

BETWEEN LEGITIMACY AND VULNERABILITY: MAPPING EMPIRICAL FACT-CHECKING RESEARCH IN PORTUGAL, SPAIN AND ITALY (2020–2025)

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Abstract. Fact-checking has emerged as a central journalistic response to the contemporary crisis of information credibility, particularly in media systems marked by political polarization and platform-driven disinformation. Although academic research on fact-checking has expanded rapidly, there is limited comparative reflection on how its empirical dimensions have been studied across national contexts in Southern Europe. This article addresses that gap by examining empirical fact-checking research conducted in Portugal, Spain, and Italy between 2020 and 2025. The study is based on a systematic review of 108 peer-reviewed empirical articles indexed in Scopus. Focusing exclusively on reported empirical findings, a qualitative thematic analysis was applied to identify recurrent patterns, tensions, and interpretative frameworks shaping academic production in the three countries. The analysis reveals three dominant thematic clusters. First, the integration of artificial intelligence

into fact-checking practices appears as a site of innovation accompanied by ethical concerns, opacity, and increased editorial dependence. Second, structural constraints such as resource scarcity, limited visibility, and infrastructural fragility significantly restrict the reach and societal impact of fact-checking initiatives. Third, disinformation is consistently framed as a politically saturated phenomenon, frequently instrumentalized by radical right-wing actors to delegitimize journalism and reshape public discourse. These findings depict fact-checking as a practice oscillating between symbolic legitimacy and operational vulnerability, shaped by technological transformations, structural inequalities, and political contestation. The article argues for a situated understanding of fact-checking that accounts for its communicative, political, and technological dimensions, highlighting the need for comparative and context-sensitive approaches in future research.

Keywords: Fact-checking, Disinformation, Artificial intelligence, Southern Europe, Media legitimacy, Media Agenda.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of disinformation has taken on a pressing central role in the media, political and academic agendas in recent years. To some extent, as a counterpoint to this demand, a movement has developed within the journalistic community in which the verification of facts *ex post* has become a separate journalistic entity.

One of the possible journalistic responses to the crisis of information credibility caused by the proliferation and widespread dissemination of fake news, conspiracy theories and discursive manipulation campaigns has been the establishment of content verification platforms (Graves, 2016; Amazeen, 2015). The most visible face of this phenomenon of a posteriori verification is most prominently observed in times of greatest pressure and social unrest (Brennen et al., 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020).

The growing sophistication of disinformation strategies — often anchored in pseudoscientific discourses, visual manipulations or strategic decontextualizations (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2025; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Pantti & Sirén, 2015) — makes it clear that we need to understand not only the inner workings of fact-checking platforms, but also the nature and evolution of the content they aim to debunk. While recent literature has been effective in characterizing the institutional and methodological aspects of fact-checking (Humprecht, 2020; Uscinski & Butler, 2013), there remains a gap in the systematic examination of the empirical results generated by these studies: what types of content are primarily fact-checked? In which thematic domains? With which discursive strategies? And with what specific challenges? This article aims to contribute to this effort by qualitatively exploring the empirical findings identified in a systematic review, focusing on academic work on fact-checking in Portugal, Spain and Italy between 2020 and 2025.

The comparative analysis between Portugal, Spain and Italy is particularly relevant, since these countries share the same model of media system, the polarized pluralist one, according to the typology of Hallin and Mancini (2004). This model is characterized by a high political parallelism in the media, weak journalistic autonomy, strong state intervention and uneven pro-

fessionalization. These conditions make it particularly conducive to the study of phenomena such as fact-checking, which are often situated between traditional journalistic logic and information activism (Carlson, 2016). The sharing of this communication ecosystem thus justifies the adoption of a common interpretative framework that allows us to identify patterns and divergences between the countries analysed.

On the other hand, the rise of the radical right and forms of illiberal populism in southern Europe introduces an additional layer of complexity to the phenomenon of disinformation (Waisbord, 2018; Bobba & Hubé, 2021). These political forces often use disinformation as a rhetorical and strategic tool, while actively discrediting the mainstream media and fact-checkers themselves (Hameleers, 2020; Magallón-Rosa, 2022; Pérez-Curiel & Rivas-de-Roca, 2022). In this sense, fact-checking practices become not only technical devices for informative correction, but also performative acts that are part of a broader symbolic dispute over epistemic authority and discursive legitimacy (Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Tandoc et al., 2018).

It is therefore in this context of informative fragmentation, ideological polarization and epistemic tension that this analysis is set. By qualitatively examining the empirical contents of the studies analyzed, we propose a critical reading that allows us to understand the privileged thematic domains, the structural challenges faced by fact-checkers in Southern Europe, and the political and communicative implications that arise from their practices.

Considering the theoretical context already described, our study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How is empirical research on fact-checking in Portugal, Spain, and Italy conceptualized and characterized in the literature between 2020 and 2025?
- RQ2: How are structural, technological, and professional challenges understood in the literature to shape the practice and perceived effectiveness of fact-checking?

