

DOSSIER

POST-TRUTH AND TRUST IN JOURNALISM:

an analysis of credibility Indicators in Brazilian venues¹

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Brasileira de Pesquisadores em Jornalismo

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ABSTRACT – The terms ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’ have been used to describe the augmented dissemination potential of misinformation in digital networks in the second decade of the years 2000. In Brazil, different actors have been exploiting digital social networks for political purposes, disseminating content that imitates legitimate journalistic material, often obtaining better audience metrics than the news stories published by mainstream media. This article is divided into two parts. First, defines the term pseudo-journalism to classify fraudulent texts that use journalistic narrative resources to deceive the audience. Second, it presents the results of an analysis of 23 political content producers with the greatest audience on *Facebook* in Brazil, based on the credibility indicators developed by Projeto Credibilidade (Trust Project). The results suggest that, in the current scenario, it is not possible to distinguish the quality journalism from pseudo-journalism based on the characteristics of the websites and articles published by political content producers.

Key words: Journalism. Credibility. Pseudo-journalism. Post-truth. Trust Project.

PÓS-VERDADE E CONFIANÇA NO JORNALISMO: uma análise de indicadores de credibilidade em veículos brasileiros

RESUMO – Os termos “notícias falsas” e “pós-verdade” vêm sendo usados para descrever a potencialização da desinformação nas redes digitais na segunda década dos anos 2000. No Brasil, diversos atores vêm instrumentalizando as redes sociais para disputas políticas, espalhando conteúdo falso que imita materiais jornalísticos legítimos, muitas vezes obtendo mais audiência do que o noticiário de veículos tradicionais. Este artigo se divide em duas partes. Na primeira, conceitua o termo pseudojornalismo para classificar textos fraudulentos que usam os recursos narrativos jornalísticos para ludibriar a audiência. Na segunda, apresenta os resultados de uma análise de 23 produtores de conteúdo político do país com maior audiência no *Facebook*, a partir dos indicadores de credibilidade desenvolvidos pelo Projeto Credibilidade (Trust Project). Os resultados sugerem que, no cenário atual, não é possível distinguir o jornalismo de qualidade do pseudojornalismo a partir das características dos websites e matérias publicadas por produtores de conteúdo político.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo. Credibilidade. Pseudojornalismo. Pós-verdade. Projeto Credibilidade.

POSVERDAD Y CONFIANZA EN EL PERIODISMO: un análisis de indicadores de credibilidad en medios brasileños

RESUMEN – Las expresiones “noticias falsas” y “posverdad” vienen siendo utilizados para describir la potencialización de la desinformación en las redes digitales en la segunda década de los años 2000. En Brasil, distintos actores vienen instrumentalizando las redes sociales para disputas políticas, diseminando contenido falso que simula materiales periodísticos legítimos, obteniendo, a menudo, mayor audiencia que el noticiero de medios tradicionales. Este artículo está dividido en dos partes. Primero, conceptualiza el término pseudoperiodismo para calificar textos fraudulentos que utilizan los recursos de narración típicos del periodismo para engañar a la audiencia. En segundo lugar, presenta los resultados de un análisis de 23 productores de contenido político del país con mayor audiencia en *Facebook*, a partir de los indicadores de credibilidad desarrollados por el Proyecto Credibilidad (Trust Project). Los resultados sugieren que, en el escenario actual, no es posible diferenciar el periodismo de calidad del pseudoperiodismo a partir de las características de los sitios web y de materias publicadas por productores de contenido político.

Palabras clave: Periodismo. Credibilidad. Pseudoperiodismo. Posverdad. Trust Project.

1 Introduction

The 2016 US Presidential Election galvanized the perception that the Internet, and especially social networks such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*, have become an instrument for the diffusion of false information, both through misconception and deceit from their spreaders. Although the concern about the distortion of social facts by the various participants in the public sphere is not new, the shift from the one-all communication model – typical of broadcasting – to an all-all model – typical of digital networks – has deepened the fear about the effects of this misinformation. The circulation of ‘fake news’ on social networks was identified as one of the causes of Donald Trump’s victory, which was supported by webpages and websites dedicated to producing distorted versions of news from

the conservative right's perspective, or even articles with no factual basis (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Criticism of *Facebook* has taken such a large proportion that CEO Mark Zuckerberg was forced to offer an answer on his own profile (Zuckerberg, 2016). The problem is not restricted to the United States. In the 2014 Brazilian presidential elections, according to a *BBC investigation* (Gragnani, 2017), fake profiles were used to support various candidates on social networks. The French Prime Minister proposed legislation to curb misinformation during election periods (Chrisafis, 2018) after he himself was falsely accused of having bank accounts in tax havens during the 2017 election.

