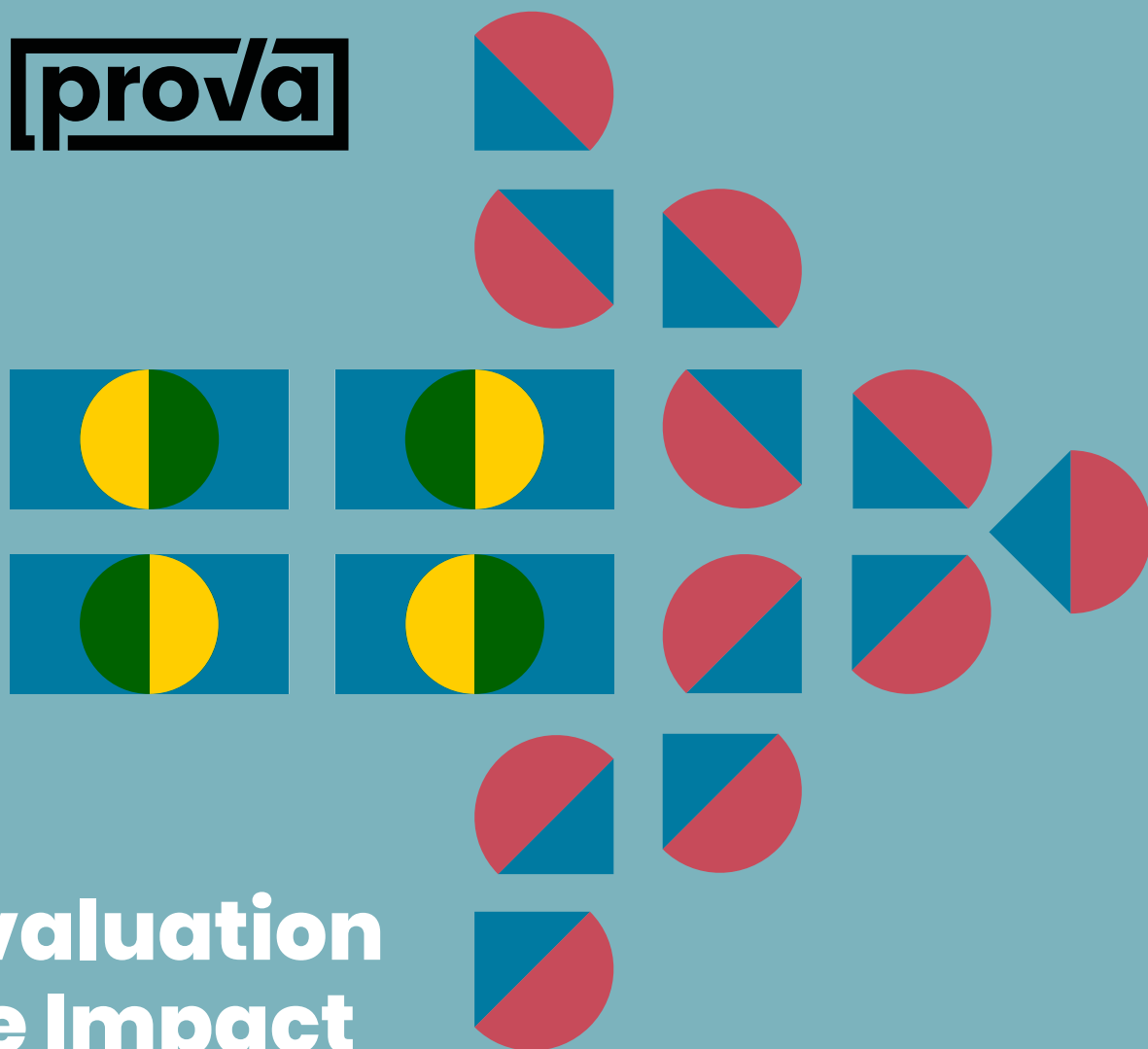# com|prova

An Evaluation of the Impact of a Collaborative Journalism Project on Brazilian Journalists and Audiences

REPORT SUMMARY

By: **Claire Wardle,
Angela Pimenta,
Guilherme Conter,
Nic Dias,
Pedro Burgos**

Acknowledgements

This is a summary of the research report. To read the full report, visit the First Draft website. ➡ https://firstdraftnews.org/

Introduction

Comprova was an ambitious, collaborative journalism project that focused on verifying or debunking questionable stories published on social media and within messaging apps during the 12 weeks leading up to the Brazilian 2018 presidential election. Facilitated and supported by First Draft, the project involved 24 of Brazil's largest newsrooms and included 59 journalists and editors, aided by an additional three First Draft staff members.

Designed to provide a trusted source of information for Brazilian voters, Comprova's ambition was to prevent the duplication of newsrooms verifying the same content, to consolidate the verification effort, and to ensure that quality information was amplified via the large audiences that already engaged with the 24 news brands.
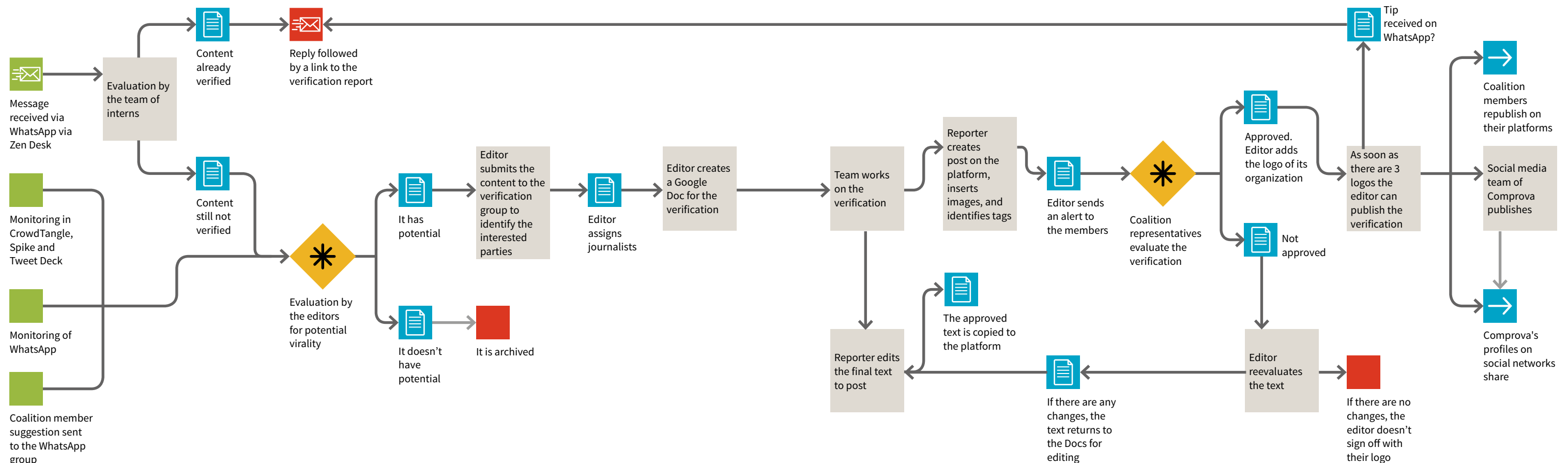
Comprova was inspired by the CrossCheck methodology, devised by First Draft's Managing Director, Jenni Sargent, and first tested in the lead up to the 2017 French presidential election. CrossCheck France brought together 37 organizations (33 of them local and national newsrooms) between the end of February until early May 2017, to collectively debunk misinformation relating to the election and to publicly share responsibility for the accuracy and transparency of the resulting reports.

