

DISSEMINATION STRATEGY OF SPANISH FACT-CHECKING AGENCIES ON THEIR 'WHATSAPP' CHANNELS

ESTRATEGIA DE DIFUSIÓN DE LAS AGENCIAS DE VERIFICACIÓN ESPAÑOLAS EN SUS CANALES DE 'WHATSAPP'

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Alejandra Tirado García

Universitat Jaume I de Castelló (España)

tiradoa@uji.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5947-7215>

Laura Alonso-Muñoz

Universitat Jaume I de Castelló (España)

lalonso@uji.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8894-1064>

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Abstract: The objective of this research is to understand the dissemination strategy employed by Spanish fact-checking agencies through their *WhatsApp* channels. Specifically, it analyses the theme and function of the publications, the type of misinformation verified, and the interaction and multimedia presence. Quantitative content analysis is used to analyse the 258 messages published by *Newtral*, *Maldita*, and *EFE Verifica* on their *WhatsApp* channels over two months. The results show some interesting findings. Firstly, it is noteworthy that *Newtral* and *Maldita* have a regular publication frequency, but not *EFE Verifica*. Secondly, the conflict between Israel and Palestine dominates a large portion of the verifications by *Newtral* and *EFE Verifica*. In contrast, *Maldita* focuses on informing about topics related to science and technology or politics. Thirdly, it is highlighted that only *Maldita* seeks to promote real interaction with users through reactions. These findings provide insights into the use of newly created *WhatsApp* channels by fact-checking agencies.

Keywords: Journalism; Disinformation; *WhatsApp* channels; Fact-checking.

Resumen: El objetivo de esta investigación es conocer la estrategia de difusión que emplean las agencias de verificación españolas a través de sus canales de *WhatsApp*. Concretamente, se analiza el tema y la función de las publicaciones, el tipo de desinformación que se verifica y la interacción y la multimedialidad presente. Para ello se emplea el análisis de contenido cuantitativo sobre los 258 mensajes publicados por *Newtral*, *Maldita* y *EFE Verifica* en sus canales de *WhatsApp* durante dos meses. Los resultados muestran algunos apuntes interesantes. En primer lugar, destaca como *Newtral* y *Maldita* tienen una frecuencia de publicación bastante regular, pero no *EFE Verifica*. Segundo, el conflicto entre Israel y Palestina ocupa gran parte de las verificaciones de *Newtral* y *EFE Verifica*. En cambio, *Maldita* se dedica a informar sobre cuestiones relacionadas con la ciencia y la tecnología o política. En tercer lugar, destaca como sólo *Maldita* busca fomentar una interacción real con los usuarios a través de las reacciones. Estos hallazgos aportan conocimiento sobre el uso que realizan las agencias de verificación de los recién creados canales de *WhatsApp*.

Palabras clave: Periodismo; Desinformación; Canales de *WhatsApp*; Verificación.

1. Introduction

The emergence of the Internet, the popularization of social media as informational tools, and the redefinition of the public sphere, among other factors, have multiplied the volume and reach of information directed at citizens. Currently, users have constant and unlimited access to content from all kinds of sources, some of which provide accurate information, while others disseminate fake or erroneous news. In this context, there has been an increase in the discredit of traditional media (Salaverría & Cardoso, 2023), and a significant rise in the misinformation to which citizens are exposed (Casero-Ripollés, Doménech-Fabregat & Alonso-Muñoz, 2023). Information disorders circulate false or misleading content created, presented, and disseminated with the aim of obtaining economic profit and/or intentionally deceiving the public (European Commission, 2019). The exposure to this type of content seriously undermines the legitimacy of institutions and has strong democratic consequences (Bennet & Livingston, 2018). According to the First Study on Disinformation in Spain, 95.8% of the population identifies the phenomenon of disinformation as a serious social problem (Uteca, 2022).

Given this scenario, data verification has gained special prominence in recent years, a journalistic discipline aimed at guiding citizens on the credibility of online content (Brandtzaeg, Følstad & Chaparro Domínguez, 2018) and promoting truth in public speech (Humprecht, 2020). While the first initiative of this kind dates to 1995 with *Snopes.com* (Graves, 2016), it has been over the last decade that most projects aiming to combat the phenomenon of disinformation have proliferated. These have spread worldwide, gaining momentum from 2016, when the Brexit referendum took place in the United Kingdom and Donald Trump's first presidential election campaign took place (Blanco-Alfonso, 2019). Since then, numerous journalistic initiatives have been dedicated to fact-checking (Vázquez-Herrero, Vizoso & López-García, 2019), becoming the most important variant of journalism in the digital age (López-Pan & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2019) with 391 active initiatives worldwide (Stencel *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, 50 countries have data verification projects linked to the *International Fact-Checking Network* (IFCN), which brings together 91 registered platforms, both dependent on media outlets and news agencies, as well as independent ones (Cherubini & Graves, 2016).

