Review Article

Unveiling the truth: A systematic review of fact-checking and fake news research in social sciences

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The current media ecosystem, marked by immediacy and social networks dynamics, has created a fertile field for disinformation. Faced with its exponential growth, since 2014, research has focused on combating false content in the media. From a descriptive approach, this study has analyzed 200 documents on fact-checking and fake news published between 2014 and 2022 in scientific journals indexed in Scopus. This study has found that Europe and the United States are leading the way in the number of journals and authors publishing on the subject. The United States universities are the ones that host the most significant number of authors working on fact-checking, while the methodologies used, mostly *ad hoc* due to the novelty of the topic, allow to reflect on the need to promote work focused on the design, testing, and evaluation of prototypes or real experiences within the field. The most common contributions analyzed include typologies of false content and media manipulation mechanisms, models for evaluating and detecting disinformation, proposals to combat false content and strengthen verification mechanisms, studies on the role of social media in the spread of disinformation, efforts to develop media literacy among the public and journalists, case studies of fact-checkers, identification of factors that influence the belief in fake news, and analysis of the relationship between disinformation, verification, politics, and democracy. It is concluded that it is essential to develop research that connects the academy with the industry to raise awareness of the need to address these issues among the different actors in the media scenario. **Keywords:** journalism, misinformation, disinformation, media literacy, media trust

INTRODUCTION

The communication landscape, marked by immediacy and the rise of digital communication, generates a global problem: misinformation. We are discussing an expanding phenomenon caused by information overload that prevents people from making rational decisions (Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2022). As noted by Bhattacharjee et al. (2020), the expansion of this type of content has the potential to change public opinion, polarize people, and even threaten public health, democracy, and international relations.

According to *trust project* data, 54% of the population does not differentiate fake news from real news (CSIC, 2022). The problem of the growth of false information has been coupled with the fragile media education of the citizenry. Authors like Chadwick et al. (2018) point out that sharing sensationalist news on social networks denotes democratically dysfunctional disinformation behaviors. In this line, *digital news report*

Spain 2022 points out that the Spanish population distrusts the news published by the media (Vara Miguel, 2022). This situation poses a significant challenge for the media, which must work to regain the lost trust of citizens (Kumar et al., 2019), offering rigorous and quality information.

The scenario demands, therefore, that projects from different social tribunes–among the industry, journalism, and academia–are developed to counteract the spread of misinformation (Ciampaglia et al., 2018). Empowering citizens through media and information literacy, emphasizing the development of critical skills (Tejedor et al., 2022), is a strategic way to turn these harmful inertias.

Fact-checking is a practice closely linked to the origin of journalism (Vizoso & Vásquez-Herrero, 2019). Its growth constitutes an opportunity for journalism to reconnect with its social responsibility focused on "ensuring the veracity of information, scrutinizing power and transforming information into knowledge that citizens can assume" (Rodríguez Pérez, 2020, p. 244). In addition to promoting media literacy, developing this discipline of content verification and, by extension, the birth of projects and platforms of this type is vital. Many authors point to fact-checking as the most effective tool to combat misinformation (e.g., Amorós Garcia, 2018; Cotter et al., 2022; Patra & Pandey, 2021).

In this way, fact-checking seeks to "unmask the errors, ambiguities, lies, lack of rigor or inaccuracies of some contents published in the media" (Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2018, p. 734), as well as public discourses with an impact on society (Palau-Sampio, 2018). Politicians and alternative media are the main areas analyzed for fact-checking (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018).

Unlike the traditional journalistic process–which contrasts the information before it is published–this verification takes place after it is published. As explained by De Rezende Damasceno and Patrício (2020), fact-checkers analyze information that third parties have already released and disprove it if it is false, an aspect that connects with the diverse typology of interface models emerging in cyberspace (Tejedor et al., 2022). Many fact-checking projects have been created in recent years, especially in a scenario marked by the growing prominence of artificial intelligence (AI).

According to data from *Duke reporters' lab*, in 2023, there will be 387 active fact-checkers distributed around the world. Thus, we see that we are facing a growing discipline. For this reason, the present research will seek to know how the evolution of fact-checking has been approached at the academic level. The study has focused on systematizing the scientific literature on fact-checking and fake news published worldwide. The analysis of this theoretical corpus allows us to know the main research trends around verifying fake content. Specifically, the study is structured around the following research questions:

1. Is fact-checking a growing topic in academic research?
2. What topics are being researched concerning fact-checking?
3. Which countries, universities, and journals are developing more studies on fact-checking in the world?
4. What are the most recurrent research techniques related to the study of fact-checking?
5. What are contributions of academic research on fact-checking to field of study and at a practical level?

