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By: Ana María López-Jijón

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_____ Supervisor

Prof. Elyse Amend

The role of disinformation during the 2017 and 2021 presidential elections in

Ecuador: why fact-checking in journalism matters

Ana María López-Jijón

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ABSTRACT

Fact-checking is an essential aspect of the journalistic practice, especially in highly contentious periods like presidential elections. Fact-checking cuts through the constant tension between the truth and manipulated data. A fact-checker's job is to shed light on falsehood and provide audiences with content that can stand out amidst so much information published online. The goal of this essay is to show why fact-checking matters, and how it has shaped political discussions around Ecuador's 2017 and 2021 presidential elections. I have also illustrated what a fact-checking exercise looks like. Fact checkers start by analyzing a piece of questionable content's "red flags" and follow hints to reconstruct where it came from. For this exercise, I focus on a contentious photograph of Ecuadorian politicians Rafael Correa, Lenín Moreno, and Andrés Arauz that was shared on social media during the Ecuadorian 2021 presidential. My goal with this exercise is to illustrate the processes of fact-checking and provide others interested in doing such verification work tools to use and a model to follow.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I argue that fact-checking is becoming an essential component of a journalist's practice. Although external fact-checking organizations are relatively new (Graves & Amazeen, 2019) and although many people misunderstand the procedures involved in fact-checking (Elizabeth et al., 2015), this process is not a fringe element of journalism. Rather, it has become indispensable for the people and organizations that make news.[1]

Using the example of the 2017 and 2021 presidential elections in Ecuador, I show (1) how disinformation has proliferated and come to influence electoral politics in Ecuador; (2) why fact-checking matters in this context; (3) and what fact-checking looks like in practice by providing a step-by-step illustration of the processes involved in determining the accuracy of a single photograph related to 2021 Ecuadorian presidential election. In this way, I reveal not only the importance of fact-checking, but also the amount of work it entails. I show why news outlets need to invest in fact-checkers and why external fact-checking organizations deserve more attention and support.

Ecuador is a useful site to examine fact-checking because disinformation in Ecuadorian politics is common. In almost every election since 1979, the losing candidate has wrongfully claimed has claimed to be the victim of "electoral fraud" (González, 2021). These claims not only harm people's trust in democracy. They can also affect electoral outcomes. To give just one example, we can look at the case of Rodrigo Borja and León Febres Cordero. Ecuadorian elections have two rounds of voting: one to choose the top two candidates from a larger pool of candidates, and a second to choose the

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[1] In this essay, I focus on external *post hoc* fact-checking, or when journalists and experts analyze the accuracy of a circulating news report, video, audio clip, or claim.

president between these two finalists. In 1984, Rodrigo Borja won the first electoral round. Febres Cordero and his supporters responded by calling it a "monstrous fraud," even though they had no evidence (El Telégrafo, 2012). However, with this claim Febres Cordero effectively delegitimized Borja. Febres Cordero's claims sparked several demonstrations in Guayaquil, a coastal city of Ecuador and the politician's main stronghold city. Local and national newspapers covered the protests and reproduced the fraud accusations (González, 2021). Febres Cordero won the second round and became Ecuador's 35th president. According to Andrés Vallejo, former Minister of Government who worked with the Borja presidential campaign, "I think we lost the election because they started talking about fraud. The idea that we cheated [really] hit people," (Vallejo, A., personal communication, April 2019). False claims, in short, have power. They impact the way people think, behave, interact, and vote.

Four decades after the Borja-Febres Cordero runoff, Ecuadorian politicians and their supporters continue to claim "electoral fraud" after most presidential elections, despite growing election oversight and lack of any concrete proof (NDI 2021). What is more, in more recent elections, politicians and their supporters have gone further, sharing doctored images, out-of-context quotes, false claims, and more. Fraud claims now come hand-in-hand with inaccurate information spread through social media. It is in this context that fact-checking organizations have begun to operate. Studying fact-checking in Ecuador, then, allows us to explore the burgeoning practice of verification where it is needed most.

This essay is organized in four parts. First, I review the academic literature on fact-checking. I define different types of inaccurate information and explain why people are increasingly vulnerable to it. Second, I provide a historical overview of fact-checking in Ecuador. I show the role disinformation has played in recent elections and how fact-

checking organizations are changing the current media landscape. Third, I provide an example of how fact-checking is done by examining a photograph that was used to discredit a political candidate. By showing the fact-checking process in action, I reveal the work involved to determine whether a claim is true or false. Finally, I provide a brief conclusion where I discuss the importance of fact-checking more broadly. I end by making recommendations to current and future fact-checkers on how best to use this practice to defend the truth.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 What we mean by "misinformation," "disinformation," and "fake news"

Misleading content – or "misinformation" has always been part of the news industry. "Fake news is not new, and it's not going away. As long as people want to gain power or wealth, as long as people want to persuade others at any cost, fake news will continue." (Farmer, 2021, p. 2). Misinformation, broadly speaking, refers to any false or inaccurate information people produce and communicate to each other, regardless of whether they intended to deceive or not (Ireton & Posetti, p. 7) Incorrect information and unintentional mistakes fall under this category (Farmer, 2021). Journalists, for instance, sometimes write articles that include incorrect dates, misspelled names, or inaccurate photo captions (ALLEA, 2021). As author and scholar Joan Donovan reminds us, "misinformation is everywhere, an inherent part of communication that does not imply intent" (in Sweet, 2021).

"Disinformation," in contrast, does imply intent. It involves "deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information" (Ireton & Posetti 2018, p. 7). The people who spread disinformation are organized, have resources, and can automate their spread of falsehoods through social

media and technology (Ireton & Posetti 2018). They aim to mislead an audience with fabricated or deliberately manipulated content (ALLEA, 2021). "Fake news" belongs in this category, as do malicious rumors or defamation (Farmer, 2021, p. 2). Disinformation challenges facts and can even modify "the conscious processing of information, creating a structure where contradictions are not recognized." (Flore et al., 2019, p. 1).

Fake news differs from other forms of disinformation in that it tries to mimic news media content. It looks like news media in form but does not follow an editorial process of accuracy and credibility (Lazer et al., 2018). As Posetti and Matthews (2018) put it:

> We now inhabit a world with computational propaganda, state-sponsored 'sock-puppet networks', troll armies, and technology that can mimic legitimate news websites and seamlessly manipulate audio and video to create synthetic representations of any number of sources. In this environment, where trust becomes polarized around what "news" aligns with their views, many news consumers feel entitled to choose or create their own 'facts.' Combined, these developments present an unprecedented threat level that can drown out journalism, as well as contaminate it with the implication that there is nothing to distinguish it from false and fraudulent information more broadly.

Put another way, when misinformation and disinformation are "dressed up as news and distributed via social media," (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 32) they threaten the work done by journalists, they threaten efforts to find the truth. After all, a journalist's mission is to produce news based on facts, not falsehoods, that can be proven with evidence.