Fact-checking agencies have an important role in literacy so that both information professionals and citizens learn to distinguish false from true content and stop contributing to its virality (Buchanan, 2020). These agencies not only have to ensure the accuracy of the information they verify and the quality of the messages they disseminate, but also present them attractively and ensure

they reach a massive audience through their digital channels. To date, fact-checkers had opted for *X* (former *Twitter*) and *Facebook* as the most used channels, followed by *Instagram* and *YouTube* (Dafonte-Gómez, Míguez-González & Ramahí-García, 2022), and recently also *TikTok* (Sidorenko-Bautista, Alonso-López & Giacomelli, 2021). However, in Spain, in early September 2023, some fact-checking agencies made the leap to instant messaging mobile services and launched their own *WhatsApp* channels. This is the case of *Maldita*, *Newtral*, and *EFE Verifica*, Spanish agencies signatories of the IFCN codes.

Although previous literature has warned of the importance of instant messaging mobile services in combating disinformation (Dafonte-Gómez, Míguez-González & Ramahí-García, 2022), there are still no scientific studies on the subject. In this sense, the present research constitutes a descriptive approach to how Spanish fact-checking agencies use *WhatsApp* channels to disseminate their content. Although it is an exploratory study, the analysed cases are useful to observe the different formulas used by fact-checkers to reach the audience.

2. Literature review

Disinformation has become a problem threatening the legitimacy of contemporary democracies (Bennett & Livingston, 2018) and has consequences on the democratic quality of our societies. It is a phenomenon that has been present throughout the history of communication, especially during the times of armed conflict (Bloch, 1999). In the first half of the 20th century, Nazism (Doob, 1950) and Soviet communism (Lasswell, 1951) recurrently employed the planned dissemination of false messages to confuse the adversary. Subsequently, during the Cold War, this practice became widespread, extending to a large number of countries worldwide. In the 1990s, this practice was further enhanced with the arrival of the technological revolution and its impact grew exponentially to the point in which, in 2017, the *Oxford* dictionary chose the term «fake news» as the word of the year (Vázquez-Herrero, Vizoso, & López-García, 2019). Since then, a spiral of disinformation previously unseen has been witnessed (Salaverría & Cardoso, 2023), which worsened even more with the COVID health crisis in 2019 (Zunino, 2021; León *et al.*, 2022), leading to what the *World Health Organization* (WHO) has termed an «infodemic» (WHO, 2020). Additionally, the outbreak of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 has also contributed to the proliferation of hoaxes aimed at destabilizing the adversary (Fernández-Castrillo & Magallón-Rosa, 2023).

Presently, we are facing a communicative ecosystem marked by information disorders (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) that «drive the production and massive circulation of deliberately false information, non-harmful erroneous

information, and malicious information» (Casero-Ripollés, Doménech-Fabregat & Alonso-Muñoz, 2023: 4). Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) point out different variants of disinformation. Firstly, the one known as «misinformation» (Burnam, 1975) refers to inadvertent errors that journalistic organizations may make when preparing information, such as incorrect data or misattributions resulting from involuntary confusions inherent in communicative processes. The second modality, «malinformation» (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), refers to truthful information whose dissemination is unethical because it is strategically used to cause harm. Finally, the third and the most worrying variant for Western democracies, due to its rapid spread, corresponds to deliberate falsehoods or hoaxes. «Disinformation» refers to fabricated false content intentionally disseminated. This variant grew following the COVID-19 pandemic with social media and instant messaging services as the main stage, to the extent that companies such as *WhatsApp*, *Facebook*, *X* (former *Twitter*) and *Google* took measures to reduce their users' overexposure to unverified content (Salaverría *et al.*, 2020).

Although the growth of disinformation is not solely attributable to technology, the existence of a wide range of falsification practices on digital platforms also raises alarms about the existence of bots, imposter profiles, or the so-called «astroturfing», a form of falsification that involves the planned coordination of multiple social media accounts to artificially create thematic trends (Arce-García, Said-Hung, & Mottareale-Calvanese, 2022; Chan, 2022). Furthermore, recent advances in Artificial Intelligence have also exacerbated this phenomenon insofar as they allow the mass fabrication and dissemination of so-called «deepfakes» videos and audios that reproduce false images and sounds, but with a high degree of realism (Casero-Ripollés, 2024). According to Fernández-Castrillo and Magallón-Rosa, the relationship between AI and disinformation is particularly sensitive when discussing «moments of special informational and emotional sensitivity; the culture of outrage and clickbait can potentiate and amplify their harmful effects» (2023: 26).