Therefore, this article aims to promote a comparative and contextualized understanding of fact-check-

king as a journalistic practice embedded in specific media systems, power relations, and technological infrastructures.

1.1 From the information crisis to the institutionalization of fact-checking

The media ecosystem has undergone profound changes in recent years, largely driven by technological changes, audience fragmentation and disintermediation promoted by new digital platforms (Beckett, 2010; Tandoc et al., 2018). The collapse of the classic gatekeeping model, which has paved the way for the unregulated circulation of content and, consequently, made the task of assessing the value of information more complicated, is the most obvious aspect of these changes (Boczkowski, 2010; Carlson, 2016; Vos, 2019). In this new ecosystem, fact-checking emerges as a form of ex post epistemic control, whose legitimacy is based on the idea of restoring factual truth in a fragmented public space.

The phenomenon of disinformation is amplified by the speed and horizontality of social media, creating what the WHO and several authors call an infodemic (Zarocostas, 2020; Brennen et al., 2020). The absence of centralized editorial mechanisms gives users the role of gatewatchers (Bruns, 2011), by amplifying content based on emotional preferences, political affinities or cognitive biases. In response, fact-checkers position themselves as agents of “epistemic rebalancing” (Graves, 2016), legitimized by verifiable methodologies, procedural transparency and links to the democratic public sphere.

1.2 Conceptual definitions: fact-checking, disinformation, and epistemic dispute

Fact-checking is defined as a specialized journalistic practice that applies systematic and verifiable methods to the evaluation of public statements, with the aim of assessing their veracity (Amazeen, 2020; Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2018; Luengo & García-Marín, 2020). Unlike conventional forms of news editing, it is a retroactive activity that operates on previously published content, proposing an inverse selectivity or gatebouncing (Vos, 2019). As such, it presents itself as an institutionalized

extension of journalistic accountability, with a normative-democratic vocation (Amazeen, 2020).

However, disinformation — the central object of these practices — is a fluid and multidimensional concept, as Wardle (2018) observes. The term fake news itself is insufficient to capture the diversity of the information ecosystem. For this reason, Wardle (2018) proposes a classification into seven categories of distortion: false connection, misleading content, false context, impostor content, manipulated content and fabricated content. These, in turn, are organised into three macro-groups, according to the degree of veracity and the intention to harm of the information. They are classified as misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

In turn, Tandoc et al. (2018) propose a typology that crosses the level of facticity with the degree of intentionality, which results in four analytical categories. Both proposals highlight the need for an interpretative and contextual approach to disinformation, which can go beyond the true/false binary.

The study by Zecchinon and Standaert (2025) exemplifies these challenges well, when analysing the limitations of specialist fact-checking in the face of visual disinformation during the war in Ukraine. The authors argue that image verification requires semantic and hermeneutic skills, not just technical or factual ones, and exposes the limits of models based exclusively on literalness and objectivity.

In addition to operational definitions, it is important to consider fact-checking as a practice situated in a broader field of epistemic dispute. Graves (2016) argues that the emergence of verification platforms represents an attempt to institutionally reposition journalism in the face of the erosion of its monopoly on the production of factual truth. This repositioning occurs in a context of pluralization of authoritative voices — experts, influencers, algorithms — that challenges the epistemic centrality of conventional media. Carlson (2016) reinforces this idea by proposing that fact-checking should be understood as a ritual of authority, through which journalism attempts to reaffirm its legitimacy in an environment of contestation.

Tandoc et al. (2018) suggest that this epistemic performance is inevitably intertwined with ideological disputes: when selecting what to check, which sources

to use and which criteria to apply, fact-checkers expose themselves to criticism of bias and accusations of censorship, especially in environments marked by political polarization. Waisbord (2018) adds that these tensions are inseparable from the rise of post-factual cultures, in which truthfulness gives way to ideological verisimilitude. Thus, fact-checking operates simultaneously as a technical practice, a symbolic gesture and a political intervention in contemporary public space.

It is also important to recognize that the practice of fact-checking is subject to profound variations depending on the socio-political context in which it is exercised. As Vinhas and Bastos (2025a, 2025b) argue, the hegemonic view of fact-checking as a technical-behavioural response to individual deviations — often based on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) assumptions — is insufficient to capture the specificities of informational environments marked by structural distrust, institutional fragility or colonial legacies. In these contexts, fact-checking often assumes more horizontal and community-based contours, integrating local networks of social correction and competing for consensus in a cultural grammar distinct from that assumed by Western normative models.

1.3 Evolution and institutionalization of fact-checking: from the United States to Southern Europe

Although it had already emerged in the early 2000s, through projects such as FactCheck.org (2003) and PolitiFact (2007), it was only during the first Trump era, in a context of strong political polarization, that the fact-checking movement established itself as a transnational journalistic movement (Graves, 2016). In Europe, however, the growth of fact-checking was later and fragmented, with the existence of two predominant organizational models. In the newsroom model, the networks are integrated into conventional newsrooms, and in the NGO model, they are based on independent organizations, often with academic or civic ties (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). The latter is the predominant model in Southern European countries (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2023).

