


The consolidation of Spanish fact-checking sites: internationalisation, quality indexes, accountability and constraints in daily work

La consolidación de las plataformas de fact-checking españolas: internacionalización, índices de calidad, accountability y condicionantes en el trabajo diario



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Abstract:

After their first years of public activity, four fact-checking sites have established themselves within the Spanish information ecosystem: Maldita.es, Newtral, Verificat, and EFE Verifica. Each with a distinct business model, their collaborative and complementary work represents the first concerted effort to combat the spread of disinformation in Spain. This research study assesses the internationalisation rates and quality of work of these sites based on the commitments outlined in the International Fact-checking Network Code of Principles. At the same time, in-depth interviews with representatives of these sites provide an overview of the efforts made to implement these standards, linked to various basic ethical aspects: transparency, accountability and public participation. The interviews were conducted after observing the declared methodology on the websites of the four outlets, as well as their daily fact-checking practice. This article represents an approach to the ethics of fact-checking in relation to the IFCN Code, which is the most widely implemented and globally recognised framework within the fact-checking movement. Despite some non-compliance with economic transparency and minor discrepancies in methodology among these Spanish outlets, the study concludes that they satisfactorily adhere to these ethical parameters, and thus their work can be considered of a high standard.

Keywords:

Fact-checking; verification; disinformation; journalism; ethics; IFCN.

Resumen:

Tras unos primeros años de actuación pública, cuatro plataformas de verificación se han consolidado en el ecosistema informativo español: Maldita.es, Newtral, Verificat, y EFE Verifica. Con un modelo empresarial distinto, su trabajo común y, en cierta forma, complementario supone una primera expresión de los esfuerzos realizados en España contra la expansión sistemática de la desinformación. Esta investigación analiza los índices de internacionalización y la calidad del trabajo de estas plataformas a partir de los compromisos enunciados en el Código de Principios de la International Fact-checking Network (IFCN), del que todas ellas son firmantes. Al mismo tiempo, y a través de diversas entrevistas en profundidad con los representantes de estas organizaciones, se lleva a cabo una descripción de los esfuerzos realizados en la aplicación de dichos estándares, vinculados con varios aspectos deontológicos básicos: transparencia, rendición de cuentas y participación del público. Las entrevistas se realizaron tras una observación de la metodología declarada en los sitios web de las cuatro plataformas, así como de su práctica cotidiana de verificación. El artículo establece un primer modelo de abordaje de la deontología del fact-checking en relación con dicho código, que es, a su vez, el que cuenta con mayor implantación y reconocimiento global dentro del movimiento. A pesar de que las plataformas españolas presentan algunos incumplimientos relativos a la transparencia económica y ciertas discrepancias en cuestiones metodológicas menores, la investigación demuestra que el grado de cumplimiento de estos parámetros deontológicos es satisfactorio y, por tanto, que su trabajo puede considerarse de calidad.

Palabras clave:

Fact-checking; verificación; desinformación; periodismo; ética; IFCN.

1. Introduction. The professionalization and internationalization of fact-checking

More than two decades after its nascence in the United States to verify false political discourse (Graves, 2016, 2017; Graves et al., 2016; Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019) and later to counter disinformation on social media (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018), modern fact-checking has moved beyond its initial novelty and become an increasingly professionalized movement with a specific methodology characterized by its need for transparency and replicability. At the same time, fact-checking sites are marked by a clear tendency towards innovation and the use of new technologies (Vizoso et al., 2018). This is also borne out by recent studies on verification practices in the Mediterranean region –to which Spain belongs (López-Pan & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2020; Moreno-Gil et al., 2022; Palomo & Sedano, 2018; Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2020) as well as in Spain and Latin America (Moreno-Gil et al., 2021; Palau-Sampio, 2018; Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2022; Vizoso & Vázquez-Herrero, 2019).

The fact-checking phenomenon arose in Europe during the late 2000s and early 2010s, with the emergence of hundreds of projects. Since then, the movement has undergone a certain consolidation, with 417 initiatives in over 100 countries worldwide as of June 2023 (Stencel et al., 2023).