Keyes (2004) names contemporary life as the 'post-truth' era, while Manjoo (2008) prefers the term 'post-fact' to refer to the potentiation of misinformation, of which one of the primary causes would be the possibility of any amateur with access to a computer and the internet to produce and disseminate text, images, audios or videos without the supervision of any gatekeeper (Keen, 2007). The situation is aggravated by the way the human mind works. Authors such as Carr (2011) and Wu (2016) point out that our cognition finds it difficult to analyze and validate the information found by individuals in digital networks. Our mind is prone to various cognitive biases, even when it is not overwhelmed by constant stimuli from websites and smartphone apps (Cosenza, 2015). Researchers such as Nyhan and Reifler (2010) have revealed that, once widespread, it is very difficult to change misperception of citizens through corrections.

We therefore have a scenario in which various social actors seek to deceive the public through social networks such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, which in turn have become the main source of news for the average citizen. The 2015 Brazilian Media Survey shows that almost half (48%) of Brazilians use the Internet and spend at least 5 hours of their day online – longer than in front of the TV, still the main information medium. Among internet users, 92% are connected to social networks, with *Facebook* being the main one – 83%. To get an idea of the disproportion to traditional media, 21% said they read print newspapers at least once a week and only 7% said they read it every day (Secom, 2015). The 2017 State of News Media survey revealed that for the first time 55% of US adults 50 and older are getting informed on social networks, up 10 percentage points from 2016 (Pew Research Institute, 2018). The picture turns even more serious if we consider that the architecture and design of these websites reduce the reader's ability to discern by taking advantage of cognitive biases that make it difficult to filter, analyze and critique information.

When messaging is coordinated and consistent, it easily fools our brains, already exhausted and increasingly reliant on heuristics (simple psychological shortcuts) due to the overwhelming amount of information flashing before our eyes every day. When we see multiple messages about the same topic, our brains use that as a short-cut to credibility. It must be true we say—I've seen that same claim several times today. (WARDLE, 2017)

The journalistic field has been looking for ways to avoid, or at least mitigate, these harmful effects of misinformation. One of the most common responses is fact-checking initiatives such as *Aos Fatos* and *Lupa*², which seek to point out lies and half-truths in the discourse of authorities and other political actors. Another possible and probably more effective approach is to prevent readers from believing the information disclosed by content producers without journalistic responsibility or with a history of disseminating false or distorted information. This paper investigates an initiative created from this second way of addressing the issue: Projeto Credibilidade³, the Brazilian chapter of the Trust Project⁴, a consortium of more than 100 international journalistic companies originated at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at the University of Santa Clara, United States, which has the goal to increase transparency and to develop techniques for identifying reliable digital journalism. It consists of a set of formal indicators that, once incorporated into design and editorial processes, would serve as a guide for the reader to attest to the credibility of that media outlet.

The journalistic credibility indicators developed by the Credibility Project (PC) gave rise to a research instrument designed to assess the adherence to these markers by some of the journalistic outlets. The second step was to apply the instrument to the 24 most relevant content producers on Brazilian *Facebook* selected from the Political Debate Monitor in the Digital Environment database⁵. The purpose of the study is to verify whether it would be possible to discern between legitimate journalistic vehicles and Brazilian pseudo-journalism propagators using the credibility indicators proposed by the initiative.

2 Pseudo-journalism and journalistic credibility

The post-truth era involves various types of social actors, such as research institutes, public relations agencies, politicians, civil society organizations, journalists and the average citizens. The latter resort to various misinformation procedures such as the production of false

content, the distortion of events reported by news outlets, the spreading of rumors in face-to-face conversations or through communication services such as *WhatsApp*. According to Kakutani (2018, p.24):

Since the 1960s, there has been a snowballing loss of faith in institutions and official narratives. Some of this skepticism has been a necessary corrective—a rational response to the calamities of Vietnam and Iraq, to Watergate and the financial crisis of 2008, and to the cultural biases that had long infected everything from the teaching of history in elementary schools to the injustices of the justice system. But the liberating democratization of information made possible by the internet not only spurred breathtaking innovation and entrepreneurship; it also led to a cascade of misinformation and relativism, as evidenced by today's fake news epidemic.

