



The hardest check:

**Measuring the
impact of fact-checking**



chequeado

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There are currently more than 50 fact-checking organizations in the world. They are journalistic organizations aimed at checking the public discourse. Fact-checking organizations (FC) verify public discourse by assigning different degrees of accuracy to the public statements of political and social leaders. In Latin America, in addition to chequeado.com in Argentina, there are FC projects in Uruguay, Brazil, Colombia and Honduras. Thus, there are many resources being allocated to this type of projects. Is it possible to measure the impact of FC in Argentina and Latin America? What have been the effects of these organizations so far? These analytical and methodological questions pose practical implications for the influence of these organizations: the better the understanding of their effects, the more these organizations can improve their impact.

FC originated in the United States 11 years ago⁴ and the organizations adopting this practice have proliferated over the last years. But only very recently their results have started to be measured. This paper looks at what is known about the impact of FC and based on this evidence, it advances a proposal to measure the impact of Chequeado. In order to do so, the paper is organized as follows. The next section outlines the different aims of FC organizations and presents a typology of their potential impacts (section I). For a better understanding of the effects these organizations have had to date, a review of the main findings of the most relevant studies on the impact of FC is conducted. It is focused on the potential impact of FC on three types of actors: citizens, political leaders and the media (section II). Finally, section III advances guidelines for an impact assessment of Chequeado, which could be replicated in other Latin American FC organizations.

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⁴ FactCheck.org was the first FC organization. It was founded in 2003 by Brooks Jackson in the United States.

I. The Different Types of Impact of FC organizations

FC organizations share the goal of providing accurate information but for different purposes: to improve public discourse, to encourage accountability and to promote citizens' involvement in shaping the public agenda. Not all the organizations share the same aims.

A look at the FC organizations' websites shows that some of them focus on the three actors (political leaders, journalists, and citizens) such as *Chequeado* and *FullFact*, while others only focus on one of these - such as *FactCheck.org* and *PolitiFact*. *FactCheck.org* emphasizes its role in providing accurate information to improve public discourse by fomenting a better-informed public: "Our goal is to apply the best practices of both journalism and scholarship, and to increase public knowledge and understanding."⁵

By contrast, *Chequeado* states that they foster the three aims previously mentioned: to improve public discourse; *to encourage political accountability and to promote citizen participation* (it encourages active participation in the contents of its Web page). Along the same lines, *FullFact*, the main FC organization in the United Kingdom, also seeks to influence the public, journalists and political leaders.

These differences in the aims of the organizations reflect the different actors over which FC might have an impact: the media, the political elites and the citizenry. The aim to improve public discourse is mainly directed to citizens. Although, it also affects journalists and political leaders, as they can also get more informed and, thus, improve their public discourse. The impact on the press has an indirect effect: it might increase public's trust in the media (Thorson, 2013). To encourage political accountability by fact-checking statements is mainly directed towards the political elites. The aim to increase citizens' involvement in public discourse involves the citizenry, as well as the media because it seeks to involve both groups in checking the accuracy of the information presented in public speeches. Authors such as Thorson (2013), Graves & Glaisyer (2012) and Amazeen (2013) agree that FC might have an impact on these three social groups: the citizenry, politicians and the press.

II. What do we know about the Impact of FC?

Fact-checking is a journalistic practice that gained popularity over the last few years. Therefore, there are only a few studies that seek to measure its impact and they are based

⁵ FactCheck.org, Web page, www.factcheck.org/about/our-mission/

on FC in the United States. This implies that this literature review should be taken with a grain of salt, as the contexts in the United States and Argentina differ in several ways. This paper presents the main findings according to the actor on which FC might exert an impact. Strictly speaking, an impact assessment involves identifying a causal relationship between a project, program or policy (in this case, the action of fact-checking) and the aimed outcomes. To estimate the causal effect, any chosen method must take the *counterfactual* into account, i.e. what would have been the outcome for the program participants if they had not been exposed to it. Also, some evaluations attempt to assess the impact of an intervention by comparing the situations of the participants previous to the intervention and after it. This type of assessment design does not use a control group, and therefore, it seeks to establish the program's impact under the (usually unlikely) premise that there are not changes due to the time occurred between the before and after situations (Independent Evaluation Group, 2006).

