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WhatsApp as a verification tool for fake news. The case of ‘B de Bulo’

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Abstract

Introduction. According to the Digital News Report 2017, Spain is the European country with the highest penetration of WhatsApp for news consumption. **Hypothesis and objectives.** This tool of immediate communication allows media to increase from a qualitative perspective sources, traffic and even involve active audiences in fact-checking tasks. Our goals are to describe the process of creating B of Bulo feature in the newspaper SUR, analyze its operation and impact on social networks. **Methodology.** A mixed methodology is applied, by combining quantitative and qualitative techniques: content analysis, interviews with those responsible for the management of the service, participant observation and monitoring of visits. **Results.** The publication of content on hoaxes is done every 48 or 72 hours, and those related to children or politics are avoided. Despite these editorial limitations, news pieces in this section are part of the list of the most read contents. **Conclusions.** The results confirm the success of the proximity relationship established between newsroom and audiences via WhatsApp.

Keywords

Fake news; post-truth; fact-checking; local press; Telegram; WhatsApp.

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Translation of paper by **Yuhanny Henares**
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1. Introduction

Fake news have become one of the main problems of the Digital Era today. Its relevance forced the Dictionary of the Royal Academy of Spanish to incorporate the term post-truth in 2017, which refers to “the deliberate distortion of a reality, that manipulates beliefs and emotions in order to influence on public opinion and social attitudes.” The intensive circulation of this kind of contents requires the journalists’ reaction to protect and advocate the quality and veracity of professional information.

The fact that a hoax gets to the cover of a relevant media reflects in most occasions, a lack of fact-checking by journalists involved. On January 24, 2013, *El País* published in the cover an exclusive photograph of the president Hugo Chávez intubated while receiving medical treatment in Cuba. Other media also received the proposal by the agency Gtres Online, the only source having that material, but only *El País* decided to publish it. The image was a fake. Exclusive news offer distinction but when they are not fact-checked they might seriously damage the medium’s credibility, and these failures promote the audience desertion. In this sense, editorials of digital news media must face a double pressure: be the first in disseminating a story and publish it with the complete correction and care of a written edition (Torres, 2007). Many media are tempted to prioritize speed and impact over fact-checking, without understanding that time becomes an ethical problem when rapidness is preferred over correctness (CdPeriodismo, 2013). Some experts, such as the journalist Delia Rodríguez, have warned about the dangers of these practices: “everything has an author, a responsible ordered the subject, hands that executed everything even though they did not sign it. If you copy, if you lie, if you manipulate, if you write trash, there is always someone who will notice, because we are on the Internet and we are all experts in something” (Rodríguez, 2016).

Despite these advises, which comply with the basic principles of the profession, *El Mundo* published a story on November 26, 2016, about a brave dad and his sick daughter Nadia, for whom he couldn’t afford a cure. The newspaper helped collect almost 150,000 Euros, although only the father’s version was published. Everything turned out to be a charade. Other journalists (Josu Mezo of the blog *Mala Prensa*, Ángela Bernardo of *Hipertextual*, and Manuel Ansele and Elena Sevillano of *El País*) dismantled the story and did their homework: contrasted sources. Therefore, this is one of the main weaknesses of the Spanish journalism, the lack or even the absence of sources (Chicote, 2010).

The journalist Craig Silverman confirms in ‘Verification Handbook’ (2014) that something as basic as confirming data, is being lost in editorial offices, and the technical easiness of rectifying any mistaken information, shouldn’t reduce the publication process. In this sense, the Era of Information has changed the journalistic paradigm. Media have lost their leading role and are not the only senders of information (Paniagua, 2017). Social networks, which have multiplied in the last ten years, now occupy that space, they have already favored a communicative hyperactivity based on an excess of contents that generates ‘noise’, allowing rumors to filter and fake news to emerge, which both journalists and consumers are not always able to discern.

The strategies implanted on media, derived from this context of informational uncertainty have been varied. The agency France Press tried to stop this situation in 2009 when forbidding the use of Facebook or Wikipedia to its writers as source of information. Others, such as Steve Buffy, editor of

‘Gazzete Communications’, recommended using Mark Zuckerberg’s social network instead as starting point for research, of course, with great caution.

