



## FACT-CHECKING JOURNALISM AS PUBLIC TRANSPARENCY INTERMEDIARY: A CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** In order to make transparency accessible, intermediary organizations, such as Journalism, play a prominent role in passing on the available data to the public. The aim of this article, therefore, is to understand how fact-checking agencies took advantage of public transparency resources to build their texts. A comparative investigation was carried out of four agencies from different countries: Agência Lupa (Brazil), Factcheck.org (USA), Pagella Politica (Italy) and Correctiv (Germany). In all of them, the information provided by the State on its Internet pages (that is, active transparency) was the main source to support the check-ups in order to 63.5% (Brazil), 53.4% (Italy), 52.7 % (USA) and 29.2% (Germany) of the texts used public data to support their conclusions. Associating fact-checking Journalism and transparency refers to the notion of expert systems-above all, by demonstrating that actors external to the State are also capable of participating in the inspection and opening process of public institutions.

**Keywords:** Public transparency; Fact-checking; Political journalism; Governmental data.

### 1 Introduction

Among the possible definitions for political transparency, Hood (2010) understands it as the execution of activities in a way that decisions, rules and other relevant information are visible to external observers, while Lindstedt and Naurin (2010) summarize it as the accessibility of information about an organization. In both definitions, there are points of contact to consider: the external observer and accessibility. Thus, it remains clear that, in order to achieve transparency, it is necessary that any citizen who is outside the political administration has access to information about the government.

More than that, it becomes essential to verify whether the general population can understand public data, which depends both on the action of the government entities themselves and other actors. In this ecosystem of transparency, journalism has already been pointed out as an agent capable of intermediating between transparency and the general public.

This research focuses on a specific branch of Journalism, fact-checking, and its possible contribution to transparency. This professional content is gaining more and more space every day, not least because of the intensity of spreading content of dubious origin on digital social media, and uses a lot of public data to build its texts. This led to the formulation of the research question to be answered: how did fact-checking take advantage of State transparency?

In order to answer this question, the article made a comparative analysis of agencies

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from four countries: Brazil, United States, Germany and Italy, whose contexts of communication and politics are different, in order to realize the differences and similarities in the performance of this journalistic practice in these different realities. By collecting tweets published over two years in the four main agencies of these nations, all the checks published in that period were collected. Then, they were submitted to content analysis in order to ascertain where the information used by journalists in their texts came from, which allowed a categorization in relation to the source, such as data of active transparency, press data, among others that will be better detailed in the appropriate section.

This article is structured as follows: the literature review is divided into the next two sections, presenting concepts of transparency and its intersection with journalism, as well as the definitions of journalistic activity that are of interest to this research. Next, the methodological path and the results found are presented. Finally, there is a wide discussion about the performance of Journalism from transparency.

## **2 Transparency and Journalism**

The existing definitions in the Brazilian and international literature on digital democracy lie around the idea of new digital tools “to supplement, reinforce or correct aspects of the political and social practices of the State and citizens for the benefit of the democratic content of the political community” (GOMES, 2007, p. 9). In summary, all are based on the use of information and communication technologies to strengthen democratic processes, with special attention to modifications in the institutional design that allow the involvement of the population in a more efficient way (COLEMAN, 2005; MARQUES, 2008; 2016).

As previously pointed out, something more relevant to this study, however, in the context of transparency, is its accessibility character, which consists in providing information in a way that the public can understand. It is not enough that they are merely available, but that citizens know how to use them to shape their decisions. To achieve this goal, intermediary organizations play a relevant role, as they interpret the available data and pass it on to the citizens. They have communication channels with broad audiences, such as websites and social networks, and they can make this important data available for public consumption. In addition, they are most likely to have the capabilities required to organize the data in a palatable manner.

However, transparency through digital resources also has a negative aspect, which is the presence of raw information without any context. For the proper consumption of these data, an expert system would be necessary (GIDDENS, 1991; MIGUEL, 1999), which means actors capable of participating in the transparency process, because they possess knowledge to deal adequately with the data present there. Even for transparency to be improved, it is necessary for information to propagate with quality and depth (MARQUES, 2016), a task that journalism can assume.

