Verificad and the 2018 Mexican Election

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Background

Verificado 2018 was a collaboration between Mexican media aiming to work together to limit the impact of viral misinformation in the run up to and during Mexico’s 2018 national elections. Co-founded by Pop-Up Newsroom, AJ+ Español and Animal Político, Verificado 2018 grew to a coalition of over 90 partners, including national and local news outlets, civil society organizations and universities, who worked together to find and investigate content on digital platforms, fact check candidates, and publish credible, well-sourced content.

This case study will show how and why this collaboration came together, how it worked from an implementation perspective, the goals of the project and the impact that we observed.

About the Author

Tom Trewinnard is co-founder of Pop-Up Newsroom, and a co-founder of Verificado 2018. Tom worked with founding partners to establish the project goals, design project workflows and train project journalists in social media monitoring and verification best practices. Throughout the project, Tom offered editorial, technical and strategic support, and helped manage the election-day newsgathering operation set up in Mexico City. Tom is Director of Programs at Meedan, who develop the open source collaborative verification platform Check, which served as one of the collaborative workbenches for Verificado 2018.
Why Verificado

The 2018 elections in Mexico were the biggest in the country’s history. With the presidency, every seat in congress, state governorships and seats in state and local legislature up for grabs, over ten thousand candidates were running for thousands of available seats. The electorate totaled over 72 million eligible voters. The stakes were high: should one candidate or party dominate results, they could reshape Mexican politics for the foreseeable future.

Into this setting, the risk of internal and external actors using disinformation and social media manipulation tactics to influence public opinion seemed a clear risk. While much of the English-speaking world only came to terms with the threat of “fake news” in 2016, the months following the Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US, Mexico has a long history of politicians and parties using nefarious tactics to influence the outcome of elections. In 2016, a hacker named Andres Sepulveda gave a detailed interview to Bloomberg in which he claimed to have been an online agitator on behalf of outgoing president Enrique Peña-Nieto in the 2012 elections, using different technologies and anti-democratic strategies to secure Peña-Nieto the presidency. In 2017, as details of the disinformation activities of Cambridge Analytica in the US and UK emerged, video was leaked showing the company highlighting their intentions in Mexico, and job postings for their team in Mexico were discovered online.

With so much political power at stake, and with the world alert to the misinformation crisis that has plagued recent elections around the world, the Verificado 2018 co-founders, convened by AJ+’s Mexican strategy director Diana Larrea, decided to act. In an information ecosystem flooded with disinformation and malicious actors, the question we asked was how could Mexican media play a new role in helping Mexico’s voters make informed choices about their political futures? Given the size of the election and the anticipated volume of election-related claims, links, videos and memes that would flood social networks, we knew that if we were to effectively find viral misinformation - and perhaps more importantly, spread effective debunks and credible information - we couldn’t do it alone. The scale of the challenge we faced demanded a broader collaboration with Mexican media and institutions.
Creating Verificado

In establishing the core partner group, we consciously brought together three organizations with complementary skillsets.

» Pop-Up Newsroom brought experience of designing and running large-scale collaborations around election misinformation, verification training expertise and a strong background in collaborative technologies.

» Animal Político brought deep fact-checking and editorial expertise and a strong reputation in Mexico that would help convene a wider coalition.

» AJ+ Español brought world-class multimedia production and editorial expertise, that would prove key in producing creative and shareable content for the initiative.

Journalistic collaboration is hard and goes against a long-standing tradition of competition in media. By bringing together three organizations with different skillsets and audiences, we were able to benefit from diverse expertise that was central to the success of Verificado.

