finally, we collected 88 Facebook posts from Verificado's Facebook page. We scanned Verificado's website and both its Twitter and Facebook accounts at least twice per week to ensure that all postings in Verificado's platforms were collected.

We examined Verificado as a case study given the project's intrinsic and instrumental value as an unprecedented collaborative fact-checking effort and its potential to further our understanding of communication strategies used by fact-checking projects among different contexts (see Stake, 1995). According to Creswell (2013), a case study involves the explanation of the case, the issue the case illustrates, the context, main themes, and conclusions from the analysis. We examined Verificado's attempt to promote fact-checking within the Mexican context and the global fact-checking movement. Then, we identified and analyzed the communication strategies used by Verificado, paying particular attention to how the project communicated and interacted with stakeholders. We then explained the implications of these strategies for fact-checking within and beyond the Mexican context.

We identified the strategies Verificado used by conducting a manual textual analysis of all Verificado's fact-checking notes, tweets, retweets, and Facebook posts. According to Altheide (1996), texts are important "to understand culture—or the process and the array of objects, symbols, and meanings that make up social reality shared by members of a society" (p. 2). However, to identify the various socially constructed meanings around a text (Miller, 2010), the context of a text "must be understood in order to grasp the significance of the document itself" (Altheide, 1996, p. 9). Therefore, we did a thematic analysis to identify recurrent strategies in the texts to determine how Verificado attempted to establish itself as a legitimate fact-checking enterprise in the election.

Results

We identified three key themes in Verificado's public discourse content: branding Verificado as legitimate, camaraderie and collaboration, and critical humor.

Branding Verificado as Legitimate

Verificado distanced itself early from journalistic outlets by making the project's structure and operation public, perhaps because news coverage is generally suspect in Mexico (Hughes et al., 2017; Ramírez, 2014), in part as a result of politicians' and criminal organizations' practice of buying favorable coverage (Freedom House, 2017; Guerrero, 2014; Hughes et al., 2017). Specifically, Verificado published its reporting methodology and funding model, similar to fact-checking operations in the United States.

In this way, Verificado worked to embrace transparency in its platforms as a value distinguishing their reporting from other news organizations and presented it as a legitimate source of information. Verificado's main strategies to legitimize the project were the disclosure of information, the emphasis on their associations with trustworthy initiatives and organizations, and the active interaction with their users.

Disclosing Process and Personnel

Verificado went to great lengths to delineate itself from the journalistic status quo in Mexico by publicizing various aspects of its operations. According to Mora Roca (2018), an executive producer at AJ+ Español and Verificado's visual desk and WhatsApp channel leader, the project organizers disclosed the organizational structure, publicized the reporting methodology, and framed both as transparent, open, and collaborative in an effort to build trust in the Verificado initiative and to generate value for the Verificado stamp appearing in their fact-checking notes (Senado de México, 2018). Specifically, Verificado directly and prominently identified the nonprofit organizations, universities, tech companies, and news outlets collaborating in or financing the project (Verificado 2018, 2018d, n.d.-b). Furthermore, Verificado published group photos of some of the more than 96 participating journalists from 60 news outlets, as well as pictures of their workspace (VerificadoMX, 2018c, 2018h). Verificado's concept of openness included access to the physical newsroom. While speaking at the Mexican Senate, Mora Roca encouraged people to visit, witness the journalists' work, and participate themselves (Senado de México, 2018). These public disclosures and invitations for public site visits are meaningful deviations from journalistic practice at large in Mexico where journalists, for better or worse, often work in secrecy.

The project's efforts at branding itself as legitimate through the disclosure of its fact-checking methodology also warrants closer attention. Verificado framed its decision making as scientific or clinical in nature as it explicated key concepts and preregistered a decision tree for how journalists instigated fact-checking. The project prominently displayed a link to its fact-checking methodology on its landing page, which identified misinformation and deceitful claims as the main purview of its work (Verificado 2018, n.d.-a). Verificado's methodology tab referenced a step-by-step guide created by El Sabueso (The Bloodhound) and Animal Político in 2015. The methodology was certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at Poynter in 2018 (Animal Político, 2015; International Fact-Checking Network, 2018; Verificado 2018, n.d.-a). According to Animal Político (2015), El Sabueso's fact-checking process was inspired by the ones used by fact-checkers such as Politifact and Chequeado in Argentina. As of this writing, Verificado's website provides a detailed description of its methodology (see Verificado 2018, n.d.-a).

