

FACT-CHECKING AND JOURNALISTIC AUTHORITY IN BRAZIL: AN ANALYSIS OF FATO OU FAKE AND ESTADÃO VERIFICA

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ABSTRACT

In order to understand how mainstream media companies utilise fact-checking services, this paper investigates the following research question: to what extent did the Brazilian agencies Estadão Verifica and Fato ou Fake endeavour to reinforce their epistemic authority through fact-checking during the administrations of Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2023–present)? For this examination, all texts published by the two agencies that mentioned Jair Bolsonaro in their titles between January and May 2022 and Lula between January and May 2023 were collected. The *corpus* consisted of 119 checks (95 from Estadão Verifica and 24 from Fato ou Fake) and was subjected to content analysis. The data indicates that the agencies' coverage focused on similar issues during the two administrations, with more than half of the publications refuting rumours detrimental to Lula. The results also reveal that the fact-checking process prioritises journalism's own sources. In other words, Estadão Verifica and Fato ou Fake primarily relied on their own material or that of other mainstream media companies to verify the selected stories — this approach suggests limits to the transparency of the investigation, since much of the information used has already undergone editorial filtering, which is not always clear to the public.

KEYWORDS

political journalism, objectivity, fact-checking, Bolsonaro, Lula

CHECAGEM DE FATOS E AUTORIDADE JORNALÍSTICA NO BRASIL: UMA ANÁLISE DO FATO OU FAKE E DO ESTADÃO VERIFICA

RESUMO

Com o objetivo de compreender de que modo empresas de comunicação *mainstream* mobilizam o serviço de verificação de fatos, este trabalho investiga a seguinte questão de pesquisa: em que medida as agências brasileiras Estadão Verifica e Fato ou Fake buscaram reforçar sua autoridade epistêmica por meio da checagem de fatos ao longo dos Governos de Jair Bolsonaro

(2019–2022) e Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2023–presente)? Para isso, foram coletados todos os textos publicados pelas duas agências que, em seus títulos, mencionaram Jair Bolsonaro, entre janeiro e maio de 2022, e Lula, entre janeiro e maio de 2023. O *corpus* compreende 119 checagens (95 do Estadão Verifica e 24 do Fato ou Fake) e foi submetido à análise de conteúdo. Os dados indicam que as coberturas das agências se concentraram em assuntos semelhantes durante os dois Governos — sendo que mais de metade das publicações desmentiu boatos prejudiciais a Lula. Os resultados revelam, ainda, que o processo de verificação de fatos dá ênfase a fontes do próprio jornalismo. Isto é, o Estadão Verifica e o Fato ou Fake mobilizaram materiais próprios ou de outras empresas de comunicação *mainstream* a fim de checar as histórias selecionadas — o que sugere limites à transparência da apuração, uma vez que muitas das informações utilizadas já passaram, anteriormente, por filtros editoriais, nem sempre claros ao público.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

jornalismo político, objetividade, checagem de fatos, Bolsonaro, Lula

1. INTRODUCTION

This research examines the journalistic coverage provided by two fact-checking agencies affiliated with mainstream media companies in Brazil: Fato ou Fake (part of Grupo Globo) and Estadão Verifica (associated with the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*). The aim is to analyse how these initiatives have been employed to reinforce journalism's credibility as a reliable source of information across different administrations, specifically those of Jair Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

In a communication landscape characterised by the activities of various agents involved in the production and dissemination of content (Marques, 2023; Waisbord, 2018), journalism has faced a crisis of legitimacy and trust (Massuchin et al., 2022; Mick, 2019; Reese, 2022). According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, trust in news has been gradually declining over the years, both in Brazil and globally (Newman et al., 2023). In this context, media organisations have sought to reaffirm their professional authority and highlight their commitment to the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and objectivity (Fontes, 2022; Marques, 2023; Marques et al., 2023). They assert that services such as fact-checking help curb the spread of disinformation (Ferracioli, 2021) and strengthen the role of the press as a reliable source of information (Becker, 2019). The issue is that even these initiatives have been repeatedly accused of favouring particular political tendencies (Adair & Iannucci, 2017; Fernández-Roldán et al., 2023), resulting in a backfire effect on their efforts to enhance media credibility.

Considering these points, this paper addresses the following research question: to what extent did Estadão Verifica and Fato ou Fake endeavour to reinforce their epistemic authority through fact-checking during the Administrations of Jair Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva? It is well-documented that Jair Bolsonaro's Administration (2019–2022) was characterised by recurrent criticism of journalists and media organisations from the former President himself (Fontes, 2022; Nicoletti & Flores, 2022) and his supporters (Massuchin et al., 2022). This atmosphere prompted the press to reaffirm its

commitment to the principles of journalism and democracy through institutional campaigns, news coverage, and editorials (Fontes, 2022; Marques, 2023). Lula, in contrast, criticised Bolsonaro's stance and began his third term by fostering a less confrontational relationship with journalists (Estado de Minas, 2022; Lopes, 2023; Lula, 2023). However, from a historical perspective, the current President and his supporters have also accused Brazilian newspapers of persecution, with criticism of the press being a recurring topic in coverage of Operation Car Wash and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff (Albuquerque, 2021). Given that Bolsonaro and Lula are positioned at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum and contested each other in the 2022 election, this research aims to determine whether, and to what extent, there was bias in the fact-checking activities conducted by two of Brazil's leading newspaper organisations.

The empirical approach involved collecting all texts published by the two fact-checking agencies that mentioned Bolsonaro in their titles between January 1 and May 31, 2022, and Lula between January 1 and May 31, 2023. This time frame was chosen to allow for a comparison of an equal number of days of both administrations, excluding the direct influence of electoral periods. The *corpus* consists of a total of 119 texts: 95 from Estadão Verifica and 24 from Fato ou Fake. Content analysis was conducted through the creation of a codebook based on previous research on fact-checking (Ferracioli et al., 2022; Marques et al., 2024) and iterative readings of the *corpus* (Bardin, 1977/2011).