METHOD

This descriptive research is based on a systematic review of the literature on fact-checking and fake news, which includes categories of analysis that demand a quantitative and qualitative approach to the object of study. Thus, the study's primary objective has been to know how academic research has approached the phenomenon of fact-checking at a global level. Applying a systematized literature review (Grant & Booth, 2009) has been considered the ideal technique for identifying trends and main currents (Codina, 2018) in an area of interest. Previous research, such as Blanco Alfonso et al. (2019), has employed this methodological approach to analyze the impact of fake news in social science research. In the case of this study, the literature review has focused on knowing:

1. general data on the articles published on fact-checking and fake news worldwide,
2. information on authorship and journals of publication,
3. data on the research techniques employed, and the contributions of the research to the field, and
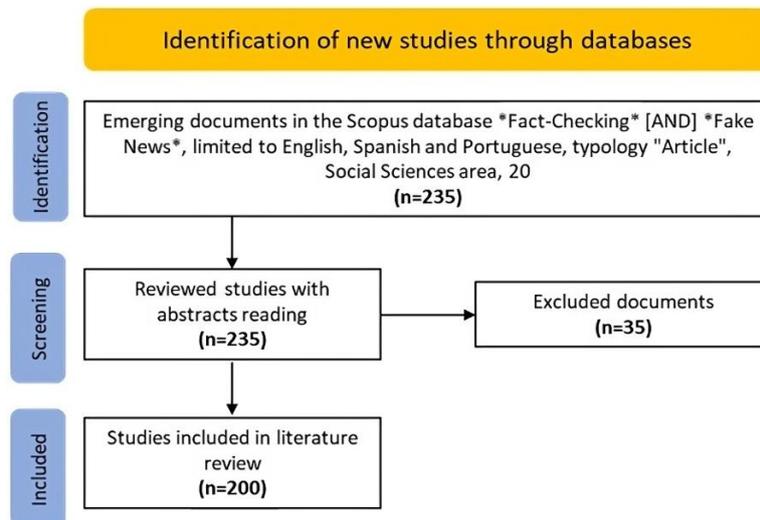4. the contributions of research to the field of study and at a practical level.

Identification of new studies through databases

Identification: Emerging documents in the Scopus database *Fact-Checking* [AND] *Fake News*, limited to English, Spanish and Portuguese, typology "Article", Social Sciences area, 20 (n=235)

Screening: Reviewed studies with abstracts reading (n=235) → Excluded documents (n=35)

Included: Studies included in literature review (n=200)

Figure 1. PRISMA sample selection procedure (Source: Authors)

Table 1. Bibliographic analysis of methodologies (own elaboration on Blanco Alfonso et al., 2019)

Variables	Categories
Article metadata	Title
	Year
	Keywords
	Topic
Authors	*N* authors
	University/research center
Journals	Journal's name
	Country
Methods	Content analysis
	Case study
	Interview
	Survey
	Discourse analysis
	Focus group
	Observation
	Experimental
	State-of-the-Art
	Others/*ad-hoc*
	Not specified
Research contributions	Theoretical and practical implications

The methodological procedure was designed following preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) extension guide (Page et al., 2021). In this sense, this research is a literature review from a mixed perspective with explanatory scope. This literature review was applied to an analysis sample of scientific articles published in academic journals indexed in the Scopus database between 2014 and 2022. To this end, a search was performed within the database using the keywords *fact-checking* and *fake news*, using the Boolean [AND] in the topic section (title, abstract, and keywords). The application of this search resulted in a total of 235 articles. These publications were subjected to an abstract reading filter that allowed the identification of 200 documents dealing with the subject matter consulted, rejecting n=35 documents from this first screening (**Figure 1**). The main reasons for exclusion were, as follows:

1. not being related to the subject matter,

2. being in a language other than English, Spanish, or Portuguese, and

3. being indexed in the Social Sciences area but being technical articles, mainly in computer sciences.