2.2 Why people spread and believe disinformation

Disinformation can be generated for different reasons, "the most apparent motivations are financial profit and ideological conviction." (ALLEA, 2021, p. 7). In many cases, people make and spread disinformation to create confusion and cause political mistrust. Audiences are also predisposed to accept and support information that confirms their past beliefs and opinions. Researchers call this "biased assimilation," or when people judge new ideas "based on previous information or emotional appeal"

(ALLEA, 2021, p. 7). This, in turn, can lead to "motivated reasoning" where people are willing to deceive themselves in order to maintain their current worldviews (ALLEA, 2021, p. 7).

People around the world have always been prone to biased assimilation. What makes the current journalistic landscape different is the amount of information available and the novel ways in which it travels, such as personalized information, targeted propaganda, and manipulated content in general fabricated and powered by technology (Flore et al., 2019). Artificial intelligence technology allows a broader audience to access tools for manipulation. "Online content may then be digitally signed with a cryptographic key embedded into the file metadata to be later decrypted by browsers or platforms, making it also inspectable by regulators or the general public" (Flore et al., 2019, p. 64). Individuals are vulnerable to misinformation because of their constant exposure to information. As Flore and colleagues (Flore et al., 2019) explain:

> People constantly exposed to massive amounts of information tend to trust opinions that were formed in and shaped by those groups that confirm pre-existing convictions, with an effect known as "band wagoning." It is the "illusory truth effect," which is the mechanism that confers trustworthiness to stories via previous exposure, despite their low level of overall believability. (p. 4)

People are also vulnerable to disinformation because of the way it spreads through social media. People prefer to "use simpler, easier ways of solving problems than ones requiring more thought and effort." (Shane, 2020). And people increasingly find these solutions in social media content. Stories and information that have not been verified diffuse faster, farther, and deeper than those that have been verified (Berghella, 2019, para. 6). Nevertheless, the creation and distribution of misleading content is not new. Propaganda and false information that favors a government or politician goes beyond the digital era. "It is, however, clear that the rise of the Internet and the resulting connectivity between millions of people around the world over different channels and platforms allows

for magnification of this type of content at a time – and in a way – that is unprecedented." (Berghella, 2019, para. 2)

Social media and the internet have amplified the possibilities of mobilizations, propaganda, and the building of similar ideologies within a network. Social media allows people to find allies, collaborators, colleagues and even partners that defend the same belief system, even if that reproduces information that has not been verified (Fiore et al., 2019). In general, people trust information that comes from those who are close to them. As Menczer & Hills (2020) explain:

> We prefer information from people we trust, our in-group. We pay attention to and are more likely to share information about risks (…). We search for and remember things that fit well with what we already know and understand. These biases are products of our evolutionary past, and for tens of thousands of years, they served us well. (…) Modern technologies are amplifying these biases in harmful ways, however. Making matters worse, bots—automated social media accounts that impersonate humans—enable misguided or malevolent actors to take advantage of his vulnerabilities.

Content that is constantly repeated increases the possibilities of it becoming more credible (Flore et al., 2019). What is more, when there is a massive amount of information at play, people tend to trust opinions that confirm their beliefs. "Repetition increases the ease with which statements are processed, which in turn is used heuristically to infer accuracy" (Flore et al., 2019, p. 4). If a user comes across content shared by someone they personally know, they are more likely to believe it. Also, "bad news" spreads more quickly than good or neutral news, because it is "loaded with strong negative emotions, like anger or fear, making [it] the perfect match for the construction of a hostile narrative" (Flore et al., 2019, p. 6). This can be seen during moments of political crises: "social media users not only share content from reliable sources, but also extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, fraudulent, and other forms of unsubstantiated content"

(Flore et al., 2019, p.6). Therefore, people are particularly vulnerable to manipulated content in times of uncertainty or unrest.

Misinformation is shared three times faster than other types of news. An MIT study found that "false news stories have a 70% higher probability of being retweeted as compared to accurate stories" (Berghella, 2019, para. 6). The study also shows that people, not bots, are responsible for disseminating false news. Moreover, "people are more likely to believe something to be true if they can process it frequently – it feels right, and so seems true" (Shane, 2020). This is where fact-checkers can intervene. Fact-checkers are those who track circulating content and try to stop the dissemination of falsehoods.

2.3 Why fact-checking initiatives are necessary

Fact-checking and verification organizations—like *FactCheck.org* and *PolitiFact* in the United States, *Channel 4 News Fact Check* in the United Kingdom, and *Les Décodeurs* in France—started to appear worldwide in the early 2000's. In 2010, *Chequeado* in Argentina pioneered the fact-checking movement in Latin America. The Duke Reporters' Lab counted 42 fact-checking sites operating in South America in 2021 (Stencel & Luther, 2021). There has been a considerable growth of 17 verification initiatives since 2018. In the case of Ecuador, the country has had three fact-checking initiatives: *El Verificador* (GK), *Ecuador Chequea* and *Ecuador Verifica*. Only the last two are still in operation.

Although the Duke Reporters' Lab identified 341 active fact-checking projects in 102 countries, they also found that this growth in fact-checking sites is now slowing down (Stencel & Luther, 2021). According to the report, the rapid expansion of fact-checking sites started in 2016, when the Brexit vote and the presidential race in the United States raised the alarm about how misinformation affects audiences (Stencel & Luther, 2021). However, the enthusiasm for fact-checking is starting to wane, even though misleading

content keeps appearing in political elections and now during the coronavirus pandemic (Stencel & Luther, 2021).

Misinformation and disinformation are especially prevalent during political elections. Political candidates have always tried to discredit each other, usually through canvassing and public debates. This process, however, has been transformed by the rise of social media. As Rodríguez-Hidalgo and colleagues (2020) explain, "electoral processes have become fertile ground for the dissemination of fake news because social networks are crucial tools in the development of political campaigns" (Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2020, p. 43). Through social media, political groups have more direct and targeted access to different audiences. They can share messages, images, and ideas in the same space where their friends and relatives share life updates or upload pictures of cats.

Technological advances mean that today both information and disinformation can reach a wider audience. Social media, then, attracts politicians, authorities, and political organizations because it creates opportunities for engagement. Through social media, "disinformation can spread exponentially fast, often being uncritically picked-up and redistributed to an even larger audience by traditional media" (Flore et al., 2019, p. 4).[2]

The diffusion of information is driven by algorithms that can easily be exploited. Experts now talk of people living in "echo chambers," "where users are confronted only with similar opinions, rapidly leading to extreme polarization" (Flore et al., 2019, p. 4). Those spreading disinformation take advantage of these echo chambers, compromising the democratic process.