Some studies in Brazil have already sought to point out how the Law of Access to Information (LAI, *Lei de Acesso à Informação*) relates to the routine of journalistic production. Sousa and Geraldes (2016) diagnosed certain difficulties such as response times and lack of familiarity of professionals with the use of this type of data. Also, there were some investigations that pointed out a strong association between the production of materials with these data from transparency and a social role of supervision by the profession (BRENOL, 2019); that showed the Ministry of Finance as the most contacted entity by Brazilian reporters (GONÇALVES *et al.*, 2019); which indicated that texts on public administration were the topic most discussed by Brazilian professionals (DUTRA, PAULINO, 2014); and which found that materials on LAI were not restricted to only a specific group of reporters, but have been used in the most diverse publishing houses (NASCIMENTO *et al.*, 2019), in such a way that research on public power has become a common feature of journalism practiced in Brazil (FERRACIOLI; MARQUES, 2020a, 2020b).

This relationship between journalism and transparency can be understood from the traditional definition of expert system formulated by Giddens (1991), according to which there are two characteristics necessary to categorize this agent. On the one hand, a consumer who does not have specialized technical knowledge. The reader to whom the checking is addressed fits perfectly with this definition, since the ordinary citizen is not familiar with the possibilities of access to information provided by transparency and does not even have the best technical resources to enjoy it. The other characteristic of the expert system is the belief in the specialized knowledge held by the expert, which is also claimed by communication professionals.

Knowing this panorama on transparency and journalism, it is necessary to present what characterizes the specific journalistic practice that is of interest to this research. The fact-checking inherent in the process of investigating a report is still, in most cases, based on traditional methods of verification, such as calling the sources directly (BRANDTZAEG *et al.*, 2016). On the other hand, fact-checking as an isolated practice points to a change in the search for elements to perform this activity. Graves (2016) demonstrated that the whole procedure of fact-checking can be divided into some phases: choosing the statements that will be checked, contacting the person who pronounced them, finding out how it began to be propagated, carrying out the work with the data and disseminating the result of this process. It is at this stage of the verification itself, in which it is necessary to confirm the veracity or falsity of the information, that journalists resort to State transparency initiatives. Major agencies, in the investigation of Graves (2016), guide their reporters to use official data from government agencies.

Although it is inserted in a digital universe in which agility seems to be an essential characteristic, fact-checking journalism chooses to slow down journalistic work. The focus of the activity is not the scoop, nor breaking news. Even if there are more immediate activities,

such as live discussion checks, the verification of statements and content is not concerned with only addressing recent issues (GRAVES, 2016). The very popularization of checking, however, ends up mitigating this character, because the checkers seek to speed up the delivery of checks to verify phrases that have just been uttered.

The preferred spaces for disclosure of checks are social networks, in particular Twitter. These platforms have been used by journalism to search for sources, disseminating content and having contact with the public (MCGREGOR, 2019). Professionals in the field also knowingly use the Twitter to update on recent events and to check what has been aired in the coverage of other communication companies (WILLNAT; WEAVER, 2018), which makes this platform a prominent element in current professional practice (MCGREGOR; MOLYNEUX, 2020). In addition, previous research has already focused on this social media when investigating checks, highlighting the importance of previous connections between users for belief in checking (MARGOLIN; HANNAK; WEBER, 2018).

When one thinks about the way in which the journalist has access to the information they will report, there is a difference between the practice of fact-checking and the daily life of a common newsroom. While the traditional reporter goes to the event or contacts the sources by phone or email, the checker receives his initial material from public statements, almost always through other actors in the press. This implies a change in the role of the journalist, who ceases to be the professional who ascertains firsthand the facts and reports and becomes a professional arbitrator, who mediates between the public and political agents (SEIBT, 2019).

### **3 Methodological Aspects and Presentation of Results**

In order to capture characteristics that resemble the activity of fact-checking and also allow to distinguish national characteristics, the agencies with the largest number of followers in the Twitter and on Facebook (as of June 2019) were selected from four different countries: Brazil, United States, Italy and Germany. Each of these countries represents a media system described by the literature, that is, there is a specific relationship between the media and politics (HALLIN; MANCINI, 2004; MÁRQUEZ-RAMÍREZ; GUERRERO, 2014), which implies different practices of Political Journalism: Captured-Liberal (Brazil), Liberal (USA), Polarized Pluralist (Italy) and Democratic Corporatist (Germany). The agencies selected under these criteria were as follows: Lupa, Factcheck.org, Pagella Politica and Correctiv.