Even so, Facebook is working on improving its system after what happened in 2016, when some former employees of the social network ensured having ‘camouflaged’ news that exalted the most conservative policies among Facebook Trending Topics, or in other words, the system that the platform had to show the most outstanding news to users. Zuckerberg did, back then, what some months later turned into one of the social network’s greatest problems: news automation. At that moment, the algorithm did not distinguish between real or false. This way, the social network started filling with fake news that users deemed to be true. All this potentiated by the election period in the United States. Even Barack Obama was concerned about the boom of this kind of news and the impossibility of users to discriminate them. The II Report of the Spanish Internet Users Association confirms that 70% of users have trouble distinguishing a hoax from a reliable news (*Asociación de Internautas*, 2009).

Due to these backgrounds, in the last five-year period several platforms dedicated to detecting this kind of fake information have started. For instance, in Spain, three of them were born in a year: *Maldito Bulo* in November 2016, *El Tragabulos* in January 2017 and *B de Bulo* in March 2017.

Although journalists are more connected than ever, the lack of resources, making decisions based on sentences, abbreviations, emojis, or a brief communication that may or may not be accurate representations of truth, make difficult to maintain quality standards that must characterize journalism. A situation that has caused that only a third of the Spanish population trusts media (Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2015).

This devastating landscape coexists with another reality, and it is the expansion of mobile communication. The *Asociación para la Investigación de los Medios de Comunicación* (AIMC) indicated in 2017 that 94.3% of Internet users browse the web from their smartphones and 62.7% of users do so out of home. WhatsApp has turned the Spanish population into the greatest users of its application in Europe, being present in 98% of smartphones in the country (CNMC Report).

In the labor aspect, based on a CIS survey, 25% of Spanish use WhatsApp for work-related issues. In this context, the use of electronic communication has surpassed face to face and voice to voice communication by far. Studies demonstrate that Generation Y and Millennials prefer using the instant messaging platforms or other social networks instead of attending an office and communicate in-person.

For years, Twitter has established the informative agenda, but now media face a post-Twitter era, because platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram also allowed to transform immediate messages into news, in such a way that the audience can condition the agenda (Batra, 2016). To actively involve and engage the audience into a collaborative journalism based on immediate communication, experiencing and introducing it into fact-checking and contents filtering processes represents a challenge but also an opportunity to increase audience and its loyalty.

Since 2015, media like *La Sexta Noticias*, *El Periódico de Cataluña* or *Sur* have incorporated these new consumers’ habits into their routines, by applying data-supported strategies such as the fact that 69% of users that comment television content, send their messages through WhatsApp (Suñé, 2016). In the international field, initiatives of Reddit, Propublica, The Guardian, BBC or The Washington

Post have also demonstrated that media can benefit from active audiences obtaining more sources and comments with links to evidences.

Despite this professional adaptation to the context of immediate communication, the circulation of fake news is quite alarming. The problem is not the new networks, but confirming who signs the content, thus seeking, comparing and always going to reliable brands, just like with food (Casal, 2016), otherwise, journalism can undergo irreparable damage. The actor Denzel Washington recorded a video to refute the rumor about his support to Trump by saying: “When you don’t read the newspaper you are uninformed, but if you read it, you are misinformed.” (Mèdia.cat, 2016).

In this same trend, fake news published on Facebook generated a great debate about whether Trump achieved the presidency thanks to them because, according to a study of the Pew Research Center, 60% of United States citizens obtained information about elections through this social network (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016). Zuckerberg’s response consisted of creating an alert system, similar to Google’s Fact-Check, to indicate users whether a news was fake or not. In the browser’s case, the option must be used by media when they are completely sure that they have done their job in a responsible manner. On the other hand, Facebook is studying the possibility of keep trusting artificial intelligence when using an algorithm that identifies fake news. Although this can entail a new problem long term: overflowing the thin line between filtering and censoring. At the same time, a group of four young individuals have solved the fake news problem for now by implementing an extension for Chrome, the web browser (Itkowitz, 2016).

Media in collaboration with research centers have also adopted an active role to protect themselves against the circulation of fake news. Initiatives like ‘The Trust Project’, internationally supported by media such as *La Repubblica*, *The Economist*, *La Stampa*, *The Washington Post* or *Trinity Mirror* promote the creation of protocols and tools to identify and certify the content on Internet. Duke Reporter’s Lab has also elaborated a directory where he located 126 active sites dedicated to contents’ fact-checking. PolitiFact is one of the most known because it was awarded with a Pulitzer prize.

