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Fact-Checking in Buenos Aires & the Modern Journalistic Struggle Over Knowledge

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Abstract

In news environments all around the world, journalists are frazzled about what they consider to be a deplorable state of the media. With large demographics of consumers having access to digital technologies and new methods of story-telling via social media platforms and the Internet, newspaper reporters of the past are finding themselves constantly having to catch up to a rapidly changing realm of knowledge-production. This thesis uses fact-checking as a lens through which to study the modern relationship between power, information, and the creation of narrative, and it is rooted in observations from my various engagements with fact-checkers in Buenos Aires and at an international conference in Rome. Applying Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'the intellectual,' I examine how Argentina's polarized political environment and clashing of class interests inspired the organic rise of Chequeado, a fact-checking organization committed to holding elite groups accountable to the rest of society by establishing a new kind of journalistic authority over knowledge-producing processes. Using my experience traveling with the Duke Reporters' Lab to Global Fact V in Rome, I broaden this discussion to fit a globalized framework. In spaces where ideological battles wage and the very definition of reality is at stake, fact-checkers are vying for a narrower kind of authoritative power over the information that gets exchanged between classes, one that mobilizes the public to use their access to knowledge and counter hegemonic narrative.

Introduction

In 1996, the word “objectivity” was dropped from the Society of Professional Journalist’s Code of Ethics, what press critic and media professor David Mindich described as “the closest document that American journalists have to a professional oath.”¹ Mindich made note of this two years later, as he lamented how new trendy forms of media and news production were destroying traditional standards of journalistic integrity. According to Mindich, the increasing popularity of gossip and political scandals as well as the blurring of professional lines between politicians and journalists towards the end of the twentieth century signaled that “the line between the old guard and the tabloids is less clear than ever.”² Even worse, daily newspapers and network news divisions across the country were on decline, allowing news cycles to become more consistently frenzied by “Internet amateurs” and “the traditional press’s own online sites.”³ Mindich admitted that this is not a fresh dilemma; he recalled that “one of the great truths of journalism history is that when older news media are threatened by newer ones, an intense debate over the nature of news ensues, followed by an era of retrenchment and change.”⁴ He pointed to the emergence of radio in the 1920s and then television in the 1940s as other examples of moments in which “the nature of news” became a highly contested topic within the realm of journalism, as traditional practices for storytelling and content production gave way to technologically innovative platforms that the masses enjoyed and engaged with in new and different ways. But Mindich’s tone was nonetheless extraordinarily skeptical about this next wave of

¹ David T. Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

tremors in the industry, and he ultimately implied that although the “practice of objectivity” had been deemed by journalists to be an impossible, unrealistic and unattainable ideal, society was straying further and further from adequate knowledge-producing practices with every new generation of media.⁵

Mindich’s work, now two decades old, offers valuable insight into the panic and insecurity that journalists and media critics feel every time “the nature of news” is altered by forces outside the industry’s control. Though the examples he cites are now outdated, his worry that new media are eroding the integrity of traditional journalistic values and deteriorating the quality of society’s outlets for expression is as relevant today if not more so as when he first reflected on this dilemma. A vast amount of literature in recent years has sought to diagnose similar questions about how the explosion of social media platforms and online content have destroyed norms for news exchange. Tim Dunlop, an American media commentator and political blogger, argued that news consumers in the age of digital media are much more in control of the information they receive, signaling a shift in power that journalists and editors do not know how to navigate.⁶ Rasmus Nielsen, a political communication professor at Oxford and the Director of Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, studied media environments in the U.S. and across Europe in the twenty-first century and found that the death of print newspapers and weakening of local journalism networks has created a moment of instability that allows new forms of media to trump traditionally trusted institutions.⁷ One group of scholars from a mix of disciplines found

⁵ Mindich, 5.

⁶ Tim Dunlop, “The new front page: new media and the rise of the audience,” Scribe Publications Pty Ltd, March 2014.

⁷ Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, “Local Journalism: The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media,” Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2015.

that new opportunities for news exchange via the Internet were diminishing traditional processes of information gathering across the world, allowing for new forms of storytelling and knowledge production that don't necessarily follow adequate verification mechanisms.⁸ Traditional processes of information gathering generally call for referencing the original source, but since information on the Internet tends to come from "unverifiable origins," the study warned, it can often be untraceable and therefore un-verifiable by these standards.⁹

The last two decades' media shifts have thrown journalists, editors and media critics into yet another frenzy over the "nature of the news," and it's almost painfully ironic to see the extent to which nobody expected these side effects. As an undergraduate student at Duke University, I've interacted with dozens of journalists from a variety of news organizations in the U.S., from local reporters in Durham to magazine writers at national publications.¹⁰ It seems that many journalists are either appalled, disgruntled or some combination of the two in regards to where their industry is headed in the years to come. But merely ten years ago, media critics had the exact opposite prediction: they were tremendously excited about the potential technological shifts implied, and were eagerly anticipating a new world of creativity, connectedness and innovation. These shifts included

⁸ Adela-Mihaela Taranu, Elena Paun, Nadia Florea, Raluca Nicolae, George Lazaroiu, "The Ethics of Participation, Sharing and Collaboration in Networked Media Cultures: New Digital Technologies and Participatory Models of Knowledge Production," *Economics, Management and Financial Markets* Vol. 6, No. 2, 2011.

⁹ Society of Professional Journalism, "Society of Professional Journalism Code of Ethics," 2014, <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>; Adela-Mihaela Taranu et al.

¹⁰ This includes courses News on a Moral Battleground with Philip Bennett, Magazine Journalism with Bronwen Dickey and David Graham, TV Journalism with Lynn Owens, and Advanced Reporting & Newswriting with Bill Adair; as well as experiences at events such as 36 Hours of Journalism @ Duke, and DEMAN Media Weekend, both of which involved local television, radio and print journalists from Raleigh and Durham as well as Duke alumni and affiliates that work in various national media companies.

the demise of television and print media and the rise of social media, which includes digital platforms for expression that allow for the large-scale collaboration of average citizens to produce content. In 2008, Clay Shirky, an American writer and professor who studies the Internet, presented the idea that these new social tools, including mobile phones and the web, were allowing people to contribute to global projects in a way the world had never seen before, and that this was ultimately a positive change for society.¹¹ He held that the rise of things like blogging and photo-sharing websites could result in the “mass amateurization” of Internet consumers, redefining what it means to be a journalist, news reporter or photographer and completely altering the way in which news is spread online.¹² The same year, Yochai Benkler, a Professor of Entrepreneurial Legal Studies at Harvard Law School, described the “networked information environment” as a series of adaptations that would ultimately produce a “more critical and self-reflective culture” along with an “increasingly information dependent global economy, as a mechanism to achieve improvements in human development everywhere.”¹³

But the digital age produced challenges that neither academics nor journalists saw coming, including the spreading of false information, the intentional manipulation of truthful information, or the ease with which these could affect millions of news and content consumers across millions of platforms. Two thousand and sixteen saw the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the momentous Brexit vote in England, both highly criticized national decisions that were made in the midst of contentious fake news

¹¹ Clay Shirky, *Here comes everybody: the power of organizing without organizations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2008.)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Yochai Benkler, *Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, (Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 2.

campaigns and a barrage of disinformation from both political leaders and social media users. In India and Brazil, viral misinformation spread on the messaging platform WhatsApp has seen catastrophic side effects, including botched political campaigns and even accidental killings.

Media companies have inevitably had to respond to some of these catastrophes, since oftentimes it's a platform's very features that allow it to be so effective in producing chaos. Since April of 2018, a dozen people have reportedly been killed in India due to the spread of rumors on Whatsapp, an application that allows group chats with up to 256 members and has a feature that lets users easily forward messages.¹⁴ In November of the same year, the company, which is owned by Facebook, announced that it would award "\$50,000 each to 20 [misinformation] research projects from 11 countries, for a total of \$1 million.¹⁵ The move came after a call for research about fake news stories, out-of-context photos and rumors on WhatsApp, which have plagued users in countries like Brazil and India—its largest markets."¹⁶ In Brazil, WhatsApp became flooded with disinformation during the 2018 presidential election, when far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro was accused of hiring a group of entrepreneurs to fund fake news campaigns about Bolsonaro's opponent on the messaging platform.¹⁷ It seems that across continents and even in

¹⁴ Vindu Goel, Suhasini Raj & Priyadarshini Ravichandran, "How WhatsApp Leads Mobs to Murder in India," New York Times Magazine, July 18 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/07/18/technology/whatsapp-india-killings.html?mtrref=time.com>.

¹⁵ Daniel Funke, "WhatsApp on its misinformation problem: 'Fact-checking is going to be essential'," Poynter Institute, July 9 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/news/whatsapp-its-misinformation-problem-fact-checking-going-be-essential>.

¹⁶ Daniel Funke, "WhatsApp awards \$1 million for misinformation research," Poynter Institute, November 12 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/news/whatsapp-awards-1-million-misinformation-research>.

¹⁷ Patrícia Campos Mello, "Empresários Bancam Campanha Contra O PT Pelo WhatsApp," Folha De S. Paulo, October 18 2018, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/10/empresarios-bancam-campanha-contr-o-pt-pelo-whatsapp.shtml>.

different areas of interest, media professionals feel themselves caught in an informational storm they cannot control.

Instead of the informational utopia that Shirky and Benkler foresaw, many journalists and critics are pronouncing truth to be gone, irrelevant, or lost in a sea of false online content.¹⁸ On November 11, 2016, about a week after Donald Trump had been elected president of the United States, reporter Amy B. Wang asserted in *The Washington Post*, "It's official: Truth is dead."¹⁹ That year, "post-truth" was chosen as Dictionary.com's word of the year, followed by "fake news" in 2017 and "misinformation" in 2018.²⁰ The perception of a modern informational chaos has led some to believe that truth is no longer relevant and journalism's basic tenets are no longer held sacred, carrying the implication of a dead, idyllic past. If news is no longer perfect, then that means they believe it once was, once existed and got produced via truthful, accurate and unbiased processes carried out for the sake of educating the people, holding government accountable and providing the building blocks for a fair and open democracy. Was this ever truly the case?

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky would argue not. In 1988, the social critics argued that the process behind the production of state propaganda can also be applied to the media, writing:

"the observable pattern of indignant campaigns and suppressions of shading and emphasis, and of selection of context, premises, and general agenda, is highly

¹⁸ Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, (The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series, 2018.); Philip M. Napoli, "What If More Speech Is No Longer the Solution? First Amendment Theory Meets Fake News and the Filter Bubble," *Federal Communications Law Journal*, pp. 57-104, Vol. 70, No. 1, April 20 2018, <https://sanford.duke.edu/articles/fake-news-first-amendment-and-failure-marketplace-ideas>.

¹⁹ Amy B. Wang, "'Post-truth' Named 2016 Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries," *The Washington Post*, November 16 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/16/post-truth-named-2016-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries/?utm_term=.e33bdd321f53.

²⁰ "A History Of Dictionary.com's Word Of The Year," *Dictionary.com*, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/s/word-of-the-year-list/#word-of-the-year>.

functional for established power and responsive to the needs of the government and major power groups.”²¹

What the authors mean is that selective emphasis and omission of information can be a powerful tool for those in power to create an archive of knowledge that serves certain interests. Pointing at several examples of American news coverage of politically significant events in the 1980s, they demonstrate how the news media is designed to allow the process of information production to be manipulated in accordance with whatever corporate owners desire. This is despite the claims by leaders of the media “that their news choices rest on unbiased professional and objective criteria, [with] support for this contention in the intellectual community.”²² While media critics like Mindich and others refer to vague, idyllic journalistic institutions of the past, Herman and Chomsky propose that all journalists have ever really done is claim authority over knowledge production and use this social capital to control public opinion.²³

So is the media industry falling apart, or are the elite groups traditionally in control of knowledge-production facing a reckoning of their power over narratives in news cycles? Has the Internet destroyed the credibility of once trustworthy and reliable newspaper organizations, or has the ability to produce and share information finally been handed to the masses? The questions facing the news industry today are ones about power, about who has control over narratives in news production, and about who *should* have it. In this thesis, I aim to look at these tensions from the perspective of fact-checking, a growing journalistic practice that takes a radically different approach to knowledge and

²¹ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent the Political Economy of the Mass Media*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

²² *Ibid.*, xi.

²³ *Ibid.*

information. I frame fact-checking as a project seeking to re-establish journalistic authority over truth, and discuss the ways in which fact-checkers are zeroing in on what they consider to be the core function of journalism: a transparent, neutral, and independent source of information.

I became interested in news and American politics around 2016, when I discovered Twitter. Facebook had already become the most important tool I used on a daily basis in order to keep myself informed on current events, but Twitter offered a much vaster platform for informational exchange that I became addicted to once I understood how to properly engage with it. I followed hundreds of journalists from hundreds of publications, as well as lawyers, politicians and pundits, and found myself suddenly at the brink of a galaxy brimming with content of all sorts, that could entertain as well as educate. Twitter made it as easy as the swipe of a finger to keep up with politics, the economy, entertainment, popular culture, society, and anything else I was curious to know about. This produced an authoritative sense of knowledge about the things happening in the world around me that allowed me to feel like I could finally consider myself a well-informed, civically engaged citizen.

Despite this delightful propulsion into the universe of American news, fact-checking remained in my peripheral vision until I began to do journalistic research under Bill Adair at the Duke Reporters' Lab. Adair is currently the Knight Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy at Duke's Sanford School, and he is also the founder of Politifact, one of the largest and most popular fact-checking organizations in the United States. I was only vaguely aware of the company's existence when I started working at the Lab, which funds academic research and tech projects centered around the practice of fact-

checking. I'd spent months keeping up with the news, following the campaigns of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, spending an average of two to three hours a day on Twitter, and scanning over reports from a multitude of news outlets, and yet fact-checking had never gotten my attention, despite its growing popularity in the United States and elsewhere.

Since political fact-checking emerged as an independent branch of journalism in the United States, led by the creation of Factcheck.org in 2003 and then Politifact and The Washington Post Fact-Checker in 2007, the practice has emerged across a vast spectrum of media environments around the globe.²⁴ By 2015, the network of international fact-checkers had grown so tremendously that Poynter Institute²⁵ launched the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in September of that year, in order to keep track of emerging projects and organizations and promote "best practices and exchanges in the field."²⁶ Fact checking, as defined by the IFCN, is a nonpartisan and transparent method of journalism meant to hold powerful figures and bodies accountable for their claims; how different organizations and individuals carry out this process varies across different environments and contexts, but verified IFCN signatories are committed to following a series of principles that guides their work and development.²⁷

The reason fact-checks rarely ever made their way into my Twitter feed is because they offer a different type of 'news' than what traditional media outlets and newspaper organizations offer. On Politifact's website, users won't find an array of news topics and

²⁴ Glenn Kessler, "Fact-Checking Organizations around the Globe Embrace Code of Principles," The Washington Post, September 15 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2016/09/15/fact-checking-organizations-around-the-globe-embrace-code-of-principles/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.a208f4acd7b5.

²⁵ Poynter Institute is a non-profit school for journalism owned by the Tampa Bay Times in St. Petersburg, Florida.

²⁶ "The International Fact-Checking Network," Poynter, <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

articles, varying from opinion to local reporting to subjects of national interest. Rather, they'll find an archive of claims rated by Politifact's staff and statements made by the president, members of his administration, other politicians, television personalities, bloggers, occasionally even viral posts or images from social media. The ratings indicate the accuracy of that claim that was rated: "True," "Mostly true," "Half true," "Mostly false," "False," or the deadly "Pants on fire," which implies not only a complete inaccuracy but one that was deliberately made. For a social media user with an endless amount of possibilities sitting in a rectangle in her hand, reading through a list of politicians' claims along with explanations of why they are true or not does not necessarily prove to be the most entertaining choice, nor the most alluring method for informing herself about political events.

