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A Mazaira-Castro, J Rúas-Araújo, I Puentes-Rivera (2019): “Fact-checking in the televised debates of the Spanish general elections of 2015 and 2016”. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, pp. 748 to 766.

<http://www.revistalatinacs.org/074paper/1355/38en.html>

DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-2019-1355en](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2019-1355en)

# Fact-checking in the televised debates of the Spanish general elections of 2015 and 2016

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This article fact-checks the statements made in the televised debates that took place during the Spanish general elections of 2015, between Mariano Rajoy (PP) and Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), and 2016, between Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría (PP), Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos) and Pablo Iglesias (Podemos). **Methods:** A total of 335 and 382 factual assertions were extracted from two thematic blocks of the 2015 and 2016 debates, respectively, and subsequently fact-checked in order to determine their veracity. **Results:** More than 85% of the factual assertions made by participants were accurate. In fact, data accuracy was very high in the case of government representatives (95.4% in the case of Mariano Rajoy and 84.38% in the case of Soraya Sáenz de

Santamaría), followed by Pablo Iglesias (92%), Albert Rivera (88.89%) and Pedro Sánchez (58.1% and 69.23% in the 2015 and 2016 debates, respectively). **Discussion and conclusions:** Participants in televised debates use a significant amount of factual assertions that reveal their more technical or political profiles. However, they hardly cite their sources, which complicates fact-checking by the audience.

### Keywords

Fact-checking; televised debates; elections; disinformation; fake-news.

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## 1. Introduction

The dissemination of fake news, lies and disinformation is not a new phenomenon. In fact, in the history of propaganda there are plenty of examples (Domenach, 1963; Durandin, 1983; Jay, 2010) of practices, rules and techniques that are repeated in the present.

Today's digital fact-checking is not a fad, but refers to a typical practice of traditional good journalism, which essentially tries to respond, digitally, to the classical questions of what, who, when, where and why (Redondo, 2018), to follow the source and find where the information comes from in three levels: publishing medium or website, journalist and cited sources.

However, the practice of *ante hoc* fact-checking (before publishing) began to disappear with the advent of social networks and the pressure put on production speed, which have made fact-checking an increasingly difficult task (Patel, 2017). This was particularly true after the recent US presidential elections, when the American media alleged the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, was disseminating fake news and hoaxes (Rúas, Puentes and Fernández, 2018), including the alleged paedophile ring involving Hillary Clinton's team (known as *Pizzagate*), which even prompted a citizen to show up with a shotgun in the pizzeria where these events supposedly took place.

Fake news played an important role in the American 2016 presidential elections (Leer, 2016) and afterwards (Gunther et al. 2018), leading to strong political crises (Azzimonti and Fernández, 2018) that aimed to cause unrest in parties, governments and nations (Bennet and Livingston, 2018), and a clear disruption of democracy.

In fact, information pollution and feedback with rumours and false information have strong implications and democratic consequences (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017), which generate great polarisation and intensification of information capable of manipulating the public agenda (Faris et al.,

2017), and can also be used by powerful groups as a pretext to attack, restrict and ridicule the free press.

Fake news mimic real journalism, devalue and delegitimise expert voices, undermine the trust and serious coverage of the media, propagate more quickly and deeper than truth and, moreover, have become a lucrative activity (Sadiku et al, 2018).

Recent studies on the dissemination of disinformation on Facebook and Twitter (Allcott et al., 2018) show an exponential growth in the volume of fake news disseminated over social networks. The number of people who read fake news during election periods believing they are real continues to grow (Guess et al., 2018) and the level of interaction with false information is very high, and increases constantly, in a process that some authors already consider unstoppable (Ghosh and Scott, 2018). A recent study shows that fake news stories remain on Facebook even after changes in the news algorithm were made at the beginning of 2018 (Newswhip, 2018). Still, some studies show that the use of social networks by traditional journalism to address the issue of fake news generates some interest on the part of the audience (Palomo and Sedano, 2018).

Communication is a human biological need (Rúas and Garcia, 2018), which includes the satisfaction of managing alternative information tailored to our desires, ideas, cognitions, and emotional perceptions that are characteristic of the so-called post-truth age, where facts count less than the sensations they produce.