In Spain the situation is disturbing. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2015 indicated that Spanish media were the least credible of Europe and the second ones in the world, after North American media. These data demand an active reaction and response from media and researchers, in order to redirect a discredited communicative activity. Developing new tools or strategies in a responsible manner that facilitate contents’ fact-checking and detecting rumors is essential to safeguard the credibility of media. In Spain, there have started fact-checking initiatives such as *El Objetivo*, *Polétika*, *La Chistera*, *Maldito Bulo* or *El Tragabulos*. This article is focused on analyzing one of these experiences, *B de Bulo*.

B de Bulo represents a special model because this section has a mobile phone to receive messages from the audience through WhatsApp about those contents they want to know whether to be true or false. Many fake messages turn into viral contents that circulate through WhatsApp, and this section selects the fake contents that the audience might receive, analyses them and turns to different sources to explain why the message is a fraud, offering a useful service for the citizen.

Despite the relevance of the phenomenon, from the academy the literature about it is rather scarce and recent. There is no thesis focused on the use of instant messaging applications for fact-checking by the

media. Up until now, studies have mainly dealt with the analysis of certain specific coverages (Ramalho, 2014), international reference cases like *The Washington Post* or *The Guardian* (López, Rodríguez and Álvarez, 2016), methodological proposals (Sedano and Palomo, 2018) or the use that Spanish media make of WhatsApp (Fares, 2018; Negreira, López and Lozano, 2017).

2. Objectives and methodology

Many research articles have explored citizen participation in digital news media. It is more difficult to find studies focused on the internal professional view, describing and/ or analyzing how editorials manage direct communication, what strategies are being developed and how journalists manage these new routines. These limitations are part of our objectives.

This study has a triple goal: to describe the creation process of *B de Bulo*, a section included in the Malaga newspaper *Sur* (Grupo Vocento) which online edition was founded in March 2017; secondly, to analyze its impact on social networks: how many followers has reached (Twitter and Facebook), what news have been most shared, and which had a greater impact among users. And, in third place, we will study the productive routines that surround said section, in order to know how themes are selected, how they perform fact-checking of published information and the type of feedback established with users.

To approach these objectives, a mixed methodology is applied, which combines quantitative and qualitative techniques: content analysis, interviews with the staff responsible for maintaining said section, participant observation and statistical data studies.



Image of *B de Bulo* on social networks. *Sur*

2.1. Methodological strategies

In-depth interview offers evidences about the nature of the phenomenon to be studied, facilitating the context and its emerging origin, and it enriches from the internal view of whom has a direct experience with the situation to be analyzed (Miller and Barry, 2016: 51). Therefore, in a first stage we conducted an interview with Elena De Miguel, chief editor of the digital department of *Diario Sur*, who allowed to identify the reasons underlying the creation of the *B de Bulo* section, how it was managed, how long

did it take to prepare its onset, what are the main problems faced on a regular basis, what are the sources used, fact-checking techniques used and how are contents selected.

Participant observation was another ethnographic method implemented for data collection, understood as the active view that enables the researcher to learn about an activity in the natural scenario where it takes place, while becoming involved in the routine (Kawulich, 2006). In this case, the researcher was, at the same time, the professional responsible for implementing the section, which favored the members of the environment to act naturally, avoiding an intruder's look, which could have caused an uncomfortable situation in the editorial's office.

This qualitative approach was complemented with the content analysis of all news published for four months in the *B de Bulo* section since its foundation, from March 10, 2017 to July 10 that same year, reviewing themes, the use of sources and categorizing how news are fact-checked or how are hoaxes refuted.

Regarding social networks, we have studied its growth both on Twitter and Facebook, the two platforms used. Moreover, we analyzed the reach on Facebook and its interactions to identify the news that reached most people, as well as the news shared the most or the number of reactions. A similar analysis was performed on Twitter, by studying the favorites and retweets obtained. To achieve these data, SUR facilitated the access of the researcher to the statistics system available as user on both platforms.

3. Results

B de Bulo is born thanks to an intern's initiative, with the purpose of implementing a fact-checking section open to the community; as a way of helping citizens to detect rumors.