Although the author refers to the US context, where the misinformation 'epidemic' has been at the center of public debate since the 2016 presidential elections, the above scenario applies largely to Brazil, where rumors and falsehoods circulate on social networks. They were also a concern during the 2018 elections, with accusations of disseminating falsified information and using robots to simulate Internet militants hitting various candidates and parties. Representatives of the three branches of the Republic, the media and civil society spoke out about the damaging effects of circulating 'fake news', especially on social networks such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *WhatsApp*, and proposed initiatives to combat the phenomenon since such various types of misinformation can lead to misconceptions, that is, 'actual beliefs that are false or contradict the best available evidence in the public domain' (Flynn et al., 2017, p.128). Among other possible examples, the consequences of this kind of misconception can be seen: in politics, when citizens support a war under false pretenses; in public health, when counterfeit research creates fears about vaccines; in education, when teachers are compelled by religious pressure to teach creationism in parallel with the theory of evolution; or in the environment, by generating the impression that there is reasonable doubt about the human contribution to global warming.

The focus of this paper is on what is conventionally called 'fake news'. The term was coined in October 2014 by Craig Silverman, currently editor of *BuzzFeed News*⁶ US, facing a false story that an entire city in Texas would be quarantined after a family contracted Ebola (Silverman, 2018). At the time, Silverman was leading a project at Columbia University that analyzed the diffusion of false information on social networks and news outlets and decided to raise a warning about this particular fake news. In the 2016 American elections, however, the

term was distorted by Donald Trump and his allies, who used the term to classify truthful information that displeased them (Silverman, 2018).

To move away from this semantic war, which focuses the discussion of post-truth, we will not use the term ‘fake news.’ From the standpoint of Journalism, it is an oxymoron, because if a text is produced without factual basis or is intended to mislead its reader, it is not news. Journalistic reporting of an event may be mistaken – news errors often occur, even when produced strictly according to professional rules –, but intentional distortion or lying necessarily exclude a particular text from the news category.

A responsible journalist does not produce either false news, exaggerated news, or corrupted news. They do not subordinate honest reporting to ideological coherence or political activism. They do not try to please advertisers or to adjust to the vehicle commercial interests – nor to the public’s preferences (Schudson, 2017).

Wardle (2017) distinguishes different types and degrees of distortion that circulate on social networks. First, it differentiates fake content inadvertently shared from fake content shared with vested and/or financial interests. It then lists seven categories of misinformation mapped during the 2016 US elections. They are:

- a) **False connection:** when the headlines or captions do not support the content;
- b) **False context:** when genuine content is shared with false contextual information;
- c) **Manipulated content:** when true information is deliberately manipulated to deceive;
- d) **Satire or parody:** it is not motivated to cause harm, but can mislead readers;
- e) **Misleading content:** misuse of information to frame a problem or a person;
- f) **Imposter content:** when credible sources are imitated by third parties;
- g) **Fabricated content:** When 100% of the information is designed to cheat or do harm to something or someone.

According to Wardle’s distinction, there are many ways to misinform the public. This content – which can be entirely false, manipulated, impostor or fabricated – often mimics the news, using the same narrative and visual resources as journalistic texts to confuse the reader. Fake news would therefore be a specific type of misinformation disguised as journalistic content. In a literature review of the concept, Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2018, p.7) conclude that

What is common across these definitions is how fake news appropriates the look and feel of real news; from how websites

look; to how articles are written; to how photos include attributions. Fake news hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news. Furthermore, going beyond the simple appearance of a news item, through the use of news bots, fake news imitates news' omnipresence by building a network of fake sites.

Fake news is a fraudulent imitation of journalistic genres with the purpose of using the discursive marks of a social institution of democratic states to lead the reader to lend greater credibility to its content. In addition, the term news in English refers to all types of journalistic genres, while in Portuguese it traditionally refers to the inverted pyramid text format. Thus, in this paper, the term pseudo-journalism will be used to refer to this specific type of content. The term uses the Greek pseudo radical – which denotes deception, deceit, or fraud, to the broader term journalism – to refer to the specific type of misinformation that Projeto Credibilidade seeks to counteract.

Verifying the truth of an account has always been crucial to belief in journalism. The search for a truth as correspondence or conformity to the reality about facts is one of the deontological principles of journalism, along the public interest (Lisboa, 2012; Fenaj, 2007). It is important to point out that credibility is an epistemic predicate of sources and their reports, which makes sense in an intersubjective relationship (Lisboa, 2012). That is, for the credibility of a journalistic vehicle or a story to be perceived by the public, there must be a correspondence between the credibility constituted of the former and the credibility perceived by the latter (Lisboa, 2012). This differentiation is based on Kant's (1970) concept of knowledge, which differentiates the 'thing itself' (noumenon) from the 'thing to us' (phenomenon) so as to emphasize that objects exist independently of our perception, but it is only through our perception that we can apprehend them. The credibility of the sources of information on which Projeto Credibilidade focuses is anchored in values, principles and practices that have historically constituted themselves as important for the social consolidation of journalism and for confidence in its discourse (Lisboa & Benetti, 2017). These values are not immutable because they embody cultural, social and technological changes. Most, however, are the result of a historical background, concentrate much of the expectations that the audience has about their reports and give clues as to what the enunciator must do to appear reliable (Lisboa & Benetti, 2017).