This paper is organised into five sections in addition to this introduction. The first section examines the impact of changes in the information environment on journalism. The second section reviews the literature on fact-checking. The third section describes the data collection and analysis methods. The fourth section presents the research findings. Finally, the paper reflects on these findings within the context of the existing literature.

The results indicate that the primary sources used by both agencies originate from mainstream journalism, including content from the media companies affiliated with the two fact-checking initiatives. This reliance on internal sources suggests that Brazilian news organisations have underutilised fact-checking methods. Instead of focusing on transparency and verification, they tend to emphasise their own authority, which could contribute to increased public distrust.

2. JOURNALISTIC LEGITIMACY, POLARISATION, AND POLITICISATION

The emergence of professional journalism “claimed the mantle of scientific realism to ground its approach to truth-telling — focusing facts, utilising quasi-scientific methods, and bracketing ideology and subjectivity” (Waisbord, 2018, pp. 1869–1870). However, in the face of many actors producing and sharing content via digital platforms and the proliferation of fake news, journalism has sought to reaffirm its professional authority (Marques, 2023; Reese, 2022). Fontes (2022) notes that “the delimitation and reinforcement of journalistic authority involve not only emphasising what the normative characteristics of journalism are but also delineating what cannot be considered as such” (p. 95). Carlson (2016) highlights that, as with many professional activities, social acceptance is

a fundamental condition for maintaining journalistic authority. Through meta-journalistic discourse, the norms, protocols, and meanings of the profession are established: “meaning is negotiated across those seeking authority and those who grant it through their acceptance” (Carlson, 2016, p. 355).

As occurred in the United States during Donald Trump’s Administration (Koliska et al., 2020), many of the challenges faced by journalism organisations and professionals stem from attacks by political leaders. In Brazil, the tensions between the press and political actors have remained intense since the 2013 demonstrations, which were followed by the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the imprisonment of Lula in 2018 (Albuquerque, 2019; Marques et al., 2023; Pimentel, 2023). However, according to the Associação Brasileira de Jornalismo Investigativo (2022), tensions escalated during the Bolsonaro Administration. In 2021, 69% of attacks on journalists were perpetrated by individuals linked to government or State institutions.

To examine how journalistic institutions sought to reaffirm their legitimacy during Jair Bolsonaro’s Administration, Fontes (2022) analysed news and opinion pieces from three Brazilian quality papers — *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, and *O Globo*. The findings indicate that the defence of journalistic legitimacy centred on a commitment to the principles of professional journalism — impartiality, neutrality, and objectivity — reaffirmed through self-promotional texts or the announcement of awards received by their journalists.

Similarly, Marques (2023) argues that the persistent conflicts between Bolsonaro and the press have led to transformations across four dimensions of journalistic practices in Brazil: institutional media campaigns, news production, editorial content, and the responses of professionals to attacks. According to the author, media managers have attempted to reshape their public image to reinforce the narrative that journalism serves the interests of citizens. The media organisations and their professionals were frequently featured in the news coverage. The assertion that journalism offers an impartial account of the facts became increasingly common in editorials. Additionally, press professionals, traditionally claiming a stance of neutrality, began to take more explicit positions concerning political actors — a shift towards politicisation observed in other democracies as well.

These changes are not limited to Brazilian journalism. In the United States, for instance, while local newspapers are shutting down, the number of partisan newsrooms is growing rapidly. “The danger is that readers (...) are being served up emotive, partisan, divisive news disguised as community reporting, confounded the two” (Bartholomew, 2022, para. 8).

3. FACT-CHECKING AND THE CONTEST FOR EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY

Fact-checking has emerged as a product specifically dedicated to reaffirming the authority of journalistic coverage (Graves, 2018) since it asserts the epistemic legitimacy to determine the degree of veracity of publicly circulating statements or information

(Ferracioli, 2021). Lelo (2022) notes that, although verifying the integrity of news has been a core journalistic principle since the early 20th century, “modern fact-checking aims to reinvigorate journalistic legitimacy for the public interest” (p. 78).

Fact-checking is not primarily focused on generating “scoops”, unlike traditional reporting in news sections (Lim, 2018). It is also common for the same story to be fact-checked by multiple agencies (Marques et al., 2024), highlighting a more collaborative approach among companies that otherwise compete commercially for the public’s attention. As Graves and Konieczna (2015) argue, fact-checking groups “understand themselves as practising the kind of ‘accountability journalism’ that is vital to a well-functioning democracy, and see their work as responding to an ongoing crisis in journalism” (p. 3). It should also be noted that contemporary fact-checking tends to emphasise political topics, such as speeches by public officials (Becker, 2019).

If traditional newsrooms still maintain opacity regarding their procedures and the details of everyday production (Christofoletti, 2021; Gehrke, 2020) — a distinctive feature of fact-checking initiatives is precisely their alleged concern for transparency, particularly regarding sources and the investigative process (Becker, 2019; Santos & Maurer, 2020). Such an approach is evident in the descriptions provided by the Brazilian agencies themselves, as well as in the guidelines of the International Fact-Checking Network: “we believe truth and transparency can help people be better informed and equipped to navigate harmful misinformation” (Poynter, n.d.-b). As Becker (2019) explains, in theory, the idea is to allow readers to follow the same paths fact-checkers take. According to Santos and Maurer (2020), the transparency of the processes could, in fact, have more potential to benefit readers than the indication of labels by the agencies.

In a survey of 31 professionals from Agência Pública’s *Truco dos Estados* project, Seibt and Fonseca (2019) sought to identify the journalistic principles they relate to their activity. Transparency was cited by all respondents, ranking higher than other normative values such as accuracy, objectivity, and credibility. According to the authors, “if it is no longer possible to trust media discourse a priori, unveiling the content production process is an alternative way to gain credibility” (Seibt & Fonseca, 2019, p. 11). Gehrke (2020) provides insight into this scenario by highlighting that “fact-checkers frequently evoke this journalistic value to defend their work, once transparency’s approach requires demonstrating to the readers the news sources used” (p. 2).