After conducting the interviews and analyzing 50 news (an average of 12 per month) published from March to July 2017 in *B de Bulo*, the use of two types of sources was noted: messages coming from interactive communication spaces (WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook or email) and, on the other hand, the search of contents performed by editors, mainly Jon Sedano, as participant observer of the study. Through the first pathway, during the four months of analysis, alerts were received from 18 different individuals on WhatsApp, one from Telegram and four via Facebook. Some of these users sent several messages with different hoaxes, in order to know almost in real time, the content's veracity or to request further investigation and refute it on the web, if a fake.

3.1. Productive routines

The bidirectionality of communication with the user is key for the section's success. Therefore, when readers what to know whether the content they have sent to the media is real, if the hoax is already published on the web they are sent the link so that they read the news and hence, increase the piece's traffic with the certainty that the content is interesting for the user; if it has not been published yet but it is already known that it is a hoax thanks to official notices, it is made known, and lastly, if there is no evidence about the interest it may have for the audience, but is still considered a relevant issue, it is fact-checked on the site. To evaluate whether it is relevant or not, we studied whether the theme had an impact (by looking at related news on the Internet or through social networks) or if it is an isolated case. If the story might interest a broad audience, then the work on it is initiated.

The 75% of content published during the four months of analysis was directly proposed by journalists, and 25% was the audience's initiative: 20% was delivered through WhatsApp by 18 different people, 4% through Facebook, and only one suggestion came via Telegram.

The 18 individuals that contacted by WhatsApp sent a total of 34 different alerts, of which one was advertising for a pornographic group and another one was the notice about a next demonstration. Out of the remaining 32, seven news were published in *B de Bulo*, distributed as follows:

News published in <i>B de Bulo</i> coming from WhatsApp	Nº of alerts
White van that kidnapped children in Malaga	4
Website that offered one year of free subscription to the Netflix service	2
Woman who kidnapped children in the vicinity of <i>Rincón de la Victoria</i>	1
MRW's solidary campaign to gather clothes for Portugal	1
Windows update hiding a virus	1
DAESH WhatsApp Group impossible to abandon	1
HIV infected needle inside gas station hose	1

Table 1. Published news coming from users via WhatsApp. Source: Authors' own creation

The person contacting from Telegram sent two messages: one of them about an already published new (Heineken beer factory in Seville with suckled pigeons) and another one from a missing girl. In the former's case, the link to the original story was sent, while for the latter we thanked the contact, but it was not published because it affected a minor.

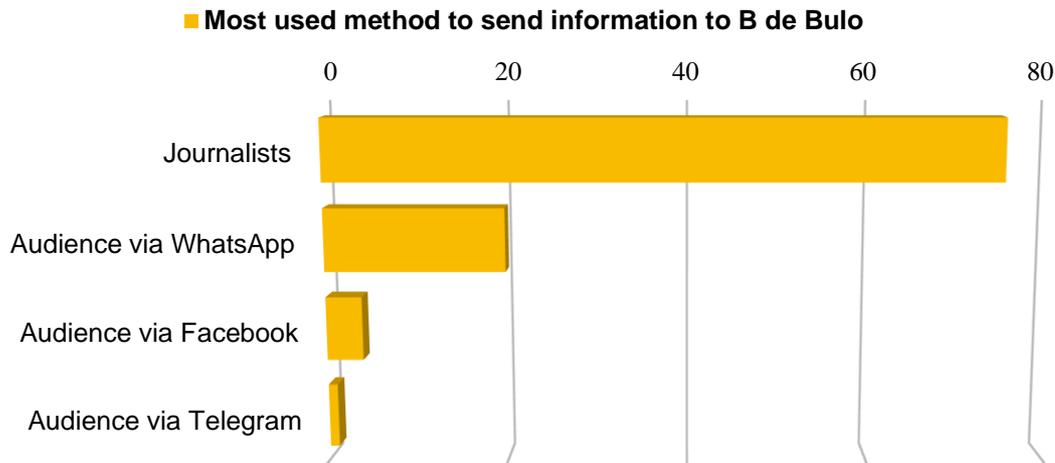
Regarding Facebook, messaging individuals alerted about different events, of which two were published in *B de Bulo*: the gang attacking those whose headlights illuminate their vehicles and the new blood alcohol level control for copilots.