Fact-checking isn't meant to be a dazzling, glamorous new trend that revolutionizes modern media environments, and it certainly isn't one. It is a niche, rapidly growing but still relatively small transnational movement of journalists trying to reinstate what has seemingly been lost: a source for honest, reliable, verified information, an archive of knowledge about today's world that is absolutely accurate.²⁸ They claim it to be entirely nonpartisan and transparent, aimed at providing the public with reliably verified factual information that they can then use to strengthen their beliefs and shape their decisions as citizens and voters in a participatory democracy. Fact-checking's guiding principle is accountability, and many of their efforts are meant to form a meaningful relationship

²⁸ Lucas Graves, "Boundaries Not Drawn," *Journalism Studies*, pp. 613-631, Vol. 19, No. 5, June 24 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1196602>.

between journalists and their audience in order to better hold public figures accountable to truthfulness of the information they disseminate and base policy off of.

The questions that tugged at me when I began to prepare my research project were why have journalists on almost every continent been turning to fact-checking as a method of accountability journalism, and what does this say about the status of journalists as knowledge-producers in twenty-first century societies and media environments around the world? This endeavor would take me to Buenos Aires for two months to study the city's media environment from the perspective of its only fact-checking organization, a non-profit named Chequeado that operated from a tiny office space on the seventh floor of a heavily-windowed building. It would also take me to Rome, Italy for a week to attend the fifth international fact-checking conference, Global Fact V with a team from the Duke Reporter's Lab.

Throughout my summer (and Argentina's winter) from June to July of 2018, I interviewed nine Latin American journalists from Buenos Aires's media scene, including four from two newspapers of varying political ideologies, and several others from Chequeado. I spoke to them about the country's recent political history; about the presidency of Cristina de Kirchner and the "media war" she launched on Clarín, the country's leading newspaper conglomerate; about how they justified Argentina's media landscape, which is quite openly filled with partisanship and political agendas; and about whether they truly believed that Chequeado, the fact-checkers, had been able to achieve neutrality against this backdrop.

I also spent every day in the offices of Chequeado, from about ten or eleven in the morning, to about five or six in the evening. I was usually amongst the first to arrive but the

first to leave, as many of the writers and editors had to stay plugged into the news cycle until late at night. I sat in on all of their team meetings, which they'd conduct every Wednesday afternoon with every member of the organization, and watched them present their work at Global Fact V, in English, and lead some of the conference. My work here draws on observations and conclusions from all these experiences, as well as on Antonio Gramsci's concept of the intellectual.

Gramsci, an Italian twentieth-century Marxist scholar, believed that "all men (sic) are philosophers" in that they all inherently possess three things: 'common sense,' a language unique to their distinct cultural practices, and a perspective shaped by some sort of belief system.²⁹ But only some men are able to function as *intellectuals*, the professional and societal elites in charge of organizing society's systems and operations.³⁰ His distinctions between different kinds of intellectuals, the professional *traditional intellectuals* and the working class *organic intellectuals*, will allow me to talk about Chequeado's role in an Argentine society rift with class interests and ideological power struggles.³¹ Ultimately, I will show how Chequeado's insistence on holding news and information accountable to a higher standard of veracity in Buenos Aires is grounded in their goal to hold social and professional authority over the production of knowledge, inhabiting the role of the organic intellectuals that advocate for the accessibility and mobility of the average citizen. I argue that in a time of rapid change in knowledge production, these organic intellectuals emerge from the industry of journalism seeking to

²⁹ Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-10.

give away some of the traditional, privileged social capital their profession has historically depended on. They trade this off for a new kind of social moral authority that allows them to provide the masses with an anti-establishment, unorthodox and counterhegemonic approach to narrative and truth-telling.

In my first chapter, I reconstruct the narrative of a historical conflict using four interviews with journalists from two of Argentina's largest newspapers, Clarín and Página /12, in order to show how the country's descent into deep political polarization under the de Kirchner presidency from 2007 to 2015 affected journalists' rhetoric. I'll continue to use Herman & Chomsky's ideas about government and media to frame my analyses, as well as Lee McIntyre's concept of *post-truth*, to show what a charged and high-stakes battlefield the realm of media is in Argentina, one that has wrapped journalists up into a struggle over knowledge and narrative.

In my second chapter, I detail the operations of Chequeado, including their three principle departments (education, innovation and editorial board) as well as the day-to-day operations of their office. After exploring the organization's ties to traditional media and struggles over gauging impact, I build on Gramsci's theory of organic intellectuals in order to better frame the motivation behind fact-checkers' work and methodology. Chequeado journalists' choice to focus on the facts behind the reporting in Argentina is considered a radical departure from modern traditional journalism, and their insistence on the binary fact as the solution to counter unproductive informational wars has much to tell us about how power and knowledge influence each other in this tense world of news production.

These informational battles seem rampant in modern media environments, and in my third chapter I'll describe how an international community of fact-checkers is forming,

growing and professionalizing its practices rapidly as a response. Using data from Global Fact V, the conference in Rome, I'll describe the panels, presentations, and discussions that were held with more than two-hundred participants from 56 countries who were either academics, journalists or fact-checkers interested in the field's most pressing conflicts and exciting advancements. I show how the conditions that produce this reactive, anti-orthodox approach to knowledge production can be found in an array of media environments across a vast amount of countries, resulting in a defined and mobilized class of organic intellectuals who are working towards their collective mission of informing the masses and holding elites accountable to truth.

Chapter 1: The polarizing tales of de Kirchner versus Clarín

My first week at Chequeado, Pablo Fernandez welcomed me with a lunch at a café around the corner of the organization's office. Fernandez, a former professor of digital media at Universidad de Buenos Aires now working as the organization's Director of Innovation, answered my questions about Argentina's political environment, a topic I'd yet to comprehensively grasp despite having read news article after news article in preparation for my trip to Buenos Aires. By then, I'd learned that Chequeado, Argentina's first and sole fact-checking organization, had been founded to diminish the negative effects of a media environment rift with partisan conflict. A power struggle involving President Cristina de Kirchner had resulted in biased storytelling and politically motivated fact-bending from both parties involved, and in response to this Chequeado sought to offer news consumers a tool they could use to effectively inform themselves about the world.

Fernandez assured me that to this day (Chequeado was founded in 2008), polarization had gotten so extreme in some topics that different political affiliations meant entirely different recounting of events and constructions of factual narrative. Chequeado's ideology, one of a transparent, simplified, strictly restrained methodology, identifies this disjuncture as the brokenness of traditional media. Fernandez explained that politics in Buenos Aires had become such a polarizing factor in society that being "in the gray"—not having a particularly strong political leaning one way or the other—was seen as a negative, almost suspicious, characteristic. Everyone was plugged in to the news, everyone had an opinion, and everyone hated the side opposite to theirs.

Fernandez's testimony revealed a deep discomfort with the way information gets exchanged and created in environments with a booming digital media, politically partisan

news agencies and frequent examples of political corruption and manipulation. I'll discuss Fernandez and Chequeado's ideology more thoroughly in the next chapter, but for now I'd like to demonstrate how a generation of traditional journalists in Buenos Aires experienced their social legitimacy as knowledge producers and authority over truth crumble in what were socially, politically and economically tumultuous circumstances.

In this chapter, I will break down interviews with four journalists from two popular newspapers considered ideological opposites, Clarín and Página /12. I asked each interviewee the same question: can you recount to me what occurred throughout the conflict between Clarín and Cristina de Kirchner's regime? This was a struggle that took place during de Kirchner's presidency from 2007-2015 and was debated and discussed rigorously amongst the press and its critics. As Fernandez predicted, each journalist highlighted entirely different details in the retelling of the same events each had lived through less than twenty years ago. These contrasting narratives reveal the cause for Chequeado's concern: good journalists need a source of neutral, uncontested facts. Without a source for strictly verified information that uses neutrality and transparency to help consumers build narrative, effective knowledge production cannot take place.

In order to place these stories into a larger conversation about politics and news in Argentina at this time, I'll use a political historical analysis written by Jerónimo Repoll, a professor of culture and communications at the University at Mexico City. Repoll's account draws on the work of prominent Argentine historians and analysts as well as primary sources from the government to explain the relationships between government and media actors in Argentina, focusing on the 2009 Audiovisual Communications Law as a vantage point.

According to Repoll, Argentina's rich communications infrastructure began with the spread of television under the presidency of Juan Perón beginning in 1946.³² Perón is a polemic historical figure, with both devout followers and staunch critics, who served three tumultuous presidential terms, the second of which ended with a military coup and the last of which ended with his death in July of 1974.³³ His political philosophy, dubbed "Peronism," is described by Argentines as a political movement that draws support from both the left and right, defining itself most principally by its dedication to social populism and national economic independence.³⁴ Perón was interested in being popular and powerful, and as soon as he recognized the ability of the press to mobilize opposition and threaten his influence, he became distrustful and suspicious of the press.³⁵ Though his administration had been democratically elected, it acted increasingly authoritarian between 1946 and 1955, restricting the media's freedom of expression and ensuring that television channels were all under control of the state.³⁶

When military general Pedro Eugenio Aramburu launched the "Revolución Libertadora" and overthrew Perón, he dismantled the network that had been set up to restrict public opinion, and televisions spread throughout the country once private companies had access to channels between 1955 and 1974.³⁷ All state industries were privatized during this time, and national private multimedia groups formed, from which

³² Jerónimo Repoll, "Política y medios de comunicación en Argentina: Kirchner, Clarín y la Ley," *Andamios*, Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México, pp. 35-67, Vol. 7, No. 14, December 2010.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Humberto Cucchetti, "Lecturas e interpretaciones sobre los orígenes del peronismo: Nacional-populismo o adaptación fascista?", *Studia Historica Historia Contemporánea* pp. 151-171, Vol. 30, 2012.

³⁵ Repoll.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Repoll.

Grupo Clarín emerged as a powerful one from the start.³⁸ Media ownership was concentrated in the hands of few companies. Government censorship again happened during the military junta from 1976 to 1983, and television channels were again under direct control of the state, though this was reversed when democratic processes resumed in 1984.³⁹ As soon as Peronist President Carlos Menem was elected, Clarín pressured his administration to privatize state-owned television channels, modifying a law that prevented private companies from acquiring broadcasting licenses.⁴⁰ Grupo Clarín got Canal 13, and continued to enjoy an era of privatization in the 90s, after which there only remained one channel under state control.⁴¹

Clarín dominated basically all the massive mediums for communication, while Telefónica owned all the telecommunications sector and yet another conglomerate dominated radio.⁴² These dominant enterprises entered into powerful political relationships that ensured their privileged access to state power. Repoll summarizes that “control, censorship, nationalization, concentration of power and centralization of audiovisual production were central characteristics of the history of television in Argentina,” and these are the same tensions that underlie the country’s modern struggles between government and media actors.⁴³

For the most part, all the journalists I reached out to in Buenos Aires were extremely welcoming of my wanting to interview them; I was able to get in contact with

³⁸ Ibid..

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Nora Mazziotti, “La televisión en Argentina”, en G. Orozco (coord.), *Historias de la televisión en América latina*, Barcelona: Gedisa, pp. 44-45, 2002.

⁴² Repoll.

⁴³ Ibid.

them via Laura Zommer, the director of Chequeado who'd formerly worked as a reporter for the conservative Argentine newspaper *La Nación*, Clarín's ideological ally. Zommer's expansive network in the industry has allowed her to surge Chequeado's popularity forward, and all of the journalists I spoke to had previously been invited to work on collaborative projects with the organization. Since to this day, political polarization surrounding the Clarín/de Kirchner struggle remains a hotly contested point of debate, study and discussion amongst academics and journalists in Buenos Aires, the journalists of Clarín and Página /12 offered particularly generous and animated insight into how they are struggling to operate effectively within an incredibly charged and high-stakes politicized atmosphere.

The Interviews

I'll introduce the interviews in the order in which I conducted them, in order to piece together the information they provide as naturally and realistically as possible, perhaps the way a consumer would learn about a story by reading a variety of news articles. Each of these sessions took place at either the Clarín or Página /12 headquarters, both of which were at grand office buildings few subway rides downtown from Chequeado.

Interview with Werner Pertot: July 9, 2018, Página /12

Werner Pertot is a journalist at Página /12, a newspaper that editorially favored Cristina de Kirchner's media reforms, civil society organizations, and pro-government

sectors.⁴⁴ Its ongoing relationship to this political affiliation is not difficult to draw: Grupo Octubre, the multimedia company that has owned Página 12 since March of 2016, is run by Victor Santa María, who currently sits as the president of the Justicialist Party to which de Kirchner belonged.⁴⁵ Página /12's commercial interests were often in line with that of de Kirchner's administration, and the newspaper was known to offer scant criticism of her presidency.⁴⁶

Pertot has been working at Página /12 as an editor, writer and reporter since June of 2005. He was running late when I arrived, and after consulting with the doorman and waiting for twenty minutes in the building's dim lobby, Pertot joined me in one of the black leather chairs and answered my questions for half an hour. He, like the others, allowed me to record our interview. The following are quotes from his account of the struggle that occurred between Clarín and the government during Kirchner's presidency, embedded with my own analysis that breaks down his version of the story and discusses what he identifies as the major themes and concerns from the conflict.

"[Clarín] didn't take a decidedly critical stance against the government for some time, there was a lot of ambiguity for a bit which ended up breaking down in the year 2009... Starting with the decision of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's government to approve the Audiovisual Communication Law..."

According to Pertot, the story doesn't really start until 2009, two years into de Kirchner's presidency (she was sworn in on December 10th of 2007) when her administration decided to pass something called the Audiovisual Communication Law. Up

⁴⁴ Brenda Inés Di Paolo, "Clarín Y Página/12 En El Debate Sobre La Ley De Servicios De Comunicación Audiovisual," *La Trama De La Comunicación*, Directory of Open Access Journals, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2017.

⁴⁵ Víctor Santa María, "Mi responsabilidad como trabajador y mi responsabilidad como editor," Página /12, September 20 2018, <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/143403-mi-responsabilidad-como-trabajador-y-mi-responsabilidad-como>.

⁴⁶ Di Paolo.

until then, he says, Clarín hadn't decidedly taken issue with any of the government's policies. It was specifically the introduction of this law that set off the cascade of events.

"...It was a law... that established a whole series of guidelines for audio-visual communication, and the principal guideline, that is, the main conflict they had, was that [the law] held that media groups couldn't hold a certain percentage of outlets in the hands of the same company. It was an anti-trust clause, or anti-monopoly, that held that in order for communications to be democratic, there had to be limitations on the concentration of massive media sites. This was the position of the former government, but the acting one does not consider this to be a problem now, and does not take any sort of action as far as the concentration of media power is concerned. In fact, many hold that it favors them..."

He explains that the law was an "anti-trust clause" that sought to ensure a democratic dispersal of media power, and points to this as the core of the conflict: Kirchner's administration wanted to limit the ability of corporations to dominate the media market. So far, he has set up a business conflict in which a monopoly with interests at stake—presumably, Clarín—was bothered by the democracy-seeking policies of a just government. Pertot points out that acting president Mauricio Macri, who was elected in 2015, does not hold the same stance against monopolized media as his predecessor, and instead allows conglomerates like Clarín to flourish.

"...But, anyways, this resulted in a large judicial conflict that reached the Supreme Court, which forced Clarín to get rid of some of their outlets, but it never did. They went around in circles until the government finally changed after eight years and [Clarín] not only succeeded in not selling some of its outlets, but they actually purchased more and today are even bigger than during that time period..."