The effects of fake news and disinformation are very difficult to contrast, as shown in different studies (Thorson, 2016; Shin et al., 2018), because users tend to “lower their guard” on social networks (Stahl, 2018) and select their news sources and to interpret the messages in a way that confirms their previous convictions, which is known as “confirmation bias” and echo chambers, which keep them in their comfort zone. People tend to believe that their own views on life are the only ones that are correct – which is known as naive realism– and label those who disagree as “irrational or biased” (Shu et al., 2017).

Having a high education level does not prevent these contents from being shared in social networks, due to social motivations, like the need for topics of conversation, fun, desire to interact and be in contact with friends or because the content seems important and sharing it “makes users seem influential and look good to each other” (Chen and Lee, 2015; Lotteries-Echeverri *et al.*, 2018). Young people in particular have to rely on social networks to inform themselves about politics, events and breaking news (Rubin, 2017).

Fake news are considered a complement and not a substitute for hard news (Guess et al., 2018) and a form of emotional reinsurance in the consumption of information. Veracity, therefore, is not always a decisive element when it comes to deciding to consume and share a news story. Moreover, contemporary communication is a reflection of the multiplication and fragmentation of the ways in which lies propagate (Clavero, 2018), in a way that public communication has moved from a pyramidal mass communication structure to flows of news, information and conversation on multiple levels, with new forms of deceit facilitated by the digital revolution (Waisbord, 2018).

In any case, intentionality should always be the fundamental criterion to take into account when it comes to evaluating news quality, from the erroneous information disseminated by the “good Samaritan” that shares an emergency alert, to the propaganda of the authoritarian regime that plans to discredit dissidents (Redondo, 2017).

In this sense, Wardle (2017) has established a scale that ranges from least to most severe: (1) involuntary erroneous information that may be the result of the exercise of poor journalism; (2) parody; (3) provocation; (4) partisanship; (5) profit; (6) search for power or political influence; and (9) propaganda. On the same line, Zimdars (2016) has developed another scale that goes from clickbait and sensationalist headlines that seek to increase traffic to rumours, junk news, satire, false political news, conspiracy theories, hate speech and state propaganda.

And the struggle for the quality of information also involves the responsibility of journalists and the media, including the increasingly frequent use of anonymous sources and “off the record” statements which, as Redondo points out (2017), have spread without justification, even across important newspapers, contributing, in this way, to the development of thought bubbles and digital currents that do not contribute to the necessary capacity of reflection and journalistic critique.

### **1.1. Response from the European Union and the Member States**

Fake news have been labelled as a threat by Spain, in its 2017 National Security Strategy, while entities such as the Platform for the Defence of Freedom of Information, which gathers groups of lawyers, journalists and users, have developed a decalogue for the search for common strategies to counteract the proliferation of fake news and its effects on journalism and society.

Countries such as Germany, the UK, France and Italy have recently expressed their intention to promote laws to combat the proliferation of fake news (Pauner, 2018). In the case of Germany, fines of up to 50 million euros are foreseen for social networks that do not eliminate defamatory content, hateful messages and fake news.

For its part, in 2016, the European Parliament demanded a solution to the dissemination of fake news and its possible repercussions in the ongoing election processes in different European countries, urging social media companies to take measures to counteract such publications (Rúas, Puentes and Fernández, 2018). Since then, companies like Facebook have announced tools for this purpose, standing out its collaboration and links with the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), linked to the Poynter Institute and its code of ethics.

In mid-2018, it was estimated that there were 148 fact-checking teams around the world, of which only a third had adopted such Code of Principles, including in Spain, *La Sexta*'s TV show *El Objetivo* (“The Target”) and the website *Maldito bulo* (“Damn Hoax”), both dedicated to fact-checking (Magallón-Rosa, 2018).

NATO and the EU opened a European Excellence Centre against Hybrid Threats (Hybrid Coe) in Helsinki, which seeks to counteract cyberattacks and propaganda, in addition to the creation in 2015 of the East StratCom Task Force within the EU, to address ongoing disinformation campaigns in

Russia, and the European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA), based in Greece and established in 2004 to ensure networks and information security (NIS) and develop a security culture in society and increase awareness about it.

From the normative point of view, the UN and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) made a “joint statement on Freedom of Expression, Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda”, which shows concern for the possibility of disinformation and propaganda confusing the population and interfering with their right to receive plural information and form their own opinion, in addition to the Code of Good Practices on Disinformation, a EU initiative to promote quality journalism and digital literacy.