In Brazil, the first fact-checking initiatives (Lupa, <https://lupa.uol.com.br/>; and Aos Fatos, <https://www.aosfatos.org/>) were established to operate autonomously. They began their activities in 2015 under the supervision of journalists who had worked for mainstream organisations (Lelo, 2022). Since then, traditional news organisations have also established their own fact-checking units — a phenomenon repeated in other countries. In this context, Graves et al. (2016) conducted an experiment with political journalists in the United States to investigate what motivates the publication of “fact-checking” texts. They found that content appealing to the prestige and values of the profession remains significantly relevant despite the commercial pressures associated with public interest.

However, even sponsoring fact-checking initiatives has not shielded commercial journalism from criticism. In addition to concerns about the criteria used by fact-checkers to select their agendas (Uscinski & Butler, 2013), there are also criticisms regarding the potential partisan biases of the professionals involved in this activity. Adair and Iannucci (2017) illustrate how conservatives in the United States challenge the “self-proclaimed” role of fact-checkers as arbiters of truth. They also argue that the journalists involved in fact-checking often have ideological preferences aligned with left-wing parties. In the Spanish case, Fernández-Roldán et al. (2023) demonstrate that right-wing parties are more likely to have their content classified as “false” compared to left-wing parties.

By interviewing fact-checkers working in Spain, Fernández-Roldán et al. (2023) concluded that some agencies do not specify objective criteria for selecting stories to fact-check and do not have clear policies for prioritising sources. Moreover, the journalists revealed that there were no objective protocols for distinguishing between a “true” story and a “half-true” one. In other words, while the professionals claimed to use journalistic criteria in their work, their responses were inconsistent when asked about the specific criteria they actually employed.

Regarding the Brazilian context, Fontes et al. (2019) interviewed journalists involved in covering the 2018 elections as part of the *Comprova*¹ project. Concerning the criteria for selecting content, the journalists reported that they prioritised stories with significant social media impact — and noted that content related to Jair Bolsonaro tended to have greater reach.

In light of the discussion outlined above, this paper addresses the following research question: to what extent did Estadão Verifica and Fato ou Fake endeavour to reinforce their epistemic authority through fact-checking during the Administrations of Jair Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva?

4. METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES

The focus of this study is on the journalistic coverage provided by two fact-checking agencies: Fato ou Fake (<https://g1.globo.com/fato-ou-fake/>) and Estadão Verifica (<https://www.estadao.com.br/estadao-verifica/>). The selection of these two cases was based on their affiliation with mainstream media companies — Fato ou Fake is associated with Grupo Globo, and Estadão Verifica is operated by the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*. Fato ou Fake was established in July 2018 and asserts that its fact-checking criteria are based on transparency regarding sources, methodology, and corrections (*G1 Lança Fato ou Fake, Novo Serviço de Checagem de Conteúdos Suspeitos*, 2018). Estadão Verifica was launched in June 2018 (Bramatti, 2021) and is a signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network, which sets standards and principles for fact-checking².

¹ The *Comprova* project is a collaborative, non-profit initiative that currently unites journalists from 41 Brazilian media outlets. Learn more at: <https://projeto.comprova.com.br/>.

² Refer to Poynter (n.d.-a).

To examine the performance of the two initiatives during the Administrations of Jair Bolsonaro and Lula da Silva, we collected all fact-checks that mentioned (a) Bolsonaro in their titles between January 1 and May 31, 2022; and (b) Lula between January 1 and May 31, 2023. This data collection yielded 95 texts produced by Estadão Verifica and 24 by the Fato ou Fake team, resulting in a total *corpus* of 119 texts.

Based on preliminary observations of the content and a review of previous studies on fact-checking (Ferracioli et al., 2022; Marques et al., 2024), a codebook (see Table 1) to implement the content analysis strategy (Bardin, 1977/2011) was developed. Two researchers experienced in this technique coded the texts, and the reliability of the variable classification was tested using Krippendorff's alpha (Krippendorff, 2004).

(a) Topic or subject of the fact-check	(1) Elections and/or political support; (2) public policies (proposal, implementation, and regulation) and public works; (3) international issues (relations with other presidents, negotiations, investments from or in other countries); (4) COVID-19; (5) multiple topics in the same fact-check; (6) moral and religious topics; (7) other. Krippendorff's alpha: 0.77
(b) Does the fact-check use journalism itself as a source of information?	(0) No; (1) yes. Krippendorff's alpha: 0.78
(c) Does the fact-check mention State agencies or officials as sources of information?	(0) No; (1) yes. Krippendorff's alpha: 0.86
(d) Does the fact-check mention civil society agents as sources of information (scientists, experts, think tanks, non-governmental organisations, companies, etc.)?	(0) No; (1) yes. Krippendorff's alpha: 0.80
(e) Does the fact-check explicitly indicate that journalism is a reliable source?	(0) No; (1) yes. Krippendorff's alpha: 0.84
(f) Does the fact-check contradict Bolsonaro, Lula, or their supporters?	(0) No; (1) the fact-check contradicts Bolsonaro and/or his supporters; (2) the fact-check contradicts Lula and/or his supporters; (3) the fact-check contradicts Bolsonaro and Lula and/or their supporters. Krippendorff's alpha: 0.78
(g) Is the fact-checked rumour detrimental to Lula or Bolsonaro?	(0) Neither; (1) the verified story (the rumour) is detrimental to Bolsonaro; (2) the verified story (the rumour) is detrimental to Lula. Krippendorff's alpha: 0.93

Table 1. Codebook

5. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The graphs in Figure 1 and Figure 2 illustrate the number of fact-checks that mention Bolsonaro in their titles between January and April of 2022 and Lula between January and May of 2023. Although there is a notable difference in the volume of texts produced by each agency, both provided similar coverage of the two political figures examined. Specifically, Fato ou Fake published 10 fact-checks related to Bolsonaro and 14 about Lula during the relevant months. In contrast, Estadão Verifica released 47 fact-checks mentioning the President during Bolsonaro's Administration and 48 during Lula's Administration.