What ensued was a judicial struggle over whether or not the Law would be passed. Pertot does not find it necessary to delve into specifics of whatever happened, portraying the schism as a vague bureaucratic, legal tangle and suggesting Clarín was able to avoid the consequences of when the administration changed.

"...So, yes, I'd say there was a very big conflict between de Kirchner's government and this particular business group... You'd also have to look at other business groups that

supported de Kirchner's government, because obviously it wasn't a war against everyone, it was between determined sectors, while others sectors functioned as allies..."

Again, this was an economic struggle that transpired due to specific groups with market interests that clashed. De Kirchner's presidency is portrayed sympathetically; it was a government that had certain allies in some sectors and enemies in others, so commercial struggles between certain actors was inevitable.

"...It can be observed how [Clarín] made up this whole image—the image of a war, with Kirchner, is an image that Clarín constructed [in its articles]... One of the editors of Clarín at the time later admitted in an interview, he said "We did war journalism during that time."⁴⁷ That was the style, the logic of the newspaper at that time."

Pertot asserts that Clarín fabricated the war, and cites an interview from 2016 in which one of the newspaper's editors admitted to having "done war journalism" during the paper's struggle with de Kirchner.⁴⁸ For him, this is evidence enough to conclude that Clarín's desire to curb de Kirchner's anti-trust Law motivated them to engage in polarizing, divisive discourse that would frame the government as their opponent in battle.

Interview with Silvia Naishtat: July 10, 2018, Clarín

Silvia Naishtat is a journalist at Clarín, where she began working in 1990 and has served as the editor of economy and finance sections since 1994. Though the newspaper was founded in 1945, it was only able to rise to prominence as the region's most influential media conglomerate under the presidency of Carlos Menem, which oversaw liberalization and privatization reforms that allowed Clarín to gain publishing and broadcasting power.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Julio Blanck, "Julio Blanck: "Hicimos Periodismo De Guerra", " interview by Fernando Ross, La Izquierda Diario, Youtube, July 16 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXmew6ZWiHM>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Repoll.

Under de Kirchner, Clarín editorially favored private sector groups and all those opposed to her administration, including voices from both conservative and leftist groups that criticized the administrations' policies.⁵⁰ Today it is considered the most widely-read newspaper in all of Latin America.⁵¹ Opposite to Página /12, the company's market interests align with acting President Mauricio Macri's economic policies, and they have been generally flattering of his presidency.⁵²

Naishtat was warm and inviting when I met her at Clarín, taking the time to show me around the office, introduce me to colleagues and give me a glimpse of what daily operations are like. My visit coincided with the FIFA World Cup's semi-finals, France against Belgium, so most of the office was tuned into the match and cheering excitedly. Naishtat and I sat to talk in the office's small, busy café.

"Buenos Aires looked like a dismantled city, people living off trash, off the streets. Clarín began to tell the story of the fantastic economic recuperation that followed, from 2002 to 2006..."

Immediately, Naishtat does something radically different from Pertot: she identifies Clarín as a voice for public change, representation, and storytelling. She implies that its work during this era was somehow valuable to Argentine society, as citizens made way through tough economic healing earlier in the century.

"...Starting in 2007, when Cristina de Kirchner assumed the presidency, the government began to have an attitude of authoritarianism... not so much relating to the topic of freedom of speech at the beginning, but it certainly had authoritarian characteristics, for example, when someone from the private sector complained [publicly about the government], they'd do financial inspections on that person, and if someone from the public sector complained, they'd be kicked out of the government... And on top of that, the state began to use an interventional force to go after private corporations and try to possess them..."

⁵⁰ Di Paolo.

⁵¹ Repoll.

⁵² Ibid.

Naishtat's portrayal of president de Kirchner and her administration's tactics is also immediately astonishingly different from that of Pertot. For Naishtat, de Kirchner was definitively authoritarian from the onset, aggressively punishing dissenting individuals from both the private and public sectors as well as using policy changes as a means to control private companies.

"This all began to bubble up until the year 2008, when there was a conflict with "el campo,"⁵³ because they put very high taxes on imports. Clarín took on the attitude of [defending "el campo" against the repression of the government], always trying to maintain a delicate balance that many times they struggled to find, because the government [blocked us from access]."

Naishtat explains that in 2008, de Kirchner introduced tax reforms that negatively impacted the rural farming class, resulting in a conflict that forced Clarín to grapple with traditional journalistic questions of balance and political neutrality. While the newspaper claimed to represent the interests of a repressed group that was being mistreated by a tyrannical administration, it also sought to maintain journalistic legitimacy as an organization that was partial to no one, something made only more difficult by the government's failure to cooperate with their reporting. Again, this wildly departs from Pertot's description of an economic struggle.

"...They closed all the official sources. We did not have access to any of it [(the government)]. We were able to find news using other routes, from [people we knew on the inside] who told us what was going on. But they closed off all of our access to information. It was therefore very difficult to be balanced, and it placed us in a difficult situation. They put on a whole campaign called "Clarín mente [Clarín lies]." They tried to publicly discredit us."

In her view, de Kirchner's government committed acts against Clarín that prevented it from effectively being able to do its job: it cut off Clarín from access to information and

⁵³ Referring to Argentina's rural farming population.

sought to delegitimize its credibility in the eyes of the public. Pertot hadn't alluded to this at all in his retelling of the conflict, but what Naishtat described was a carefully orchestrated government effort to shut down the abilities of a free press marked by a commercialized slogan. She explained it as in character with an authoritarian-leaning administration that worked to subvert outlets of criticism. In her view, this forced Clarín into a vaguely difficult position regarding their ability to provide readers with fair information.

Interview with Pablo Blanco: July 12, 2018, Clarín

Blanco represents a more youthful perspective, also from Clarín. As a reporter, he has more experience with digital media, and has been working at the newspaper since 2013 as director of online media. The youngest journalist I spoke to outside of Chequeado's team, he was more aware of social media trends and online news, and branded tattoos and piercings that made him look his age. He is close friends with some of the reporters from Chequeado, and spoke to me generously and without any time limit in a conference room of Clarín's offices.

"It was difficult. I lived the last bit of it, I joined Clarín in 2013, during the last two years of the battle with the government. The battle takes off with the conflict in "el campo"... the export taxes caused the cordial relationship between the government and the newspaper to fall apart..."

Blanco's introduction to the story is in line with that of his colleague Naishtat, and therefore also vividly contrasts that of Pertot. For him, as for Naishtat, the conflict rose due to de Kirchner's export taxes that put the rural farming class in peril. He ambiguously explains that the relationship between Clarín and the government crumbled due to this

apparently strongly polarizing issue, but doesn't go more in depth. Naishtat did not mention the Audiovisual Communications Law, and so far neither has Blanco.

"...Then the false discourse that "Clarín miente (Clarín lies)" began to be promoted by the Kirchner presidency... It became a slogan, and Clarín and the journalists at Clarín began ferociously criticizing the government. The phrase became popular and everyone from little kids to grandparents were saying it, something that really [fostered an attitude of war journalism from within Clarín.] What I lived during the last two years of Kircherismo was tense—official sources wouldn't speak to us—there were aggressions, bullying on social media, anything that Clarín published was bastardized by the government."

What Blanco does offer extensive detail on is the way the government attacked Clarín once the struggle between the two had begun. He describes a tense environment in which members of Kirchner's administration used marketing strategies like slogans, catchphrases and social media campaigns to socially delegitimize Clarín in the view of the public. In response to this, Clarín journalists became extraordinarily hostile in their treatment of de Kirchner, very much engaging in the battle with their own form of assault. Blanco doesn't state whether or not he believed this to be problematic, but he certainly seemed to believe it was justified due to the horrendous treatment these writers and reporters had to endure throughout these years, a sort of social humiliation sponsored by a government campaign.

"...There were posters. There were socks. One time Guillermo Moreno, the secretary of domestic trade, did an official tour in Angola and passed out socks to African children that all read "Clarín miente". There were balloons, in each assembly for the opening of congress sessions there were balloons, cookies that said "Clarín miente". Once this magazine called La Garganta Poderosa (The Powerful Throat) made a board game that had different figurines of journalists, and the whole point of the game was to spit them out, to spit out journalists from Clarín... Still today, at barbeques with friends, when debating politics or talking about something in the news, my friends will tell me to stop talking because Clarín lies, I'm a liar. It's a joke, but it became a part of the culture."

For Blanco, the struggle was a dilemma over legitimacy between two of the country's most powerful producers of knowledge and holders of public trust. Since tax struggles within "el campo" had made Clarín the carrier of an anti-government narrative de Kirchner did not like, members of her administration sought to completely destroy the newspaper's standing and credibility amongst audiences within Argentina and abroad. According to him, the effort was a fully commercialized publicly funded enterprise that became so embedded in the country's popular culture that even to this day, Blanco's standing and reputation as a journalist gets constantly teased and tested by his own friends.

It's worth noting the detail and specificity of this part of Blanco's testimony. His account was the only one that highlighted in elaborate detail all the various efforts that had been made by de Kirchner's government to campaign against the newspaper's truthfulness, but he entirely evades the narrative of Clarín having monopolistic interest that was threatened by the Audiovisual Law. In addition, Blanco was animated and excited when describing to me what he considered to be fascinatingly preposterous government actions, and he seemed intent on convincing me that for a reputable journalist like him, this event had been a big deal that carried serious consequences on his ability to effectively function within his role in society. At almost fifty minutes, his interview was the lengthiest of the four.

Interview with Victoria Ginsberg: July 13, 2018, Página /12

A trip back to Página /12 with Victoria Ginsberg, the editorial board's secretary, resulted in my quickest interview (twenty minutes) with the least detail of the bunch. She

was having a busy day, so I promised her a short list of questions, and she was nonetheless distinctly curt. I can only speculate whether she was truly pressed for time or if, after what I'd heard from Blanco, she didn't particularly enjoy discussing this topic.

"At the beginning the relationship [between the Kirchner government and Clarín] was cordial. What happened was that Clarín is a very big group, not just communications but it's a powerful company in the entire country, it has diverse interests that cross over to other sectors. Specifically, it seems to me that when some of those interests began to be affected, that's when a battle started..."

Unsurprisingly, Ginsberg echoes her colleague Pertot's description of a clash in commercial interests commencing the schism between de Kirchner and Clarín. She portrays Clarín not as the valiant journalistic voice that Naishtat described, nor as the victim of a hostile anti-press government that Blanco details, but rather as a nationally influential corporate power with diverse market interests in sectors other than just news. When those corporate interests were threatened by de Kirchner's policies, the struggle began.

"There were a lot of others sectors that had to do with this, such as the agricultural export sector. There was a very big position of defending "el campo" and in that sense, there was created a sort of war or battle between the two sectors, and I'd say that I don't know if it started there, but it was something that marked the polarization very heavily..."

Ginsberg says she's unsure when exactly the conflict started, but she opened her testimony describing Clarín as an entity with commercial interests, implying that these financial endeavors with "other sectors" were the catalyst of events. She states that the battle was "created," implying that both de Kirchner and Clarín engaged in markedly polarized discourse in order to fabricate a war with little basis in reality. Ginsberg holds that once this hostile language became the dominant one amongst both the press and the government, polarization was irreversible.

“It continued after that, because afterwards the government propelled the law restricting media, which directly affected Clarín’s interests, and from then on there was a serious polarization. Before there had been a little tension. That’s how I’d tie together that story.”

This was all Ginsberg commented on.

Reflections

I didn’t ask follow-up questions to any of my interviewees about specific details they’d mentioned, because I wanted to allow them to shape the story in whatever way came most natural to them. This way, I’d know what events they considered important enough to dedicate time to, which ones they believed irrelevant. The details that Ginsberg omitted are just as crucial to understanding her agenda as the ones they instantly provided and highlighted, and they are notable for several reasons. Firstly, they are identical to that of Pertot: both the *Página /12* journalists excluded and included the same details, depicting Clarín as primarily “business” or “monopoly” rather than a newspaper, pointing to the introduction of the Audiovisual Communications Law as the catalyst of the crisis, and arguing that deep polarization and an idea of “war” was fabricated by prevalent political and editorial discourse. For them, the debacle was nothing more than a complicated economic struggle over power.

Perhaps these similarities wouldn’t be so striking on their own, but when placed in conversation with Naishtat and Blanco’s accounts, distinct patterns of omission and emphasis among bipartisan lines become obvious. Both Naishtat and Blanco avoided mentioning the Audiovisual Communications Law, which would have forced them to admit Clarín’s financial stake in de Kirchner’s political success. While the *Página /12* interviewees

took no issue with the de Kirchner government, Naishtat characterized it as distinctly authoritarian, with specific interests in shutting down criticism by whatever means necessary. Blanco echoed this narrative of a valiant press against an oppressive government, and at another point in the interview, compared Cristina de Kirchner's administration to that of brutal Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chavez.

As far as identifying heroes and villains, victory and loss, the two narratives exactly oppose each other. Their one similarity is that they both seem to tell a story about two completely different "countries," one in which Argentina has been altered by the actions of a corrupt government and another in which media conglomerates have unbridled access to power. As a whole, the interviews also reveal traditional journalists' various insecurities and frustrations about how the news gets made and controlled in Buenos Aires. I also asked them what they thought of fact-checking as a solution to this, and as disgruntled or dismissive as they could be about Chequeado's claim to be the sole reliable arbiter of truth, none of them deemed it completely unnecessary or irrelevant; they'd directly participated in investigative projects with Chequeado's team, and considered it valuable, innovative work. If even traditional journalists are willing to welcome and cooperate with an organization that justifies its existence based on the idea that their own work is unreliable, then the task of effectively producing knowledge must be too tough for these professionals to handle all on their own.

Some perspective

According to Repoll, both Clarín and Cristina de Kirchner represent parties with specific class interests that clashed and inspired hostile campaigns against the other.⁵⁴ This can be read in their language: in the last four months of 2009, between September 1st and December 12th, 64% of the newspaper's front page headlines had markedly negative coverage of Cristina de Kirchner.⁵⁵ For Repoll, this is evidence enough to assert that “in Argentina, communications media in general and the printed press especially are far from the ideal model of neutral and objective journalism that is proposed in journalism manuals which are taught in schools of communication.”⁵⁶ The industry's supposedly defined purpose—to inform the masses, provide a bridge between elite circles of knowledge and understanding and the average citizen—is not being accomplished under this system, which places journalists in compromised positions with financial and political stakes in the consequences of their editorial choices.