Table 1 presents the categories of analysis applied to the sample of 200 articles. The systematic review thus contemplated five variables: the first four for quantitative analysis and the fifth for qualitative analysis.
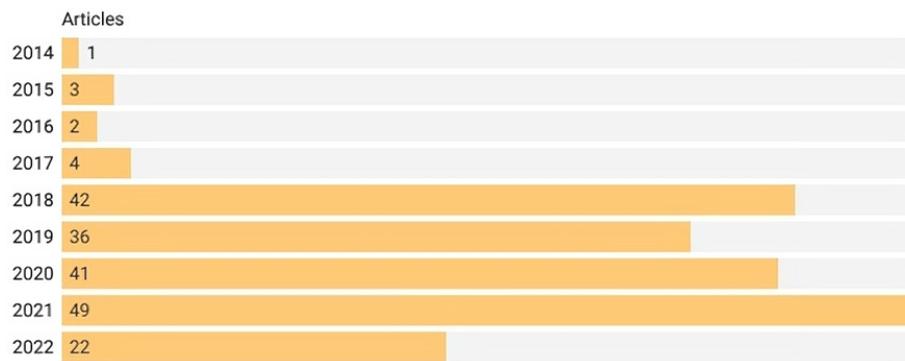
Figure 2. Interannual evolution of fact-checking studies (2022 results were collected through June) (Source: Authors)
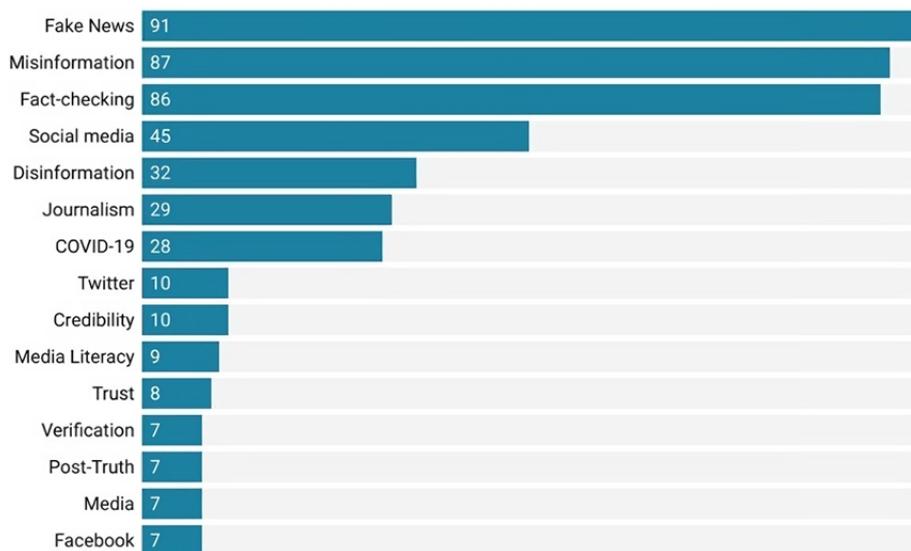

Figure 3. Number of articles that use specific keywords (Source: Authors)

RESULTS

The results obtained from the application of the systematized review of the bibliography are presented below, arranged by category of analysis:

Metadata of Analyzed Articles

Figure 2 shows the evolution of publications on fake news and fact-checking over time. The years that recorded the most publications on the subject are 2021 (49 articles), 2018 (42 articles), 2020 (41 articles), and 2019 (36 articles). This reveals a wide margin of difference with the publications of previous years (between 2014 and 2017).

From what has been seen, it is understood that although there is no linear annual growth, there is an increasing trend in the number of publications on the subject. Above all, the increase in the number of publications in 2018, compared to the previous year, is striking.

Regarding the keywords used in the articles, **Figure 3** shows the 15 most frequently used. These keywords denote, in turn, which topics are most addressed and with which research on fake news and fact-checking is usually related. It is understood that being a topic framed in communication studies, it is constantly related to phenomena and topics such as disinformation, social media, or the need for media literacy, among others.