In order to approximate the constituted credibility to the one perceived by the reader, journalism must always provide evidence of the truth of its reports, that is, justifying that its practice is truth-oriented and

in the public interest (Lisboa, 2012). Throughout its history, the practice has been incorporating science-based observation and verification techniques (Franciscato, 2005), the use of photography, the attention to spelling and clarity in writing, the reporter's signature, the policy of correcting errors, codes of ethics, among other elements, in order to become credible to the public. As Charaudeau (2010) argues, providing such evidence is not a necessity, but an obligation. From a philosophical point of view, journalism becomes knowledge only if it can sustain its truth through justification – truth and justification are, therefore, the pillars of the epistemological status of the practice (Lisboa & Benetti, 2015).

However, the question of credibility in journalism does not end there. The incorporation of what we might call credibility indicators does not end public questions about the reliability of news. We use credibility and reliability here as synonyms because trusting someone presupposes an assessment of their credibility (or reliability). Credibility would be a feature of what is trustworthy, but trust can be understood as a behavior, an expectation about the attitude of the other or something (Luhmann, 1996; Giddens, 1991). Charron and Bonville (2016) define revolutions as moments when values and practices considered essential to the exercise of the activity go through a moment of crisis. The current moment of spreading false content disguised as news puts journalism in a new moment of public scrutiny, making the analysis of initiatives that set out to differentiate legitimate journalism from disguised journalism propaganda, such as Projeto Credibilidade, even more essential. The purpose of this paper is to present the results of an evaluation of this strategy, launched in Brazil in 2016.

3 Projeto Credibilidade

The Trust Project⁷, translated in Brazil as Projeto Credibilidade (PC), is an international consortium of journalistic organizations that agree to adopt transparency standards aimed at maintaining and increasing public confidence in the press. The consortium's director is journalist Sally Lehrman, a researcher at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at the University of Santa Clara, USA. The project started in 2014, when participants in the Panel on Ethics in Digital Journalism expressed concern about the degradation of news quality due to audience pressure. The group took their concerns to *Google* News director, Richard Gingras, who agreed to support an effort to create search algorithms

that favored content producers who follow ethical standards. Initially, about 75 journalistic organizations joined the consortium, which today brings together media such as The Washington Post, The Economist, La Repubblica and the German agency DPA.

The first stage of the project was the development of journalistic credibility indicators that could be systematized into structured data schemas to be incorporated into the HTML code of the participating cyberjournals. The coding provides signals that can be recognized by search algorithms, thus allowing automatic credibility to a website when a reader looks for news on services such as *Google*, Bing, *Twitter*, and *Facebook*. By adopting a minimum set of indicators, consortium participants are allowed to embed the Trust Project seal, the T mark, on their pages. The general idea is that the T mark is an indicator of the content producer's compliance with ethical principles.

The method used to develop the indicators was to conduct in-depth interviews with news consumers, followed by analysis by editors of various organizations during seminars and workshops:

The Trust Indicators emerged from a collaboration led by Lehrman, which included top publishers around the world. She began by commissioning one-on-one interviews with users to understand what people value in the news – and why and when they trust them. In the workshops that followed, news executives matched these results with the values of journalism to identify characteristics that underlie the quality and reliability of news: the Trust Indicators. Through design sprints and a development and engineering event, they created a system to increase news openness and transparency by displaying and signaling the Trust Indicators. (Trust Project, s.d., s.p.)