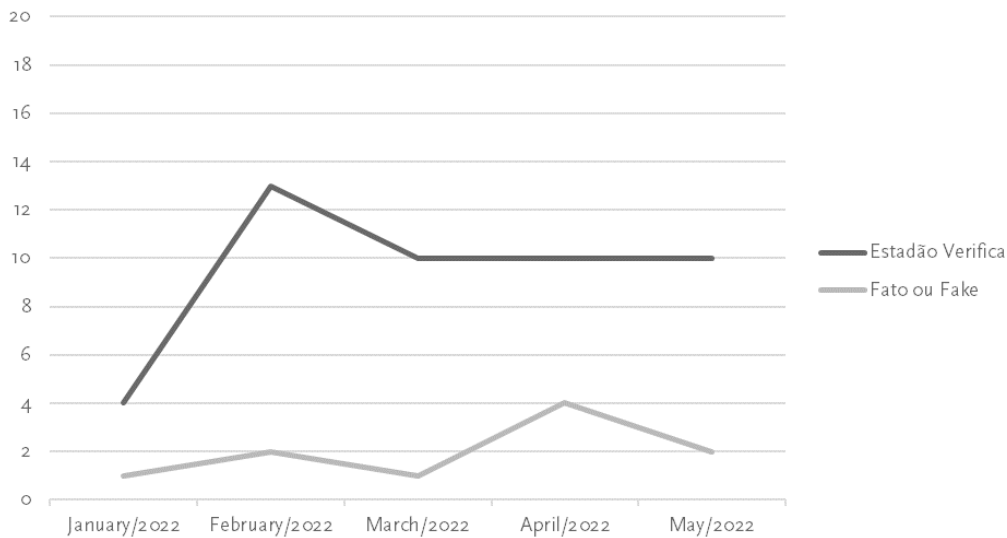


Figure 1. Fact-checks that mentioned Bolsonaro in 2022 (based on data from Estadão Verifica and Fato ou Fake, 2024)

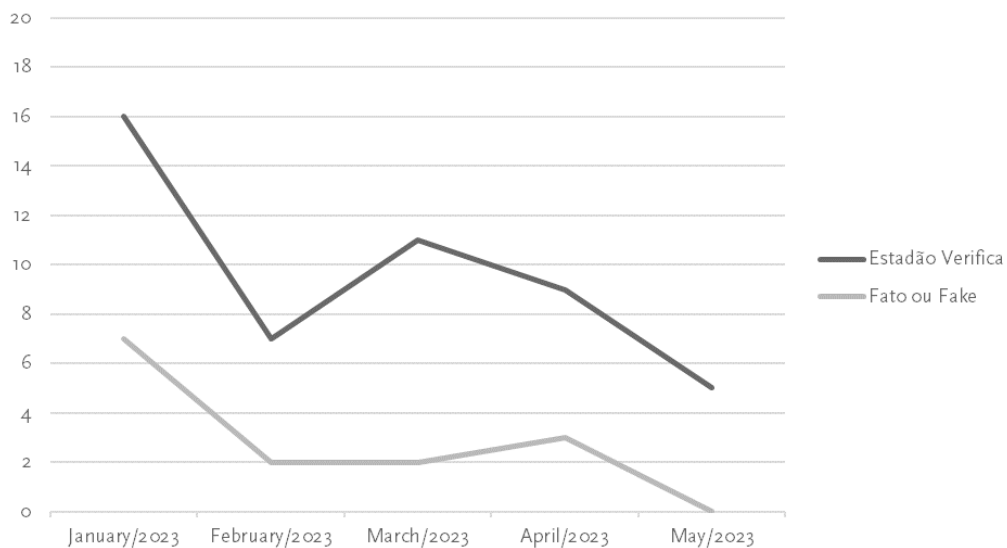


Figure 2. Fact-checks that mentioned Lula in 2023 (based on data from Estadão Verifica and Fato ou Fake, 2024)

It is also worth noting that in January 2022, the agencies published only a few texts about Bolsonaro (four in Estadão Verifica and one in Fato ou Fake). In contrast, the first month of Lula's Administration saw a more intense start, with 16 fact-checks in Estadão Verifica and seven in Fato ou Fake. Most of these texts referred to purported actions taken by the Lula Administration (for example, “É #FAKE que Canal de Transposição do São Francisco Mostrado em Vídeo Foi Fechado Após Início do Governo Lula” [It Is #FAKE That the São Francisco Transposition Canal Shown in Video Was Closed After the Start of Lula's Administration], from Fato ou Fake, on January 23, 2023, and “Não Houve Mudança na Taxação do Pix Após Posse de Lula” [There Was no Change in Pix Taxation

After Lula Took Office], from Estadão Verifica, on January 6, 2023). They also addressed rumours that the current President had not actually assumed office, such as the fact-checks “Não, Augusto Heleno Não Assumiu a Presidência do Brasil no Lugar de Lula” (No, Augusto Heleno Did Not Assume the Presidency of Brazil in Place of Lula), from Estadão Verifica, on January 5, 2023, and “É #FAKE que Lula Foi Impedido de Entrar no Palácio da Alvorada e no Avião Presidencial” (It Is #FAKE That Lula Was Prevented From Entering the Palácio da Alvorada and the Presidential Plane), from Fato ou Fake, on January 4, 2023.