Wouters and Opgenhaffen (2024) highlight the importance of the subnational level, especially in con-

texts of ‘fact deserts’, where the absence of local verification compromises democratic accountability. In these regions, local fact-checkers act as local watchdogs (d’Haenens et al., 2019), benefiting from the trust and connection of local audiences, even with scarce resources and low public visibility.

In Mediterranean countries — particularly Portugal, Spain and Italy — fact-checking is conditioned by characteristics typical of the polarised pluralist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), such as political parallelism, low journalistic professionalism and strong media instrumentalisation. This reality has encouraged the emergence of independent projects such as Maldita.es (Spain), Polígrafo (Portugal) or Pagella Politica (Italy), generally driven by electoral contexts and with a strongly civic orientation (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022). In general, they face funding difficulties, little integration in the mass media and challenges in terms of impact and recognition among the public (Vizoso & Vázquez-Herrero, 2019).

On the other hand, linguistic diversity and media centralization limit the widespread circulation of their checks, especially outside periods of political or electoral crisis (Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2020). Even so, these projects stand out for their methodological robustness, procedural transparency and commitment to the public — and are often signatories to the IFCN code (Graves & Anderson, 2020).

1.4 Effects of fact-checking: empirical evidence and academic debate

Concomitant with its emergence, criticisms of the real effectiveness of fact-checking have also emerged, especially in highly polarized contexts. The correction of false beliefs, for example, does not have a uniform impact on audiences and can even serve to reinforce pre-existing convictions (boomerang effect) (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Uscinski & Butler, 2013). Despite this, Graham and Porter (2025) indicate that the boomerang effect is not only rare but that most fact-checking interventions produce positive, albeit modest, results.

Another limitation of fact-checking is that its cognitive effects tend to be short-lived and require repeated exposure (Amazeen, 2015). Effectiveness

increases when messages are specific, clear, non-confrontational, and applied to consensual factual topics rather than highly polarized domains (Guess, Lockett, et al., 2020).

Despite the promising results, fact-checking is strongly conditioned by variables such as trust in the issuer (Graves, 2016; Moreno-Gil et al., 2022) and selective exposure that limits the penetration of fact-checks in ideological bubbles (Guess, Nyhan, et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 2020). Other factors that reduce the acceptance of corrections were found in low media literacy, information overload and the fragmentation of digital sources (Fridkin et al., 2015). Moreno-Gil et al. (2022) observe that fact-checkers have low penetration among politicized audiences, and that their content rarely circulates outside institutional or journalistic niches. Criticism of the neutrality of fact-checkers and suspicion of ideological alignment call into question the symbolic legitimacy of fact-checking as a journalistic institution.

2. Methodology

This study constitutes the second analytical phase of a broader research project, which began with a systematic review of the academic literature on fact-checking in three Southern European countries: Portugal, Italy, and Spain. After collecting the articles for analysis, we conducted a qualitative thematic analysis to analyze the empirical results reported (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

2.1 Systematic literature review — data collection

In this first phase, we conducted a systematic analysis of research focusing on studies on fact-checking in Portugal, Spain, and Italy. We used the Scopus bibliographic database, limiting our search to articles published from 2020 to the present, in four languages: Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and English. The number of publications (journal titles) indexed in Scopus by country varies and may help explain why Spain has more studies: in the field of communication, Portugal has 10 journals, Spain 32, and Italy 11.

The data collection resulted in 108 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025. Subsequently, they were systematically collected and analyzed, with the aim of mapping recent academic production on verification practices in Portugal, Spain, and Italy. The selection process followed the PRISMA protocol (Page et al., 2021), using international databases and a triangulated screening procedure based on keywords, abstracts, and titles (see Figure 1).

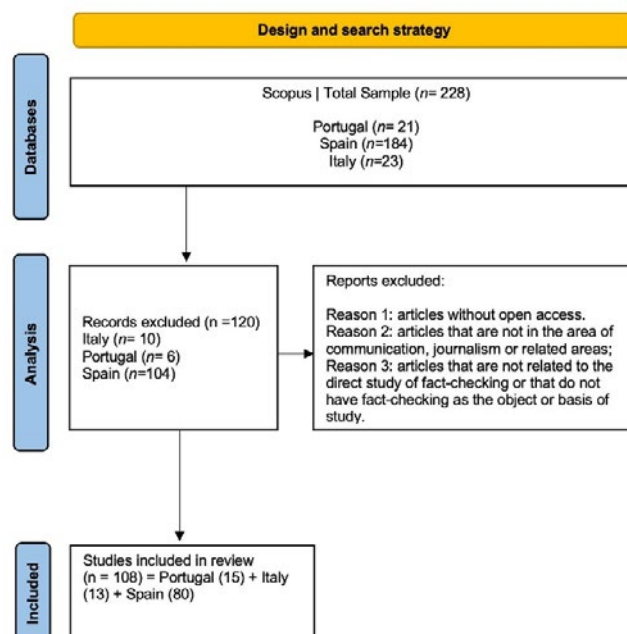


Figure 1. Search design and strategy.