As shown in **Figure 3**, the keywords that stand out, following the topic analyzed, are fake news, used in 91 articles: misinformation, in 87 articles, and fact-checking, in 86 articles. Other keywords, such as social media
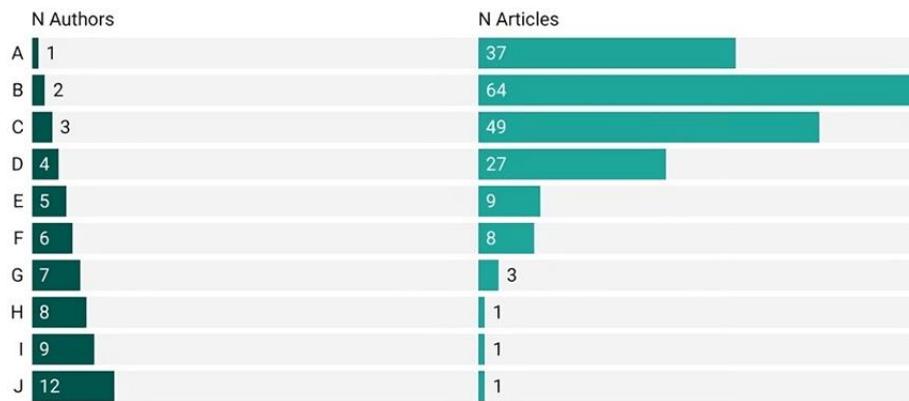
Figure 4. Articles written according to number of authors per collaboration (Source: Authors)
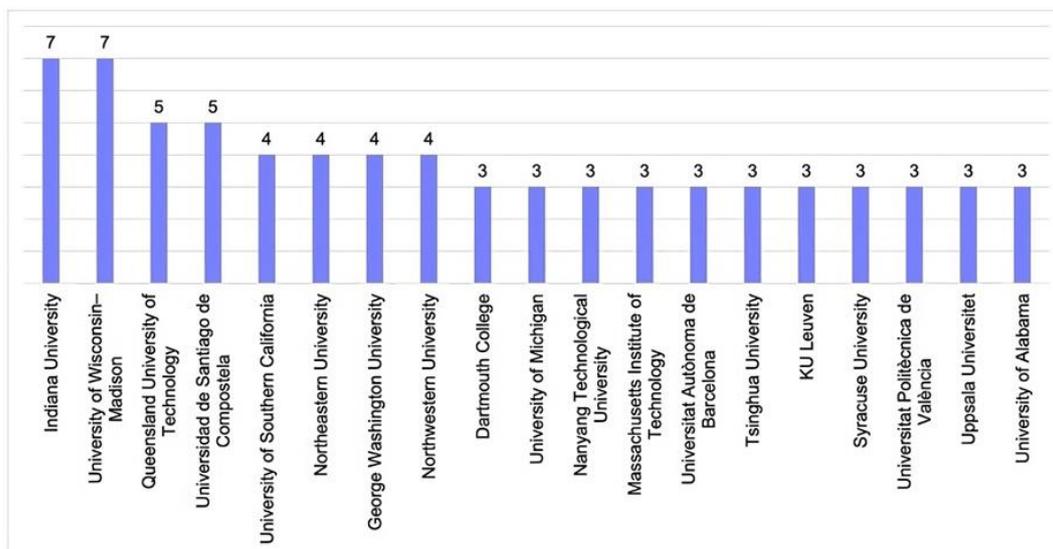

Figure 5. Number of authors of articles by institutional affiliation (Source: Authors)

(used in 45 publications), disinformation (32), journalism (29), and COVID-19 (28), also have an outstanding presence.

Authors Analysis

Within the authors' analysis variable, the present study sought to determine the number of authors per collaboration and their institution of origin. In this sense, **Figure 4** shows that many articles (64) on fake news and fact-checking have been written in two-author collaborations. This is followed by collaborations of three authors (49 articles), one author (37 articles), and four authors (27 articles). On the other hand, only a few articles were written by five or more authors. Within this group, one article written by 12 authors is noteworthy.

About the authors' affiliation, **Figure 5** shows those institutions that host three or more authors who have written about fake news and fact-checking. Thus, we can see that a total of seven authors hold an affiliation with Indiana University (the United States). The same number of authors belong to the University of Wisconsin-Madison (the United States). Behind these are Queensland University of Technology (Australia) and the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain), with five authors who have written on the subject.

