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TRANSPARENCY AGAINST MISINFORMATION?

Analysis of how Lupa and Aos Fatos agencies use public transparency mechanisms in verifying dubious content disseminated digitally

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ABSTRACT – This paper analyzes how two fact-checking agencies, Lupa and Aos Fatos, utilized public transparency tools in verifying misinformation spread digitally in 2022. Through content analysis, 63 checks were identified using transparency tools, which represented less than 7% of the total checks conducted (950). However, such tools proved decisive for verifications involving subjects, agents, and public authorities. We discuss the implications of these results for the role played by fact-checking agencies in combating misinformation and their declared support for the defense of Brazilian democracy.
Key words: Public Transparency. Journalism. Disinformation. Fact-checking agency.

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TRANSPARÊNCIA CONTRA A DESINFORMAÇÃO?
Análise de como as agências Lupa e Aos Fatos usam mecanismos de transparência pública na verificação de conteúdos duvidosos disseminados digitalmente

RESUMO – Este trabalho analisa como duas agências de checagem, Lupa e Aos Fatos, utilizaram-se de ferramentas de transparência pública na verificação de desinformação difundida digitalmente em 2022. Por meio de análise de conteúdo, identificou-se 63 checagens com ferramentas de transparência, o que representou menos de 7% do total das checagens realizadas (950). Contudo, tais ferramentas se mostraram decisivas para as verificações envolvendo assuntos, agentes e autoridades públicas. Discutimos as implicações desses resultados para o papel ocupado pelas agências de checagem no enfrentamento à desinformação e no seu apoio declarado à defesa da democracia brasileira.
Palavras-chave: Transparência Pública. Jornalismo. Desinformação. Agência de checagem.

TRANSPARENCIA CONTRA LA DESINFORMACIÓN?
Análisis de cómo las agencias Lupa y Aos Fatos utilizan mecanismos de transparencia pública en la verificación de contenidos dudosos difundidos digitalmente

RESUMEN – Este artículo tiene como objetivo comprender cómo se construye en el periodismo literario la narrativa de los conflictos por la tierra en la Amazonia – en concreto, la masacre de Eldorado do Carajás, uno de los enfrentamientos más graves entre la policía y los trabajadores, que se saldó con 19 trabajadores muertos y más de 50 heridos en el sureste de Pará. El corpus de análisis seleccionado es el libro-reportaje *O massacre: Eldorado do Carajás - Uma história de impunidad* (2019), escrito por el periodista Eric Nepomuceno. A través de la lente del "análisis pragmático de la narrativa periodística" de Motta (2007), hemos llegado a la comprensión del libro, con los resultados que muestran que es esencial prestar atención a los casos de violencia en el campo, la devastación del medio ambiente y la represión excesiva de las personas que luchan por su derecho a la tierra.
Palabras clave: Amazonia. Conflictos por la tierra. Periodismo literario. Libro-reportaje *La masacre.* Análisis narrativo

1 Introduction

Amid the wave of attacks on contemporary democracies in different regions of the world, Brazil has been among the countries where democracy has been tested in recent years (Filgueiras, 2018; Miguel, 2019). At least two events have caused great instability in Brazil's political and social systems: the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, and the election of a far-right candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, as President of the Republic in 2018 (Miguel, 2019).

In this climate of pressure and threats to democratic stability, one of the major challenges is confronting the phenomenon of disinformation and its effects. This process, which has a negative impact on democracy (Waisbord, 2018), manifests itself through the spread of false and inaccurate information, with digital social networks serving as fertile ground for

dissemination and consumption (Miguel, 2022). Amid the decline in trust that journalism has been experiencing in Brazil since 2015 (Carro, 2023), fact-checking agencies seem to have emerged as actors aiming to defend journalism's epistemic authority. It is important to highlight that providing verified, high-quality information to citizens is essential to democratic experiences, as noted by Almada et al. (2022) and Gomes (2018).

Brazil has legal frameworks that require state institutions to provide information publicly through transparency mechanisms, including transparency portals, official gazettes, and the Freedom of Information Act (Lei de Acesso à Informação). Evidence from previous research indicates that using these public transparency tools requires technical skills on the part of journalists: skills that are neither required nor developed in professionals working for local or regional news outlets (Nascimento & Lycarião, 2021).