After defining the four fact-checking agencies that would be the object of the research, it was necessary to establish a time. To obtain a period wide enough to cover electoral coverage and months in which there were no extraordinary events, the interval from July 2017 to June 2019 was determined, over which the four countries had national disputes.

To facilitate the collection, all the tweets of such agencies in the period in question were catalogued and all checks whose links were referenced there were opened. This resulted in the

following number of published checks: 2792 (corresponding to the unit of analysis of this research), divided as follows between each country: USA - 455, Italy - 579, Germany - 89 and Brazil – 1669.

Next, the content analysis aimed to point out the main source used in each of the four countries. The results described in Chart 1 show that active transparency was the most frequent source for the checking in all countries.

**Chart 1** – Number of checks classified according to the predominant source

	BRAZIL		USA		ITALY		GERMANY	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Active transparency	1060	63.5%	240	52.7%	309	53.3%	26	29.2%
Non-state entities	283	16.9%	69	15.1%	194	33.5%	11	12.3%
Press	82	4.9%	57	12.5%	34	5.8%	23	25.8%
Social networks	74	4.4%	41	9%	31	5.3%	20	22.4%
Statements	115	6.8%	36	7.9%	6	1%	0	0%
Press office	49	2.9%	12	2.6%	5	0.8%	9	10.1%
Passive transparency	6	0.3%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

Source: Ferracioli (2021).

As is evident from the data, active transparency appears predominantly in all media systems, so the article will point out how each of the fact-checking agencies of these countries used this data. Active transparency is the one that is proactively made available by the government, currently on internet portals, without a specific request for the data to be released. This category is opposed to passive transparency, whereby the State has an obligation to provide information requested by any individual without justification (ALVES et al., 2021; LIMA; ABDALLA; OLIVEIRA, 2020). The category 'non-state entities' refers to data obtained from organizations that do not make up the State structure, while 'press' includes all checks in which the information comes from investigations carried out by other media. The text was classified as 'social media' in cases where the elements that underlie it were derived only from publications on social networks, while 'statements' is the category that includes the use of public statements by political authorities as a source for fact-checking and 'press office' defines the information passed on by these bodies, when this is explicit in the text.

Next, the active transparency data of each of the countries that make up the corpus of the analysis will be presented. In the Brazilian case, this category is proportionally higher

compared to other nations, with 1060 appearances (63.5%). This shows that the use of data available on transparency portals (both from the federal government and subnational entities) was very frequent in Brazilian checks. Thus, when the then governor of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel (Christian Social Party, *Partido Social Cristão*), mentioned that the contracts of the Emergency Health Fund were signed, such information was countered by Lupa based on data from the Transparency Portal maintained by the state governed by him<sup>2</sup>. We highlight, in Table 1, the most cited sources of this kind, namely:

**Table 1** – Most frequent sources of active transparency in Brazilian checks

SUPERIOR ELECTORAL COURT	123
BRAZILIAN INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY AND STATISTICS	104
LEGISLATION	75
ELECTRONIC PROCESS	67
CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES	67
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES AND RESEARCH ANÍSIO TEIXEIRA	46
SENATE	43
INSTITUTE OF APPLIED ECONOMIC RESEARCH	40
TRANSPARENCY PORTAL	32
MIN OF FINANCE	24
FEDERAL REGISTER	22
GENERAL REGISTER OF EMPLOYED AND UNEMPLOYED	17
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JUSTICE	16

Source: The author, 2021.

The data made available by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE, Tribunal Superior Eleitoral) on its website were the most recurrent, with 123 appearances. Thus, when there was an election-related statement, it was information about voter turnout, percentages of votes for candidates since the re-democratization, and about the profile of the electorate that were the basis for the checking.

In second place, came the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística), a government entity dedicated to the production of statistics and that was contacted to check statements on economic issues, but also for other situations, such as when the then Minister of Health, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, said that the use of condoms was falling in Brazil.

Access to legislation is understood here in a broad way, as the availability by the State

<sup>2</sup> Available in: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/lupa/2019/01/16/witzel-sbt-policiais-hospitais/>. Published on Jan. 16, 2019.

of all the legal regulations that compose it. As the Planalto Palace (Palácio do Planalto, headquarters of the Brazilian national Executive) has a website aimed only at making the legislation available, the checkers referred to it to base the verdicts.

