Article

The Factuality of News on Twitter According to Digital Qualified Audiences: Expectations, Perceptions, and Divergences with Journalism Considerations

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Abstract: This research analyzes to what extent qualified digital audiences perceive, understand, and value the factuality of news published by news media within a communicative ecosystem where unverified information proliferates on social media. Additionally, it examines which factors may influence what highly educated and critically capable information audiences expect to find when consuming journalism. A qualitative, comparative study was conducted from a sample obtained of the ten most relevant statements on socio-political topics with the highest number of interactions published on the Twitter (X) accounts of six European digital and legacy media (Médiapart and Le Monde, France; Tortoise and The Guardian, United Kingdom; El Diario.es and El País, Spain), along with their reflection and development on the respective websites. With an expanded analytical scope to 300 tweet-news items (*n* = 300), two in-person focus groups were held at the College of Europe in Natolin (Poland) with postgraduate students from nine countries to assess their perception of the degree of truthfulness, bias, quality, and credibility of the displayed information. The results indicate that young, qualified digital audiences feel secure and capable of detecting any disinformation disorder. They value the variety of mentioned and verifiable sources, the presence of expert voices, and data-based claims as key elements in constructing credible media narratives.

Keywords: factuality; disinformation; Twitter; digital audiences; journalism

1. Introduction

False stories conceived and distributed across various digital platforms are often perceived by audiences as genuine news. The multiplicity of actors and sources in the current communicative ecosystem, along with 24-h information flows and the accelerated production rhythms on social media, prompt media to publish quickly without adequate verification (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008), thereby increasing misinformation among increasingly fragmented audiences who find it progressively challenging not only to distinguish falsehood from truth but also to differentiate factuality from speculation and opinion within statements. In this regard, several studies by the Pew Research Center (2018) and the Reuters Institute (2021) indicate that the problem lies not only in media verification but also in public expectations, valuation, and reading comprehension.

Although the academic literature has already extensively addressed considerations of what journalism is and how it should act to differentiate itself from other content creators in the current digital landscape (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Truyens & Picone, 2021; Pérez Curiel et al., 2021), this conceptual review of journalism's norms and roles has almost always

been conducted from the perspective of production rather than reception. Consequently, discrepancies arise between how professionals conceive their practice (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013) and how audiences, especially younger ones, perceive that performance in terms of what can be considered top-quality journalistic work (Weaver et al., 2007; Costera-Meijer, 2007).

For all these reasons, this study aims to analyze whether the concept of factuality, as the foundation for constructing verified news facts (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014) that distinguish them from rumors and hoaxes (C. Silverman, 2015), remains relevant in the construction of contemporary journalistic discourse, both in traditional and new digital media, through the social channel Twitter (X). In doing so, it delves into the evaluation of two central aspects: first, whether new consumption habits developed on social media produce cognitive biases (Greifeneder et al., 2021) that may shape what digital audiences expect to find in publications by news media and, second, to what extent these audiences, accustomed to trusting what they read and share on such platforms (Karlsson et al., 2017; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019), may validate information lacking factual basis and constructed from misleading statements or headlines (Luo et al., 2022).

For the purposes of this research, the analysis focuses on the perceptions and expectations that highly qualified digital audiences hold regarding journalism. This term refers to digital-native users (Prensky, 2001) familiar with technology, social media, and new devices who are further distinguished from other active audiences (Livingstone, 2019) by their high level of education and, consequently, critical thinking, knowledge of new media, and ability to detect misinformation (Orhan, 2023).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Disinformative Context in Digital Environments

The transformation in the ways of producing and consuming information in digital environments has blurred traditional boundaries of journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Journalists and media organizations must redefine their role in response to the emergence of new communicative actors engaged in activities that may be perceived as journalism (Maares & Hanusch, 2020, p. 262) by audiences, whose perception is decisive as they are the ones who grant legitimacy and credibility (Deuze & Witschge, 2016; Kananovich & Perreault, 2021).

The arrival of these new content creators from journalism's periphery (Chua & Duffy, 2019), who occupy a significant communicative space by building follower communities and capturing audiences, has led journalists and news media outlets to try to distinguish themselves from these actors to safeguard their "professional jurisdiction" (Lewis, 2012), emphasizing traditional values and codes, such as verification, independence, impartiality, and transparency (Singer, 2015), in the production of factual stories. Simultaneously, digital environments have fostered spaces for adopting new journalistic routines, moving away from professional normativity and tending toward hybrid solutions (Ferrucci & Canella, 2023) in an increasingly social and participative landscape.

