

FACT-CHECKING IN LATIN AMERICA: EXPERIENCES AND POTENTIAL

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Unlike what happens in Europe or the United States, where a survey carried out by Google in 2012 on 500 people showed that 64% of voters used the Internet to check candidates' statements, fact-checking in Latin America is not well-known, and there is little experience. However, it has been gaining momentum recently, so this type of initiative could multiply in the near future.

Chequeado, one of the pioneering sites in the field, was developed in this continent. It started developing in late 2009 when only a few organizations in the world were devoted to contrasting public discourse with facts and data, and it went online in 2010¹.

It was long before similar proposals came along, at least until 2013, and when they did, many of these new initiatives did not have long-term plans. In most cases, these initiatives were linked to the national elections of each country. This means that this new style of journalism was used to cover current events, such as the national elections, in a novel way.

EL POLÍGRAFO – CHILE

Chile was implementing the automated registration and voluntary voting system for the first time in the 2013 presidential elections. The first round took place in November and the runoff round in December.

To cover this important event, El Mercurio newspaper decided to fact-check the data provided by the candidates or their campaign teams, following the international fact-checking trend. To this end, in mid-2013, an editor from the newspaper traveled to PolitiFact's headquarters in St. Petersburg, Florida, to learn about the way they worked, their methodology, and their journalistic principles. Although in other cases PolitiFact issued licenses, as in PolitiFact Australia, the newspaper developed its own proposal, adopting several concepts they learned from the North American site but customizing "original contents, more in line with the national culture," as El Mercurio pointed out.

Thus, on July 7 that year, they started a weekly column in the printed Sunday edition called "El Polígrafo" (the polygraph), after the device that monitors



1. For more details on this case, see Chapter IV.

the physiological changes in the body and plots them on a graph to, theoretically, detect lies. The statements rating system includes five categories: True ("The statement is correct and needs no clarification"), Almost True ("The statement is correct, but needs clarification, additional information, or context"), Half True ("The statement is partially correct, but there are errors, omits important details, or lacks context"), Almost False ("The statement is not correct"), and False ("The statement is not correct and there are elements that are far removed from reality"). They also use a seven-step methodology, which includes asking the person who issued the statement, reviewing files, interviewing experts in the field, and using databases, among others.

"For four months, the journalists in charge of this project thoroughly analyzed the contents disseminated by the candidates or their campaign staff to verify how accurate and consistent they were over time. Many were found to be truthful and consistent. Still, there were also 'half-truths,' statements far removed from reality and unexpected changes of mind", described the media outlet itself in an [article](#) that provides a summary of the initiative.

El Polígrafo [analyzed](#), for example, whether the candidates' work or background matched their claims and noted that although Bachellet had studied pediatrics, she was not formally a pediatrician as she had not taken the exam for the degree (and was therefore rated as Almost False).

In addition to contrasting statements with available data, El Polígrafo created additional subsections such as: "... and for the reader's verdict," in which they [follow](#) their usual fact-checking process but they do not rate the statement; "reply," [where](#) those who were fact-checked have the right of reply; and "Flip," which compares statements made long ago with more current ones by the same person, to show if they remained consistent or changed their minds, that is, whether they were irrefragable or made a complete flip.

The "El Polígrafo" column continued beyond the elections and comes out every Sunday in print. Sometimes it publishes investigative columns, where they do not use ratings but, for example, report on the high authorities who have defaulted on their student loans. El Polígrafo only monitors the statements of political candidates or political officials.

RETE AL CANDIDATO - COSTA RICA

In February 2014, there were elections in Costa Rica, and the Costa Rican weekly El Financiero launched a fact-checking app called "Rete al candidato" (challenge the candidate) for this event. El Financiero is a newspaper specialized in business, finance, and economics founded in 1995, and it is part of the Grupo Nación, one of the communications companies in Costa Rica.

"Rete al candidato" is a web app, that is, an application or program that works within a web page, and was launched on November 18, 2013: <http://media.elfinancierocr.com/retealcandidato/>. The site wanted citizens to be able to "challenge" those running in the elections and check the figures and data they mentioned in their public appearances and thus confirm whether their claims were correct or not.

It was presented as a challenge, so whenever a person heard or read a statement that struck their attention, they would have to turn it into a question: "Is it true that ... ?" When clicking the button to submit the challenge on the site, a form popped up for the reader to fill out information such as which candidate they were challenging, the reader's full name and identity card number, the question for the challenge, the argument as to why the information quoted by the politician might not be entirely accurate. They could also attach files with additional information to support their claim that what was said was incorrect.

The reader had to accept the terms and conditions, where, among other things, it was stated that the challenge would be moderated by El Financiero, that the more concrete and substantiated challenges had more chances of being published over the others, and that each challenge had to "address economic, social, environmental, financial, technological or business issues." Once submitted, the newspaper's editorial staff would review it and contact the challenger via e-mail if any clarification was needed, if the challenge was published, or if the challenged candidate responded. Readers were urged to share the challenge on their social media, "to strengthen public debate," and the newspaper promised to publish the cases where the presidential candidates were wrong and those where they had been able to prove the accuracy of the data.

The challenges that were answered directly by the candidates were marked with a star on the site. "Challenge the candidate" did not use a rating system. Instead, they confirmed or denied the statement, with a few exceptions where they used words such as "False," for example:

I challenge the presidential candidate of the National Liberation Party, Johnny Araya:

Is the current inflation rate the lowest in the last 40 years?

Answer: Yes. The lowest inflation rate of the last 40 years was that of 2013 at 3.7%.