The University of Southern California (the United States), Northeastern University (the United States), George Washington University (the United States), and Northwestern University (the United States) are the centers of affiliation of four authors each. It can thus be seen that American universities are the ones that host the most significant number of authors writing on the subject.
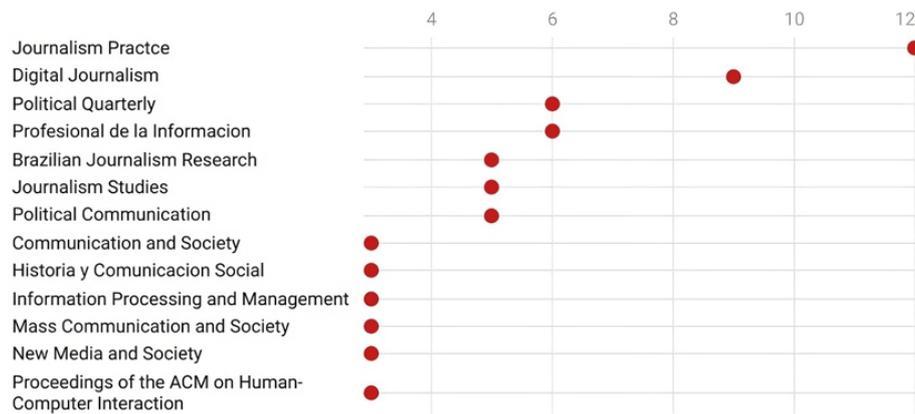
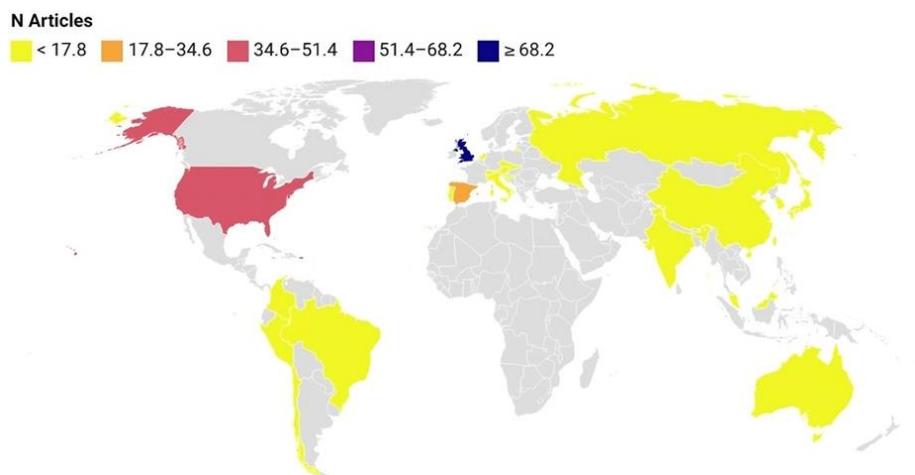**Figure 6.** Number of articles by journal (Source: Authors)

Figure 7. Number of articles by country of journal (Source: Authors)

Journals Analysis

Within the variable journals, it was considered of interest to know the names of the journals and the country to which they belong.

Figure 6 shows those journals that have published three or more articles on fake news and fact-checking. At the top of the list is Journalism Practice, which has published 12 articles on the subject. Digital Journalism follows it with nine publications, and Profesional de la Información and Political Quarterly with six articles each. Meanwhile, Brazilian Journalism Research, Journalism Studies and Political Communication journals have published five articles on the subject each.

We now turn to the category of country of publication of the journals (**Figure 7**). It was found that, according to the location of the journals, the United Kingdom is the country, where the largest number of articles on the subject have been published (85). This is followed by the United States, where 45 articles have been published on the subject. It is followed by Spain, with the publication of 20 articles. Smaller figures can be seen in Switzerland (seven), Brazil (six), India (six), the Netherlands (six), and Portugal (six). The other countries shown in the graph have published from three to fewer articles.

From these data, we can see that Europe is the continent that stands out the most for hosting magazines that give space to the publication of articles on fake news and fact-checking. However, Asia and the entire American continent also show a high production on the subject.