Experimental research is often considered the gold standard in impact assessment as it reduces the risk of external factors accounting for the changes observed in the aimed outcomes, and therefore, makes it possible to attribute these changes to the intervention. The main advantage of this method is that it levels the participants in the control and in the treatment groups in relation to all the possible variables (observable and latent) that can affect the variables being studied by randomly assigning the participants to the control and treatment groups. However, in many real life scenarios randomization is not possible. Then, the closest possible match between the treatment and control group is sought by identifying other similar characteristics among them (quasi-experiments). Some of the studies presented below belong to the first type (before and after situations), and others are experimental studies. A summary of the main studies is available in the Appendix.

The Impact on the Citizenry

This literature review begins by analysing the studies that focus on the influence fact-checking has on the public. These are based on a long tradition of American political psychology on the impact of political information on public opinion. Among the experimental research specific to FC is the study by Thorson (2013), "*The Consequences of Misinformation and Fact-checking for Citizens, Politicians, and the Media.*" In this controlled experiment, 606 participants were classified according to their political preferences (Democrat or Republican). They were divided into three groups, and all read a newspaper article about one of the candidates (John McKenna) in Iowa's electoral campaign. One paragraph of the article was different for each group. One group received the article with a paragraph describing a misleading accusation made by the candidate's opponent (Eric Hall). Another group read the article with the accusation, followed by a correction issued by a journalist or a FC organization. The third group received the article

with the accusation and a correction issued by McKenna's campaign office. Then, the participants had to answer a series of questions regarding their attitudes towards both candidates and about perceptions of four media outlets (USA Today, CNN, GetTheFacts.org, and Iowa Ledger). The results show that the participants were more predisposed to accept the corrections when they reinforced their partisanship and own views. The interaction between exposure to misinformation and partisanship is subject to a great tradition of political psychology analysis about the influence of the media that is sceptical about the impact information consumption has on changing people's attitudes. One of the most renowned academics in this field is Zaller (1992). In his book, *"The nature and origins of mass opinion,"* argues that the better informed people are those most exposed to public discourse and information, and also those with stronger and more consistent political preferences, therefore, more selective in what information they accept and internalize. Thorson (2013) concluded that the participants that read the article with the correction issued by a FC organization were more sceptical about the misinformation, proving that corrections issued by newspapers and FC organizations are effective. However, Graves & Glaisyer (2012) in their paper, "The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012," argue that FC can have a negative impact on the public regarding the correction of misinformation. They analyze the case-study "Did the President call Americans lazy?" where they assess the media coverage of a piece of President Barack Obama's address at a business summit in 2011. The authors argue that the flurry of fact-checking caused many more people to hear the misinformation that Obama might have called Americans lazy, having the inverse impact than was intended. Although the evidence is inconclusive, the experimental study provides optimism about the plausible impact of FC on the citizenry.

Another potential impact of FC on the public is promoting greater participation of citizenry in the public agenda, so they can be more engaged and demand reliable information. In her paper, *"Making a Difference? A Critical Assessment of Fact-checking in 2012,"* Amazeen (2013) concludes that FC does have a positive impact of this sort. The study, by interviewing experts on FC, journalism, politics and academics, concludes that the feedback from readers is another measurement of FC impact and shows the extent to which FC encourages the involvement of the citizenry in public discourse. However, the author highlights the need for a quantitative measurement of the extent of this influence.