The first set produced by the consortium listed 37 indicators, from which were chosen eight, in November 2017⁸, considered crucial to be incorporated by the cyberjournals participants of the consortium in the first phase of implementation:

- a) **Best practices:** Presentation of information on funding, corporate structure, history, mission and ethical commitments of the organization, such as policy for corrections, diversity in selecting sources and hiring employees, quality standards, among others;
- b) **Author Expertise:** Details about the reporters, such as topics in which they have professional experience, languages spoken, training, awards, links with the cyberjournal, presence in social networks, among others;
- c) **Type of work:** Tags included in stories to distinguish opinion, analysis, humor and advertising from news reports;
- d) **Citations and References:** Linking evidence about documents and people whose content or statements are used in in-depth reporting, including social networking profiles, databases, text, photos or videos on social networks, scientific articles, and more;
- e) **Methods:** Also focused on in-depth reporting, this

indicator provides for behind-the-scenes exposure to journalistic work, such as the number of sources interviewed or documents consulted, the trips taken, the editors involved throughout the production, the reporter's motivations, among other things;

f) **Locally Sourced:** Informs when a report was made on site, including geolocation;

g) **Diverse Voices:** Providing links to human resource reports and drafting manuals that highlight drafting efforts to ensure greater diversity in coverage;

h) **Actionable Feedback:** Disclosure of editorial policy for collaboration with the public and contacts of those responsible for the interaction.

Brazil has a chapter of the Trust Project called Projeto Credibilidade (PC). Sponsored by *Google*, PC is managed by the Institute for the Development of Journalism (Instituto para o Desenvolvimento do Jornalismo, *Projor*), under the direction of journalist Ângela Pimenta and university professor Francisco Belda. By February 2019, the local consortium brought together 20 entities such as *Folha de S. Paulo*, *Zero Hora* and *Jornal de Jundiaí* newspapers; digital native vehicles such as *Nexo* and *Poder360*; *Fatos* and *Lupa* checking agencies; as well as the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism. The Brazilian chapter follows the same guidelines as the international consortium and adopts the same indicators.

4 Methodological procedures

In order to verify how credibility indicators manifest themselves among the different types of Brazilian content producers, the present study decided to adopt the point of view of a reader having their first contact with an information vehicle and wanting to decide if it is trustworthy. As the indicators developed by PC are necessarily explicit because they were designed for machine identification, their markers will also be available to the average reader. At the same time, the indicators are the product of a joint effort between academia and newsrooms, so even if debatable in some ways, they derive from a professional consensus on which elements evidence the observance of minimum quality standards in news production, reporting, and other journalistic materials.

The first step was to create a research tool in the form of a spreadsheet including 34 markers considered mandatory in PC's Minimum Viable Product⁹ (MVP) of credibility protocol. The 34 markers are a deployment of the eight minimum indicators defined by the Trust Project. The set of documents, intended to provide guidance to

consortium participants on protocol implementation, provides definitions and examples of use of each of the markers. Thus, the description of the MVP also served as a guide for application of the research instrument.

After that, 27 outlets were selected through the Political Debate Monitor in the Digital Environment¹⁰. The Monitor is a project of the Research Group on Public Policies for Access to Information at the University of São Paulo (USP), coordinated by professor Pablo Ortellado. The tool collects all stories about Brazilian politics from media outlets and *Facebook* pages and categorizes them considering the shares and number of stories produced. Misinformation is a problem in all areas of journalism, but its effects can be especially harmful in politics information, as it can have a dramatic impact on a country's situation by influencing the behavior of organized civil society and voters.

Although in 2018 *WhatsApp* was the most popular app among Brazilians, Datafolha's survey indicated that the proportion of voters accessing political news on that service was similar to that of voters accessing such content through *Facebook* (GI, 2018). By publishing sharing data from producers of political content on *Facebook*, the Monitor allows us to build a ranking of the most important sources for voters with reasonable approximation to reality. At the same time, the limitations of this type of collection are offset by convenience and gratuity.

The Monitor compiles this information into three report categories: weekly, daily, and thematic. This research used the automatic weekly reports generated from May to October 2017. In order to prevent any private event widely reported from influencing the result, it was chosen one week of each month – giving a three-week break between each week analyzed.

The Monitor's automatic weekly reports are divided into two categories: the most shared posts and the most shared stories of the week. We selected the category of the most shared articles to give priority to journalism, the focus of this research. Then we've come down to a list of 97 pages on *Facebook*. From this list, we've analyzed only those which declared themselves as 'media/news agency or vehicle'. Our criterion is that self-declaration makes a content producer capable of being studied from the perspective of the norms and values of the profession, regardless of whether it is in fact a journalistic vehicle from the point of view of field theories. The selection reached 27 self-declared journalistic vehicles, of which four could not be analyzed: during the data collection period, the *Facebook* page Canal da Direita changed its classification to 'community'; while the page Desquebrando

o Tabu was removed from *Facebook* for violating usage guidelines; the website *Jornal Livre* was down (error 404) at the time of the analysis; and *Sensacionalista* is a site reportedly devoted to satire and parody.

