

BEYOND THE FACTS:

political fact-checking and the risks of “us against them” journalism. A France– Brazil comparison



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ABSTRACT – The revival of fact-checking in the 2000s mainly refers to political discourse, which partially shifted into the “post-truth” register in the late 2010s. Faced with disregard for facts and misinformation, fact-checking reaffirms the authority of journalists and presents itself as a means of promoting the emancipation of citizen-readers, as demonstrated by the fact-checking of the debates between the two rounds in France and Brazil, analyzed in this article. The tests called upon establish the journalistic method as the norm and ignore the narrative dimension of journalism, in which freedom of expression and the representation of diversity of opinions are at stake. Between politicians and journalists, convinced readers and distant audiences, an “us against them” dynamic emerges that questions the initial claim of fact-checking to place journalism at the center of public debates.

Key words: Fact-checking. Journalistic authority. Primary sources. Misinformation. Political debate.

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ALÉM DOS FATOS: o fact-checking político e o risco entre si. Uma comparação França-Brasil

RESUMO – O renascimento do fact-checking na década de 2000 refere-se principalmente ao discurso político, que passará parcialmente para o registro da “pós-verdade” no final da década de 2010. Confrontada com o desprezo pelos fatos e a desinformação, a verificação dos fatos reafirma a autoridade dos jornalistas e apresenta-se como um meio de promover a emancipação dos cidadãos-leitores, como mostra o fact-checking dos debates entre os dois turnos na França e no Brasil, analisados neste artigo. As provas convocadas estabelecem o método jornalístico como norma e ignoram a dimensão narrativa do jornalismo, em que estão em jogo a liberdade de expressão e a representação da diversidade de opiniões. Entre políticos e jornalistas, leitores convencidos e públicos distantes, emerge um “nós contra eles” que questiona a pretensão inicial do fact-checking de colocar o jornalismo no centro dos debates públicos.

Palavras-chave: Fact-checking. Autoridade jornalística. Fontes primárias. Desinformação. Debate político.

MÁS ALLÁ DE LOS HECHOS: fact-checking político a riesgo de cada uno. La comparación Francia-Brasil

RESUMEN – El resurgimiento del fact-checking en la década de 2000 se refiere principalmente al discurso político, que pasará parcialmente al registro de la “posverdad” a finales de la década de 2010. Frente al desprecio por los hechos y la desinformación, la verificación de hechos reafirma la autoridad de los periodistas y se presenta como un medio para promover la emancipación de los ciudadanos-lectores, como lo demuestra el fact-checking de los debates entre las dos rondas en Francia y Brasil, analizado en este artículo. Las pruebas convocadas establecen como norma el método periodístico y desconocen la dimensión narrativa del periodismo, en la que está en juego la libertad de expresión y la representación de la diversidad de opiniones. Entre políticos y periodistas, lectores convencidos y audiencias distantes, emerge un “nosotros contra ellos” que cuestiona la pretensión inicial de la verificación de hechos de colocar al periodismo en el centro de los debates públicos.

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1 The mutations of fact-checking and the political challenges of journalism

Ascertaining facts is part and parcel of the work of newsrooms. Having become prominent at the turn of the 21st century (Bigot, 2017), the practice has morphed into what today is termed fact-checking (Dobbs, 2012), the primary interest of which is the discourse of political figures. As well, beginning with the turn of the century, television (in the United States, Brazil, and Europe) acquired ever-greater importance in the political arena (Neveu, 2003), with various elected officials eagerly participating in talk shows and infotainment programs that exercise essentially no journalistic checks on their pronouncements. This was perceived as a betrayal of journalism, understood as the institution emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, within which information rests on “the identity between fact and truth, and a certain caesura concerning entertainment” (Mota Gomes, 2012, p. 136). In subjecting political discourse to journalistic expertise ex-post, fact-checking invokes that historic, yet today contested, division. It participates in the construction of journalistic authority (Carlson, 2017) since it is in a position to inform audiences about politicians’ credibility or lack thereof. Behind its meticulous work of verification, fact-checking is thus eminently political (Graves, 2016) and complements, but does not substitute for, the work of political journalists whose main focus is the analysis of issues of public interest.

At the close of the 2010s, however, in the wake of the British vote in favor of Brexit and the surge of populist figures such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, fact-checking was at an impasse. Its authority became increasingly difficult to uphold because the very reality of facts, representing a specific form of knowledge (Anderson & Schudson, 2019) which journalists endorse, came to be contested. Relatively straightforward when the task is to rectify a politician’s statements, whether false or merely imprecise or erroneous, fact-checking faces a far more complex challenge when faced with “bullshit” and with those for whom truth is always relative and contingent on opinion (Joux, 2023). The “facts” to which journalists are committed – because they can attest to their reality without overly investing them with personal sensibilities or opinions – count for increasingly little: on social networks, the incessant discussions surrounding facts ultimately become more important than the facts themselves. This is

plain to see in the logic of X (formerly Twitter), aptly underscored by Géraldine Muhlmann (2023, p. 22), who demonstrates the need to retrace “tweet threads” to their original posts in order to ascertain the event that gave rise to a given discussion: over the course of multiple tweets consisting of comments, denunciations, and arguments of varying soundness, the discussion itself becomes the event under discussion, concealing the raw material of fact-checking beneath its many layers.