To 'CrossCheck' a report means reviewing and approving the verification steps taken by another newsroom, adding the logo of your organization alongside other contributing partners, and then amplifying the report to existing audiences.

By **Claire Wardle**, *Director, First Draft*

Confirming the findings from the evaluation of the CrossCheck France project, this evaluation of Comprova demonstrates that the CrossCheck model does work: it has significant impact on the journalists who participate – and by extension their newsrooms – and likewise has a clear, positive impact on readers and audiences.

COMPROVA WORKFLOW DIAGRAM

Message received via WhatsApp via Zen Desk

Monitoring in CrowdTangle, Spike and Tweet Deck

Monitoring of WhatsApp

Coalition member suggestion sent to the WhatsApp group

Evaluation by the team of interns

Content already verified

Reply followed by a link to the verification report

Content still not verified

Evaluation by the editors for potential virality

It has potential

It doesn't have potential

It is archived

Editor submits the content to the verification group to identify the interested parties

Editor assigns journalists

Editor creates a Google Doc for the verification

Team works on the verification

Reporter creates post on the platform, inserts images, and identifies tags

Editor sends an alert to the members

Coalition representatives evaluate the verification

Approved. Editor adds the logo of its organization

Not approved

Tip received on WhatsApp?

As soon as there are 3 logos the editor can publish the verification

Coalition members republish on their platforms

Social media team of Comprova publishes

Comprova's profiles on social networks share

Reporter edits the final text to post

The approved text is copied to the platform

If there are any changes, the text returns to the Docs for editing

Editor reevaluates the text

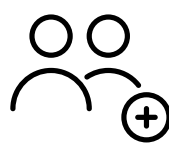If there are no changes, the editor doesn't sign off with their logo

COMPROVA BY NUMBERS

Stories

1,750 Number of original articles published by Comprova partners based on reporting by the Comprova project

146 Number of Comprova reports published on projetocomprova.com.br

Social Media

2,711,578 Total engagements on social media related to Comprova content

1,358,422 Total engagement with content on the Comprova Facebook Page

754,562 Total engagement with all Comprova-related stories on the partners' Facebook and Twitter pages

598,594 Total engagement on Facebook and Twitter when partner newsrooms posted Comprova reports on their social accounts

135,000 Number of Comprova's Facebook Page followers

18,000 Number of Twitter followers for @comprova

3,413 Number of Instagram followers on @projetocomprova

573 Number of Facebook and Twitter posts that mentioned Comprova

466 Number of Comprova YouTube channel subscribers

6 Number of Twitter Moments designed to teach verification techniques to audiences

WhatsApp

350,567 Total number of interactions between the audience and Comprova journalists on WhatsApp

78, 462 Number of files containing tips and supporting evidence submitted via the public Comprova WhatsApp number

48,488 images

24,345 video files

4,831 audio files

67,870 Number of new tips sent in from the public (doesn't include follow up responses)

108,443 Number of WhatsApp messages sent from the Comprova team to individual members of the audience

18,154 Number of messages shared by Comprova journalists in their private WhatsApp group

COMPROVA TIMELINE

Nov 13 2017
FIRST MEETING
❯ First Draft presentation (CrossCheck legacy and incentives for newsrooms to collaborate)
❯ Skepticism (competition and unwillingness to collaborate)
❯ Eight newsrooms attended; two signalled interest in participating in collaborative project to fight misinformation in Brazil

Feb 2 2018
1st WORKSHOP
Purpose:
❯ Decide collectively what a collaborative project to monitor and debunk disinformation in Brazil might look like
❯ No decisions about formally signing up took place at the meeting, but it gave participants enough information to take back to newsrooms
Content:
❯ First Draft presentation (CrossCheck legacy and incentives for newsrooms)
❯ Fact checking (official sources) and verification (unofficial sources)
❯ Brazilian political, media, and disinformation outlook
❯ Pros and cons of a collaborative project
❯ Design sprint (project modeling)

March 12 2018
2nd WORKSHOP
Established:
❯ Scope (verification and presidential election, crosscheck)
❯ Abraji as operational partner
❯ Grants for participant newsrooms
❯ Pro bono legal counseling
❯ Comprova as the project name
❯ Signed-in members: UOL, Jornal do Commercio)

May 27-29 2018
BOOTCAMP
Established:
❯ Connections and a trusting relationship among partners
❯ Creation of a deliberative council
Consolidated:
❯ Guidelines
❯ Principles for monitoring techniques
❯ Workflow processes
❯ How to publish debunks
Mapped:
❯ Potential policy and cultural issues to be explored by bad actors during the presidential campaign
Tools lessons:
❯ Social media and verification tools
❯ CrossCheck case studies
Meetings:
❯ Platform representatives (Google, Facebook) and WhatsApp
Attendance:
❯ Coalition partners, including verifiers, editors

June 27 2018
ABRAJI PARTNERS TRAINING
Content:
❯ Monitoring techniques (CrowdTangle, NewsWhip, and TweetDeck)
❯ Verification test
❯ Q&A on the coalition
Established:
❯ Comprova five guiding principles: accuracy, fairness and impartiality, independence, transparency, and ethical responsibility
❯ Monitoring workflow responsibilities
❯ Advisory board guidelines
❯ Weekly coalition calls (Zoom)
❯ Slack as the coalition team messaging tool
❯ WhatsApp public line strategy
Attendance:
❯ Coalition partners, including verifiers, editors, and managers who did not attend previous Comprova-related events