While, for Repoll, the de Kirchner government should have sought to “guard and guarantee the independence of the media and ensure freedom of expression,” it instead rolled out distinctively aggressive campaigns against Clarín, including blocking the company's relationship to newspaper distributors (it also took this measure against Clarín's competitor, *La Nación*), revoking its ability to broadcast nationally-cherished football games, and using public funds to finance merchandising efforts.⁵⁷ de Kirchner framed the Audiovisual Law as a democratic measure taken to ensure the diversity and

⁵⁴ Repoll.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

plurality of the country's media environment, but the law's language also suggests that it's meant to punish media that were opposed to government management, framing "monopolistic and oligopolistic practices in communications media" as a serious threat to democratic processes and the citizen's right to information.⁵⁸

Repoll draws an interesting comparison between Juan Perón's reactions towards the press and that of Cristina and Nestor de Kirchner. Nestor had preceded Cristina as president from 2003 to 2007, and the political power couple were self-pronounced "Peronistas" who maintained a stronghold over the Argentine government through the Justicialist Party (Partido Justicialista), the largest party in Congress.⁵⁹ The de Kirchner's treatment of Clarín is reminiscent of Perón's treatment of La Prensa, a government-opposed newspaper, from 1946 to 1955:

"La Prensa, like Clarín now, emerged as the champion of the opposition against the government, knocking it down continuously with any excuse. In the meantime, Perón's government, like today that of Nestor Kirchner and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, was hostile to the diary in every way imaginable; amongst the most obvious it can be mentioned: the rationing of distribution of printing paper, the inspections of factories and, finally, [the establishment of a legal clause that caused the newspaper company] to let go of much of its assets."⁶⁰

Repoll identifies in both instances a clear conflict between market and state. While Clarín opposed the Audiovisual Communications Law due to economic interests, it did so publicly under the guise of defending freedom of expression from a government that sought to regulate and control communications and media. On the contrary, the government maintained that the Law was an effort to avoid monopolies and the concentration of power in the audiovisual industry, in order to ensure the plurality of

⁵⁸ Repoll.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

voices in the media. But de Kirchner's aggressions towards Clarín suggest a desire to silence and discredit the newspaper, not just limit it financially. The evidence affirms "a partiality and political positioning of communications media in Argentina," as well as a "government effort (and the current one is no exception) to control the media, identifying media content production as a strategy to exercise government control."⁶¹ Together, both actors pose a tremendous threat freedom of expression and democratic processes.⁶²

Conclusion

My inability to draw a single comprehensive narrative about what happened between Cristina de Kirchner's administration and Clarín from four experienced journalists representing Argentina's top newspapers is revealing. Most poignantly, they show how in Buenos Aires's journalism industry was that at least a handful of the country's most distinguished journalists were deeply worried about the extent to which power, partisanship and ideological interests had wrecked traditional democratic norms for legitimacy and authority within the realm of knowledge-production.

For the Página /12 journalists, it was monopolistic control of the industry that threatened the fairness of media coverage and limited how well diverse voices could reach large audiences. For those from Clarín, it was an administration's attempt at socially discrediting journalists' legitimacy that had affected their professional mobility and public credibility, limiting how effectively they could do their job. For both, there were concerns over censorship and having accessibility to insider government information cut off

⁶¹ Repoll.

⁶² Ibid.

depending on the administration's preference. It seemed that amongst those in charge of the news, few are confident about its condition in Buenos Aires, and neither was I after walking away from those interviews. These journalists understand themselves to be the class of people responsible for translating knowledge from elite circles to less powerful ones, and if they believe that restrictions on their craft are limiting them from providing information fluidly and effectively, then something is urgently wrong with the way knowledge is getting produced within Argentine media.

There are a handful of theoretical frameworks and terms that I'd like to adopt in order to draw out the tensions underlying this data and understand the hidden power structures at play. Herman and Chomsky would point out that these journalists all engaged in the same patterns of rhetoric one would expect from politicians, who are interested in accomplishing certain goals with their language and narrative choices.⁶³ There's an "observable pattern" of "suppressions of shading and emphasis, and of selection of context, premises, and general agenda."⁶⁴ The framing of the story is being used to respond "to the needs of... major power groups," in this case Buenos Aires's largest media companies.⁶⁵ Both Clarín and Página /12 "fix the premise of discourse" by setting the standards for and limitations of public knowledge, something that allows them to control archives of information and "manage public opinion."⁶⁶ Sometimes powerful people disagree on issues and different aims are taken, but for the most part, "views that challenge fundamental premises" or suggest that there's a systematic process behind the production of knowledge

⁶³ Herman & Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 1998.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. xv.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. xv.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. xi.

will be excluded from mass media even when there's vibrant controversy over points of view.⁶⁷

There may be actors within the system that offer some sort of moral guidance, but for the most part, groups in control act collectively and similarly, because they “see the world through the same lenses, are subject to similar constraints and incentives, and thus feature stories or maintain silence together in tacit collective action and leader-follower behavior.”⁶⁸ This implies that it's impossible for strong counternarratives to emerge; if the elites aren't saying something, it will rarely ever be sponsored on major platforms for international exchange, so ultimately it is politicians and wealthy media conglomerate owners to decide what story the audience gets to hear. This heightened competitive space of knowledge-production, in which political partisanship dominates over factual veracity and opposing elite groups are able to battle over reality using emotionally provoking claims, is defined as “post-truth” by Lee McIntire, a research fellow at the Center for Philosophy and History of Science at Boston University. For him, post truth-is

“not so much a claim that truth does not exist as that facts are subordinate to our political point of view. Thus post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not.”⁶⁹

He considers post-truth a strategy to convince others of something even though it may not have strong evidential backing, and calls it “a recipe for political domination.”⁷⁰

McIntire traces what he considers to be the factors that led up to post-truth in the U.S., focusing on debates over the scientific evidence behind climate change and the tobacco

⁶⁷ Herman & Chomsky, pp. xi.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. xii.

⁶⁹ McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, pp. 237.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 251.

industry's campaign to "cast doubt on scientific consensus that smoking cigarettes causes cancer."⁷¹ He shows how over time, groups in power, whether they be private corporations or political actors, have manipulated information and facts in whatever way necessary to make them fit a certain ideology.⁷² Current-day post truth, then, is not about the disappearance of truth or the unimportance of facts, but rather a strategic method utilized to achieve ideological dominance by framing reality with carefully selected news and knowledge, and then using this artificially constructed worldview to justify policy decisions that go against sound scientific evidence and serve the group or individual in power.

For journalists, this means an era of ideological power-grabbing that makes it impossible for them to stray from politically-motivated narratives based in fear, hatred and ignorance. Though McIntyre's concept has a specific U.S. history, the phenomenon of post-truth seems to be one that is born of specific contingent moments occurring globally. It isn't tied to one place or group, but relates to any class interested in attaining political domination by manipulating processes of knowledge production. In Buenos Aires, we see how a period of post-truth was ushered when class interests clashed and erupted into war under Cristina de Kirchner's administration. de Kirchner didn't just disagree or dispute Clarín's criticism of her regime; rather, she made the state go after the paper's social legitimacy, after its claim of reality. Her suggestion was not that Clarín was misguided or incorrect in its criticism, but that it was intentionally lying about the truth about her presidency, and that only her version of events and truth was correct.

⁷¹ McIntyre, pp. 431.

⁷² Ibid.

Clarín engaged in this divisive rhetoric, as one of its editors himself admitted, and the editorial tone of the newspaper reinforced an aggressively polarizing discourse that depended upon the fabrication of alternating realities. Lies denote the deliberate manipulation of a truth, and thus imply the existence of an inherently opposing version of the story, the correct one. When elite groups adopt the language of lying as a rhetorical strategy, knowledge production becomes a competition for the survival of contrasting hegemonic narratives that are each rooted in negation of the other. Journalists cannot provide the masses with “objective” information about the world as long as they have financial and political stakes in this environment, as we saw with Pertot, Naishtat, Blanco and Ginsberg’s skewed historical accounts.

In an interview with Vox, Simon Blackburn, Professor of Psychology at Cambridge University, argued that “In [a] sense, we can never really be post-truth.”⁷³ If you walk out to the street and see that a bus is about to hit you, your being able to recognize that truth—that the bus is about to hit you—is what allows for your survival.⁷⁴ The problem that “post-truth” addresses is one that exists “in other domains, like politics and religion and ethics. There is a loss of authority in these areas, meaning there’s no certain or agreed-upon way of getting at the truth. This is a very old problem in philosophy that goes all the way back to Plato.”⁷⁵ Blackburn implies that this reckoning with truth that modern society is undergoing is not a new dilemma, but rather one that has existed since the beginning of philosophy, and is now emerging again in a different form.

⁷³ Sean Illing, “A Philosopher explains America’s “post-truth” problem,” Vox, August 14 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/8/14/17661430/trump-post-truth-politics-philosophy-simon-blackburn>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Social media and technology are frequently pointed to as the explanations for how falsehoods and conspiracy theories gain enough fuel to influence an election, but the characteristics of post-truth politics have existed since as far as the 1600s, when pamphlets became “cheap, crude publications, often denouncing political and social foes in vitriolic and slanderous terms.”⁷⁶ They had tremendous political influence, and were “important in fomenting both the English civil war and the American war of independence.”⁷⁷ The proliferation of these pamphlets is almost perfectly similar to the social media campaigns that occur now on Facebook and Twitter, utilizing dramatic lies and aggressive language to sway users towards a certain political agenda.

The aim of this thesis is not to take on the question of whether something is inherently different about the way today’s journalism industry exists and engages with society. It’s hard to tell to what extent this modern media environment aligns with or diverges from the systems of control and knowledge that Herman and Chomsky identified in the 1980s, and my data certainly doesn’t help us answer this. Rather, my goal with this chapter was to show what’s at stake in the field of journalism today: the creation of knowledge. There’s a debate happening over who gets to control narrative and information in Buenos Aires, over who gets to tell what story. In my next chapter, I seek to understand how Chequeado’s fact-checkers have responded to this problem, and what their reaction can teach us about the way power currently operates in modern media environments.

⁷⁶ “Free speech has met social media, with revolutionary results,” NewScientist, June 1 2016, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg23030763-000-free-speech-has-met-social-media-with-revolutionary-results/>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Getting to Know Chequeado Through Gramsci

My experience with Chequeado began late on a Monday night at Palacio Piccaluga in the upscale neighborhood of Retiro, where the organization was hosting its annual fundraiser *La Noche de Chequeado*. Donations from a diverse group of individuals and corporations as well as occasional grants or funds from international bodies are how the site sustains itself financially, so the success of this event was crucial and Laura Zommer, Chequeado's director, was weaving her way through the crowd of guests continuously greeting the journalists, academics and businessmen who'd been invited. The night included an open bar as well as catered hors d'oeuvres, dinner and dessert, and all of Chequeado's staff was formally dressed in the company's signature colors, red, white and black.

It was quite a lavish event—Zommer wore a ballgown that reached the floor—which was why when I stumbled into Chequeado's offices the next day around noon, I was surprised to find a small space no larger than a classroom, with large panels serving as makeshift walls between "rooms" and boards of wood being used as tables.⁷⁸ The kitchen and bathroom were miniscule areas crammed in one corner opposite a wall made completely of glass window, something that offered a stunning view of the sunset but also guaranteed that we'd have little insulation against the cold. All three of the office's heaters were piled on top of each other, broken, in the tiny "room" that served as the administrative center where employees Ana Valacco and Noelia Guzmán sat every day producing spreadsheets, making phone calls and scheduling appointments. This is where I

⁷⁸ Fernandez informed me that as of March 2019, the office has been able to purchase new tables.

would sit my first few weeks, helping the women with things like translation or sorting data depending on what they needed.

Adjacent to them was Zommer's "office," which consisted of one small table covered in an organized array of books and supplies, and the rest of the space was an open area with some makeshift tables of varying heights and semi-defective chairs. It wasn't a particularly comfortable workspace, but the team would often stay there writing and making calls from ten or eleven in the morning to very late at night, sometimes past nine or ten in the evening if it had been a particularly stormy day of news. Chequeado's young journalists—many of them are still under thirty—could probably find work in a more furnished, heated building, but I got the sense that their dedication to the organization's mission and success was fervent enough to keep them tied to their desks no matter how many office heaters would fail to work.

In this chapter, I introduce the story of Chequeado's founding, as told to me by Velazco and Guzmán on my second day with the organization. After introducing Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectuals" in order to better frame and understand Chequeado's motivations, I delve into the organization's proceedings, from its daily operations, to the responsibilities of its three main departments, to its relationship with other media sites and the government in Buenos Aires. I show how Chequeado journalists' choice to focus on the facts behind reporting in Argentina is grounded in their goal to hold social and professional authority over the production of truth, and argue that in doing so they are inhabiting the role of organic intellectuals that mobilize the working class & counter hegemonic narratives.

The birth of Chequeado

Julio Aranovich, José Bekinschtein, and Roberto Lugo are probably the three people in Argentina who were least likely to create the country's first fact-checking organization. Aranovich is a physicist, Bekinschtein specialized in economics and Lugo is a chemist; the three of them studied their respective fields abroad, and every time they'd come back home to Buenos Aires, they'd find that having political debates with friends was nearly impossible.⁷⁹ Differing political affiliations didn't just mean different opinions, but entirely contrasting accounts of reality, making it difficult for members of Argentine society to agree on even the most basic facts.

The three men, who had nothing to do whatsoever with the world of news and communications, decided they would take it upon themselves to do what no media or newspaper organization in Buenos Aires had managed to do effectively: provide a divided public with verified facts, create an archive of knowledge that would arm civil discourse and debate with reliable information about society's most pressing issues. By this time, political fact-checking had been on the rise in the U.S., with the birth of Factcheck.org in 2003 and then Politifact and The Washington Post Fact-Checker in 2007. Aranovich, Bekinschtein and Lugo were familiar with these organizations' line of work, and they thought the idea of an ideologically neutral journalistic entity dedicated solely to the verification of factual statements was exactly the medicine Buenos Aires's ailing news environment needed.

⁷⁹ "Founders" page, Chequeado, <https://chequeado.com/autoridades/>.

Olivia Sohr, one of Chequedo’s two journalists who have been with the organization since its commencement, told me that before the website was launched in October of 2010, the small team of founders and recruits had discussed a variety of different possible formats and styles the project could take on. Would a ratings system, such as that of Politifact, be better than something more straightforwardly analytical, like FactCheck.org? Sohr explained:

“Their focus was very centered on, if we want engaged citizens we need to have better information circulating, and for that, the format of Factcheck.org worked perfectly, since you could directly contribute facts to the public debate. The first thing we did was set up a private blog with a password, post articles and show it to our friends, to see how they liked it, what their reactions were and whether they thought it was interesting. We began to play around a bit with the format, the topics we chose and everything. And after a little while we began forming a team, feel it grow, have people come and go, and finally in October of 2010, we launched the site.”



Figure 2: The homepage of Politifact.org lists most recent “fact-checks.”

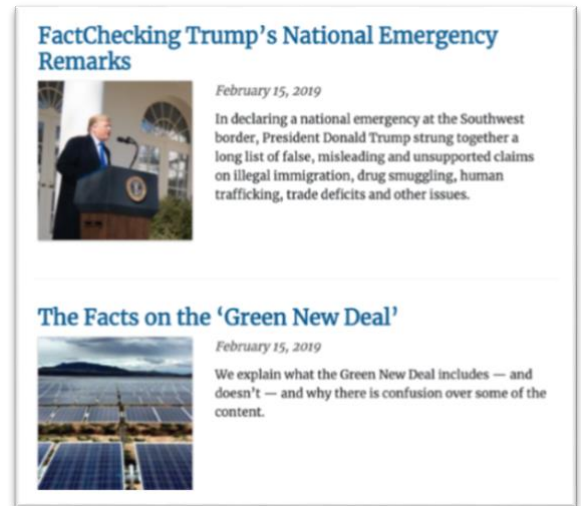


Figure 1: The homepage of Factcheck.org lists most recent articles.

Running low on money, journalists, and motivation, the founders were ready to shut down the project, but both Sohr and another young journalist, Matías di Santi, had seen something the three scientists hadn’t: “Across our interactions with readers on the site and even journalists on Twitter, we were able to see how people were genuinely interested in

our project, in the format of the work, in the way we were presenting things. This enthusiasm was palpable for me and Mati in a way it wasn't for the founders." Di Santi is the other original member who's still with the company today. He recalled to me how the near death of the company caused him and Sohr to "take charge [of the project] as though it were our lives' duty. We started to work on a plan for development, to [really put together a team]." The two convinced the founders that the organization was worth pursuing, and all it would need was a more stable structure for funding.

Finally, Laura Zommer joined the team in 2012. Zommer had formerly worked as a journalist at the popular newspaper La Nación, but her diverse communications background that included experience working for the public sector made her a brilliant networker, and she was able to get Chequeado off the ground and find enough funding to ensure a stably-functioning organization. The organization must be careful about how it gets financed, since transparency and autonomy are two of its core values. The founders wanted to ensure that no commercial or political interest could affect Chequeado's editorial choices, so they made it policy never to accept government funds and to keep a public record of all sponsors, including individual or corporate donations. The lavish fundraising event from my first night with the team is one example of the aggressive strategies Zommer has taken up to finance their survival.