It is important to emphasize that the bibliographic research was conducted using specific queries for each country, as described below:

- Portugal: (TITLE-ABS-KEY("fact-checking" OR "fact checking" OR "fact-checker*" OR "verification journalism" OR "fake news" OR "misinformation" OR "disinformation")) AND (LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, "English") OR LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, "Portuguese")) AND (AFFILCOUNTRY("Portugal")) AND (PUBYEAR > 2020)
- Spain: (TITLE-ABS-KEY("fact-checking" OR "fact checking" OR "fact-checker*" OR "periodismo de verificación" OR "verificación de hechos")) AND (LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE,

“English”) OR LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, “Spanish”)) AND (AFFILCOUNTRY(“Spain”)) AND (PUBYEAR > 2020)

- Italy: (TITLE-ABS-KEY(“fact-checking” OR “fact checking” OR “fact-checker*” OR “giornalismo di verifica”)) AND (LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, “English”) OR LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, “Italian”)) AND (AFFILCOUNTRY(“Italy”)) AND (PUBYEAR > 2020).

Based on the corpus established in that initial procedure, this article focuses exclusively on the empirical findings reported in these studies to conduct a second-order analysis, thematically organizing the discursive domains and analytical patterns that emerge from the existing literature. Special attention is given to the communicative strategies, structural limitations, and sociopolitical implications of fact-checking practices in the media context of these three countries.

2.2 Qualitative thematic analysis of empirical findings

First, it is important to emphasize that we chose to analyze a corpus composed of the empirical results identified in each previously selected publication. The main objective of this method was to identify recurring patterns, thematic convergences, and dominant research trends related to fact-checking practices in Portugal, Spain, and Italy.

To this end, our analysis considered the principles of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006), understood as a flexible qualitative analytical method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning in a dataset. However, in our study, we sought to apply a thematic analysis closer to an analytical technique, allowing us to synthesize the findings in our corpus, rather than a more interpretive analytical approach, such as that later developed by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021). We consider this method appropriate because the objective was not to quantify categories or frequencies, but always stemmed from the initiative to identify recurring thematic patterns through the empirical findings that were published in the analyzed studies.

Secondly, our analysis focused on identifying recurring analytical domains among the studies, while preserving the contextual particularities of each investigation. Therefore, throughout the analysis process, the sample of our corpus was read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the empirical evidence (Nowell et al., 2017). This allowed us to systematically extract and code all relevant results on the practice of fact-checking, namely organizational characteristics, technological developments, professional routines, political dimensions, and audience-related issues.

Thirdly, we grouped the closest or most similar codes into broader thematic domains, which allowed us to identify the most recurrent analytical patterns in the literature (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the thematic structure was progressively refined through an iterative comparison between studies, until they consistently captured the recurrent empirical patterns identified across the analytical corpus.

Therefore, our qualitative thematic analysis allowed us to create three thematic domains that were considered recurrent in the results of the publications analyzed. Although presented separately for analytical purposes, the themes were designed to be understood as complementary and interconnected dimensions of research around fact-checking.

Thus, the analytical process of the analyzed corpus revealed a set of themes associated with emerging fact-checking practices, namely regarding the use of online platforms, the adoption of AI in the journalistic process, and the daily challenges of the profession. The themes were defined through the systematic grouping and interpretation of semantically related codes identified across the analytical corpus: 1) Tension and adoption of artificial intelligence in journalism; 2) Technical and structural challenges of fact-checking; 3) Fact-checking and the political relationship. It is important to highlight that the themes were defined based on the semantic analysis of the corpus, considering a critical and qualitative interpretation of the meanings found. Table 1 summarizes the main stages of the qualitative thematic analysis conducted in this study.

The selection and interpretation process was carried out by the authors through repeated reading and comparison of empirical results, with iterative discussions to refine the thematic domains.

Stage of analysis	Description of the analytical procedure
Definition of the analytical corpus	The analytical corpus comprised the empirical findings reported in the studies included in the systematic review on fact-checking practices in Portugal, Spain, and Italy.
Familiarisation with the corpus	The empirical findings were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the evidence and to identify recurrent analytical patterns across the selected studies (Nowell et al., 2017).
Coding of empirical findings	Relevant empirical findings were systematically extracted and coded according to their analytical content, including organisational characteristics, technological developments, professional routines, political dimensions, and audience-related issues.
Development of thematic domains	Conceptually related codes were grouped into broader thematic domains, allowing the identification of recurring patterns across the empirical literature (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).
Refinement of themes	The thematic domains were progressively refined through an iterative comparison between studies to ensure that each theme consistently represented the empirical evidence included in the analytical corpus (Nowell et al., 2017).
Final thematic structure	The analytical process resulted in three thematic domains that synthesise the principal empirical trends identified in the reviewed literature: (1) Tension and adoption of artificial intelligence in journalism; (2) Technical and structural challenges of fact-checking; and (3) Fact-checking and the political relationship.