June 28 2018
LAUNCH
24 partners
AFP Brasil, Band TV, Band News TV, Band News FM, Rádio Bandeirantes, Correio do Povo, O Estado de S. Paulo, Exame, Folha de S.Paulo, Futura, Gaúcha ZH, Gazeta Online, Gazeta do Povo, Jornal do Commercio, Metro Brasil, Nexo Jornal, Nova Escola, NSC Comunicação, O Povo, Poder 360, revista piauí, SBT, UOL and Veja

August 5 2018
1st DEBUNK
❯ Parties will receive BRL $1.7 billion from the Electoral Fund for campaigns

August 16 2018
10th DEBUNK
❯ European Union did not ask for retaliation to Brazil for Lula's arrest

September 10 2018
BOLSONARO ATTACKER DEBUNK
❯ Photo in which Bolsonaro aggressor appears next to Lula is a montage

September 27 2018
EROTIC BABY BOTTLES DEBUNK
❯ "Erotic bottle" were not distributed in day care centers by PT

October 3 2018
100th DEBUNK
❯ George Soros did not finance movement #nothim against Bolsonaro

October 28 2018
146th DEBUNK
❯ Video in which Malafaia criticizes Bolsonaro is from 2017

Key Findings
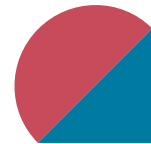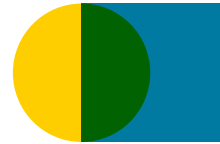
Research Questions

1. How did journalists collaborate with one another to debunk misinformation?
2. How did participation in Comprova impact the journalists and their newsrooms?
   1. Did collaboration between journalists improve reporting standards?
3. How did Comprova impact its audience?
   1. Did they find Comprova's reporting useful?
   2. Did they share Comprova's content?
   3. Did Comprova's reporting change people's beliefs?
4. What types of misinformation were sent to Comprova via its WhatsApp tip line?
5. Who did Comprova reach via social media?
   1. Was Comprova effective at reaching a diverse audience?

Our multi-method evaluation included the following seven separate elements:

1. A two-phase survey with 26 journalists who participated in the project.
2. Two phases of semi-structured interviews with journalists who participated in the project.
3. Analysis of 18,500 WhatsApp messages and the shared Google Docs used by participating journalists.
4. Analysis of 120,941 messages with relevant tips, from a total of 242,124 messages submitted to the central tip line from the audience.
5. Analysis of the social media campaigns on Facebook and Twitter that were designed to increase engagement with Brazilian citizens. More than 2.5 million social engagements across the platforms used for Comprova were examined on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.
6. A survey with 715 Comprova audience members.
7. A survey experiment with 511 Brazilian adults to examine whether or not reports changed people's beliefs.

As these two lists demonstrates, this was a complex evaluation process. Those interested in reading the full report can find it on the First Draft website (https://firstdraftnews.org/). This document is a summary of the key findings.

How did Comprova impact audiences?

Comprova reached a significant percentage of the Brazilian population. By convening a coalition of existing, large news organizations, it was possible to create a new brand in 12 weeks. Our audience survey, representative of the Brazilian population who use the internet, demonstrated that almost 25 percent of those surveyed had heard of Comprova.

Although Comprova debunks were faithfully shared by its coalition, the reach of these posts was limited by the size of each partner's audience. The Comprova team expected its Facebook and Twitter followers to grow naturally until the end of the election. However, we realized that relying on broadcasts to followers could limit the audience for debunks—not only in terms of size, but demographics and political views as well.

Previous research from the United States has shown that conservatives tend to hold less favorable views of standalone fact-checkers than progressives, especially when comparing politically knowledgeable individuals in both camps.[1] Likewise, Audience Insights data for Comprova's Facebook Page showed that most followers identified as left wing, following the Pages of politicians such as Manuela D'Ávila and Fernando Haddad, and political parties such as PSOL 50 and Partido dos Trabalhadores.

During the project planning phase, the power of promoted posts and ads was discussed with the technology companies, and we were donated Facebook ad credits and Twitter for Good credits from both companies. With these ad credits from Facebook and Twitter, Comprova used ads on the two platforms to reach a wider and more diverse audience. Ads allowed us to target wide swathes of citizens likely to have an interest in politics. By the end of the project, for example, sponsored Facebook posts reached almost seven million people, compared to the roughly 136,000 organic followers of Comprova's Page. ►

Our audience survey, representative of the Brazilian population who use the internet, demonstrated that almost 25 percent of those surveyed had heard of Comprova
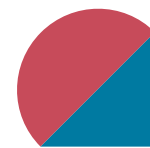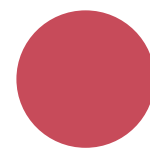
1 Nyhan, B. and Riefler, J. (2015) *Estimating Fact-checking's Effects Evidence from a long-term experiment during campaign 2014*, American Press Institute http://bit.ly/2KtejN5
Rasmussen Reports, 2016, *Voters Don't Trust Media Fact Checking* http://bit.ly/2MSnFUD

By the end of the project, sponsored Facebook posts reached almost seven million people, compared to the roughly 136,000 organic followers of Comprova's Page.

From August 6 to October 31, the campaigns collectively reached nearly 6.9 million people and appeared on Facebook screens more than 24.5 million times.

The gender imbalance reflected in Comprova's ad engagements was also present in Comprova's organic followers: as of April 2019, Comprova's Facebook followers consisted of 64 percent women, of which 70 percent had a college education. These followers apparently leaned left, as they followed the pages of politicians such as Eduardo Suplicy, Manuela D'Ávila, Jandira Feghali, and Fernando Haddad. These followers also liked political parties such as PSOL 50 and the PT: Partido dos Trabalhadores.

The left-leaning tendency among followers and those engaged with Comprova ads underscored the importance of pushing Comprova's content to a wider, more balanced audience through the use of sponsored posts.

Facebook

Ad campaign groups

Five groups of ad campaigns were created, each with a distinct objective:

1. increase **traffic** to Comprova's website, to allow people to read debunks in entirety;
2. increase the number of **followers** on Comprova's Facebook Page;
3. drive user **engagement** for promoted posts;
4. encourage users to send rumors to Comprova via **WhatsApp** for investigation; and
5. promote **video views**.