The Impact on the Political Elites

The potential impact of FC on the political elites consists of increasing the reputational costs and deterring politicians from using misinformation in their discourse. But how can we measure the decision not to say something? Nyhan & Reifler (2014) did it. They measured the impact of FC on the political elites through a field experiment. 1169 state

legislators from 9 U.S. States where *PolitiFact* had affiliates were randomly assigned to three groups. The treatment group received letters for two months being reminded of the existence of a *PolitiFact* office in their state, the possible electoral consequences of receiving a negative rating from the organization, and examples of FC articles. The placebo group received letters for two months informing the participants of a research project about the accuracy of political statements during the electoral campaign, without mentioning FC. There were not letters sent to the control group, nor were they contacted in any form. Afterwards, the authors assessed whether the legislators received negative ratings from *PolitiFact* (*half* true or below) or if the accuracy of their statements was challenged publicly in other articles or blogs in Lexis/Nexis⁶. The results from the study show that the legislators who were reminded they were vulnerable to FC and its possible political consequences changed their behaviour: this group was 63% less likely to receive a negative rating from *PolitiFact* or to have the accuracy of their statements questioned publicly. Thorson (2013) also concludes that FC has a positive impact on the political elite as it increases the reputational cost of making misleading statements. According to her research, politicians are punished for making false accusations as shown by a decline in public opinion when the statement is challenged by FC organizations or other journalists, even among members of the same political party.

However, observational studies such as Graves & Glaisyer's (2012) highlight the recurring use of misleading information by Mitt Romney and Rick Perry's campaigns in the "Did the President call Americans lazy?" case, even after the statement had been refuted by FC organizations. Amazeen (2013) does not provide findings of a positive impact of FC on political leaders either, as she concludes the impact on political leaders is limited. However, her study does include anecdotal evidence from interviews with campaign teams that show changes caused by FC, such as mentioning FC in the campaign ads and assigning a spokesperson specifically for the FC organizations. From Thorson's research (2013) it is possible to conclude that FC has a positive impact on political leaders' accuracy by increasing politicians' reputational cost.

The impact on the Media

FC presence in the media has grown exponentially over the last several years in the United States. Amazeen (2013) presents a growth of over 900% of FC mentions in newspapers in the United States, and over 2000% in radio and television, between 2001 and 2012. Both Amazeen (2013) and Graves (2012) agree that the impact of FC on the press

⁶ Lexis Nexis is a data base offering legal research and news articles.

is also reflected in the proliferation of FC organizations and its incorporation by the media. Does this increase in FC leverage over the media have an indirect effect on the media by increasing public’s trust in the press? Thorson’s research (2013) shows that readers of the article with the FC correction indicated higher evaluations of mass media, proving a positive impact of FC on the press. This study as well as Amazeen’s (2013) prove a positive impact of FC on the press by increasing the public’s trust in the media in general, and the considerable increase of FC projects.

A summary of the studies to date is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of the studies on FC impact.

	Press		Citizenry		Political Elite	
	Trust	Diffusion	Facts	Participation	Encourage	Deter
Thorson (2014)	POSITIVE		POSITIVE		POSITIVE	
Nyhan & Reifler (2014)						POSITIVE
Graves & Graisyer (2012)			NEGATIVE			NEGATIVE
Nyhan & Reifler (2012)			INCONCLUSIVE			POSITIVE
Amazeen (2013)		POSITIVE	INCONCLUSIVE	POSITIVE		INCONCLUSIVE
Graves (2012)		POSITIVE	INCONCLUSIVE			

The literature review reveals some common challenges to any impact assessment to measuring the impact of FC organizations. The first challenge is how to isolate the impact of FC activities. The methodological discussion between assignment (a causal relation in which it is possible to isolate the intervention’s impact from other influences) and contribution (assuming the intervention is an element among others that cannot be isolated) is also relevant in these types of studies. Many of the studies analysed assume it is possible to isolate this effect, which is debatable. Furthermore, the assessment studies surveyed should be read carefully as they analyze the potential impacts without taking into consideration the goals pursued by each FC organization. Is it possible to assess the effect of FC in changing the political discourse if this is not an advocacy strategy intended

by the organization? This also is a highly discernable issue that requires a deeper reflection than what is at stake in the surveyed studies.