Consequently, journalism as it emerged at the close of the 19th century, and developed throughout the 20th, around the figure of the reporter (Schudson, 1978) who goes into the field to determine the facts, is in this context forgotten and shunted aside. Ultimately, this brand of journalism counts for less than journalism which participates in the broad discourse of social media, deploying its expertise and views on a range of subjects. In this environment, the “information journalism” of factuality made universal through methods that neutralize the observer’s gaze, is replaced by “communication journalism” that is more subjective (Charron & de Bonville, 1996) and at times more polemical. Its most recent incarnation has been that of the conversational journalism prevalent on 24-hour news channels featuring debates between supposed experts of everything, as well as on digital social networks.

In Brazil, as has been observed in other countries, the increase in social polarization (Layton et al., 2021), populist discourse (Mendonça & Caetano, 2020), and mass use of social networks (Santini et al., 2021), as well as declining trust in traditional media (De Albuquerque & Tavares, 2021), have given rise to a proliferation of fact-checking organizations on the media scene in response to the challenges facing journalism’s social role and authority, given the increasing capacity of diverse actors to disseminate misinformation, particularly in the digital environment (Ekström et al., 2020). Fact-checking, in addition, has established itself through the adoption of joint standards, such as the Code of Principles established in 2015 by the Poynter Institute’s International Fact-checking Network (IFCN), and through collaborative efforts in the form of digital platforms, an emblematic example being CrossCheck during France’s 2017 presidential election campaign (Smyrniaios et al., 2019). To this context, we must also add other, more opportunistic factors that explain the success of fact-checking units, such as the mobilization of younger journalists’ digital competencies, the marketing potential

for newsrooms advertising their fact-checking expertise, and the promotion of open-access public fact-checking services at a time of increased journalistic paywalls (Nicey, 2022).

Faced with a flood of disinformation and the loss of public trust, fact-checking's most recent iteration increasingly spotlights the methods through which it succeeds in attesting facts, confirming figures, and exposing the sources of online rumors and conspiracy theories (Joux & Sebbah, 2020). Importantly, it examines disinformation and "fake news" in order to identify instances of malicious intent on the part of various actors (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In so doing, fact-checking engages the public in conversation and increasingly lays claim to a debunking role which consists of denouncing misinformation by contextualizing its emergence and identifying the actors who propagate it (Carlino & Pignard-Cheynel, 2023), guiding online readers to develop a form of digital and informational literacy.

These same aims and intentions had also underpinned the fact-checking renaissance of the early 2000s. The forms of fact-checking emerging throughout the 2000s and the late 2010s, in the wake of the proliferation of social media and the misinformation phenomenon, represented both an attempt at journalistic re-intermediation and the reaffirmation of journalists as essential actors of democratic public debate. When voting, citizens must be able to make informed decisions based not only on known and attested facts but also on competing interpretations faithfully reported and attributed to their main proponents. This is why fact-checking persists in its classical form, more strictly limited to verifying the factuality of politicians' statements. It is this form that initiates the work from which everything else derives: recapitulating the facts that form the common ground on which no political figure can avoid treading. This common ground is where political conversations and arguments attempt to convince voters that a given reading of reality is ultimately more just than another.

We therefore chose to analyze fact-checking specifically as it relates to a crucial stage of the democratic process, i.e. debates between presidential election finalists, and to enrich the scope of the study by comparing two distinct national contexts. Specifically, we observed and analyzed fact-checking in the course of second-round debates in two national presidential elections occurring in 2022: between Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron in France, and between Jair Messias Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil.

2 France and Brazil: a comparative approach

Scrutinizing candidates' statements in the course of a debate entails fact-checking in near real-time, that is, during or immediately following the event. For researchers, this creates both advantages and hindrances. First, it brings to the fore the reflexes and habits of journalists, who must work quickly (which is evident in their citing of peers' work as readily available proof in the urgent context of a debate). Second, it limits the possibilities for analysis and contextualization. The political debate context allows for the observation of fact-checking in its most immediate and, for lack of time, least thought-through intent, providing an illustrative lens through which to observe what modern fact-checking says about journalism and the conception of information in democratic societies.

Because they exhibited evident comparisons, we determined to focus our study on second-round debates occurring in 2022 in France (Emmanuel Macron vs. Marine Le Pen) and Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro vs. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva). In both cases, a representative of the conservative right featured in a context of normalized right-wing discourse: in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro was the incumbent, Brazilians having previously given him a majority in 2018; in France, Marine Le Pen had moderated her discourse in order to counter the *Front républicain* that had emerged amid presidential elections in 2017, when she had reached the second round of voting. In both countries, there had been a normalization of the extreme right choice of vote as an integral part of the political landscape. Their opponents were Emmanuel Macron and Lula da Silva, both representing a political shift, since both had initially come to power at the head of newly-formed parties promising political renewal. Both needed to defend their previous records in office and their capacity to continue the social transformations they had initiated, against candidates who also insisted on the need for profound, yet very different, social change. The debates between them were thus truly democratic in scope, in that they stood to inform citizens on the societal choices endorsed by candidates representing parties without long histories of governing, which signaled ideological renewal no matter the electoral outcomes, even if Lula da Silva had previously exercised power for nearly a decade. Combined with the vulnerability of traditional political

parties, moreover, in France as in Brazil these dynamics paved the way for increased social polarization (in France, the *Front républicain* coalition's "all against Le Pen" serves as an illustration; in Brazil, representations of Lula and Bolsonaro descended into outright "communist" and "military" caricatures floating in a vast sea of misinformation).