The ad campaigns generated 447,728 link clicks, 111,213 Page likes, 2,380,121 post engagements,[2] and 475,109 video views of at least 10 seconds. From August 6 to October 31, the campaigns collectively reached nearly 6.9 million people and appeared on Facebook screens more than 24.5 million times. More than 3.5 million people (52 percent of the total) were reached from October 3 to 7 alone due to an increase in ad spending, and increased interest in the lead-up to the first election.[3]

Demographics
The audience for Comprova's ads was 53 percent women, which is consistent with the official numbers of registered voters from Brazil's Superior Electoral Court (TSE).[4] However, 61 percent of post engagements came from women, particularly over the age of 45 (almost 38 percent). Women over 45 also accounted for almost 43 percent of all ad link clicks. Since women over 45 account for 23 percent of all registered voters in Brazil, this is a relevant segment of the voting population (although voting isn't mandatory for people 70 and older). If not for our campaign encouraging users to send Comprova rumors via WhatsApp—where men accounted for 59 percent of views and link clicks—these figures may have been even more skewed toward women.
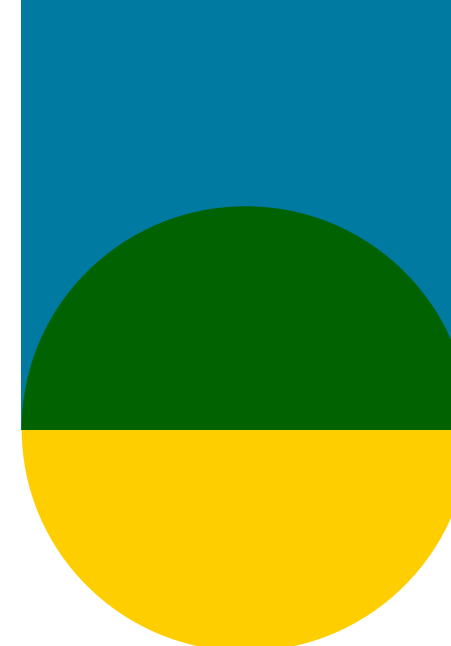
Twitter

Compared to Facebook, Twitter's user base in Brazil is much smaller. While 57 percent of registered voters have a Facebook account, only 13 percent use Twitter.[5] However, it's still an important and vibrant community for real-time discussions of news events and politics, as evidenced by the fact that it is the platform of choice for elected leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro. Thus, Comprova's content also needed to be disseminated through this social network, and Twitter's Ads for Good initiative helped the project reach a much wider audience.

Social media was responsible for almost half of all Comprova's website traffic — 47 percent of unique visitors, out of a total of 491,337 users from August 6 to October 31, 2018.

Ad campaign groups
Since the grant provided by Twitter's Ads for Good program had specific guidelines for the types of content that could be promoted, our first ad campaign focused on increasing Comprova's Twitter followers and encouraging users to send questions about what they saw online about the presidential elections to Comprova via WhatsApp. We began to run ads in mid-September and boosted our output in the days leading up to the first election on October 7, 2018, and the second election on October 28, 2018. These ads resulted in 1,120,558 ad impressions and 11,949 follows, out of approximately 17,800 total followers by October 31.

A second, smaller ad campaign was created to increase video views for a media literacy piece that was posted on October 19 to help users verify suspicious content. The media literacy campaign resulted in 113,813 ad impressions and 58,322 video views.

Website (Google Analytics)

Social media was responsible for almost half of all Comprova's website traffic—47 percent of unique visitors, out of a total of 491,337 users from August 6 to October 31, 2018. Direct traffic followed social with 18 percent; organic search, such as from Google, totalled 17.5 percent; and referral traffic from other websites like Comprova's partners amounted to only 11 percent of visitors.

While not all social visitors came from paid campaigns, and Google Analytics' metrics are different than Facebook's (such as link clicks), Comprova's social media efforts were crucial to bringing people to the website, where they could read the entire debunk. Out of all social visitors, Facebook represented a staggering 93 percent, while Twitter contributed 4 percent Twitter users, however, spent one minute more on the website than people from Facebook, who averaged only 30 seconds.

Conclusions

The paid social media campaigns were greatly responsible for connecting Comprova's content to a wider audience during the three months the project operated. Gaining followers in social platforms is a long-term commitment and algorithms tend to curb organic reach, so promoting posts is an efficient way to quickly show relevant information to a properly targeted audience that is more likely to have an interest in the subject. Promoted posts were especially relevant for this project, since it strived for journalistic balance in covering left- and right-wing political reports.

By **Guilherme Conter**, *MSc in Marketing Strategy and Consumer Behaviour at Federal University of Parana*

2 Engagements include reactions, comments, link clicks, and video views.

3 These numbers have important caveats. First, the total number does not include organic, non-paid numbers. Second, the number is estimated from sampled data and thus not exact. Third, paid and organic numbers can't be combined, as it would duplicate people reac hed by both types of posts. (This also applies to post statistics.)

4 TSE - Estatísticas do eleitorado – Por sexo e faixa etária. Available at: http://bit.ly/2KXNyQB

5 http://bit.ly/2WNvlaI

Audience Surveys

To supplement the audience demographics offered by Facebook, Twitter, and Google Analytics, Comprova distributed a survey via its own social media accounts, its website, and the social media accounts and websites of coalition members. A link to the survey was published as a 'post' on Facebook and Twitter accounts, and the audience was told that the survey was going to be used to evaluate the project. Nearly 49 percent of participants who completed the survey encountered it via Facebook.

It is important to note that an opt-in survey such as this almost certainly suffers from selection bias. Still, the survey offers additional insight into the composition of Comprova's audience. A total of 715 individuals participated in the survey. (However, due to drop-off and non-responses, the number of respondents that answered any one question varied slightly.)

As expected, nearly all respondents (92 percent) were residents of Brazil, with the remainder spread across countries like the United States, Portugal, the UK, and Canada. The average age of a respondent was 42.1 years old (SD = 15.0). Of the respondents, 53.2 percent were men, and 44.5 percent were women.[6]

Survey respondents were politically involved: 81.0 percent reported they were "very" interested in politics and public affairs, with another 15.2 percent indicating they were "more or less" interested. A full 59.6 percent of respondents said they "always" paid attention to politics and topics of public interest, and another 28.7 percent said they paid attention "most of the time." These results are unsurprising, given Comprova's active attempts to target those interested in political candidates, political parties, and politics generally.

Despite political interest, respondents did not have strong partisan loyalties. A plurality (28.1 percent) of respondents said they did not identify with a political party. Moreover, of those who did identify with a political party, 83.8 percent said they were not active members of their party. The top five parties reported by participants are listed in Table 1.

