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

As this detailed report demonstrates, collaborative projects on this scale are not only logistically challenging, but they also require a large number of individuals to take a giant leap of faith, both in the idea and in each other. We sincerely thank every journalist who believed enough in the concept and the overall ambitions of Comprova to dedicate time, energy, enthusiasm and patience over many months. We thank Adriana Garcia and Angela Pimenta for steering and shaping the project from the ground in Brazil. We thank Daniel Bramatti and his team at Abraji for extraordinary efforts to launch and support Comprova from the outset. We thank Sérgio Lüdtke for his principled and passionate editorial leadership, and all others on the central support team in Brazil who worked tirelessly to react, adapt and improve as the project gained momentum. We thank Marco Tulio Pires from Google News Lab, Brazil, for his proactive and engaged support, and all other organizations and institutions that contributed technology and resources. Thanks also to the following people who helped to propel Comprova’s work to Brazilian voters: Maira Carvalho at Facebook, Gustavo Poloni at Twitter, and Carl Woog and Ben Supple at WhatsApp.

We also want to thank all other organizations and institutions that contributed physical space, technology, resources and guidance: Abraji, Projor, ANJ, Faap, Aos Fatos, Eleições Sem Fake, Ideal H&K Strategies, Textual and RBDMF Advogados. We also thank the technological support and training of Torabit platform and Fabricio Benevenuto from UFMG.

Moving on to overseas support, we sincerely thank the teams at Stacker, CHD and Small Ave in London, for their assistance in designing and developing the Comprova brand and collaborative platform in record time. We thank Grégoire Lemarchard from AFP in Paris for graciously sharing training and consultancy based on his experiences as a member of CrossCheck France. We thank First Draft’s core project team, led by Aimee Rinehart, for driving the project forward across time zones and language barriers. Finally, we thank Nic Dias, for his contribution to refining systems and processes, and for his invaluable leadership in coordinating this research and helping First Draft to effectively test, evaluate and continue its efforts to fight disinformation through collaboration.

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, US 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.
### Social Media

**Total engagements on social media related to Comprova content**

| 2,711,578 | Number of original articles published on projectcomprova.com.br |
| 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 |

**Total engagement on Facebook and Twitter when partner newsrooms posted Comprova reports on their social accounts**

| 598,594 | Number of Comprova’s Facebook Page followers |
| 135,000 | Number of Twitter followers for @projectcomprova |
| 18,000  | Number of Instagram followers on @projectcomprova |
| 3,413   | Number of Facebook and Twitter posts that mentioned Comprova |
| 573     | Number of Comprova YouTube channel subscribers |
| 466     | Number of Twitter Moments designed to teach verification techniques to audiences |

### WhatsApp

**Total number of interactions between the audience and Comprova journalists on WhatsApp**

| 350,567 | Number of files containing tips and supporting evidence submitted via the public Comprova WhatsApp number |
| 78,462  | Images |
| 48,488  | Video files |
| 24,345  | Audio files |

**Number of new tips sent in from the public (doesn’t include follow up responses)**

| 67,870 | Number of new tips sent in from the public |
| 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb 2 2018</td>
<td>1st WORKSHOP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 12 2018</td>
<td>2nd WORKSHOP</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 27-29 2018</td>
<td>BOOTCAMP  ABRAS PARTNERS TRAINING</td>
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<td>June 28 2018</td>
<td>Launch 24 partners</td>
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<td>Aug 5 2018</td>
<td>1st DEBUNK</td>
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<td>Aug 16 2018</td>
<td>10th DEBUNK</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sep 10 2018</td>
<td>BOLSANARO ATTACKER DEBUNK</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sep 27 2018</td>
<td>100th DEBUNK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 3 2018</td>
<td>146th DEBUNK</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### Newsrooms

- 8 Eight newsrooms
- 2 Brazilian political, media, and cultural issues
- 3 Newsrooms (official sources)
- 1 Coalition (unofficial sources)
- 1 Coalition member, including verifiers, editors
- 6 Coalition partners, including verifiers, editors