In order to analyze the fact-checking attending these second-round debates, we first identified those media who had established dedicated verification mechanisms. In France, they were the following six outlets: FranceTVinfo, Le Journal du Dimanche (JDD), Le Monde, Libération, Le Parisien, and 20 Minutes. For Brazil, we identified Agência Lupa, Aos Fatos, Fato ou Fake, and Estadão Verifica, for a total of four outlets. The majority of these media had editorial teams dedicated to fact-checking, the exceptions being JDD and Le Parisien. Our sample, therefore, was not intended to be an exhaustive portrait of fact-checking units in either country but is nevertheless complete in terms of the near real-time fact-checking deployed during the debates under study. Furthermore, the study focused on media outlets possessing dedicated fact-checking units, allowing us to sketch a general comparative portrait of media fact-checking practices in the two countries.

We examined the website of each media outlet in the sample in order to identify all fact verification reports related to the debates. We then grouped the identified fact-checked statements thematically to compare the different media outlets' verifications. Some of the websites featured discrete articles reporting instances of fact-checking, while others contained a continuous scrolling page listing fact-checked statements. Some reports concerned the statements of a single candidate, while others addressed multiple candidates' pronouncements on a single topic. We considered it germane to tabulate all instances of fact-checking of candidates' assertions by each outlet. Overall, we identified 92 statements fact-checked by the media in France and 241 by the media in Brazil (table 1).

Table 1*Body of fact-checked statements*

Media outlets by country	Number of fact-checked statements
France*	92
20 Minutes	14
Check News / Libération	24
Décodeurs / Le Monde (décryptage)	9
Décodeurs / Le Monde (vérification)	19
FranceTVinfo	12
JDD	5
Le Parisien	9
Brazil**	241
Agência Lupa	50
Aos Fatos	88
Fato ou Fake	38
Estadão Verifica	65

* In France, not counting JDD and Le Parisien, which do not have dedicated fact-checking units, two specific statements were verified by all media outlets under study, while one specific statement received differing assessments from at least two media outlets.

** In Brazil, three specific statements were verified by all media outlets under study, while four specific statements received differing assessments from at least two media outlets.

Furthermore, for each media outlet, we identified their assessments (true, false, or partly true or false), the content of verified statements (numbers, chronologies, references to legislation, declarations, decisions), and the sources adduced as evidence, which allowed us to cross-compare all these elements for every identified instance of fact-checking (table 2).

Table 2*Synthesis of assessments**

France				
	Le Pen	Verdict	Macron	Verdict
20 Minutes	9	2 true, 4 false, 1 true and false, 1 missing context, 1 mixture	5	1 partly true, 1 mostly false, 1 exaggeration, 1 mixture, 1 no assessment (Russian loan)
Check News	13	4 mostly true, 3 mostly false, 5 false, 1 no assessment	11	3 mostly true, 5 true, 1 mostly false, 2 no assessment
Décodeurs (décryptage)	6	2 false, 2 true, 2 mixture	3	2 true, 1 mostly true
Décodeurs (vérification)	13	6 mostly true, 2 mostly false, 5 no assessment	6	2 true, 1 mostly true, 1 mostly false, 2 no assessment
FranceTVinfo	7	2 partly true, 4 mostly true, 1 false	5	5 true
JDD	5	5 false	0	
Le Parisien	7	2 false, 5 no assessment	2	2 true
Brazil				
	Bolsonaro	Verdict	Lula	Verdict
Agência Lupa	42	10 true, 20 false, 6 true, but..., 6 exaggeration	29	10 true, 7 false, 3 true, but..., 9 exaggeration
Aos Fatos	42	6 true, 29 false, 7 not quite true	29	9 true, 9 false, 11 not quite true
Fato ou Fake	19	6 true, 10 false, 3 not quite true	16	7 true, 5 false, 4 not quite true
Estadão Verifica	41	3 true, 22 false, 3 inaccurate, 7 misleading, 2 not quite true, 4 exaggeration	23	6 true, 2 false, 4 partly true, 7 inaccurate, 3 misleading, 1 not quite true

*Assessments deduced by the authors where an assessment was not explicitly stated by the media outlet. Instances where it was impossible to ascertain whether a statement was mostly true or false are marked “no assessment”.

Our analysis was two-fold: we first analyzed the debates' fact-checking within the perspectives of the two distinct national prisms to, second, compare and contrast them within an international scope. The comparison aimed to ascertain whether, in the context of the debates, we could identify national differences in fact-checking practices, so as to determine their potential significance. Indeed, beyond the quantitative comparison of instances of fact-checking (e.g. number of fact-checked statements, distribution of fact-checking by candidate, and number of true, false, or other assessments), we adopt a largely reflexive approach. We thus undertake an analysis of the choices made by fact-checking units, inferring what those choices may say about divergent conceptions of journalism.

3 France: prudent fact-checking in the service of readers

In France, the media outlets in our sample fact-checked 60 statements by Marine Le Pen and 32 by Emmanuel Macron, including 8 exchanges involving both candidates. Overall, a certain journalistic normativity characterizes these instances of fact-checking: verified statements are reiterated, quoted, or summarized, and then qualified with assessments such as “true,” “false,” or “mostly” or “partially” true or false. The designations are not systematic, however. For instance, JDD and Le Parisien did not qualify their findings, although readers could frequently deduce the nature of the assessments. CheckNews (the fact-checking unit of the daily Libération) chose a different approach, in which its journalists described the proportion of truth and falsehood in candidates' statements. It is worth noting, however, that JDD and Le Parisien conducted comparatively basic fact-checking of the French debate, likely since they did not maintain dedicated fact-checking units, in contrast to outlets such as Le Monde (dedicated unit: Les Décodeurs), Libération (CheckNews), 20 Minutes (Fake Off) and FranceTVinfo (Le vrai ou faux). Within our sample, JDD reported only five verifications, all relating to statements made by Marine Le Pen (attesting to the publication's positioning in opposition to the candidate) accompanied by only sparse supporting arguments. Indeed, argumentation is another characteristic common to journalistic writing specific to fact-checking: once the verified statement has been cited and an assessment declared, supporting argumentation is systematically presented to corroborate the degree of veracity, frequently appended

with hypertext links directing readers to relevant sources. A standard sequence of “verified statement + assessment + argumentation + source list” is the norm, with subtle differences.