2.1. To combat disinformation in the digital environment

The exponential growth of disinformation in recent years and the loss of quality and credibility of media outlets have heightened concerns about the dissemination of false information (Bachmann & Valenzuela, 2023). This has led to data verification, a basic practice, and a *sine qua non* condition of journalistic production, gaining prominence within the current information ecosystem as a tool to combat fake news (Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Guallar *et al.*, 2020), especially in European and North American journalism (Vázquez-Herrero, Vizoso, & López-García, 2019). This practice is popularly known as fact-checking and

consists of «the systematic practice of verifying the statements made by public figures and institutions and publishing the results of the process» (Walter *et al.*, 2020: 73). Data verifiers are considered non-partisan bodies whose objective is to provide truth (Humprecht, 2020) and improve citizens' access to information (Palau-Sampio, 2018; Nyhan & Reiffler, 2015).

Between 2012 and 2017, there was significant growth in fact-checking, resulting in the creation of over a hundred national and international journalistic verification organizations (Alonso, 2019; Ufarte, Peralta, & Murcia, 2018). Leading media outlets such as the *BBC*, *The Washington Post*, *Le Monde*, or the *EFE agency*, among others, have created their own fact-checking spaces for users to verify whether information is true or false (Vázquez-Herrero, Vizoso, & López-García, 2019). Similarly, newspapers like *Público.es* have also incorporated computer tools like *TjTool*, which show users the tracking of news published by the media (Terol & Alonso, 2020). Institutionally, verification groups have also been created, such as the *European Digital Media Observatory* (EDMO), which promotes organizations dedicated to information verification in Europe, and the *International Fact-Checking Network* (IFCN) of the *Poynter Institute* in the United States, which promotes the excellence of verifiers with codes of good practices to contribute to public discourse through transparency and accountability. In Spain, there are currently five consolidated journalistic data verification organizations, three of them independent—*Maldita.es*, *Newtral*, and *Verificat*—and two belonging to state media—*EFE Verifica* and *Verifica RTVE*. All are associated with the IFCN and exhibit high levels of compliance with its principles (Moreno-Gil & Salgado-de Dios, 2023).

The need to reach society is an intrinsic part of the *raison d'être* of fact-checkers so that their debunkings reach affected individuals (Humprecht, 2020). In this regard, verification organizations have incorporated social media into their content distribution strategies because, among other reasons, it is not necessary to invest a large amount of money, and they can involve users in social conversation regarding the verifications they publish (Brandtzaeg, Følstad, & Chaparro-Domínguez, 2018). Thus, they offer users the possibility to share content either to spread their debunking or to generate traffic to their websites. While presence, regularity in content publication, and interaction on social media are essential aspects of their activity development, recent studies have shown that the presence on these platforms is more prominent in the case of independent fact-checkers than those linked to media outlets, as the latter tend to use the media's own channels (Dafonte-Gómez, Míguez-González, & Ramahí-García, 2022).

On platforms like *X* (former *Twitter*), *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, or *TikTok*, fact-checkers disseminate their content and multiply its spread through interactions with their contacts in the same spaces where misinformation circulates (Margolin, Hannak, & Weber, 2018; Sidorenko-Bautista, Alonso-López, & Giacomelli, 2021). In this regard, some studies have indicated that the narrative format of the debunking on these platforms does not influence the user's attention to a greater or lesser extent (Ecker *et al.*, 2020; Huang & Wang, 2022). In this line, according to Bachmann and Valenzuela (2023), it does not matter if verifications have multimedia elements or attractive stylistic resources, despite agencies' efforts to find optimal correctives (Walter *et al.*, 2020). Conversely, Sidorenko-Bautista, Alonso-López, and Giacomelli (2021) point out that, on platforms like *TikTok*, verification journalism has a place and it will endure «as long as it seeks and develops new narrative skills, taking into consideration the constant evolution experienced by the platform regarding trends and user groups» (2021: 107). To achieve this, verifiers work to adapt content to the narrative style of this social media, using vertical video, *TikTok*'s editing tools, and formats like micro-tutorials, although interaction with the audience is lacking (Elizabeth & Mantzarlis, 2016). Regarding the most popular topics of verifiers on *TikTok*, political topics stand out, as well as health, climate, and technology (Sidorenko-Bautista, Alonso-López, & Giacomelli, 2021).