The problem of intervention and intoxication with fake news in the election processes has also led the European Commission to make an statement on “Free and fair European Elections” (COM, 2018, 637), through the leaders gathered at the Salzburg summit, held in September 2018, and mentions the need to combat attempts at digital manipulation by third countries, in the face of the upcoming European elections in May.

## **2. Election debates and fact-checking**

Election debates are one of the most demanding tests in contemporary political communication, an opportunity for candidates to defend their ideas and proposals, and an opportunity for citizens to see, listen, compare and decide. In addition, debates generate a fundamental democratic discussion and contribute to the promotion of civic dialogue and contrast of opinions.

This public debate also involves aspects such as fact-checking, which already has a long epistemological tradition in political events and public debates of all kinds (Jackson and Jamieson, 2004; Amazeen, 2015) and, in particular, in relation to the statements made by the candidates during and after the televised election debates (Wintersieck, 2017) in defence of political honesty. As a result, fact-checking has become a civic demand and service (López, Rodríguez and Álvarez, 2016).

In the case of Spain, despite the short tradition and emergence of first-level debates, there is a relevant scientific interest in its analysis and study, with some theoretical contributions and work made by Barreiro and Sánchez Cuenca (1998), Gunther, Montero and Wert, 1999, Campo Vidal (2013; 2017), Díez Nicolás and Semetko (1995), Gallego-Reguera (2012, 2015), Marín (2003), Ruiz Contreras (2007), Santamaría (2012) and Vidal Riera (1997), among others.

In addition, the current Spanish political context, marked by the rupture of the bipartisanship and the emergence of new leaders and digital political communication strategies (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016; López-García, 2016; Del Olmo, Ruiz & Díaz, 2016; Rodríguez Andrés, 2016; Dader and Campos, 2017), has positioned the debate as a key tool for both political parties and civil society and an ideal audiovisual space to exercise democracy today.

With the new moderate pluralist party system (Sartori, 2005) and according to the different models and systems of relations between the media and political groups (Hallin and Mancini, 2008), the

formats of the debates have had to adapt and open to more candidates, as well as having to face new demands for the participation of the public.

Fact-checking tools, such as Truth-O-Meter and PolitiFact, served to analyse the three election debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in the recent American elections and to verify the existence of false statements made by both candidates: 104 false statements were made by the Republican candidate and 13 by the Democratic candidate (Dale and Talaga, 2016).

Some of the parliamentary fact-checking carried out in Spain, specifically in the case of the Galician Parliament, focused on the analysis of the oral questions and answers of the President of the Xunta of Galicia and the opposition spokespersons (Rúas, Mazaira and Puentes, 2017), show certain degree of accuracy (65%) of the data provided in their interventions. However, it has also been noted that parliamentarians do not cite their sources, that the transparency and accessibility of the data provided is relative and that their use is purely rhetorical, and that they do not highlight or encourage the public debate and discussion.

### 3. Methods

In order to observe the existence of strategies in the use of data by the political actors and the degree of veracity of their assertions, we analysed the statements made by the participants of the two televised debates that took place on 14 December 2015 (between the candidate of the PP, Mariano Rajoy, and the candidate of the PSOE, Pedro Sánchez) and on 13 June 2016 (between Pablo Iglesias of Podemos; Albert Rivera of Ciudadanos; Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría of the PP, and Pedro Sánchez of the PSOE).

The study involves the analysis of the 117-minute-long videos of the two debates and the extraction of all the factual assertions made by all participants: 335 from the two-person debate and 382 from the four-person debate. Afterwards, the analysis focused on the first two blocks, economy and employment, and then on social policies/welfare state, which resulted in a total of 187 statements extracted from the debate between Mariano Rajoy and Pedro Sánchez and 239 from the four-person debate. There were two reasons for choosing both blocks: because both of them involve the largest number of factual statements, and because they achieved the largest audience shares of the debate.

The fact-checking process focused on the analysis of the use of quantitative data mentioned by the different participants in the first two blocks of both debates (economy and employment and social policy/welfare state), to achieve the following objectives:

1. Determine whether participants in the two televised debates use data to support their arguments.
2. Check whether participants in the two televised debates cite and use verifiable sources to facilitate access to the spectator (who might want to delve into, complete or simply verify accuracy).
3. Determine the extent to what the data sources used are official, public or private and verifiable in a digital way, enabling citizens to perform fact-checking.
4. Check the veracity and accuracy of the data provided.