During the study period, Verificado produced 47 misinformation fact-checking notes and eight deceitful claims notes. Both typically included a narrative of how the fact-checking process was applied for generating the note, along with the rationale used to classify the information within Verificado's veracity ranking per the reporting methodology. The notes were published simultaneously on the project's webpage and social media (Facebook and Twitter). Many of the news outlets part of Verificado shared the notes on their websites and social media accounts with credit to Verificado or with the Verificado logo or stamp.

The fact-checking of a video of PAN presidential candidate Ricardo Anaya giving a speech in English with Spanish subtitles illustrates the methodology. In the speech, Anaya contested Donald Trump's claim that Mexico was sending rapists to the United States (Larraiz & Nicolai, 2018). Anaya also argued that building a wall between the United States and Mexico and ending free trade would not have the effect Trump sought (Larraiz & Nicolai, 2018). Shortly after, a heavily edited video subtitled in Spanish was posted to YouTube. The editing and Spanish subtitles indicated Anaya was supporting the construction of a border wall between Mexico and the United States, a proposition that would have been met with widespread condemnation by voters. The video also made it appear as though Anaya was referring to Mexican immigrants in the United States as rapists (Larraiz & Nicolai, 2018). Verificado's fact-checking indicated the video had been shared 712,000 times through YouTube and 120,000 times on Facebook despite having been manipulated to drastically misrepresent Anaya's original speech. The fact-checking identified the original YouTube and Facebook accounts that shared the deceitful video (Larraiz & Nicolai, 2018), likely in an effort to out these accounts as sources of deceit. The note included a link to the accurate video, which Anaya and PAN had originally shared on Facebook and the Web (Larraiz & Nicolai, 2018).

Legitimacy by Association

Verificado, its reporters, and partner news organizations branded most of their work as belonging to or originating from Verificado19S, helping to create brand recognition of such coverage and to associate their work with transparency and grassroots journalism. For instance, some of Verificado's first articles included information about what the project was, why it was created, and how it drew from some of Verificado19S's goals and experiences (Verificado 2018, 2018d). The branding encouraged followers to think of Verificado as a resource for citizens and not as a medium used by political elites to engage in power struggles or to cover up their incompetence.

Also, Verificado's emphasis on the link between its own work and Verificado19S's framed the project as a legitimate effort given the prior's widespread recognition as a trustworthy platform for information. Verificado19S was known for its interactive, public, real-time online platform and for seeking transparency in the use of public funds in the aftermath of Mexico City's earthquake (Funke, 2017; Hernandez, 2017). Verificado19S was praised as a service "that saved Mexicans from misinformation during the earthquake" (Velasco, 2017), and as the "most updated and visited platform during the days after the earthquake" (Linares, 2017, para. 12). Verificado19S's grassroot and citizen-led nature made it a superior alternative to government inefficiency and misinformation. Verificado 2018 tapped into this narrative to demarcate its own practices from those of the mainstream media.

In addition to linking itself to its namesake, Verificado emphasized associations with collaborative fact-checking efforts in the Global North by advertising that the IFCN at Poynter certified part of its methodology (Verificado 2018, 2018d). The project webpage also drew connections to CrossCheck and Electionland, stating that both informed its work (Verificado 2018, 2018d). The strategy encouraged users to see Verificado as both an important and innovative effort, which were similar terms used to describe Electionland and CrossCheck by collaborators (Trewinnard, 2018a). Yet by drawing comparisons to the Global North, Verificado problematically drew on colonial ideology. In several instances, problems specific to the Mexican context tended to be erased or minimized in the narrative, favoring a less complex, Global-North-centered perspective. For example, one of the first Verificado's introductory articles tracked and centered the problem of political misinformation to the 2016 U.S. presidential election and explained that political misinformation was "not a massive phenomenon yet in Mexico. And Russian interference is—for now—only a possibility but not a fact" (Verificado 2018, 2018d, para. 7). Such statements disregard and leave unchallenged the long history of political clientelism in Mexico (see Guerrero, 2014). Concerningly, unethical journalism and political misinformation have gone unchecked in Mexico and there has been a massive political mobilization of bots and trolls in social media in favor of political elites (Guerrero, 2014; Semple & Franco, 2018). Framing misinformation as an external problem may have helped sidestep criticism of Verificado's partners who may have helped further such problematic practices domestically.

