



Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:  
The 26th Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

## **THE INTERACTION BETWEEN PUBLIC AND FACT-CHECKING CONTENT: THE PERCEPTION OF LUPA'S COMMENTERS ABOUT POLITICAL DEBATES DURING 2022 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN BRAZIL**

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### **Introduction and Context**

This study aims to identify patterns in the comments section of fact-checking journalism publications and assess whether users attempt to discredit fact-checking efforts. We recognize that we are living in an era of informational disorder (Wardle, 2018). To combat fake news and various forms of disinformation, journalism has increasingly relied on fact-checking as a means of verification. While the precise origins of fact-checking are difficult to determine, Factcheck.org, founded in 2003, is widely regarded as the first U.S.-based organization dedicated to fact verification (Graves, 2018). Following its establishment, other fact-checking initiatives, such as PolitiFact and The Washington Post's Fact Checker, were launched in 2007. According to Elizabeth (2014, n.p.), this approach to journalism "aims to increase knowledge by re-reporting and researching the purported facts in published/recorded statements made by politicians and anyone whose words impact others' lives and livelihoods."

As Lelo (2022b) observes, traditional journalism outlets perceive fact-checking as beneficial, as it reinforces the legitimacy of journalistic practices through rigorous investigative methods. Furthermore, Lelo (2022a) highlights the growing interdependence between fact-checking and digital platforms. Major corporations such as Meta and Google are among the largest funders of fact-checking initiatives. These partnerships often involve content evaluation, where fact-checking organizations assess the credibility of information. Facebook's Third-Party Fact-Checking Project is one such initiative. Additional collaborations include platforms hiring fact-checkers, funding tool development to combat disinformation, and fostering partnerships between fact-checking agencies (Lelo, 2022a).

Suggested Citation (APA): Anastacio, T. and Tavares, C. (2025, October). *The interaction between public and fact-checking content: the perception of Lupa's commenters about political debates during 2022 presidential election in Brazil*. Paper presented at AoIR2025: The 26th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Niterói, Brazil: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

The significance of fact-checking in journalism lies in its role in promoting transparency and credibility (Spinelli & Santos, 2018). However, particularly in political contexts, fact-checking efforts are frequently challenged. Lelo (2020) found that an individual's political stance influences their perception of and trust in information. Additionally, individuals are more likely to share content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, as it reinforces their personal narratives.

These phenomena have intensified with the expansion of the internet. Online comment sections provide users with a platform to express their opinions and discredit media content. Houston et al. (2011) and Chung et al. (2015) note that user-generated comments significantly shape how audiences perceive information. Zhang and Schmierbach (2024) further argue that partisan worldviews influence political attitudes and perceptions of the credibility of information. Given these dynamics, it is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives.

## **Data and Methods**

Building on this discussion, this study investigates how individuals use the comment sections of political fact-checking content to express their opinions and positions. To address this, we analyze Lupa, one of Brazil's first fact-checking agencies, established in 2015. Lupa is a member of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), a global organization affiliated with the Poynter Institute in the United States. The agency specializes in verifying public statements and addressing potentially false information disseminated online (Lupa, 2015). Following each investigation, Lupa assigns a label to the analyzed content.

This study examines comments from three fact-checking publications covering electoral debates broadcast by SBT, Band, and Globo during the 2022 Brazilian presidential election. The social media platform Instagram was chosen due to its higher engagement compared to other social networking sites where Lupa publishes its content. The debate-related posts were published in a carousel format, featuring informational cards displaying the candidate's name, photo, and party affiliation, followed by their statements and the corresponding fact-checking results. A label certifying the accuracy of the statements made was also included on the card. The fact-checks were published between late August and late September 2022. A total of 1,407 comments were extracted from the posts using the paid version of the Google Chrome extension IGCommentExporter. After removing comments lacking clear meaning, 1,222 remained: 223 from the SBT debate, 496 from the Band debate, and 503 from the Globo debate. Textual analysis was conducted using the Iramuteq software, employing techniques such as similarity analysis, Reinert classification, and word cloud generation.

## **Findings**

Comments on the Globo debate fact-checking reflected diverse discussions, with significant attention given to then-candidate and current president Lula's statement regarding his acquittals by the United Nations (UN). His remarks referenced his 2018 arrest and the legitimacy of his trial. Additionally, users commented on the speeches of candidates Simone Tebet and Soraya Thronicke, both of whom received a "True" label

from Lupa. Analysis revealed that Lula was the central figure in discussions surrounding this publication.

In the Band debate, Lula again emerged as a central topic of the commenters. In this case, his statement about appointing the first black person to the Brazilian Supreme Court was widely discussed. Jair Bolsonaro, the then-president, also had one of his statements fact-checked by Lupa. In it, Bolsonaro claimed that Brazil's inflation in 2022 was among the lowest in the world. In both instances, some users criticized Lupa's work. Defenders of Lula emphasized that he was the first president to appoint a black judge after the 1988 Constitution, while critics of the Bolsonaro fact-checking argued that Lupa's timeframe was too narrow, suggesting that a more recent period should have been considered.

Finally, comments on the SBT debate fact-checking centered on Simone Tebet's claim about rising food prices. Although Lula did not participate in the SBT debate, he remained one of the most frequently mentioned figures in the comment section.

## Conclusions

The analysis of comments on fact-checking reports from the 2022 presidential debates reveals a range of discussions. The fact-checking process frequently served as a catalyst for debates extending beyond the original claims, such as the legality of Lula's trial. Additionally, Lupa's assessments and labeling were subject to criticism from users. The labels "False" and "Exaggerated" stood out among the assessments made, highlighting a certain reflection on the notions of truth and falsehood, as well as the agency's authority in making such determinations.

In the next phase of this research, we will conduct a categorical content analysis of the comments. This analysis will include categories assessing users' positions on fact-checking and the candidates mentioned, as well as whether comments are monologic or engage in dialogue with other users. By adopting this methodological approach, we aim to examine the same material while accounting for the distinctive characteristics of user-generated comments.

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