Table 2 shows that the agencies’ coverage focused on similar issues during both Administrations. Primarily, both initiatives prioritised public policy — encompassing areas such as public works, services, and regulations. In Estadão Verifica, this topic accounted for 21 texts during the Bolsonaro Administration and 18 texts during the Lula Administration. In Fato ou Fake, there were three texts during the Bolsonaro Administration and six during the Lula Administration. In the case of Fato ou Fake, all fact-checks classified under this topic in 2023 addressed and disproved rumours that Lula had taken actions harmful to the population, such as suspending the supply of medicines through the “Farmácia Popular” programme and ending delivery apps.

FACT-CHECK TOPICS	BOLSONARO ADMINISTRATION		LULA ADMINISTRATION	
	ESTADÃO VERIFICA	FATO OU FAKE	ESTADÃO VERIFICA	FATO OU FAKE
Public policies	21 (45%)	3 (30%)	18 (37.5%)	6 (43%)
Elections and/or political support	12 (25.5%)	2 (20%)	3 (6.5%)	4 (28.5%)
International issues	3 (6.5%)	2 (20%)	7 (14.5%)	1 (7%)
More than one topic	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	3 (6.5%)	0 (0%)
COVID-19	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	1 (7%)
Moral and religious topics	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)
Other	9 (19%)	3 (30%)	14 (29%)	2 (14.5%)
Total	47 (100%)	10 (100%)	48 (100%)	14 (100%)

Table 2. Fact-check topics (based on data from Estadão Verifica and Fato ou Fake, 2024)

It is also interesting to observe how certain specific issues repeatedly appeared in public policy investigations, notably those related to the São Francisco River transposition project. In Estadão Verifica, the topic was highlighted in fact-checks such as “Ponte Sobre Canal do São Francisco Mostrada em Vídeo Foi Entregue por Temer, Não Bolsonaro” (The Bridge Over the São Francisco Canal Featured in the Video Was Completed Under Temer, Not Bolsonaro), published on January 4, 2022; and “Falsamente Atribuída a Bolsonaro, Chegada de Água do Rio São Francisco a Barra de Santana (PB) Ocorreu em 2018” (Misattributed to Bolsonaro, the Arrival of Water from the São Francisco River in Barra de Santana [PB] Actually Occurred in 2018), published on February 19, 2022. In Fato ou Fake, the two reports on this topic are from 2023: “É #FAKE que Canal de Transposição do São Francisco Mostrado em Vídeo Foi Fechado Após Início do Governo Lula” (It Is #FAKE That the São Francisco Transposition Canal Shown in a Video Was Closed After the Start of Lula’s Administration), published on January 23, 2023, and “É #FAKE que Lula Mandou

Fechar Canal de Transposição do São Francisco em Salgueiro (PE)” (It Is #FAKE That Lula Ordered the Closure of the São Francisco Transposition Canal in Salgueiro [PE]), published on February 2, 2023.

Fact-checks focusing on elections and political support make up the second most frequent topic. In *Estadão Verifica*, 12 texts were published in 2022 and three in 2023. Given that 2022 was an election year, it was expected that fact-checking agencies would devote more attention to rumours about elections and political endorsements. However, *Fato ou Fake* published only two reports on this topic in 2022 and four in 2023. For example, on January 11, 2023, *Fato ou Fake* released the report “É #FAKE que Lula Não Foi Eleito Pelo Povo Brasileiro e que Apuração dos Votos Não É Confiável” (It Is #FAKE That the Brazilian People Did Not Elect Lula and That Vote Counting Cannot Be Trusted).

The rumours regarding international issues included, for example, relations with other presidents (“Meme Também Engana: É Falso que Putin Tenha Sido Convencido por Bolsonaro a Não Atacar a Ucrânia” [Memes Are Also Misleading: It Is False That Bolsonaro Convinced Putin Not to Attack Ukraine], *Estadão Verifica* on February 18, 2022), and claims about presidential trips (“É #FAKE que Lula Foi Expulso de Portugal” [It Is #FAKE That Lula Was Expelled from Portugal], *Fato ou Fake* on April 26, 2023). This category includes three fact-checks by *Estadão Verifica* in 2022 and seven in 2023. Meanwhile, *Fato ou Fake* published two in 2022 and one in 2023.

Some of the fact-checks published by *Estadão Verifica* were extensive, aiming to debunk rumours by providing detailed information. As a result, five fact-checks covered multiple topics (two in 2022 and three in 2023), a scenario not observed in *Fato ou Fake*. Two topics had only a few entries: COVID-19 (one from each agency in 2023) and moral and religious issues (two from *Estadão Verifica* in 2023). An example of a moral topic is the publication “Vídeo de Lula É Compartilhado com Velocidade Reduzida Para Sugerir Efeito de Álcool” (Video of Lula Shared in Slow Motion to Suggest Alcohol Effect; *Estadão Verifica*, March 28, 2023). Additionally, both agencies reported similar numbers of fact-checks that did not fall into the previous categories. One example is “Vídeo Engana ao Afirmar que Comandante do Exército Deu Recado a Lula e STF” (Video Misleads by Claiming Army Commander Sent Message to Lula and STF; *Estadão Verifica*, March 10, 2023).

Table 3 illustrates the sources employed by the fact-checks and the extent to which the agencies explicitly support journalism. Both agencies analysed use journalism itself more frequently than other traditional newsroom sources, such as State representatives and members of civil society. *Estadão Verifica* referenced newspaper articles and other fact-checking agencies in 43 texts in 2022 and 45 texts in 2023. *Fato ou Fake* did so in eight texts in 2022 and 10 texts in 2023. For comparison, *Estadão Verifica* used State sources in 39 texts in 2022 and 35 texts in 2023. In *Fato ou Fake*, State sources were used in only two texts in 2022 and 10 texts in 2023. Civil society sources (including experts, organisations, and citizens) were used by *Estadão Verifica* in 25 texts in 2022 and 22 texts in 2023. In *Fato ou Fake*, these sources were cited in five texts in 2022 and four in 2023. Additionally, it is evident that the use of journalistic material as a source did not vary significantly between the two periods analysed; it remained prominent during both the Bolsonaro and Lula Administrations.