The three scientists, Aranovich, Bekinschtein and Lugo, are no longer directly involved with Chequeado's affairs. They imported the idea, funded the project's launch, and assembled a team of journalists with at least two extremely dedicated members. Once it could function independently by attracting its own financial resources, they left it to evolve and grow in the wilderness of Argentina's media environment.

Considering Gramsci's intellectuals

In order to continue to talk about journalists and their social function, I'd like to introduce Gramsci's notion of intellectuals. Gramsci identifies intellectuals as the ones responsible for mediating class struggles, and especially for providing the masses with the ideas, theories and ideologies necessary to link to the traditional intelligentsia and veer towards hegemony.⁸⁰ They are the ones society depends on to organize knowledge and make it accessible to average citizens, but they can also act to protect their own interests and desires.⁸¹ In the media society I witnessed in Buenos Aires, journalists have definitely been set up as a kind of intellectual class, one that's meant to communicate privileged, elite knowledge from the higher echelons of society to the broader population. In my previous chapter, each of my interviewees believed themselves to be an actor caught in this role, though they all expressed disappointment at various limitations that had been imposed on the reaches of their power.

Gramsci's framework proposes that "all men are potentially intellectuals in the sense of having an intellect and using it, but not all are intellectuals by social function."⁸² The division between intellectuals and non-intellectuals is a myth, held up only by the intellectuals' superior social and professional capital. Thus, this intellectual class of journalists in Argentina is sustained by the social capital it derives from economic and political ties that link it to the historically privileged, giving it what Gramsci describes as an "inter-class aura".⁸³ This is why social legitimacy and public opinion were so important for

⁸⁰ Gramsci et al, pp. 5-10.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 5-10.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 6.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 3.

journalists like Silvia Naishtat and Pablo Blanco, reporters from Clarín who'd been slandered and vilified by Cristina de Kirchner's "Clarín lies" campaign; without the audience's trust, their standing and ability to fulfill their role as mobilizers of society is at tremendous risk.

I pointed out in my last chapter how Naishtat, Blanco, Pertot and Ginsberg, four traditional journalists in Buenos Aires, feel threatened by the conditions of their industry, because it puts their social standing and access to elite resources in peril. Thus, how well they can do their job—inform their readers, provide the non-intellectuals with knowledge and guidance on how to interpret that knowledge— is affected by the political and economic climate of the country. Modern media has become terrain for an ideological battle over clashing narratives, and traditional journalists must abide by these hegemonic rules of play in order to sustain their relationships, resources and professional standing.

But this class of intellectuals is not the only one capable of wielding influence over society's knowledge, as "organic intellectuals" can also sprout from the working class in order to organize the mass's political efforts and guide lower-class members of a party in achieving conscious societal responsibility.⁸⁴ According to Gramsci, organic intellectuals are the hope that the working class has to achieve equal footing with the elites, as their function is to grant laborers the resources, knowledge and access they need to achieve greater prominence.⁸⁵ When market and government interests clash and prevent the effective mobilization of knowledge, organic intellectuals can be expected to emerge in the

⁸⁴ Gramsci et al, pp. 5-10.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

interest of the average citizen, as happened when Chequeado emerged in response to the informational chaos that occurred under the de Kirchner administration in Buenos Aires.

Organic intellectuals operate outside of the bounds of traditional professions in order to confront orthodoxy. What matters for Gramsci about organic intellectuals is what class they come from, because the aspirations of the group they're connected to completely dictates what their purpose will be.⁸⁶ Chequeado's fact-checkers emerged from journalists, which are traditional professional actors who are tied to political and economic interests in the hegemonic system. But they are also meant to be advocates of information for the average news reader; journalists aren't just interested in their relationship with the government, but also in their relationship with people. It's people reading newspapers, and putting their faith in newspapers, that makes them operate effectively.

Fact-checking grew out of the need to connect with an audience in order to inform, in order to possess some control over the knowledge that people consume. Journalism in Argentina is rooted in the idea that information is central to the spread and stability of democracy, and that in order for it to function effectively this information must be reaching average citizens in a meaningful way. So Chequeado's methodology is really just a stricter, narrower version of this traditional journalism logic, one geared towards a new type relationship with the modern digital consumer: we'll identify the truth, and you use your intellect to control your own narrative.

In my next section, I'll describe Chequeado's operations in detail, embedded with my argument about how fact-checkers fulfill the role of the organic intellectual by advocating for the masses' access to reliable, politically relevant information. In a space of deception,

⁸⁶ Gramsci et al, pp. 5-10.

mistruths, and viral rumors, they are offering the bare, indisputable fact to the citizen as the ultimate tool for holding elite hegemonic power accountable to a grounded, information-centered portrayal of reality.

Getting to know Chequeado

Chequeado's work is divided into three main departments, each with its own director and team. These are redacción (the newsroom/editorial board), led by Matías di Santi; innovación (digital innovation), led by Pablo Fernandez; and educación (education), led by Hariel Merpert. Laura Zommer oversees the entire organization and especially its funding, though she also edits all articles in conjunction with di Santi. Additionally, there's a small administrative team that runs logistics and data.

Every day, di Santi directs a team of six or seven reporters (a regular influx of volunteers changes staff numbers on a daily basis) as they work to produce between twenty to thirty articles per month. Before delving into the specifics of their investigative methodology, it's important to note that the scope of Chequeado's targets is broader than that of the organizations it was inspired by: while U.S. fact-checkers like Politifact and Factcheck.org only verify statements made by politicians, institutions, public figures, and the occasional blogger, Chequeado fact-checks all these *and* the media. No matter if it's a newspaper or website, a small company or a large conglomerate, di Santi and his team fact-check content produced by anyone in Argentina, even other journalists.

Sohr had explained that this decision had been made in the midst of the unrest of Cristina de Kirchner's administration, when the only voice that was unified and critical of the government was Clarín. "If we'd only fact-checked politicians, we would have

exclusively been fact-checking Kirchner's administration, since strong political opposition didn't really exist at that time," she said. "The only strong voice of the opposition was Clarín. And if we wanted to be neutral and make sure we were checking both sides, then we had to fact-check them, too." For Chequeado, neutrality means a balance of information emerging in a polarized landscape, and this meant that they couldn't offer fact-checks of the de Kirchner administration without also putting Clarín's claims in question.

Now, the editorial staff strives for neutrality by fact-checking information fairly from both sides of every political and economic issue. During my time with them and June and July, a tremendous debate over the legalization of abortion was taking place, and Chequeado had reported on it with a practically didactic approach, publishing articles and analyses that focused on arming the public with factually accurate claims from either side of the argument. On April 10th, when the Argentine Congress opened the discussion about the abortion bill, Chequeado published "Facts to keep in mind while following the debate on legalizing abortion,"⁸⁷ which also included thorough explanations of what the status quo was in Argentina regarding abortion, the government's history with women's health issues, and how Argentina's abortion laws fared in comparison to other countries around the world. On June 13th, they published "What changes are proposed in the project to legalize abortion?" which outlined all the details of the bill and explained specifically what would change for women and how.⁸⁸ They also periodically posted fact-checks that tested the

⁸⁷ Matías di Santi, "Datos para tener en cuenta para seguir el debate por la liberalización del aborto," April 10 2018, Chequeado, <https://chequeado.com/el-explicador/datos-para-tener-en-cuenta-para-seguir-el-debate-por-la-liberalizacion-del-aborto/>.

⁸⁸ Lucía Martínez, "¿Qué cambios plantea el proyecto de legalización del aborto?", Chequeado, June 13 2018, <https://chequeado.com/el-explicador/que-cambios-plantea-el-proyecto-legalizacion-del-aborto/>.

veracity of claims from either side, titled “#AbortionDebate: Checking arguments in favor and against.”⁸⁹ Chequeado fact-checked a handful of politicians’ statements regarding the topic, and hosted a live fact-check of congress’s debate of the issue on August 8th.

This referee-driven approach differs greatly from that of traditional journalists. One needs to look no further than the navigation menu on top of Chequeado’s website to identify the ways in which the organization’s journalistic logic departs from that of a company like Clarín or Página /12.



Figure 3: Chequeado.com's navigation bar.

Chequeado’s home page features a list of sections, the first of which is “Chequeos,” or fact-checks. These articles follow the same identical format: they identify a claim, who made it, and what its factual rating is based on Chequeado’s labeling system. A claim can be deemed uncheckable, true, almost true, doubtful, hastily generalized, exaggerated, misleading, unreasonable, or false depending on the outcome of Chequeado’s investigation. The following section is “El Explicador,” literally “the explainer,” which breaks down topics of public interest in a simplistic way meant to make important information known to citizens (like how certain health programs work, or how recent Venezuelan immigration has affected Argentina). The page for “Mitos,” or myths, debunks popular misconceptions.

⁸⁹ Olivia Sohr and Lucía Martínez, “#DebateAborto: chequeos a los argumentos a favor y en contra (I)”, June 13 2018, Chequeado, <https://chequeado.com/el-explicador/debateaborto-chequeos-a-los-argumentos-a-favor-y-en-contra-de-la-interrupcion-voluntaria-i/>.

“FalsoEnLasRedes”, or “false on social media,” includes fact-checks of virally spread fake news and content. And lastly, “Investigaciones,” or investigations, provides lengthy articles about various topics that required more in-depth reporting.

The home pages of Clarín and Página /12 are also broken up into sections, but the content each tab offers reveals a radically different logic about what information is necessary for the digital news consumer.



Figure 5: Página/12.com's navigation bar.



Figure 4: Clarín.com's navigation bar.

Página/12 lists national news, economy, society, culture and entertainment, world news, and sports. Clarín lists latest news, politics, world news, society, police, entertainment, and classifieds. While Chequeado’s site offers readers an array of tools and formats with which to better study and understand people, things and statements in Buenos Aires, Página /12 and Clarín offer the entire world summarized in a newspaper.

Chequeado’s claim to authority lies in that its scope is extremely narrow, meaning that it builds credibility upon the fact that the site offers no further analysis than a mere presentation of the facts. Though it cannot claim to neutrally summarize the entire world, it can adhere to a strict methodology of content production that allows it to break down

relevant information and act as referee over what is true. By shedding all the categories that make up *Página* /12 and *Clarín*'s home pages and offering only the accurate verification of factuality, they're able to zero in on the core function of journalism and claim jurisdiction over the judgment of factual accuracy. *Chequeado*'s reporters follow a strict eight-step methodology in accomplishing this work:

1. *Select a phrase from the public sphere.*
2. *Consider its relevance.*
3. *Consult the original source.*
4. *Consult the official source.*
5. *Consult alternative sources.*
6. *Establish a context.*
7. *Confirm, relativize or dismantle the affirmation.*
8. *Qualify.*⁹⁰

Although the steps seem obvious, they're much more difficult to follow than I'd originally thought. I only worked on two fact checks with *di Santi*, but I became quickly frustrated with the method's limitations. One of these instances occurred when *di Santi* asked me to help him with a simple project. He'd recently seen an infographic in *La Nación*, one of Argentina's largest media and newspaper companies, about Buenos Aires's homeless population and its demographic makeup, and wanted me to find the original source of information in order to publish it in a story for *Chequeado*.⁹¹ Obtaining this was simple enough: The Ministry of Habitat & Human Development had a census available to the public that included information about how many homeless people resided in Buenos Aires, where they were concentrated, how old they were, and several other descriptors. It had so far been a freezing first week of July in the city, so *Mati*'s goal for the piece was to inform

⁹⁰ "Methodology" page, *Chequeado*, <http://chequeado.com/metodo/>.

⁹¹ Florencia Abd and Luciana Coraggio, "Pasar el invierno en la calle," *La Nación*, June 23 2018, <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/pasar-el-invierno-en-la-calle-nid2146784>.

readers about how many citizens would be weathering the low temperatures out in the cold without shelter. I wrote the article, summarized the information exactly how he'd asked, and submitted, feeling accomplished.

The first glitch that occurred came when Zommer, the director of Chequeado and head editor, looked over the piece. She highlighted the paragraph where I'd compared rates of homelessness in Buenos Aires to that of other cities, and recommended that I adjust the numbers for population size in order to adequately be able to portray a comparison. After doing the math and showing Mati, he suddenly became skeptical of the accuracy of the Ministry's calculations, which claimed there were 1,091 people living in homelessness in Buenos Aires. Even when controlled for population, this figure was significantly lower than that of every other city we were comparing it to, from Bogotá to Barcelona; Mati hadn't contemplated on this much when he'd looked over the data for the first time, but now that he thought about it out loud with the other journalists, it seemed strange. "You walk a block out of this office and you run into five homeless people on every corner," he told the others. "And we only have a thousand? A thousand homeless people in the entire city?"

From the quick research I'd done while writing the article, I'd learned that how well governments or civil organizations can keep of homeless people in cities often depends on whether or not the city is able to house them in shelters. For example, New York City has an extensive shelter system that makes it much more feasible to tally how many people are in need of them: in November of 2018, the Coalition for the Homeless counted 63,636 homeless people sleeping in the municipal shelter system each night.⁹² Counting exactly

⁹² *Basic Facts About Homelessness: New York City*. Report. Coalition for the Homeless. New York, 2018, <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/basic-facts-about-homelessness-new-york-city/>.

how many homeless people dwell outside these shelters, however, is practically impossible. The Coalition doesn't even try to guess, and merely estimates that there is an additional "thousands of unsheltered homeless people" sleeping in the streets and other public spaces, adding that "recent City surveys significantly underestimate the number of unsheltered homeless New Yorkers."⁹³

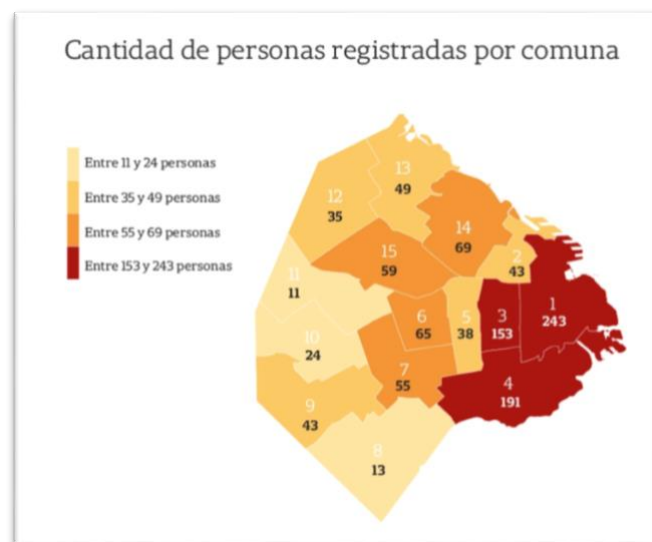


Figure 6: A bit of Abd and Corragio's infographic in *La Nación*.

I explained this to Mati, and now that we imagined city officials tallying the number of homeless people by literally walking around the city and counting what they saw, the data they'd provided started to seem infinitely more ridiculous. The demographic breakdowns that had been charted in *La Nación*'s infographic made even less sense: how could anyone confidently assert, as the graphs did, that there were exactly 11 homeless people dwelling in a certain neighborhood, and 65 in the one next to it? Perhaps these numbers might have been accurate the day they were gathered, but how true were they for any given day since then? How valuable was this data?

⁹³ Ibid.