Methods Analysis

We also sought to determine which research techniques were used in the articles (**Figure 8**). It is striking in this section that the most frequently used techniques (in 53 articles) were those developed *ad hoc* for each
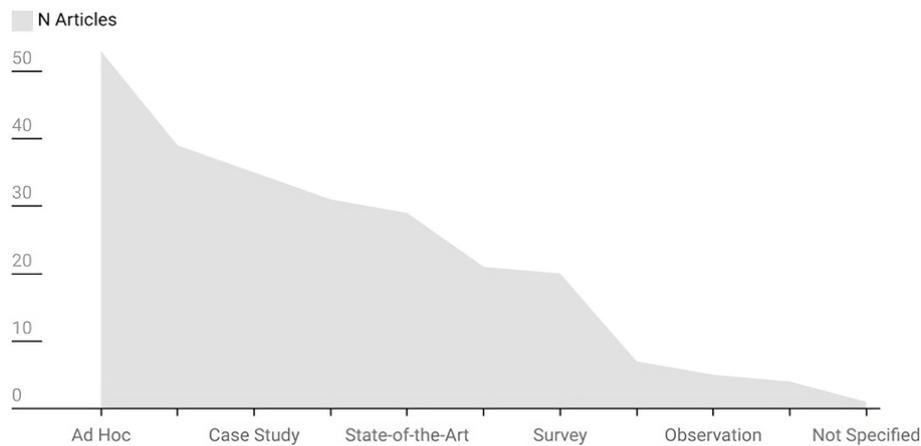
Figure 8. Number of articles according to research techniques employed (Source: Authors)

research. Behind this, we find that content analysis is used in 39 articles. Close behind is the use of the case study (35 articles), the experiment (31 articles), and the state-of-the-art (29 articles).

Interviews (21 items) and questionnaires/surveys (20 items) also showed significant use. Discourse analysis, observation, and focus groups were the least used tools.

Research Contributions

The research contributions variable has been analyzed from a qualitative perspective. In this sense, among the contributions of the analyzed articles, the formulation of different typologies of false content (i.e., Chaves & Braga, 2019; Finneman & Thomas, 2018; Lu, 2020; Molina-Canabate & Magallon-Rosa, 2020; Molina et al., 2019; Salaverría et al., 2020; Su et al., 2018), and even of media manipulation mechanisms (i.e., Levitskaya & Fedorov, 2020) stand out. All these established classifications are helpful not only at the academic level but also at the practical level. Added to this, models for the assessment of misinformation and false content are also presented (i.e., Cheng & Chen, 2020; Kim & Kang, 2018; Lu, 2020; Sharma et al., 2022), and models and techniques for detection (i.e., Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Barve & Saini, 2021; Barve et al., 2022; Bastos et al., 2021; Ebadi et al., 2021; Garrett & Poulsen, 2019; Jiang & Wilson, 2018; Kumar et al., 2019; Kumari et al., 2022; Lanius et al., 2021; Leonardi et al., 2021; Thornhill et al., 2019). Although some are applicable only in the conditions in which the research was carried out, there are many that can be replicated in other contexts and are thus a contribution to academia and industry.

Some articles even go a step further, and their contribution is reflected in the presentation of concrete proposals on how to combat false content and strengthen content verification mechanisms, mainly through the use of technologies (i.e., Ayoub et al., 2021; Bharali & Goswami, 2018; Becker, 2021; Ciampaglia et al, 2015; Featherstone & Zhang, 2019; Fossá & Müller, 2019; Kanozia, 2019; Kartal & Kutlu, 2022; Katsaounidou et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2019; King et al., 2021; Kumari et al., 2022; Lakshmanan et al., 2018; Mena, 2020; Shao et al., 2018; Tambuscio & Ruffo, 2019; Tambuscio et al., 2018; Thomson et al., 2022; Zollo, 2019).

Many authors delve into how social networks are powerful vehicles for the virilization of false content (i.e., Brady et al., 2017; Chadwick et al., 2018; Cotter et al., 2022; Leng et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2017; Walter et al., 2020; Wang & Song, 2020), thus inviting reflection and action to counteract this phenomenon. Other authors emphasize the use of these platforms for conducting verifications and dissemination of these (i.e., Bernal-Triviño & Clares-Gavilán, 2019; Carson & Farhall, 2018; Coddington et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019; King et al., 2021; Lanius et al., 2021; Opgenhaffen, 2022; Shin et al., 2017; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019), thus opening the way to rethink how to use them correctly for this purpose. It is striking in the line of combating misinformation how many articles advocate the development of media literacy for the public (i.e., Addy, 2020; Carillo & Montagut, 2021; Chakraborty et al., 2021; Cronkhite et al., 2020; Ershov, 2018; Katsaounidou et al., 2019; Laskar & Reyaz, 2021; McDougall, 2019; Pérez Tornero et al., 2018; Su et al., 2018) and also from journalists and those who are trained in this profession (i.e., Ershov, 2018; Mutsvairo & Bebaw, 2019; Pérez Tornero et al., 2018; Reed et al., 2019; Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2018).