Professional ethics is one of the parameters influencing in the publication criteria of hoaxes. In this sense, from the news received by users, there were two that were discarded once investigated. The first one was about a gas station in Malaga with water in its deposits that damaged several vehicles. In this case, we concluded it was a hoax, and since the message didn't have much impact, it was considered that its publication would do more damage than benefit to the company, therefore the reader sending the message was told it was only a hoax. The second alert was the case of a girl kidnapped in Mexico, and it was discovered that the girl was already safe. *B de Bulo* received four messages from WhatsApp about her and one from Facebook, and these users were explained that the girl was safe and that she has only disappeared for two hours. Again, publishing the news was not deemed convenient because she was a minor and was already safe.

The rest of news published in the section were proposed by the journalist. In order to locate said contents the following routine was articulated: Firstly, there is a search on Twitter with hashtags such

as #bulo or #stopbulos to know about recent messages where users talk about hoaxes. At the same time, several official accounts are followed which echo in these kinds of publications, such as National Police, Civil Guard, Traffic, VOST (Team of digital volunteers in emergencies) or SOSdesaparecidos, among others.

Finally, to the phone of *Diario Sur* there also came messages containing hoaxes from the audience punctually.



Graphic 1. Origin of hoaxes that appear in the section. Source: Authors' own creation

Considering this content, or the content available searching news on Internet that use the term 'bulo' [hoax], as well as from the analysis of the main viral news, we obtained a daily basis to select the section's potential contents. Despite the volume located sometimes, there is an editorial limitation in *Diario Sur* which is the fact that each publication must be distanced a minimum of 48 hours from the next one, in order to avoid granting excessive notoriety to originally fake news on the cover of the digital newspaper, which might lead to the reader's confusion. In addition, this measure favors the correct fact-checking of said contents. Another restriction is that children or politics related contents are avoided.

3.2. Fact-checking strategies

The journalist always offers arguments, based on facts and data, to justify why a message is a fake. The fact-checking process is different in each story, although from a general perspective, the steps to be followed are similar. Thus, first there is the search of the original source to confirm its veracity. Given the case of photographs and videos, images are downloaded, and a native Google search is done in order to see whether there are related news.

In other occasions keywords in several languages are used in order to find any helpful data. For instance, the video about a wind generator that broke due to the wind's force in Cadiz was really filmed in Italy and manipulated afterwards: the beginning was cut off to avoid identifying the language and noise was added in order to hide the original oral intervention. There was a search about wind generators breaking to locate the piece's origin. Since the video couldn't be found, a photogram of the best quality possible was extracted and when it was uploaded to Google, it returned a similar new.

Following the trail of this story the video was found, which many media placed in Italy. Once the location and accurate dates were obtained there was a search until finding a relevant media publishing the new. Once everything was fact-checked, the article was written in the section alluding to the original source.

Practically all contents are fact-checked by going to the original source. This allows to confirm the veracity of the fact or the search of further data that helps determine whether it is a hoax or not.

Another way of fact-checking a fake new is to use the message from an official source. In this case, the hoax is explained and confirmed versus the official information about it, adding the link, tweet or the quote in the text, so that readers can confirm for themselves it is a lie.

Lastly, in the case of local news, mainly events, there is contrast versus primary sources that could have access to said data, such as local or national police, the healthcare service, etc. besides people directly involved in the issue, like the case of the gas station. In order to do a fact-checking of the news, in addition to talking to the station and with another employee from the company, contact was established with a competitor gas station nearby, as well as the taxi drivers' union and with Consumer Assistance Centre of Malaga. They all confirmed it was a hoax. On the other hand, the hoaxes talking about the kidnapping of children in a town and that the police already working on the issue, are solved by contacting the delegation of that area in order to confirm the message's veracity.

Regarding the average time, the fact-checking requires, it differs for each news. The faster to produce are those where the official sources confirm or deny a content; in these cases, the news explaining what happened is written and it is accompanied by the original message from the official source. If there are no official data about it, the fact-checking can range between some hours and a day. Exceptionally, in those case where there is the need to wait for the reply of involved parties, that usual range has been exceeded.