Ultimately, we discovered that the city’s official census had been conducted by scanning the streets of Buenos Aires over the course of one night, while another census carried out by a coalition of more than 40 civil organizations had done the same procedure every morning and evening for a week and come up with a grand total of 4,394 homeless people dwelling in Buenos Aires. Chequeado published an article that contained both numbers and explained that the large gap between them was a result of differing methodologies, not overtly stating that one was better than the other, but definitely suggesting that the government’s data wasn’t entirely trustworthy.⁹⁴ “Although this is the only official census available, other studies assure that there are more homeless people than the government claims,” the article states.⁹⁵

The project, which I’d expected to be a quick, two or three day long endeavor, had now taken almost a full two weeks to investigate, work out and publish. “The whole point of this is to raise awareness of homeless people suffering during the winter, and winter’s going to be over by the time we’re done with the article,” I spat, frustrated, into a voice recording one evening when I got home from the office. Chequeado’s methodology of questioning, verifying and corroborating every fact and figure had driven me crazy—fact-checking is a slow, thorough, expensive process—but it also made me realize how scarcely I doubt the veracity of the information I come across. Even Luciana Corraggio, the journalist from La Nación who’d created the infographic, had made the mistake of trusting the Ministry’s numbers blindly, and publishing them as sound information on a platform that

⁹⁴ “En los últimos tres años aumentó la cantidad de personas en situación de calle en la Ciudad,” July 6, 2018, Chequeado, <https://chequeado.com/hilando-fino/en-los-ultimos-tres-anos-aumento-la-cantidad-de-personas-en-situacion-de-calle-en-la-ciudad/>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

reaches hundreds of thousands of readers. When I went back again, I realized that many of her pie charts didn't even add up to 1,091 due to a gap in many of Ministry's demographic breakdowns.⁹⁶ Corraggio didn't catch the mistake, and I wouldn't have either, if it hadn't been for the fact-checkers.

Currently, the way Chequeado decides on topics to focus on/articles to write is by talking it out in a weekly team meeting. During her presentation at Global Fact V, Zommer explained to the audience that these meetings are central to the functioning of the organization, because they allow members equal opportunity to give their opinion and thoroughly discuss each decision the organization takes. Frequently throughout my time with them in the office, many members of the team emphasized that they felt this weekly team meeting is one of the most important aspects of their success as an organization. However, leaving it up to a team of less than twenty people to scan all of Argentina's news and public content on a daily basis in order to decide what is most relevant or crucial to fact check is obviously not entirely effective. Thus, they look for innovative technological methods that include use of artificial intelligence and machine learning to help them scan data for verifiable claims.

The innovation department brags its creation of "Chequeabot," an automated fact-checking tool that has been lauded as a tremendous success by many others in the fact-checking industry.⁹⁷ Chequeabot scans tons of data fed to it from digital news sites, transcripts from television reports, presidential speeches or congressional debates, and then identifies all the statements that contain factual claims (so for example, it wouldn't

⁹⁶ Abd and Coraggio, "Pasar el invierno."

⁹⁷ Daniel Funke, "In Argentina, fact-checkers latest hire is a bot," Poynter Institute, January 11 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/news/argentina-fact-checkers-latest-hire-bot>.

pick up the phrase “I like coffee” but would pick up “The price of coffee is soaring”).

Chequeabot is also able to use machine learning to judge what claims would be of most interest to Chequeado’s team—so “The price of coffee is soaring” wouldn’t pop up very high on Chequeabot’s list of claims because it’s not of relevant, but “President Mauricio Macri’s economic policies are causing the price of coffee to fluctuate” might be rated more important and mentioned higher. Chequeado’s team jokes that Chequeabot is another member of their team, because they consult Chequeabot’s lists of claims on daily basis to see if the bot caught any interesting statements the rest of the group missed.

In all their operations, it becomes clear that the editorial department’s efforts are geared towards a completely new relationship between the reporter and the news consumer. More limitations are imposed on what content these journalists can produce—fact-checking is a “specialization” of the traditional practice, so it operates outside the realm of hegemonic media in Buenos Aires and entails a very strict set of guidelines and constraints.⁹⁸ Chequeado’s financial statements are public information, and adhere to a mission statement centered on independence, non-partisanship and transparency. This means that, unlike Clarín or Pagina /12, Chequeado’s editorial work does not have any politically or financially partisan standpoint; the Zommer, di Santi, Fernandez and their employees have no public affiliation to any government institution.

To compensate for this lack of access to capital that would have helped advance their profitability and professional careers, Chequeado’s team had to morally and socially institutionalize themselves in the field of journalism, to become a part of the system. They did this by emerging during a high-stakes, elite struggle over knowledge and claiming to

⁹⁸ Gramsci et al, pp. 6.

represent the interest of the average citizen, who has no access to privileged circles of knowledge.

It's difficult to tell false information apart from trustworthy content, especially when newspapers are all online and in the same format, with oftentimes subtle political undertones and opaque editorial processes. News consumers are rarely offered bare data by traditional media outlets, and Chequeado's social standing derives its legitimacy from being the only one that does this, the only one that *can*. It's operating in the most unorthodox way possible to prove to readers that the organization is on their side, at least on the side of their having access to reliable, fair and honestly presented information. The archive of knowledge that di Santi and his colleagues produce on a monthly basis has become the city's only institutionalized news outlet that offers a counter-hegemonic approach to narrative, one that promises to be more inclusive of the consumer's intellect and ability to independently synthesize perspective and opinion. In return, the public provides Chequeado with the sustained financial investment and social moral authority it needs to keep effectively fulfilling this promise.

Relationship to traditional media

Chequedo's social moral authority was put to the test when a collaboration with the social media giant Facebook to fight the spread of fake news on the platform resulted in conflict with a small traditional media outlet called *Primereando las Noticias*. Towards the end of 2016, the Facebook announced that it would partner with organizations that are signatories of Poynter's International Fact-Checking Code of Principles in order to combat

the spread of hoaxes and fake news on the platform.⁹⁹ The site now allows third party fact-checkers access to flagged content, posts on Facebook that have been marked by users as phony or untrustworthy, which they can review, investigate, and rate according to a system of nine labels:

1. **False:** The primary claim(s) of the content are factually inaccurate. This generally corresponds to “false” or “mostly false” ratings on fact-checkers' sites.
2. **Mixture:** The claim(s) of the content are a mix of accurate and inaccurate, or the primary claim is misleading or incomplete.
3. **False Headline:** The primary claim(s) of the article body content are true, but the primary claim within the headline is factually inaccurate.
4. **True:** The primary claim(s) of the content are factually accurate. This generally corresponds to “true” or “mostly true” ratings on fact-checkers' sites.
5. **Not eligible:** The content contains a claim that is not verifiable, was true at the time of writing, comes from another social platform, or from a website or Page with the primary purpose of expressing the opinion or agenda of a political figure.
6. **Satire:** The content is posted by a Page or domain that is a known satire publication, or a reasonable person would understand the content to be irony or humor with a social message. It still may benefit from additional context.
7. **Opinion:** The content expresses a personal opinion, advocates a point of view (e.g., on a social or political issue), or is self-promotional. This includes, but is not limited to, content shared from a website or Page with the main purpose of expressing the opinions or agendas of public figures, think tanks, NGOs, and businesses.
8. **Prank generator:** Websites that allow users to create their own “prank” news stories to share on social media sites.
9. **Not rated:** This is the default state before fact-checkers have fact-checked content or if the URL is broken. Leaving it in this state (or returning to this rating from another rating) means that we should take no action based on your rating.¹⁰⁰

If content gets either a “False,” “Mixture” or “False headline” rating from a fact-checker, its “distribution” gets reduced. That means it’ll show up less in News Feed (the home page where a Facebook user scrolls through posts), and will always be accompanied related articles from fact-checkers in order to guide users to more reliable outlets.¹⁰¹ Users

⁹⁹Adam Mosseri, “Addressing hoaxes and fake news,” Facebook Newsroom Wordpress, December 15 2016, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2016/12/news-feed-fyi-addressing-hoaxes-and-fake-news/>.

¹⁰⁰ “Fact-Checking on Facebook: What Publishers Should Know,” Facebook Business, last updated April 9 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/help/publisher/182222309230722>.

¹⁰¹ “Fact-Checking on Facebook: What Publishers Should Know,” Facebook Business, last updated April 9 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/help/publisher/182222309230722>.

also get notified of the fact-checker's reporting when they go to share this content, or if any of the content they've shared in the past gets newly labelled.¹⁰² Facebook claims to "take action against Pages and domains that share, and domains that repeatedly publish content which is rated "False." Such Pages and domains will see their distribution reduced as the number of offenses increases. Their ability to monetize and advertise will be removed after repeated offenses." ¹⁰³

Facebook's collaborative project gives ample opportunity to fact-checkers that have been "certified" by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) to police and monitor content that other media sites produce. In Argentina, Chequeado is the only organization working with Facebook, and many other sites in Buenos Aires were uncomfortable with the idea of Chequeado having that much influence over content, especially since Facebook is a popularly used application in Argentina. In late July of 2018, this tension was exacerbated when Chequeado declared an article on Facebook "false" because of an economic prediction it had made about President Macri's recent policy changes. The site that had published it, *Primereando las Noticias*, came out accusing Chequeado of censorship and claiming that the article's social media reach had plummeted thanks to the fact-check.¹⁰⁴

Censorship is the last thing in the world Laura Zommer or Pablo Fernandez want to be accused of. The week following this debacle, Fernandez told me that the whole endeavor had made everybody in the organization question whether they truly deserved the right to reduce the visibility of "fake news" on Facebook by 80%, to grapple with limits of their own

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ "Agencia Paco Urondo, "Censura de Chequeado y Facebook: Es un antecedente complicado," La Tinta, July 19 2018, <https://latinta.com.ar/2018/07/censura-chequeado-facebook/>.

claim to authority. It had also slightly worsened the relationships between Chequeado and its surrounding media environment: Fernandez added that some media sites reject Chequeado's claim to journalistic authority altogether, and do not consider it a member of the media. He said that if you ask him, "We *do* do journalism and we do it better than others," which he thought about for a moment before ultimately deciding that yes, he would say that on the record. He cited Alejandro Berkovich and Horacio Verbitsky as two very prominent Argentine journalists who publicly oppose Chequeado's monitoring of other media sites; they're all for fact-checking politicians, but do not believe that Chequeado should be the arbiter of what is right and wrong when it comes to content produced by other journalists. Fernandez of course considers this ridiculous, and bragged that he can usually change the minds of those who disagree with Chequeado's methods with nothing but a thirty-minute conversation.

Fernandez, like fact-checkers their own havocked media environments all around the globe in, is stubbornly convinced that Chequeado's work offers an effective working solution to the many issues currently at stake in the world of media and journalism in Buenos Aires. His insistence that Chequeado *does* do journalism is curious, considering how radically different Chequeado's methodology, writing style and formatting is from traditional journalism. But, again, his claim on behalf of the organization's prominence is rooted in the idea that it is a *more functional version of journalism than the one that's going on right now*, a journalism that's closer to the goal of informing non-intellectuals and allowing them to mobilize against unreliable, manipulative hegemonic narratives. Chequeado does not seek to replace other media sites, as reporter and founder Olivia Sohr

explained to me one day in the office; rather, it seeks to fill in the gap for what they cannot accomplish, what their privileged class interests prevent them from doing.

Measuring impact

Fact-checker's reliance on public trust and social moral authority is due in part to the difficulty of being able to tangibly or effectively measure the impact of fact-checking, forcing everyone to have to trust the organization at their word when it claims to be crucially important, socially beneficial work. One way Chequeado has approached this roadblock is with their education department, which is founded on the hope that they'll be able to cultivate demand for facts within the next generation of news consumers. By teaching them how to actively seek out reliable information and navigate digital media effectively, Chequeado hopes to be planting seeds for a more conscientious and educated era of knowledge production in the future. Whether this will bear fruit and create a less havocked news environment in the next five to ten years, only time will be able to tell, but the fact-checkers insist that teaching others how to verify information is vital work.

On their website, they state:

"Of all the actors that intervene in public debate, Chequeado has strategically chosen to focus on creating:

- 1. Professional journalists and communicators capable of utilizing facts and other proper methods of fact-checking; the fight against viral disinformation and data-driven journalism.*
- 2. Citizens who can analyze discourse, differentiate between events & information and debate things that deserve to be questioned due to their lack of transparency. We focus on adolescents between 15 and 18 years old because they are the ones incorporating themselves into the democratic system.*

At Chequeado we believe that the quality of public debate is strongly linked to the ability of producers and reproducers of debate to base their declarations in verifiable

information that can be understood and analyzed by the average citizen with standard access to sources. A society in which the actors that form public debate are lacking necessary tools to do so, the quality of debate will only be able to achieve whatever is allowed by its limitations."¹⁰⁵

Chequeado thus believes itself to be responsible for the development of savvy and well-educated non-intellectuals, so that they may overcome their lack of class privilege and social capital and be able to use digital tools to create their own knowledge, control their own hegemony. This is based in a belief that everyone is perfectly capable of analyzing and creating their own news, that "all men are philosophers," and they just need to know what the right resources for information are in order to become completely autonomous and much more critical readers.¹⁰⁶

The organization does programming in high schools and universities with the mission of educating young citizens and news-readers on how to build sound arguments, find reliable evidence and engage in honest public debate.¹⁰⁷ Ariel Merpert, known around the office as "Hache," is Chequeado's head of Education, and would often speak of the enthusiasm that young students would respond with, of how quickly they'd absorbed the methodology, after coming back from events. These include simulations such as "Chequeado Plus," which is modeled on the United Nations and designed to "encourage teenagers to develop critical skills and implement sound evidence in their arguments." Between 2016 and 2018, 10,000 students across five provinces participated, and the project was also replicated in South Africa in a collaborative effort with the fact-checking organization Africa Check.

¹⁰⁵ "Education" page, Chequeado, <http://chequeado.com/chequeado-educacion/>.

¹⁰⁶ Gramsci et al, pp. 3.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Traditional newspaper organizations don't have an education sector, nor do they make any kind of active company effort to educate readers about how to effectively read the news in the modern age. Chequeado takes this on, unlike any other newspaper organization in Buenos Aires, because central to its existence is the belief that news consumers and news producers are out of touch in this landscape of competing narratives. It believes that by bridging the gap between the creators and users of content will Buenos Aires's media actors be able to create a reliable archive for information that allows consumers to adapt their own intellect and become socially conscious of their role as knowledge producers in society.

In addition to education, Olivia Sohr has taken up several different strategies to try and track the organization's impact, but all of these come with serious limitations. One method includes maintaining a database of all the times Chequeado gets mentioned in social media, but this is of course logistically difficult, as it's sustained by a google form that Oli encourages her colleagues to fill out as frequently as they can. Whether or not the mentions are caught is largely up to chance. Chequeado has also surveyed its readers to better understand audience reach, but this was limited to a sample of people who'd bothered to fill out the questionnaire. This meant mostly mobile users, and also didn't grant a platform to people who may have engaged with Chequeado in other ways, such as participated in one of their events or listened to one of their journalists on television or radio.

Fact-checking is founded on the belief that the sheer presence of a neutral, independent organization, which has taken up the task of monitoring speech and calling out inaccuracies, will force its surrounding environment to engage in a more robust,

authentic relationship with information. Oli mentioned that she often saw Chequeado's work reproduced in news articles from other publications, which marketing-wise is a blow but impact-wise signals tremendous success in its mission to improve public knowledge:

"Where I do think we could be having an impact, and, again, this is unprovable, in part because they never cite us, but the fact that, a lot of times with certain topics, journalists have much easier access to information than they would have had before. Because we systematize it, because they know that the sources we use are serious. Since we put links to all of our sources, instead of citing us they cite the source directly, so they're using our sources. Sometimes you'll come across an article that has the exact same source as us, but they hadn't cited us. I imagine they must have read our article and from there found the sources, and in the long run that's great for our goals, because that means that we're circulating better information. We can't measure it."