Our three organizations, alone, however, had nowhere near the reach needed if Verificado were to gain the profile needed to cut through the noise of social networks flooded with rumour, misinformation and fake news. We needed to build a national coalition of media - including broadcast, digital and print - from across the political spectrum. One major challenge we had observed from working on earlier election misinformation collaborations - and from the field of fact checking in general - is that without a distribution coalition, as publishers, we are likely only speaking to the people who have chosen to follow a fact-checking project. This is only a tiny subset of the national audience, all of whom are at risk of election related mis- and disinformation. From the outset, Animal Político and AJ+Español sought to build a richly diverse coalition of media from across Mexico, that had a combined audience that crossed geographic and political boundaries. By the end of Verificado 2018, that coalition extended to over 90 partners across 28 of Mexico’s 32 states (including the Federal District of Mexico City).
Project Goals

In the kickoff workshop, AJ+ Español’s Alba Mora Roca framed the overarching goal of the project with a succinct and powerful mantra: “Viralizemos la info confiable.” Let’s viralize credible information.

This mantra stuck, because it captured not only the goal of finding and debunking misleading and false information, but also the key challenge of making the highly researched, fact checked reporting and debunks we were producing as viral and shareable as possible.

In attempting to push back against viral misinformation - memes, images, videos - fact checks in the form of lengthy articles are of limited impact. Rigorous reporting and explanations of fact checking are important and featured prominently in Verificado (at Verificado.mx), however additionally we sought to produce content that subverted the visually engaging simplicity of disinformation, to ensure that the debunks and reporting we worked on were shared as widely and as quickly as possible.

An additional and complementary goal of Verificado was to raise public awareness of misinformation writ large: how it worked, how parties could manipulate social media - both through manipulated content and manipulating the networks themselves - and how the public could conduct basic verification for themselves. In some ways, this side of the project looked more like a media literacy campaign (or, perhaps better put, misinformation literacy), and the explainers produced in pursuit of this goal were the most viewed and consumed content of anything we published.

Partnerships and Collaboration

For Verificado 2018, Animal Politico led outreach to national and local media partners in Mexico - drawing on their long-standing relationships. This outreach involved one-on-one meetings with partners to explain the goals and values of the initiatives and explain how partners could contribute to reaching those goals. Following the launch, with an initial group of 30 partners, we received many more requests for partnership. These requests were carefully evaluated by Animal Politico, to ensure that we weren’t admitting partners to Verificado who worked counter to
the goals and values of the project (i.e. by themselves distributing disinformation, or were funded by political parties, for example).

When building a coalition for a collaborative effort to combat disinformation, there are some important considerations:

» Viral disinformation can be national, aimed at top-level races, but it can also be regionalized and localized. Ensuring geographic diversity in a coalition is essential to ensure you can effectively monitor disinformation wherever it’s spreading - particularly during the campaigns (when candidates are often traveling around the country) or on election day (when localized disinformation can impact voter turnout).

» If your coalition is only of independent media and fact checkers, it’s unlikely that any debunks or fact checks that you publish will reach the audience that has been impacted by the disinformation. Working with media from different backgrounds (both political, and format - broadcast and radio, for example) can help ensure content is being seen, and shared, by as wide an audience as possible.

» Few media are willing to partner in a never-ending collaboration. We’re still looking at models to continue efforts like Verificado beyond election periods, but in Mexico our success was partly due to the limited timeframe of the initiative. This not only helped lower the bar of entry for media (committing to a three-month project is much easier than committing for an undefined period), but it also created a campaign-style buzz around the project, raising its profile and ensuring we built a wide audience base.

How Verificado Worked

Verificado 2018 kicked off in March, just before the official launch of the campaigns. To launch the initiative, we ran a Pop-Up Newsroom workshop in Mexico City with over 100 journalists from across Mexico. The goals of the workshop were threefold:

» To design workflows and verification practices that would allow all members of the coalition to participate in the project, in whatever way they were most able;

» To train the gathered journalists in verification and fact checking best practices, and how to monitor social networks effectively to spot viral claims for checking;
To familiarize everyone on the project on the different tools and technologies that we would use for the collaboration.

Coming out of the workshop, we had representatives from much of the coalition set up on Slack, email lists and Check (more on the collaborative technologies used below), and had designed verification processes for different types of content, including political claims, WhatsApp threads, and images and memes.