The fourth position was occupied by the category ‘electronic process’, which encompasses information provided by the Judiciary Branch on pending cases, having occurred 67 times. As regards transparency, the rule is that they can be consulted on the internet by anyone, which allowed the consultation by the checkers and the production of the texts.

With the same number of occurrences is the ‘Chamber of Deputies’, which provided various information ranging from the voting of parliamentarians in specific votes to reports produced in committees.

In the Italian case, the use of data provided by the State on a voluntary basis, that is, “active transparency”, was also the most frequent among the checks, with 309 occurrences (53.3%). More than half used this type of data, for example, when Deputy Pierluigi Bersani (Democratic and Progressive Movement) asserted that 700,000 construction jobs had been lost<sup>3</sup> and the statement was compared with unemployment data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (Istat). Table 2 details which agents were most cited (that appeared more than five times) in the checks:

**Table 2** – Most frequent sources of active transparency in Italian checks

LEGISLATION	70
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF STATISTICS	61
MINISTRY OF ECONOMY	29
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR	29
CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES	18
BANK OF ITALY	12
SENATE	11
SOCIAL SECURITY AGENCY	11
GOVERNMENT OF ITALY	10
MINISTRY OF JUSTICE	9
MINISTRY OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	7

Source: The author, 2021.

The data indicate that, in most cases, the checkers used legislation made available by the State to base their checks. This occurred, for example, when former deputy Giuseppe Civati (Possible, *Possibile*) made comments about the weapons collected by the government and was rebuffed based on decree 104/2018, made available online by the government<sup>4</sup>.

The second most cited source within this modality was the *Istat*, which, as previously seen, is the body of the Italian government dedicated to the provision of statistics and appeared

<sup>3</sup> Available in: <https://pagellapolitica.it/dichiarazioni/8019/si-meta-dei-posti-di-lavoro-si-sono-persi-nelledilizia>. Published on Mar. 2, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Available in: [https://www.agi.it/fact-checking/armi\\_governo\\_civati-4386232/news/2018-09-18/](https://www.agi.it/fact-checking/armi_governo_civati-4386232/news/2018-09-18/) published on Sep. 18, 2018.

61 times (10.5% of the total). In third place, were information provided by the Ministry of Economy, mentioned in 29 texts (5%). This was the source of the check on Governor Nicola Zingaretti's (Democratic Party) statement regarding the increased collection of value-added tax<sup>5</sup>.

In view of the purpose of this research to look more closely at active transparency, Table 3 below contains the sources that appeared at least five times throughout the coverage in the United States:

**Table 3** – Most frequent sources of active transparency in the US checks

BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS	25
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE	22
LEGISLATION	18
CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE	15
BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS	14
CONGRESSIONAL BUDGET OFFICE	14
SENATE	10
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES	8
ELECTRONIC PROCESS	7
CENSUS BUREAU	7
ENERGY INFORMATION ADMINISTRATION	7
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE	6
U.S. CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION	6
JOINT COMMITTEE ON TAXATION	6
WHITE HOUSE	6

Source: The author, 2021.

At the top of the Table is the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the federal government's bureau dedicated to labor market data, such as on the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on U.S. job openings<sup>6</sup>. Following is the Department of Justice, which is the equivalent of a Brazilian Ministry, as it is the highest echelon of the American administrative division. Its data enabled checks involving the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which is subordinate to it, and even discussions about health coverage<sup>7</sup>.

There was also room for references to legislation (citing the California Penal Code used to verify the statement<sup>8</sup>), which appeared in 18 checks; and for entities linked to the federal legislative branch, such as the Congressional Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office, which were respectively the fourth and sixth most cited.

Finally, in the German case, once again the first position was occupied by data from the "active transparency", with 26 occurrences (29.2%), as when figures released by the Department of the Interior (*Bundesinnenministerium*) were used by Correctiv to check a rumor about acts of

<sup>5</sup> Available in: <https://pagellapolitica.it/dichiarazioni/8285/tria-da-per-sicuro-laumento-delliva>. Published on May 23, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Available in: <https://www.factcheck.org/2018/10/factchecking-trump-on-trade/>. Published on Oct. 3, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Available in: <https://www.factcheck.org/2018/10/trump-misleads-on-preexisting-conditions/>. Published on Oct. 2, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Available in: <https://www.factcheck.org/2019/05/kamala-harris-spins-facts-on-truancy-law/>. Published on May 14, 2019.



violence against Muslims<sup>9</sup>.