POLITICAL PARTY	PERCENTAGE IDENTIFY
Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT)	18%
Partido Social Liberal (PSL)	12.6%
Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (PSOL)	11.6%
Partido Novo (NOVO)	8.7%
Partido Democratico Trabalhista (PDT)	7.5%

Table 1. **Top five federal political parties claimed by survey respondents.**

Did audiences trust Comprova reporting?

Beyond mere exposure, the audience members surveyed thought highly of the coalition:

- **79.6 percent completely or partially agreed with the statement that Comprova could be trusted.**
- 81.5 percent completely or partially agreed that Comprova was accurate.
- 76.4 percent completely or partially agreed that Comprova was fair.
- 77.9 percent agreed completely or partially that Comprova told the whole story.
- 31.9 percent agreed that Comprova was biased (partially or completely). By contrast, 29.7 percent disagreed and 30.6 percent were neutral on the issue.

Perceptions of Comprova's individual reports were similarly strong:

- 81.4 percent partially or completely agreed that reports were accurate.
- 81.0 agreed partially or completely that reports were authentic.
- 78.0 agreed partially or completely that reports were believable.
- **78.4 percent said reports taught them something they didn't know.**
- **40.4 percent said Comprova helped them to decide their vote, while 27.4 percent was neutral on the issue and 32.2 percent disagreed.**

More than 70 percent of respondents said they shared or discussed Comprova debunks in order to inform someone. A majority of these conversations were with family, friends, and colleagues—with 41.3 percent reporting having talked to friends, 27.6 percent to family, and 18.8 percent to colleagues.

More than 70 percent of respondents said they shared or discussed Comprova debunks in order to inform someone.

◄ Snapshots of the report stimuli used in the survey experiment.
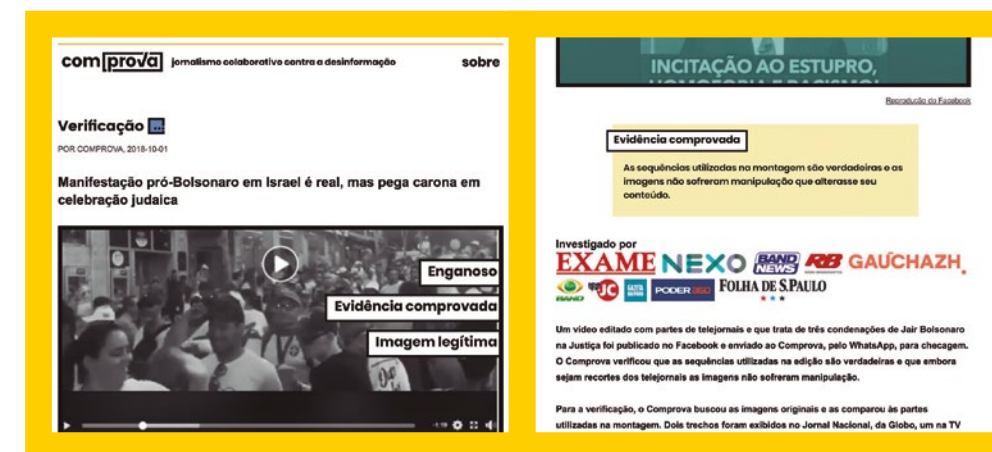
Did Comprova reports impact the beliefs of audience members?

To test the efficacy of Comprova's debunks at an individual level, we conducted a separate survey experiment in the months following the second round of the 2018 Brazilian federal elections.

Research Design

A sample of 511 Brazilian adults[7] viewed (1) a suspect piece of social media content that circulated widely during the 2018 Brazilian federal elections and then (2) a relevant report produced by Comprova.

Respondents began the survey by indicating their party affiliation and political ideology. They also specified whether they would vote for Fernando Haddad or Jair Bolsonaro if the second round of the federal election were held today. Based on their answer to this last question, participants were block-randomized to view one of two videos. The first video consisted of a montage of news reports describing three of Jair Bolsonaro's (real) convictions in civil court for insensitive, racist and homophobic comments. The second video appears to depict an independent, pro-Bolsonaro demonstration in Jerusalem. However, in reality, the video showed the Brazilian delegation of a larger Christian march intended to show solidarity for Israel.[8]

Participants then viewed a written Comprova report addressing the video they had just watched. Respondents were asked to rate how much they believed the core fact supported by the video they had viewed at three points: immediately before the video, immediately after the video, and immediately after the Comprova report. Belief was measured with an 11-point belief scale that ranged from "Completely false" (1) to "Completely true" (11).

After viewing the Comprova report, participants used a five-point scale ranging from "Completely disagree"

to "Completely agree" to indicate how much they agreed Comprova was trustworthy, accurate, fair, and biased. They also indicated how much they agreed Comprova "told the whole story."[9] After reverse-scoring answers to the question dealing with bias, responses to these questions were averaged to produce a credibility score for Comprova.
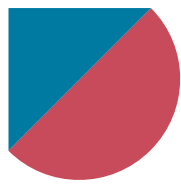
The data show that both Comprova reports moved beliefs in the expected direction. After viewing a montage of news clips describing Bolsonaro's moral outrage convictions, participants on average reported tentative belief that the convictions were real (M = 6.82). After reading a Comprova report that affirmed the core fact of the video, belief ratings rose to an average of 7.24—a statistically significant difference. Similarly, after viewing a video supposedly depicting a pro-Bolsonaro demonstration in Jerusalem, participants on average reported a timid belief that the demonstration was real (M = 6.81). After reading a Comprova debunk that contradicted this claim, belief ratings dropped to an average of 5.50. This difference is also statistically significant.

Our survey experiment suggests that Comprova's reports, in the short term, changed beliefs at the individual level. Qualifications of the survey experiment must be noted. Although the approach of asking participants in correction experiments to rate beliefs multiple times has been used before,10 this design may be vulnerable to demand characteristics. In other words, participants may have rated their beliefs as having changed because they thought they should—not because they in fact did.

By **Nic Dias**, *Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School*

6 The rest preferred not to report their sex or selected "Other."

7 Participants were recruited via Lucid, an online panel company that computationally compiles participants from several online panels and approximates representative samples using standard quota sampling techniques. Demographic information available here: http://bit.ly/2WEUkNJ. Five participants dropped off before the end of the survey. Their responses were retained.