The present study started from the premise that, since fact-checking agencies position themselves as models of journalistic excellence, it is likely that they use the transparency tools extensively. This, in turn, could create favorable conditions for the continuous use of these transparency instruments.

Therefore, the present study poses the following research question: to what extent, and in what ways, are transparency tools used by Brazilian fact-checking agencies in their verification processes? The goal is to investigate how these tools have been employed by the Brazilian fact-checking agencies, Lupa and Aos Fatos, to verify dubious content disseminated digitally in 2022. To conduct this analysis, the following transparency tools were examined: transparency portals, official gazettes, and the Freedom of Information Act. These mechanisms, as characterized by Nascimento (2019, p. 44), are public management tools that "cover a range of topics/areas of interest in public administration, and can thus be categorized by their different communicative potential and reach, as well as their varying degrees of public accessibility".

For the present investigation, content analysis (Sampaio & Lycarião, 2021; Maia et al., 2022) was employed as the main methodological strategy, analyzing the fact-checking reports produced by the two agencies in 2022. This was done using five analytical indicators: (a) the proportion of fact-checking publications that used transparency tools, out of the total number of publications; (b) the number of tools used in each fact-checking process; (c) which tools were used; (d) whether the use of the tool was central to the verification process, or not; and (e) for which topics were the

transparency tools most frequently mobilized.

The present paper is organized as follows: a discussion of public transparency and the role of journalism, and the provision of information in democratic experiences. This is followed by an examination of the challenges and damage caused by disinformation. Next, we address the work of the two fact-checking agencies. Following that, we explain the main methodological strategy used in the investigation (i.e., content analysis), and present the results obtained. Finally, we explore the implications of the results to understand the role played by fact-checking agencies in combating disinformation and their stated support for safeguarding Brazilian democracy.

2 Public transparency and the role of journalism

In Brazil, within the socio-political landscape of recent years, both democracy and journalism have been under attack, facing numerous threats and pressures (Filgueiras, 2018; Miguel, 2019, 2022). Attacks on the democratic system are constant and, in this process, there has been increased discrediting of journalistic activity, with the role of mediating agents being called into question (Carro, 2023). At the same time, there is a growing denial of reality and a rising mass production and dissemination of disinformation (Alves dos Santos Júnior, 2023).

In the present paper, we argue that, while journalistic practices may, in certain contexts, act against democratic regimes (De Albuquerque, 2019; Quirino & Guazina, 2018), journalism, including practices outside traditional media, has the potential to serve as a mediator of public information and enhance democratic experiences. This is particularly true when it contributes to the public scrutiny of authorities (Araújo & Guazina, 2024; Ferracioli & Marques, 2020; Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2019; Medeiros & Badr, 2022). In a context where the production of disinformation has intensified and multiplied, journalism provides a concrete way to combat part of this problem: the disinformation spread by political and economic actors.

Periods of political instability, such as those experienced in Brazil since 2013, may be marked by intense street protests and major events. In Brazil, those events included the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, which led to the rise of authoritarian stances and efforts to discredit mediating institutions such as universities, the press, and

the judiciary (Filgueiras, 2018; Miguel, 2019, 2022).

During such periods, the role of journalism as an agent of democratic preservation becomes even more crucial. This is not because journalism has consistently fulfilled this role, particularly among its most traditional and influential agents, as noted by De Albuquerque (2019), but because journalism objectively requires a democratic regime to perform its activities with the highest level of freedom possible.

With this understanding, the concept of militant democracy, coined in the 1930s by the German constitutionalist Karl Loewenstein, becomes highly relevant. This idea refers to democracy's ability to defend itself, by adopting legitimate self-defense actions, against those who use democratic rules to ensure the success of totalitarian or authoritarian power projects.

From the perspective proposed in the present investigation, one key point is regarding how pro-democracy forces, whether by conviction or necessity, can rely on the defining and structuring mechanisms (such as transparency tools) of the system to generate resources (news) with which to combat the threats (disinformation) that aim to erode democratic experiences. This connection between public transparency and journalistic practice emerges from a relationship of interdependence, as observed in Ferracioli and Marques' (2020) argument. According to those authors, journalistic practice is crucial for "(a) interpreting data sets, (b) discussing the allocation of public resources, and (c) revealing and criticizing instances where transparency is only partially offered" (Ferracioli & Marques, 2020, p. 17). Journalism plays a role in turning what is merely the available information into communication through the use of transparency tools. In parallel, Gomes (2018, p. 337) argues that "[...] what makes communication relevant to democracy is not just its potential to contribute to democratic life, but also the fact that it can become a significant anti-democratic force".