Repeating a more detailed look at the sources of active transparency, Table 4 shows which entities and bodies gave the most information to the agency. Only those government bodies that appeared in at least two checks were shown.

**Table 4** – Most frequent sources of active transparency in German checks

LEGISLATION	4
FEDERAL OFFICE FOR MIGRATION AND REFUGEES	3
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR	2
FEDERAL STATISTICAL OFFICE	2

Source: The author, 2021.

It is possible to see that access to laws, decrees and ordinances (grouped around the legislation category) was the most frequent. Thus, Correctiv was able to check a statement by MEP Marcus Pretzell (Alternative for Germany - AfD) based on an article of law specific to the state of North Rhine-Westphalia<sup>10</sup>.

The most contacted body was the *Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge* (Bamf), which is the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, which is consistent with the international theme being always in the spotlight in the German checks – so, statements by Deputy Jörg Meuthen (AfD) about Muslim foreign children<sup>11</sup> could be scrutinized.

Other entities were mentioned in a more sporadic way; it is worth highlighting the German statistics body (comparable to the Brazilian IBGE and the Italian *Istat*), the scope of which allows statistics especially on Employment Relationship<sup>12</sup>.

#### 4 Discussion of the Results and Final Considerations

The central point of this article concerns the link between journalism and transparency, and it is relevant to point out that the results indicate interesting features for thinking of this intersection between those fields.

The validity of the checking activity has always related to the provision of the sources used, which allowed the citizens to even retrace all the steps taken by the professional and evaluate the conclusion reached from the path taken (NEISSER, 2015). This is in line with the

<sup>9</sup> Available in: <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2018/03/12/nein-die-regierung-erfand-keine-islamfeindlichen-straftaten>. Published on Mar. 12, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Available in: <https://correctiv.org/ruhr/faktencheck-ruhr/2017/07/10/wird-afd-mann-pretzell-doppelt-bezahlt>. Published on Jul. 10, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Available in: <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/artikel-faktencheck/2017/09/19/the-kids-arent-alright/>. Published on Sep. 19, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Available in: <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/artikel-faktencheck/2017/08/23/liegt-die-lohnluicke-zwischen-maennern-und-frauen-in-deutschland-bei-21-oder-bei-6-prozent/>. Published on Aug. 23, 2017.

expectations of the reader, who, among the desired roles of the journalist already known, such as objectively reporting and overseeing power, also demands that journalists be more transparent regarding their sources (LOOSEN; REIMER; HÖLIG, 2020).

Research dedicated to the effects of fact-checking had already pointed out that there is a more favorable reception to fact-checking by readers when there is a detailed explanation of the entire process, in a way that the user can easily understand (BRANDTZAEG; FØLSTAD, 2017). The use of data from active transparency has the potential to meet all the requirements that make the reception of fact-checking more positive. The information provided by the State is usually on websites whose links are disclosed by the checkers, which allows easy access to it. Although there is a difference in the percentages with which each country used this source of active transparency, it is not possible to determine that Brazil (because it has the highest percentage among all in this category) is the most transparent State. The data found here only allow us to glimpse that Brazilian fact-checking journalism was the one that best knew how to use transparency to its advantage.

If the active dissemination of State information is a resource that allows *accountability* (PINA; TORRES; ACERETE, 2007), intermediation by journalism can expand and contextualize data. Given that the government is the most common source for certain established practices such as Data Journalism (STALPH, 2018; TANDOC; OH, 2017), it is also so for fact-checking, as evidenced by the empirical findings. However, there was no consistency between the government bodies most contacted by each of the countries. The explanation for that may be linked to two main factors: the availability of a large amount of information by those bodies and the thematic relevance of the bodies in relation to the approach of that fact-checking agency. In Brazil, the data from TSE were the most used, which is related to the wide coverage that the Lupa agency carried out of the presidential elections of 2018, together with the TSE's renowned database, which even the academic literature frequently uses. In the United States, on the other hand, the most mentioned data were those from the entity that compiles statistics about work, which shows that the emphasis of the North American agency was checking statements from that universe, which include mentions of unemployment rates, underemployment, among others. At this point, the very choice of sources represents an element to indicate the most frequent editorial themes of each agency, more linked to the context of the nation in which they are inserted than to alleged recurring themes in a universal way in the checks.