8 The conclusion of the first report was unfavorable to Bolsonaro, whereas the conclusion of the second was favorable to him. As importantly, the first report confirmed the suspect content, whereas the other corrected the suspect content. Ideally, the stimuli would also have included pro-Haddad and anti-Haddad debunks. However, Comprova only verified a handful of claims explicitly referencing Haddad.

9 Questions were pulled from Meyer (1988). The scale's Cronbach's alpha value was acceptable (α = .80).

10 Swire et al. (2017)

Our survey experiment suggests that Comprova's reports, in the short term, changed beliefs at the individual level.

What types of misinformation did the audience send to the Comprova team via WhatsApp?

Comprova had one central tip line on WhatsApp. During the 12 weeks of the project, we received 105,078 messages from the audience, which included suspicious claims, images, video, or audio messages for the team to debunk. Due to WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption, this method of soliciting tips is the only possible way to collect misinformation data without violating the app's terms of service. While there is some degree of self-selection bias, the sample appears to be representative of misinformation that the Comprova team saw in other networks, with some peculiarities of the messaging platform.

This data came from an overall data set of 242,124 messages that were received or sent during the project. Many of these were welcome messages or replies wherein Comprova journalists asked for more information to help with the verification process. So that we could evaluate a clean corpus of data, these additional messages were removed for the purposes of this analysis.

The number of messages we received increased as the campaign went on. This was partly a by-product of the Comprova 'brand' growing in name recognition, but it was also a response to the Facebook ads we posted circulating the WhatsApp number.

Message Formats
During the project we received thousands of messages from the public. The most common message format forwarded to Comprova was image files, usually real pictures with partisan captions. Official documents or real news stories taken out of context and screenshots (of real and false conversations) were also popular. Classic memes, with a big text overlay were less common in Comprova's database, possibly because as propaganda or humorous pieces they don't purport to be true, so are less debunkable.
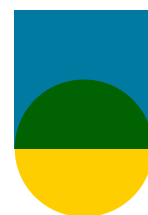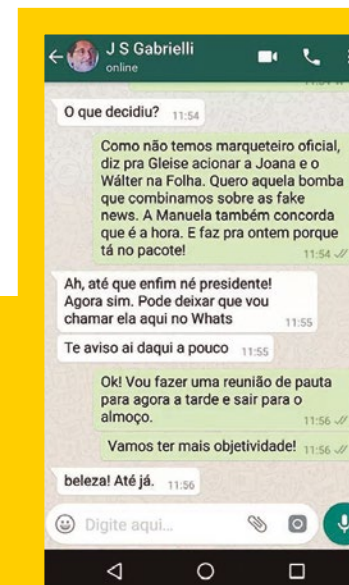

◄ This image was the one piece of misinformation that we received most regularly during Comprova. It's a genuine image of ballot box on the back of a truck, that had not been tampered with. It circulated widely on WhatsApp with a rumour suggested that the ballots in the box had been pre-stamped with votes for Haddad.

◄ This screenshot, shared 663 times, shows a false conversation between former Petrobras President Jose Sergio Gabrielli and Fernando Haddad. In the exchange, they are coordinating attacks on Bolsonaro together with Folha, one of Brazil's largest newspapers. In one version of this hoax, the same picture of a check is put forth as proof that Haddad's campaign was paying the media to go after Bolsonaro.

◄ A picture of a criminal gang apprehended by police, together with the image of a check for R$68 million was forwarded to Comprova 862 times. Both images were real, and were taken close to the elections. The message that accompanied the images alleged—with no basis—that the criminals would use the stolen money to fund Haddad's campaign.

Some of the images were always sent in bulk: an "album" of some 10 photos showing how the Workers' Party helped leftist governments in Latin American (with hit-or-miss captions) was shared with Comprova 225 times. Another album showed official pictures of Workers' Party members meeting with OEA electoral observation missions. The text that accompanied those images alleged that the meeting was secret, with the goal of cheating the results in favor of Haddad (here's Comprova's report).

This screenshot, shared 663 times, shows a false conversation between former Petrobras President Jose Sergio Gabrielli and Fernando Haddad. In the exchange, they are coordinating attacks on Bolsonaro together with Folha, one of Brazil's largest newspapers. In one version of this hoax, the same picture of a check is put forth as proof that Haddad's campaign was paying the media to go after Bolsonaro.
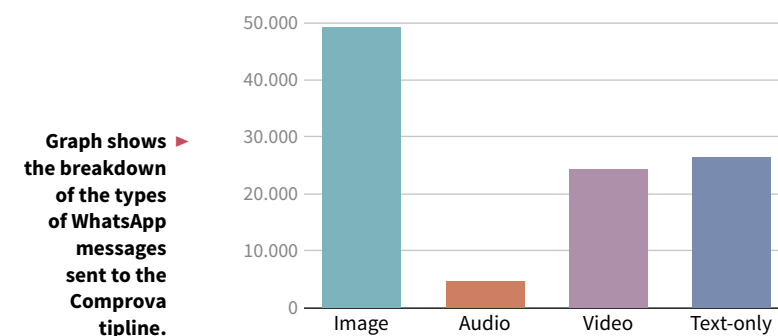
Graph shows the breakdown of the types of WhatsApp messages sent to the Comprova tipline. ►

TYPES OF MESSAGE RECEIVED

Category	Approx. value
Image	~49,000
Audio	~5,000
Video	~24,000
Text-only	~26,000

(Y-axis: 0, 10.000, 20.000, 30.000, 40.000, 50.000)

While there was much press coverage around the "culture wars" aspect of the elections—a few of Bolsonaro's supporters infamously attributed to Haddad the distribution of "erotic baby bottles" to children—if these messages really went viral, they didn't arrive at Comprova's WhatsApp number en masse. Nothing related to gender issues, abortion, or gun laws appeared in the top 200 images shared.

We also ran Google Cloud Vision in every image to extract "entities" (be it a candidate, a symbol, or an object), and there weren't large numbers related to the "culture wars" issues. One might infer that Comprova's tippers were therefore discerning enough that they wouldn't think this type of information should be taken seriously, or that these types of messages were contained in filter bubbles.[11] ►

11 As noted earlier, the WhatsApp messages in this dataset were sent from audience members who knew about Comprova. They were more likely to be consumers of the mainstream media. We know anecdotally that there was more extreme content available on WhatsApp, but the Comprova team was very aware of debunking any content that hadn't been shared widely, as the publication of the debunk would give additional oxygen to those rumours

▲ Candidate Fernando Haddad meets with OEA members.