SOURCES USED	BOLSONARO ADMINISTRATION		LULA ADMINISTRATION	
	ESTADÃO VERIFICA	FATO OU FAKE	ESTADÃO VERIFICA	FATO OU FAKE
Uses journalism as a source	43 (91.5%)	8 (80%)	45 (94%)	10 (71.5%)
Uses the State as a source	39 (83%)	2 (20%)	35 (73%)	10 (71.5%)
Uses civil society as a source	25 (53%)	5 (50%)	22 (46%)	4 (28.5%)
Indicates journalism as a reliable source	24 (51%)	0 (0%)	16 (33.5%)	1 (7%)
Total	47 (100%)	10 (100%)	48 (100%)	14 (100%)

Table 3. Sources used in fact-checks and endorsement of journalism (derived from *Estadão Verifica* and *Fato ou Fake* data, 2024)

Note. The sum of the frequencies of the variables presented in Table 3 exceeds the total values because the same text can use more than one source and indicate journalism as a reliable source.

It should be noted that 19 fact-checks relied solely on journalism as a source: 13 from *Estadão Verifica* (accounting for 13.5% of the agency's fact-checks) and six from *Fato ou Fake* (representing 25% of the agency's total fact-checks). One of the examples is “É #FAKE Imagem que Mostra Musk Comendo Pastel ao Lado de Bolsonaro” (It Is #FAKE Image Showing Musk Eating Pastry Next to Bolsonaro; May 23, 2022). The investigation clarifies that the image is a montage referencing a story depicting the actual meeting between Musk and Bolsonaro and another story about Musk's trip to Texas shortly after the meeting.

Press sources are used in two ways: through direct quotations, specifying the name of the journalistic company or fact-checking agency, and indirectly, by referencing the journalistic content through links. While *Estadão Verifica* featured more direct quotations from journalism, *Fato ou Fake* employed more indirect references. It is also notable that both agencies frequently rely on news coverage from their affiliated companies. *Fato ou Fake* notably prioritises G1, also owned by Grupo Globo — with 13 instances of this practice (accounting for 54% of its total fact-checks). *Estadão Verifica* includes 49 reports referencing the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* (i.e., 51.5% of its total reports). Many of these references directly quote previous coverage: “as previously explained by *Estadão*” or “as detailed by *Estadão*”.

In this context, it is interesting to note that although references to their own group are significant, the agencies also rely on other journalistic sources. That is seen on three occasions in *Fato ou Fake*, but *Estadão Verifica* employs this approach more frequently. For instance, a fact-check published on March 13, 2023, includes links to *Poder360*, *O Globo*, and *Exame* and mentions within the text that the newspaper *Estado de Minas* gathered the information. Another example of this practice is the fact-check published on April 25, 2023, which includes references to CNN, *El País*, BBC News, *Folha de S. Paulo*, *Metrópolis*, and G1. Another fact-check (“Tuíte Confunde ao Mencionar Aumento de Salário de Bolsonaro e Ministros” [Tweet Is Confusing When Mentioning Salary Increase for Bolsonaro and Ministers], May 22, 2022) features the following excerpt:

the post also criticises the news coverage of the issue as if there had been no repercussions. However, during the increase, several media outlets

covered the topic, including *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, *Estado de Minas*, *Correio Braziliense*, *Valor*, *CNN*, and *G1*.

The agencies also reference fact-checks that have already been conducted. While *Fato ou Fake* made more self-references to its own verifications, *Estadão Verifica* often cited other agencies as a strategy to reinforce that other sources had already discredited the material. The fact-check titled “Post Imita Visual de Portal Para Espalhar Boato Sobre Lula e Conta de Luz” (Post Mimics Visual of Portal to Spread Rumour About Lula and Electricity Bill; February 27, 2023) notes that “this content was also fact-checked by *AFP* and *UOL Confere*”.

Estadão Verifica also notably advocates for journalism as a reliable source. During the analysed period, there were 40 instances (24 during the Bolsonaro Administration and 16 during the Lula Administration). Particularly noteworthy are the cases where the agency presents its association with the International Fact-Checking Network as its “signature”, as what happened on May 5, 2022 in the text entitled “Lei Rouanet: Postagem Engana ao Atribuir a Bolsonaro Processos Para Artistas Devolverem Valores” (Rouanet Law: Post misleads by attributing to Bolsonaro processes for artists to return amounts):

the international association of fact-checkers requires certified entities to adhere to a code of principles and commit to five key areas: nonpartisanship and impartiality, transparency of sources, transparency of funding and organisation, transparency of methodology, and an open and honest corrections policy.

This emphasis on defending journalism aligns with core journalistic values, particularly transparency. However, the argument is presented in various ways. For example: “seek information from reputable press outlets, government agencies and credible institutions” (“Lula Foi Vacinado Contra Covid, ao Contrário do que Afirma Legenda de Vídeo” [Lula Was Vaccinated Against Covid, Contrary to What Video Caption Claims], March 6, 2023), “*Estadão Verifica* has not found any news on reliable websites indicating that that the current administration intentionally suspended water pumping” (“É Falso que Governo Lula Mandou Desligar Bombeamento de Água da Transposição do São Francisco” [It Is False That Lula’s Administration Ordered the Shutdown of Water Pumping from the São Francisco Transposition], January 20, 2023) and “if the country were actually implementing unisex toilets as a government policy, it would be covered by the media” (“É Falso que Lula Tenha Plano Para Implementar Banheiros Unisex no País” [It Is False that Lula Has the Plan to Implement Unisex Toilets in the Country], May 29, 2023). In *Fato ou Fake*, the fact-check titled “É #FAKE que Vídeo Mostre que Lula Não Recebeu Vacina Contra Covid” (It Is #FAKE That Video Shows Lula Did Not Receive Covid Vaccine), published on February 28, 2023, countered the claim with the statement: “professional media widely reported the event”.