The core partners agreed that to ensure consistent high-quality content, and crucially, consistency in visuals and branding, the main editorial functions of Verificado would be centralized in Mexico City. Both Animal Político and AJ+ Español had hired small, dedicated teams for the project (total ~35 journalists, editors and producers) and these teams would work in unison from offices in Mexico City to coordinate the different phases of work:

» Monitoring and submissions: The centralized editorial teams lead monitoring - basically the scanning of social networks for viral misinformation that Verificado could investigate and either verify or debunk. In addition, coalition partners could share content they had seen, and thought may be relevant for checking, via Slack or Check. Monitoring also involved reviewing claims, memes and content shared with Verificado by the audience via Twitter and Facebook hashtags #QuieroQueVerifiquen (#IWantYouToVerify). This meant the collaboration was not only between media partners, but also extended to the audience, who every day submitted hundreds of items they had observed on social networks and private messaging apps that they thought we might want to verify.

» Prioritization and assignment: Because the volume of things to check and investigate always outstrips the editorial team’s capacity to investigate, there is an important prioritization and assignment function played by the editorial leads within the team. In prioritizing things to check, various factors are taken into consideration, such as:

» The virality of the claim or meme (i.e. is this something that has been seen and shared by a lot of people?). This is a particularly important consideration, as Verificado debunking a claim that had only been seen by a handful of people could have the impact of more people seeing (and potentially believing) the harmful content. In some cases, even though the team could debunk a claim or meme, strategic silence was the best option (though content would be added to Check in case it gained traction later and it was worth-while Verificado publishing a debunk).

» The relevance of the claim to the election (i.e. is this something
that, if shared widely, could have a negative impact on people’s ability to make an informed choice at the polling booth?).

» The “checkability” of the claim (i.e. is this something that with some work it would be possible to verify or debunk?). Given the high volume of claims to check, it is important to focus on the possible, rather than chasing details of uncheckable claims. This is important because one strategy of disinformation actors is to flood networks with hard to check and low impact claims, thus exhausting capacity for investigating the important claims.

» Once a claim was deemed a priority for checking, it would be assigned by an editorial lead to one member of the editorial team for investigation.

» Verification: After assignment, a journalist working at the centralized editorial operation would investigate the claim (or meme) and attempt to verify the content. This process differs, depending on the type of content being checked, but can involve:

» Investigating the provenance of a piece of content, such as an image or video, using tools like Google Reverse Image Search (to see if an image has existed online before the event it claims to show, or has been manipulated from an earlier image), InVID (to assess the provenance of YouTube videos);

» Investigating the source of a piece of content, to establish whether a claim, meme or image came from a real person, or was being spread by bots or sockpuppet accounts (a common disinformation strategy);

» Contacting members of the partner coalition who might be better placed to assist with the investigation (if it pertains to a certain state or district of Mexico, for example);

» Checking source statistics upon which political claims are being based, including evaluating the statistical methodology of a claim, to better understand whether a datapoint was being used in its full and correct context. This may also involve contacting subject matter experts for insights.

» Editorial review: After working on their investigation, the journalist would present their findings to a senior editor, who would review the findings and the process used, to ensure that content published by Verificado met high editorial standards.

» Production: Once signed off by an editor, producers would work to prepare the content for publication. For text content, Animal Politi-
co would prepare the content for publication on the project website Verificado.mx. For claims and content with a more visual dimension, AJ+ Español would create graphics and short videos that explained the debunk, often explaining how content had been manipulated to audiences.

» **Publication and distribution with partners:** Prior to publication, an email would be sent to all the coalition partners with a list of content to be published the following day, allowing them time to add the stories and graphics to their own CMS. This meant that upon publication, Verificado’s debunks could simultaneously be published by any or all the 90 media coalition partners involved in the project - greatly increasing the probability that anyone who had seen or shared the original misleading content would see the debunk or correction as published by the Verificado coalition.

Though details between projects will differ, the phases of work outlined above are generally applicable to any election misinformation reporting project. It involves a good deal of work, carried out by many people, often not co-located. Coordination is a huge challenge, and the value of having editorial leaders with oversight of the full process cannot be overstated. For Verificado, this role was performed by Alba Mora Roca (AJ+ Español), Tania Montalvo and Daniel Moreno (Animal Político).