Table 1. Main stages of the qualitative thematic analysis conducted in this study.

3. Results and discussion

Overall, our results allowed us to identify the main themes raised by empirical research on fact-checking in Portugal, Spain, and Italy (RQ1). Furthermore, the results also reveal the structural, technological, and professional challenges that shape fact-checking practices (RQ2).

3.1 Tension in the adoption of AI in journalism

The first theme we identified, after analyzing the studies, addresses the increasing integration of artificial intelligence in fact-checking practices. We acknowledge that the different studies conduct research and use different methodological techniques, but the truth is that they consistently explore how AI is being incorporated into journalistic verification processes. Furthermore, they also analyze the opportunities and challenges associated with its use. Taken together, these studies provide a comprehensive overview of the current role of artificial intelligence in contemporary fact-checking practices.

Our analysis allowed us to understand, at first, that there is tension regarding the adoption of artificial intelligence in journalism. While, on the one hand, the need to integrate AI into the fact-checking process is recognized; on the other hand, journalists also have a skeptical view regarding its application (Table 2). Martínez-Navarro (2025) reports “acceptance” and “resistance” on the part of journalists. Cantón-Correa et al. (2025, p. 466) state that “[...] their efficiency and effectiveness depend mostly on the integration of the human factor in the verification process”, which reinforces the idea that AI does not completely replace human work, but can complement it. Even so, fact-checkers are dependent on “[...] continuous training and collaboration between different actors to effectively address disinformation” (Cantón-Correa et al., 2025, p. 466). Regarding the integration of AI into fact-checking practices, Gutiérrez-Caneda and Vázquez-Herrero (2024) point out that there are risks and financial barriers to its full implementation. The same study reports that there is an impact on “distrust of the media” and that there are “inequalities between countries”. Like Cantón-Correa et al. (2025), Gutiérrez-Caneda and Vázquez-Herrero (2024) highlight the need to strengthen journalists’ knowledge in this area.

Open-source intelligence (OSINT) occupies an ambiguous position in the reviewed literature. It is named explicitly only in two papers. Cantón-Correa et al. (2025) report that 66% of Iberian fact-checkers seek OSINT training, second only to artificial intelligence, and Gutiérrez-Caneda and Vázquez-Herrero (2024) identify command of OSINT tools as a condition of contemporary verification work. Yet no study in the corpus examines OSINT as a methodology in its own right. The practices it designates appear instead under other descriptions, including reverse image search, geolocation and metadata verification through tools such as TinEye, InVID and Google Lens (Gonçalves et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Serrano et al., 2021; Sánchez-González et al., 2022). OSINT as a recognised professional competence has yet to receive sustained scholarly attention.

Furthermore, our findings also include studies that present a reconfiguration of fact-checkers’ routines, influenced by the emergence of AI (Cuartielles et al., 2023; Gonçalves et al., 2024). Artificial intelligence is used “[...] in monitoring and filtering internet and media content; transcription of verifiable phrases; verification of images and videos; selection of content submitted by the audience” (Gonçalves et al., 2024, p. 1).

Theme	Sub-themes	Reference
Ambivalent adoption of AI in journalism	Cultural transformation of routines, complementarity	Martínez-Navarro (2025); resistance, Cantón-Correa et al. (2025); Gonçalves et al. (2024); Gutiérrez-Caneda et al. (2024)
	Barriers and asymmetries in implementation	Cantón-Correa et al. (2025); Financial resources, technical inequality between AI profiles, organizations
Ethical concerns		Hidalgo-Cobo et al. (2025); Gutiérrez-Caneda and Vázquez-Herrero (2024); García-Marín (2024). Gonçalves et al. (2024); Baptista, Gradim, et al. (2023); Gutiérrez-Caneda et al. (2024)
	Cultural resistance and ethical concerns	

Table 2. Themes and subthemes related to the adoption of AI in journalism

It is clear that there is a hybrid model of fact-checking, in which technology improves work efficiency, but does not solve all the challenges, namely ethical issues (Gonçalves et al., 2024; Baptista, Gradim, et al., 2023; Gutiérrez-Caneda et al., 2024), such as algorithmic bias and the need for human validation. These findings reinforce the argument that there is a human-machine complementarity.

3.2 Technical and structural challenges of fact-checking

In the second theme of our analysis, we included studies that focus on the professional and technical challenges faced by fact-checking practices. Although these studies were applied in different national contexts, we found that they collectively highlight the main factors influencing not only the implementation but also the sustainability and effectiveness of fact-checking practices.

Our results demonstrate that the fact-checking process faces technical and structural challenges. Firstly, in terms of its effectiveness. For example, Marcondes et al. (2024, p. 1) state that “[...] fact checking, no matter how good it is, fails in its goal of debunking fake news for the general public”, mainly because it presents a low engagement rate, generating little interaction or involvement on social media, which can be explained by an emotional disconnect and unconvincing communication. Secondly, the use of and access to the work of fact-checkers is limited (Almenar et al., 2022; Baptista, Gradim, et al., 2023; Hidalgo-Cobo et al., 2025; Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2024). The literature suggests

that fact-checking has a limited reach, with low levels of familiarity with the practice (Baptista, Gradim, et al., 2023), since “[...] the majority of the population is unaware of what fact-checkers are” and “those who use them are a minority” (Almenar et al., 2022, p. 124). Thus, Almenar et al. (2022) believe that fact-checking can hardly effectively combat misinformation, especially in a polarized context.