Alongside social media, the digital environment offers new tools for the activity of fact-checkers. This is the case of *WhatsApp* channels, recently created, which have emerged strongly and currently constitute one of the usual communication channels between media outlets and citizens. It is a new feature of the platform that allows the dissemination of public messages to large audiences, instantly reaching recipients. Communication developed in these channels is unidirectional since subscribers can forward messages but cannot chat or leave comments. Users can react to content using emojis, but it is the channel owner who decides which ones are available. Additionally, if subscribers have privacy enabled, no one can see their phone number.

In Spain, *WhatsApp* channels were launched in mid-September 2023 and only existed in Singapore and Colombia until then. Since their creation, numerous media outlets have incorporated them into their communication strategies, including some verification agencies such as *Newtral*, *Maldita*, and *EFE Verifica*, with a notable reception from the audience in terms of the number of subscribers. Through these channels, they aim to ensure that messages sent reach users' mobile devices directly without the need to open the application or search for

a specific channel. Therefore, it is particularly relevant to understand the content distribution strategy used by Spanish verification agencies on *WhatsApp* channels.

3. Data and Method

The objective of this research is to understand the dissemination strategy employed by Spanish fact-checking agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels. Specifically, the following specific objectives are outlined:

1. To identify the topics of the messages shared by Spanish fact-checking agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels.
2. To analyse the types of sources included in the messages shared by Spanish fact-checking agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels.
3. To examine the function of the messages shared by Spanish fact-checking agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels.
4. To study the types of misinformation verified by Spanish fact-checking agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels.
5. To analyse the interaction and multimedia presence in the *WhatsApp* channels of Spanish fact-checking agencies.

To achieve these objectives, messages published between October 15th and December 15th, 2023, by three Spanish fact-checking agencies—*Maldita*, *Newtral*, and *EFE Verifica*—have been selected. The sample selection primarily responds to two reasons. The first is that these three fact-checking agencies are the most relevant in Spain. The second is that *WhatsApp* channels were opened in Spain on September 13th. However, since not all media outlets created the channel on the same day, to equalize the sample and make it comparable, October 15th has been established as the date when the channels of the three selected verification platforms had already begun to publish content. The sample of this research consists of 258 messages (124 from *Newtral*, 115 from *Maldita*, and 19 from *EFE Verifica*).

To address the objectives outlined in this research, the technique of quantitative content analysis is employed, which allows for the objective and systematic examination of the content of the analysed messages (Bardin, 1996). The analysis model created for this research collects information on 7 variables, whose categories are mutually exclusive, and therefore each message can only be classified into one of them (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of the analysis model

Topic	Function	Type of disinformation ¹	Type of sources	Type of interaction	Type of multi-media	Type of link
Science and technology	Inform	Joke, satire or parody	Official	React	Photo	Own web
Economy	Advise	Exaggeration	Professional	Share	Video	External web
Health	Disclaimer	Decontextualization	Alternative	Send information to verify	GIF	Own Social Media accounts
Politics		Fabricated Content	Others		Screenshot	Extern Social Media accounts
Environment		Manipulation of images or videos			Link	Phone number
Culture and Sport		Reuse of images or videos			Other	Other
Immigration		Others				
Territorial Policy						
Food						
International conflicts						
Terrorism						
Disinformation						
Security						
Religion						
International politics						
Social Policies						
Incidents						
Monarchy						
Other						

Source: Own elaboration.

The sample has been manually captured directly through the WhatsApp channels of the three selected fact-checking agencies. It has been analysed by

¹ Model based on Wardle and Derakhshan (2017).

two coders who conducted a pre-test on 10 % of the messages ($n = 26$), obtaining high Krippendorff's Alpha values (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007) for all variables ($\alpha > 0.90$). The data have been processed using the statistical package SPSS (v.28).