In this context of technological impact, the integration of citizen voices in multiplatform content production and audience fragmentation, digital-native mediahave emerged as alternatives to traditional media, proposing new relationships with audiences (Cabrera et al., 2019). These new media of the digital era are characterized by creating community through participatory strategies and thematic specialization, focusing on audience-centered journalism (García-Orosa et al., 2020, p. 12), and utilizing social platforms to do so.

With this priority, digital media outlets linked to virality emerged, especially in the 2010s (Denisova, 2023), relying on social media traffic volume as their primary distribution strategy (Hurcombe, 2022). This also led them to adopt clickbait techniques—that is, content

designed to capture user attention by enticing clicks through emotional, sensational, and misleading headlines (Chen et al., 2015). The centrality of social media in the production and circulation of information has resulted in greater polarization of public opinion, an increase in biased messages, and, most notably, an exponential rise in misinformation (Álvaro-Sanchez, 2018).

Indeed, there has been a surge in so-called fake news, which is distributed globally, massively, and instantly via social media channels and other digital platforms, amplifying the effects of scams (Tandoc & Seet, 2024) and creating confusion among news consumers (Elías & Teira, 2021). As Elías (2021, p. 21) points out, false or fabricated information coexists with real news but in a biased way through a series of processes "where different channels feed off each other, lending greater credibility to this toxic narrative."

Despite its popularization, the concept of fake news does not encompass all forms of information disorder that exist (Ireton & Posetti, 2018; Wardle, 2019), nor does it capture the complexity of a disinformation phenomenon that exists for various reasons and can reach different levels of severity (Salaverría et al., 2020). The public dissemination of false content has diversified to such an extent that scams range from simple jokes to decontextualization or deception and may be fabricated deliberately or arise from exaggerations, misinterpretations, or mere confusion.

Considering all circumstances, scams spread more quickly and have a greater impact than true news (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This disinformation pandemic, as an "indication of the collapse of the old news order and the chaos of contemporary public communication" (Casero-Ripollés, 2020, p. 3), has required the effective implementation of urgent fact-checking mechanisms by agencies and journalistic media to detect and combat it (Pérez-Curiel & Velasco Molpeceres, 2020).

2.2. Factuality as a Distinctive Element of Journalism

In the so-called "post-truth" era (Suiter, 2016), the power of facts has been diminished by the proliferation of falsehoods and conspiracies, "alternative facts," and moods that carry more weight than evidence itself (McIntyre, 2018). This has resulted in greater audience fragmentation (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012) and a breakdown of the consensus and common factual basis needed to conceive and interpret reality. Thus, factuality stands as the foundation of "objective journalism" (Schudson, 2001) and as the distinguishing element that grants legitimacy to journalistic media over other actors, including politicians and partisan outlets.

Grounded in the verification discipline as the essence of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014), news discourse has traditionally been constructed factually, meaning it is based on verified facts. The ability of media to provide truthful and reliable news is based on institutionalized professional norms and practices that confer knowledge and authority in the eyes of the public (Karlsson et al., 2017). In this way, factuality as the foundation of new construction is associated with truth and serves as a compelling method of work, involving the effective use of resources—particularly linguistic ones—and the use of evidential markers to earn audience credibility (Ekström & Westlund, 2019).

In today's landscape, despite the rise of search engines and social channels as information sources, traditional media that rely on factuality to build their news discourse remain the most credible for a large part of the public (Newman et al., 2021). Moreover, they serve as the best antidote to counter disinformation and align with the demands of audiences who increasingly seek fact-based news rather than content that is debatable and solely opinion-based (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). Therefore, media authority decreases drastically when they publish news that has not been properly verified (Parks, 2022) or when they fail to detect and expose false information (Graves, 2017).

Although the multiplication of voices and messages through social media does not always make it easy to clearly distinguish truthful news from falsehoods, it is the responsibility of media and journalists to help audiences recognize such misleading content and continue providing them with relevant information (Spradling et al., 2021).

2.3. Audience Expectations and Perceptions

There is no doubt that audiences have taken on a central role within the field of journalism, which increasingly directs its strategy toward them (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018), as do other content creators in hybrid digital environments where, as mentioned earlier, professional and non-professional actors intermingle (Schapals et al., 2019). However, this prioritization of better understanding audiences through metrics is negatively impacting the quality of the information produced: there are more news stories on the same topics, content is published quickly with insufficient verification and context, and imprecise and superficial content proliferates (Furst, 2020). This raises the question of the value that digital audiences assign to journalistic quality.