Legitimacy by Interaction

Similar to Verificado19S, Verificado made the participation of and interaction with citizens a key element of its work (Senado de México, 2018). Many of Verificado's direct interactions with followers on Facebook and Twitter were likely geared toward generating trust among users by clarifying the project's goals, process, and perceived bias. For example, Verificado shared on Twitter a fact-checking note stating Lake Texcoco was sinking 30 centimeters per year, not a meter per year, as Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the presidential candidate for the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional, had claimed (VerificadoMX, 2018g). A follower replied this topic should not be fact-checked by Verificado given it was a "technical" issue and different from "fake news" (VerificadoMX, 2018g). Verificado replied within hours clarifying fact-checking political claims was part of its work, included a link to an article describing the project, and encouraged the user to read it for more information (VerificadoMX, 2018g). In the same Twitter thread, Verificado credited Forbes México, one of the news organizations collaborating with Verificado, as the authors of the fact-check note about the Texcoco lake claim. The example illustrates how Verificado was actively responding to users concerns, clarifying its goals, and crediting collaborators.

Verificado was also responsive in addressing users' concerns about political bias, specifically the project's perceived selection bias. Some users said Verificado only fact-checked López Obrador's political claims and demanded Verificado fact-check the claims of presidential candidates from other political parties (VerificadoMX, 2018g). Verificado replied they fact-checked claims of presidential candidates from other parties and included links to a fact-check note on Anaya and another on José Antonio Meade. The response encouraged users to visit Verificado's website to access all of the fact-checking notes published up until that time (VerificadoMX, 2018g).

Camaraderie and Collaboration

Verificado distanced itself from traditional media by highlighting the unprecedented journalistic collaboration and framing such work as the future of journalism (VerificadoMX, 2018c). This strategy emphasized that Verificado's collaborative structure and operation were different from traditional media, despite many traditional media outlets such as Televisa contributing to the initiative. Verificado framed cooperation among journalists as a core strength of the project, stating they were "collaborating to innovate," describing its work as an "unprecedented effort" and a "collaborative project" positioning itself at the forefront of a changing media industry in stating that like Verificado, "journalism's future is collaborative" (La Universidad de la Comunicación, 2018; Verificado 2018, 2018a, 2018d).

Collaboration was also presented as a means to circumvent logistical challenges inherent in a fact-checking operation in Mexico (e.g., the lack of equipment, staff, money, time), especially when such a project was centered on an important election, which necessitated a high degree of responsiveness (Trewinnard, 2018a). Collaboration across outlets then was framed as a way to pool resources among journalists, news organizations, tech companies, and universities to limit the spread and impact of misinformation and expand the reach of information in ways that would otherwise not have been possible (Trewinnard, 2018a).

In addition to soliciting collaboration with journalists, Verificado likewise reached out to its audience. Drawing on popular culture, often from U.S. TV shows, films, and cartoons, Verificado tried to entice audiences to collaborate by breaking down the hierarchical separation between Verificado's journalists and its audience. This may have encouraged followers to see themselves as central to the news-making process and as cocreators of fact-checked stories as they flagged dubious claims within their own social networks, forwarded these claims to Verificado, and then participated in spreading fact-checked items themselves through platforms like WhatsApp. This departs from how Mexicans typically participate in political discourse as it is presented through traditional media, which is to say Verificado constructed news audiences as central protagonists in meaning making rather than as passive recipients. This represents a critical shift in the conceptualization of media audiences in Mexico. Whereas the majority of Americans have had Internet access for nearly two decades (Pew Research Center, 2018), this was the first major political campaign season where the majority of Mexicans were similarly positioned and 45% of voters were under 35 (Payan, 2018). Verificado's interaction with its audience recognized this difference and made it salient.

The project also positioned itself as a cocreator of fact-checked stories with their audience by establishing direct, two-way interactions with followers through social media. Project administrators encouraged users to submit information publicly or privately to Verificado's Facebook page or through Twitter with the hashtags #Verificado2018 and #Quieroqueverifiquen (#Iwantyoutoverify). The strategy also afforded Verificado the opportunity to fact-check information people shared in private channels between family and friends. For instance, Verificado identified WhatsApp as one of the main platforms used for distributing political misinformation and encouraged users to submit anything they wanted fact-checked from WhatsApp (Verificado 2018, 2018c)—about 90% of Mexicans with Internet access use WhatsApp (Asociación de Internet.mx, 2018). Verificado had users distribute its fact-checked information

by sharing them in their public and private social media platforms. For example, Verificado shared a follower's posting that stated her family had been spreading misinformation in the family's group chat. The follower thanked Verificado because she could show her father what information was reliable and he then shared Verificado's fact-checking notes in the chat. Verificado's Tweet described it as success story (Glez Guerra, 2018).