Text-based messages followed the same themes, with an emphasis on the claim that electoral fraud took Bolsonaro's win in the first round. Many of the messages that were sent repeatedly to Comprova used the tactics of mid-1990s chain emails. The most widely shared text, received 541 times with the same exact words, claimed that the number of absentee ballots and null voting were inflated by the electoral authority, and ended "if you send this message to just 20 contacts in a minute, Brazil will unmask this criminal. DO NOT brake this chain. The unwary must know the truth."
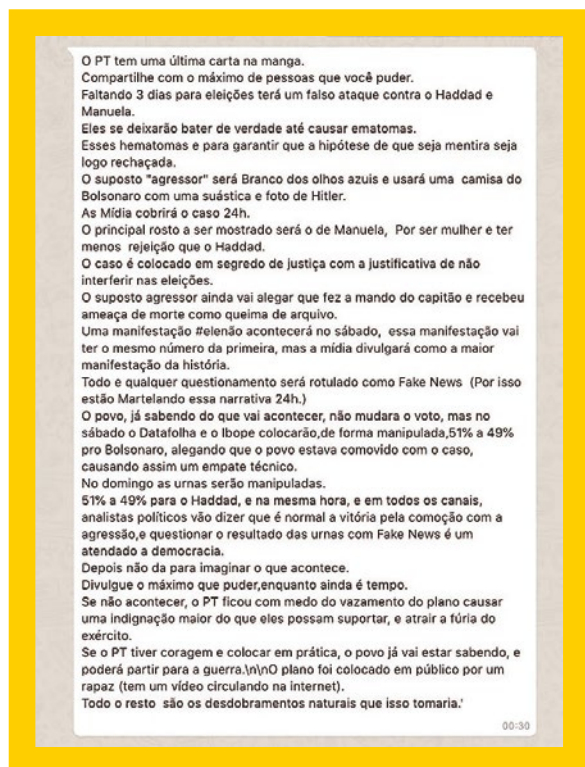
◀ Transcripts of audio and video messages were also popular. This viral message claimed that Haddad and his VP, Manuela D'Ávila, would stage them getting beat up, with actors wearing Bolsonaro's T-shirts and swastikas as the culprits. It was shared to Comprova's WhatsApp number 217 times. The video with the same script was shared 445 times.

Brazilians love to send audio messages, and there were a number of viral audio files among the disinformation sample: 30 were sent to Comprova an accumulated 1,642 times, or 33 percent of the total. We analyzed those, and as was the case with images and text, allegations of electoral fraud (always narrating efforts to undermine Bolsonaro's candidacy) accounted for two-thirds of the most viral audios. The most widely shared audio was a version of a video where two police officers talked about electoral ballots being violated. Those officers are under investigation.

While pro-Bolsonaro messages dominated the sample Comprova collected, four of the most popular audio recordings—including the second most shared, sent 208 times—were variations of a conspiracy theory claiming that the stabbing of Bolsonaro was staged.

In terms of quality, most were amateurish. Many recordings were done in a car, with no apparent script, which gave a sense of urgency and authenticity. One of the audio recordings mentioned that Lula, Brazil's president between 2003 and 2010, had a trillion Euros in money and diamonds in Switzerland from someone claiming to be a journalist.

The same can be said for videos: a person in front of a camera shooting with a cellphone was the most common type of video file sent to Comprova. But there was also some strange mixed-media videos. A person reading a parody Facebook Page for United Socialist Republics of Latin America (URSAL) was the second most shared and was received by Comprova 242 times.

Among the most widely shared, the only video that looked more professionally done claimed that Haddad threw a bible in the garbage (he said it was stolen). But most of the videos were scripted op-eds, with many opinions and few facts that could be checked.

By **Pedro Burgos**, *professor at Insper, ICFJ Knight Fellow*

How did Comprova impact journalists?

There were no errors during the project. In order to achieve this, journalists had to navigate with the competing pressures of immediacy and accuracy. As the project went on, while team members and respective newsrooms seemed increasingly at ease with the collaborative effort, they shared a sense of urgency to publish debunks, fearing that viral rumors could distort public debate. Indeed, the interviews conducted with Comprova reporters and senior editors of partnering newsrooms reveal both their commitment to pursuing accuracy, and therefore to avoid mistakes, and the perceived need to verify claims in the shortest possible time span.

"When we work mostly with digital media, we have a tendency to rush a lot to publish. We are concerned about scooping (...). Comprova has proved that rigor in newsgathering is as important, or even more important, than speed. We could not take the chance to make a mistake or leave something unfinished, or to publish something that could not be absolutely proven with documents, research, with the results [provided] by the tools we used." **Senior Editor 1**

"In our newsroom we are worried about the dissemination of false information. When some [false] information gained high scale, we produced some kind of denial explaining what was circulating, why that was not true." **Reporter 10**

"I think [Compova] has improved the work of everybody. We were striving to be the most accurate possible, as true as possible. (...) It was something wonderful, I can say today that I was part of something historical."

"Not that we were slow in any way, I think we were very agile. We often did many verifications that ended on the same day or in a few hours, but always taking care to look, look again, analyze, check if there was something missing or not, and he [the editor] always caused a doubt in our heads, that anguish, to be sure you had in fact concluded that verification or not, if that debunk was done or not. (...)"

"While some [fact-checking] agencies published something with only an official rebuttal, we looked at the facts, [into] what had happened and into what was at the origin of it. I think speed and accuracy can go hand in hand, but not always. I think we have to moderate it a bit, so that we can also have the necessary accuracy that I think was the most important thing for Comprova in that election." **Reporter 2**

The production of reports with solid evidence injected frequent postponements in the workflow, mostly related to intermediary steps of newsgathering (research of topics to be verified, reaching sources and getting their feedback). On the other hand, both the initial steps (pitch assignment and verification team formation) and the final ones (writing, editing, and crosschecking) were typically carried out in a matter of hours. The more complex the claim to be scrutinized, the longer the debunk.