To address the role of journalism in mediating transparency and handling disinformation, we reiterate the idea of public transparency as a fundamental attribute for sustaining and enhancing democratic life, given that contemporary democracies share a core that legitimizes the necessity of exercising this value. Moreover, this principle is claimed, to varying degrees, by the most diverse traditions of democratic studies (Bobbio, 2000).

In the Brazilian context, Almada et al. (2022) compared the levels of online transparency in the federal government during the administrations of Dilma Rousseff and Jair Bolsonaro. The authors

base their study on the understanding that public, governmental, or administrative transparency is necessary "to enable the evaluation and monitoring of the State by citizens, journalists, and civil society organizations" (Almada et al., 2022, p. 172).

In the present study, transparency tools are characterized as the specific instruments that promote visibility and access to information created by the public administration (Nascimento, 2019). From this perspective, the present research investigated transparency tools as potential sources of information used by journalists from fact-checking agencies to verify suspicious content. Assessing to what extent and in which ways these tools are used is helpful to broaden our understanding of the degree to which fact-checking agencies have effectively promoted verification with a high level of rigor and quality. This rigor and quality are demonstrated when the verification process can be replicated by any citizen who is capable and motivated to read and interpret information, something made possible primarily by public transparency tools.

3 Challenges and damage caused by disinformation

Disinformation in politics is not a new phenomenon, but it is one of the key issues in the contemporary world (Gomes & Dourado, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018; Waisbord, 2018). What has amplified the political effects of fake news, rumors, and misinformative content are the digital environment and the consequent speed with which harmful content to democracy is produced and spread. This is particularly amplified on social media platforms and instant messaging apps (Gomes & Dourado, 2019).

Waisbord (2018, p. 2) also highlights this perspective, stating that fake news, understood as information detached from reality, is not a novelty and has "a longer history than news consciously produced to represent real events". What distinguishes the dimension of this phenomenon in the contemporary world, the author argues, are the speed, scale, and mass consumption of false information disseminated on digital platforms. However, he notes, fake news is more than an old deception strategy adapted to the digital age; it has also become a narrative tool used by politicians, commentators, and right-wing activists to undermine news organizations.

According to Tandoc et al. (2018), the origins of the term fake news lie in using false or misleading information presented as real news.

They emphasize that the concept is not new and has evolved, adapting to changes in media and how information is consumed. The authors present a typology of fake news, identifying six main categories: a) news satire (content that uses humor and exaggeration to comment on current events, often mimicking real news formats but with the primary intention of entertainment); b) news parody (content that creates entirely fictitious stories for entertainment, also imitating real news formats, but with absurd stories that clearly signal their fictional nature to the audience); c) fabricated news (content without factual basis, created to appear legitimate with the goal of deceiving the public or generating clicks for ad revenue); d) manipulation of images/photos (use of real images digitally manipulated to create a false narrative, often accompanied by a text that reinforces the misleading message); e) advertising (content produced by advertising agencies disguised as real news, to promote products, companies, or ideas, without making clear that it is paid content); f) propaganda (content created by political entities to influence public perception or promote specific agendas, often mixing real facts with distorted or false information). These categories are defined based on two axes: the level of factuality (i.e., how much of the content is based on real facts), and the intention to deceive the public (i.e., whether there is an intention to make the public believe the content is real news). The present study proposes this typology to clarify the debate around fake news and to guide future research on the topic.

For Gomes and Dourado (2019), the phenomenon of fake news, specifically in the political context, directly undermines two elements highlighted in the present paper: journalism and democracy. Those authors argue that, with the spread of false narratives about political facts, journalism has seen its role and social relevance in democratic societies affected. While the journalistic profession "has historically been regarded as having the privilege of ensuring us about the real events of the present" (p. 34), it is now being epistemologically questioned and challenged. In practical terms, the wide production and circulation of false political content in the digital environment distorts perceptions and not only creates but strengthens real barriers to an informed citizenry. According to Gomes and Dourado (2019), attacks on journalism and the creation of false narratives, crafted to target specific groups and influence shared perceptions, are political acts that have a direct impact on the quality of public life in contemporary democracies.