Even a small country like Ecuador is extremely online. Its population is connected through the internet and social media: 77.8% of the population has a mobile device and 80.1% of the population uses the internet (Alvino, C., 2021). Out of Ecuador's total

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[2] By "traditional media," I am referring to legacy newspapers, television, radio, and print magazines.

population 17 million, 14 million people have access to social media (Del Alcázar, J., 2021). In January 2021, Facebook registered 13.3 million users in the country, according to the [Ecuador Estado Digital report](). Twitter has 1 million Ecuadorian users, TikTok 2.3 million, and Instagram 5.2 million (Del Alcázar, J., 2021). This means the country has a large audience with easy access to digital platforms. This also means that misinformation and disinformation have many places to spread. In the next section, I discuss the spread of disinformation and the rise of fact-checking in the Ecuadorian context.

3. DISINFORMATION AND FACT-CHECKING IN ECUADOR

3.1 A clash between public and private media

An independent press has long been associated with a healthy democracy. In practice, however, the relationship between political actors and the press is often contentious (Schudson, 1995). In Ecuador, this became especially apparent during the government of Rafael Correa from 2007 to 2017. In this time, both the private and public media became more ideologically polarized, with different political actors using the media as a tool to advance their political interests, and not as a service meant to "provide citizens with accurate and reliable information" (APA, 2021).

When Correa left the presidency in 2017, he had an overwhelming 46% popular approval rating (El Universo, 2019). According to Vanderbilt University's *AmericasBarometer*, between 2008 and 2017 Correa's approval was one of the highest in the region. In ten years of government, 57.6% of Ecuadorians thought his performance was, on average, good or very good (Larrea & Montalvo, 2017).

During the decade he was in power, Correa established what he called the "Citizens' Revolution" (Goeury, 2021). This was a political process that, by controlling the five branches of government (judicial, legislative, executive, participatory, and

electoral power), was able to institutionalize a populist and authoritarian leadership (Ortiz, 2015). Public media was one of the main pillars of this process. Correa turned the public media into an instrument of power. As Philip Kitzberger (2015) explains of similar regimes in Latin America:

> Many of the governments of the region's new left have linked their counterhegemonic orientations with post-neoliberal agendas and demands for democratization of the power of the media. Where progressive governments emerged after a severe crisis of representation or the collapse of the political system, as in Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, there was a radical politicization of the question of the media, including regular counter-discourse deconstructing the interests and practices of the dominant media, discussion of constitutional reforms and new legal and regulatory frameworks, attempts to alter the relationships of media ownership, and the promotion of public media as an alternative to the market. (pp. 1-2)

Before the Citizens' Revolution, the Ecuadorian media was largely private; there was an almost complete absence of public media. Two newspapers represented 65% of the national circulation: *El Universo*, representing the elites of Guayaquil city, and *El Comercio*, owned by a wealthy family in Quito, Ecuador's capital (Kitzberger, 2015). By 2008, three state media organizations would emerge: *Diario El Telégrafo* (print), *Ecuador TV* (television) and *Radio Pública del Ecuador* (radio) (Freire, 2018, p. 10).

In 2008, the government seized 18 media outlets from the private sector and turned them into a part of the State, as part of Correa's shift of the media system as an "indispensable part of a transformed political order" (Kitzberger, 2016, p. 3). As a result, the struggle between public and private media emerged. Critics of public media argued that journalists were not being rigorous and were not pursuing diverse sources, simply repeating what government officials told them (Freire, 2018). Critics of private media, meanwhile, argued that journalists were bowing to commercial and elite interests (Novoa, 2012). Both sides accused each other of favoring ideology over facts.[3]

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[3] By 2020, 15 of the seized media outlets had been disbanded. Two of the seized television channels, for instance, accumulated losses of up to $23 million (Panchana, 2020).

Correa left a legacy of declaring open fire on private, especially traditional media outlets such as the newspapers *El Universo*, *El Comercio*, *Expreso*, *Hoy*, and *La Hora*, and television channels like *Teleamazonas* and *Ecuavisa* (Meléndez & Moncagatta, 2017). His regime placed the traditional media in opposition to his left-leaning government, claiming they were aligned with a "neoliberal and liberal democracy agenda" (Moncagatta & Espinosa, 2019, p. 129). It was in this context of polarization and mistrust that the 2017 political elections took place.

3.2 Disinformation in the 2017 presidential election

The campaigns for president of Ecuador started on January 3, 2017. A total of eight politicians presented their candidacy for the first electoral round. Guillermo Lasso and Lenín Moreno won, making it to the second round. Lasso, a former banker, was the conservative and opposition leader. He won 28.09% of the votes. Moreno, who had served as Correa's vice-president from 2007 to 2013, Citizens' Revolution candidate. He got 39.36% of the first-round votes.

The two candidates campaigned for the presidency from March until April 2017. Fundamedios, or the Andean Foundation for Media Observation and Study, analyzed the press coverage of these campaigns in six public media outlets. They found a significant increase in the proselytizing campaign in favor of Moreno: "the Citizen's Revolution regime has implemented […] a great communicational apparatus to capture public opinion and present a single truth for the citizenry" (Fundamedios, 2017).

However, in Ecuador, as in the rest of the world, the political debate was not only happening on the pages of traditional media. The debate was also transferred from the streets and public squares to online spaces (Tomalá, 2020) According to data from the Ministry of Communications, the use of digital platforms in the country increased from 42% in 2012 to 84% in 2016 (Moreno, 2017, p.1). The candidates, therefore, also

packaged their messages for Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter (Moreno, 2017, p. 3).

By 2017, Twitter had 1.2 million users in Ecuador, "around 10% of the voting population." (Puyosa, 2017, p. 44) In March of that same year, 4.4 million people in Ecuador had a smartphone, and Facebook had 10.5 million users (Tomalá, 2020). Political analysts agreed: "In this scenario, to win votes, it was vital to dominate the […] networks." (Tomalá, 2020, p.19). And, as we have seen, social media is a space in which disinformation easily spreads.

Iria Puyosa (2017) analyzed the ten most common hashtags Ecuadorians used on Twitter before the second round of voting, between March 12 and 30, 2017. She found that seven out of the 10 hashtags spread disinformation aimed at Lasso; the other three targeted Correa and Moreno (Puyosa, 2017). What is more, there was an interplay between social media and both public and private traditional media. Disinformation that appeared in social media was amplified by traditional media outlets and this, in turn, was then debated on social media, creating a messy feedback loop.

Take the following example: In March 2017, Fundamedios reported that the public media was circulating flyers with misleading content. One flyer said that Lasso was a "militant fascist of the Opus Dei"[4] who wanted to "take public resources, remove subsidies, and fire all public servants" (Fundamedios, 2017). Another alleged that the candidate wanted to increase the cost of basic services and reduce people's salaries at the same time. These claims did not match Lasso's actual election proposals. Even so, the flyers seized media attention. *TC Televisión* published videos and photos of the flyers on its social media accounts. The Fundamedios (2017) report explains:

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[4] Opus Dei is a Roman Catholic organization founded in 1928 in Spain, by St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer. Its "(…) core ideal is sanctification of work. But critics and some former members have accused the group of having cult-like practices and promoting a right-wing agenda" (Gross, 2005).