The organisations in question generally adhere to the two main models outlined by Graves and Cherubini (2016): the NGO model and the newsroom model. The NGO model is more prevalent in Eastern Europe, with a few instances in the United Kingdom and Italy, and is characterised by its more limited resources yet complete editorial and financial independence (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). In Spain, this model is embodied by two organisations: Maldita.es, which describes itself on its website as a non-profit association with aspirations to become a foundation, and the Catalan project Verificat.

The newsroom model, on the other hand, comprises fact-checking initiatives that originated within traditional media and has a significant advantage “in terms of reach and resources”, according to Graves and Cherubini (2016, p. 8). However, these initiatives are reliant on editorial decisions and financial support from the media companies that own them. In Spain, both the EFE Verifica and Verifica RTVE outlets fall within this category as they are linked to publicly owned media outlets.

A less commonly found approach that incorporates elements of the newsroom model is the for-profit fact-checking initiative, which is not backed by legacy media outlets but rather by smaller companies with a broader focus on communication. One such example of this business model in Spain is the start-up Newtral, which stands as the first and sole representative of this approach in Spain. In addition to its fact-checking services, Newtral offers a range of other communication services.

The fact-checking movement encompasses a diverse range of organisational models that reflect different social and political contexts, as well as journalistic ecosystems (Graves, 2016). Furthermore, modern verification sites comprise a patchwork of structures, methodologies, and ways to present and disseminate results (Noain-Sánchez, 2021). However, certain features common to all these outlets strengthen the transversality of the phenomenon. These include an evident journalistic inclination (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Graves, 2016; Herrero & Herrera-Damas, 2021; Moreno-Gil et al., 2022; Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2020) and a close association with accountability and media literacy initiatives (Amazeen, 2020; Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020; Riera & Zommer, 2020). Recent studies have shown that within the Mediterranean context (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) these organisations tend to implement robust methodologies that ensure access to information, draw on primary and official sources as well as fulfil their commitment to transparency (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022; Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2020).

1.1. Methodological standards and codes of conduct: quality, transparency, and accountability

In 2015, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) was established by the Poynter Institute to promote the professionalisation and internationalisation of the fact-checking movement, which were key to its consolidation, global presence, and maturity. The IFCN Code of Principles sets out a series of best practices regarding impartiality, transparency and accountability, the ultimate aim of which is to guarantee minimum quality standards among the signatory organisations.

The IFCN Code of Principles focuses on key commitments to transparency, including methodology, use of sources, organisation and funding, accountability, and public participation. According to the IFCN, this set of principles seeks to promote excellence

in fact-checking and it adds, “We believe nonpartisan and transparent fact-checking can be a powerful instrument of accountability journalism”. Besides unifying these criteria, the IFCN certifies the quality of its signatory fact-checkers’ work.

Becoming a signatory to the IFCN code is crucial for fact-checking sites, especially in the light of the European Union’s ‘strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation’, released in 2022, which highlights in Measure 33:

“Measure 33.1. Relevant Signatories will comply with the requirements of instruments such as being verified signatories of the International Fact-checking Network (IFCN) Code of Principles or the future Code of Professional Integrity for Independent European fact-checking organisations”.

The EU’s strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation comprises 44 detailed commitments grouped into several categories. These include demonetisation of information, exclusion of advertising containing disinformation, cooperation with third parties, and promotion of media literacy initiatives to empower users, researchers, and the fact-checking community. The code also calls for the creation of a website as a transparency centre to monitor compliance with the code.

Meanwhile, the Code of Professional Integrity for Independent Fact-Checking Organisations, developed by the European Fact-checking Standards Network (EFCSN) in 2022, sets out three main categories of standards: Methodological Standards, Ethical Standards and Transparency Standards. Verified members must ensure that their fact-checking is transparent, professional and committed to the highest levels of accuracy. They must also safeguard their impartiality, manage corrections transparently and uphold the safety and privacy of individuals. Its members must also disclose their organisational structure, funding sources and partnership agreements to adhere to transparency standards. These three categories of standards bring together several essential elements required of fact-checking organisations: transparency, accountability with the public, and third-party empowerment.