5. Determine whether the two-participant or four-participant debate format influences the results of the fact-checking assessment.
6. Determine to what extent the profile of the participant (political, technical or academic) influences the use and presentation of data.

In Total, a total of 183 statements containing quantitative data were fact-checked, distributed in the following way:

**Table 1.** Number of statements with quantitative data susceptible to analysis

Debate format	Number
2-person debate	92
4-person debate	91
Total	183

Source: Authors' own creation

Data were distributed by blocks, in the following way:

**Table 2.** Distribution of the number of statements analysed per block

Debate format	Economy and employment	Social Policy Block
2-person debate	54	38
4-person debate	61	30

Source: Authors' own creation

The duration of the different blocks was as follows:

**Table 3.** Duration of the analysed blocks

Debate format	Economy and employment	Social Policy Block
2-person debate	25 mins. 40s.	24 mins 24s.
4-person debate	32 mins. 31s.	32 mins 25s.

Source: Authors' own creation

#### 4. Results

As shown in tables 4 and 5, all participants, in both debates, used, to a greater or lesser extent, data to support their arguments. In the case of the debate between Mariano Rajoy and Pedro Sánchez, the distribution of verifiable data was the following:

**Table 4.** Number of statements made by each participant in the 2015 debate

	Number of assertions with quantified data
<b>M. Rajoy</b>	54
<b>P. Sánchez</b>	38

Source: Authors' own creation

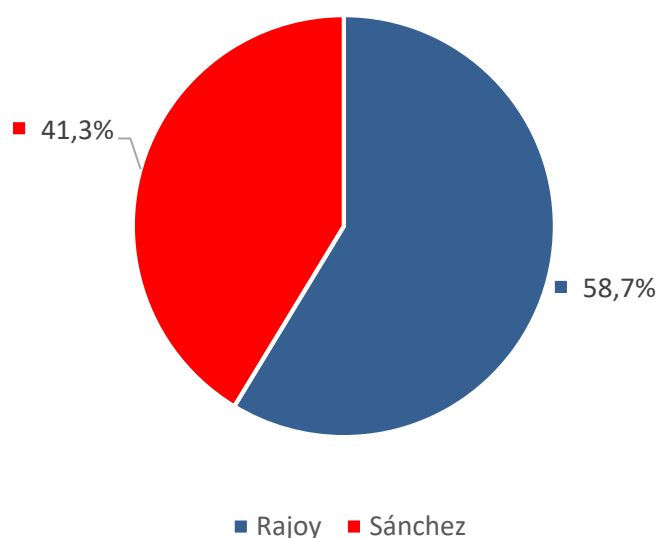
**Table 5.** Number of statements made by each participant in the 2016 debate

	Number of assertions with quantified data
<b>P. Iglesias</b>	28
<b>A. Rivera</b>	12
<b>S. Sáenz de Santamaría</b>	36
<b>P. Sánchez</b>	15

Source: Authors' own creation

Also outstanding is the fact that the distribution of the referred data was not homogeneous among all participants, as reflected in figures 1 and 2. In both cases, the participant who used the largest number of assertions with verifiable data was the representative of the Government: in the case of the two-person debate it was the then president, Mariano Rajoy, and in the four-person debate it was the then Vice-President, Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría.

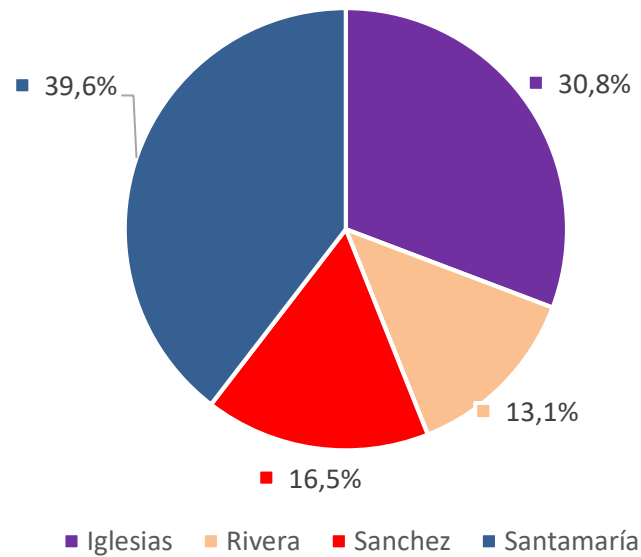
**Figure 1.** Distribution of factual statements with quantified data made in the 2015 debate