In addition to the daily management of Verificado, the core leadership team - Diana Larrea, Alba Mora Roca (AJ+ Español), Daniel Moreno, Tania Montalvo (Animal Político) and myself (Pop-Up Newsroom) held weekly management calls to discuss ongoing strategic questions and to make any workflow adjustments required to ensure the smooth running of the entire operation.

> **Anyone who had seen or shared the original misleading content would see the debunk or correction**
Fact Checking the Presidential Debates

During the election campaign, there were three key debates at which the leading presidential candidates engaged in lively discussion about their policy platforms and political records. For Verificado 2018, these debates presented major opportunities to interrogate the claims made by the candidates and assess their rhetorical style. For each debate, the entire Verificado team - supplemented by additional staff from Animal Político, up to a total of over 60 journalists - worked to document and analyze the claims made by candidates in real-time, with AJ+ producing visuals and graphics that compared the different approaches by the candidates.

For the third presidential debate, the largest of the three, the newsroom fact-checked 40 claims, publishing findings following the debate and in the subsequent days. In fact-checking and verification, speed is important, but accuracy is vital. The days following each presidential debate saw the highest traffic to Verificado.mx, reflecting the value of engaging in the key moments of the political campaigns and devoting energy to investigating and analyzing candidate claims.

Read more: What it’s like to fact-check a Mexican presidential debate

Election Day Newsroom

On July 1, 2018, the combined Verificado teams gathered at a joint newsroom in Mexico City to provide real-time coverage of the voting process. While misinformation during the campaign impacts the public’s ability to make informed choices in an election, misinformation on voting days can have the impact of reducing turnout - a strategy that could be weaponized by candidates and parties wishing to suppress voting by, for example, spreading viral false claims of ballot burning. At the same time, it’s essential that where claims of voting irregularities are verified, that they are reported in a timely manner by media such that electoral regulators can act as required.
With leadership from Pop-Up Newsroom’s Fergus Bell, and myself, Alba Mora Roca and Diana Larrea (AJ+) and Tania Montalvo and Daniel Moreno (Animal Político), we adapted the daily workflow of Verificado for a more real-time setting, incorporating new technologies such as Krzana that could help give us a sense of claims of irregularities as early as possible.

The stories we covered on election day were many and varied, but included verifying a series of videos of incidents of armed ballot robbery in the city of Puebla, captured on camera by citizens in the polling stations and verified in our newsroom in conjunction with local partners, and debunking text added to Facebook’s camera app that misleading claimed that taking photos inside polling stations was illegal. After our report, Facebook quickly changed the text that appeared in the app.

Collaborative Technology

Key to managing the collaboration was a suite of technologies that helped structure communications and the flow of information between the various desks and teams within the Verificado operation. The primary tools used were:

- Slack - a workplace communication platform that is well suited to co-located and remote teams sharing ideas and asking questions. All coalition partners had a presence on the Verificado Slack team, and it was the main communications hub for the project;

- Check - an open source collaborative verification platform developed by Meedan, used as the central workbench for gathering and investigating content for the project. Check allows teams to work together on the process of curating content and going through a shared, structured verification and annotation process, before assigning a status like “Verdadero” (True), “Falso” (False) or “Engañoso” (Misleading). Check thus plays the role of project database, containing all the links, claims, memes and content investigated by the project - this is useful because it ensures that there is no duplication of work, important to avoid when dealing with hundreds of claims with limited capacity. [Disclosure: I am the Director of Programs at Meedan, the US-based technology non-profit that develops Check].
Following the launch of Verificado 2018, it became increasingly apparent that only monitoring “open” social platforms - Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, campaign publications - was only dealing with a segment of the misinformation spreading around the campaigns. WhatsApp, a private messaging app now owned by Facebook, is highly popular in Mexico, and it was clear that some rumours and misinformation were being shared widely on the platform. Led by AJ+ Español, Verificado 2018 launched a WhatsApp “tip line” that encouraged users to send the team content they suspected of being false or questionable. Verificado journalists would then investigate submissions and reply to users with the resulting fact-checks.