Also in relation to the popularity of fact-checking, García-Marín (2024) points out that there are significant differences among fact-checkers in the use of platforms and formats. In other words, some fact-checkers use more efficient formats to generate interaction on social media, such as likes or comments. In general, “[...] the single photograph is the most used type of content, [...] however, the photographic format, despite being the most widespread, is not the one that receives the most likes and comments” (García-Marín, 2024, p. 498). Furthermore, search engines such as Google, due to the ease and speed of accessing information, seem to act as competitors of fact-checkers, with users resorting more to this method to verify information (Almenar et al., 2022). In addition to this fact, it should be added that fact-checking is not a uniform and common practice across all media outlets, being common only in the largest media outlets (Gómez-Calderón & López-Martín, 2024).

Rivas-de-Roca et al. (2024) found that fact-checkers focus on traditional political leaders, not engaging in the symbolic conflict promoted by more populist, emotional and provocative discourse, which may influence the impact of fact-checking on social media, dictated by the logic of the attention economy. Baptista et al. (2022) also found that fact-checkers tend to focus their attention on televised debates during election periods, not highlighting the misinformation circulating on social media.

However, some studies (e.g., Sánchez-González et al., 2022) report that fact-checkers make an effort to adapt to the demands of digital platforms, particularly through the use of audiovisual formats. Sánchez-González et al. (2022, p. 136) indicate that “[...] the greatest innovations are materialized in videos and podcasts, ranging from summaries and curation of content to explanatory. They are carried out through networks such as YouTube, Instagram and even TikTok, Twitch

and podcasting channels, using narratives adapted to these channels.” In this sense, the use of audiovisual formats such as short videos, visual carousels and podcasts reflects an alignment with the modes of information consumption on social media. Furthermore, the same study reinforces the idea that social media, despite the challenges already listed, are used strategically by fact-checkers, aligning themselves as a digital communication strategy.

Subtheme	Corpus	References
Efficiency vs. Financial Barriers	“Fact-checking is a time-consuming task that requires human resources, which are generally scarce in small newsrooms such as those in Portuguese regional media outlets. In news deserts, the situation becomes even more dramatic.”	(Torre & Jerónimo, 2023, p. 10).
	“Although AI has been used to automate repetitive tasks and collect data for news, there remain ethical challenges and financial barriers that must be addressed to fully integrate AI into journalism”	(Santos, 2023, p. 686)
	“[...]Workload is an obstacle that prevents most journalists from devoting the time required to verification work”	(Gómez-Calderón & López-Martin, 2024, p. 1).
Need for new journalist profiles	“The results allow us to affirm that there are specific and novel skills and abilities that a new journalistic practice demands: verification journalism and that, therefore, these new competencies should be considered in Higher Education plans”	(Herrero-Diz et al., 2022, p. 231)
Fact-checking on platforms	“[...] local journalists expressed a need to learn more about techniques to increase the visibility of their news content on the internet and social media”	(Dourado et al., 2025)
	“Our findings indicate that video is the most common format to disseminate disinformation content, namely, to illustrate war scenarios. [...] especially YouTube”	(Baptista, Rivas-de-Roca, et al., 2023)
	“[...] TikTok is a network that facilitates the spread of disinformation, but which in turn is a tool for debunking hoaxes beyond the range of action of conventional media”	(Alonso-López et al., 2021, p. 65)

Table 3. *Sub-themes associated with the main challenges of fact-checking practice*

Returning to the use of social media by fact-checkers, we realize that social media, especially TikTok, functions as an ambivalent space: simultaneously a vector of disinformation and also a medium that can be synonymous with innovation for fact-checking (Alonso-López et al., 2021; Sidorenko-Bautista et al., 2021; Sánchez-González et al., 2022). TikTok thus reconfigures journalistic practices and leads fact-checkers to adopt its language in order to make their communication more effective among younger people (Sidorenko-Bautista et al., 2021). On the other hand, our findings seem to show differences, by country, regarding the use of online platforms. While Facebook remains the main platform for disinformation in Portugal (Poch-Butler et al., 2025), X, formerly Twitter, and the messaging platform WhatsApp are the ones that spread the most disinformation and are the most verified in Spain (Paniagua Rojano et al., 2020; Poch-Butler et al., 2025). Other studies (e.g., Baptista, Rivas-de-Roca, et al., 2023) have shown that YouTube was the preferred platform for disinformation agents to spread false con-

tent at the beginning of the war between Russia and Ukraine. Therefore, fact-checkers require, above all, a communicational adaptation, not only in terms of technical mastery, but especially in terms of adopting a more visual language and a hybrid professional profile, in which fact-checkers must assume educational roles.