In a survey that Chequeado passed out to journalists several years ago, many respondents said that they used Chequeado without citing them. "Of course, it's a shame they don't cite us," Oli added. "But on the other hand we're happy that... they had quicker access to it, and that their readers will be getting better information that they would have if Chequeado hadn't existed." As she admitted, her theory is entirely impossible to prove, but she explained that the big-picture goal of fact-checking isn't to reach a certain number of clicks; it's to make society's informational environments better just by existing by propagating the idea that truth should be held to a certain standard. In Chequeado's total transparency, in its complete honesty about financial sources and corporate or political affiliations, it allows the public to hold it accountable to its claim of neutrality and autonomy, and in return claims the social standing necessary to police others according to the truthfulness of their statements, speeches and arguments.

Ideally, just the idea of getting caught by a fact-checker would encourage even the most corrupt politician to defend policies and write speeches with properly verified, accurate information. At Global Fact V, Laura Zommer gave a Keynote speech telling the

story of the organization's success, and she mentioned how President Mauricio Macri seemed to have been intimidated by Chequeado's role as society's watchdog:

"...for the last speech Macri gave in front of Congress, his administration sent us every fact and source that would be mentioned in the speech, before the president even gave it. And, on top of that, he even warned the cabinet that had provided the data that if Chequeado found anything "fake," there would be problems. Sadly for his cabinet, we found and published one!"

This gets hailed as a tremendous accomplishment amongst fact-checkers, and was applauded heartily at the conference. It's what they believe journalism is capable of doing when stripped down to its organic function, even though it means resorting to a tedious and expensive work, one that is less consumed than other forms of media and far less profitable. Finding funding is often difficult for fact-checking organizations, and many are composed of volunteers who dedicate their time out of dedication to the project. Chequeado, which is considered one of the most successful operations in the business, brags only a tiny, poorly furnished office space with about fifteen team members.

It certainly doesn't help that fact-checking is less in demand than other kinds of digital content. Though it's definitely a small sample size, I conducted my own miniature investigation into Chequeado's impact and found that of the twenty-five residents of Buenos Aires I spoke to throughout my time there, only three had heard about the company at all, and one of these alone actually had visited the website. Pablo Fernandez wasn't surprised to learn this, and told me I'd have better luck finding readers of Chequeado amongst Congress than amongst average citizens. In our last conversation before I left the city, Fernandez pulled out a napkin and drew a series of rings in order to explain to me what Chequeado suspects its reach to be. The innermost ring, which represents Argentina's elite academic and political class, is overly represented in

Chequeado's audience: according to survey results, 20% of its readers have a master's degree, something that only 8% of Argentina's total population boasts. So the site is engaged by highly educated readers, and the further you stray from this elite inner circle, the less likely you're going to find people who actually engage with Chequeado.

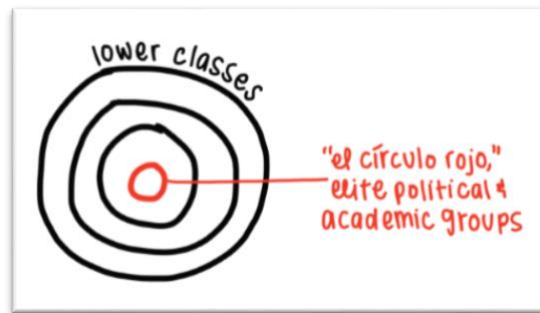


Figure 7: My version of Fernandez's diagram, with added captions.

While of course one of fact-checking's goals is to reach a larger audience of consumers and become appealing to the masses, as this is the group it claims to most serve the interest of, Fernandez emphasized that jumping from the inner ring to the outer ring proved challenging for Chequeado. He explained that in order to reach a broader sweep of people, their editorial board would need to adjust its language, break things down, become a lot more didactic, and a lot less neutral; as it turns out, the average citizen is generally uninterested in bare facts that hold no promise of a riveting narrative, enticing scoop or provocative argument. But since Chequeado can't be sensationalist or appeal to either side of polarization, it loses people consumers from the outer ring who would prefer to read something more alluring, more entrenched in Argentina's high-stakes ideological battle. It's a tension Chequeado constantly struggles with: how to strive towards creating a real social impact without giving in to corporate desires for clicks and monetary success, how to convince news readers they need fact-checking when they generally don't seem to want it.

Conclusion

Fact-checking in Argentina is a practice driven by organic intellectuals who are advocating for the autonomy of the working class in a terrain where elites' access to market and capital has allowed them unbridled control over knowledge production and the entrenchment of contradicting dominant narratives. Chequeado's employees have emerged from this fraught media environment in order to restore vigorous, standardized practices to the verification and investigation of information, and the efforts of all their departments are directed at how to maximize their limited resources and provide a set of tools everyone can use to seek truth to power.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, Buenos Aires's journalism industry is a space where ideological battles are waged and class interests clash. It is a realm where power and knowledge are fought over, and Chequeado has emerged in order to defend the average man's citizen in this struggle. They represent the societal moral interest in sustaining an honest public debate, where trustworthy information is exchanged and engaged to draw varying conclusions about policy and law.

In this chapter, I showed how the organization's social objective is to hold powerful voices accountable to the truthfulness of the information they contribute to public debate, and to afford non-intellectuals the social capacity to do the same. I argued that in doing so, these fact-checkers are fulfilling the role of organic intellectuals in that they are have sprouted from the working class's interest with a specialized version of a professional practice in order to better confront hegemonic narratives. We can't tell whether anything has inherently changed in the traditional hegemonic system that drives media in Buenos

Aires, Chequeado seems to believe that society is urgently in need of a new story, one that allows news consumers to use their own intellects and resist orthodoxy.

In the next chapter, I will explore this argument as it exists on a global landscape by describing the discussions, presentations and conversations that took place throughout Global Fact V in Rome. I will demonstrate how the framework of the organic intellectual is applicable to fact-checkers from all over the globe, as the practice is occurring in a universally uniformed fashion across a large assortment of countries, signaling a recurring pattern of clashing class interests and competitively polarized environments.

Chapter 3: Global Facts and the Governance of Fact-Checking

In June of 2014, a group of about forty fact-checkers and researchers convened for the world's first international fact-checking conference at the London School of Economics. In an article summarizing the event for the fact-checking site Politifact, editor Angie Holan asserted that "the hunger for truth remains a universal human desire, and that's what gives fact-checking its power."¹⁰⁸ She named several fact-checking organizations from around the world that had been founded since Politifact's birth in 2007—including Istinomer in Serbia, Morsi Meter in Egypt, and Chequedo in Argentina—and cited this as proof that fact-checking was not an American trend, but one that was taking the international journalistic community by storm.¹⁰⁹

Four years later, Global Fact V assembled in St. Stephen's School in Rome, this time an event consisting of over two-hundred participants from more than 54 countries. It was now funded and organized by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), a branch of Poynter Institute created in 2015 in order to keep track of emerging projects and organizations and promote "best practices and exchanges in the field."¹¹⁰ IFCN's founding director¹¹¹ Alexios Mantzarlis kicked off the conference with an opening speech that lauded the rise of fact-checkers and described the influence that this new emerging class of journalists was apparently wielding over the world around them:

"If five years felt like a long time in general, they are a geological era when it comes to the community of fact-checkers. Every two years, this conference has doubled in size,

¹⁰⁸ Angie Drobnic Holan, "3 takeaways from the 2014 Global Fact-checking Summit," Politifact, June 20 2014, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2014/jun/20/3-takeaways-2014-global-fact-checking-summit/>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid; "Fact-Checking," Poynter.

¹¹¹ Since February of 2019, Baybars Örsek and Cristina Tardáguila have taken over as Director and Associate Director of the IFCN, respectively.

roughly reflecting the growth in fact-checking projects launched around the world... In Brazil, Italy, Spain, at the EU level and in many other places, fact-checkers have been called to advise policy-makers on the challenge of misinformation. Around the globe, fact-checks are highlighted on the internet's main search engine. In fourteen countries, fact-checkers have the power to downrank false stories on the largest social networks in history... Our clout has grown much faster than our numbers have."

Whether Mantzarlis is correct or not in his belief that fact-checking has grown in standing and prestige within the realm of news and politics across the globe, the notion that fact-checking is crucial work necessary for the integrity of media environments all around the world seems to be a central tenet of the practice. Lucas Graves, a former journalist and current media researcher who's studied fact-checking extensively for several years, echoes Mantzarlis in his description of fact-checking as a "genuinely transnational professional movement" that has "taken root both inside and outside of news organizations."¹¹² Though in one paper, he acknowledged that it was still too early to judge whether the fresh landscape of fact-checking would be truly effective in accomplishing its ambitious set of goals—including holding public figures accountable for their words, improving the quality of public debate, and contributing to a transparent and non-partisan body of investigative knowledge—he holds that rising international interest in fact-checking represents a "growing occupational movement" that seek to "legitimize fact-checking as unbiased journalism, establish common standards and practices, and secure reliable funding for this emerging genre."¹¹³

In this chapter, I will outline the methods of the IFCN, demonstrating how the creation of a central governing body run and supported by fact-checkers, journalists and

¹¹² Lucas Graves, "Boundaries Not Drawn," *Journalism Studies*, pp. 613-631, Vol. 19, No. 5, June 24 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1196602>.

¹¹³ Ibid.

academics across the globe allows them to hyper-regulate and hyper-professionalize the practice of fact-checking. I will also describe my data from the International Fact-Checking Conference in Rome, which took place in June of 2018. I aim to paint a picture of fact-checkers as a global network of organic intellectuals pooling together their resources in order to establish social legitimacy, and demonstrate how this project for authority and power is occurring across an international network of media environments experiencing similar threats of control, censorship, funding, neutrality, and partisanship.

Global Fact V: The global institutionalization of the IFCN

Global Fact Five had more than 200 participants from 56 countries.¹¹⁴ In the opening remarks, Neil Brown of Poynter Institute, a non-profit school for journalism owned by the Tampa Bay Times in St. Petersburg, Florida, said that fact-checking is about putting power back in the hands of the people who are consuming information, an effort rooted in the belief that people can self-govern. This is the promise of the organic intellectual: to unleash the non-intellectual's capacity to participate actively in the organization of society. Mantzarlis of the IFCN described the role of fact-checkers as the "arbiters in a take-no-prisoners war over the future of the Internet," something that could no longer be considered an experiment but a permanent and problematic part of the media industry. Bill Adair, the founder of PolitiFact, identified financing, audience, and partisanship as the biggest challenges that were being felt across the board.

¹¹⁴ Daniel Funke, "Here are all the notes you need from Global Fact 5," Poynter, June 23 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2018/icymi-here-are-all-the-notes-you-need-from-global-fact-5/>.

Panels: What are fact-checkers talking about?

Throughout all the varying panels and presentations, it became clear that fact-checkers' dependency on social legitimacy and public appeal defines much of their methodology and practice. Aaron Sharockman, director of Politifact, described a project the organization had done to reach out to their smallest audience demographic—republicans—and explain to them how fact-checking worked, in order to earn their trust. Sharockman said that Trump's followers had grown critical of fact-checkers' work due to their emphasis on his lies: Trump's Politifact scorecard is 70% of Trump's statements have been rated either mostly false, false, or pants on fire by Politifact, and the company awarded his statements as Lie of the Year in 2015 and 2017.¹¹⁵

In order to repair the organization's relationship with this demographic and prove that its methodology was not biased against Trump, it travelled to Alabama, West Virginia, and Oklahoma and identified three cities where more than half of voters had chosen him in the 2016 presidential election. The Politifact staff, which consists of eleven people, conducted a mix of formal and informal events: they'd go to a bar, hold conferences, individually survey people, and host activities, such as testing people on how sharp their new political knowledge was. The initiative proved to be a huge success in reinstating these people's faith in a journalistic method of content production, and Sharockman's takeaway was that fact-checkers don't do enough to explain their craft to people, explain "how committed we are to being unbiased." Politifact also began to fact-check local politicians,

¹¹⁵ "Donald Trump's file," Politifact, <https://www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump/>.

because these tend to be less polarized political races that allow much more room for people to welcome facts.

Clara Jiménez Cruz of Maldita.es, a fact-checking site from Spain, also spoke of the importance of effective communication between consumers and reporters, though her organization is more focused the need to limit the reach of virally spread false information on social media platforms as effectively as possible. Cruz showed how Maldita’s reporters used the same formats, channels, fonts, and layouts as the “bad guys” (the people actively creating and circulating factually incorrect content on websites like Facebook, and apps like Twitter, Instagram and Whatsapp) in order to appeal to their same audiences, namely, news consumers who tend to fall prey to this kind of aesthetic and informational appeal. Maldita’s method is based on the conviction that if poorly-produced images and texts are all it takes to go viral, then this must be the best way to counter the viral spread of misinformation.



Figure 8: A Maldito Bulo fact-check, with the word “Bulo” (hoax) stamped on a false Facebook post.

Maldita’s logic proposes a curious solution to fact-checking’s dilemma of popularity and audience reach. In my last chapter, I included a conversation with Pablo Fernandez of Chequeado in which he expressed frustration at Chequeado’s inability to attract a

demographic of readers from the less elite classes of Argentine society. This poses a tremendous challenge to their efficacy as a knowledge-producing institution, which relies on being able to reach the masses and effectively communicate essential information to them. While Fernandez said that it was nonetheless difficult to attract mass appeal without adopting a sensationalized, polarized tone, Maldita's methodology shows how there are other ways to get consumers to pay attention to facts.

Grace Jackson of Facebook shared a study from the company that had found that having a well-structured headline was the most effective way of helping people realize that a hoax article didn't have any credibility. She encouraged the audience to think about the context people are in when they're reading articles, because the patterns of the consumer—whether she/he is more likely to click on something, finish reading, visit the website, or do none of these things and just skim the headlines—defines what fact-checkers can realistically accomplish given constraints on the user's time and interest. It's therefore crucial to consider whether it's more urgent in that moment for a consumer to just read the facts or visit the website, and how things should be formatted according to that goal.

Jackson is from a tech company and yet she has valuable advice for fact-checkers, something that shows how intertwined the nature of these new digital technologies is with the way stories are exchanged nowadays. Rapid technological advancements have changed how information gets produced, presented and understood, and this often leaves journalists out of touch with their audience's adapting needs, especially since social media platforms like Facebook are quite secretive about how their products operate. Tessa Lyons was another company representative at the conference, and she came to present on the

company's fact-checking efforts in what was one of the entire weekend's most anticipated panels. Facebook has been frequently criticized for having a lack of transparency concerning the measures it takes (or refrains from taking) against fake news, so the glimpses of intel it offers the public on occasions such as this one are rare. The tension in the room was palpable, especially during the question and answer portion of her talk, as many in the audience were anxious to express their frustrations with the platform's opaqueness and rigidity.

Lyons delivered a carefully prepared and meticulously memorized speech. She said that since it's difficult to define terms like "fake news" and "misinformation," it would be tricky for the company to publicize any sort of standard methodology for cleaning up faulty content when it would have to be based on an arbitrary, imperfect and everchanging definition. She added that Facebook was interested in combining human and technological resources to increase the impact of fact-checking, since it's quicker to spread false news on the platform than it is to debunk it. At the end, she answered a question from Tai Nalon of the fact-checking organization Aos Fatos in Brazil, who had suffered severe online harassment and public repudiation as a result of Aos Fatos's partnering with Facebook. (This occurred due to online, right-wing trolls accusing the organization of censorship and rejecting its claim to nonpartisanship.)¹¹⁶ Nalon asked Lyons if it would ever be in Facebook's interest to create a legal fund for journalists like her who'd become the victims

¹¹⁶ Daniel Funke, "These fact-checkers were attacked online after partnering with Facebook," Poynter, September 10 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2018/these-fact-checkers-were-attacked-online-after-partnering-with-facebook/>.

of aggressive anti-fact-checking social media campaigns on the very same platform. Her passionate plea received applause from the crowd, and Lyons responded vaguely.