4. Results

4.1. Frequency of publication and characteristics of the *WhatsApp* channels of *Newtral*, *Maldita*, and *EFE Verifica*

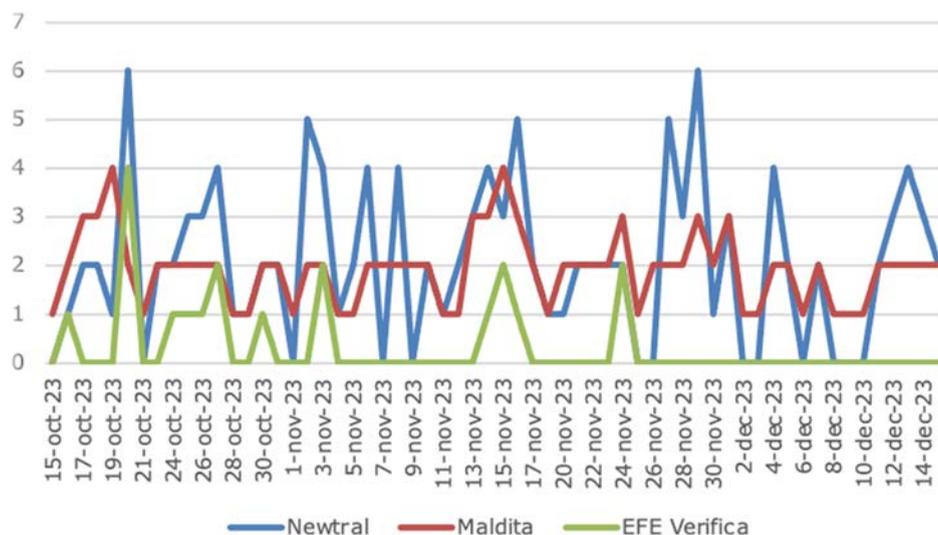
The *WhatsApp* channel of *Newtral* has 16,985 followers² and presents itself as a platform that «defends facts against misinformation and hoaxes» and helps «understand what is happening without noise or ideologies». During the analysed period, it is observed to have an irregular publication frequency, with peaks of activity where there are days when it shares up to six messages and others where it does not publish anything (Figure 1), disseminating a total of 124 messages. The contents published by *Newtral* are mainly characterized by containing little text. They display a headline, sometimes complemented with a subtitle, and usually contain a link to their website for further information. The messages they use to verify information often contain the same elements: an image with the word «fake» on top and two red crosses at the beginning of the text.

Maldita has 27,668 followers³. In the presentation of its channel, it indicates that users can find «debunking of hoaxes and misinformation that reaches your mobile phone and useful information for daily life». Additionally, it complements the profile description by adding its motto («Journalism so you won't be fooled») and a link to its website. The publication frequency between October 15th and December 15th is high and quite regular (Figure 1). Although some peaks of activity can be observed, the fact-checking agency has published at least one content almost every day, reaching a total of 115 messages. The contents shared by *Maldita* are structured in the same way as on its website, thus using the same captions and sections. This makes them easily recognizable by users who consult the digital version of the fact-checking platform. They are usually long messages with substantial text, accompanied by various emojis and a link to their website.

² Number of followers as of January 23, 2024.

³ Number of followers as of January 23, 2024.

Figure 1. Publication frequency of *Newtral*, *Maldita*, and *EFE Verifica* on their WhatsApp channels during the analysed period



Source: Own elaboration.

EFE Verifica has 7,952 followers⁴ and does not present any biography on its profile. Its publication frequency is very irregular, and it has only shared content on 12 out of the 60 analysed days (Figure 1). Two types of messages are published on the channel. The first type consists of a headline followed by the statement «What do we verify?» and a «Conclusion», accompanied by a link to obtain all the information. The second type consists of a headline and a brief description along with the link to the web content.

4.2. Topics and functions of the messages shared by the fact-checking agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels

If we analyse the topics covered by the messages published by the three fact-checking agencies, we observe that, in general, the predominant topics are related to international conflicts (19%), the realm of politics in general (13.6%), and topics related to science and technology (11.6%) (Table 2).

⁴ Number of followers as of January 23, 2024

These are three topics that have dominated the media agenda during the months analysed. The first one is linked to the conflict between Israel and Palestine, which, despite being a longstanding issue since 1948, gained momentum on October 7, 2023, following the *Hamas* attack. The second is marked by a moment of great political interest, such as the inauguration of Pedro Sánchez as the Prime Minister, held on November 15 and 16, 2023, and the negotiations to secure the necessary support for its approval. Finally, the third refers particularly to topics related to artificial intelligence or climate change, two highly relevant topics due to their political and social implications.

Table 2. Topics of the messages shared by the fact-checking agencies on their WhatsApp channels (%)

Topic	<i>Newtral</i>	<i>Maldita</i>	<i>EFE Verifica</i>	Total
Science and technology	1.6	24.3	–	11.6
Economy	4.8	7.9	–	5.8
Health	1.6	1.7	–	1.6
Politics	17.7	11.3	–	13.6
Environment	4.8	7.8	10.5	6.6
Culture and Sport	–	0.9	–	0.4
Immigration	3.2	2.6	–	2.7
Territorial Policy	8.1	8.7	5.3	8.1
Food	–	9.6	–	4.3
International conflicts	29.0	4.3	42.1	19
Terrorism	5.6	0.9	5.3	3.5
Disinformation	4.0	6.1	21.1	6.2
Security	8.9	2.6	–	5.4
Religion	2.4	–	–	1.2
International politics	4.0	3.5	–	3.5
Social Policies	2.4	3.4	–	2.8
Incidents	–	0.9	15.8	1.6
Monarchy	0.8	0.9	–	0.5
Others	0.8	2.6	–	1.6
TOTAL	99.7	100	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.