Each of the 23 self-titled journalistic vehicles was analyzed to verify the presence or absence of the markers described as mandatory in PC's MVP of credibility protocol. Labels are divided into those to be embedded at the website level – for example, links at the bottom of the homepage –, those to be incorporated at the story level – such as the reporter's photo and event location –, or those to be embedded in both or either at the choice of vehicle. Therefore, we've analyzed the home page and the ten stories positioned closest to the top of the home of each of the 23 content producers. If the item was found on the website or in at least one of the ten cover stories at the time of analysis, the vehicle received one (1) point. If it was not found, it scored zero (0). The vehicle earned a point even if the indicator in question was found in only one of the 10 cover stories of the day of the analysis. Thus, the results were visualized and compared, which made possible to identify which indicators were more frequent and which had no occurrence.

In the end, the points awarded to each content producer were summed up to compare how credibility markers manifest themselves in the different types of Brazilian information disseminators and how they would be judged by the hypothetical reader described above.

Note that we use *Facebook* for two reasons: a) to identify the most relevant sources of information according to sharing criteria and social likes used by Monitor; and b) because it is an important information channel used by 66% of users (Newman et al., 2018). The analysis of content producers' compliance with PC's credibility indicators was performed from the vehicles' websites and not from their *Facebook* pages.

5 Results

Before reporting the results, it is important to point out some questions to guide the reading of what we've observed. Firstly, site scoring is a snapshot of a moment and is not intended to classify vehicles as more or less credible. The ranking order adopted in this study was intended to compare the producers of political content with each other and to reflect on how much the results can be taken as a reflection of the reality.

On the other hand, we believe that performing analysis from day to day rather than months best reproduces the experience of an average reader

accessing the content of a cyberjournal from an Internet search or referral found on a social network, often without prior information about the vehicle. Usually, this first experience defines the credibility of the user, without, of course, neglecting other issues that may interfere with this assessment. According to Serra (2006), the credibility of those who shared a news piece influences the evaluation of the degree of reliability of this same news.

Each of the vehicles could receive a maximum of 34 points, which is 100% according to the MVP originally planned by the Trust Project. None, however, met all the requirements. The first on the list, the website of *Época* magazine, from *Editora Globo*, scored 24 points, which means it filled 68.5% of the items listed (see table below). Besides *Época*, only three vehicles filled more than half of the minimum PC items, with over 50% compliance. They are: *BuzzFeed Brasil*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, and *G1*. Prestigious vehicles like *El País*¹¹, *Estadão*, *BBC Brazil*¹², *Jornal do Commercio*, *Veja*, and *IstoÉ*¹³ obtained scores below 50%. It is noted that vehicles from the same media group, such as *Época* and *G1*, had very different scores (24 and 18 points, respectively), which shows that there is no uniformity regarding the concern with standards or the uniformity of norms and technical standards. Some vehicles with worldwide presence, such as *El País* (Spanish), *BBC* (British) and *BuzzFeed News* (American), on the other hand, meet most of the requirements on their home sites, but not on their Brazilian pages, which explains their median score. The website of the traditional *IstoÉ* magazine and the *Record R7* news portal¹⁴ obtained the lowest score (3 points), which represents 8.5% adherence to the indicators.

Self-titled journalistic vehicles from the last decade, such as *Brasil247*, *Jornalivre*, *Jornal do País* and *Diário do Centro do Mundo* (DCM), for example, received low scores, but similar to traditional content producers, which reveals the troubled informational scenario we live in and the difficulty of the average reader in identifying credible journalism today. *Jornalivre* (7 points), above *IstoÉ*, calls itself a media vehicle and appropriates journalistic narrative resources, including its name, but it is a site created by Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL)¹⁵ to 'denounce' journalists, newspapers or stories they consider to be communists or threats to economic liberalism, a well-known pseudo-journalism producer. There is no distinction in it between what is news or opinion, which makes it difficult for the reader to differentiate between informative and opinionated content. In July 2018, *Facebook* took 196 pages and 96 accounts offline, based on the network's code of authenticity, because they 'hid the nature and origin of its content' and were intended to generate 'division and spread misinformation'

(Salty & Grillo, 2018), and *Jornalivre* was among them.

In other cases, the vehicles appropriate concepts dear to journalism such as *Jornal do País*¹⁶ (6 points), which calls itself a ‘media vehicle that acts with credibility and seriousness within ethics and always seeks to offer the best in information circulating in Brazil and in the world.’ The same goes for the website *Pragmatismo Político* (8 points), which claims to be ‘characterized by editorial independence’ and that it ‘disseminates quality information and fosters debates and reflections that stimulate critical thinking’ (Redação *Pragmatismo*, 2017), but does not bring details of its financing mode and does not show the credentials of its team of journalists and contributors. The *UOL Portal*¹⁷, a major news vehicle, faces the last position with a total of 6 points, or just 16% compliance with PC indicators.

