

How is Nodio different from an independent fact-checking organization?

18-Oct-20.

11:39 PM

Cristina Tardáguila

for LA NACION

By Cristina Tardáguila and Laura Zommer

Nodio, the disinformation and symbolic violence observatory on media and digital platforms created by the Public defender's office for audiovisual communication service users is not, and it could never be like Chequeado or any other of the over 300 fact-checking initiatives of the world, according to the census published this week by Reporters' Lab at Duke University, USA. There are many differences between the two initiatives: their relationship with the State, their object of analysis, and their funding.

Will Nodio work on media literacy, awareness campaigns, and educational materials to warn about disinformation and associated problems, or will it act as a law enforcement agent, drafting reports and curbing criticism as some organizations have reported? The final resolution on the creation of the observatory is still now out; thus, we still don't know the extent of its scope, and it is early to say whether it will help citizens be better informed or not. However, international Government experiences to curb disinformation are not precisely good.

Chequeado is the flagship project of La Voz Pública Foundation; it was created by three media users fed up (a Ph.D. in Physics, a Ph.D. in Chemistry, and an Economist). Ever since it was founded, ten years ago, it has remained a civil society initiative, non-profit, independent from the State, and has never received nor will it ever receive public funding from governments or political parties in Argentina. Their working method, team, and diversified funding are transparent, and anyone can reach out to them online.

The organization's mission is to enhance the quality of public debate to strengthen democracies, with more open and fact-checked data circulating. Chequeado wants to reduce intellectual impunity and increase the cost of lying, and it strives for information to win over disinformation. It does not have enforcement powers.

Nodio, on the other hand, is a project of the Public Defender's office, is an entity created by Law No. 26,522 (also known as the Media Act) in 2009. It is an autonomous public entity under the scope of Congress. It operates under the Bicameral Commission for the Promotion and Monitoring of Audiovisual Communication, whose current chair is the former journalist and now National Representative of the Frente de Todos party, Gabriela Cerruti. The director, Miriam Lewin, was appointed last May, with nine votes in favor (governing party) and six abstentions (opposition, who claimed they had not received enough information on time).

Among its objectives are "to receive and channel inquiries, complaints, and reports from the television and radio audience," act on its own motion, call for hearings on the topic or propose changes to public policies and standards. Since it is a public entity, its scope of action is established by law. Thus, one of the drawbacks of the initiative is that digital platforms don't fall within the scope of the Audiovisual Communication Services Law. Similarly, digital or graphic media would not follow under this scope either.

Since the creation of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in 2015, once a year, Chequeado undergoes a general assessment where a researcher (an international Ph.D. researcher whose name is not disclosed until after the evaluation) checks if the organization has followed the Code of Principles it signed. The Code states that, in addition to having a transparent method, team, and funding, the organization must have in place and follow a corrections policy and treat everyone the same, whether they are public leaders (governing or opposing parties), union members, businesspeople, journalists or media outlets. It was announced that Nodio would focus on media and platforms. Is this the case, or, like Chequeado and the other independent fact-checkers worldwide, will it also try to combat the disinformation created by public officers and governments?

Poor international track record

What we are now witnessing in Argentina and other Latin American countries reminds us of what happened in Asia towards the end of 2019: governments create official instruments to control disinformation. A high-level group of experts called in by the European Commission said that governments do so without establishing the basic definition of "disinformation" first.

The IFCN keeps, since 2018, a database on all the measures adopted in 60 countries to curb disinformation. A thorough review of these documents shows that the laws and fact-checking units created by governments—like those in Thailand, Indonesia, and India—lead to nothing but censorship, self-censorship, fear, and imprisonment.

In Latin America, Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration in Mexico created a fact-checking unit within the official News Agency of the State, Notimex. In Brazil, the Senate passed an "anti-fake news law" which, without establishing clear definitions to describe the problem, sets up a Council (that even includes police officers) devoted to creating strategies to curb fake news.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the World Health Organization (WHO) statement that in addition to fighting the SARS-CoV-2 virus, we have to fight the "infodemic" pushes governments to adopt measures of this nature, but extra care is needed. Fact-checking public discourse is vital if the approach is transparent, methodic, and nonpartisan. Any effort that lacks one of these three may come close to the dreaded censorship.

Tardáguila is the associate director of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and Zommer, is the director of Chequeado

Cristina Tardáguila