Associating journalism and transparency, therefore, leads to the notion of expert systems (DE CARVALHO, 2008; MIGUEL, 1999; SCHWAAB, 2007) – especially by strengthening the argument that actors from outside the traditional political field may also be able to participate in the process of oversight and openness of State institutions. Fact-checking journalism, with its typical persuasive function (SEIBT, 2019), always seeks to convince the

reader that it is an agent capable of making good use of transparency and of being the reader's representative in this task. In all the four journalistic roles played by the agents cited, it was always possible to see that the mention of transparency was a resource to convince that the checking was correct. Therefore, fact-checking journalism would be qualified for this activity, and it seeks to persuade the reader not only that the content checked is true or false, but also that it is a knowledgeable actor.

Transparent is the one that allows itself to be seen, in which there are no shielded spaces to the public eye (GOMES; AMORIM; ALMADA, 2018). The checks produced have shown that statements and rumors can be contested through journalism if the public authorities allow this view to happen - which occurs not by the will of the rulers occupying the positions at the time, but by legal imposition. More than a government policy tied to the temporary occupants of the administration, the rules on transparency allow for a lasting public policy of State capable of enabling oversight at any time. If there is no hidden space in the administration, it becomes easier for the fact-checking agencies to produce their texts in a way that legitimizes them, which is precisely the use of transparency. If advertising allows social sanction, it is journalism that makes it effective by including data from transparency. Thus, there is a contextualized appearance to embarrass the members of the political class, which realizes one of the functions of transparency.

Considering that it is "journalism that produces the narratives that give meaning to the facts" (GOMES; AMORIM; ALMADA, 2018, p.16), the checking agents assume this role in a consolidated way, placing themselves as an essential element in the transparency relationship. They consolidate the idea that journalism is an expert system (MIGUEL, 1999) and demonstrate that the opening of the State occurs through news texts (BERTOT; JAEGER; GRIMES, 2012), in this case, checks. The recurrence of checks is the way to ensure that the institutional resistance of the State to transparency (TORRES, 2020) is diminished by the performance of the checker who masters the skills to have access to data. In many countries, the journalistic class has been a major advocate of transparency approval (CAMAJ, 2016; RODRIGUES, 2017), which would indicate that it would be one of its most frequent users. Within the scope of the checking, it was possible to see that this impetus for transparency was proven. It should be noted that transparency seems to be the watchword for checking. This is because, besides being a source of information and a necessary process, it also needs to be in the financing (ALENCAR; DOURADO, 2020): to know how other communication companies hire checks from these agencies and also how the resources from crowdfunding are applied.

This consolidation of fact-checking journalism through transparency is added to the expanding movement in the concept of Journalism. Lewis (2012) had demonstrated how certain agents freed themselves from the concept of "journalism" to deal with "information". In the case of the checking, there was no rupture with the notion of Journalism. However, this

movement of expansion was also present. Through the wide network of transparency currently existing, it was possible to collect and create the bases that support the activity of fact-checking. The indicated liberation is that of the traditional concept of Journalism, in which there are news to be transmitted and in which its main points will be highlighted: when, where, who. Fact-checking journalism expands its action by seeking to have a closer look at the information that is the basis of the news product and grants itself the position of a capable agent for this function. The reporter no longer acts as that professional who seeks new information or some event that fits the criteria of newsworthiness, because it begins to act to verify information already disseminated.

Lewis and Usher (2014) explain the importance of thinking about the confluence zone between data use and journalistic practice to think of the evolution of data journalism. This border zone has been outlined in fact-checking journalism: the checkers take full advantage of this intersection and of the previous accumulated repertoire regarding access to public information to produce the published material. Without this expertise in both areas, it would not be possible to produce checks at the rate they were published (in this respect, Brazil stands out for being faster than others in publishing checks).

This credibility is also built because the checks always allow the reader to access the original site where the information behind them is located. Baack (2015) points out how a data intermediary should always allow public access to primary information. Fact-checking journalism meets this requirement, which is essential for the reconstruction of credibility: there is no need for blind confidence that the data used is true, because the journalist himself provides the link that leads to the original site. The logic of control over the information that characterized journalism (LEWIS, 2012) no longer prevails, because the checking agencies indicate, with links, where the information that underpinned the text is, with the stated purpose of allowing any reader to verify the veracity of what was ascertained.