The most obvious differences in approach and presentation are apparent in the outlets’ choices to be either explicit or implicit in their assessments. *Le Parisien*’s fact-checking approach was to not make explicit assessments. Its reports demonstrate, for example, that multiple interpretations of candidates’ statements about numbers are possible, showing, based on supporting arguments, that the choice to qualify claims as “true”, “false”, or otherwise can be reductive. *Le Parisien* thereby invited readers to forge their own estimation, in the awareness that a certain expertise is necessary to endow numbers cited by candidates with real meaning. *Le Parisien* chose to accompany its readers towards autonomous decisions in making definite assessments.

Among outlets that did make explicit assessments, a duty of caution prevailed and assessments such as “true” and “false” are rather infrequent, the preferred options being more nuanced, such as “true, but...” or “partially true” and similar formulations. For example, out of 14 fact-checked statements, *20 Minutes* expressed a definitive assessment only 6 times (4 “false”, 2 “true”). *Les Décodeurs*, for their part, specified only 2 (“true”) unequivocal assessments out of 19 verified statements. As for *CheckNews*, whose assessments are made clear by the tenor of the adduced arguments, 5 out of 24 statements, all made by Marine Le Pen, were declared “false”. *FranceTVinfo* instead favors graduated assessments of degrees of veracity: out of 12 statements, Marine Le Pen received 1 “false”, 2 “partly true”, and 4 “mostly true” ratings, while Emmanuel Macron’s affirmations were assessed as “true” in 5 cases, implying, if one were to rely on these results, that his pronouncements were entirely accurate. All these assessments, however, are hardly neutral. They provide a brief evaluative overview of candidates’ sincerity and credibility, in the knowledge that a sizable proportion of readers will not engage in a detailed reading of all the arguments and evidence. Evidently, fact-checking journalists play a political role that can favor, without explicitly saying so, one or another candidate – fact-checking does not escape partiality. For example, a specific statement made by Marine Le Pen on the abolition of mathematics requirements in secondary education during Emmanuel Macron’s first five-year term was true: such a measure was implemented, although subsequently

withdrawn. Les Décodeurs' assessment mentioned only a "recent reversal" by Macron. However, parallel to their fact-checking reports, Les Décodeurs also published a series of in-depth analyses of the debate in which they assessed Marine Le Pen's statement as true. Therefore, by indicating "recent reversal" rather than simply "true" in their fact-checking assessment of Le Pen's statement, Les Décodeurs chose not to endorse her credibility.

The interpretation of numbers can be complex, as *Le Parisien's* approach demonstrates – it is no less so concerning politicians' statements on other subjects. The verifications conducted by journalists illustrate that fact-checking, meticulous though it may be, is always an attempt to arrive at a form of truth, which nevertheless remains anthropological, i.e. subject to errors of interpretation and comprehension, as well as to subjective biases. This prudent approach is manifest in one of FranceTVinfo's verifications of a statement by Emmanuel Macron on domestic violence: after an initial report that had assessed Macron's statement as false, the outlet subsequently revised its decision, stating that "the editorial team corrected its erroneous analysis". Thus, even where an assessment is clearly communicated, readers must proceed with caution, including in relation to the journalistic text.

This caution vis-à-vis numbers, assessments, and journalistic reports underscores another aspect of fact-checking: its ongoing call for readers to engage with the sources. No matter the outlet or the fact-checked statement, arguments are always adduced. But what is their worth? What trust is to be invested in journalistic reporting on political discourse? The attempted answer to those questions is transparency, which takes the form of exposition of the journalistic process of verification undertaken by publications. Here, the transparency of the journalistic practice aims to both win the public trust (Karlsson et al., 2017), by unveiling its procedures, and to establish a certain verticality in the relationship between fact-checkers and their audiences. Indeed, the journalistic method is imposed on readers and the disclosure of sources, which nearly systematically accompanies the presented arguments, invites them to carry out the verification in their own turn – while relying on the same information used by the fact-checking publication. Fact-checking journalists, therefore, engage in a singular relationship with their readerships: they abdicate their monopoly over the production of journalistic truth since any reader can engage in the same

production, yet simultaneously venture that journalistic principles will be accepted as the legitimate means of assessing truth and falsehood in the public space.

For example, about a sequence during which Emmanuel Macron accused Marine Le Pen of climate skepticism, CheckNews advanced a markedly nuanced interpretation based on a historical reading. The editors noted that Marine Le Pen's 2022 electoral platform, accessible to readers through a hyperlink, defended an environmentally-friendly approach, although emphasizing that in aiming to abandon the European Green Deal it differed from the approach of the European Commission. In this perspective, Marine Le Pen is not a climate skeptic. But, by situating her statements within a succession of past pronouncements, CheckNews recalled that her party had not voted in favor of the Paris Agreement in 2016 and that, ten years prior, Le Pen had questioned the findings of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In order to support its argumentation, CheckNews cited other media outlets who reported on the candidate's declarations, including militant environmentalist publications (TerraEco, Reporterre) and more mainstream conservative outlets (Europe1, Les Echos), endeavoring to avoid bias by referencing a balanced source base. In the light of this evidence, Emmanuel Macron's accusation of climate-skepticism is tenable. It is up to the public to decide whether or not Marine Le Pen had tempered her views, and thereby to assess the sincerity of the Rassemblement National candidate's policy shifts.

