

The fact-checking movement in Latin America owes a great deal to the Gabo Award

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The following is a text by Laura Zommer, director of Chequeado, juror at the 2019 Gabo Award, winner of the 2015 Gabo Award, and 2013 runner-up, about the evolution of fact-checking in Latin America and the challenges fact-checkers in the region face. Send your submission to the eighth edition of the Gabo Award by October 5th.

I am going to tell you a story that I think very few people know. The fact-checking movement in Latin America—which has made it crystal clear during the COVID-19 pandemic why now more than ever, it is crucial to debunk disinformation and work together—owes a great deal to the Gabo Award. As some people point out that Chequeado is the "parent" of the movement, we may say that the Gabo Award is its parent.

Chequeado's live group fact-checking event was one of the three finalists in the new "Innovation" category in 2013, together with the wonderful work of El Faro and La Silla Vacía (which ended up winning). This recognition was pivotal to us and our future as an organization. We were a new media outlet; we only had a staff of 5 and no guaranteed funding. This recognition was a nod to doing things differently and not repeating old recipes. Staying transparent, experimenting, and collaborating became our mantras.

We started casting our nets at the Gabo Festival. We met and were inspired by journalists and media from across the region. Months later, we invited them to join the LatamChequea network. We created this network because we firmly believed Latin America was screaming for more control over the uncontested statements of political leaders—left and right—and a higher quality public debate.

We proved that investing in innovation was key to grow and we created our Lab. Over time, it became a critical piece in our work (to develop tech tools to help us go faster without disregarding quality and design new ways to reach out to and start a conversation with the public).

It was during the Medellín meeting that Olga Lucía Lozano told me to convince Juanita León to create La Silla Vacía's Lie Detector in Colombia, and Cristina Tardáguila—the

then O' Globo journalist and current associate director of the International Fact-Checking Network—decided to take it upon herself to bring public discourse fact-checking to Brazil (with Preto no Branco at O' Globo first and then by setting up Agencia Lupa).

The following year, the great Natalia Viana, brought Truco! to Agência Pública and then many others followed suit: Animal Político's El Sabueso in México, Ojo Público's Ojo biónico in Peru, UyCheck in Uruguay and Aos Fatos in Brazil.

And that brings us to 2015. Since all of us at Chequeados are stubborn, we made a Gabo Award submission once again. We entered the Innovation category with the expansion of fact-checking in the region, which we had promoted through informal talks with colleagues and in-person and online courses across the board. And we won! By then, we were a staff of 10, and 7 new initiatives were attempting to increase the cost of lying in Latin America.

Other initiatives followed in Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, Guatemala, Ecuador, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Bolivia, Chile, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Cuba.

By then, the fact-checking movement mainly focused on providing context to and contrasting against official and alternative sources the statements of political, union, and business leaders and the declarations in the media, and opening up the data for the public to check with us.

The fact-checking method that we used (and still do) entailed contacting the person who issued the statement and asking for the evidence to support it. This was, and still is, a difficult task because the access to and quality of the information and data are a serious obstacle in many of our countries.

After the surge of disinformation around the globe (the so-called "fake news") following Donald Trump's win in the US in 2016, UK's Brexit, and the "NO" movement in Colombia, fact-checkers were faced with a more complex scenario because viral content on social media knows no national boundaries and it is not always possible to identify the author to demand explanations or hold accountable. In addition, as we already know, tech giants' algorithms and business models reward the content that achieves greater engagement without considering whether it is true or false.

Finally, after the onset of the pandemic, the flood of disinformation turned into a tornado, which even pushed the World Health Organization (WHO) to come up with a name for this problem (infodemic) and urge the world to fight it together with the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

This is how LatamChequea Coronavirus came to be this past March. Chequeado is leading the joint effort of 35 organizations: AFP Factual, Salud con Lupa; Aos Fatos, Estadao Verifica and Lupa from Brazil, Bolivia Verifica, Mala Espina Check from Chile, La Silla Vacía and ColombiaCheck from Colombia, #NoComaCuento (La Nación) and La Voz de Guanacaste from Costa Rica, Periodismo de Barrio and El Toque from Cuba, Ecuador Chequea and GK from Ecuador, EFE Verifica, Maldita and Newtral from España, Agencia Ocote from Guatemala, Animal Político, Spondeo Media and Verificado from México, Despacho 505 and La Lupa from Nicaragua, El Surtidor from Paraguay, Convoca, OjoPúblico and Verificador (La República) from Peru, Observador and Polígrafo from Portugal, PoletikaRD from the Dominican Republic, UyCheck from Uruguay and Cotejo.info, Efecto Cocuyo and EsPaja from Venezuela.

We have published over 3000 checks and explanations to fight against the pandemic disinformation with information. The Gabo Award was, undoubtedly, a visionary and a part of this achievement. Thank you for your support and for what you have helped and are helping build!

About the Gabo Award and Gabo Festival

They are organized by the Gabo Foundation, which, inspired by the ideas and work of Gabriel García Márquez, seeks to promote spaces for reflection and debate and ethical, rigorous, innovative, and public service journalism.

The Gabo Award and the Gabo Festival are possible thanks to the partnership of the Gabo Foundation with the SURA and Bancolombia groups, and their subsidiaries in Latin America, and the collaboration of the Gabo Foundation with the Mayor's Office of Medellín. Subscribe to our newsletter or follow us on our social media to keep updated with the latest news: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.