On March 20, the channel's [Facebook] account released a note entitled "Lasso the offshore magnate," in which it mentioned that the candidate allegedly earned $30 million after the banking crisis [of 1999]. The same information was divulged through the official account of TC's 100xCientoFutbol sports program. Users on social media questioned why public resources were given to this and [Lasso] himself took to Twitter to assure that this was part of a dirty campaign against him.

Take another example: Correa claimed on Twitter – and the Moreno campaign echoed – that Lasso was lying to citizens in order to get their votes. *Telesur TV* (a Venezuelan television channel that operates in many Latin American countries) repeated Correa's opinions in a reportage a couple days before the election (Telesur, 2017). Supporters of both candidates, in short, made false claims on social media. And these claims were not restricted to social media; they were often then amplified and given legitimacy by the press. News media outlets then spread this misinformation and disinformation through their official social media accounts.

While traditional media is regulated in Ecuador, social media is not. Starting in 2013, the government was able to regulate traditional media through a new Communication Law established by Correa's government. The law does not incorporate any regulation or control over the spread of misinformation or disinformation. Also, it was not extended to social media content. What is more, the interplay between social media and traditional media is complicated by the extensive use of bots and fake accounts (Gómez, 2021). Troll accounts spread insults, threats, defamations, and intimidating content. Gómez (2021) explains:

> These users usually manage several profiles and, due to their degree of organization and high quantity, are able to position trends, hashtags, or topics on which the majority is supposed to discuss, [and are able to] confuse, direct the conversation, lie. (p. 29)

On April 2, 2017, Moreno was elected as the 46th president of Ecuador. Lasso claimed there was electoral fraud. Moreno defeated Lasso with a 2.32% difference of

votes. Election day was mired with misinformation and confusion. At 5 pm, exit polls called Lasso the winner. At 9 pm, Ecuador's National Electoral Council confirmed Moreno's victory. However, *Participación Ciudadana*, a nongovernmental organization that was monitoring the results, said the election was a tie (McKirdy & Romo, 2017). The public media supported Moreno. The private media supported Lasso's fraud discourse. In the next week, 10.5% of *El Universo*'s daily coverage was used to explain the presumed irregularities in the electoral process. They published interviews with opposition actors who tried to delegitimize the electoral process. They also projected a negative image of the electoral institutions (Posso, 2017).

Lasso was not able to provide evidence of unlawful activity during the counting of the votes, and the presidential transition went ahead. But the election season, overall, revealed the limitations of traditional media, the perils of new social media, and the extent of disinformation. The election, in other words, revealed the importance of fact-checking, of providing a rigorous, independent, non-partisan assessment of the facts.

3.3 The rise of fact-checking and verification in Ecuador

In August 2015, *GK* media published a new segment on their website: "*El Verificador" (The Verifier)*. *El Verificador* was the first fact-checking platform created in Ecuador. Between August 2015 and February 2016, it published 12 verifications. They did a live fact-checking of Correa's last annual report to the National Assembly in 201X, as well as speeches given by other authorities. *El Verificador* also worked during the 2017 presidential elections analyzing the candidates' claims. Their last verification was published in 2018. In 2020, they re-published four verifications of the Spanish fact-checking site Maldita.es. They have not verified any claim in 2021.

"*Ecuador Chequea" (Ecuador Checks*) was created in October 2016, by Fundamedios. Its objective is to "determine which statements made by [political]

authorities in the country are true, deserve contextualization, are unsustainable or are false. [...] We analyze the misleading information that circulates on the Internet to prevent it from being disseminated as true." In June 2017, *Ecuador Chequea* verified electoral content and identified at least 14 platforms as producers of disinformation. It found that "for political purposes, falsified images and audios were disseminated on social networks, which influenced public perception." Fundamedios also found that the 'peak' of fake-news circulation was between October 2016 and May 2017 (Fundamedios, 2017). Since January 2019, *Ecuador Chequea* has been part of the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN). It continues to fact-check political claims to this day.

During the 2017 presidential campaign, no traditional media outlet had a team of fact-checkers dedicated to combat disinformation. As María Natalia Saltos (2017) wrote, "the political discourse was not corroborated; the media limited themselves to replicating the statements without verification" (p.14).

Desirée Yépez, former editor of *Ecuador Chequea*, explained that traditional media did not have the resources for a fact-checking department, as most of the time it is too expensive: "In Ecuador, the economic situation of the media has been —for many years—complex and —in many cases —precarious, which means that the allocation of their budgets is limited." (quoted in Saltos, 2017, p. 69) *Ecuador Chequea* was the only institution devoted to verifying content that was published on the internet for the 2017 election. In its first year, the initiative published 500 articles, including verifications, reports, and multimedia products.

For the next four years, *Ecuador Chequea* continued to work as the only Ecuadorian fact-checking organization. They analyzed the public discourse of political figures such as then-president Lenín Moreno, former president Correa, Lasso, and former assemblywoman Cynthia Viteri, among others.

In September 2020, "*Ecuador Verifica*" ("*Ecuador Verifies*") was born. It is an unprecedented initiative in the country. It brings together media outlets, universities, and civil society organizations. It is modeled on similar initiatives around the world, such as *Electionland*, in the United States, *CrossCheck*, in France, *Verified*, in Mexico, and *Projeto Comprava*, Brazil. Fundamedios powered the project. Since its origins, the principal objective has been "to combat misinformation and promote digital literacy" (Fundamedios, 2020). The Reporters' Lab added *Ecuador Verifica* to the 19 new fact-checking projects of 2020 (Stencel & Luther, 2021). It was supposed to last from September 2020 to April 2021, finishing right after the last presidential election cycle. However, as of July 2021, *Ecuador Verifica* was still operating. *Ecuador Chequea* and *Ecuador Verifica* are the two only Ecuadorian sites dedicated entirely to fact-checking. Both are supported by international non-governmental organizations.

The 2017 presidential election was shaped by the polarization of traditional media and by the rise of political disinformation online. By the 2021 election, four years later, the media landscape in Ecuador had changed. The 2021 campaign was the first to feature a group of fact-checkers dedicated exclusively to verifying information (Gómez, 2021). These fact-checking organizations still faced considerable challenges. In Ecuador, it is still difficult to access reliable sources of information (Tomalá, 2020). And yet, these organizations made a difference in this most recent election cycle. As Yalilé Loaiza, content director of Fundamedios, explained about *Ecuador Verifica*: "Our goal is for the greatest amount of verified information to reach users [...] We fight against the virilization of the false and we seek to make the verified viral" (quoted in Gómez, 2021, p.31).

3.4 Fact-checking the 2021 presidential election

The 2021 Presidential campaign started on December 31, 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic. For the first round, Ecuadorians had to choose between 17 possible

candidates. There were old and new political faces, but the real fight was between Andrés Arauz, representing Rafael Correa's new party, Centro Democrático, and Guillermo Lasso, vying for the presidency again, embodying the conservative opposition. In the first round, Arauz received 32.72% of the votes. Lasso got 19.74%. Unsurprisingly, before and after, social media was booming with misleading content about both candidates.