Verificado seemed to conceptualize fact-checking an agentic act for citizens and essential to its own efforts. Placing users as integral in the fact-checking process involved "training" users to be proficient at identifying dubious media claims. During a Facebook Live event, Mora Roca and Moreno Chávez said fact-checking is a shared responsibility among media, governments, and citizens (Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, 2018a). Both stated citizens are central in identifying fake news and stopping its dissemination (Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, 2018a). This view is evident in the strategies used by Verificado. For example, some posts and Facebook Live events included information and mini-tutorials on how images and videos can be manipulated and how to spot fake ones (AJ+ Español, 2018). These posts often had examples contrasting original and manipulated images and videos showing the differences between the two (AJ+ Español, 2018).

Verificado demarcated itself from professional media by attempting to deformalize its relationship with audiences and position itself as a collaborative and friendly peer with users rather than as a disconnected, distant distributor of information and arbiter of reality. Verificado often used memes, witty responses, or emojis intended to set a civil, friendly tone for social media interactions. For example, Verificado intervened in a heated argument among Twitter users derived from one of its fact-checking notes by saying, "Listen, listen, don't fight [crying emoji]. These discussions are more fun and pleasant when we treat each other nicely" (VerificadoMX, 2018f). In another thread, a follower had originally posted that reading Verificado's time line was an exercise in asking what was true and real. Verificado replied with an animated gif of a woman looking confused while trying to make sense of math equations appearing in front of her face (Pastrana, 2018b). The user responded "Hahaha, Aw, I love you [Verificado 2018]" (Pastrana, 2018a). Verificado responded, "We love you too, but as a friend" (VerificadoMX, 2018d).

Critical Humor

Verificado used humor, memes, and U.S. pop culture to dually promote its own work and delineate Verificado's scientifically based reporting from other outlets. These postings do not directly criticize other journalists or Mexicans' friends and family who have spread misinformation. Rather, Verificado framed fake news as an object worthy of ridicule, showing users that, like them, Verificado both understood the failings of journalistic practices and how politicians take advantage of journalism's shortcomings.

Verificado used humor in singling out WhatsApp as a platform for spreading fake news in Mexico and as a space where misinformation should be identified and debunked. For example, a post on Twitter read "Did your family share fake news again in their WhatsApp group? Don't worry! Send your suggestions to us at the hashtag #Iwantyoutoverify" (VerificadoMX, 2018a). Verificado's call to action included an

animated gif of Jessica Jones rolling her eyes. The gif encouraged followers to identify with an image that could serve to illustrate the frustration they may have felt when their family members shared fake news in private family chats.

Another post included an animated gif of *Star Wars*'s Yoda striking two members of the red guard with a light saber with the caption "Notes, threads, WhatsApp messages, memes. . . . Help us to fact-check them using the HT #Iwanyoutoverify" (VerificadoMX, 2018e). The image encouraged followers to think about fact-checking as a fight where Yoda represented the wise, powerful, and noble fact-checkers who were "fighting" against an oppressive state's misinformation efforts. Similar posts include animated gifs and memes from popular U.S. media content such as *Parks and Recreation*, *The Simpsons*, and *Looney Tunes*. In this way, Verificado attracted the attention of followers with the use of popular U.S. media.

Discussion

We found that Verificado's emphasis on transparency, a hallmark of fact-checking in the Global North (Hermida, 2015), differentiates it from traditional Mexican media. Verificado actively pushed back on popular conceptions of journalistic labor and practice to legitimize its work. Verificado could be taken as the standard for future fact-checking initiatives in Mexico. However, the project's structure was unique and short-lived, ending operations on July 9, 2018, a few days after the election (VerificadoMX, 2018b). Although fact-checking projects mimic each other to convey legitimacy (Lowrey, 2017), it remains to be seen if Verificado made a lasting impression in its short life span.

Verificado's Field Repair Function

Broadly, Verificado seems to position itself as a form of field repair, mirroring established repair strategies detailed by Graves and Konieczna (2015) such as collaboration among journalists. Organizations outside Mexico should take note, as our findings may implicate the planning and execution of future efforts abroad. By publicizing the collaborative nature the staff's home organizations, the project may have inadvertently bought those organizations goodwill with the public. Doing so may have whetted the appetite of Mexicans for greater accountability, as indicated by vocal support for continuing the Verificado project beyond July 1. Regardless of the origins of low trust in journalism and political institutions, current efforts aimed at verifying politicians' claims and journalists' reporting can help to create a wider culture of accountability in Mexico and nourish trust in those same institutions. The collaboration between journalists and their home organizations may have also provided a roadmap for insulating journalism from corruption and coercion.