In light of this scenario, Waisbord (2018, p. 1) asks: "what is

journalism's responsibility when truth is threatened, distorted, and shattered?", and then lists several challenges for its performance. These challenges include political polarization and the emphasis on privatized spheres, in which certain belief communities refuse to cease their fictional narratives, signaling a deep erosion of public life.

4 Fact-checking

With the growing scale of disinformation production in recent decades, various fact-checking and verification initiatives have emerged around the world. These fact-checking projects, as characterized by Dourado (2019), are:

> [...] digital initiatives dedicated to examining data presented by public figures, such as politicians, tracking the promises made during elections, and more recently, identifying fake news that acquired online relevance, especially during election periods, in an effort to provide information transparency and promote truth in facts. These initiatives are associated with journalism companies or non-profit, non-partisan journalism organizations focused on civic engagement, government transparency, and public accountability. (Dourado, 2019, p. 94).

In these initiatives, as Mahl et al. (2024) argue, fact-checkers are committed to professional journalistic principles but also exhibit a distinct identity shaped by epistemological considerations, given that the goal of verification efforts is to reach a verdict on the accuracy of claims.

In terms of routine, previous studies indicate that the work of fact-checkers can be demanding and time-consuming, involving multiple layers of complexity. These include the continuous evaluation of the political and social relevance of the abundant claims to be checked, balancing them with the interests of the target audience, such as monitoring the disinformation environment; using different methods for evaluation and classification, such as truth meters; the challenge of avoiding bias; identifying claims containing verifiable facts; and, producing balanced reports.

Amazeen's (2015) work focuses on the challenges and importance of fact-checking, especially in the political context. That work highlights a point also referenced in the present investigation: given the demand for rigor in the analysis and selection of information, the use of public data can serve as evidence and enhance the corroboration or refutation of claims.

Albuquerque (2021), in a different approach, characterizes fact-checking agencies and the disinformation combat network as phenomena with strong roots in knowledge production and as dissemination models operating under a technocratic logic that rhetorically claims to defend representative democracy. The author argues that, although these agencies declare they intend to combat disinformation and promote the accuracy of information, they operate within a structure of political and economic interests sponsored by institutional agents. This is viewed as part of a broader dynamic of truth control, in which private agents and a corporate logic play a central role, as opposed to a more pluralistic and participatory approach from society. The author calls this arrangement a "Corporate Ministry of Truth", alluding to how these entities establish a controlled narrative about what is true.

A similar argument is developed by Albuquerque and Matos (2022), based on the concept of media governance. According to those authors, this form of governance allows private entities, including fact-checking agencies, to assume a role historically performed by the state, consisting of regulating the structures and central actors of public discourse for the benefit of the common good and safeguarding democracy.

Against the background of declining trust in journalism, observed in Brazil since 2015 (Carro, 2023), fact-checking agencies have emerged as entities that aim to reaffirm the epistemic authority traditionally held by journalism. Research conducted by Marques et al. (2023) revealed that, in the process of verifying conspiracy theories related to covid-19, the Comprova project (a collaborative fact-checking initiative) used journalistic outlets as information sources in more than half of their examined verifications. Such a practice raises questions about the extent to which fact-checking agencies consult various available sources, particularly those from specialized systems outside journalism (Miguel, 1999).

In Brazil, according to a mapping conducted by Duke Reporters' Lab, a journalism research center at Duke University in the United States, there were nine active fact-checking initiatives in 2023. This number was documented in the lab's 10th annual fact-checking census. According to the report, the following organizations are active in Brazil: AFP Checamos, Agência Lupa, Aos Fatos, Boatos, Projeto Comprova, E-farsas, Estadão Verifica, Fato ou Fake, and UOL Confere. Beyond this universe of entities that are connected, to some extent, with commercial journalism, initiatives from institutions linked to universities also contribute to the diverse array of fact-checkers in Brazil. These include those housed

within the National Network to Combat Disinformation (RNCD), an organization created in 2020 that brings together researchers, projects, collectives, and institutions, such as universities, from various regions of the country to promote the right to information. The RNCD's fact-checking initiatives include Coletivo Bereia, NuJoc Checagem, Projeto Coar, Avoador, Fakebook.Eco, and Âncora de Fatos.