Between October 26 and February 7, *Ecuador Verifica* did 167 verifications. Most were related to misinformation published and virialized in social media platforms. For example, Arauz was singled out for apparent fake college degrees, or for financing his campaign with money from drug trafficking. These were false statements. Likewise, a video of Lasso talking in an interview about, supposedly, wanting to lower the workers' salary to USD $120 per month became so viral that he started a new campaign offering to increase the salary from USD $400 —the current base salary— to USD $500 per month. The original accusation was false as well.

During the second round, the spread of disinformation intensified, so much so that both candidates started to publish their own rebuttals to the information shared online. verified information. For instance, on his official webpage, Arauz published corrections to viral texts and multimedia content. Newspaper *El Universo* even highlighted how Arauz had a "team dedicated to denying false news" (El Universo, 2021). Similarly, Lasso used Twitter whenever faced with content he assured was false.

Érika Astudillo, former editor of *Ecuador Chequea* and *Ecuador Verifica*, told the newspaper *El Universo* that in the last two weeks before the first round of voting, the initiative published between 10 and 12 verifications weekly. Before the second round, fact-checking peaked, with the organizations verifying more than 20 claims per week. Moreover, Loaiza from Fundamedios explained to the same newspaper that "on Twitter,

disinformation has 70% more retweets than true information (…) Personal attacks prevail over real proposals" (El Universo, 2021).

AFP Factual, the fact-checking site of Agence France-Presse, also verified information related to the Ecuadorian elections. They found false statements attributed to candidates, manipulated photographs and videos, and other types of multimedia that circulated without its proper context (Ecuador Verifica, 2021). AFP is part of Ecuador Verifica's media coalition. AFP Factual contributed to the verification of information during the most intense months of the electoral campaign. Along with Ecuador Verifica, they became a prop to combat the proliferation of disinformation during the elections.

"No newsroom is big enough to do this job alone," said Cristina Tardáguila, the former International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) editor in an interview with Ecuador Verifica (Ecuador Verifica, 2020). Several traditional news outlets published content that was previously verified by Ecuador Verifica and AFP Factual, something that did not happen with the fact-checked content published by Ecuador Chequea in 2017. In that sense, journalists were starting to acknowledge they are key players in the fight to control the spread of misleading content. By 2021, at least part of the cycle of disinformation was being broken.

On April 11, 2021, Guillermo Lasso won the presidential election. This time, the losing candidate, Arauz, did not claim that election fraud had taken place, but instead immediately conceded (The Guardian, 2021). And while disinformation is still prevalent in Ecuador today – Ecuador Chequea is currently debunking false information about the Covid-19 pandemic – the 2021 presidential election did reveal the importance of verification and fact-checking. In the next section, I provide a detailed example of how this is done in practice.

4. FACT-CHECKING IN PRACTICE
4.1 The four steps to fact-checking

In this section, I will analyze one verification published by *Ecuador Verifica* during the presidential elections of 2021. The first objective is to show the practical application of fact-checking and to understand the context behind this process. My second objective is to break down the example for future fact-checking in an Ecuadorian context. I will use the procedure implemented by *Ecuador Verifica,* which takes a statement and verifies whether it is "true," somewhat true ("yes, but…"), "unverifiable," or "false."

Statements are categorized as "true" when they are precise, directly congruent with the source, and do not omit data or limit the contextualization of the discussed issue. Statements are deemed "yes, but..." when they include partially true data but require greater contextualization, clarity or precision. In this classification, it is important to highlight the level of accuracy of a statement, to say whether the statement is mostly accurate, somewhat accurate, or mostly inaccurate. "Unverifiable" content refers to expressions, statements or arguments that cannot be directly substantiated from official data. This category does not determine whether a statement is true or false until an objective source can be located. Finally, a statement that openly contradicts the official data is categorized as "false," for example a misleading argument or a proven lie.

The fact-checking process at *Ecuador Verifica* (2020) includes four stages. First, journalists monitor public statements and official claims shared through social media, selecting verifiable phrases that can be compared to concrete facts. These phrases can be related to public policy, the economy, society, human rights, or other topics of interest. The important thing is that they are truth-claims, not opinions or private anecdotes. Second, a journalist analyzes the selected statement and compares it with an original source, finding official administrative or census data, academic research findings, previous interviews or statements, or information in non-governmental databases. Third

comes the analysis and contextualization. The graphics team visualizes the statement for a better understanding of the processed data. To finish, journalists and editors evaluate the verified data and classify it in one of four ways: as "true," "yes, but," "unverifiable," or "false."

This methodology is based on the transparency principle used by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). The network's code of principles is currently applied to organizations worldwide. Organizations that want to sign on to this network must be legally registered, non-partisan, not associated to a politician, political party, or state, and must aim to publish non-partisan reports about political processes (Stencel & Luther, 2021). A total of 109 organizations follow this code (Stencel & Luther, 2021).

As a disclosure, it is important to highlight that I worked as a fact-checker in *Ecuador Verifica* between October 2020 and June 2021. On April 9 2021, I did the verification for "Photograph of Andrés Arauz next to Lenín Moreno and Rafael Correa was manipulated" ("[Fotografía de Andrés Arauz junto a Lenín Moreno y Rafael Correa fue manipulada"](#)), which I will analyze it in detail for this essay. The photo became viral in April 2021, a couple days before the second round of that year's presidential election. The picture showed former president Rafael Correa walking beside then-president Lenín Moreno, whose wheelchair was being pushed by, apparently, then candidate Andrés Arauz. The photograph was used to claim a collusion between the three men, in an effort to discredit Arauz's candidacy. I analyzed the image following the verification techniques recommended by two organizations who have published extensively on the subject of online images, namely *UNESCO* and *First Draft*.

4.2 Fact-checking tools and techniques

In *UNESCO's* [Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training](#), the organization recommends that journalists look

for "red flags" during the fact-checking process (Posetti & Matthews, 2018, p. 105). First, a fact-checker should try to confirm if the content is original, or if it was taken from previous reporting and was re-appropriated. Second, a fact-checker should determine if the content was digitally manipulated. Third, a fact-checker should verify the time and place of the visual content. They should ask, can this be confirmed by available metadata, or can the time and place of the visual content be confirmed using visual clues?

These "red flags'' are useful because there are different types of misleading visual content. As Vaccari and Chadwick (2020) explain, "misleading visuals are more likely than misleading verbal content to generate false perceptions" (p. 2). People tend to consider audio and images to be more "real" than text, because it resembles "the real world" (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020, p. 2). The most common type of misleading visuals is information that has been shared and re-shared: "Virality in such cases is often caused by the accidental sharing of content that can be easy to debunk, but not easy to pull back" (Posetti & Matthews, 2018, p. 105).