We also highlight as a contribution of the evaluated articles, the execution of case studies of various fact-checkers (i.e., Berendt et al., 2021; Bernal-Triviño & Clares-Gavilán, 2019; Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Fossá & Müller, 2019; Haigh et al., 2018; Haque et al., 2020; Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2018; Martínez-Carrillo & Tamul, 2019; Palau-Sampio, 2018; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019; Vizoso & Vázquez-Herrero, 2019; Zamit et al., 2020), which unveils their workflows, the impact that the verifications they perform are having on society, the level of development they have, the success or failure of their models, and the support they receive.

Research was also found that, as a contribution, it identifies what other factors, in addition to the public's exposure to fake news, influence the belief of fake news. These factors include political factors (i.e., Thorson, 2016; Weeks, 2015), economic factors (i.e., Kim & Kang, 2018), different types of biases such as cognitive, social, and algorithmic (i.e., Ciampaglia, 2018; Moravec et al., 2019), audience emotions (i.e., Alba-Juez & Mackenzie, 2019) and their beliefs (i.e., Moretzsohn, 2019; Sultana & Fussell, 2021), among others. This helps to have a broader picture of what promotes the adoption of fake news as accurate and, from there, to consider preventive and corrective measures.

Another contribution presented by some of the articles is the reflection they make on the relationship that exists between disinformation, verification, politics and democracy (i.e., Ahmed, 2018; Aird et al., 2018; Banerjee & Haque, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Chadwick et al., 2018; Choi & Haigh, 2019; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Kim & Kang, 2018; Lin, 2022; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Patra & Pandey, 2021; Tandoc et al., 2018; Thorson, 2016; Turner, 2018; Vargo et al., 2018; Wahutu, 2019; Weeks, 2015; Yoon, 2019). Addressing this issue opens the opportunity to reflect on how actions should be taken at the governmental, social and media industry levels to counteract the spread of fake news.

The series of contributions of the research analyzed are those that, in general view, have been identified as the most recurrent to be raised. However, it is essential to clarify that not all articles are limited to these and that, of course, there are more contributions presented, for example, the need for the training of journalists in technological skills (i.e., Pereira-Fariña, 2018; Vizoso & López-García), the defense of collaboration between the industry, journalism, and academia (i.e., Ciampaglia et al., 2018), or the reflection that the spread of fake news has its origin in the same complex situation of journalism due to ideological and commercial interests (i.e., Mayoral et al., 2019), its state in the face of technological development (i.e., Himma-Kadakas, 2017), the ethical crisis of the media (i.e., Rodrigo-Alsina & Cerqueira, 2019; Waisbord, 2018), among others.

CONCLUSIONS

The research concludes that fact-checking has become a booming topic in the research field worldwide. This aspect emphasizes the importance of this object of study and the need to promote new and renewed studies on this challenge, which perennially generates new challenges, threats, and problems due to technological developments. This aspect connects with the growth trend in the number of publications, which has reached new heights in the last decade. In this sense, the study highlights the need to analyze whether the growth of this type of study connects with the thematic agenda of the media and, in this sense, what type of news events have generated a more remarkable emergence of this type of work.

The topics analyzed, including misinformation, fact-checking, social media, and disinformation as the most common concepts, show a direct connection between the phenomenon of fake news and processes linked to the media or platforms dedicated to generating different types of content (**Figure 9**). In this sense, there is a need to promote interdisciplinary studies that, going beyond the media territory, bring this type of study closer to other thematic areas, such as health, environment, or economic information, which require important work to combat information hoaxes and interested manipulation. In short, as one of its conclusions, the study emphasizes the importance of reinforcing the interdisciplinary and multi-thematic nature of research on fact-checking. This aspect connects with the geographical mapping of studies and academic works that place some publications (and countries) as leaders in promoting editorial processes on these topics.