By positioning itself as an agent capable of enabling transparency, fact-checking journalism materializes transparency through the ability to dialogue with diverse audiences and allows citizens to exercise their right to transparency. Social control is realized, in a way, by fact-checking (PERUZZOTTI; SMULOVITZ, 2002; WAISBORD; PERUZZOTTI, 2009), because it allows citizens to control the veracity of the authorities' discourse, making it easier to distinguish which arguments mobilized by members of the political class do not find support in public data.

The use of transparency showed common features among the four countries checked, which is worth pointing out. Local statistical bodies such as the Brazilian IBGE, the Italian Istat and the German *Statistischen Bundesamt* were among the most contacted. Thus, the dissemination of statistics by the specialized departments of national governments is a great agent that contributes to this practice of fact-checking journalism. Tabary, Provost and Trottier

(2016) had exposed how in Canada journalists complained about the poor quality of raw data, being forced to resort to data pre-processed by institutions. The appearance of these statistical bodies shows that this trend was also found in the countries analyzed here, which shows that it is a common trend in the activity. The practical application of these data in texts can, in a mediated way, make checks bring the audience closer to the implications of such data. If any deputy makes statements about the salaries of men and women, these bodies, which are responsible for the censuses in their countries, for example, actively provide the information and the reader of the check will easily find it, because the checking usually has the indicated link.

Although previous research had pointed out that, in Germany, data journalists are more concentrated in large-circulation daily newspapers and public broadcasters (BEILER; IRMER; BRENDA, 2020), the appearance of public data in the checks is indicative that there are professionals in other smaller branches within journalism, such as fact-checking. Even to use data from non-state entities (which Chart 1 has also shown to be frequent in checks in all countries), it is necessary that the checker has specific knowledge to deal with the amount of information. In this regard, although it has not been specifically analyzed in this article, these non-state entities also provide the basis for fact-checking to constitute a credible activity. This is because it would not be necessary for the reader to rely on agency A or B, but on data produced by a renowned institution, such as the United Nations or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

It is interesting to highlight that, although the judiciary has already been pointed out as less transparent (MICHENER; CONTRERAS; NISKIER, 2018; NASCIMENTO; RODRIGUES; KRAEMER, 2015), electronic processes have been a relevant source for articles, especially in Brazil. Even if the structure of this branch could not be completely unveiled, the easy access to the pending cases before the courts proved to be a valuable element for the production of the checks. Still regarding the judiciary, the use of data made available by the National Council of Justice (CNJ, *Conselho Nacional de Justiça*) is also worth highlighting in the Brazilian case. This structure created as a control body of this branch was a recurring source, especially of a particular tool, Geopresídios, which groups data on criminal enforcement in Brazil. There is no way to ignore, therefore, that the judiciary has shown itself to be an agent who has contributed to transparency: even if not with data about itself, at least about third-party cases before it. The checking showed that there is room for this branch in journalistic coverage, which other investigations on the use of transparency by journalism had failed to capture.

The legislative branch, in turn, proved to be an important source of information. As much as in other spaces of digital democratic innovations this is a prominent field (BRAGA; MITOZO; TADRA, 2016), transparency was also highlighted. Although, in Brazil, it has been widely used to ascertain how certain issues were voted, the surveys carried out by the technical staff of the legislative houses have been a great source for the checks. It should be noted, for

example, that in the United States, the *Congressional Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office* appeared quite prominently. Their original function is to produce surveys to support the votes of parliamentarians, but this research found that they also fulfill an additional function: to provide the public, through fact-checking journalism, with systematized information about the issues.

About the use of data from non-state entities, especially in Italy, the European Union has emerged as the data provider, which should generate a discussion about the importance of community transparency and can serve to strengthen the bloc (there were checks on politicians who advocated leaving the country, copying Brexit from the United Kingdom). Thinking about the transparency of journalism should also mean thinking about these multilateral organizations, especially for countries participating in plurinational blocs whose normative action is proving increasingly intensive.