If we analyse the data based on each of the *WhatsApp* channels, interesting differences among them can be observed. *Newtral* focuses primarily on two topics: international conflicts (29 %) and politics (17.7 %). As mentioned earlier, the conflict between Israel and Palestine and Pedro Sánchez's investiture have been abundant sources of misinformation, especially the former. Additionally, it also shares content related to territorial politics (8.1 %) and security (8.9 %). In the case of territorial politics, the agency debunks information related to the Amnesty Law and concessions made by Pedro Sánchez's government to Catalan politicians, especially concerning financing. Regarding security, the verifications revolve around scams that emerge in the online environment and topics related to cybersecurity.

In contrast, *Maldita* covers a wider range of topics, although those related to science and technology stand out (24.3 %). In this regard, a significant number of messages refer to Artificial Intelligence, such as the use of AI software to impersonate identities or predict the winning numbers in the Christmas lottery, or more technological matters such as the advantages or disadvantages of using public Wi-Fi networks. *Maldita* uses a colour code based on the legend of content used on its website so that users can clearly identify the topic. For instance, science-related posts have a green header, while technology-related ones have a blue header.

Maldita also stands out for the significant volume of content published on nutrition (9.6 %). In these posts, the fact-checking agency provides practical information on how to cook certain foods for freezing or on the properties of some foods beyond their energy consumption, among other topics. This type of publication sets it apart from *Newtral* and *EFE Verifica*, which do not share content on this topic.

Finally, *EFE Verifica* has the most concentrated thematic agenda. Apart from verifying information on international conflicts (42.1 %), it places special emphasis on topics related to misinformation in general (21.1 %), such as the agreement in which it participates with *Microsoft* for detecting misinformation in Latin America. Another frequent theme is events (15.8 %). Specifically, it published several pieces of information about the death of the *Córdoba CF* football player Álvaro Prieto.

Regardless of the topics of the content published by the three fact-checking agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels, we observe that, overall, 80.2 % of the messages do not identify any of the sources consulted. These percentages vary depending on the agency. Thus, *Newtral* does not include any reference to sources in 82.3 % of the publications, *Maldita* in 76.5 %, and *EFE Verifica* in 89.5 %.

Table 3. Typology of sources present in the messages shared by the fact-checking agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels (%)

Typology of sources	<i>Newtral</i>	<i>Maldita</i>	<i>EFE Verifica</i>	Total
Official	81.9	77.8	100	80.5
Professional	13.6	3.7	–	7.8
Alternative	4.5	11.1	–	7.8
Others	–	7.4	–	3.9
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.

With regard to the messages that do refer to a source, those of an official nature stand out particularly (Table 3). That is, those linked to public bodies or institutions whose authority is socially recognized and, as a result, are highly relevant. In the case of *Newtral*, the percentage of sources of a professional nature (13.6 %) is also noteworthy, mainly referring to the press or communication offices of private entities. On the other hand, *Maldita* gives great importance to alternative sources (11.1 %) and identifies experts in the field to refute or justify the arguments used in their publications.

Regarding the function of the messages shared by the three fact-checking agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels, we observe some interesting differences. While the content of *Newtral* (78.2 %) and *EFE Verifica* (84.2 %) is mainly dedicated to debunking false information, *Maldita* focuses on informing (65.2 %) readers about topics it considers relevant, serving a dual function: debunking false information and providing knowledge on these topics so that users can form an opinion and not believe the false content circulating on the internet (Table 4). It is also noteworthy that a high percentage of *Maldita* (7.8 %) and *EFE Verifica* (15.8 %) publications aim to advise readers on how to learn to detect false or manipulated information (Table 4).

Table 4. Function of the messages shared by the fact-checking agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels (%)

Function	<i>Newtral</i>	<i>Maldita</i>	<i>EFE Verifica</i>	Total
Disclaimer	78.2	27.0	84.2	55.8
Inform	19.4	65.2	–	38.4
Advise	2.4	7.8	15.8	5.8
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.

If we analyse those contents whose objective is to debunk, we observe that, in general terms, three types of false information stand out (Table 5). The first is the decontextualization of facts, statements, or images (26.7 %). This involves information that is real but is linked to a deliberately false or distorted context. The second is the reuse of images or videos (22.6 %) that are real but have been produced at another time or in a different context than the one they are intended to be linked to. And the third refers to deception through fabricated content (20.5 %). In other words, these are contents that have no connection to reality and are created to make the public believe false statements or events.