Quality has been cited by professionals as a fundamental element in determining and assessing whether the types of content produced and distributed to audiences may ultimately be perceived by them as credible, engaging, and relevant (Sundar, 1999). However, its perception and evaluation remain unclear within the collective imagination of such heterogeneous audiences as those in the digital space (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020). In fact, generational behavioral differences exist among audiences based on their experience, motivations, and understanding of how news is constructed and where it originates. According to a study by Wunderlich et al. (2022), journalism is perceived differently among younger, digital-native audiences who have not developed defined consumption habits, access more non-journalistic sources, and tend to be more distrustful of the media and adult audiences, also familiar with the analog era, who show greater loyalty to specific media brands and assign higher credibility to the professional sources they follow.

These differing perceptions among audience segments regarding the relevance and reliability of certain content over others (Craft et al., 2016) also help explain the difficulty many users have in detecting the degree of truthfulness, factuality, or bias in messages, whether they contain false information or real information. This often leads them to share these messages on social media and digital platforms, either because they do not delve into the full story and focus only on the headline (Herrero & González-Aldea, 2022) or because they lend credibility to anything that has many interactions and has thus been previously shared and validated by others (Luo et al., 2022), especially within their own contacts (Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021). Other factors influencing the likelihood of false content spreading and going viral include the topics, especially if they are up-to-date (Hameleers et al., 2021); the presence of news values, such as controversy or the unexpected nature of events; as well as emotional appeal and human interest (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

In one way or another, we refer to active audiences or "new citizens" (Masip et al., 2019), who act as prosumers and take the initiative to participate in public debate by sharing content in online environments, particularly on social media, without any journalistic filtering. This also allows false information to thrive as there is no media intermediation (Cooke, 2018).

In light of the above, the relationship between what journalists do and think and how digital audiences consider and value professional work in terms of quality, trust, and credibility warrants further academic exploration (Karlsson et al., 2017, p. 162). Understanding and comprehending the expectations and perceptions of news-consuming audiences will help to better redefine the role of journalistic media within the new attention economy (Truyens & Picone, 2021, 2024).

Accordingly, the primary research objective of this study is to analyze to what extent qualified digital audiences perceive, understand, and value the factuality of news published by news media within a communicative ecosystem where unverified information proliferates on social media channels (RO1). Additionally, this study aims to determine how these audiences value quality journalistic work over other content from external platforms or non-media sites (RO2) and which possible factors influence what audiences expect to find in journalistic media, beyond merely considering the news relevant or of general interest due to its topic (RO3).

To address these objectives, the following research questions are raised:

- RQ1: To what extent do qualified digital audiences struggle to detect falsehood or bias in journalistic statements?
- RQ2: How do qualified digital audiences perceive and value news that is based on more facts and better source work?
- RQ3: Which factors are most influential in shaping news perception among qualified digital audiences?

3. Method

3.1. Sample Collection and Content Analysis

With these objectives in mind, this research was conducted following two methodological processes. The first comprised a comparative content analysis of a sample of the ten most relevant statements on political or social topics, with the highest number of interactions published on the Twitter (X) accounts of six leading European media outlets, as well as their reflection and development on the respective websites, between 1 January and 31 December 2021. Thus, the content analysis corpus comprises 60 tweets ($n = 60$) and their corresponding articles published in the digital editions of the media outlets under study.

To make the sample, not only tweets but also news articles were considered. Although Twitter provides readers with a mechanism for interpreting the meaning of news (Sadler, 2018) through headlines and links to media websites, it becomes fragmentary and sometimes misleading. Some studies on social media consumption indicate that audiences tend to share news sometimes without reading them or clicking on them (Sundar et al., 2024).

For sample selection, the Global Digital Subscription Snapshot, a media ranking by online subscribers published quarterly by the Fédération Internationale de la Presse Périodique (FIPP) in collaboration with CeleraOne—a German company specializing in digital technology and big data—was used as a reference. Specifically, the data used in this study correspond to the third-quarter 2021 report.

First, an exploration was conducted to identify the top three European digital-only media outlets with the highest number of subscriptions. According to this criteria, the following media outlets emerged (in order): Médiapart (France), Tortoise (United Kingdom), De Correspondent (Netherlands), El Diario.es (Spain), El Confidencial (Spain), The Local (Sweden), Zetland (Denmark), El Español (Spain), and Krautreporter (Germany). The remaining media on the list are digital subscriptions of outlets with a print edition. Since the Dutch outlet De Correspondent ceased publication in early 2022, the sample was comprised of Médiapart (France), Tortoise (United Kingdom), and El Diario.es (Spain).

Once these outlets were identified, the next step was to select generalist media outlets publishing newspapers in these same three countries or markets to compare publication strategies between online editions of traditional media and new digital media. The Twitter (X) accounts and online editions of leading print media outlets in subscriptions in their respective countries that are thus included in the study sample are, in order, The Guardian (United Kingdom), Le Monde (France), and El País (Spain) (See Table 1).

Table 1. Contextual data about the media accounts examined. Source: author's own elaboration.