First Draft, a non-partisan organization, also has five pillars that can be implemented in the verification process (First Draft, 2019). They are similar to the ones established by the UNESCO handbook. As a journalist, a fact-checker should try to answer the six questions used in the information gathering process: "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," and "how." By answering these questions, a journalist can shape a story that has all the elements an audience needs. It is the same for fact-checkers: they should try to answer as many questions as possible in order to know if the content is original, who created the content (can the original source be found?), when was it created, where was the account website (on what online platform?) and why the content was created in the first place. Figuring out a person's motivation is a key part of the

verification process. As with any other news story, "the more you know about each pillar, the stronger your verification will be" (First Draft, 2019).

Every online verification starts with a social media platform, so it is important to activate each platform analysis. On Facebook, for example, the account analysis helps fact-checkers find out more about the content's source. It gives the fact-checker a clearer view of a source by analyzing the archival content published by an account (Posetti & Matthews, 2018). The big picture will help the fact-checker to evaluate content and, if it's available, get a detailed trace of how the particular information was shared (Cazalens et al., 2018). On Twitter, in contrast, analyzing the social history of an account helps to identify the motivation and identity of the content creator, and whether it is a bot or an actual person tweeting. By analyzing social history, a fact-checker can get insight into the account's past activity. The fact-checking initiative Africa Check advises fact-checkers to use some tools to inspect an account history, such as Foller.me, Botometer or BotOrNot. Also, they advise doing a manual check, like Googling the tweeter's name, inspecting the timeline, looking for context, among other things (Joseph, 2018).

Reverse Image Search is a useful tool because it helps to establish the 'big picture' of the visual verification process. Databases such as Google Reverse Search, TinEye or RevEye help fact-checkers see if the content has been recycled or is an original creation. If it is not the original, the databases search for earlier versions of the images, assisting in answering many of the principal questions: "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," and "how." (Posetti & Matthews, 2018)

In the case of videos, YouTube Data Viewer and InVID32 are tools that detect video thumbnails while they are being published. "A video thumbnail is a still image that acts as the preview image for your video," (TechSmith, 2017) so it can show the exact time and place of an upload. Also, the succession of images can help the viewer to identify

the context of the video (France24, 2018). InVID is very effective for verifying images circulating on social media. With this tool, a journalist can do reverse image searches on videos posted in Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Vimeo, Dailymotion, LiveLeak and Dropbox (France24, 2018).

EXIF Viewer is a helpful tool for extracting metadata attached to visual content. Metadata is the summarized information contained in a web page, document, or file (Chapple, 2020). As journalist Mariano Blejman explains (Blejman, 2013):

> It's there every time we leave an electronic record behind. When we take a photo, it will have data about the camera, the time it was taken, and probably the name of who took it if geolocation and face detection are enabled on the device. So, taking a picture now is much more than just a photo. It's telling information about yourself. (…) Every time we send documents, in addition to sending the content in the document, we are sending information about the machine that processed it and the operating system. If the software is registered, surely you will find your name in the properties window. When we send an email, we are not just sending our content and recipient. Collectively, we also reveal patterns in how we interacting with society and one another.

Journalists and fact-checkers analyze metadata because it leaves clues, making it a source of information for geolocation, weather corroboration, location, exact time and date, light setting, among others (Posetti & Matthews, 2018). The limitation, however, is that social media networks remove most metadata.

Given that "disinformation is becoming so easy to generate and spread," (Urbani, 2019, p. 6), it is crucial that journalists understand and implement basic verification techniques. Urbani (2019) writes that "verification is a fluid process of finding new clues and corroborating evidence, and the progress you make on one check might help you with another." (p. 7) The fact-checker's job, then, is to connect the clues. Using old reporters' methods as well as new techniques, fact-checkers fight disinformation now and in the future.

4.3 A fact-checking case study: The controversial photograph

People often make sense of images by telling stories about what they see. In the case of the photograph of Correa, Moreno, and Arauz, people shared stories about these three men. At 1.83 meters, Rafael Correa is a tall man by Ecuadorian standards.[5] Since he came to power in 2007, he has defined himself as a person with a strong personality. In 2008, while he was pushing for a new constitution, he said: "I cannot deny I am a leader, I am not one of those devious (sneaky) presidents ... (I am) a president with a strong personality, and they confuse strong personality with authoritarianism" (El Universo, 2008)

In Correa's unofficial biography, *The Seventh Rafael (El séptimo Rafael)*, journalists Ana Karina López and Mónica Almeida dug into his family origins and profiled Correa beyond his public persona. "Correa created the myth of the enlightened man who had all the answers, knew everything, and was the only [person] who could lead the country" (quoted in Alnavío, 2018). Correa's striking, aggressive personality contrasted with Lenin Moreno's mellow persona. As vice-president, Moreno was known for his good humor and affability. *El Universo* (2009) described Moreno's personality in 2009 as a "nice guy":

> The smile and the outstretched hand are the first contact that Lenin Moreno Garcés establishes in public or private with whoever he is speaking with. With a serene demeanor, the current vice president never raises his voice or insults anyone. (p. ##)

In 1998, Moreno was shot by criminals who were trying to rob him. He lost total mobility of both legs and was confined to a wheelchair (Infobae, 2018). Moreno got into politics in 2006 with Correa. As vice-president, from 2007 to 2013, he focused on developing national projects for people with disabilities.

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[5] The average male height in Ecuador is 1.64 meters (El Telégrafo, 2017).

In 2012, Moreno was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the National Assembly of Ecuador. From 2013 to 2017, Moreno was appointed by former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as his Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility. He also served as Chairperson of the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities of the Organization of American States (United Nations, 2013). He has written 10 self-help books on laughing, recovering from trauma and other positive thinking topics (Reuters, 2017). Moreno became the first person in a wheelchair to be elected President of Ecuador and of a South American nation (New York Times, 2017).

Moreno narrowly won the run-off elections against Guillermo Lasso in April 2017. During the campaign, he promised an end of Correa's confrontational style, but guaranteed he would continue developing the "Citizens' Revolution" work. However, by the start of his presidency he had broken with Correa and split their political party: "During the second half of 2017, the governing (party) effectively split into two camps [one with Correa, one with Moreno] and, in early 2018, Correa and his followers left the party to build a new political movement" (Wolff, 2018). Moreno ended Correa's 10-year legacy. "Correa did not take long to make a place as the highest figure of the opposition and to show his presidential aspirations, although until recently he kissed his successor and encouraged him affectionately" (New York Times, 2017). The last time the politicians were seen together publicly was during Moreno's Presidential possession ceremony, on May 24, 2017.

Andrés Arauz is a young and relatively unknown politician. He was 36 years old when he ran for president, an economist who started working in the government right after he graduated from college. He has worked as a public servant all his life, from being a trainee at Ecuador's Central Bank to becoming the Minister of Culture, from 2007 to

2017. He had a very low profile while he was in the government. In August 2020, when he was appointed as his party's presidential candidate, people on social media started asking who he was. He even called himself "the perfect stranger" of Ecuadorian politics in his campaigns, as journalist Federico Rivas explains for EL PAÍS newspaper (Rivas, 2021):

> Correa's support transformed him from a "perfect stranger," as he himself was presented with irony on social networks, to the winner of the first electoral round, with more than three million votes.