Despite the challenges of doing so, fact-checkers need to be able to navigate social media platforms in order to know how to best debunk false news and keep people checked into some kind of neutral, reliable reality. Bobby Diffy of Ipsos MORI, a market research company in the United Kingdom that conducts surveys for a wide range of organizations, presented findings on the spread of fake news and nature of myth-busting. She said that how well people are able to gauge “how bad things are” might depend on their emotional expressiveness, and that this was something that tended to vary by country: while Italians tended to be overly pessimistic about reality, Germans and Swedes were consistently more accurate, though it’s difficult to know why. Either way, being overly pessimistic about their and others’ realities is not good for their health, and knowing “how bad things actually are” is a much better and more productive psychological state of mind to be in. Essentially, facts *do* matter, and it’s important that the public engage with them.

One team from Mexico, Verificado 19S, presented a panel on the project they ran during the earthquake that had hit Puebla in September of 2017. It depended entirely on several group-chats in Whatsapp, from which five-hundred volunteers and two-hundred journalists collaborated their efforts in documenting where resources were available and what buildings had been destroyed. Antonio Martinez argued that while traditional journalism often just added noise in times of disaster, fact-checking had offered a way for the community to work together in information-gathering processes and build an archive of knowledge that proved useful in ensuring each other’s’ survival.

Martinez's story, told in quick Spanish at a Latin America break-out session, made my jaw drop. *Five-hundred volunteers* running and biking around the aftermath of an earthquake, donating their time to gather crucial information about the city's condition, coordinating their efforts via *messaging group-chats*: I could barely believe it. It shows that people do understand the importance of a method like fact-checking when the environment is less politicized, when the project is focused on tangible facts about the literal landscape rather than on the correctness of political assertions. When earthquake victims need to know whether or not there are supplies in a building, there's no room for competition of hegemonic narratives, so fact-checking is a popularly welcomed by the community.

The challenge of modern digital media is not only that it allows for polarized hegemonic narratives to compete over peoples' attention, but also that it produces an endless amount of content that's impossible for any one body to be able to monitor. In the interest of sifting through all this data as quickly as possible, fact-checkers have turned to automation and machine learning to help them navigate the online galaxy of information. Adair of Duke University, Mevan Babahar of Full Fact, a fact-checking site in England, and Simon Baumgartner of Google discussed the future of Claimreview, which is code fact-checkers can embed in their articles that allows search engines to highlight the fact-checks in search results. They pointed out that 60% of PolitiFact's traffic comes directly from Google, which places an icon with PolitiFact's rating over any relevant search results. At a Duke Tech & Check Breakout, Adair and his team of programmers and journalists emphasized that automated fact-checking is still a "long way away," and currently the most technology can do on its own is match previously fact-checked statements to new claims.

Another technological application of fact-checking is ClaimBuster, a bot that uses machine learning to apply criteria to sentences and assert whether these would be interesting for fact checkers to look at. According to Adair, this technology is “okay”.

The final panel named “What do we need to get better at?” featured Mantzarlis of the IFCN listing the most significant challenges facing fact-checkers all around the world. This included doubts about the neutrality of the selection process, the mechanism by which fact-checkers select topics and information to verify. One way that a Turkish organization confronted this issue was by publishing explanations for why certain checks were chosen over others. In the meantime, a French site threw out its selection process entirely, turning its format into a search engine that would produce fact-checks only of the questions that consumers plugged in. AfricaCheck, a collaborative fact-checking organization that serves South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal checks things that they believe will be potentially harmful if gone unchecked, like government corruption scandals.

Transparency and nonpartisanship were Mantzarlis’s other points of concern. Fact-checkers often have to handle skepticism about nefarious or ulterior motives, especially when they have to start out as relatively unknown organizations with little credibility. One organization in the Czech Republic makes an effort to counter this by publishing information about literally every dollar they receive or spend, but this can get much more complicated when the organization is a commercial enterprise, and flooding the website with financial data doesn’t necessarily translate to complete transparency. Fact-checkers also take different measures in their approach to non-partisanship: while Bill Adair of Politifact chose not to vote in the primaries so as not to disclose his political affiliation, Clara Jimenez of Maldita in Spain encourages her employees to have their own opinions

and express them publicly so long as they speak on their own behalf and not for the organization. Glenn Kessler of the Washington Post said he believed what was most important was that, if you read a months' worth of his fact-checks, you wouldn't be able to tell what his political beliefs were.

The diverse range of ideas, styles and nationalities present at the conference may not entirely support Mantzarlis's opening remark about the ever-growing prestige and efficacy of fact-checkers. Methods for gauging impact still aren't strong enough to determine exactly what fact-checking does to the environment around it, but the practice definitely exists as a global response to an internationally occurring problem. Across entirely different political contexts, journalists are increasingly left feeling out of control of what their audiences consume, whether because of the nature of social media platforms, the entrenchment of inaccurate hegemonic narratives, or some complicated combination of both. As a response, they have emerged intent on establishing a new relationship with the digital news consumer, one that relies on mutual trust and respectability to effectively communicate basic factual information.

The IFCN: Professionalization and regulation

My data from Global Fact V provides fascinating insight into the transnational nature of the struggle over knowledge that Chequeado is trying to mediate in Buenos Aires. While fact-checking organizations may adopt unique formats, styles, tones, and methodologies, their investigative processes and financial activities are universally standardized and regulated by an authoritative central governing body. This system is as disconnected from the realm of professional traditional media as it can be, as its existence

is rooted in the desire to distance authoritative journalistic content from the work of traditional intellectuals. As a result, this organic movement has established itself as a diverse network of talents and individuals from almost every continent, professionalizing the practice of fact-checking in order to combine global efforts and provide themselves with what they need to function successfully: money, manpower, popularity, social legitimacy, and authoritative moral standing amongst knowledge-producing institutions. The existence of the IFCN assists fact-checkers all over the world in accumulating the professional, social and financial capital they need to functionally operate.

In order to get verified by the IFCN—which many fact-checking organizations currently seek, because it’s a stamp of legitimacy as far as the journalistic community is concerned—a party has to prove that they fulfill the network’s standards for proper practice. Some of these include:

IFCN List A

- *Is your organization or team dedicated solely to checking the discourse of politicians or detecting viral hoaxes in social platforms?*
- *Has your organization made public its incorporation documents?*
- *Does your organization have a public nonpartisanship policy?*
- *Does your organization disclose its sources in enough detail that readers could replicate the fact check?*
- *Does your organization disclose the sources of funding, including which types of funding it does or does not accept? Does it have a public statement of ownership?*

On its website, the IFCN also outlines the perks that come with verification:

IFCN List B

- *Get an independent and expert analysis of your transparency and methodology.*
- *Verified signatories get free access to a toolbank worth more than \$5,000 USD a year including DomainTools, Statista and Infogram.*
- *Verification is a necessary condition to be recognized as a fact-checker by major platforms and to apply to some IFCN grants.*
- *Become part of a large community of leading fact-checking organizations around the world that exchanges best practices.*

The trade-off is fairly clear: comply with what the “experts” have decided are the rules of play, and enjoy the benefits of belonging to their community. Being an IFCN signatory means gaining access to tremendous resources, such as the ability to partner with Facebook and have greater control over preventing the spread of hoax information on the giant social media platform. No centralized commanding authority like this exists within the world of journalism: you don’t need to pass any special exam to become a journalist, nor is a specialized degree required to get hired at a newspaper publication. It is a field that is logistically simple to join, especially since the advent of the Internet and the flourishing of online publications.

The IFCN makes fact-checking a difficult field to join, or at least a more bureaucratic one. Of course, organizations could choose to ignore the regulations of this exterior governing body and set themselves up however they please, but then they’d be missing out on the tremendous capital they gain when they subject themselves to international standards of accountability and become part of this self-celebrated community. On its website, the IFCN posts all the forms and deliberations that go into getting an organization verified as a signatory, and it’s incredible to see the extent to which the network is allowed to inspect and critique the behavior of groups that operating overseas. Fact-checkers are eager to abide by the IFCN’s rules and legitimize its authority, because that’s how desperately they want to be recognized and brag the internationally significant verification stamp on their website. During my time at the Duke Reporters’ Lab, in which I researched emerging fact-checking projects in order to locate and describe them on the Lab’s publicly available database and map, I realized how important it is for small media initiatives like these in distant corners of the world to establish some sort of institutional support.

Oftentimes, fact-checkers would come forward via email to me or my supervisor, begging to get noticed and placed on the map.

On a local scale, fact-checkers establish their authority with audiences by defining their journalistic jurisdiction in specific terms. I'd like to draw attention to the first bullet point from IFCN List A: "Is your organization or team dedicated solely to checking the discourse of politicians or detecting viral hoaxes in social platforms?" This is a crucial point in fact checkers' ability to claim authority over the production knowledge, because it disassociates them from journalistic practices that are commonly associated with bias and unfairness. By avoiding things like opinion columns, ideologically partisan editorial boards, political analyses, and endorsements of political candidates or policies, fact-checkers are able to socially differentiate themselves as the true referees of the battle over truth.

Herman and Chomsky are helpful in thinking about this:

"The bare existence of a fact does not mean anything in and of itself; there may be facts present in a media report, but it's the presentation of that fact, the representation of the information, all the related facts that accompany that one fact and give it meaning—that's where the suppressed bias comes in."¹¹⁷

Fact-checkers are following their logic that *the bare existence of a fact does not mean anything in and of itself*; this is what they aim to achieve. Bare facts with no meaning or implication attached. A neutral and transparent representation of the information, a strict limitation on added facts to only whatever is essential for immediate context. That leaves the analysis of the facts up to the intellect of the consumer entirely, allowing them more autonomy and social consciousness that helps them build a counterhegemonic narrative. Fact-checkers promise to be absolutely non-partisan by adhering to a strict methodology of

¹¹⁷ Herman & Chomsky, pp. xv.

content production that has jurisdiction over factual verification exclusively. They're adapting the traditional intellectual's claim to all-encompassing journalistic authority in order to better fit the current atmosphere of individualized content production, and this requires a meaningful relationship with the consumer and increased respect for her/his intellect.

Though it may not seem so initially, fact-checking is quite a radical departure from the practice of traditional journalism. It relinquishes all control over narrative, doesn't exist to produce a profit on behalf of any group or company, and doesn't advocate for any political perspective, party or individual. It exclusively holds the final word over facts, with the ultimate goal of making a rigorously accurate and socially mobilizing archive of knowledge that is popularly used by intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike that may be used to hold all of society accountable to a truthful account of reality. Fact-checkers thus fulfill the role of the organic intellectual by advocating against the hegemonic influence of elites, encouraging average news consumers to put their intellect to use and create their own narratives.

In this chapter, I showed how the challenges that fact-checkers all around the world are facing all have to do with threats to their authority, limitations on their social credibility and audience reach. Concerns over transparency, nonpartisanship and trustworthiness show how fact-checking is a project obsessed with establishing a new kind of journalistic control over people's knowledge-producing processes. This small network of journalists has resorted to a hyper-professionalization and hyper-regulation of the practice in order to ease these worries and create a claim to institutional authority and legitimacy within an array of digital media environments across the world. All the panels revealed a

movement of people intent on establishing a compromised jurisdiction over the exchange and production of information in order to encourage collaborative and high-quality production of knowledge and information.

Conclusion

We live in a world not of shifted truth, but of shifted truth-tellers. In media environments all over the world, rapidly evolving digital tools have granted the public more access to creating its own news and content, and yet it seems that as a society we are still no better at critically consuming information than when we were communicating via pamphlets. This project grew out of my need to reconcile my excitement for the endless possibilities of modern journalistic technology with the horror I feel every time one of my intelligent, college-educated friends proves to be completely apathetic towards the news. Two years ago at the Duke Reporters' Lab, I discovered fact-checking, a relatively small but rapidly growing transnational journalistic movement that seeks to operate outside the bounds of traditional hegemonic journalism in order to provide what's missing to the masses: the facts of the matter.

In order to better understand fact-checkers and their role in society, I travelled to Buenos Aires, Argentina for two months to conduct participant-observation style research with the organization Chequeado. I also travelled to Global Fact V, the fifth international fact-checking conference, to observe how fact-checking exists as a worldwide trend responding to a globally recurring struggle over truth and knowledge. In this thesis, I showed how the practice is zoning in on the core function of journalism in order to claim a new kind of authority within the industry, one that is capable of countering unreliable, market-driven hegemonic narratives about the world by arming the average news consumer with the information they need to synthesize antiorthodox opinions and beliefs.

These organic journalists are responding to a media atmosphere in which traditional news organizations are incapable of effectively operating as guardians of

knowledge, since their stakes in political and economic interests guide much of their editorial choices and force them to adopt the polarizing rhetoric of elite groups. Whether this is a crisis that has existed for decades but is only now creating enough chaos due to the advent of digital technology, or whether something has fundamentally changed about the way we engage with and create knowledge, it's difficult to tell.

Either way, fact-checkers have created a movement for themselves where they have been able to address what they identify as the shortcomings of modern traditional journalism: a lack of accreditation and critical skills needed to join the field, of a transparent and publicly understood investigative method, and of a nonpartisan, informationally driven approach to narrative-building. The existence of the IFCN, an organized network of intellectuals and their resources, has allowed them to establish legitimacy on an international scale, and their model of accountability journalism allows them to establish trust amongst local audiences.

In 2010, after the American journalist and television personality Jake Tapper hired Politifact to fact-check his Sunday morning talk-show, Tapper was invited to appear on *The Colbert Report*, a satirical late night talk show hosted by comedian Stephen Colbert on Comedy Central.¹¹⁸ "Now, Jake," Colbert asked Tapper, "Why on earth would you cede the power of the host to an organization like Politifact to check the facts on your show?"¹¹⁹ Of course, Colbert was feigning outrage at the idea of fact-checking as part of the satirical persona he maintained for *The Colbert Report*, a power-hungry conservative Republican.

¹¹⁸ Jake Tapper, "Sunday morning fact-checking – Jake Tapper & Bill Adair," interviewed by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, April 4 2010, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/xhpb5/the-colbert-report-sunday-morning-fact-checking---jake-tapper---bill-adair>.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

But he was not wrong to suggest that fact-checking is about authority, in the sense that it claims jurisdiction over truthful information, a moral standing apparently even more significant than that of journalists like Tapper himself. Tapper responded that though he is meant to be the “first line of defense,” he doesn’t always have researched facts in front of him, and is therefore unable to ensure that his talk-show guests rely exclusively on accurate data to build arguments and justify political ideologies, hence the need for a fact-checking organization to serve as a sort of neutral, authoritative reference.¹²⁰

Humans are story-tellers. We don’t just consume information, we use it to tell stories and create narratives about our lives and the world around us. But, like Tapper, we don’t always have the researched facts in front of us, and often allow ourselves to stray from the accurate data in order to build our tales. Fact-checking is a reminder that a society cannot stand by letting its politicians, journalists and news readers do this too severely. When ideological battles wage between powerful people and their powerful enemies, when society’s very reality is constantly being re-written by disagreeing pens, it is the fact-checking organic intellectual who seeks to reconcile broken relationships in knowledge production and prove that truth and honesty trump even the most flaming pair of Pants on Fire.



Figure 9: Politifact's Pants on Fire rating.

¹²⁰ Tapper, “Sunday morning fact-checking.”

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