Media Outlet	Media Type	Country	Foundation	Account	Joined Twitter
Médiapart	Digital only	France	2008	@Mediapart	2009
Tortoise	Digital only	UK	2018	@tortoise	2018
Eldiario.es	Digital only	Spain	2012	@eldiarioes	2012
Le Monde	Print/Digital	France	1944	@lemondefr	2009
The Guardian	Print/Digital	UK	1821	@guardian	2009
El País	Print/Digital	Spain	1976	@el_pais	2007

After the sample was collected, the different headlines were evaluated based on journalistic verification criteria, such as the distinction between information and interpretation and opinion, the presence of bias, source usage, background references, language use, and markers of fallacy.

To establish these verification criteria, an analysis sheet matrix with 29 items was created to measure and evaluate the information published by the media consistently using the same parameters. The matrix included, in addition to indicators of tweet location and dissemination (retweets, likes, and replies), a series of indicators related to each social statement, as well as each headline and body text of the information published on the websites of the media outlets in the analysis sample.

In addition to items related to the topic and geographic scope of each piece of information (national or international), the content indicators for tweets in the analysis sheet detail aspects such as the approach (informative, interpretative, or opinion-based), perspective (partial or declarative from a protagonist or global/with more than one protagonist), and bias. These same indicators (approach, perspective, and bias) are applied to the study of headline content, for which two additional aspects are analyzed: the degree of alignment with the tweet and its relationship to the main content of the news article body.

Regarding content indicators for the news texts on each website, not only are the approach, perspective, and bias measured—similar to the tweets and headlines—but also data usage (whether data are verifiable, unverifiable, or inaccurate), whether the information is contextualized, and the number of sources used, as well as the predominant typology in each news text (governmental institutional, non-governmental institutional, journalistic, documentary, expert, anonymous, or without sources).

To validate the consistency of this coding instrument, a content analysis was carried out to obtain some preliminary results that would later be debated in the focus groups. Among other findings from the perspective of social audience consumption, a greater viral impact and reliability are detected in tweet-news articles published by generalist media outlets, clickbait techniques promoted by digital natives are disapproved by users in their interactions, and the trend that audiences share information on Twitter without clicking on the links to the news is confirmed.

Thus, the first stage of the research served to justify and collect the research sample as well as to validate the coding process employed in the content analysis. As content analysis an important tool for social science in drawing valid inferences about media behaviors (Riffe et al., 2023), in this case on social media platforms and websites, a further methodological qualitative process was needed to respond to the research objectives. Thus, the categories and variables included in the content analysis would be used to conduct the discussion among the participants in the focus groups.

3.2. Focus Groups

Based on this structured content analysis, a report of results was obtained, which was further examined in a second phase of the research through two in-person focus groups.

The focus group was employed as an ideal methodological tool in social sciences to gather participants' perceptions (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996) and concerns through interaction, thus facilitating a qualitative analysis (Wilkinson, 1998). Unlike the so-called "discussion group," the focus group better meets the needs of this research as it allows for guiding the discussion more effectively using a pre-established questionnaire and obtaining individual responses from participants that are synergistic and comparable (Domínguez & Dávila, 2008, p. 105).

This second methodological stage thus addresses one of the stated research objectives: analyzing audience perceptions of published journalistic content and media behavior in light of the content analysis by presenting news examples for participant evaluation. This led to the preparation of these focus groups.

The working sessions were held on 24 and 25 November 2022 at the College of Europe in Natolin (Poland). This academic institution offers an Advanced Master's in European Interdisciplinary Studies, bringing together 125 students each year from across the continent, as well as from other regions, such as North Africa and the Middle East. These students come from various fields of study, are multilingual, and have strong academic records. Since the focus groups aimed, on the one hand, to incorporate participant interdisciplinarity and, on the other, to ensure their qualifications as information consumers with critical thinking skills, the College of Europe proved to be an appropriate setting for this study.

Two separate focus groups, each lasting two hours, were conducted. Each session, moderated by the research team and conducted in English, worked with a group of students ranging from six to eight participants, a range that authors like Prieto and March (2002) consider ideal. In total, there were fourteen participants (six men and eight women) from nine different countries (Poland, Portugal, Ukraine, Algeria, United Kingdom, France, Spain, Lebanon, and Ireland), with previous studies in up to eight different disciplines (Law, Business Administration, Journalism, Philology, International Relations, Political Science, History, and Economics). All participants, aged 24 to 30, were part of the "Nest" working group on disinformation within the aforementioned Advanced Master in European Interdisciplinary Studies and were recruited through the professor responsible for that working group, who served as a key informant to identify those with suitable profiles to participate in the sessions.