Table 1 – Score of the analyzed cyberjournals.

Vehicle	Score	Percentage
<i>Época</i>	24	68.5%
<i>BuzzFeed Brasil</i>	21	61%
<i>Folha de S. Paulo</i>	20	58%
<i>G1</i>	18	53%
<i>El País</i>	15	44%
<i>InfoMoney</i>	14	41%
<i>Estadão</i>	13	38%
<i>BBC</i>	11	32%
<i>Jornal do Comercio</i>	11	32%
<i>Brasil247</i>	10	29%
<i>HuffPost</i>	10	29%
<i>Socialista Morena</i>	10	29%
<i>Veja</i>	10	29%
<i>Pragmatismo Político</i>	8	23%
<i>Revista Fórum</i>	8	23%
<i>Jornalivre</i>	7	20%
<i>DCM</i>	7	20%
<i>Jornal do País</i>	6	17%
<i>UOL</i>	6	17%
<i>Menino Gay</i>	5	15%
<i>O Antagonista</i>	4	12%
<i>IstoÉ</i>	3	9%
<i>R7</i>	3	9%

Fonte: The authors (2018).

6 Final considerations

The study aimed to verify whether formal elements of journalistic websites, particularly the indicators proposed by Projeto Credibilidade, could serve as common readership signals to gauge the credibility of sources of political information. The results suggest that, at the moment, such indicators cannot be used for immediate or automatic attribution of credibility, because many cyberjournals that adhere to the profession's ethical norms and values do not express this commitment on their websites, which may explain the low scores received by traditional vehicles. That is, the results of the analysis do not express the current reality of the Brazilian news environment regarding credibility. However, they indicate that pseudo-journalism producers appropriate discursive markers associated with journalism to deceive the audience. A first contribution of the study, therefore, is to draw the attention of PC proponents and other similar projects to the ability of content producers to manipulate the information and design of their websites to meet formal credibility requirements without however being committed to the deontological norms and standards of journalism.

It is also important to reflect on some specific PC indicators, such as 'author's expertise', which makes it necessary to explain the competence and previous experience of the authors of a particular article on the subject, as well as its formation, awards, publication history, languages, among other characteristics. This may undermine the credibility of newly graduated journalists or limited budget independent vehicles to hire experienced journalists, for example. The support of corporations such as *Facebook* and *Google* and the early adhesion of major media groups to PC also cast doubt as to whether the initiative would not primarily benefit traditional media outlets, marginalizing new entrants to the media ecosystem.

In a qualitative assessment of the ranking, it is clear that the best placed vehicles are those that fulfill the requirements of the 'best practices' indicator, which includes the presentation of information about the organization's financing, corporate structure, history, mission and ethical commitments, such as policy for corrections, diversity in selecting sources and hiring employees, quality standards, among others. Adherence to this indicator is vital to the credibility of a vehicle and implies a more distinctive character than the other criteria in assessing the transparency and seriousness of a vehicle. However, as all indicators have the same weight, this distinction does not appear in the results found by this research. In

addition, the consumption of news through social networks impairs the reader's verification of these requirements; he reads the news inside *Facebook* without being directed to the vehicle's website.

It should be emphasized once again that the goal of PC is 'to create transparency standards to make the press more reliable.' Analyzing content producers and ranking them is not a PC purpose. This approach was a scientific initiative, the result of a research idea from journalism researchers, which began before the 2018 Brazilian elections and revealed in advance how the most widely read political content websites on *Facebook* have poor compliance with values in the field, which may have contributed to aggravate the misinformation scenario that culminated in the victory of Jair Bolsonaro, elected with the help of a pseudo-journalism machine (Benites, 2018; Mello, 2018).

We believe these aspects do not belittle the importance of Projeto Credibilidade, although they point out its limitations. The results, in our view, reinforce the need to encourage traditional and novice vehicles to express their adherence to journalistic principles and values, that is, to clarify their constituted credibility so that this predicate is perceived by the public. Demonstrating compliance with professional ethics is a requirement of the new times that goes against the usual behavior of the press. Journalism has developed over the last 150 years as an expert system (Miguel, 1999), where public confidence in its specialized competence was presupposed and unverifiable. Without being able to verify the truth of all the information disclosed, the public was obliged to give a vote of confidence to their capacity and aptitude in the selection and production of true accounts of the present time. In the contemporary scenario, however, this attitude needs to be revised, and legitimate vehicles increasingly need to demonstrate the difference between their professional practices and the often unethical and immoral practices of pseudo-journalism producers. Thus, journalism could emphasize its compliance with deontological principles and improve its contact with readers (Aguiar, 2017). Beckett & Deuze (2016) state that transparency is a new value in the field, capable of sustaining the public's confidence in a journalism that is more open to emotion and subjectivity. The present study reveals that Brazilian producers of political content, both legitimate and illegitimate, are very little transparent.

