



Efforts of Spanish-language Television Networks in the U.S. to Combat Disinformation

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Abstract

Univision and Telemundo are the two leading Spanish-language television networks in the U.S. and their nightly newscasts have an audience of more than two million combined. Both networks have in recent years founded fact-checking websites to combat that increase in disinformation to help their Spanish-speaking audience better identify fake news. This paper is a mixed methods analysis of their standalone websites, El Detector (Univision) and T Verifica (Telemundo) and of the social media channels supporting those sites. It found that these sites publish fact-checks on a range of topics from politics to immigration and Latin America that are of interest to U.S. Latinos who speak Spanish. But there is very low engagement from audiences with these stories on social media, which calls into question the impact of these projects, which are needed in this age of disinformation.

Key Words

Spanish-language, fake news, disinformation, social media, television, United States

1 Introduction

There are almost 42 million people who speak Spanish at home in the United States and 75% of U.S. Latinos report being able to carry on a conversation in Spanish pretty well or very well [1]. Among all Latinos, those born in and outside of the U.S. some 24 percent prefer to receive their news in Spanish. But among the Latinos who live in the U.S. but were born outside the U.S. some 47 percent of them prefer to receive their news in Spanish [2].

The two leading Spanish-language broadcast news networks in the U.S. are Univision and Telemundo. The first Spanish-language television station in the U.S. owned by a Latino was founded in 1955 in San Antonio, Texas, by Raoul A. Cortez. In 1961, Cortez's son-in-law started a company that would expand into the 1970s and eventually become the Spanish International Network and then eventually become Univision News in 1987 [3]. Jorge Ramos and Maria Elena Salinas were co-anchors of the national newscast, "Noticiero Univision" for nearly 30 years and many Latinos in the U.S. grew up watching Ramos and Salinas [4].

The original Telemundo was founded in 1954 as WKAQ-TV Channel 2 in Puerto Rico. The Noticiero Telemundo as it is known today began airing a nightly national newscast in 1987 [5]. In 2002, NBC purchased Telemundo in a \$2.7 billion deal. [6]. Some of their former and current anchors also are well-known in the U.S. Latino community, including José Díaz-Balart, María Celeste Arrarás and Julio Vaquero. These two national broadcast networks have been a

leading source of news, especially for Spanish-speaking Latinos living in the U.S. They also have local station affiliates covering local news in Spanish in most of the major cities in the U.S.

1.1 Fact Checking News Sites in Spanish in the U.S.

Disinformation is what the World Health Organization calls an infodemic [7]. These two television networks, Univision and Telemundo, launched initiatives, websites and companion social media, to combat the spread of fake news to reach Latino audiences in the U.S.

Univision's El Detector was the first Spanish-language fact-checking site founded in the U.S. and it was launched in March 2016. El Detector was born to debunk false messages that misinform the Hispanic community. In addition to doing it in Spanish, it prioritizes the issues that matter and impact Latinos most, according to their website [8].

Tamoa Calzadilla, director of El Detector, said in an article posted on their website, "It was very challenging because of the amount of misinformation that was spreading in the United States and what that has meant when working to serve the Hispanic community and its information gaps during the pandemic. The world of fact-checking in this country serves English-speaking audiences very well, but not Hispanics, and that is precisely the community for which we work at Univision News and, therefore, at El Detector." [9] T Verifica is the fact-checking platform of Noticias Telemundo Digital, launched in September 2020. T Verifica publishes fact-checks in Spanish [10]. According to their website, their mission is to "verify the accuracy and veracity of claims made by politicians, officials, and other relevant figures in the public sphere." They document and debunk false news and rumors that affect the Latino community in the United States [10].

There are more than 74 active fact checking sites in the U.S., according to the Duke Reporters' Lab. Some of the best known fact checking sites that publish in English in the U.S. include Factcheck.org, Politifact and Snopes. Several news organizations and newspapers also regularly publish fact checks including CNN, National Public Radio and the New York Times [11]. Of the 74 active fact checking sites, Duke has identified just three sources of fact checking in Spanish in the U.S. - Telemundo's T Verifica, El Detector from Univision and Factchequeado [11].