In this way, the focus groups were formed based on elements of homogeneity among participants as they shared common experiences within the same university campus, similar educational levels, and specific training relevant to this study. Meanwhile, diversity was ensured in terms of gender, background, and country of origin to analyze the extent to which these variables might affect their perception and evaluation of the news.

The Questionnaire

Each session began with a briefing on the research project associated with the focus group, as well as an outline of the procedure to be followed during the session. The second part of the presentation included a questionnaire with ten questions and examples of information published by the media outlets in the analysis sample to establish comparisons among them and measure participants' perceptions accordingly. As each of the ten examples was displayed on multiple screens in the classroom, participants had access on their computers to an online form containing all the content to respond to the questions individually. Of the fourteen focus group participants, only eight submitted a completed form.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections of five open-ended questions each (Table 2) and, at the end of each section, a group discussion was initiated among participants to gather opposing opinions and viewpoints in addition to the responses they had already

written on their respective forms. Thus, the focus group would yield two types of results: the collection of completed forms from participants and the recording of sessions with their contributions, which would later be transcribed for analysis.

Table 2. Battery of questions posed in the focus groups. Source: author's own elaboration.

Q1 To what degree do you think these tweet statements are true, partly true, or false?
Q2 Do you consider these statements information, interpretation, or comment?
Q3 Which one is the most based on facts and which one is the least factual?
Q4 Which tweet is the most attractive and appealing (in order to obtain engagement)? Why?
Q5 Which angle of the story is the most complete according to the number and quality of sources employed in the piece of news?
Q6 What parts of the story are more biased by taking into account those absent elements and points of view that would be necessary to complete the story?
Q7 To what degree do these headlines properly lead to understanding the stories or are they not directly related to the main element of the reported topic?
Q8 Please, compare these pieces according to the kind of sources employed in them.
Q9 Please, compare these pieces of news by the topic dealt with and if they are based on newsworthy criteria and can be regarded as general interest/relevant news.
Q10 To what degree do you think these tweet statements are true, partly true, or false?

The focus group included questions related to ten different statements (shown as screenshots) from the analysis sample. To enable comparisons within each focus group, it was essential to have news items from different media on the same topics, allowing us to transfer elements examined in the content analysis to the focus group. This led us to extract from the sample of 60 news items those that had been published by other media for comparison.

The selected news items were COVID-19 (three or four media outlets), the Pandora Papers (general and a specific story about Putin; only in the three consortium research media: Le Monde, The Guardian, and El País), the attendance of former People's Party leader in Spain, Pablo Casado, at a mass in memory of dictator Francisco Franco (The Guardian, El País, and Eldiario.es), the Citizen's Security Law or "Gag Law" according to the Council of Europe (El País and Eldiario.es), and the rape accusation of a former British Conservative MP (The Guardian and Tortoise). The French digital outlet Médiapart did not overlap with any other outlet, not even with Le Monde, on national or Francophone topics. This is because they prioritize unique topics and investigations to add value to their coverage for subscribers.

As the sample was considered insufficient to complete the entire questionnaire within the focus group, it was expanded through Twitter's advanced search function to include all news published by the six media outlets in this study that corresponded with the same topics and coverage as the tweet-news items in the initial sample. To increase the sample size, we used search parameters and keywords, such as the names of each media outlet plus topics like COVID or pandemic, Pandora Papers, Putin, Spain, political parties, Gag Law, Council of Europe, Britain/UK, France, and politics. This extended the scope of analysis to a potential 300 tweet-news items ($n = 300$). This expanded search yielded new examples, enabling the focus group to incorporate additional comparisons between statements and images.

In the double focus group, cross-comparisons were made among two or three outlets, either from different countries (COVID-19 or Pandora Papers), to observe the impact

of journalistic culture or the potential national perspective on international topics, or between two outlets from the same country (El País-Eldiario.es or The Guardian-Tortoise), to measure the traditional vs. digital-native variable.

With this dual objective, two types of information were initially posed in the focus group questionnaire:

1. Headlines and tweets published by different media outlets about the same topic;

2. Tweets and their respective links to news published by different media outlets on the same coverage.

Next, a question was included to assess whether the degree of informational bias varies when the same media outlet addresses different topics or protagonists. In this case, The Guardian's coverage of the appearance of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky, in the Pandora Papers:

3. Headlines and tweets published by the same media outlet about different news and political actors.

Finally, also with only one question of this type, a question was asked regarding the newsworthiness criteria used to include chosen topics on the agenda. For this, two of the most retweeted news items in Eldiario.es and Médiapart were selected to compare the dynamics between two digital-native outlets from different countries. In this way, an example from Médiapart was also included in the group discussion, as it was the only one of the six media outlets in the sample that had not appeared for the reasons explained above:

4. Tweets and their links to content that achieved high engagement and were published by different media outlets.

In the question set (Table 2), the order followed the variables analyzed in the first part of this study (content analysis). Since the main objective is to assess the extent to which audiences perceive and understand the factuality of news, the same question was asked at the beginning and end of the session regarding participants' general view of the statement shown and the degree of truthfulness or falsehood they could detect. By asking this question both at the start and the end of the session, the sequence of examples and questions served to check if, and to what extent, participants' initial perceptions changed or remained after viewing various examples and, most importantly, after discussing them with others.