Finally, the verification capacity seems to be limited by the lack of investment in newsrooms, especially in small or local media (Jerónimo & Sánchez Esparza, 2023). Furthermore, there appears to be “almost blind trust” in official sources at the local level (Jerónimo & Sánchez Esparza, 2023), which may also indicate an excessive reliance on official sources by fact-checkers and journalists in general. This pattern may indicate a risk of bias and reinforces the idea that disinformation grows faster than efforts to combat it. Not only considering local cases, for example, Herrero and Herrera-Damas (2021) find other problems related to the practice of fact-checking. This study analyzed the fact-checking process in the Ibero-American universe and found that fact-checking services have a series of difficulties in covering the amount of disinformation circulating on social media, particularly when disseminated on closed social networks such as WhatsApp. Access to information and the subjectivity that currently exists in public opinion are other types of limitations presented, as well as the difficulty in accessing audiovisual resources essential for verification.

3.3 Fact-checking and the political relationship

The third thematic area concerns studies that examine the relationship between fact-checking and the political sphere. We note that the selected literature also explores how fact-checking practices interact with the various realities of the political and media ecosystem, namely with political actors, media organizations, and public debate. In some ways, this illustrates the role of fact-checking in contemporary democratic contexts.

In a first approach regarding the relationship between fact-checking and politics, our results reinforce the centrality of politics in the media coverage of fact-checkers (Poch-Butler et al., 2025; Blanco-Herrero et al., 2024), with, for example, a decrease in disinformation about COVID-19, but disinformation related to

government policies remaining (Almansa-Martínez et al., 2022). Furthermore, fact-checking tends to focus on political discourse, especially in electoral contexts (Poch-Butler et al., 2025; Baptista et al., 2022). This indicates, on the one hand, that there is a shift in the focus of disinformation; on the other hand, this shift reflects a continuous challenge, on the part of fact-checkers, to monitor political discourse, particularly on social networks such as X and WhatsApp (Almansa-Martínez et al., 2022). Furthermore, disinformation agents are often actors with political or ideological interests (Herrero-Diz et al., 2020), which also implies motivated political reasoning in the field of reception and distribution. In this sense, the challenge for fact-checking is evident, since it does not operate in a neutral field, which will have implications for its use and effectiveness. In this close relationship with politics, Ufarte-Ruiz et al. (2020, p. 23) state that fact-checkers verify “[...] mainly political statements and the information circulating on the Internet and whose business model diverges from conventional journalism”, suggesting, in some way, that fact-checking is a practice of civic mediation and political accountability and its social function is to evaluate, correct and denounce.

The studies analyzed allowed us to understand that disinformation seems to tend to favor populist agendas, particularly from the radical right. However, populist, radical-right leaders are, paradoxically, less fact-checked than traditional politicians (Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2024). As for political asymmetry, while some studies suggest that fact-checking can be biased (Paniagua Rojano et al., 2020), others (e.g., Baptista et al., 2022) suggest the opposite. Still, for all intents and purposes, fact-checkers act as discursive actors who actively intervene in the political arena and are invoked as a source of authority [in parliamentary contexts] to validate political discourses (Campos-Domínguez & Renedo-Farpón, 2024), which confers them prestige or recognition.

In summary, the results demonstrate that empirical research on fact-checking in academia in these three countries — Portugal, Spain, and Italy — converges around three interrelated thematic domains — technological innovation, structural vulnerability, and political contestation — thus answering the research questions that guided this analysis.

4. Conclusion

In a general approach, this work allowed us to identify a set of challenges, tensions, and limitations associated with the practice of fact-checking in three Southern European countries, particularly regarding the adoption of AI in newsrooms, but also in relation to the challenges the profession faces daily. The article demonstrates that fact-checking in Portugal, Spain, and Italy is best understood as a practice marked by a persistent tension between symbolic legitimacy and operational vulnerability. We note that, across the three analytical dimensions identified, fact-checking simultaneously consolidates itself as a normative response to the crisis of informational credibility and is limited by various structural, technological, and political factors. In fact, the integration of artificial intelligence particularly illustrates this ambivalence well. That is, AI is seen as a source of innovation and efficiency, but it also introduces new forms of dependence, ethical opacity, and inequality among organizations, which can reinforce the asymmetries that already exist in the media ecosystem. Moreover, artificial intelligence, although perceived as a promising technology for journalistic practice, continues to be viewed with some resistance by fact-checkers and journalists, especially due to associated ethical concerns. However, it seems to us that this resistance should not be interpreted as a rejection of innovation, but above all as problems related to transparency or editorial competence itself. It is important to note, however, that although OSINT-related practices were identified in some of the studies we analyzed, the concept itself received only limited explicit attention in the corpus analyzed. In some ways, this seems to suggest that scientific research on fact-checking has focused, to date, more on the operational use of verification techniques than on OSINT as a distinct methodological framework, highlighting an avenue for future research. It is important to understand how AI reshapes professional norms and power relations within the media ecosystem.