In the present work, we understand that one type of source, particularly independent of the fact-checking agencies themselves, is the public information provided by the Brazilian government through transparency tools such as official gazettes, transparency portals, and the Freedom of Information Act (Lei de Acesso à Informação). Do Brazilian fact-checking agencies regularly use these sources in their work?

This question is relevant when considering that previous research demonstrated that the use of public transparency tools requires technical skills that local or regional outlets neither demand from their professionals nor develop throughout their professional careers (Nascimento & Lycarião, 2021). Thus, it is expected that, as agencies project themselves as models of journalistic excellence, fact-checking organizations would engage such competence in a more pronounced manner, thus leading to more favorable conditions for frequent use of these tools.

Such use would bring significant benefits to the specific activity of checking dubious content by providing a legitimate and reliable path for clarifying information through widely verifiable sources. To the best of our understanding, if fact-checking agencies frequently used transparency tools, this could challenge Albuquerque's (2021) notion that they position themselves as the ultimate arbiters of truth. This is because, in this hypothetical scenario, the sources used would not be concentrated solely on other journalistic companies, as indicated in the study by Marques et al. (2023). Since public transparency tools are accessible to any citizen, the foundation of what is true or false would not rest on self-proclaimed journalistic stances, but, rather, on public information structures generated by the country's democratic framework.

Considering that Brazil has established regulatory frameworks that compel state institutions to make information available publicly, through transparency tools, the question arises as to the extent and manner in which these tools are employed by the fact-checking agencies in their verification processes. That is, in distinguishing between truthful information and disinformation.

To investigate this issue, the present study focuses on fact-checks conducted in 2022, by Lupa and Aos Fatos, on dubious content

disseminated digitally during that year. Both agencies have been operating in Brazil since 2015 as pioneering digital natives in this field, and they are listed among the country's leading commercial initiatives of this type, a criterion that motivated their inclusion in this corpus. They are also part of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), a global network of fact-checkers brought together by the Poynter Institute in the United States, which also supported their inclusion. As IFCN signatories, both agencies operate under a Code of Principles, a set of ethical guidelines guiding fact-checkers in the news verification process, ensuring that both agencies follow a certain standard. Table 1 summarizes key information about them.

Table 1

Overview of the characteristics of Lupa and Aos Fatos

	Lupa	Aos Fatos
Year of establishment	2015	2015
Operational areas	Investigative reports, fact-checking, verifications, and special content (Lupa Journalism). Workshops, training, and maintaining a repository of research on disinformation. Media literacy initiatives in schools, universities, institutions, and companies (Lupa Education).	Journalism production, intelligence, and technology.
Scope	Fact-checking statements made by public figures, and verifying potentially false information circulating on social media platforms and messaging apps.	Fact-checking and investigating disinformation campaigns. Journalists verify statements made by authorities and influencers, as well as rumors, photos, videos, audio, graphics, flyers, drawings, and other media.
Labels and ratings	False, Contradictory, True, Too Early, Exaggerated, Underestimated, Unsustainable, True but..., and Watch Out.	True, Not Quite, and False.
Funding sources	Partnerships with journalism, technology companies, and various sectors to produce journalistic and educational content. Occasional funding and donations for specific purposes, particularly to develop special projects to combat disinformation. Active partnerships and contracts with digital platforms; membership program through subscription plans.	Supporter program "Aos Fatos Mais". Editorial partnerships. Products and services in technology and intelligence from Aos Fatos Lab, such as the "Radar Aos Fatos" and "Escriba" tools.

5 Method

Content analysis (CA) (Maia et al., 2022; Sampaio & Lycarião, 2021) was adopted to answer the research question: "To what extent, and in what ways, are transparency tools used by Brazilian fact-checking agencies in their verification processes?", using five analytical indicators. These indicators are (a) the proportion of publications fact-checked in 2022 by the Lupa and Aos Fatos agencies, that used transparency mechanisms, concerning the total number of productions; (b) the number of tools used in each fact-check, where the use of these instruments is explicitly mentioned; (c) which tool was used; (d) the nature of the use of the tool, whether it was central to the outcome of the verification or merely auxiliary; (e) which themes most prompted the use of transparency tools in the verification of dubious content.