The ease with which pseudo-journalism websites mimic traditional vehicles leads us to question, however, the validity, in the current scenario of misinformation, of PC indicators as the only guide

for gauging the reliability of journalistic content by the reader. If they can be easily manipulated by fraudulent vehicles, this limitation should be considered by vehicles and readers who rely on their indicators as a guide to attesting the reliability of websites. Aspects of journalistic language, formats, and discursive genres such as news and opinion can easily be appropriated by producers of fraudulent content for the purpose of posing as legitimate journalism in the eyes of the average reader.

There are aspects beyond journalism, of course, that lead the reader to believe in pseudo-journalistic content, which is not just about the inability of legitimate vehicles to demonstrate its importance. The results of this analysis, however, lead us to even deeper questions about what would be, after all, the distinguishing features of journalism compared to other kinds of discourse – that is, those that are not so easily imitated and should be encouraged at the present time – and through which journalistic credibility could be attested. They also demonstrate that the intersubjective and multidimensional nature of credibility cannot be overlooked. Indicators regarding the integrity and competence of the source of information, the two main dimensions of a speaker's credibility, are not fixed, but situational and tensioned with each communicative exchange. Future studies may focus on these aspects to specify which journalistic genres are least likely to be falsified and which elements concentrate credibility in this new de-ritualized environment of news consumption, in which journalism still seeks to reposition itself as a producer of knowledge and mediator of democratic deliberation.

NOTES

- 1 A first version of this paper was presented at the Journalism Studies WG of the XXVII COMPÓS Meeting, held in Belo Horizonte, in 2018. We are grateful for the contributions that allowed us to deepen the premises and conclusions of this study.
- 2 *Lupa* (<https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/lupa>) and *Aos Fatos* (<https://aosfatos.org>) are fact-checking agencies affiliated with the International Fact-Checking Network and work similarly to previous international initiatives, such as PolitiFact (<https://www.politifact.com>), from US. Its focus is fact-checking political rumors and statements made by public officials, especially in election periods.
- 3 Available at: <https://www.credibilidade.org>.

- 4 Available at: <https://thetrustproject.org>.
- 5 The Political Debate Monitor in the digital media seeks to map, measure and analyze the political debate ecosystem by collecting all articles on Brazilian politics published by hundreds of media outlets and *Facebook* pages. The project publishes weekly reports containing the number of stories produced, the number of shares and comments for each story – by vehicle and by aggregate category. Such reports can be used to gauge the audience of political content producers on *Facebook*, the social network most widely used by Brazilians.
- 6 *BuzzFeed's* news division, network-driven entertainment and content platform. Since its founding in 2012, *BuzzFeed News* has been noted for award-winning journalistic investigations (Tandoc Jr., 2018).
- 7 All information about the Trust Project was obtained from its website: <https://thetrustproject.org>.
- 8 All information about Projeto Credibilidade was obtained from its website: <https://www.credibilidade.org>.
- 9 Minimum Viable Product (MVP) is a management area concept used to designate a version of a product or service that has the minimum characteristics required to be placed on the market.
- 10 All information was obtained from the Political Debate Monitor in the Digital Environment: <https://www.monitordigital.org>.
- 11 Brazilian division of the Spanish journal *El País*.
- 12 Brazilian Portuguese version of *BBC*, British Broadcasting Corporation, the British public broadcasting service.
- 13 Brazilian weekly magazine created in 1976 by Editora Três.
- 14 News website maintained by Record, Brazilian commercial television broadcaster created in 1953. In Brazil, radio and television are public concessions.
- 15 Movimento Brasil Livre is a liberal and conservative movement created in 2014. Its main leaders supported President Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections.
- 16 It calls itself an independent media vehicle, but there is no refer-

ence on its page to its origins and funding. There are also no journalist bylines in the news, which are essentially sensationalist.

- 17 Universo Online, known by the acronym UOL, calls itself the largest content, digital services and technology company. It belongs to Grupo Folha, owner of Folha de S. Paulo, one of the largest newspapers in Brazil.

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