

Critical Books Review

REDONDO, M. *Verificación digital para periodistas. Manual contra bulos y desinformación internacional.*

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Apostles of certainty

In a context of urgency and information overabundance, journalistic verification has resurfaced as a fundamental task in newsrooms, industry and academia. Plagued by traditional partisan propaganda, conditioned by algorithmic hierarchies and deafened by the noise of social networks, citizens are now demanding that journalism involve verification of the truth. In addition to the classic functions that the press contributes to democracy (Schudson 2008), this new scenario demands, adds and underlines that of verification. “Apostles of certainty” is the apt expression that C.W. Anderson (2018) has coined it to designate data journalism professionals, and we could well use it for all reporters.

Digital verification for journalists is therefore an activity that urgently needs its place in journalistic practice. As with other emphatic labels or names of journalism, its rapidly-increasing prominence reveals the shortcomings and defects of the industrial media structure, obsessed with productive routines with dizzying urgencies and information units that impact upon the quality of the message. In the communicative ecosystem of the network society (García Avilés 2015), the user is exposed in the transmedia flow to multiple broadcasters during brief communications (Noguera 2018). This multiplication – together with the disintermediation of the poles of hierarchy – unleashes a torrent of disinformation or falsehoods that haunt the participatory sphere.

In this short and practical manual, Myriam Redondo proposes a frequent reference guide, a map of clues to disable the spread of hoaxes and to combat the mechanisms of post-truth and international disinformation. In this text, the author gathers techniques and digital resources for the verification of contents and individuals. This is a practice book, with little theory on the fundamentals, but with a useful approach for journalists, students and anyone involved in content creation.

This pragmatic mission of the book makes reading more convenient in front of a computer or mobile device, due to the abundance of digital resources mentioned above. Thus, the discourse is fragmented and, as the writer herself acknowledges, “may perhaps be overwhelming”. Therefore, more than a reflective reading, as recommended, this manual is proposed as an essential tool for the journalist’s desk. A quick reading of the book reveals the shadowy area of digital journalistic practice, a realm often overlooked for the sake of speed and agendas in the face of ‘scoops’ or breaking newflashes. Therefore, it is a good idea to read it carefully to put the tips into practice as a tutorial. The book does not theorise excessively, as discussed earlier, for that is not its objective: Redondo builds on the foundations of practice, places the reader at the origins of this discipline and assembles a very clear structure around the classic five essential questions of journalistic information.

With a critical eye – rather with a cynical eye – the more experienced editor could claim that the old methods of verification are sufficient: indeed, haste is counterproductive, it is advisable to trace the origin of the information, examine who says what and why, to determine what ideological preferences they have, and to never publish anything without contrasting. But, in the face of this kind of superficial diagnosis, this book reveals the immense task of digital verification that opens up to the professional journalist in the current panorama. In addition, it is most of the traditional media, perhaps unknown in the digital arts, or maliciously seeking clicks, that tend to propagate the hoaxes or inaccuracies (Silverman 2013).

The book begins with a brief history of digital verification, in which Redondo situates the future of this phenomenon, links it with the classic elements of journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2012) and relates it to other similar phenomena (political *fact-checking* and traditional *fact-checking*), a distinction that is not entirely clear. The digital verification that the author is talking about would thus focus specifically on user-generated content,

an approach that is consistently maintained throughout the book. The three phenomena, Redondo writes, are united and have the same objective: to avoid errors and lies.

This approach means that the clues, tools and resources in the manual are primarily aimed at verifying external content circulating on the Internet and messaging services. As a whole, it is tremendously useful and revealing, since it illuminates those digital dens where the vicious cycles of disinformation originate. First of all, it attunes the reader to cybersecurity and the effective management of one's own computer in order to ready it for the task of digital verification; these are not complex tasks and it is likely that most 'digital native' readers have already taken on board some of these tips. Next, Redondo presents a very relevant chapter focused on the search for information, where hints are given to get the most out of social network platforms, websites and search engines.

The author then uses the classic five questions of journalistic information to illustrate the most useful resources for the reader. Verify the sender ("who" are the sources, i.e. the users who broadcast the content and how to research them on their pages or on third-party platforms) and verify the message ("what" has been spread and "when"), where numerous tools are specified to determine the veracity of images, texts and videos. It then explains how to verify the "where" of the content using Google Maps and Google Earth, how to geolocate information on social networks, which is a very favourable terrain in the current context. Finally, Redondo offers a brilliant chapter on the biases of sources, and their motivations to propagate inaccuracies or hoaxes, and reflects on anonymity, political polarisation and algorithmic bubbles. The book closes with a list of resources and readings, which help to complete this updated digital verification manual. The manual also includes very practical techniques to combat disinformation in the face of bots and attacks by disinformation factories.

A simpler version of this text could serve as a digital literacy manual; such is its further usefulness beyond its main target groups – professionals and journalism students. For this reason, some of the practices may seem a little obvious or well-known; as the author acknowledges, it is possible that they are often not put into play, not because they are unknown, but because of the vices of urgent information or economic pressure. It also lists dozens of resources that require some computer skills, which the author explains and, when not relevant, links to tutorials or refers to instructions from the resource provider.

In short, this is a book that helps to reflect on journalistic practice in the current context and to understand the relevance of digital verification in the new media ecosystem, through very well explained hints and examples. It is a recommended guide for any professional in journalism (and content in general) at a fascinating time for the industry. As the author says, "good journalism has verification and digital verification, or else it isn't good".

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