The Factchequeado project was founded in 2022 to address the spread of disinformation in Spanish in the U.S. Their goal is to form networks, train journalists and counter disinformation in Spanish within the U.S. Factchequeado is an initiative of Maldita.es, a nonprofit fact checking site founded in Spain in 2014 by Clara Jiménez Cruz, and Chequeado, based in Argentina, the first fact checking site in South America founded in 2010 by Laura Zommer. They publish and debunk fake news stories and share them with their media outlet partners [12].

The initiatives of Univision and Telemundo differ because they are news media outlets themselves with much wider audiences. Both networks claim to have more than 20 million daily viewers for all their programs, including news, entertainment and telenovelas. The average audience for the early evening national news time slot is about 1.1 million for Univision and close to 700,000 for Telemundo [13].

Latinos in the U.S. who receive their news in Spanish have few sources to fact check their news. Having accurate information about health risks and the vaccine became acutely important during the pandemic as Latinos initially died from COVID-19 at higher rates than other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. [14].

2 Literature Review

There is ample research on the spread of disinformation online and on social media and its harmful effects on the general population. A seminal 2018 study analyzed the diffusion of both

true and false news stories on Twitter. It highlighted the alarming speed at which false information spreads on social media platforms and highlighted the need for tools to counteract the spread of disinformation [15]. Another study concluded that the proliferation of fake news impacts public health because it fuels panic in the public and discredits the scientific community [16].

There has been some research on the impact of fake news on the Latino community in particular. One study surveyed 2,800 Latinos in the U.S. and found misinformation can shift factual beliefs among Latinos but fact checks improve factual accuracy varying in levels of political knowledge, trust, and acculturation [17]. Another study of Latino voters in Texas found older Latinos exposed to social media are more susceptible to conspiracy theories than younger Latinos [18]. This study also found that those who make greater use of information on Spanish-language outlets tend to be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories [18]. But it did not track which Spanish-language media they read and or the efforts of Spanish-language media in the U.S. to combat fake news. There is a body of research on the impact of disinformation on social media and the importance of fact checking and some research on the impact of disinformation on U.S. Latinos. However, there is little research on how news outlets in the U.S., who publish and produce content in Spanish, use websites and social media to combat disinformation.

3 Methodology

This paper will analyze how two Spanish-language broadcast networks in the U.S. are combating disinformation with stand alone websites dedicated to fact checking and also using social media platforms. For this paper, the author hand coded more than 350 news articles, TikToks, Instagram posts, X posts and YouTube videos posted in April 2024 by Telemundo on their disinformation site called Tverifica and Univision's site called El Detector as well as the posts and videos published on their social media platforms. Using a mixed methods approach, the paper coded the topics of the website articles and also did a content analysis of the social media posts. The author coded the posts on topics including immigration, politics, Latinos, Latin America, politics, war and other. The author identified whether any of the media outlets created playlists or hashtags associated with disinformation. The author also examined how frequently the news media outlets posted disinformation. The author also examined all the online and social

media fact-checking content posted by each Spanish-language news outlet in the sample period of April 2024.

4 Research Questions

What were the most common topics of disinformation published by Univision's El Detector and Telemundo's T Verifica?

Were they more general news or specific to U.S. Latinos or Latin America?

Did they have a playlist or hashtag focused on disinformation?

How was the information distributed through the website or via which social media platforms?

How much interaction, shares or likes, did the posts receive on social media?