Verificado additionally expands or adapts extant strategies geared toward field repair by folding in collaboration from the public. In a country where the workings of both government and journalists are largely obscured, and corruption and coercion in both run rampant, Verificado also attempted to cultivate trust in its own brand via transparent, scientific decision-making while simultaneously deformalizing fact-checking and collaborating with audiences, adding to the repertoire of strategies available to fact-checking organizations seeking to engage in field repair. Similarly, by training both journalists and the public in how

to identify and debunk dubious claims, Verificado may have primed the pump, so to speak, for involved individuals to continue the project's work beyond its shuttering. Finally, we found Verificado's communication strategy was geared toward disassociating itself from professional journalism as practiced in Mexico, not by replicating the formal communication channels of its so-called peer organizations but rather by mirroring the communication styles of its audience. As a result, Verificado may have dually distanced itself from corrupt institutions and legitimized its own work by appearing more authentic in its attempted co-optation of channels frequently used to spread misinformation.

Our examination perhaps most importantly finds that field repair efforts can be extended from reforming professional practices to reorganizing journalistic labor. Verificado not only demonstrated that claims can be arbitrated but also that innovative organizational structures, specifically collaboration among and between journalists and the public, can afford journalists greater levels of independence and autonomy. Furthermore, this structure combated the instantaneity and reach of misinformation by incorporating audience labor into its workflow.

Normalizing and Viralizing Fact Checks

Verificado's discourse surrounding its collaboration with audiences and its use of meme culture has several implications. Verificado attempted to demystify fact-checking, a critical journalistic practice, by constructing the work as collaboration between the audience and journalists. Verificado's discourse constructed audiences as agentic and seemingly brought a novel dynamic for fact-checking methods. This demystification of fact-checking and journalistic practice is furthered by Verificado's discursively constructed linkage between fact-checking and popular culture—an arena with which audiences are likely familiar and comfortable discussing.

In addition, Verificado created innovative, interactive, and shareable materials by drawing on popular culture, humor, and a variety of formats to decrease perceived barriers to sharing fact checks through popular formats such as memes. This is an important strategy considering people play a major role in spreading misinformation in social media, and novelty increases the likelihood of sharing (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). The use of humor and popular culture to expose instances of misinformation might have encouraged users to spread fact checks by providing a friendly tone in an otherwise polarized political environment. In other words, Verificado embraced the characteristics and dynamics of misinformation networks to spread accurate information by making fact-checking practices "natural" and part of a "civil" discourse.

The participation of media and citizens was essential in this fact-checking process, particularly for the reach of the project and considering the highly saturated media environment in such a historic election. Accordingly, Verificado likely used self-promotion to engage more people and to involve journalists not only from big cities, such as Mexico City, but also from other parts of the country (Terceros, 2018). Perhaps more importantly, however, self-promotion may have afforded Verificado access to identifying and combating misinformation in private channels such as WhatsApp.

Limitations

Our findings should be considered in light of several limitations of our method and the case. We cannot know whether Verificado's efforts altered their audience's perceptions. Although our work sought to determine how Verificado communicated with stakeholders, knowing whether the strategies employed here were efficacious would be helpful for practitioners generally and future pop-up newsroom organizers specifically. We cannot determine the motivations behind the messaging we identified. Furthermore, Verificado was limited by the characteristics of the Mexican context in the types of practices that it could seek to replicate to legitimize its work. It is not possible to say whether the communication strategies we identified here would be attempted again by fact-checking organizations outside of this particular context.

Future Research

The most immediately pressing follow-up to our project would involve interviewing organizers and users of Verificado to determine how these two publics understood one another over the course of Verificado 2018's fact-checking of the campaign season. Although our work focused on identifying how Verificado initially sought to position itself before campaigns officially began, we do not know how Verificado altered its strategies once politicians began making statements in their bids for election. Likewise, audiences' motivations for communicating with Verificado may have shifted over the course of the campaign season.

More broadly, as Verificado attempted to co-opt channels of misinformation and disassociate itself from professional journalism as it is understood in Mexico, future work should examine whether emergent fact-checking projects behave similarly. After all, Verificado may have set a precedent in its strategy of deformalizing interactions with audiences while simultaneously presenting itself as an adherent to a rigorous fact-checking methodology.

Conclusion

Verificado's emphasis on legitimacy, collaboration, and critical humor serve as a form of field repair for Mexico's beleaguered journalism industry. Most importantly, Verificado's strategies were successful in engaging citizens and embracing their agency in the process of fact-checking rather than focusing on establishing or defining boundaries between journalists and audiences. Moreover, Verificado's work may also result in greater demand for transparency from media outlets, as this metajournalistic discourse can also shape journalistic practice.

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