Source: Authors' own creation



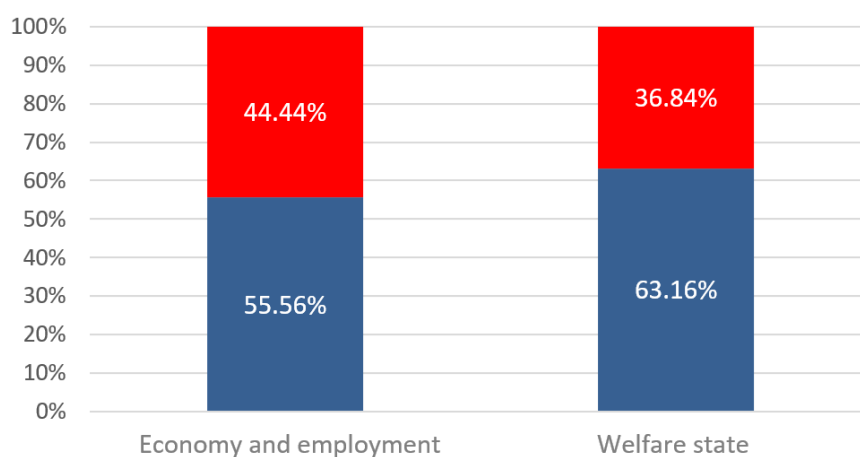
**Figure 2.** Distribution of factual statements with quantified data made in the 2016 debate



Source: Authors' own creation

With regards to the use of data by thematic block, there is an outstanding intensification of use, also on the part of the Government, of data in the Welfare Policies block, which indicates the advisory team for the debate knew that this section would be the target of more attacks, as it is an area where the results of the government were being questioned and criticised the most by the opposition.

**Figure 3.** Distribution of factual statements made in the 2015 debate by blocks and participants



Source: Authors' own creation

**Figure 4.** Distribution of factual statements made in the 2016 debate by blocks and participants



Source: Authors' own creation

On the other hand, the fact that the frequent use of quantitative data by the participants in the debates is not accompanied by the corresponding citation of sources is outstanding. Of the 183 assertions that include potentially verifiable quantitative data, only eight cite the sources. Pablo Iglesias is the author of six of these eight assertions, which cited the following sources:

1. National Observatory for Dependence (National Association of Social Services Directors and Managers).
2. Living Conditions Survey (INE)
3. FOESSA (Caritas) Report
4. BBVA Foundation
5. Ministry of Labour and Social Security
6. Eurostat (European Statistical Office)

With regards to the fact-checking of the factual statements, more than 85% have been verified with quantitative data susceptible to be verifiable, as shown in table 6, by official sources, private entities and non-verified sources.

**Table 6.** Fact-checking of sources with quantitative data

Debate format	Public Sources	Non-public Sources	Non-verified
2-person debate	71	4	17
4-person debate	76	5	10

Source: Authors' own creation

The percentage of statements made by each participant that have not been able to be verified is very similar in the case of the two-person debate (Table 7); and not so similar in the case of the four-person debate, which highlights the high level of non-verification of the data used by the representative of Ciudadanos, Albert Rivera (Table 8).

**Table 7.** Percentages of statements with non-verifiable quantitative data by participant in the two-person debate (2015)

	Percentage of unverifiable statements
<b>M. Rajoy</b>	18.52%
<b>P. Sánchez</b>	18.42%

Source: Authors' own creation

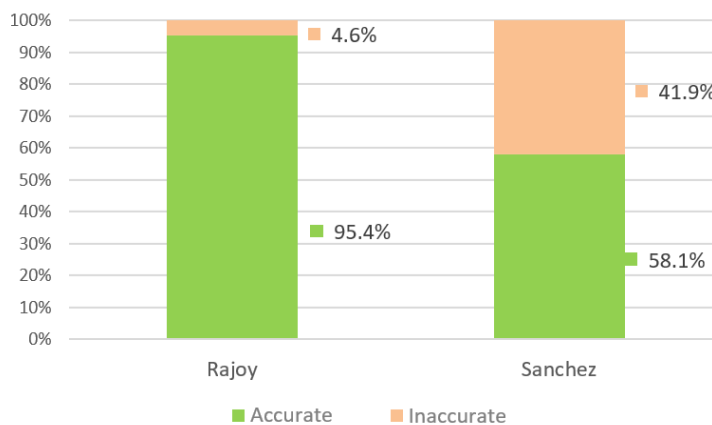
**Table 8.** Percentages of statements with non-verifiable quantitative data by participant in the four-person debate (2016)