Table 4 presents the number of fact-checks that explicitly identified whether the

rumours were spread by Bolsonaro, Lula, or their supporters³. A substantial portion of the texts did not make this direct connection. When such associations were made, they predominantly involved Bolsonaro and his supporters. In *Estadão Verifica*, 16 verifications linked the former President or his supporters to the dissemination of the rumour (10 in 2022 and six in 2023). In *Fato ou Fake*, this was observed in three texts (one in 2022 and two in 2023). For instance, the fact-check titled “Parlamentares Mineiros Exibem Placas com Afirmções Falsas Contra Lula em Vídeo Denunciando Rodovia” (Minas Gerais Parliamentarians Display Signs With False Claims Against Lula in Video Denouncing Highway; March 13, 2023) involved congressman Nikolas Ferreira (Liberal Party) and senator Cleitinho (Republicans), whom *Estadão Verifica* identified as Bolsonaro supporters.

DOES THE FACT-CHECK CONTRADICT LULA, BOLSONARO, OR THEIR SUPPORTERS?	BOLSONARO ADMINISTRATION		LULA ADMINISTRATION	
	ESTADÃO VERIFICA	FATO OU FAKE	ESTADÃO VERIFICA	FATO OU FAKE
The fact-check does not contradict Lula, Bolsonaro, or their supporters	36 (76.5%)	9 (90%)	41 (85.5%)	12 (85.5%)
The fact-check contradicts Bolsonaro or his supporters	10 (21.5%)	1 (10%)	6 (12.5%)	2 (14.5%)
The fact-check contradicts Lula or his supporters	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
Total	47 (100%)	10 (100%)	48 (100%)	14 (100%)

Table 4. Does the fact-check contradict Lula, Bolsonaro, or their supporters? (based on data from *Estadão Verifica* and *Fato ou Fake*, 2024)

Lula and his supporters were identified as sources of disinformation in only two instances. On March 30, 2022, *Estadão Verifica* charged pro-Lula groups with spreading a false article in *Revista Veja* claiming that Bolsonaro had no chance of re-election (“É Falso que ‘Veja’ Tenha Publicado Capa Dizendo que Bolsonaro Não Tem Chance de Reeleição” [It Is False that “Veja” Has Published a Cover Saying Bolsonaro Has No Chance of Re-election]). On March 24, 2023, the agency also released the fact-check “Lula Alimenta Onda de Desinformação ao Acusar Moro de ‘Armação’ em Operação Contra o PCC” (Lula Fuels Wave of Disinformation by Accusing Moro of ‘Setup’ in Operation Against the PCC).

The final variable in the codebook examines the agent affected by the rumours being fact-checked (Table 5). In 2022, most of the fact-checked stories did not specifically target Lula or Bolsonaro. However, as a rule, the fact-checks aimed to clarify whether Bolsonaro was responsible for certain projects or if supporters were overstating the President’s accomplishments. Examples include: “É #FAKE que Trem Entre Parauapebas (PA) e São Luís (MA) É Obra do Governo Bolsonaro” (It Is #FAKE That the Train Between Parauapebas [PA] and São Luís [MA] Is Bolsonaro’s Work), from *Fato ou Fake* (April 7, 2022) and “Kit de Material Escolar Mostrar em Vídeo Não Foi Iniciativa do Governo Bolsonaro” (School Material Kit Shown in Video Was Not Bolsonaro’s Initiative),

³ Texts mentioning deputies from the officeholders’ parties as sources of rumours were excluded from this count. This choice was made to assess how the agencies decided whether or not to identify these individuals as supporters of Lula or Bolsonaro.

from Estadão Verifica (March 7, 2022).

IS THE FACT-CHECKED RUMOUR DETRIMENTAL TO LULA OR BOLSONARO?	BOLSONARO ADMINISTRATION		LULA ADMINISTRATION	
	ESTADÃO VERIFICA	FATO OU FAKE	ESTADÃO VERIFICA	FATO OU FAKE
The fact-checked rumour is not detrimental to Bolsonaro or Lula	34 (72.5%)	7 (70%)	1 (2%)	1 (7%)
The fact-checked rumour is detrimental to Bolsonaro	8 (17%)	2 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
The fact-checked rumour is detrimental to Lula	5 (10.5%)	10 (100%)	47 (98%)	13 (93%)
Total	47 (100%)	10 (100%)	48 (100%)	14 (100%)

Table 5. *Is the fact-checked rumour detrimental to Lula or Bolsonaro? (based on data from Estadão Verifica and Fato ou Fake, 2024)*

In 2022, Estadão Verifica addressed eight texts debunking stories aimed at discrediting Bolsonaro and five texts refuted stories that attributed discredit to Lula. In contrast, Fato ou Fake showed more imbalance, with only two rumours detrimental to Bolsonaro and 10 targeting Lula being fact-checked. However, the data for 2023 is particularly notable. Both agencies focused heavily on refuting stories detrimental to Lula: Estadão Verifica published 47 texts on this topic, while Fato ou Fake had 13. Overall, both agencies concentrated their efforts on defending the new Administration.

6. DISCUSSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the premise that news organisations have sought to reaffirm their epistemic authority and that fact-checking services have been mobilised for this purpose (Ferracioli, 2021; Graves, 2018), this paper examines how two initiatives from mainstream companies — Estadão Verifica, from the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, and Fato ou Fake, from the Grupo Globo — have been used to establish journalism as a trustworthy source of information across different administrations. The literature suggests that fact-checking agencies aim to challenge events and narratives spread by official sources, as well as databases from state agencies or universities (Becker, 2019; Fernández-Roldán et al., 2023). However, the analysis conducted here demonstrates that journalism often serves as a crucial source for fact-checkers, creating a “feedback” loop. Press content was cited as a source in over 90% of Estadão Verifica texts and 75% of Fato ou Fake texts.