The United Kingdom and the United States are the countries, where the publishing companies that are betting most on the coverage of this phenomenon in the field of scientific publications are located. This aspect does not mean that the studies published are only from these contexts, but it does show interesting aspects
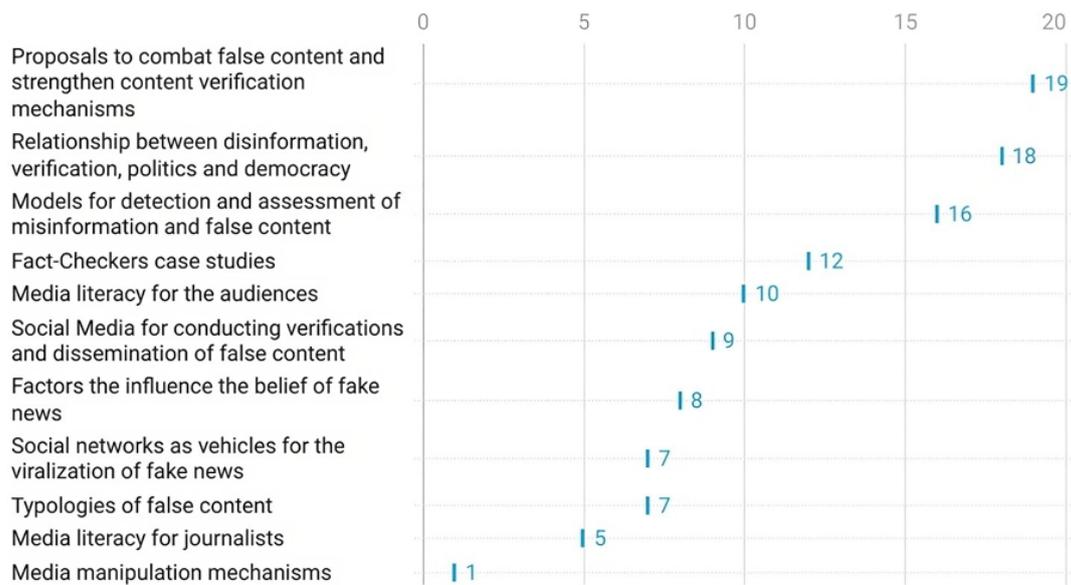
Figure 9. Thematic clusters of analyzed literature (Source: Authors)

due to the type of characteristics and approaches of the journals and the academic culture of each latitude. There is, therefore, a need to place this type of topic at the center of the thematic agenda of journals in other countries, especially in the European and Latin American context, where, despite the existence of publications on the subject, there is a lack of substance and support for them to appear in publications ranked in the main quartiles of the most reputable academic databases.

The research techniques used in this type of work point to aspects of great value for academic research and the design of future strategies in scientific transfer and publication. Content analysis, case studies, and the construction of theoretical systematizations are some of the most recurrent proposals, highlighting the presence of approaches based on experimentation. Regarding this last type of technique and the importance of betting on the interdisciplinary approach, the study concludes that the works devised and directed to the design, testing, and evaluation of prototypes or real experiences within the field of content verification should be encouraged. In a context marked by the accelerated growth of AI, this type of study opens a field of great interest and value.

The ability of AI to generate fake content has made it harder to distinguish between real and fake information. AI-generated content can be highly realistic and difficult to detect with the "naked eye". This has made it more difficult for fact-checkers to verify the accuracy of information, especially online. Also, AI has increased the speed at which misinformation can spread, so AI-powered bots can spread false information on social media platforms at a much faster rate than humans can. This makes it difficult for fact-checkers to keep up with the spread of misinformation and to effectively combat it.

To overcome these challenges, fact-checkers need to develop new fact-checking techniques, collaborate with AI researchers to develop more fair and unbiased AI tools. In addition, social media platforms and news organizations need to work with fact-checkers to stop the spread of misinformation.

Finally, it is essential to promote the development of research that connects academia with industry. This aspect is crucial to raise awareness of the need to address these issues among the different actors in the media scenario and other sectors.

In addition, it is important to connect the studies with professional practice and the needs of different daily scenarios, where misinformation has a strong impact. For this reason, the study allows us to stress the need to promote studies that, from media literacy, study the need to work together with technological developments on the importance of critical understanding of media messages. This aspect is also key to clarifying the terminological confusion around disinformation, verification, or fact-checking concepts.

All the above concludes in the need to delimit and conceptualize the new profiles and professional outlets and, therefore, the new training needs that connect with competencies and skills derived from the particularities of the verification and fact-checking processes.

In this scenario, the ethical component must play a prominent role, and, at the same time, it must be consolidated as a transversal and leading requirement both for the actors of the productive sector, especially the media, and for the citizenship as a whole and, therefore, for the different actors of the formal, informal, or non-formal educational processes.

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