	Percentage of unverifiable Statements
<b>P. Iglesias</b>	10.71%
<b>A. Rivera</b>	25.00%
<b>S. Sáenz de Santamaría</b>	11.11%
<b>P. Sánchez</b>	12.50%
<b>Total</b>	13.04%

Source: Authors' own creation

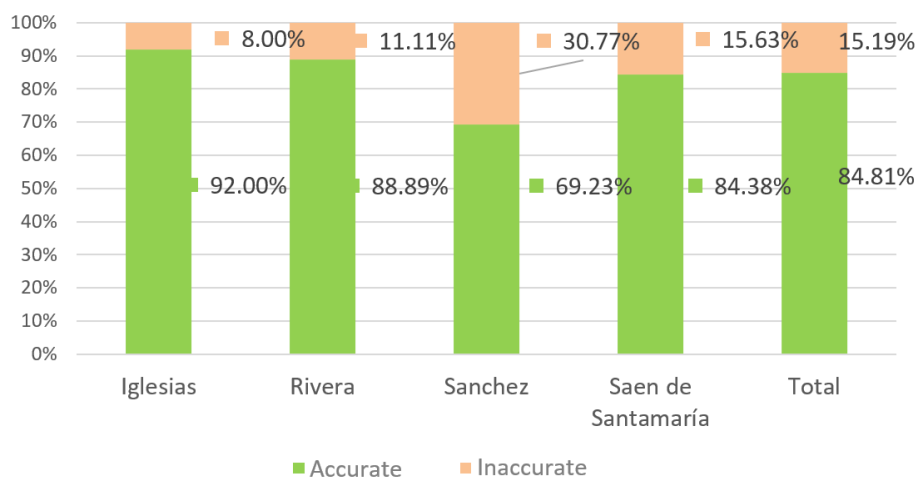
The reasons for this lack of contrast are, mainly, the lack of specified time and the inability to access sources that allow to verify the veracity of the data used, especially in the case of the representatives of the party in the Government, who use reports that are non-accessible for the public opinion.

**Figure 5.** Percentages of exact and non-exact factual statements made by each participant in the two-person debate (2015)



Source: Authors' own creation

**Figure 6.** Percentages of exact and non-exact factual statements made by each participant in the four-person debate (2016)



Source: Authors' own creation

Finally, with regards to the accuracy of the data, the factual statements made by the participant of the PP, Mariano Rajoy, stand out in the case of the two-person debate, as well as the statements made by the participant of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, in the four-people debate. In both cases, the candidate of the PSOE, Pedro Sánchez, was the least accurate in the use of data.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The results of this work show that, in terms of the research objectives, the participants of the two televised debates held during the Spanish general elections of 2015 and 2016, used in the analysed blocks, a significant amount of data to support their arguments and to defend themselves, in the case of Government, from the most vulnerable aspects in terms of criticism by the opposition.

However, the participants barely cited their sources, which prevented viewers from fact-checking. The few cited sources corresponded to official reports that could be verified on the Internet, although most of them were not directly accessible.

Likewise, the veracity and accuracy of the data provided by participants were, in general, quite high, especially in the case of Mariano Rajoy, with 95.4% in the 2015 debate, and 84.81% in the 2016 four-person debate. The percentage is very high -except in the case of Pedro Sánchez, whose data accuracy was 58.1% in the first debate and 69.23% in the second- in comparison, for example, with the veracity and accuracy, of 65%, of the oral questions made by the opposition and the answers of the president of the Xunta, Núñez Feijoo, in the case of the Galician Parliament (Rúas, Mazaira and Puentes, 2017).