This call on the public to elaborate its own assessment, based on a diversity of disclosed sources, is characteristic of fact-checking coverage, which is thereby akin to an initiation into journalistic methods of verification. By establishing a horizontality between journalist and reader, fact-checking seeks to develop critical approaches which may potentially become autonomous, bypassing journalistic fact-checking, without bypassing the routines and processes of journalistic inquiry. While the supporting argumentation deployed by CheckNews in relation to Marine Le Pen's climate skepticism exemplifies this approach, it cannot be considered the norm, however. In the urgency of a debate, fact-checking units prioritize the validation or repudiation of claims, rather than the development of critical thinking as such. The fundamental political issues material to the second-round debate, therefore, were left largely unexamined.

For the purpose of analysis, we classified the arguments cited by the media outlets according to a subject, namely: legal analysis, numbers, vote counting, administrative decision-making, and political decisions and declarations. Verifications of numbers accounted for fully half of all fact-checks in the sample, while each of the other four categories represented approximately 10% of the total. Analyses involving legislation and administrative decisions relied on legal and regulatory sources, vote counting verifications referred to figures tabulated by government bodies, and the verification of various numbers relied on data published by trusted public institutions. Fact-checking statements about political decisions and declarations, however, frequently require more nuanced analysis that invites readers to develop a more inquisitive mindset in order to better grasp the issues broached by political leaders. Among the major issues of the 2022 presidential campaign in France was the question of purported links between Le Pen's Rassemblement National and Russia (in the wake of its attack on Ukraine), as well as the party's stance towards Europe. These topics were, however, only marginally subjected to fact-checking and verifications largely referred readers to newspaper articles presenting greater in-depth analysis. In terms of the Rassemblement National's relationship with Europe, for example, the verifications in the sample focused predominantly on the constitutionality of the party's proposed referendum, although Marine Le Pen's political project opposes the EU in its present form. Yet none of the fact-checking units identified her position explicitly, as this would require more developed analyses and reflection, and no documentary sources were readily accessible to allow for prompt assessments. By contrast, in verifying numbers and references to administrative decisions, fact-checking units were able to cite reports, pieces of legislation, and studies as supporting evidence for arguments allowing for clear discrimination between truth and falsehoods. Although rectifying an overstated or downplayed figure allows for greater transparency in political debate, it cannot, however, fundamentally change its substance. Given their emphasis on broad political and societal considerations rather than precise legal or numerical details, the key issues of the French presidential campaign and debate were largely disregarded by fact-checking initiatives.

As such, the attraction of fact-checking for readers has seemingly less to do with arguments and assessments than it does with the cited sources of information – fact-checkers therefore act as

curators of selected and confirmed primary sources. Indeed, the wealth of information accessible through provided hyperlinks offers readers sound means for understanding the issues under debate, on the condition that they place their trust in the established media sources cited as sources of evidence, whether fact-checkers cite their own media outlets (the practice for *Les Décodeurs*, who overwhelmingly cite their parent paper, *Le Monde*) or others. These practices illustrate journalism's prescriptive role within public discourse, no matter which outlet readers choose as their news provider. By following the provided hyperlinks, readers can access analyses that are not directly integrated within the fact-checking reports. Prior to the debate, *Les Décodeurs* also published a series of in-depth reports addressing the political issues at play within a more analytical scope. This supplemental content implied an acknowledgment of the necessity for fact-checking to contribute to online public discourse on issues fundamental to the presidential election, even when they do not concern numbers or other "facts" considered obvious due to originating from credible public institutions.

This emancipation of fact-checking, from strictly defined verification to a more engaged form of journalism at the service of readers (Batsell, 2015), is nevertheless limited. Indeed, fact-checking units are often content to cite experts who fulfill this engagement role by proxy. Let us consider the example of verifications of Marine Le Pen's assertion that the French national debt grew by 600 billion euros during Emmanuel Macron's first five-year term and that the increase could not be fully ascribed to the Covid pandemic. CheckNews referred to the analysis of François Ecalte, former magistrate of France's Court of Audit. Ecalte's expertise was also cited in near real-time by JDD, 20 Minutes, *Le Parisien*, and FranceTvinfo, all of which credited CheckNews as their source: this single expert, therefore, alone among his peers, was cited by five of the six outlets fact-checking the debate. The readership of fact-checking websites was thus faced with contradictory dictates. Fact-checking, as mentioned above, with its arguments and linked sources, encourages readers to develop journalistic aptitudes in order to gauge the veracity of public statements; at the same time, however, it encourages them to rely on verification work already performed by media, to whom the time-consuming process is commonly delegated. Time constraints, in addition, lead fact-checking units to cite peers who rapidly unearth credible sources, as demonstrated by the wholesale referencing of

CheckNews's report on François Ecalle's analysis. Les Décodeurs did not verify the claim of a 600-billion-euro debt increase. Effectively, Le Pen's assertion was verified and assessed solely by Libération's CheckNews fact-checking unit, which was then roundly cited by others. The subject arguably called for broader discussion supported by insights from other experts, since, beyond the figure and its components, the issue of public debt is significant for France. But this is terrain into which fact-checking does not venture. As such, the empowerment of readerships is limited to the verification of numbers, laws, and regulations, and does not extend to the substantive issues under debate which, ultimately, involve not facts in isolation, but rather their interpretation.