5 Results & Discussion

The author first analyzed the stand alone web pages created by each network, T Verifica by Telemundo and El Detector on Univision. In the month of April 2024, T Verifica published five web articles and El Detector published six. Two of the T Verifica stories were related to immigration, two related to Latin America and one about the Donald Trump trial. One of the stories published April 18, 2024 was, "No, la protesta de migrantes frente al City Hall de Nueva York no fue para pedir habitaciones de lujo" [19] translated to "No, the protest of migrants in front of New York City hall was not to ask for luxury hotels." This type of fact check counters stereotypes that immigrants in the U.S. abuse social services. The reality is that the people were waiting to get into a hearing at City Hall on racial justice in how services are distributed to migrants arriving in the U.S.

Another article on T Verifica published April 9, 2024 addressed false rumors that undocumented immigrants are voting in U.S. elections. The headline was "Los datos federales no muestran un número creciente de inmigrantes no autorizados que se registran para votar" [20] translated "Federal data does not show an increase in the number of immigrants without authorization registering to vote." Of note about all of the T Verifica stories is that they all were originally published by the Associated Press, one of the world's leading news wire services. Each story was credited to AP in the byline.

Two of the El Detector stories were about Latin American politicians, one about abortion and politics, one about Israel, one about financial scams and one with general advice about how to fact check. One of the articles was about the current election in Mexico. The headline from April 30, 2024 read, "La candidata presidencial de México Claudia Sheinbaum no es extranjera, como dicen en redes" [21]. which translates to "The Mexican presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum is not a foreigner, as reported on social media." This election is being closely watched in the U.S. by Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans for two reasons. First, Mexico is about to elect the first woman president, and second, Mexico expanded the voting process so more Mexican nationals living in the U.S. can vote abroad.

Another post was a series of graphics to help readers better identify fake news. It was published on April, 2, 2024 and titled, "Día Internacional del Fact-Checking: consejos para que no te engañen" [22] which translated means " International Fact-Checking Day: advice to not be

tricked.” The following chart below categorizes the posts by general topics including immigration, politics, U.S. Latinos, Latin America, politics, war and other. Some of the articles could count in more than one news category. There were a total of 11 stories published on the web pages of T Verifica (5) and El Detector (6) in April 2024.

Table 1. Fact-checking stories published in April 2024

11 total	Immigration	Politics	U.S. Latinos	Latin America	war	financial	other
El Detector	0	3	0	3	1	1	1
T Verifica	2	1	1	2	1	0	

5.1 Social Media Pages

The author looked at each news outlet's Tik Tok, Instagram, X, formerly known as Twitter, and Facebook pages to see if they were cross posting what ran on the fact-checking web pages or if they were sharing and creating additional fact checking content.

The two news outlets, Univision and Telemundo, posted more than 200 TikToks in the month of April. But only one of them debunked a fake news story. Univision did not have any TikTok videos tagged with the hashtag #El Detector or any TikTok playlist connected to fact checking. Noticias Telemundo had one videos on their TikTok in April 2024 with the hashtag #TVerifica. The video posted on TikTok on April 5, 2024 debunked myths about the solar eclipse [23]. Univision did not have any TikTok videos with #ElDetector in April 2024. The pending TikTok ban [24] in the U.S. would not likely have a big impact on these two fact-checking sites since they don't actively use the application to combat disinformation and it could be years before it goes into effect.

T Verifica did not have an Instagram page or an account on X. T Verifica did have a Facebook page but it was inactive. Their last post was in November 2022. El Detector, on the other hand, had very active Instagram, X and Facebook accounts. They had 43 posts on their Detector Instagram page in April 2024 and 43 posts on their X page and 43 posts on their Facebook page.

Their content on both platforms was nearly identical. Most of the posts on Instagram were about politics, immigration, the war between Israel and Hamas, and other international news. One post from April 12, 2024 debunked claims by Elon Musk that undocumented immigrants in the U.S. benefits Democrats and that's why they won seats in Congress. [25] However, there is no proof of any wide-scale problem of undocumented immigrants voting. Another post [26] on April 8, 2024 fact checked the presidential debate in Mexico. Another post [27] from April 6, 2024 said that it was false that a 911 call came from a person drowning in a car after a bridge in Baltimore collapsed. This story was national news in the U.S. and among those killed were six Latino immigrant workers who were working construction on the bridge. [28]