A codebook was created in the data collection process to categorize the selected material. This codebook is available at the following link: https://figshare.com/s/e5b504c99908ea4dae45?file=45392347. Following the data collection procedures outlined in the codebook, 42 fact-checking and verification productions from Agência Lupa that used public transparency tools to review content circulating in the digital environment in 2022 were identified and collected. From Aos Fatos, 21 productions were collected under the same parameters.

On Lupa's website, starting from the homepage, all verifications published in 2022 that referenced the terms "transparency portal", "official gazette", and "Freedom of Information Act" (Lei de Acesso à Informação) were collected. The selection of these terms was based on them being the most commonly used transparency tools by journalists in the country (Lima, 2019, pp. 11-13; Nascimento & Lycarião, 2021, p. 94).

The search was conducted on the website by navigating through the following tabs and filters: journalism, verifications, and then typing the tool-related term in the search box. Afterward, the date filter was applied, customized from January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022. Productions that did not display labels or tags, such as any materials that focused on explanation without necessarily addressing the clarification of content circulating in digital media, were not included. This exclusion was made because, while fact-checking agencies today also produce explanatory content, such as "Explica" and reports, the methodological choice to focus on fact-checking and verifications for the present investigation was because of these two categories being the most comparable forms of production between the two initiatives. This allowed for a more consistent analysis of

potential patterns and demands for the use of transparency tools.

For Aos Fatos, the search was conducted similarly, from the homepage, using the search box to find verifications published in 2022 with explicit references to the terms "transparency portal", "official gazette", and "Freedom of Information Act". The terms were typed into the search box on the homepage, and the verifications were manually reviewed to ensure that their publication dates were within the period from January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022.

Here, only verifications with labels or tags were included. Data from the "investigamos" (we investigate) or "explicamos" (we explain) sections were not considered, as their focus is not on the verification itself but on the explanatory content about certain topics targeted by disinformation. The content thus selected then underwent double coding, and a reliability test was conducted using the online platform dfreelon.org, recommended by Sampaio and Lycarião (2021). The results of the test are shown in table 2.

Table 2

Reliability test

Variables	Percentage Agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (Nominal)	No. of Agreements	No. of Disagreements
Variable B (Number of tools used in each verification where the use of these instruments is explicit)	100%	1	1	1	63	0
Variable C (Which tool was used)	100%	1	1	1	63	0
Variable D (Whether the tool's use was central to the outcome of the verification or auxiliary)	92.1%	0.84	0.84	0.841	58	5
Variable E (Which themes most prompted the use of transparency tools in the verification of dubious content)	93.7%	0.928	0.929	0.929	59	4

Based on specialized literature, Sampaio and Lycarião (2021) indicate that any value above 0.9 is generally considered highly reliable and above 0.8 is sufficiently reliable. Values between 0.667 and 0.8 are considered sufficient for experimental variables and values below 0.667 tend to be acceptable only for studies in the testing phase. The productions analyzed, as well as the results for each variable and the final evaluation, can be accessed at the following link: https://figshare.com/s/e5b504c99908ea4dae45?file=45392338
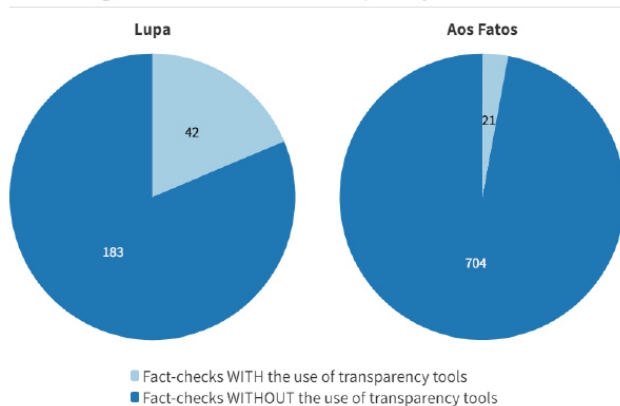
6 Results

The first analytical indicator (a) refers to the proportion of fact-checking publications by the Lupa and Aos Fatos agencies in 2022 that used transparency mechanisms, in relation to the total number of productions. The results for this indicator are: at Lupa, out of 225 fact-checks and verifications conducted in 2022, 42 used transparency tools, representing 18.6% of the total. At Aos Fatos, the number of fact-checks was significantly higher, with 725 publications. Out of those 725 publications, 21 used some transparency mechanism to address dubious content, representing only 2.8% of the total (see graph 1).