The historical context is important because during Arauz's 2021 Presidential campaign, a photo of Correa, Moreno and Arauz went viral on Ecuadorians' social media.

The image purports to show former president Rafael Correa, former president Lenín Moreno and presidential candidate Andrés Arauz walking towards the camera. The text says: "The photo that we did not know. When Arauz was in the 'pushing' commission. The photo will be analyzed for the essay. *Credit: Lorreine Holze Facebook profile, 2021.*

The photo showed an energetic Correa walking beside Moreno, while Arauz seems to be pushing his wheelchair. But was this Arauz? When did this take place? Did this suggest a reconciliation between Correa and Moreno? Did this suggest that Arauz was not a "perfect stranger"? Or was the photo meant to discredit Arauz, suggesting he is in a servile position because he is pushing Moreno's wheelchair?

In April 2021, I analyzed the photograph and published the verification on the *Ecuador Verifica* website.

This image was published by Ecuador Verifica with the verification of the photo above. *Credit: Ecuador Verifica, 2021.*

I started by looking for the most obvious visual clues. I tried to recognize the place where the picture supposedly took place. I tried to determine who was in the image and what they were doing. And I tried to catch if there was something that seemed odd in the image, like colors that do not match or unusual shadows.

In this case, the photo was taken in one of the corridors of Carondelet Palace, the seat of the national government in Quito, Ecuador. A YouTube video gives a 3D virtual tour of the Palace. I found an example of how the corridors look and was able to confirm that this was where the photo was taken. For the verification, I compared the columns and

white walls in the video with the ones in the photo I was analyzing. I noticed that the floor in the image is the same as the one in the video and compared it with photographs of the corridors of Carondelet. In addition, it is important to mention that I had been in the Government Palace several times to carry out journalistic coverage.

This image shows how the Carondelet corridors look. The Governmental Palace was built in 1611 and renovated in 1799. It has been the Presidential home since 1830, when Juan José Flores, the first president of Ecuador, was elected. *Credit: El Ciudadano, 2012.*

Afterwards I determined who was in the photo. This part was easy, because the three politicians are looking to the front, towards the camara. They were Rafael Correa, Lenín Moreno and Andrés Arauz. Once I answered the first two questions of "who" and "where," I started looking for visual hints. Correa's shirt is an important one.

For a decade, the former president regularly wore embroidered shirts with colors and traditional local designs. For communication purposes, Correa wished to wear clothes that associated him with Ecuador, moving away from imported clothes (Molina, 2015). Since he took office on January 15, 2007, the former president bought his shirts from local artisans from around the country. In his official inauguration at the National Assembly, he wore a design inspired by the *Jama-Coaque* culture, from the coastal side

of Ecuador (El Universo, 2017). His style was copied by other authorities as well as citizens. Even now, similar shirts can be bought online.

Since Correa left the Presidency, Correa has not been pictured in the traditional shirts as frequently. For example, in November 2020, during the electoral campaign, he was seen with white and orange shirts, the same as other the candidates. He was an active participant during Arauz's presidential campaign, giving interviews and commenting on the process. He even said that he would have won if he had been running for president (BBC, 2021).

In the photo: (l to r) Andrés Arauz (Presidential candidate), Pavel Muñóz (assemblymen candidate), Pierina Correa (assemblywoman candidate) and Rafael Correa (former President). Muñóz and Pierina Correa won seats at the National Assembly. Throughout the whole campaign, candidates published images with Rafael Correa to show they were supported by the former president. *Credit: Pierina Correa Instagram profile.*

By doing a Reverse Image Search, I was not able to find a picture of the three politicians together at an event, not even during one of the several electoral events promoted by Correa: his two re-election campaigns, the campaign for a new Constitution,

or the celebration of its approval a year later. However, the photo I verified and was published on Facebook has 57 comments and was shared 3,300 times. People commented things like "they are all the same" or "I hate politicians," while other users questioned the image because it looked "fake," because the color of Arauz's face looked off.

Based on UNESCO's handbook, I started to search for "red flags" in the picture I wanted to verify. The photo was published on a personal Facebook account and has text overlaying the image. This means that the image was re-appropriated and is not the original. At first glance, the image looks like it was digitally manipulated. Arauz's face looks strange. It has a different color compared to Correa and Moreno. Also, his expression does not match his body movement. His shoulders, for example, are not as straight as his face.

The online photo tool Forensically shows the image was, in fact, manipulated. The Error Level Analysis tool displays regions that are clearer than the background. The difference in the resolution when moving the cursor closer to Arauz's face is another hint that the image was doctored. Pixel distortion could indicate touch-ups on the politician's face and on the wall. Also, with the equalization histogram you can see that there are differences in image quality.

I ran the image through Forensically, Google Reverse Image, TinEye and Jeffrey's Image Metadata Viewer. None of the platforms were helpful to confirm the time and place of the image. However, I was able to confirm the place by doing manual analysis: Carondelet Palace. It is hard to corroborate when the photo was taken. It must have been between 2006 and 2017, because it was the time that Correa and Lenín were seen together in events. If I look for details, the time frame can be narrowed. How? By analyzing Correa's hair. Over the 10 years of his presidency, other visual content clearly shows Correa lost hair and turned gray.

This collage shows how much Rafael Correa changed over ten years. In 2007 he was 44 years old and was recognized by the Ecuadorian population as a "handsome man." (La Hora, 2006) *Credit: El Universo, 2016.*

By looking at Correa's hair, the original photo of Correa and Moreno, then, had to be taken before 2016. Moreno left Ecuador in 2014 to live in Geneva, Switzerland as the Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the UN. He came back to the country in 2016, for his campaign. Thus, the date of the image has to be sometime between 2011 and 2013. I searched in Flickr's Presidential official account, but there are no photos between 2008 and 2014.

So, if not Arauz, who is pushing Moreno's wheelchair? Freddy Miño was the mobility support assistant to Lenín Moreno for 12 years. He served as Moreno's government manager in logistics, administrative and mobility support since 2009 (El Universo, 2021). He worked until May 24, 2021, after Moreno left the government.

In the photo (l to r): Two of Moreno's former ministers (María Fernanda Espinosa and Eduardo Mangas), Lenín Moreno and Freddy Miño. He was a constant presence in public events that Moreno attended as president. *Credit: El Comercio, 2017.*

A brief keyword Google Search of "who pushes Lenín Moreno's wheelchair" (in Spanish: quién empuja la silla de Lenín Moreno) shows Miño during his job. Initially, Miño was appointed by the Ecuadorian Air Force (FAE), as a sergeant of the Presidential Protective Service. Since 2016, he continued his work as a public servant (El Universo, 2021).