4. Results

The prior content analysis of the six news media outlets in the sample provided the foundation to identify which publications would be presented and discussed with participants in the focus groups. Thus, to address the research questions, a sequence of ten structured questions was presented to the students, both in the presentation and via a form, to gather their impressions on the truthfulness, credibility, and bias of the information shown; the importance of source usage (data) and other quality measures; and the impact of content presentation and its appeal or impact; as well as the relevance of or public interest in the analyzed news items.

4.1. Reflections Shared During the Working Sessions

The conversation generated during the focus groups served as a starting point for reflection, later expanded and nuanced by the forms completed by participants. This discussion primarily aimed to analyze which factors may be most decisive for these qualified users to perceive and understand the informational content they consume in one way or another.

According to participants, in analyzing the perception of a news item, the value of accompanying images should be carefully considered as these often determine the tone and

focus of the news. Image selection is always an editorial decision that can imbue a greater interpretive load or, at the very least, intentionality in how the information is presented to the audience.

It was also interesting to note, based on participants' observations, how the perception of the same news piece can vary significantly and may even be conditioned by the timing of its reading. The example of the news about Vladimir Putin in the Pandora Papers investigation, before the onset of the war in Ukraine, illustrates how temporal context can influence receivers.

Additionally, participants, coming from different countries and, consequently, diverse informational cultures, highlighted that a reader's prior knowledge (background) is crucial for understanding and evaluating a news story. Sometimes, as they noted, that level of knowledge about the topic or person provides greater context for understanding and decoding the information. However, in other situations, that prior knowledge can lead to a predetermined bias or prejudice in its evaluation.

On the other hand, identifying elements that signal quality and factuality in a journalistic text, such as some of those presented and compared in the focus group, tends to lead to a more positive perception and even greater credibility. The most defining quality markers in this regard are the number of cited sources versus anonymous ones, as well as the inclusion of expert voices, both in the tweets and in the links within the news articles. According to the testimonies collected, sources not only make the news more factual but also help to expand the information and make it easier to understand.

Similarly, participants considered the journalist's involvement in narrating events to be a key factor that determines the degree of factuality of the information presented to them. In this sense, the writer's personal involvement in the story can lead to the inclusion of evaluative elements in the statements, which was noted during the focus groups as a subtle form of manipulation and bias that reduces authenticity and credibility in certain journalistic content.

On Twitter (X), as on many media websites, the shortest and most direct content does not always achieve the highest engagement. It all depends on the (factual) information and the precise choice of words. In several instances within the focus group, participants criticized certain journalistic formulas in tweets and headlines, associating them with issues related to sensationalism or clickbait techniques that are widespread in the digital world.

This last idea is also related to consumption habits in the attention economy, characterized by the limited time users generally have to read news, sometimes only engaging with the tweet/image/video or headline without clicking on the links. Participants were critical, suggesting that this dynamic sometimes leads media outlets to concentrate their entire messaging strategy on making these short statements attractive and attention-grabbing. These brief headlines or statements either aim to condense the essential elements of the news or choose a particular angle or focus, which may not always clearly correspond with the content of the article when the user clicks through.

4.2. Responses to the Forms (Working Document)

As stated, out of the fourteen students who participated and debated in the focus groups, only eight submitted the completed form. The participants were (P1) French, with a background in Law; (P2) Irish, History and Languages; (P3) Lebanese, Political Science; (P4) Polish, Law; (P5) Polish, Languages; (P6) Portuguese, Journalism; (P7) Ukrainian, Journalism; and (P8) Spanish, Law and Political Science. The responses of these participants have been grouped into different themes, all linked to the questions asked (from Q1 to Q10).

4.2.1. Veracity of the Statements (Regarding Q1)

The truthfulness of journalistic statements is a topic that generates extensive debate, especially in an environment where information flows continuously and sometimes overwhelmingly. Analyzing the opinions of focus group participants (P1 to P8) reveals a diversity of perceptions about the authenticity of the statements presented in tweets and news articles (Figure 1), reflecting the complexity of assessing truthfulness in the digital age.