4 Brazil: fact-checking as an alternative to populism

Brazil's 2022 presidential election was characterized by significant polarity between extremes, despite the participation of candidates claiming to represent a "third way". In the first round of voting, the incumbent Jair Messias Bolsonaro, representing the Liberal Party (*Partido Liberal*, PL), received 43.20% of the vote, qualifying for a run-off against former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, representing the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT), who had finished the first round in first place with 48.43% of the ballots. In the second-round vote, on 30 October, Lula was elected to a third term as President of the Federative Republic of Brazil, with 50.90% of the vote, representing a difference of 2.1 million votes in his favor, which made the 2022 presidential election the most closely contested in Brazil's history. The vote overturned the results of the 2018 election, when Bolsonaro had won with 55.13% of the vote against the leftist candidate Fernando Haddad (PT). In 2022, Bolsonaro's electoral strategy proved unsuccessful.

Many researchers pointed to disinformation as an electoral communication strategy of Bolsonaro's supporters during the 2018 campaign, principally deployed on social networks. Maranhão et al. (2018) consider that the "threats" to "the traditional Brazilian family" – ascribed by Bolsonaro's camp to impending communism, "gender ideology" and the promotion of homosexuality in schools by the former leftist government – constituted the predominant "fake news" bolstering Bolsonaro's candidacy.

This appeal to emotions, based on a superficial and divisive narrative, echoed the post-truth politics (Oxford Dictionary, 2016) that Donald Trump had first incarnated in 2016. The context is less one of disinformation than it is one of anti-information populist communication, or communication without information, detaching politics from respect for facts (Revault d'Allones, 2018). According to De Sousa et al. (2023), both Bolsonaro's and Lula's discourses during the two second-round debates of 2022 were relatively populist, prominently emphasizing the moral dimensions of the themes under debate and tending to reduce the exchanges to portrayals of a battle between good (the people) and evil (a conspiring minority). During both debates, each candidate accused the other of lying. Yet the accusation of lying presupposes an expectation for political debate to be based on truth and a baseline recognition of the shared reality of objective facts, which is the purview of journalists in the conception of Lippmann (2012 [1922]). Fact-checking the candidates' assertions thus becomes all the more compelling.

Among the Brazilian media outlets retained in our sample, Agência Lupa and Aos Fatos, which specialized in fact-checking, remain assertively independent and operate under distinctive business models (Lelo, 2022). Established in 2015, and members of IFCN, both outlets had previously conducted near real-time fact-checking of Brazil's 2018 presidential debates, explicitly defending the ideal of objectivity and the supporting role of media in relation to the public (Petters, 2020). Following those original initiatives, Brazil's larger media groups seized on the fact-checking trend (Rodríguez-Pérez & Seibt, 2022) and are represented in our sample by Fato ou Fake (Globo media group) and Estadão Verifica (O Estado de S.Paulo daily newspaper).

In their assessments, in addition to the true/false binary, each outlet employed its own terminology, such as "not quite right", to cite one example. Across the four fact-checking outlets, Bolsonaro was the candidate whose statements were most frequently verified (144 statements) and whose statements were most often declared "false" (81 statements). By comparison, assertions made by Lula were verified 97 times and found to be "false" in 23 instances. This imbalance, both in terms of the total number of statements verified and in the proportion of those declared "false" did not favor Bolsonaro; conversely, Lula's statements were more often assessed as "true". Specifically, while those of Bolsonaro's statements not

declared “false” were nevertheless assessed cautiously (12 qualified as “not quite true”, 10 “exaggeration”, 7 “misleading”, 6 “true, but...”, and 3 “inaccurate”), Lula’s were declared “true” in 32 instances and many others assessed in ways that suggested veracity, including 16 declared “not quite true”, 3 “true, but...”, 4 “partly true”, and 9 “exaggeration”. Evidently, the fact-checking performed by the four media outlets in the sample argued in Lula’s favor, his statements being assessed as more reliable than those of Bolsonaro, as was the case of French media outlets’ assessments concerning Macron. Especially during electoral campaigns, fact verification is a means of ensuring an approximate equality of analysis in relation to the declarations of both incumbent governments and their oppositions. However, the concentration of fact-checking on a specific candidate, as Cazzamatta and Santos (2023, p. 2026) underline, risks creating a perception of partiality. Their study shows that, already in 2018, Bolsonaro and his supporters had been the main focus of fact-checking by Aos Fatos, which arrived at many negative assessments, undoubtedly because disinformation was a strategy consciously adopted by the far right.

The assessments tabulated in our sample confirm the eminently political dimension of fact-checking when fact-checkers decide, in the words of Lucas Graves (2016), to choose what they verify and to say, ultimately, “what is true”. Among the four Brazilian outlets, all of which essentially favored the PT candidate, certain divergences of assessment can be discerned. Let us take, for example, the following declaration by Lula: “When I governed, from 2003 to 2010 [...] we created 22 million jobs”. Agência Lupa considered the statement to be an exaggeration, since according to Ministry of Economy data the true number was 15.3 million; Aos Fatos qualified it as “not quite true”, indicating that Lula “exaggerated” and that the figure of 22 million jobs would only be true if jobs created during former president Dilma Rousseff’s time in office were included in the count; Fato ou Fake, by contrast, qualified the statement as “false”; and Estadão Verifica considered it “misleading”, decrying Lula’s attempt at self-aggrandizement. Yet all four outlets had relied on the same source.