More recently, the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), launched in 2023, has designed a Code of standards “to ensure that organizations fact-checking misinformation and disinformation adhere to the highest standards of methodology, ethics and transparency in order to best serve the public interest”. It comprises seven articles that focus on methodology, ethical standards, transparency, assessment procedure and renewal, compliance and sanctions, periodical review of the code. Our research used the IFCN Code of Principles as a reference, as it was the first to be published and, therefore, established an independent code of ethics for fact-checking practitioners.

Previous research has approached the topic of compliance with the IFCN code by observing the methodology included in the platforms’ websites (in Spain, Moreno-Gil & Salgado-de Dios, 2023; and worldwide, Torres-Toukoumidis et al., 2021). In both cases, the results show high levels of compliance despite a general lack of transparency –regarding funding, financial information and identification of the sources’ relevant interests in the case of Spain; and the fact-checking process itself as well as the users’ interaction. A recent study that compares the transparency of source, funds, and methodology of fact-checking news in six countries on six continents concludes that transparency is not only related to the social environment but also to the subject of verification and the news writing habits of each country, while the NGO model initiatives show higher levels of compliance (Ye, 2023).

Rodríguez-Pérez et al. (2023) use the IFCN code as a reference to study the purposes, principles and difficulties of fact-checking in Ibero-America from the point of view of verifiers. The study proves that most fact-checkers agree with the ethical principles of nonpartisanship, transparency in the use of data and sources or commitment to civic responsibility, among others.

Cavaliere (2020) highlights that the commitments of the EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation boosted partnerships between signatory platforms (Google, Facebook or Twitter) and independent fact-checkers as this relation help tech giants to comply with the principles –among them, “to develop trustworthiness indicators for new sources and prioritise authentic content” (p. 11). According to the study, the different fact-checking services present significant differences in the way they apply the code, in addition to diversified methodologies and a lack of transparency regarding content curation.

This study addressed for the first time the degree of compliance of Spanish fact-checking sites with the ethical principles of the IFCN Code, which is the most widely implemented and globally recognised framework within the fact-checking movement. The IFCN Code of Principles includes specifically five commitments: to non-partisanship and fairness, to standards and transparency of sources, to transparency of funding and organization, to standards and transparency of methodology and to an open and honest corrections policy.

This study qualitatively analysed the transparency of the working methodologies, funding sources and organisational structures of the four Spanish fact-checking outlets that are signatories of the IFCN Code: Maldita.es, Newtral, Verificat and EFE Verifica. It also examined aspects of accountability that are crucial to the relationship these sites have with their audience, including formulas envisaged for channeling audience participation, efforts to promote media literacy initiatives and corrections policies used.

With the aim of analysing the efforts made by these outlets to comply with the basic ethical standards linked to transparency, accountability and public participation, several research questions have been included and guided the study.

RQ 1. Do the selected fact-checking sites fulfil transparency requirements in their methodology?

RQ 2. Do they fulfil transparency requirements regarding their use of sources?

RQ 3. Do they practice transparency in funding and organisation?

RQ 4. What new accountability features –including corrections policy–, users' participation and media literacy initiatives are they introducing?

RQ 5. What are the current funding models and trends regarding the presentation of verifications? How important is it for the sites to be signatories of the IFCN code?

2. Method

The study was conducted in two phases. First, verifications published by the four sites were systematically observed during a whole month in 2022 and 2023 (Table 1) since the analysed sites publish verifications on a regular basis –either weekly or monthly. We selected the month of September since, in Spain, is when normally the new season begins for the media, marking the implementation of changes if any. The absence of major events –e.g. political, social or economic– that could undermine the sample was also considered when selecting the month.

Previous studies that analysed the Spanish fact-checking outlets (Moreno-Gil et al. 2022, Moreno-Gil et al. 2021; Herrero & Herrera-Damas, 2021; Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2020) show differences regarding its size and structure which can be extended to the journalistic product they develop in terms of quantity and publication frequency. These differences are also noted after reading the ‘Who we are’ sections of their respective websites: Maldita is formed by 56 professionals, while Newtral has 65 employees, and EFE Verifica’s and Verificat’s working teams include 9 and 14 people, respectively –although not all the team members are dedicated to fact-checking.