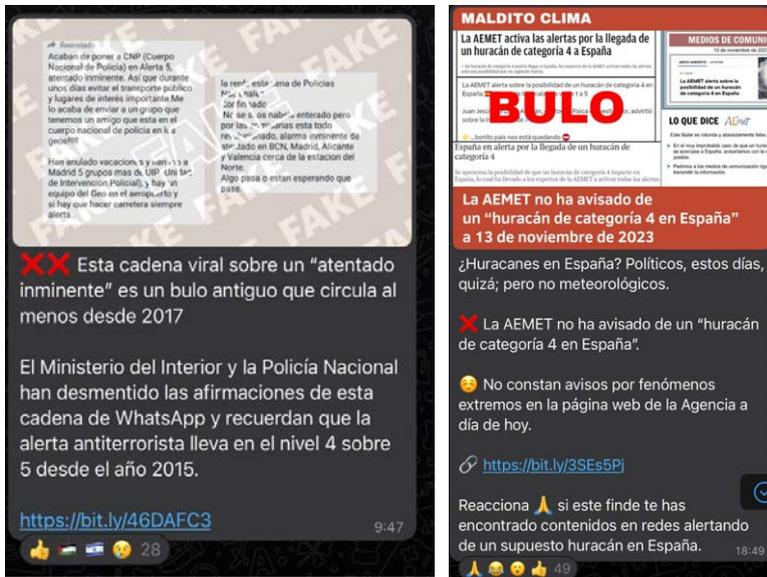
Table 5. Type of disinformation verified by fact-checking agencies on their WhatsApp channels (%)

Type of disinformation	<i>Newtral</i>	<i>Maldita</i>	<i>EFE Verifica</i>	Total
Joke, satire or parody	2.1	–	6.3	2.1
Exaggeration	9.3	19.4	25	13
Decontextualization	28.9	12.9	43.8	26.7
Fabricated Content	18.6	35.5	6.3	20.5
Manipulation of images or videos	12.4	19.4	–	13
Reuse of images or videos	25.8	12.9	18.8	22.6
Others	3.1	–	–	2.1
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.

As for *Newtral*, a significant portion of its debunked content focuses on decontextualization (28.9 %) and the reuse of multimedia content (25.8 %) (Table 5). In the first case, we can find, for example, content related to old hoaxes that resurface through social media, such as an imminent terrorist attack or protests that have taken place in a specific location but are deliberately misrepresented (Figure 2). In the second case, we encounter images or videos that are real but are linked to events different from those initially portrayed. *EFE Verifica* follows similar patterns.

Figure 2. Examples of content debunked by Newtral and Maldita on their WhatsApp channels



Source: WhatsApp Channels of *Newtral* and *Maldita*

In the case of *Maldita*, over a third of the debunked content refers to fabricated content (35.5 %) and therefore false and created *ad hoc* to deceive the public (Table 5). Along these lines, the fact-checking agency has debunked various hoaxes related to immigrants arriving in Spain and the assistance they receive, or false alerts like the one from AEMET indicating that a Category 4 hurricane was going to hit Spain (Figure 2).

4.3. Interaction and multimedia presence in the *WhatsApp* channel of fact-checking agencies

Among the various potentials afforded by social media, the ability to interact with other users (Van Dijck, 2013) stands out, as well as the capacity to share multimedia elements to accompany or complement text. However, the nature of WhatsApp channels is based on a unidirectional communicative logic, as users cannot send or respond to messages shared by the channel owner. The only way the audience can interact with the content within these channels is by using reactions.

Regarding interaction, it is only predominantly present in *Maldita*, which has sought user feedback in 83.5 % of shared messages. The same cannot be

said for *Newtral* and *EFE Verifica*, which either encourage it very little or not at all (3.2 % and 0 %, respectively).

Analysing the type of interaction promoted, in the case of *Newtral*, the phone number is shared, and users are encouraged to send in any information that generates doubts, and they want to verify. Conversely, *Maldita* seeks user reactions (78.8 %) to their content using emojis, either in a generic manner or by prompting them to use a specific one. In this regard, *Maldita's* messages have a relatively high average number of reactions ($M = 73.96$; $SD = 63.026$), reaching even up to 420 reactions in one message, compared to *Newtral* ($M = 15.39$; $SD = 7.865$) or *EFE Verifica* ($M = 10.68$; $SD = 4.308$).

In 11.5 % of cases, *Maldita* encourages users to share content with other users or groups, and in 9.6 % of posts, a phone number is provided where content can be sent for verification.