III. Guidelines for an Impact Evaluation of *Chequeado*

In order to establish an assessment system for *Chequeado* based on the reviewed studies, it is important to take into account the different contexts between the United States and Argentina. To start with, the quality of official information varies. In the United States the level of information provided by governmental units is very high and constitutes a legitimate source of information. In Argentina, there is a shortage of accessible public information and, over the last ten years, the official statistics have become the subject of a hotly debated. For this reason, to check the public discourse using these sources to provide accurate and reliable information is not simple, as the selection of sources to assure a legitimate check becomes complex. Secondly, the media environment in which *Chequeado* operates also differs: currently the media is polarized and with low levels of credibility in Argentina. Thirdly, the political structure is also different: it is very complex to guarantee a balanced coverage of the political spectrum in a personalized and fragmented party system such as the Argentine one, unlike the bipartisan American system. The experiments presented previously take place in a more stable context and, therefore, their replicability is questionable. Even though these studies seek to analyze the impact of FC, it is not the only type of assessment that *Chequeado* could implement. Guidelines to examine the process, as well as the results and impact of *Chequeado*'s work, are presented below.

Assessing the Process

First, it is possible to assess processes: these are the products of the organization work. A process assessment focuses on the means to achieve the programme or policy's goals. In order to do so, it takes into account the actions taken, the managerial procedures and routines, and the resources allocated to achieve their goals. Its findings are chiefly oriented to improve the operational management of an intervention. In the continuum attribution - contribution previously mentioned - the assessment of processes (unlike the assessment of results and impact) is mainly attributed to the work of the organization. There are two dimensions in the production of FC: the quality of the fact-check and its reach.

The table below presents some process indicators, divided into two parts: quality and reach of FC.

ASPECT	COMPONENT	MEASUREMENT STRATEGY
QUALITY	Bias in the selection	Survey to experts and replication of a sample of FC. Opinion leaders' perceptions.
	Diversity in the selection	-Survey to experts and replication of a sample of FC -Opinion leaders' perceptions -Analysis of media content: newsworthiness
	Diversity and legitimacy of sources of information	Survey to experts and replication of a sample of FC. Opinion leaders' perceptions.
REACH	Quality of the ratings	Survey to experts and replication of a sample of FC. Opinion leaders' perceptions.
	Promptness	Analysis of media content
	Audience diversity	Social media measurements Analysis of media coverage
	Size of the audience	Social media measurements

The quality indicators are subdivided in three components that aim to answer different questions. (1) ***Bias and diversity in the selection***: What are the criteria used to select the actors that will be checked? To what extent are these criteria politically and ideologically neutral? (2) ***Diversity and legitimacy of sources of information***: Are the sources used to check the discourse perceived as legitimate by the public opinion? Is there diversity in the institutional affiliations of the sources consulted? (3) ***Quality of the ratings (implementation of the fact-checking method)***: Are the ratings appropriate? Are there biases (ideological, thematic, political) in the ratings?

The quality component can be measured through different tools. Some of them are presented below. One is the *survey to experts*. This survey could be administered online, through an application self-supplied by the respondent. This survey would aim to contrast the ratings used by *Chequeado*. A sample of fact-checks would be given out (without their ratings) and the respondents would be asked to rate the articles and to give their opinion about the quality of the sources. It should be conducted with experts that are not familiar

with the fact-checks or that are not regular readers to avoid biases produced by recalling the fact-checks. A second tool could be a *survey of perceptions* to opinion leaders. No less than 50 ideologically diverse opinion makers could be selected and asked about their perceptions on the quality of fact-checks made by *Chequeado*. Finally, an analysis of *newsworthiness* could also be implemented. This study would aim to assess to what extent the statements selected for verification match the issues of interest in the media's agenda.

The coverage indicators are subdivided in three components. (1) **Promptness**: How long does it take between the date a statement is issued and its fact-check is published? (2) **Audience diversity**: What is the geographical distribution of *Chequeado*'s community? Do journalists, political leaders or civil servants consult *Chequeado*? What is the reach of *Chequeado* in the general public? (3) **Size of the audience**: What is the amount of readers and commentators (in each outlet the organization participates).

Some of the coverage indicators can be measured from information easily obtained, such as social media measurements of the reach of fact-checks and users' profiles (for example, geographical location). Other indicators would require greater resources, such as the administration of a survey. A process assessment can be taken as a permanent activity and conducted internally by the organization. In order to do so, it is necessary to design processes to systematize the indicators and define the frequency of the measurement. It is an assessment that requires fewer resources than the results and impact assessments, which are presented below.