In some instances, the press is the sole source utilised. In other words, fact-checkers do not seek official data or statements from State agents or civil society to validate their assessment of the event at issue. It is also common for agency reporters to replicate official statements and data from previously published journalistic material. It has been previously demonstrated that another Brazilian initiative, the *Comprova* project, also often relies on journalistic sources (Marques et al., 2024). However, unlike Estadão Verifica and Fato ou Fake *Comprova* does not prioritise these sources over those from the State and civil society.

In this context, an additional consideration arises. Given that fact-checking agencies

aim to reinforce their credibility and authority by highlighting transparency in their reporting (Becker, 2019; Seibt & Fonseca, 2019), the frequent self-reference to journalism as a primary source of information warrants scrutiny. Even though the use of journalism as a source reveals how fact-checking is conducted, it is important to acknowledge that information from a journalistic source has often been previously investigated — sometimes without the level of transparency that fact-checkers deem crucial (Christofoletti, 2021) — and has therefore already been subjected to a framing process. In other words, this information has already passed through various editorial filters (Santos & Maurer, 2020), potentially undermining the transparency of the rumour-checking process.

The assertion that the published clarifications are credible is further supported by the fact that other fact-checking agencies have reached the same conclusions. This data aligns with the literature, which notes that fact-checking agencies generally adopt a more collaborative approach than newsrooms' traditional practices (Graves & Konieczna, 2015). However, this can lead to a tautological process that may reveal weaknesses in the fact-checking methodology. Moreover, this data suggests that fact-checking is quite detached from the production routines that typically govern professional activity, given that verification is a fundamental aspect of journalistic work (Silva et al., 2022).

Thus, the use of journalism itself stands out as a key element in how the fact-checking agencies reaffirm their professional authority. At this point, it is crucial to revisit the period analysed: the Lula and Bolsonaro Administrations. Marques (2023) notes a significant shift in the Brazilian press during Bolsonaro's Administration, attributed to the adversarial stance the former President and his supporters adopted towards journalistic institutions. As mentioned above, Associação Brasileira de Jornalismo Investigativo (2022) reported an increase in cases of aggression against press professionals during the period. Therefore, to defend their work, media companies have increasingly engaged in self-referencing not only in opinion sections, such as editorials, but also within news reporting (Marques, 2023). This analysis reveals that fact-checking texts exhibit the same trend. It is noteworthy, however, that the agencies still adopted the same approach after Bolsonaro's Administration ended. Lula and his supporters have also criticised the Brazilian press — accusing them, for example, of supporting the impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff (Albuquerque, 2021). Nevertheless, Lula began his third term by establishing a friendlier relationship with journalists. Nevertheless, the rhetoric advocating for professional authority persisted, suggesting it is linked to a broader phenomenon that undermines the legitimacy of journalism beyond government administrations (Waisbord, 2018).

The results also indicate that other verification practices remained unchanged throughout the studied months. Firstly, both agencies focused on covering similar issues during the two Administrations, prioritising the verification of rumours related to public policies. A similar pattern was observed in the teams' labelling practices — while Fato ou Fake categorised all the stories it verified as “fakes”, most of the stories checked by Estadão Verifica were labelled as either false or misleading (in 2022 and 2023, irrespective of the Government in power). In short, the analysis suggests that fact-checking processes follow a systematic approach. In other words, the method for determining whether information is

false, misleading, or true does not affect the most frequently cited sources.

Carlson (2016) explains that metajournalistic discourse is subject to ongoing changes. However, he notes that, sometimes, professionals may prefer to defend established paradigms rather than address the inherent problems and contradictions within the profession. This phenomenon appears to be manifesting in the realm of fact-checking within mainstream journalism. Brazilian media organisations, in particular, are frequently scrutinised and challenged by the public (Newman et al., 2023). In response, Brazilian newspapers engage in corporatist rhetoric that hinders a comprehensive re-evaluation of their professional practices.

The assertion that journalism is essential for providing reliable information is also reflected in more explicit statements. The agencies advise readers to consult trustworthy sources when verifying rumours and suggest that if an event is genuine, it will be covered by the press. At *Estadão Verifica*, this is further emphasised by highlighting its affiliation with the International Fact-Checking Network and, consequently, its adherence to principles such as “nonpartisanship and impartiality; transparency of sources; transparency of funding and organisation; transparency of methodology; and an open and honest corrections policy” (as seen in “Posts Atribuem a Bolsonaro Fabricação de Lanchas Escolares dos Governos Lula e Dilma” [Posts Attribute to Bolsonaro the Manufacture of School Boats From the Lula and Dilma Administrations], February 16, 2022).

While fact-checking practices regarding sources, themes, and the reaffirmation of journalistic legitimacy have remained consistent over time, the differences in how the agencies approached Bolsonaro and Lula are significant. It is true, however, that most of the texts did not explicitly indicate whether the rumours were being circulated by the two political figures themselves or by their supporters — unlike *Comprova*, which, between 2018 and 2021, notably highlighted the role of former President Bolsonaro’s supporters in disseminating conspiracy theories (Marques et al., 2024). However, when such identification was made, it was typically Jair Bolsonaro’s supporters who were implicated. Additionally, more than half of the publications from the two agencies aimed to refute rumours detrimental to Lula. When the information disseminated did not directly target either political figure, the focus was often on clarifying public policies that were wrongly attributed to Jair Bolsonaro’s Administration. These findings align with the national literature, which explores how the Brazilian press responded to the former President’s attacks (Fontes, 2022; Marques, 2023). They also indicate that the press’s adversarial stance (Clayman et al., 2007) towards Bolsonaro has not been similarly directed at Lula during his third term.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. The analysis focused on fact-checks that explicitly mentioned the Presidents’ names in the titles, so the actual number of publications that refer to them within the texts might be higher. Furthermore, future research could benefit from comparing the work of fact-checking agencies affiliated with mainstream media to that of independent agencies.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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