In producing these fact-checks and debunks, AJ+ Español displayed their creativity, creating a new, WhatsApp specific format - dubbed the verificado, due to its vertical, fact-filled nature. The goal of the verificado was to create shareable content that could be forwarded to friends and groups on WhatsApp to counteract the sharing of viral misinformation. Verificado also launched a publicity campaign around the WhatsApp tip line that subverted a sexist and unpleasant blaming of women for the spread of rumours on the platform. Verificado 2018 was the first election collaboration to seek to address the challenge of misinformation spread via WhatsApp, and the platform provided an important opportunity to extend the collaboration with audiences, started with the #WeWantYouToVerify hashtag on Twitter and Facebook.

WhatsApp promo video: https://twitter.com/VerificadoMX/status/1009964203958865921

Example of a claim we debunked from WhatsApp, spreading a rumour that the pencils used to mark ballot papers were erasable and votes cast could thus be altered after being submitted. This claim was repeatedly debunked by electoral authorities and we emphasized that if voters were concerned about this, they could use their own pens: https://twitter.com/VerificadoMX/status/1013455709353250816

In addition to sending back responses to individual requests from users, we used the WhatsApp “Status” feature to share to all those following the account all the debunks and content we published to WhatsApp over the prior 24 hours: https://twitter.com/VerificadoMX/status/999678137872007169
Visual Language

From the outset of Verificado 2018, the core partners were aligned that a strong brand and identity for the campaign was needed. This served multiple purposes:

» A strong brand and visual identity help to distinguish our content from other brands and from the disinformation we were fighting;

» A strong visual identity (logo, graphic assets) and content with high production values are difficult to copy, reducing the risk that disinformation actors could replicate the branding and use it to further spread disinformation;

» After audiences became familiar with the brand and understood the goals of the initiative, the visual language provided a quick way for audiences to trust our content

We launched Verificado with a strong promo video, featuring Diana Larrea explaining the urgency of the challenge and the goals of the initiative: https://twitter.com/PopupNews/status/981884425108586496

In addition to a strong brand and visual identity, it was crucial for Verificado that we incorporated high production values in our content, to make it as visual, engaging and shareable as possible. A key feature of much disinformation is that it often contains a lot of information - stripped of context or with misleading context applied - embedded in a visual asset such as a meme or video. These misinformation memes spread rapidly over social networks and a fact check - as well researched and rigorous as it may be - simply does not have the same viral capacity as the content it seeks to investigate. For this reason, Verificado deliberately created content that could compete with misinformation on a viral engagement level - often subverting memes, incorporating gifs and emojis, and featuring playful and engaging animation.

An example of our use of gifs, emojis and animation to debunk the aforementioned “erasable pencils” rumour: https://twitter.com/VerificadoMX/status/1013459010568286209
Misinformation Literacy

In addition to addressing specific claims made by candidates or specific rumours and memes spread on open and private social networks, Verificado also sought to address the misinformation challenge by helping the public understand the dynamics of how misinformation worked. We did this by interviewing researchers like Alberto Escorcia, who explained how in an early week of the campaigns, he analyzed 17 trending topics on Twitter that appeared to be supporting different candidates. Using network mapping methods, Alberto found that only four of the 17 trends were organic - the rest all driven by bot activity: https://twitter.com/VerificadoMX/status/984474465366142976

We also published a glossary of terms explaining the difference between bots, trolls, decks and sockpuppets, all approaches used by disinformation actors to spread misleading content: https://twitter.com/VerificadoMX/status/997241015164686336

In one video, we interviewed some human “bots” - people paid by political campaigns to manage fake accounts to spread messages of support for one candidate while attacking others to create a misleading sense of public opinion: https://twitter.com/VerificadoMX/status/1014624904044597248

As well as explaining how different disinformation actors used various methods to manipulate social networks to give false sense of public opinion, we also published short explainer videos to help audiences better understand how they themselves could conduct basic verification of content. In this video, we explain how you can quickly check if an image you’ve seen on social media has existed online before and thus if it has been manipulated or mis-contextualized, using a method known as reverse image search: https://twitter.com/VerificadoMX/status/984556769962856449 This video, published on Twitter and Facebook was viewed over 1.5 million times and was the most consumed piece of content published during the entire initiative - clearly demonstrating audience appetite for such guides.