Clearly, fact-checking units, in Brazil as in France, took the risk of framing (Entman, 1993) candidates’ discourses, with significant impacts on their final assessments. While some media, for example, Estadão Verifica, went so far as to discern specific intentions behind

candidates' statements, others strictly based their assessments on figures from confirmed sources (i.e. ministries) as evidence of factuality. Citing these numbers was meant to allow the public to forge its own assessments by reviewing journalists' fact-checking in order to gauge their accuracy. Nevertheless, it is *Estadão Verifica* that seemed most to favor readers' interpretive autonomy, since its fact-checking did not systematically declare explicit assessments (notably concerning statements by Lula). Its qualifications of candidates' assertions were comparatively nuanced and complex, leaving readers to adjudicate more freely. While categorical assertions dominated the other three outlets' assessments, *Estadão* appeared to acknowledge shared authority between fact-checking journalists and readers.

In terms of sources adduced in the verifications, citations of other, competing media outlets predominated, further reinforcing the authority of journalistic productions in contrast to alternative voices commenting on political developments, whether on social media or elsewhere. Indeed, verifications cited the output of journalists, no matter the outlet they reported for, alongside primary sources whose presumed trustworthiness was directly linked to the power of the institutions from which they originate (ministries, public organizations, legislative bodies). *Fato ou Fake* was the only fact-checking unit to primarily use sources originating with its parent company, Grupo Globo, citing it in 20 references (cited most often among them was the news website *g1*, which aggregates new articles published throughout Grupo Globo's media outlets). Among its verifications, only 4 hyperlinks refer readers to other media sources.

Although references to media reports predominate among the evidentiary citations, additional sources are also present, frequently within verifications of a single assertion. The multiplicity of cited sources aims to reinforce journalists' credibility and objectivity, with references to other types of sources serving as a type of "counter-evidence" for media sources. In the sample, only *Agência Lupa* and *Aos Fatos* cited more non-media than media sources to support their assessments. For all four fact-checking units, however, the use of hyperlinks to refer readers to cited sources was systematic, indicating a shared conception of this dimension of fact-checking standards in both Brazil and France.

A majority of the sources cited by verifications in the Brazilian sample refer to numerical data, which in part reflects the

candidates' predilection for mentioning numbers, but demonstrates also that fact-checking journalists frequently choose to use numbers as a practical tool to assess the veracity of candidates' assertions. As noted for France, above, this focus on numbers can contribute to occlude more substantive political issues that call for analysis and contextualization, and which require an approach to journalistic objectivity focused not on a capacity to attest facts and figures, but rather on intellectual integrity and methodological rigor in formulating assessments (Cornu, 2009). For example, Bolsonaro attributed the debt accumulated by Petrobras (Brazil's state-owned oil and gas company) exclusively to Lula's PT party. Aos Fatos disputed the figures cited by Bolsonaro but did not include well-known corruption problems involving Petrobras, PT, and Lula. Verifying this same assertion, Estadão Verifica used the term "exaggeration" and cited corruption problems as one of the factors contributing to the Petrobras debt. Thus, its fact-checking assumed an analytical dimension that went beyond mere figures, bringing it closer, in this instance, to political journalism.

This extirpation of fact-checking from the ritualistic verification of detailed numbers, laws, and declarations testifies to the willingness of Brazilian fact-checking journalists, perhaps more than their French counterparts, to provide their audiences with effective means through which to critically assess the candidates' debate. The aim is not only to adopt journalistic methods of verification but to consider exchanges between political leaders with a reflexive mindset, allowing the critical dimension of journalism, in its role as a democracy watchdog, to take a stand in the face of political leaders' shortcomings. For instance, Agência Lupa provided its readership with a synthesis of the debates, underlining both candidates' communication strategies and avoidance of significant issues on which they should have been held to account. Ultimately, the emerging portrait was that of two accomplished liars, notwithstanding their unequal shares of "true" and "false" assessments, and the risks this context posed to Brazilian democracy. In its synthesis of the first second-round debate, Agência Lupa underscored both candidates' use of knowingly false information, demonstrating that post-truth politics were the rule rather than the exception. As Agência Lupa showed, moreover, each candidate emphasized lies told by the other while eschewing questions about their own

demonstrably false assertions. Following the second encounter between the two candidates, Lupa's journalists (Schiochet et al., 2022) concluded, with dejection and reproval, that it had been an "anti-debate".

Lupa's synthesis exposes one of the principal limits of journalism within the prevailing political landscape in which media frequently fail to subject political discourse to examinations that aim at informing rather than communicating. Ultimately, modern fact-checking is concerned with the reconstruction of journalistic authority, that is, the affirmation of the preeminence of journalistic criteria in assessing public discourse. Yet, even when fact-checking uncovers candidates' lies, they persist in lying – is this proof that journalism has lost its clout? It may be that fact-checking remains an editorial niche, attracting for the most part readers who are already converts and adepts of journalistic methods. It thus misses its mark, which is to help audiences develop the literacy that may allow them to shun the siren's call of post-truth politics.