The analysed data also clearly reflects the profile of each of the participants. In this sense, Mariano Rajoy provides the most technical and least instrumental content, while Pablo Iglesias shows a more

didactic profile because, by far, he cites the sources of the data he uses the most. On the other hand, Albert Rivera stands out in the use of non-verifiable data, as he makes rhetorical statements and wants to make the headlines through the gimmicky use of data. In the case of Pedro Sánchez, the PSOE candidate, he is the most inclined to round numbers (for example, when he claims that the pension savings 2011 was 70 billion euros, when the exact figure is 66.8 million, according to the annual reports of the Ministry of Employment and Social Security) and focuses on the most political aspects derived of the interpretation of these figures.

In the case of Mariano Rajoy and Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, the fact that they were part, at that time, of the Government, and had greater access to data and sources than the opposition, is a determining factor. They also received the support of the teams and members of the Presidential office that advise their candidates in the preparation of the televised debate, trying to reinforce those aspects and issues in which the party in the Government may be more vulnerable, as it has been observed in one of the blocks analysed.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the scarcity of differences, in terms of fact-checking, according to the debate's format, two or four participants, because the amount of factual statements made and verified was very similar in both cases.

This work opens several lines of research and possibilities for the future, such as the analysis of the origin of the sources used by politicians in their interventions, in terms of agenda, and the fact-checking of the news previously published by the media.

At the same time, the opportunity to get access to a large amount of information through the Internet shows the need to provide tools to analyse Big Data and to look for the development of networks and values (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017), as well as collaborative solutions among users (like crowdsourcing).

All this without forgetting that in an age of content saturation on the Web, the curation of journalistic content -i.e., finding, fact-checking, classifying, organising and sharing the most relevant information on a specific topic (Guallar, Codina, 2018)- contributes to the exercise of quality journalism and the prestige of those who exercise it (López-Meri and Casero-Ripollés, 2017).

Data do not generate knowledge by themselves, just like the presentation of more data does not imply more democracy and development. However, data do generate, on their own, empowerment and social change (Gertrudius *et al.*, 2016), hence the need to insist on the need for digital media training and literacy, which is necessary for critical awareness and evaluation of the emotional, rational and contextual elements that intervene in the reception of messages (Pérez *et al.*, 2016).

The role that the access to public information and of open and public-domain data (such as the digital library created by the Internet Archive on Donald Trump) play in the reconstruction of the historical, collective and social memory, is becoming one of the most relevant issues for digital humanities (Magallón-Rosa, 2017; 2018).

Automated fact-checking is necessary but cannot replace people when it comes to analysing messages loaded with contexts, judgments and vague statements (Pauner, 2018). It is, therefore, a cultural rather than technical change (Loreto-Echeverri *et al.*, 2018), also necessary to fight against the controlling power of social networks and some algorithms that amplify the dissemination of fake news that reduce people's view of the world. This is what has been described as the social power of algorithms (Beer, 2017; Rainie and Anderson, 2017).

Despite the difficulties and different rhythms between the production and dissemination and fact-checking of fake news, as discussed at the beginning of this work, there are reasons for hope. For example, some fact-checking works have shown that the falsehood or inaccuracy of news have affected the behaviour of politicians and candidates (Stencel, 2015, Lim, 2018) and that candidates whose dishonesty has been exposed have received negative ratings in surveys (Wintersieck, 2017), which shows that, in general terms and except for some exceptions, politicians do care about the verification of facts.

- **Funded Research.** This article is part of the R+D+I project “DEBATv, Televised Election Debates in Spain: Models, Process, Diagnosis and Proposal” (CSO2017-83159-R, Retos), which is funded by the Ministry of Innovation, Science and Universities and the National Research Agency (AEI) of the Government of Spain, with the support of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) of the European Union (EU). The research carried out for the development of this article is framed in the activity of “XESCOM: International Network for Communication Management Research” (ED341D R2016/019), a project coordinated by the Novos Research Group of the University of Santiago de Compostela, together with the groups iMARKA of the University of A Coruña, and CP2 and BiFeGa of the University of Vigo, financed under a competitive tendering scheme by the Department of Culture, Education and University Management of the Xunta of Galicia.

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### How to cite this article in bibliographies / References

A Mazaira-Castro, J Rúas-Araújo, I Puentes-Rivera (2019): “Fact-checking in the televised debates of the Spanish general elections of 2015 and 2016”. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, pp. 748 to 766.  
<http://www.revistalatinacs.org/074paper/1355/38en.html>  
DOI: 10.4185/RLCS-2019-1355en

Paper received on 30 January. Accepted on 20 March.  
Published on 5 April.