Figure 1. Second question posed to participants in the word form. Source: Twitter (X) and the author's own elaboration.

While the accuracy of details, the strength of context, and the depth of treatment are highlighted as factors that can significantly influence the perception of content authenticity (P1 and P2), fully judging truthfulness is challenging. This assessment depends not only on the presentation of facts and their context but also, and especially, on the reader's ability to understand and contextualize them (P3 and P4). In any case, the perception of a statement's truthfulness can be partial, depending on its presentation and the analysis it includes (P6, P7, and P8).

4.2.2. Perception About the Type of Statements (Regarding Q2)

The focus group participants also showed a disparity in understanding the type of statement they read. While some considered it purely informational content, others categorized it as commentary or even a biased interpretation.

For example, regarding the tweets about the management of the COVID-19 crisis in the United Kingdom shown during the sessions (Figure 1), the perceived degree of factuality of a piece is influenced by the inclusion of evidence rather than the journalist's personal interpretations (P7), as well as by the diversity of testimonies included (P8). However, participants noted that the way these elements are presented, depending on the opinions of the sources included and the language used by the author, can end up giving the text a

more interpretive (P2 and P6), rather than purely informational, personality (P5). They also pointed to the choice of images as an element that can lead to confusion and influence the interpretation of statements in one direction or another (P6).

4.2.3. Fact-Based Information (Regarding Q3, Q5, and Q8)

Continuing with the analysis of the responses collected, the inclusion of data supporting the facts stands out as a key factor in determining the perception of reliability and objectivity of the information presented (P8). However, not all data are equally verifiable, nor are all sources valued or interpreted in the same way, as they are associated with the tone in which the story is narrated and presented (P3) and with the presence of evaluations in the text that stray from a purely factual basis (P2 and P5).

4.2.4. Attractiveness and Impact (Regarding Q4)

According to the participants, the elements that make a tweet more appealing, generate engagement, and achieve greater audience impact can vary. They refer to the combination of visual and linguistic strategies as an effective means to capture audience attention and motivate reading of journalistic content (P1). In this regard, aspects such as the smart use of images featuring prominent figures or key subjects (P6), attention-grabbing headlines (P8), the inclusion of statistics, or specific designs and strategic uses of color to highlight information (P4) come into play.

4.2.5. Biases in Stories (Regarding Q6)

The identification of some type of bias often shapes the readers' final perception of the published story and its potential consideration as factual or not. This is also confirmed by the responses from participants in this focus group. Perhaps the most commonly noticed type of bias is the presence of the journalist's personal evaluations, which further blurs the line between information and interpretation (P7).

Another perceived partiality involves the balance in source selection (P1) and the inclusion of different perspectives on the same fact within the information (P6). Additionally, it was noted that more sensitive or controversial topics are particularly susceptible to bias, which is detected based on how facts are framed and which aspects are emphasized (P2).

4.2.6. Correlation Between News Headlines and Body Content (Regarding Q7)

A significant part of the evaluation of journalistic content lies in the construction of headlines as their wording and focus shape the expectations generated by the reader. From this perspective, participants emphasize the responsibility of media outlets to ensure that headlines accurately reflect the story's content to prevent misunderstandings or misinterpretations (P8 and P1).

The examples shown in this part of the focus group (Figure 2) prompted various considerations among participants. To ensure a proper understanding of the news, they believe that headlines should, in principle, be simpler and more direct (P7), though adding more detail or context, especially for complex or controversial topics, is necessary for audiences unfamiliar with the subject (P2). Therefore, they also recommend avoiding excessive simplification that may omit crucial aspects of the story (P6).

Figure 2. Seventh question posed to participants in the word form. Source: Twitter (X) and the author's own elaboration.

4.2.7. Relevance and Public Interest (Regarding Q9)

Finally, aspects that may affect digital audiences' perception of the relevance and general interest of stories were also explored. In this regard, participants highlight that for a story to be considered journalistically relevant, it should address issues that concern people and have social significance (P1), although this consideration may vary according to each person's life experience and cultural and social context (P8). Thus, the relevance of a story is measured not only by its theme but, above all, by its connection to the audience's experiences and concerns (P4 and P6).

Overall, the participants' contributions emphasize the need for media outlets to address meaningful topics in a comprehensive and engaging manner to capture the public's attention.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The current system of news production and consumption defines a landscape shared by the digital audience in a hybrid media ecosystem of both traditional and emerging outlets, as well as platforms (Chadwick, 2017). Journalism reaffirms its role of social responsibility and public service in an era where verification, impartiality, and transparency are essential to restoring public trust (Pérez Curiel et al., 2021). In this debate, digital-native and traditional media have developed strategies to compete with external prosumers who have the capacity to create viral narratives (Denisova, 2023) that do not meet the requirement of factuality, which is inherent to the journalistic profession (Ekström & Westlund, 2019).