Graph 1

Proportion of publications using transparency tools

Proportion of fact-checking publications by the Lupa and Aos Fatos agencies with and without transparency tools in 2022

Lupa | Aos Fatos

42 | 21
183 | 704

■ Fact-checks WITH the use of transparency tools
■ Fact-checks WITHOUT the use of transparency tools

Counting both agencies, we found a total of 950 productions, of which only 63 mentioned the use of one or more public transparency tools, representing 6.63% of the total. Thus, the results for analytical indicator (a) show that transparency tools were used much more frequently at Lupa than at Aos Fatos. Overall, the use of such tools was fairly limited, or even sporadic.

Analytical indicator (b) refers to the number of tools used in each fact-check. Among the 63 productions of this type, 57 used only one tool, while the other 6 used more than one transparency tool. In total, there were 69 mentions of public transparency tools within the 63 publications.

Analytical indicator (c) refers to the transparency tools most frequently used. The results show that official gazettes were the tools most commonly used in fact-checks that mentioned only one transparency tool. They were cited explicitly in 37 verifications, 18 used transparency portals, and two used the Freedom of Information Act (LAI). In the cases where more than one transparency tool was used, five used both the Official Gazette and the Transparency Portal together (10), and the other publication mentioned also two tools, specifically the Official Gazette along with the Freedom of Information Act (LAI). The totals of transparency tools mentioned within the 63 publications can be seen in table 3.

Table 3

Transparency tools most frequently used in fact-checks (n=69)

Transparency tool	Number of uses
Official gazettes	43
Transparency portals	23
Freedom of Information Act (LAI)	3

Analytical indicator (d) relates to the nature of the use of the tool, whether it was central to the verification work or merely auxiliary. The use was classified as central when the information obtained from the tool was essential to the production of the fact-check itself and for conducting the verification. That is, the information was sufficient to clarify the dubious content being addressed. The use was identified and coded as auxiliary when the information obtained from the transparency mechanism helped to complement a fact-check based

on other central information sources. Thus, when it served more than an additional verification task.

The characteristics of the use of the tool are quite divided. Of the 63 productions that addressed disinformation across both agencies, 35 involved transparency tools as supplementary to other information sources during the verification process. In the other 28, the use of the tool was central.

Analytical indicator (e) refers to the topics for which transparency tools were activated to clarify certain content. On this point, the greatest number of fact-checks involved alleged laws/decrees from the Federal Government, monitoring of political promises, and alleged misuse of public funds (see table 4).

Table 4

Topics where transparency tools were most mobilized

Topics of dubious content	Number of productions using transparency tools to address disinformation
Alleged laws/decrees from the Federal Government	13
Monitoring of political promises	9
Alleged misuse of public funds	8
Statements by candidates in electoral debates	6
Statements by politicians or public office holders	4
Statements by candidates during election campaigns	4
Content related to appointments/certifications to public office	3
Alleged election fraud actions	2
Political/candidate actions related to elections	2
Alleged laws/decrees from State Governments	2
Assets attributed to politicians, public servants, or public figures	2
Alleged statements attributed to politicians or public office holders	1
Hiring of companies linked to political parties/self-serving contracts	1
Others	6
Total	63

7 Discussion

The present study was based on the following research question: to what extent, and in what ways, are transparency tools used by Brazilian fact-checking agencies in their verification processes? To answer this question, we analyzed the fact-checks conducted by the Lupa and Aos Fatos agencies in 2022, using the five analytical indicators described above.

For the first analytical indicator (a), the results did not meet the expectations for a significant level of use of these tools by fact-checking agencies. The data from this indicator highlight a low adherence between the functionality of the tools created by transparency mechanisms and the journalistic work of fact-checking agencies. This refers both to the monitoring of the political/administrative field and their communicative potential as sources for verifying dubious content about this field.