I challenge the presidential candidate of the Citizen Action Party and current president, Luis Guillermo Solís: Is it true that Luis Guillermo Solís earns a salary of 625 thousand Costa Rican colons?

Answer: Yes. The University of Costa Rica confirmed that this the candidate's salary.

The platform, sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Foundation (KAS), was active until April 6, 2014. According to a **report** published by El Financiero at the time, a total of 79 challenges were published while the platform was active. Of these, 25 were statements or government plan proposals by the candidate of the Citizen Action Party and winner, Luis Guillermo Solís, and 20 by the National Liberation Party representative, Johnny Araya. Out of these 45 challenges, the two candidates that made it to the runoff round, Araya and Solís, answered eight, each candidate's first four challenges, even though space was provided to explain their statements, they were urged to do so.

Although one of the main objectives was to engage citizens and get them motivated to find out if competing politicians' statements were accurate and to submit challenges for them to prove that their data was, in fact, true, the audience initiated only 20% of the interactions. At the same time, the rest was left in the hands of El Financiero's editorial staff. Some challenges may have been submitted after April 6 since there were 82 on the site up until then; there were 21 about Araya instead of 20.

"Challenge the candidate" was only involved with the elections and concerned with verifying the statements of the politicians, and has not proposed so far as an initiative to be continued once the elections were over.

DETECTOR DE MENTIRAS - COLOMBIA

Unlike the two previous cases, La Silla Vacía is a digital native media and implemented fact-checking to cover the elections in a novel way. In 2013, the site **won** the Gabriel García Márquez Foundation for New Ibero-American Journalism award (FNPI) in the Innovation category, with a project called Proyecto Rosa (Pink Project). Chequedo was one of the runner-ups in the same category. As the directors of both agencies met at the event, they discussed the possibility for La Silla Vacía to undergo training and lead a fact-checking initiative around the national elections in Colombia between May (first round) and June that year.

Thus, La Silla Vacía's Lie Detector became Chequedo's first international initiative. It adopted the latter's rating system (with some adjustments, for example, instead of "True, but..." they used "Correct, but...", and instead of "Questionable" they used "Debatable"), and its methodology, especially regarding live fact-checking. Due to the electoral context, it limited its scope to reviewing public statements issued by politicians.

The initiative **was launched** on May 5, live fact-checking the claims made by the President and then-candidate for reelection, Juan Manuel Santos, during his interview on the Hora 20 radio program, broadcast by Radio Caracol of Grupo Prisa. They fact-checked 19 claims

made by the President, of which seven were correct or practically correct (True, But...), three were false, two were overstatements, four were misleading statements, and three were questionable or unsupported.

La Silla's "Lie Detector" was used to live fact-check "all the candidates who are (or were) invited to Hora 20, and all statements made in El Tiempo, El Espectador [both newspapers], Twitter, Colprensa [news agency], La Silla Vacía and in their campaign ads." In addition, candidates' appearances in other media, such as **Blu Radio**, and **RCN** television channel (where they held presidential debates), were also fact-checked live. The participation of users was encouraged to provide information or statements to be checked.

The initiative was discontinued once the runoff round and elections were over, and they did not announce whether they would rerun it.

EL OBSERVADOR - HONDURAS

We can quickly mention another initiative developed in Honduras after a Chequeado team training workshop in Nicaragua in February 2014 for 20 journalists and activists from Central America. As part of the "Defending Freedom of Expression, Strengthening Networks and Creating Spaces for Citizen Expression" Project implemented by the Committee for Freedom of Expression (C-Libre) and funded by the Actors of Change Program ASDI-HIVOS (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), the workshop attendees launched **El Observador** online, a fact-checking portal in Honduras.

El Observador fully adopts Chequeado's rating method and system, except that it fact-checks statements made by public officials, i.e., "the person who renders services to the State, elected by popular election or through direct appointments, or direct hire." Unlike the previous ones, this case is the only one where the fact-checking proposal is linked to the creation of a new media, since in the rest it was used as a section, application or novel approach to coverage in an already existing established media.

OTHER NEW CASES

As mentioned in the Introduction, four new initiatives emerged this year inspired by Chequeado. Two in Brazil and two in Uruguay. These are not analyzed in this document because they are very recent and because the presidential elections on which they focus are still ongoing: "Preto no Branco" from O'Globo and "Truco" from Agencia Pública in Brazil and "Verdadero o Falso 2014" from El Observador and UYCheck, from Uruguay. Of these four, the only one that is considering continuing after the elections is FactCheckUY.

Conclusion

This review of the state of fact-checking in Latin America shows that except Chequeado, the rest of the experiences emerged in the last two years. A couple of them started their work in 2013, and most of them in 2014. This suggests that the phenomenon is still growing, and we can expect to see new fact-checking initiatives soon.

Still, fact-checking is only being used as an alternative, novel and attractive way of covering elections in our region. Six of the eight projects mentioned here were started to cover the national elections in their countries of origin (all except El Observador in Honduras and FactCheckUY, which since the beginning were already planning to continue operating after the elections). In some cases, for example, El Polígrafo, the methodology will continue to be used after the elections, but other initiatives are exclusively tied to the duration of the elections. It should be noted that, in general, those using fact-checking methodologies were already established media outlets. Except for Honduras' El Observador (which was not actually a new proposal but entirely replicated Chequeado's format) and FactCheckUY (online for less than a week), no new media outlets or organizations have been online for less than a week) have been created for the sole purpose of fact-checking public statements.