Passive transparency, that is, the information made available by the public authority only after being directly questioned, was not present in the corpus of checks of this article. Apart from a few occurrences in Brazil, there was no mention in the texts that the data contained there came from specific requests. It is not possible to say, however, that such an attitude does not make up the practice of journalists from other nations, since in Germany, data from this origin make up the second most frequent type, according to research in large media organizations there (BEILER; IRMER; BREDÁ, 2020). What may have influenced the use of this modality is the time characteristic that characterizes it: the deadlines for responding to requests are not immediate and are still subject to appeals. The twenty-day deadline provided for in Brazilian legislation, for example, does not match the agility of daily journalism. Thus, obtaining data to verify whether a statement is correct and relying on data obtained through this request that characterizes passive transparency can take time that the media organization is not willing to wait to publish its material. Although Seibt (2019) pointed out that the pressure to publish quickly is not a defining characteristic of the checks, there is also no willingness to wait that long for publication. Not least because other statements from the same agent may appear and make the original one outdated and less prone to verification.

In addition, one cannot forget the cultural importance of the use of transparency by fact-checking. If Nascimento, Rodrigues and Kraemer (2015) had already pointed out that traditional journalism has a habit of always citing the use of transparency instruments, it is inevitable that the constant mentions by agencies of the possibilities of active transparency reinforce the existence of this sphere before the public. It is through fact-checking journalism that the public gets used to transparency, for it is there that they find the data and the links that make them understand this face of the democratic system – journalism is the window that builds their look at transparency.

Summarizing the performance of fact-checking journalism, it is important to consider

an aspect highlighted by Zelizer (1993): for her, journalists constitute themselves as a group based on the interpretation we make of events; in other words, the discourse they share about the world is what aggregates them as journalists. The relationship of fact-checking professionals with transparency can be viewed from this perspective: their constant use of transparency makes them a group even if they are in countries with different media systems.

The use of transparency is a strategy to build credibility. Aware that the population lacks the necessary resources, journalism takes this position and uses it to build its credibility (MASULLO *et al.*, 2021). The checks, therefore, are not a mere rhetorical exercise of the reporters because they are based on empirical evidence provided by the State itself. This process of internal transparency of agencies is dependent on State transparency. Using this state data is the shield capable of underpinning the checks: the state apparatus, that is, the bureaucracy, produces data that is taken as unbiased by the checking agencies.

There is no discussion of possible political orientations in the data that is being used. In the Brazilian case, for example, countless surveys from the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA, *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada*) are used (such as on the variations of the Brazilian Gross Domestic Product or number of murders in Brazil) without any reflection on how they were conducted, what was considered, etc. This style of data-based coverage with little discussion of its validity is typical of economic journalism (MULLEN, 2018; SCHIFFRIN; FAGAN, 2013), so it is not a unique variation to characterize fact-checking.

In an environment in which accusations of polarization and bias proliferate, fact-checking journalism does not intend to discuss the smoothness of data; it only refers to public data as if they were incontestable, because a more in-depth discussion about them does not interest this kind of journalism. Just as greater mention of transparency data does not necessarily indicate that a nation is more transparent, neither does the constant use of this repertoire imply greater reliability of one country's data compared to another. The fact-checking agencies do not delve into a consistent debate about how the data used was produced, since their main interest is to use it to show credibility of the final product they offer, without giving due attention to pertinent discussions about the reliability of the data they mention.

Fact-checking, however, does not attach much importance to this point, because it could take away the credibility that journalism cannot do without. Considering that one of the duties of journalism as a political agent is to grant space for the themes and voices that are relevant in the public space (BIROLI, 2013; LAWRENCE, 2006), the path is also the opposite: in addition to using transparency to sustain its credibility, it is journalism that also allows these data to reach the public. Thus, there is feedback, a symbiotic relationship between these two entities: fact-checking journalism needs the data to provide its basis, and transparency needs journalism as an intermediary to reach the citizens.

Taking advantage of public information and transmitting it to the public by means of

checking is the trait that unites all the checkers and indicates, in their texts, that they share a way of interpreting the relationship between transparency and journalism: it is a way of exercising its role, reinforcing credibility, and highlighting its democratic relevance to the public.

It is necessary to recognize that this research dealt only with a limited group of fact-checking agencies, so other organizations may act differently, especially if we consider media systems with different characteristics. This represents, at the same time, a possibility to expand this research agenda, by seeking to investigate other countries and fact-checking agencies to deepen knowledge about the use of transparency by journalism.

Another interesting research agenda to be developed would involve a qualitative approach to the performance of the checkers, with the use of techniques such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Thus, the productive routines of these professionals can be perceived regarding the use of data from transparency, bringing nuances to the study of building fact-checking credibility through transparency.

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