The data for indicators (b) and (c) show that the vast majority of fact-checks, using a transparency tool, were limited to a single tool. Additionally, when considering all fact-checks, the results indicate a predominance of the use of official gazettes in the verification routines of the agencies analyzed. This aligns with the findings of Nascimento and Lycarião (2021) for local outlets in the state of Ceará, where the most commonly used tools were also official gazettes, transparency portals, and the Freedom of Information Act, in that order. This suggests, therefore, that there is no substantial difference between the use of these tools by local/regional newspapers and by fact-checking agencies.

The fourth analytical indicator (d), the centrality of the transparency tool to the fact-checking process, showed that this centrality was not predominant. This can be partly explained by the complexity of the dubious content being checked since, in many cases, the verified subject had several layers that needed to be unraveled in the investigation. As a result, the limited functionality of transparency tools does not always fully address the various doubts generated by the information to be verified. Furthermore, given the vast range of dubious content, it is reasonable to assume that not all topics will require the use of transparency tools.

The fifth, and final, analytical indicator (e) identified the topics of these fact-checks. The use of transparency tools was observed to be recurrent in situations involving legislation either

in force or under discussion in the legislature, public policies, and the (source and destination) of public funds. Thus, there was a certain degree of alignment found between the topics addressed and the ability of public transparency tools to provide the necessary information for fact-checking. This reinforces the utility of these tools as instruments for monitoring decision-making processes and the drafting of regulations, such as the approval of laws. They also provide information for diagnosing the adopted public policies, priorities, and public investment focuses, as well as the allocation (and recipients) of budgetary funds.

In these contexts, the usefulness of public transparency tools for the work of fact-checking agencies becomes evident, as they give journalists direct access to responses and the verification of dubious content. More importantly, this verification process can also be undertaken by any citizen willing to take the same steps taken by the fact-checking agency. However, as demonstrated by the data presented, such an undertaking would only be feasible for less than 7% of the total fact-checks identified in 2022 by the two analyzed agencies. This is a very small return, considering the enormous potential and expectations surrounding a type of journalism characterized by "civic engagement, government transparency, and public accountability" (Dourado, 2019, p. 94). Moreover, our findings also raise questions about the degree of connection between the work of the analyzed agencies and their identity as specialists in using public data, capable of mediating the transparency between the state and the citizen through transparency tools (Ferracioli, 2021). This, of course, is with the awareness of the limitations already mentioned, such as the fact that not all fact-checks require the use of public transparency tools. That said, it is also worth noting that the use of transparency tools could be more extensive if fact-checks gave more attention to disinformation related to the use of public resources, as well as to legislation in force or under discussion in the legislature.

8 Conclusion

In light of the above, it is important to note that the aim of the present study was not to measure the effectiveness of fact-checking in combating disinformation. That would be a broader and more in-depth task, that requires a range of procedures explored in

the corresponding scientific literature (Lelo, 2023). The aim of the present study was to provide evidence that could answer the question of the extent and manner in which transparency tools are employed by Brazilian fact-checking agencies in performing their verifications.

The findings presented here demonstrate the usefulness of transparency tools themselves, since they serve as valuable devices for providing quick and consistent responses in actions that clarify dubious content. However, the extent to which these tools are used still seems to fall far short of the potential they offer. Larger-scale future studies might also consider conducting interviews with fact-checkers, to investigate the reasons for this limited use in each agency and context.

We understand that more intensive use of these tools would improve the work of fact-checking agencies significantly, as it would align them more closely with a pro-democracy approach. In such an approach, fact-checking the information and decisions involving politicians, public office holders, or public institutions would be supported by the transparency structures of democracy itself. This, in turn, would help promote the production of high-quality, verifiable information.

Another aspect of the present study is that, by shedding light on the work of fact-checking agencies in Brazil and their potential connection to the implementation of transparency, it contributes to addressing important issues in fact-checking studies. It also helps reduce the research asymmetry on the topic to some extent, as the primary focus of analyzes is still on the Global North (Mahl et al., 2024).

In the challenging contexts of attacks on democracy and informational disorder, it is necessary to mobilize diverse and continuous resources to prevent democratic collapse. This inevitably involves digital political communication. The use of guarantees arising from democracy itself, such as the implementation of transparency mechanisms, is one way to leverage the benefits of this experience and can guide the need to strengthen it. Journalism, by using such tools, reaffirms how necessary and effective they are (and can be) in combating the threats that undermine the continuation of the system that ensures its role as a qualified and autonomous mediator in public debate.

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