Assessing Results and Impact

Measuring results and impact is the most difficult evaluative enterprise because of the continuum previously mentioned of contributions versus attribution. The analysis of the results and impact is hard to be identified and isolated, and it is preferable to think of it as a contribution - in the context of other contributing factors (for example, public discourse could have improved because of an unexpected event with high media impact that increased the demand for information). This type of assessment is also more costly due to the resources it requires. An analysis could be conducted during the 2015 presidential election, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques that allow *Chequeado* to distinguish its impact on the political elites, the press and the citizens. To do so, an assessment in three parts is recommended.

The first part of a results assessment could focus on measuring the influence of *Chequeado*'s work on the political elite. To accomplish this, a series of *in-depth interviews* could be conducted with campaign advisors for candidates of different government levels (presidential, governor, senator, etc.) and from different provinces (taking into account *Chequeado*'s geographical coverage) to know their perceptions about the extent to which fact-checks are taken into consideration to set the strategy of the political discourse. Its purpose is to analyze qualitatively the extent to which political actors perceive a reputational cost in providing misleading information.

Secondly, a results assessment could include an analysis of *Chequeado*'s coverage of the electoral campaign, measuring the extent to which the fact-checks were present in the media campaign and were quoted by candidates and journalists, and whether there were changes in the political leaders and candidates' statements due to the fact-checks. This analysis is similar to the analysis presented previously regarding the process assessment, but in this case it would be a tool to understand the impact of the organization.

The third part of the results assessment could be a *survey to voters* to be conducted immediately after the election -it could consist of a small set of questions added to another public opinion survey- to know how they get informed and to what extent they are familiar and have used *Chequeado* to obtain information about candidates. This survey could have an experimental design if it is possible to isolate the areas where the coverage indicators show a low level of exposure to *Chequeado*. In various provinces (such as the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires) local elections will take place on different dates, so some of these tools could be replicated in several election processes.

Any type of assessment requires a design that takes into account the resources needed to conduct it, not only financial resources, but also human resources. This is not less true for small organizations, especially if any of these tools are applied during the electoral campaign because of the already high workload of the staff during this period. For this reason it is necessary to plan the human resources required to collect and systematize all the information. Considering the role *Chequeado* has in promoting the emergence of FC Projects in other countries in the region, this type of assessment could be ground breaking and eventually replicated. The studies conducted so far shows that measuring the impact of FC is just emerging and there is a long road ahead.

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V. Appendix

Author	Type	Methodology	Impact assessment
Thorson (2014)	Lab / Exp	606 subjects Newspaper articles with variations that included - Misleading accusation by opposition - Correction issued by a FC organization - Correction issued by political campaign..	- Citizenry - Political Elite - Press
Nyhan & Reifler (2013)	Real / Exp	1169 U.S. State Legislators - Letter reminding of FC - No contact 23 received PolitiFact ratings	-State Legislators (candidates)
Graves & Glaisyer (2012)	Real	- Case study: Did the President call Americans lazy?" misleading fragment of a speech issued by Obama in 2011, used by Romney and Perry´s campaigns - Media footprint	-Citizenry -Political Elites -Citizenry
Nyhan & Reifler (2012)	Lab	- Previous studies research	-Political Elites -the media
Amazeen (2013)	Real	- Survey to 35 journalists about their perceptions -Interview to 18 FC professionals about their perceptions	-Citizenry -Political Elites -The media
Graves (2012)	Real	- Observation - Content Analysis - Historical research	-Citizenry -The media -Political Elites



There are currently more than 50 fact-checking organizations in the world, including several projects in Latin America. Fact-checking is a journalistic practice that checks the accuracy of factual assertions in the public discourse. Despite this growth, we know little about its impact. This paper analyzes the studies conducted so far about the effects of fact-checking, focusing on the impact on three social groups: citizens, political leaders and the press. Based on this evidence, it presents a proposal to measure the impact of Chequeado in Argentina, which could be replicated in other Latin American fact-checking organizations.

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