The stakes for Comprova were never higher than in the investigation that took six days in early October to verify a conspiracy theory that went viral, reaching more than 1.5 million views in just 24 hours. In a YouTube video, Hugo Cesar Hoeschl, who described himself as an expert in electoral statistics, doubted the integrity of the Brazilian electronic ballots system and promised to deliver an audit based on a mathematical equation known as Benford's law.[12]

A common theme in the campaign, alleged electronic ballots fraud, resulted in 15 debunks published by Comprova. The attempts to discredit the electoral system were largely produced by Jair Bolsonaro supporters, including Hoeschl, and shared by the candidate himself. Troubled about the constant attacks against its credibility, on the eve of the runoff the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), the federal body responsible for the electoral system, ordered the removal of an online video in which Bolsonaro attacked the electronic ballots.[13] ▶

12 Lüdtke, S. (2018) *Waves of disinformation in the Brazilian elections.* Medium. Available at: http://bit.ly/2IQU9JQ

13 TSE (2018). TSE determina exclusão de vídeo em que Jair Bolsonaro critica urnas eletrônicas. Available at: http://bit.ly/2WOmA01

Conclusions

"**We have shown that it is possible to collaborate. Newsrooms do not necessarily always have to be competitors. They can work together for a greater purpose.**"

While most of UGC questioning the electoral system was poorly conceived and delivered, to the Comprova team, Hoeschl's claim seemed more sophisticated and potentially convincing in the eyes of Brazilian voters. According to Hoeschl, there were "internationally recognized studies" indicating a 73.14 percent fraud probability in the 2014 presidential election won by Dilma Rousseff. On YouTube, he also promised to use Benford's law to audit the first-round results of the 2018 race to be held on Sunday, October 7. The scientific character of the fraud charges against the e-ballots and Hoeschl's audit pledge infused significant pressure on the Comprova team. The complexity of this investigation is described in the longer evaluation, and underlines the benefits of so many newsrooms working together to demonstrate that the claim had no foundation, and to amplify reporting at its conclusion. This type of a deeper collaborative investigation provides a model for making these types of projects sustainable over the the long term.

The experience of working for Comprova was largely positive. Journalists believed that their participation provided short- and long-term benefits in verification skills learning, professional morale boost, and editorial standards improvements. Here are some quotes from reporters who were interviewed during and after the project:

"[Comprova's] greatest impact is the apprenticeship of tools and the perception of the importance of this type of specific verification. (…)" **Senior Editor 5**

"I used to say that a journalist's biggest asset was their phone book, because the more important people you had there, the more exclusive information you got – backstage, that sort of thing. Comprova has shown that working together is extremely rich. (…) I think we've done a great job. We have shown that it is possible to collaborate. Newsrooms do not necessarily always have to be competitors. They can work together for a greater purpose. **Reporter 7**

"What do I get from Comprova? A certain sense that you can do different things with different people working together. I think the most relevant was the sense that this type of project can work." **Senior Editor 5**

As an Editor posted on WhatsApp as the project wrapped up:

"Compro✅ers, Debunkillers,
I think we can consider this phase closed. (…) I would like to thank you very much, a determined team, with a spirit of collaboration such as I had never seen, that always sought to find the truth of the facts, which abstained from manifesting itself politically in such a sensitive moment of the Brazilian life to guarantee the project's credibility, and did not generate a single conflict in more than three months of work. It was a great pleasure working with you all. Thank you so much for everything.
😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊"

And someone else replied: "I'm a bit sad to go back to the standard job after months [of] experiencing this incredible format of working" **Reporter 6**

One significant takeaway for journalists was learning that mutual accountability as an industry acted as a key element in preventing errors in reporting.

"I think Comprova raises the verification standards of everyone; it requires rigor." Deputy **Director 1**

"I think [Compova] has improved the work of everybody. We were striving to be the most accurate possible, as true as possible. (…) Because we always had the goal to say [to news users]: Look, this is true; but that is a lie. (…) It was something wonderful, I can say today that I was part of something historical." **Reporter 2**

By **Angela Pimenta**, *Operations Director, Projor*

Collaborative projects work. They have a significant impact on individual journalists, the newsrooms that participate, and the wider news industry.
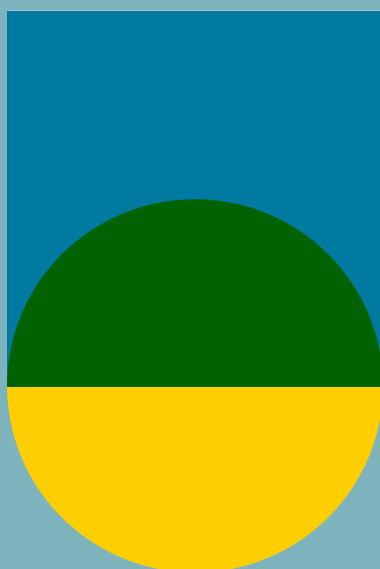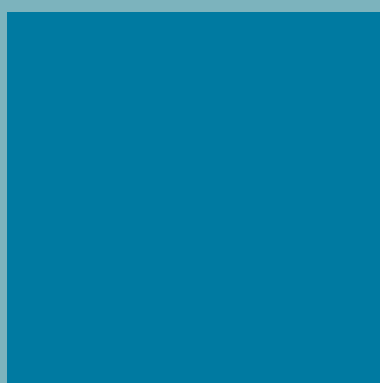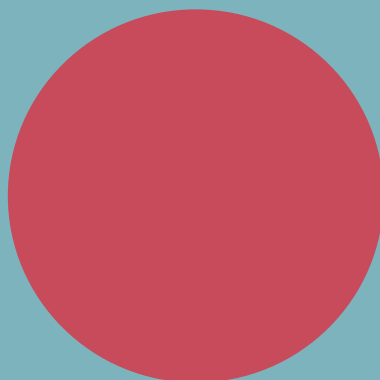
In addition, these projects produce incredibly important data sets for improving our understanding of the challenges associated with misinformation, for example: what misinformation exists and on which platforms? How do audiences understand misinformation? What works in terms of effective debunking techniques? And how can we reach audiences who are most susceptible to misinformation? The Comprova project resulted in a dataset of more than 250,000 pieces of misinformation submitted by the audience via WhatsApp. The multiple benefits of collaborative projects -- including newsroom impact, providing audience digital literacy skills, understanding how information travels online, etc. -- has to be recognized.

In countries like Brazil, which have a combination of many paywalls on news sites and a zero-rating practice that excludes time spent consuming content on WhatsApp and Facebook from counting against monthly data caps, the scales are stacked in favor of people seeking out more of their information from spaces without gatekeepers. Paywalls and zero-rating are justification enough for projects like Comprova, which provides open, paywall-free access to reporting and contextual information around viral hoaxes and rumors online.

Comprova research however raises important questions about the long-term sustainability and business models for such collaborations, and the need to expand the model beyond simply publishing debunks. Misinformation doesn't end on election day and the amount of time and energy spent developing projects like this is difficult to justify when funding and momentum stops. ■