As previous research shows (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), audience disaffection toward public, political, and media institutions is directly related to the formation of digital communities led by active, often anonymous users, who share and virtualize content without meeting the basic standards of verification and reliability inherent in journalistic information.

In the media's urgency to reclaim the public sphere, quality and truthfulness in handling facts become a potential differentiator in countering the impact of false information. However, the challenge lies in making journalistic content attractive and relevant (Sundar, 1999) among such a diverse range of young and adult user profiles (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020) and in addressing narratives oriented toward brevity and immediacy (Scolari, 2020), where the tweet is incompatible with the depth of the journalistic text.

This study examines how qualified digital audiences—better educated and with greater potential for critical media consumption—perceive and value the factuality (RO1) of information published on Twitter and on the web by journalistic media in contrast with other content circulating online (RO2).

In this regard, participants demonstrated confidence and judgment, yet also differing criteria, when assessing the truthfulness and bias of the content analyzed in the focus groups (RQ1). They referred to analysis, contextualization, and information presentation as key factors in the general perception of authenticity, though they noted that this perception could be distorted depending on the journalist's involvement in the story and the type of source selected, as well as the tone and approach adopted in headlines and images.

These results align with previous research showing that individuals with higher education levels tend to be very confident in detecting potential disinformation disorders (Martínez-Costa et al., 2023) and that this self-confidence and self-awareness shape how these audiences access and understand the news (Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Webster, 2011).

Regarding the identification of elements that represent quality and factuality in a journalistic statement (RQ2), participants highlighted the variety of mentioned and verifiable sources, the presence of expert voices, and data-based claims as key to constructing credible media narratives, thereby promoting an informed and critical understanding of news events.

In this way, journalistic texts supported by evidence are given more credibility than those based primarily on opinion. This widespread conviction among digital audiences (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019) has led media outlets to adopt and advocate for 'fact-based journalism' (Stalph, 2018) as a way to legitimize traditional journalistic practice in the public sphere against the proliferation of false news (Napoli & Royal, 2024).

The expectations that informational content can generate among audiences depend on various factors (RO3), which directly influence the final perception (RQ3). Among these factors, visual elements accompanying the information are prominent as they suggest and predispose the reader, particularly the wording and focus of headlines, which set the tone for the narrative. From this perspective, participants expressed a rejection of clickbait techniques and called on the media to ensure that headlines accurately reflect the content of the information, thus avoiding confusion and misleading interpretations.

As previous research has confirmed (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020; Chen et al., 2015), the adoption of clickbait in journalistic headlines by many digital-native media outlets is considered a form of distraction and a technique that has contributed to the rapid proliferation of misinformation on social networks, especially on Twitter (Khawar & Boukes, 2024).

Ultimately, audience perceptions and expectations of a particular informational content often differ because they are shaped by personal experiences. According to participants, perceptions of what is relevant or of general interest can vary widely depending on each person's life experience and cultural and social context. Furthermore, the relevance of a story is measured not only by its theme but, above all, by its connection to the audience's experiences and concerns.

This study presents a series of limitations inherent to the sample size and the method used. On the one hand, the analysis sample may be considered unrepresentative of the

entire universe of political-social news; however, it aligns with methodological models from previous studies (Baker, 2006; Cleary et al., 2014; D. Silverman, 2016) that recommend prioritizing quality over quantity in data collection in discourse studies.

In any case, the specific sampling was also established with consideration from a preliminary phase of research that helped set the criteria for selecting the news items that would ultimately be debated in the focus groups. Another limitation arises from the participant population in the discussions, with a highly homogeneous age range and educational level but, at the same time, diversity in terms of gender, country of origin, and cultural background. Although this might prevent comparisons between different informational consumption patterns exhibited by audiences in the whole digital ecosystem, this research remarks the importance of having specialized higher cycle training to develop more critical thinking about the news content delivered by media outlets rather than generalizing these findings to all young audiences.

This work suggests future lines of research, such as deeper exploration into new news consumption models among digital audiences who suffer from symptoms of information contamination (Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021; Luo et al., 2022) and may be influenced by cognitive biases in their interpretation of reality (Greifeneder et al., 2021; Martínez-Costa et al., 2023) or the comparative analysis of varying expectations prompted by the coexistence of journalists and content creators (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022) among audiences who largely avoid news (Toff et al., 2024) and challenge the boundaries between the journalistic center and its periphery.

This study provides an approach to the factors that shape new models of reception and interpretation of journalistic content circulating on social networks and, more specifically, to the importance that more qualified digital audiences place on fact-based journalism in today's disinformation-driven environment.

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