Most of these Instagram, Facebook and X El Detector posts relied on graphics and still images, not video, even though the publishers are television broadcasters. Engagement on the posts was fairly low with the highest number of likes for the 43 Instagram posts in April was 12. That was for a post on April 15, 2024 [29]that said the photos of bombs in the night sky are not from an attack by Iran against Israel, as reported on social media. There was much higher engagement on X with few likes but a higher number of views. The X post in April with the

highest views was 237 views for a post on April 3, 2024 “Este video de autos arrastrados por el agua no fue grabado durante un tsunami en #Taiwán: es de 2011 en Japón” [30] translated “This video of cars trapped in the water was not filmed in a tsunami in #Taiwan; it is from Japan in 2011.” The second highest post was 195 views published on April 1, 2024 titled “Es falso que Biden haya decretado el reemplazo de la Pascua por el Día de la Visibilidad Transgénero” [31] translated “It’s false that Biden has declared that Easter will be replaced as the Day of Transgender Visibility.” The third highest post was 134 views for an X post on April 23, 2024 titled “Biden no anunció el programa “Latinos sin deudas 2024” para aliviar el pago de tarjetas de crédito” [32] translated Biden did not announce a program called Latinos without debt 2024 to alleviate credit card debt.” Most of the posts on Facebook in the month have no likes or less than three likes.

Table 2. Instagram Posts on Univision’s El Detector, April 2024

	Immigration	Politics	U.S. Latinos	Latin America	war	international	astronomy	other
43 total	3	5	0	7	7	11	2	17

5.2 WhatsApp Fact Checking

Also of note, both Univision and Telemundo are part of WhatsApp’s global fact checking program. This program is comprised of more than 50 fact-checking organizations who are certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and use the WhatsApp Business App or the Business API.

“TelevisaUnivision’s elDetector has allowed us to strengthen our public service journalism. It helps us verify and explain data on COVID-19 and vaccines when our community needs it most,” said Leopoldo Gomez, President of Univision News, said in a statement about the partnership. “As the main source of news and information for the Hispanic community, partnering with WhatsApp, an app popular with U.S. Latinos, was critical to continue fulfilling our commitment of informing and empowering our audience through quality, trusted journalism.” [33].

T Verifica Editor Ronny Rojas, said in a statement, “It offers us a fantastic opportunity to expand the reach of our fact-checking efforts to the Spanish-speaking communities that need it most. This will allow us to open new direct lines of communication with our audience and ensure they are equipped with credible and reliable information.” [33].

WhatsApp is an important tool to reach viewers but there was no public data on how many people engaged with the sites through the application.

6 Conclusion

The two fact-checking websites, T Verifica and El Detector, are creating fact-checking content that is relevant to the Latino community in the U.S. Overall, Univision’s El Detector posted more consistently and regularly on social media than Telemundo’s T Verifica. The most common topics of posts were debunking myths about immigration as well as following politics in the Latin American countries of origin of many immigrants in the U.S. They also are debunking fake

news about vaccines and related health topics, but much less so than at the height of the pandemic. The content is extremely relevant to Spanish-speaking audiences in the U.S. The role of these sites will become even more important as the U.S. is holding a presidential election in November 2024.

Millions of people tune into these Spanish-language networks for news and entertainment and more than two million people each night watch their Spanish-language nightly newscasts combined. However, based on shares, views and likes only hundreds of people are interacting with each of the fact-checking stories they post on their social media channels. The Spanish-speaking audience is not engaging in great numbers with the content they are promoting through social media.

Research shows disinformation on social media is problematic and that fact-checking efforts work. As the U.S. heads towards a presidential election in November 2024, there is expected to be an increase in disinformation as happens in every election cycle. Sources like El Detector and T Verifica are important tools to combat such disinformation especially in the Spanish-speaking community in the U.S. where there are only three fact-checking sites in the U.S. that target Spanish speakers.

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