Embedding misinformation literacy content in the output of Verificado was a highly successful strategy: had we purely been a media literacy initiative, it is unlikely we would have gained such a strong audience following. But as the timely, newsworthy analysis, fact checks and debunks gathered audience attention, the following showed a strong apprecia-
tion of the explainers and media literacy content we mixed with the fact checking content.

**Impact**

The audience response to Verificado was overwhelming. From the outset, our social accounts quickly gained traction, registering more than 50,000 followers on Twitter and Facebook in the first days of the project - all organic with no paid advertising. By the end of Verificado, those numbers had grown to over 200,000 on each platform, with 10,000 followers of our WhatsApp channel. The profile of the initiative was such that we garnered the attention of the presidential candidates themselves (occasionally attempting to defend themselves against our finding of their claims to be misleading), movie stars, a former UN Secretary General and influential media. As the project came to a close in the days following the election, audiences and media alike urged Verificado to continue our work - a baton we passed back to Animal Político’s fact checkers at El Sabueso and a newly formed unit at AJ+, Verifica.

Former UN Secretary General, the late Kofi Annan praises Verificado in a speech given at Mexico’s Instituto Nacional Electoral: [https://twitter.com/aaplusespanol/status/999809775545106432](https://twitter.com/aaplusespanol/status/999809775545106432)

This level of engagement with a project such as Verificado was totally unprecedented, and to project leaders marked a significant measure of success: our project changed the level of public discourse around the elections, and Verificado became a key touch point for many Mexican voters over the course of the campaign.

While the public engagement with Verificado is the truest measure of the impact of the initiative, we also received significant recognition from media colleagues. In September 2018, Verificado was named the winner of the inaugural Online Journalism Award for Excellence in Collaboration and Partnerships, and after winning the Latin America Digital Media Award for Innovation in Engaging Youth Audiences, we won the World Digital Media award in the same category at a WAN-IFRA ceremony in Glasgow in June 2019.
By Numbers

» Started with three partners, launched with 30 partners, we closed the initiative with over 90 partners from across Mexico.

» Over the course of three and a half months, we published over 400 articles and over 100 videos.

» Our homepage, Verificado.mx, registered over 5 million unique visits.

» We gathered more than 400,000 followers on Twitter and Facebook, and over 10,000 subscribers on WhatsApp.

Lessons and Insights

» The motivation for running a project like Verificado was justified. Our day to day experience of the project was that the pre-election information ecosystem was extremely noisy and politically charged and our initiative helped a section of the Mexican electorate navigate this noisy environment.

» Verificado 2018 would not have been a success were it not for collaboration happening at different levels:

  » Between the core partners, bringing complimentary skill sets, contacts and experience;

  » Between the full network of partners, who helped to source information and stories to be checked, and to distribute Verificado content to as wide and diverse an audience as possible;

  » Between the project and the audience, who engaged passionately with Verificado via social channels and WhatsApp to send us information they wanted to be checked, and to share the content we were publishing with their friends and family networks.

» The Verificado model built on experiences and practices from previous initiatives, but was designed specifically for Mexico, with Mexican partners who had an in-depth knowledge of the Mexican media environment. When attempting similar projects in different contexts, it’s always worth going through a complete design process that in-
Involves diverse stakeholders with strong local expertise and questioning assumptions based on past experiences.

» Building a robust editorial workflow - ensuring project output is of the highest integrity and quality - is essential. Equally essential is applying creativity in how you present your editorial findings to an audience in a way that is engaging and shareable.

» Build a diverse coalition of partners, so you’re sure that debunking work and verified content is not only reaching a narrow segment of the audience that might already be less impacted by disinformation.

» Prepare ahead of time! These collaborations don’t come together overnight and the more lead time you must plan and engage partners, the fewer problems you will run into once you launch.

Verificado says farewell: Hasta la Proxima!