In today's transformed media landscape, media outlets, notably the French and Brazilian press, and particularly their fact-checking units, cannot as yet claim to represent a broader public: they are rather the media of the few. A study carried out by Santos (2018) profiles the habits of Brazilian fact-checking audiences, showing that as a readership they are mainly (70%) young, specialized, educated, and politically left-leaning. Yet fully 98.4% of Brazilian adults use their smartphones to search for and read news online: by inference, a large proportion of online readers ignore fact-checking, which moreover seems to appeal to specific political viewpoints. In France, a study conducted by Fondation Descartes pour l'Information (Cordonier & Brest, 2021) delivers a yet bleaker outlook: the French public spends no more than 3% of its time online accessing news media. Importantly, the study found a correlation between the time people spend reading news online and the diversity of sources they consult. The logic of fact-checking, which entreats the reader to seize on a variety of primary sources in order to verify and assess political discourse, is here defeated. The study nevertheless found that traditional media, overall representing trustworthy sources of information, remain the dominant providers of news to French citizens.

5 Us against them: fact-checking and its limitations

In both Brazil and France, the fact-checking of presidential elections' second-round debates favored the verification of particular details and relied largely on references to media reports and institutional primary sources as evidence. The constraints of fact-checking in near real-time go some way in accounting for these choices. Nevertheless, the image of fact-checking is at stake in the context of debates that constitute decisive moments of democratic life. In Brazil as in France, the fact-checking units described in the present article, by almost exclusively citing institutional and media sources, presented their readerships with a closed circuit, whose rules they were implicitly asked to accept in enacting the verification trajectories first undertaken by journalists. This poses the risk of constructing a journalistic "us" set against a misinformed "them" in a vicious circle that perversely strengthens falsehoods, misinformation, and vacuity in political debate. Paradoxically, for some (data on Brazil's fact-checking audiences underline their polarization), the lies and exaggerations of politicians become evidence of independence from what they see as journalism's attempts to regulate public discourse, providing an alternative to a perceived "agenda setting" dictating what can be discussed and, especially, how it may be discussed (Damasceno & Patricio, 2020). Indeed, this is the crux of the epistemological critique of fact-checking (Uscinski & Butler, 2013), which considers that political discourse is perverted when journalists attempt to oppose objective facts to issues more closely aligned with opinion or ideology. This critique must be nuanced, however, since certain beliefs are demonstrably more based in fact than others, including in the political realm, as underscored by Nyhan and Reifler (2010), who speak of "best available evidence and expert opinion" (p. 305) about the work of journalists in establishing facts. In a more recent study of the reception of fact-checking among Donald Trump's supporters during the 2016 United States presidential campaign, Nyhan et al. (2020) showed that even politically committed audiences acquiesce to more factual perspectives following exposition to rectifications, even if that does not change their voting intentions.

There are identifiable reasons for this. As an established journalistic genre and an objectified practice (Graves, 2017), fact-checking does not reflect journalism's dual essence: that of a specific form of knowledge about current events that attests to facts, but

also that of a discourse on those facts that interprets their meaning for readers. Yet fact-checking, by idealizing the verification of factual details to the detriment of broader contextualization, is at pains to give full due to the narrative dimension that allows for differing and conflicting journalistic readings of a single reality (Joux, 2023). By insisting little or not at all on such “readings” of facts, and emphasizing the dichotomy of “facts” and “fake news”, fact-checking struggles to communicate this other dimension of journalism. This, in our view, is its principal limitation: fact-checking can censure political figures’ missteps, but it is found wanting in the question of addressing the issues underpinning political discourse – an essential element of efficiently informing the public. Fact-checking, therefore, cannot replace political journalism, which is more conversational and remains a necessarily ongoing critical dialogue between journalists and the political class.

Political fact-checking in France and Brazil takes similar approaches in terms of assessments, types of sources cited, and conventions of presentation – approaches that implicitly underscore the difference between political communication and journalistic information. The respect for facts that journalists hold sacred legitimates their intervention in the public space in order to subject politicians to the imperative of reality. Fact-checking journalists justify that intervention by reinforcing their epistemology. Their approach is couched in journalistic objectivity, centered on facts that “speak for themselves” and the Popperian requirement of reproducibility (originating in the scientific domain), providing readers with the reasoning and sources underlying their assessments (for a comprehensive discussion of scientific objectivity and journalism, see Sanja Post (2014). At the same time, because the stature of journalism has been eroded in an age of post-truth politics’ attacks on traditional media and its practitioners, fact-checking treads warily in attempting to reconstruct readers’ trust in journalistic authority. It entreats readers in turn to adopt verification methods and attitudes that can empower them to guard against falsehoods and manipulation. But this emancipation of the reader can only happen if it presupposes the recognition of the applicability of journalistic methods, presupposing first the primacy of journalistic discourse above that of other actors in the public space. What political fact-checking advances, therefore, is the emancipation of captive audiences.

This emancipation takes different trajectories in France and Brazil, however, as reflected in the differences observed in our two representative samples. In Brazil, the referencing of media reports as evidence is dominant, likely because journalists seek first and foremost to establish themselves as a rampart against populism. In France, other primary sources are at the forefront. By demonstrating to fact-checking audiences how to identify and use primary sources of information, without necessarily obtaining that information from the media, fact-checking appears to equip readers to truly appropriate journalistic methods for themselves – and so to be able to do without journalists. In Brazil, by contrast, both the widespread referencing of media sources and Agência Lupa's debate analyses reiterated journalists' central role in public debate, arrogating to themselves the right to denounce political leaders' vacuity for their readerships.

In France as in Brazil, the availability of instant assessments exempts hurried readers from analyzing the underlying verification, even when the arguments and references are clearly laid out. Thus, journalists' legitimacy rests less on the imposition of their methods than it does on the commodities they offer: journalists remain legitimate because they perform a type of work that readers could conceivably accomplish themselves, but for which they lack the necessary time and resources. Emancipation, therefore, is highly relative.

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