#### Collaborative Project

- 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

#### Content

- First Draft presentation (CrossCheck legacy and incentives for newsrooms)
- Fact checking (official sources) and verification (unofficial sources)
- Brazilian political, media, and dissemination outlook
- Pros and cons of a collaborative project
- Design sprint (project modeling)

#### Purpose

- Decide collectively what a collaborative project to monitor and debunk misinformation 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

#### Tools

- Social media and verification tools
- CrossCheck case studies

#### Meetings

- Platform representatives (Google, Facebook) and WhatsApp

#### Attendance

- Coalition partners, including verifiers, editors

#### Establishment

- Creation of a deliberative council
- Scope (verification and presidential election, crosscheck)
- Abraaj as operational partner
- Grants for participating newsrooms
- Pro-bono legal counseling
- Comprova as the project name
- Signed-in members: UOL, Jornal do Commercio

#### Connections and a trusting relationship among partners

#### Monitoring workflow processes

#### How to publish debunked articles

#### 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

#### Content:

- Monitoring techniques (CrowdTangle, NewsWhip, and TweetDeck)
- Verification test
- Q&A on the coalition

#### Established:

- Comprova five workflow processes
- Consolidated:
  - Guidelines
  - Principles for monitoring techniques

#### Content:

- Verification test
- Q&A on the coalition

#### Analysis:

- How to publish debunked articles

#### Scope (verification and presidential election, crosscheck)

- No decisions about formally signing up took place at the meeting, but it gave participants enough information to take back to newsrooms

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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 demonstrate, 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.

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. 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 swaths 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.

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Rasmussen Reports, 2016, Voters Don’t Trust Media Fact Checking http://bit.ly/3mS4TH
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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 debunked claims 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, 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.

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). 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 rumors via WhatsApp—where men accounted for 59 percent of views and link clicks—these figures may have been even more skewed toward women.

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.

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, HSc in Marketing Strategy and Consumer Behaviour at Federal University of Parana

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 followers, 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.

Facebook

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. 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.

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.
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-offs 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.

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. The top five federal political parties claimed by survey respondents were Partido Social Liberal (PSL) (12.6 percent), Partido Republicano da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) (12.3 percent), Partido do Trabalhador (PT) (12.1 percent), Partido Social Democrata (PSD) (10.3 percent), and Partido Novo (NOVO) (7.5 percent).

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.

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

- 76.4 percent completely or partially agreed with the statement that Comprova could be trusted.
- 81.5 percent completely or partially agreed that Comprova was fair.
- 76.4 percent completely or partially agreed that Comprova was accurate.
- 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.

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Did audiences trust Comprova reporting?

Did Comprova reports impact the beliefs of audience members?

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Research Design

A sample of 511 Brazilian adults3 viewed (i) a suspect piece of social media content that circulated widely during the 2018 Brazilian federal elections and then (ii) 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 Jair Bolsonaro’s (real) convictions in civil court for insensitive, racist and homophobic comments. The second video appears to portray solidarity for Israel.

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.

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.

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 = 3.82). 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 5.60. 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 makes sense, the difference 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

3 The rest preferred not to report their sex or selected “Other”.
4 Participants were recruited via Lucid, an online panel company that computationally complex participants from several online panels and approximates representative samples using standard quota sampling techniques. Demographic information available here: http://bit.ly/comprovalocals.
5 Five participants dropped off before the end of the survey. Their responses were released.
6 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 it. Ideally, the stimuli would also have included pro-Haddad and anti-Haddad debunks. However, Comprova only verified a handful of claims explicitly referencing Haddad.
7 Questions were pulled from Meyer (1988). The scale’s Cronbach’s alpha value was acceptable (α = .80).
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9 Questions were pulled from Meyer (1988). The scale’s Cronbach’s alpha value was acceptable (α = .80).
10 Bram et al. (2017).
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.

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 America (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.

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.
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 debunk, 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 scoping (...). 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 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 debunk 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

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“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, 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 over the longer 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**

> “As an Editor posted on WhatsApp as the project wrapped up:
> “Comprova [Herz, 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 Editor 1**

> “I think [Comprova] 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

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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 debunk. 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.