On the other hand, our study also allows us to verify that fact-checking is very focused on a deeply politicized environment. The studies analyzed showed us that disinformation is consistently built around political phenomena and mostly associated with populist

and far-right actors. This seems to put fact-checkers in a position of permanent contestation. Therefore, we believe that fact-checking risks being confined to a kind of reactive role, oriented towards short-term political agendas instead of broader communicative or educational interventions.

It is important to emphasize that these findings should not be interpreted as evidence of institutional homogeneity among the three countries. In reality, the literature points to a pattern that converges structurally, but which presents national divergences due to the very evolution of each fact-checking ecosystem in each country.

We believe that similarities and differences can be better understood through Hallin and Mancini's (2004) model of a polarized pluralist media system, which characterized these countries with a media with strong political parallelism and a tendentially weaker journalistic professionalization.

Even so, these weaknesses pointed out for the media system of these Southern European countries help to understand why fact-checking initiatives in the three countries developed in response to common challenges, namely political polarization, the proliferation of disinformation on digital platforms, and limited financial and human resources not only in the practice of fact-checking, but also in all journalistic practice. Spain is effectively the country that presents the most mature fact-checking practice within the corpus analyzed, both in terms of organizational development and academic production. We observed that studies frequently examine internationally recognized organizations, such as Maldita and Newtral. These fact-checking organizations have been highlighted for their investments in technological innovation, the construction of collaborative verification networks, the implementation of media literacy initiatives, and the effort to incorporate artificial intelligence tools into newsroom practices (Vizoso & Vázquez-Herrero, 2019; Moreno-Gil et al., 2022; Gutiérrez-Caneda & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024). It is noted, therefore, that this greater institutional maturity may have contributed to a broader research agenda, encompassing not only public engagement but also platform strategies, innovation, and AI-assisted verification.

In the Portuguese case, scientific research focuses mainly on Polígrafo, which shows that there is a small media market in Portugal that has only recently been

more consolidated with independent fact-checking initiatives (Baptista, Gradim, et al., 2023).

This helps to understand why Portuguese studies tend to examine newsroom routines, verification practices, local journalism, and the professional challenges associated with the institutionalization of fact-checking in a media environment with relatively limited resources (Jerónimo & Sánchez Esparza, 2023; Torre & Jerónimo, 2023).

In this scenario, Italy occupies an intermediate position in the literature analyzed. Although organizations such as Pagella Politica have become important actors mainly in the public and political sphere, research from Italian academia works on the relationship between political discourse and institutional transparency in fact-checking. In addition, we also note that Italian publications have shown a proportionally greater interest in artificial intelligence related to verification than those from Portugal or Spain. While Spanish research has focused more extensively on the analysis of fact-checking practices and organizational innovation.

It is important to emphasize that these national differences do not contradict the strong convergence identified in the studies analyzed. Instead, they illustrate that countries that share the same Mediterranean media model can develop distinct organizational trajectories, even when facing similar structural pressures.

In some ways, our study supports a nuanced interpretation, in which Portugal, Spain, and Italy cannot be considered institutionally identical, but point to structural characteristics that are sufficiently similar to explain the recurring empirical patterns identified in the literature analyzed.

Furthermore, our analysis also allowed us to perceive that fact-checking faces a series of challenges, especially as a recent journalistic practice. Fact-checking still operates within a niche logic, with limited reach and effectiveness, which can be explained by the public's low familiarity. Our results point to a need to understand fact-checking as a communicative practice embedded in media systems, power relations, and specific technological infrastructures. We argue that fact-checking should not be seen as a neutral or purely technical instrument, but as sensitive to various contexts. We believe, for example, that the way fact-checkers operate on digital platforms needs to be improved, particularly in terms

of a cross-cutting adoption of audiovisual formats and explanatory language closer to the public's interests.

We advocate that future research should therefore prioritize more longitudinal analyses of fact-checking practices, going beyond analyses in electoral cycles. It is important to understand how fact-checking deals with the automation of online platforms and that media literacy can be an integrated strategy. By doing so, fact-checking research can contribute not only to evaluating the effectiveness of corrective measures, but also to rethinking the role of journalism in contested epistemic environments.

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Bio

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Rubén Rivas-de-Roca (Ph.D., University of Seville) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Sciences at the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain). He holds a PhD in Communication with an international distinction “cum laude”, from the inter-university program of the universities of Cádiz, Huelva, Málaga and Seville (Extraordinary Doctoral Award, 2022). He is a member of the Novos Medios research group and the IDE-GA. He worked before at King Juan Carlos University and the University of Seville. Moreover, he was a visiting researcher at Leipzig University (Germany), Cardiff University (United Kingdom), University of Beira Interior (Portugal) as well as at Carlos III University of Madrid (Spain). His works have appeared in journals like *Journalism*, *Media and Communication*, *Journalism Practice*, *European Journal of Communication*, etc. His lines of research focus on the study of political communication, local and new digital media, as well as the European public sphere.

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