Table 1. Total number of verifications published by the chosen organisations in the period described

Organisation/Number of fact-checks	Maldita	Newtral	EFE Verifica	Verificat
Verifications published in September 2022	90	73	26	22
Verifications published in September 2023	97	82	25	12
Total verifications advertised in the selected period	187	155	51	34

Source: prepared by the authors

The analysis focused on 11 categories, chosen based on the IFCN Code of Principles, which the four analysed organisations commit to as signatories.

The five principles established by the code were taken as a reference: commitment to impartiality and fairness, to transparency of sources, to transparency of funding and organisation, to transparency of methodology, and to an open and honest corrections policy. Quantifiable categories and those that could not be analysed through systematic observation during the selected period were discarded. The categories used in the observation phase are based on the specific commitments of the IFCN Code of Principles for the ethical principles aforementioned. They are aimed to respond to RQs 1, 2 and 4:

- Reports on how it selects the content it intends to verify
- Does not focus verification on only one end of the political spectrum
- Selects statements or content based on their scope and importance and, where possible, explains why they were chosen

- Discloses the interests of the consulted sources and any commercial relationship that could influence the verifications.
- Identifies all key sources
- Includes the sources' links
- Prioritises primary sources over secondary sources (if available and appropriate)
- Cross-checks with more sources than the one named as primary, except when it is the only relevant one
- The conclusion is genuinely debated (it derives from data and information obtained from reliable primary sources and experts' contributions)
- Whenever possible, contacts the person who made the claim or statement to seek or request evidence to support it
- Encourages users to submit content for verification

Following a thorough reading of the verifications published by the four fact-checking sites, content analysis was conducted to identify the presence/absence of the categories. To ensure consistency of results, the authors conducted a pre-test to test the validity of the codebook, and performed the analysis separately for subsequent sharing. There was no disagreement in the analysis about the presence/absence of the categories or their quantification, as the items were easy to identify. In section 3, the results were summarized on Table 2. In addition to the content analysis, a detailed reading of the respective methodology sections of each outlet analysed was conducted to respond to RQs 3 and 4 (*Do the outlets practice transparency in funding and organisation? and What new accountability features –including corrections policy–, users' participation and media literacy initiatives are they introducing?*).

For the second phase of the analysis, four in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of each fact-checking site between June and October 2022 and the average duration was 90 minutes. The interviews aimed to gain a deeper insight into the level of compliance observed among the analysed outlets during the first phase of the study. Through their answers, the sites' representatives offer a more detailed approach to their daily work, and accountability and ethical commitments.

In depth, semi-structured interviews have been used in several recent studies on fact-checking methodology and practice (Graves & Anderson, 2020; Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020; Moreno-Gil et al., 2021, Moreno-Gil et al., 2022; López-Pan & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2020; Palomo & Sedano, 2018; Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2021; Singer, 2021; Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2020). Qualitative interviews are essential for obtaining information and context on those issues that “cannot be observed or efficiently accessed” (Tracy, 2020:79). More specifically, in-depth, semi-structured interviews seek to build a depth of understanding (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021), provide rich details (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994) as well as nuanced accounts of the respondents' perspectives, understanding, values, beliefs, which “become the primary source of knowledge” (Scalan, 2020, p. 2).

The interviews were conducted using videoconferencing tools, specifically Zoom and Skype, which in recent years have become an equitable choice rather than a secondary option compared to traditional face-to-face interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Moreover, video conferencing minimises geographical barriers, making it easier to conduct interviews with people who are located in different regions (Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019).

For the in-depth interviews with the experts of the selected sites, a script with 23 questions (see Appendix) was developed around the aforementioned IFCN principles. The script was later expanded in each case to add questions on specific aspects of each site that were unclear after analysing published verifications or that needed further elaboration, in addition to the reading of the methodology and ethics statement described on each outlet's website. These questions also included those related to the inclusion of explanatory texts, media literacy initiatives linked to these organisations, or the importance for them of belonging to the IFCN, as well as those related to the annual renewal process they must go through as signatories of the international network. In all cases, except for Verificat, one in-depth interview was sufficient. With the Catalan site, two interviews were conducted because the director, Alba Tobella, could not attend the first interview and left it to an editor. She was able to be interviewed on the second occasion.

Thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted following the five main ethical principles established by the IFCN Code –commitment to impartiality and fairness, to transparency of sources, to transparency of funding and organisation, to transparency of methodology, and to an open and honest corrections policy.

This qualitative research –based on observation and interview– shed light for the first time on the application and degree of compliance with the five commitments laid down in the IFCN code of principles by the four Spanish fact-checking sites, which are signatories. At the same time, the in-depth interviews were used to triangulate the results of observation while providing first-hand information on aspects linked to quality, accountability, media literacy and the constraints in the daily work of these newsrooms in their particular fight against disinformation.

The results of the research are organised into five sections, which are based on the IFCN Code's ethical principles and related to:

1. 'Transparency in methodology' refers to the process of selecting content for verification, including considerations of its scope and importance. Impartiality and equity are also important factors, and organizations should avoid concentrating their fact-checking efforts on only one end of the political spectrum. Evidence should be presented to support or undermine claims, and attempts should be made to contact the sources of the investigated claims. Additionally, information about editorial decision-making and the authorship of texts should be provided.
2. 'Transparency in the use of sources' involves disclosing any potential conflicts of interest or commercial relationships that may influence the verification process. It also involves identifying all key sources and providing links to them, prioritizing primary sources, cross-checking with multiple sources, and reporting any relevant interests of the sources being used.
3. 'Transparency in funding and organization' entails providing detailed information about the economic data of the fact-checking outlets, as well as information about the team members involved and their commitment to refraining from making political statements on social media. Furthermore, organizations should disclose any potential agreements or collaborations with third parties.
4. 'Accountability and audience participation' involves establishing corrections policies, launching media literacy initiatives, and facilitating audience engagement. This also entails considerations of accreditation by the IFCN, which is crucial for the work of fact-checking organisations.

5. 'Evolution and prospects' refers to changes in the site funding models, and trends in the presentation of verifications and user access to content are considered. Finally, organizations should reflect on the importance of the IFCN and its code of good practice in the context of the global fact-checking movement.

3. Results

The sample analysed in the first phase of the study comprised 427 pieces –187 published by Maldita, 155 by Newtral, 51 by EFE Verifica, and 34 by Verificat in the selected period (Table 2).

Table 2. Compliance with IFCN code principles by the studied organisations in the period described based on the observation of the verifications made

Categories	Maldita	Newtral	EFE Verifica	Verificat
Describes how it selects content to verify	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)
Does not focus on only one end of the political spectrum	Does not apply as it focuses on debunking instead of fact-checking political claims	Yes (25 pieces -16%-right, 16 pieces -10%-left)	Does not apply as it focuses on debunking instead of fact-checking political claims	Yes (7 pieces -20%-right, 5 pieces -14% left-)
Criteria to select content	Virality, potential danger	Interest, relevance (political fact-checking). Virality, potential danger (debunking)	Virality, potential danger	Interest, relevance, potential danger
Discloses the interests of the consulted sources	No (100%)	No (100%)	No (100%)	No (100%)
Identifies all key sources	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)
Includes the link	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)
Prioritises primary sources	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)
Cross-checks with several sources when possible	Yes (100%). In 8 pieces (4%) uses experts –four of them are users	Yes (100%). In 9 pieces (6%) uses experts	Yes (100%). In 9 pieces (17%) uses experts	Yes (100%). In 10 pieces (29%) uses experts

Conclusion is genuinely debated	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)
Contacts the person who made the claim or statement	No (100%) as it focuses on debunking instead of fact-checking political claims	Yes (147 pieces -95%- when fact-checking political claims). No (100% when debunking)	No (100%) as it focuses on debunking instead of fact-checking political claims	Yes (63% when fact-checking political claims) No (100% when debunking)
Encourages users to submit content for verification	Yes (100%)	Yes (100% when fact-checking political claims). No (100% when debunking)	Yes (100%)	Yes (100%)

Source: prepared by the authors

The results of the observation phase show a high level of compliance in most of the analysed categories (Table 2), which will be described in detail within the corresponding sections below along with the insights obtained from the interviews conducted with representatives of the selected fact-checking sites.

