Welcoming AI! … and Turning it Into an Unprecedented Ally to Tackle Disinformation in Spanish and Other Languages

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Abstract

Having worked in fact-checking and data journalism for over a decade, my team at Chequado has developed and experimented with civic technology and AI for more than seven years. It is becoming increasingly clear that generative AI can become a huge ally for editorial offices and organizations – both large and especially small – that need to produce content more cheaply, in different innovative formats, for diverse audiences, and become quicker in their reactions and responses to misinformation. We must start experimenting with AI now (or, even better, yesterday), especially in languages other than English, to prevent information gaps and inequality from growing further. In this paper, we share some of our experiences building out AI-enabled, pro-democracy tools to combat misinformation in Spanish.

2023 has been the year of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). With it, **fears** about how AI can **make disinformation cheaper and more accessible for more actors** have rekindled and grown. According to research, disinformation has many negative effects, including harming our health and undermining trust in democratic institutions.

While it used to be relatively easy to manipulate images, it is now possible to create audio and video files in a number of languages at the click of a button, with minimum training and

at a very low cost. In addition, there are now out-of-the-box tools that can help anyone post manipulated content in various formats so that algorithms can spread them more rapidly to different platforms.

Having worked in <u>fact-checking</u> and data journalism for over a decade, my team at Chequado has <u>developed and experimented with civic technology and AI for more than seven years</u>. It is becoming increasingly clear that **generative AI can become a huge ally for editorial offices and organizations – both large and especially small – that need to produce content more cheaply, in different innovative formats, for diverse audiences, and become quicker in their reactions and responses to misinformation.**

Naturally, this will not happen overnight; we must listen more and learn, overcome fears and prejudice, change certain practices, and improve, shape, and increase the use of technology developed by actors committed to the right to information and democracy.
We must start experimenting with AI now (or, even better, yesterday), especially in languages other than English, to prevent information gaps and inequality from growing further. We must also invest in talent and the creation of multidisciplinary teams to do so efficiently; collaborate and form alliances with other organizations, media outlets, and tech companies; as well as fundraise and allocate adequate resources to make it sustainable.

Chequeado's Encouraging Experience

For years, Chequeado has been closing the tech power gap on those who produce disinformation and waging a battle for a fairer information environment. We have learned that disinformation has common characteristics worldwide and travels internationally because <u>when disinformants see that it works in one location, they tend to spread it elsewhere</u>. Among Spanish speakers, this phenomenon is compounded by the widespread use of WhatsApp in our countries, which makes content that was created in the United States or Spain spread like wildfire to Latin America and vice versa.

It's important to consider that **disinformation is both a global and hyperlocal phenomenon that takes advantage of information gaps and emotions to go viral.** To identify and tackle it efficiently, we need to analyze huge amounts of content and become familiar with global trends quickly. We also have to understand a diversity of cultures, dialects, local humor, and context to debunk disinformation appropriately for a variety of communities. Technology is particularly good - better than humans - for the former and very bad or average - for now - for the latter.

We should exploit AI's potential so humans don't need to focus as much on mechanical tasks where we don't add any value (like listening to extremely long interviews to identify claims that need to be fact-checked or responding to the same WhatsApp message 100 times), freeing us up to concentrate on assignments where we are still irreplaceable.

In 2016, we created <u>Chequeabot</u> to help us identify claims in need of fact-checking in political speeches and media outlets across all 24 Argentine provinces. We did it because we wanted to increase our impact and become faster in our response without jeopardizing the quality of our journalism. Quite simply, <u>debunking false or misleading narratives faster makes it more likely to stop</u> its spread. Time is of the essence in this industry.

Over the years, Chequeabot has grown into a platform that helps us automate part of the fact-checking process. We have moved beyond identifying claims to fact-check to also transcribing videos, flagging claims that have already been fact-checked and are repeated throughout a speech, and notifying our editors nearly in real-time to update or republish content that has become relevant again. It also helps to answer queries regarding the reliability of pictures, videos, or WhatsApp chain letters, among other tasks.

We reached a big milestone in 2023 when we successfully upgraded Chequeabot's skills with the ability to scan podcasts and other digital audio so it could listen to, transcribe, and identify within a few seconds claims to fact-check or at risk of being misleading. This breakthrough was made all the more impactful by our ability to scale this AI technology across Argentina, seven other Latin American countries (Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Chile, Peru, and Venezuela), and Spain. Though, of course, the road ahead to catch up to disinformants is still long and arduous.

What to expect in 2024, with elections happening in almost half of the world

The fact that disinformation is dynamic and disinformants evolve and improve their tactics quicker than those who debunk it is not new. All recent elections have been plagued with altered pictures, slow-downed videos, cheapfakes (when deepfakes were still too expensive to be widely used), and WhatsApp voice notes with other people's voices or generated by AI. Election after election, disinformants surprise us with new techniques that usually catch electoral authorities off guard because, at best, they are prepared to tackle disinformation with tactics used in previous elections.

Unfortunately, so far, *bad actors* – in their search for money and/or power – have always been better than pro-democracy agents at adopting technology. It's time to change this.

2024 will be democracy's Super Bowl, as The Guardian so cleverly said, with a record-breaking 40-plus countries representing more than 40% of the world's population due to holding national elections that are more or less open, free, and fair.

It is indisputable that next year will bring AI-produced electoral disinformation to elections in the United States, as well as democracies as diverse as India, Iran, Mexico, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Russia, Sudan, Taiwan, and Ukraine. The question lies in the scale of its impact and whether all candidates and their teams will be transparent with their voters about it, as well as whether authorities, civil society actors, and journalists will be able to alert them on time.

In the United States specifically, it's important and urgent to improve disinformation detection in Spanish for Hispanic and Latino communities. Factchequeado is contributing to this effort. Thanks to Chequeado's development team and the support of the AI & Local News Challenge from NYU, we have been working on "El Monitor," a tool that we hope will help our more than 60 allies in 20 states and Puerto Rico in the face of the 2024 upcoming elections.

Just as AI can assist in certain tasks, and we want to make the best use of it as soon as possible, what's key nowadays for fact-checkers and journalists who work against disinformation is to collaborate, become reliable messengers for our audiences, find

innovative ways of storytelling, build a sense of community and become relevant to meet their information needs.

Humans and machines need each other to find better ways to tackle misinformation on a global scale.

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