Regarding the use of multimedia elements, the data shows that all messages published by *Newtral*, *Maldita*, and *EFE Verifica* include at least one image or video and a link. At this point, it should be noted that, in *Newtral*, although the text refers to a video, only a screenshot of it appears in the message. This is not the case in *Maldita's WhatsApp* channel, where videos are indeed shared.

In over 95 % of instances, the links shared redirect users to the same content published on their websites, thus offering readers the opportunity to expand on the information if they are interested. In the remaining instances, they either link to the phone number available for users to share the information they wish to verify or their profiles on social media.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The establishment of *WhatsApp* channels by *Meta* has introduced a new potentiality to the realm of communication. Its rollout in Spain in mid-September 2023 has prompted media outlets and news verification agencies to integrate yet another tool into their content dissemination strategies.

The analysis conducted in this research has allowed us to delve into the phenomenon of newly launched *WhatsApp* channels by studying their usage among Spanish verification agencies. In this regard, some interesting conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, the data demonstrates that not all agencies attribute the same level of importance to *WhatsApp* channels during the period studied in this research. Thus, significant disparities exist between, on one hand, *Newtral* and *Maldita*, and on the other hand, *EFE Verifica*. This is evidenced by differences in the number of shared messages and the consistency of their publication. Additionally, we observe how *Maldita* adopts a content organization strategy aligned with its usage on its website, while the other two verifiers have less

defined and aligned strategies with the rest of the platforms they employ for information dissemination. This could be attributed, especially, to verification agencies still adapting their content dissemination strategies to this new channel, indicating they are still searching for the formula that works best for them and helps them connect with the audience. Nonetheless, as seen on other social media platforms, independent fact-checkers more frequently utilize their own profiles on digital platforms compared to verification agencies associated with a media outlet, such as *EFE Verifica*, which have their own channels belonging to the parent medium (Dafonte-Gómez, Míguez-González, & Ramahí-García, 2022; Moreno-Gil & Salgado-de Dios, 2023).

Secondly, regarding the thematic focus of the messages (objective 1), our data demonstrates that, in general, they were influenced by current events. Thus, a significant portion of the content published by *Newtral*, *Maldita*, and *EFE Verifica* revolves around topics related to the Israel-Palestine conflict and significant political events like government negotiations and Pedro Sánchez's inauguration as president. Beyond these topics, *Maldita's* channel stands out, devoting a substantial portion of its messages to addressing topics related to nutrition, science, technology, and territorial politics such as the Amnesty Law. Similarly, *EFE Verifica's* messages also focus on topics related to events, misinformation in general, and the environment. Therefore, it represents a differentiation strategy by these verification agencies. These findings align with the strategy employed by fact-checkers on social media platforms like *TikTok*, where the most popular topics are those related to health, climate, and technology (Sidorenko-Bautista, Alonso-López, & Giacomelli, 2021).

Thirdly, our data indicates that the use of sources in the messages shared by verification agencies on their *WhatsApp* channels is not prioritized (objective 2). Thus, only 20 % of the messages, depending on the verification agency, make some reference to the sources consulted. When they do, they mostly opt for official sources due to their social acceptance and consequent reliability for the public. *Maldita* stands out in consulting a significant number of experts. This data may be linked to the topics addressed by each of the agencies, as content related to aspects such as science and technology or nutrition, for example, lends itself to using this type of sources.

Regarding functions (objective 3), verification agencies generally prioritize debunking false content. This is an expected outcome due to the inherent nature of verification agencies, whose main objective is primarily this (Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Guallar *et al.*, 2020). However, *Maldita* stands out again, as it also seeks to inform users. In this sense, we observe how *Maldita* aims to educate its readers and, besides debunking false information which is circulating

through various platforms, it also informs about topics that could potentially generate this type of content.

In fifth place, we detect that the use of data, facts, or contextualized multimedia resources, the creation of *ad hoc* false content, and the reuse of images or videos are the most frequently debunked forms of misinformation by the three verification agencies (objective 4). These are recognized as the most common forms of misinformation in the literature (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Finally, our data demonstrates how all three verification agencies make appropriate use of digital language, incorporating various multimedia resources in all their publications (objective 5). However, concerning interaction, we observe that only *Maldita* seeks closeness with users, as well as their feedback, primarily in the form of reactions. This is a dynamic that has also been observed on platforms like *TikTok*, where fact-checkers do not interact with the audience despite being a necessary practice (Elizabeth & Mantzarlis, 2016). In this regard, we can establish that *Maldita* is the Spanish verification agency that makes the most of the inherent characteristics of *WhatsApp* channels.

Despite being exploratory in nature, the findings obtained in this research contribute to improving knowledge of the use of *WhatsApp* channels, a platform that is increasingly endowed with more potentialities, such as the recent possibility of incorporating surveys.

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