AFP re-published the verification I did for *Ecuador Verifica*. They called the Ecuadorian Presidency and confirmed that Fredy Miño was, in fact, the person pushing Moreno's wheelchair in the photo. AFP also did a Google Reverse Search of the image and found the original photo in a SoundCloud episode of This is Hell! Program. The program broadcasts weekly interviews and is produced in Chicago, United States. Miño is in the photo, next to Moreno and Correa. AFP contacted the program manager and he said maybe the photo was "from Wikimedia Commons." He added: "I guess that's where I found it" (AFP, 2021).
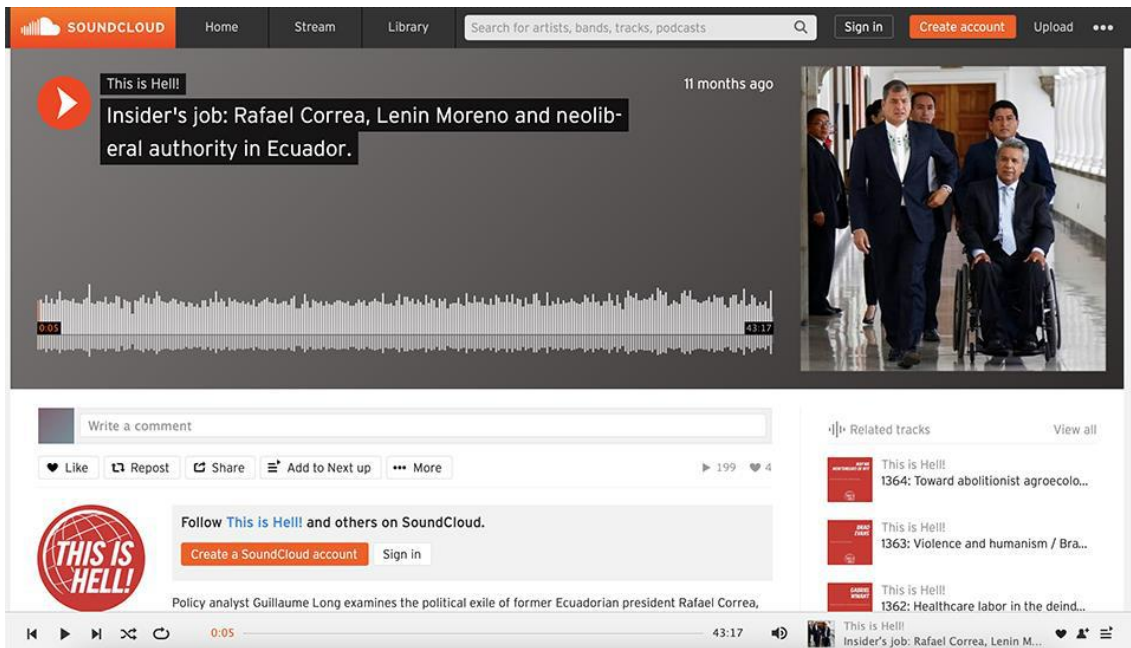
This screenshot shows the original photo published on the *This is Hell* website and found by AFP Factual. *Credit: [This is Hell](), 2021.*

As I analyzed the original photo, I concluded that it was edited. I was not able to find any conclusive facts that showed Arauz, Correa and Moreno were walking together in Carondelet Palace—not even that Arauz pushed his colleague's wheelchair. But, this exercise shows that looking for details and clues is the best way to start a verification. The small elements allow any journalist to investigate whether the information gathered from tools such as InVID or YouTube Data Viewer are reliable. As a fact-checker, I prefer to start by searching for "red flags" and by following my instincts.

5. CONCLUSION

Fact-checking is an essential aspect of the journalistic practice, especially in highly contentions periods like presidential elections. In an uncertain political scenario in Ecuador, fact-checking sites are more relevant than ever. They cut through the constant tension between the truth and manipulated data. A fact-checker's job is to shed light on falsehood and provide audiences with content that can stand out amidst so much information published online.

In the midst of all the misleading content, misinformation, disinformation, and fake news circulating around the world, verification has a stronger impact when several news organizations re-publish fact-checked content.

If 'fake news' has a 70% higher probability of being shared compared to accurate stories, it would take an army of fact-checkers to be able to contain the amount of misleading information on social media and the internet. That is why, as Cristina Tardáguila said in an interview with *Ecuador Verifica*, "no newsroom is big enough to do this job alone" (Ecuador Verifica, 2020).

In this essay I have shown why fact-checking matters, and how it has shaped political discussions around Ecuador's 2017 and 2021 presidential elections. In a tumultuous political context like Ecuador's, a coalition such as *Ecuador Verifica* is needed to curb the spread of disinformation. The country has a large audience with easy access to digital platforms, an audience that is eager for new and engaging content. The opportunities are significant, with 80,1% of the population using the internet and social media platforms. Fact-checkers have to occupy those spaces with factual information, stopping the lies and bringing the truth to political debates.

In this essay, I have also illustrated what a fact-checking exercise looks like. You start by analyzing a content's "red flags" and follow hints to reconstruct where it came from. In the case of the photograph of Rafael Correa, Lenín Moreno, and Andrés Arauz, I looked for visual clues that could lead me to concrete facts. For example, comparing Rafael Correa's hair over his 10 years in power may seem unnecessary. However, by doing it, I was able to reframe the timetable and try to determine a date the photograph in question was taken. Dates and locations are essential to a fact-checker, because they can point to other clues and other sources or data. Hints are the engine of verification. Then,

of course, comes the reporter's job of finding sources and data that matches the conclusion these hints lead to.

Fact-checking political content is not easy. In a polarized scenario, information can easily become "fake news" when it is manipulated for political ends. A fact-checker needs to have the skills of a reporter, the curiosity of a detective, and the interest of a political historian. It is only by bringing these traits together and by taking advantage of available tools that a fact-checker can do their job and find the truth among the falsehoods.

As fact-checking organizations continue to develop around the world, it is important that they remain transparent regarding sources, funding and methodology. The International Fact Checking Network code of principles binds its signatories to be as candid as possible, allowing others to verify their own fact-checking in turn. This transparency lets audiences know how the information is analyzed, in contrast to misleading content. This transparency lets audiences know that they can trust the fact-checking process.

The fact-checking ethos is simple: find fact-checkable claims; look for facts and evidence; and set the record straight, let people know when politicians, authorities or powerful key players say something true, partially true, false, or unverifiable.

The commitment to fact-checking is more complex. It requires that journalists be vigilant to falsehoods and doubt everything they see. Social media is changing the way people consume information (Posetti & Matthews, 2018, p.103). Today, misinformation and disinformation can be found in different formats. But fact-checking is the way through these changes, the way forward amid polarization. In this essay, I have shown why fact-checking matters, how it can and should be central to all journalism. My hope is that fact-checking keeps growing in Ecuador, especially during electoral times.

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