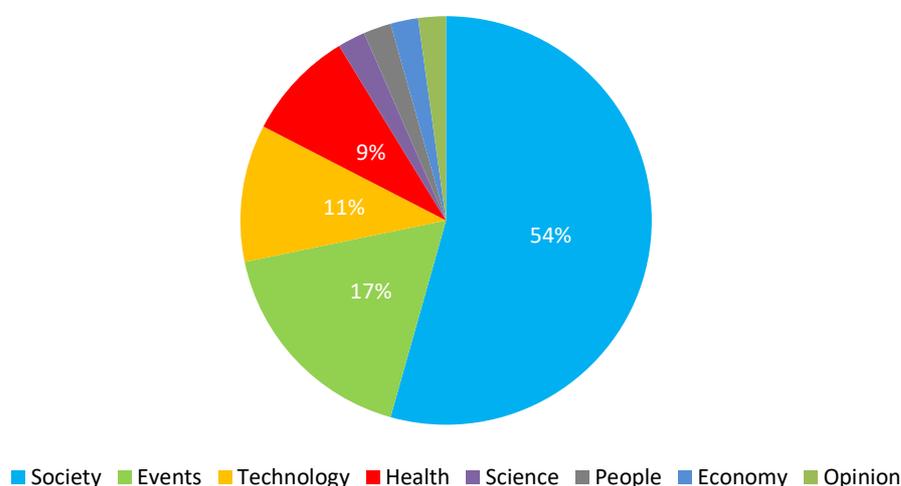
Cover of the section *B de Bulo. Sur*

3.3. Key to success

Before the question about why users share hoaxes, we found two drivers: the first one is to discredit a company, person or institution; and the second one is to create social alarm.

Fear sells, and the analysis of the 50 news published in *B de Bulo* during its first months of existence showed that 54% of them are contents about kidnapping, deaths, frauds, terrorist activities, disappeared individuals, accidents, etc. Likewise, it was seen that only 14% of these facts were linked to the local context, which allows the media to elaborate interest contents for other contexts that are not necessarily close (López, 1999). In this sense, the local newspaper generates content of local involvement, connected and open to consumer preferences without a geographic limitation.

Typology of news published in *B de Bulo*



Often media experience with innovation without obtaining any benefit in return. However, the section *B de Bulo* has been widely accepted by readers. The most read article had 214.192 visits. In fact, three of those articles are part of a very relevant list: the five most visited news in the digital section of *Diario Sur* during 2017.

All the content is published on Facebook and Twitter accounts, also developed by *B de Bulo*. After monitoring social networks, it was seen that these news were more successful on Facebook, obtaining 1235 followers and 1200 "likes". Regarding the most shared publications, the ones related to kidnapping evoked more clicks and reactions.

4. Conclusions and discussion

Technology is not neutral. This feature obliges journalists to develop mechanisms in order to do fact-checking of all contents received through instant messaging of applications like WhatsApp or Telegram essentially for two reasons: the first one, that media need to create solid bridges with the public in order to try to increase their trust, collaborate in an efficacious manner and create commitment and loyalty. On the other hand, most of media use email, text messaging, instant

messaging, blogs and comments in websites, therefore the possibility of a misinterpretation increases. Media must find the perfect balance between both scenarios.

Recently, benefits of low cost communication have reduced to describing the activity of audiences on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat. However, current journalism is affected by an over-stimulated society, constantly open to new experiences. Citizens are interested about the search of novelty, which produces a dopamine shot. At the same time, every WhatsApp alert represents a new stimulus for journalists. Messaging applications have turned into a new and faster information source, and the audience activity confirms its preference by these platforms, therefore they are very efficacious channels to connect with the public. Likewise, this private and direct communication can be an intense experience because it depicts the watchdog of the gatekeeper, and the formula of media to recover the audience's trust.

Citizens have new active roles to help media improve, to reduce misinformation, to warn about the circulation of fake news or rumors. In this context, journalists must remember that obtaining the first news is a challenge, but being rigorous or accurate is a need for survival in quality journalism.

Another evident conclusion after the analysis of *B de Bulo* in *Diario Sur* is that WhatsApp is an ideal tool for small or local media because they do not usually have the need to elaborate lists with more than 253 users, which is the application limit, and since it is the application with the greatest audience, with it they have the opportunity to increase their public.

The absence of similar previous studies opens many options for developing comparisons versus other news fact-checking sections on media, platforms completely destined to contrast hoaxes or a qualitative analysis of the population's behavior before fake news in moments of social crises.

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