3.1. Transparency in the methodology (RQ1)

The results obtained in the first phase of the study together with the responses from the representatives of the analysed sites show a high level of transparency regarding content selection, justification and balance, as well as the efforts to provide a solid conclusion at the end of each fact-check- based on data and information obtained from reliable primary sources and experts' contributions. Newtral and Verificat contact the sources when fact-checking political claims, while Maldita and EFE Verifica primarily focus on debunking. Newtral and EFE Verifica provide the texts' authorship, but Maldita and Verificat omit the byline on their pieces since they pass through different filters before being published.

Besides the methodology described on their respective websites, the four analysed sites indicate how they receive or select the claims or content to be verified above each verification piece (in 100% pieces published by the four outlets). In the case of Maldita, the reasons for selecting content were generally its virality on social media and its potential danger. Topics are sourced by editors or readers who send them through the site's WhatsApp chatbot -or other channels such as the scam inbox or email, albeit to a much lesser extent. Occasionally, the content to be verified corresponds to what was published by a media outlet and turns out to be false or inaccurate. According to Pablo Hernández, Academic Research Coordinator at Maldita: "When a media outlet messes up, and this generates or could generate confusion or mislead, we think it's our duty to disprove it, regardless of the outlet (...) And it's normal for the media outlet to rectify it"

The content director at Newtral, Joaquín Ortega, confirmed what was observed the first phase, that the start-up prioritises journalistic criteria in which a series of elements come into play -from public interest, public relevance, or the impact of the information to the characteristics of the source and its capacity of dissemination- on parameterisation, that is, the number

of times a piece of content has been retweeted. For this site, waiting for content to go viral to intervene is not necessary, nor advisable, because they must work “preventively”.

Regarding the verification of content published in traditional media, Newtral prefers to focus its efforts on “sites lacking journalistic frameworks” where, despite the occurrence of errors, professional diligence “that doesn’t exist on a social media network” is assumed. In any case, when they consider it essential to publish a text about what has been posted by other media, “we try not to identify the source of the disinformation with names and surnames” to avoid “susceptibilities” and also unfair “harassment campaigns” towards certain people who, in many cases, may not have been the source of the disinformation.

Verificat and EFE Verifica also prioritise journalistic criteria, especially by considering the danger of disinformation and its virality. However, both sites have particular topics or geographical areas of special interest that influence the selection of their content. For example, Verificat focuses on the areas of science, politics, and immigration; whereas EFE Verifica pays close attention to its Latin American area of influence in selecting its contents, as well as certain other countries, such as Colombia and Mexico, on which they maintain a more intense focus, as Sergio Hernández explained.

Like Maldita, Newtral fact-checks content that arrives through two main channels: the open verification service through WhatsApp or social media networks. WhatsApp is “fundamental” to the organisation’s day-to-day work due to its “transversality from an ideological, gender and age perspective” and to being the “main source for monitoring the temperature, receiving alerts, knowing where people are having problems with things that are being shared” (Joaquín Ortega).

Verificat focuses on statements and claims made by politicians, whether in institutions or in the media, which are reviewed mainly by the editors themselves, while tending to use social media networks and virality as the source of verifications related to science and immigration. The Catalan outlet avoids concentrating its fact-checking efforts on only one end of the political spectrum, publishing a total of 7 pieces (20%) related to the right and 5 pieces (14%) to the left during the analysed period.

Maldita mainly focuses on verifying content to the detriment of political fact-checking, which is currently done sporadically, usually coinciding with election periods. Pablo Hernández acknowledged that the site is trying to occupy a different and distinctive space and that it is trying to distance itself from possible criticism regarding its impartiality, which is common when fact-checking political issues. He drew attention to the connection between narratives originating from politicians and social media, where they find their best mouthpiece:

There is a sense that around politicians, groups are already being created (...) whose job is to generate noise, that is, promote the narratives that interest each party on social media. So the politician (...) simply lets that narrative be created and take hold on social media.

In the case of Newtral, fact-checks of political statements are not limited to the right or left of the political spectrum (25 pieces -16%- and 16 pieces -10%-, respectively); we found examples from all political parties (in government, the opposition and, mainly, Catalan politicians).

The organisation acknowledges two clearly differentiated working dynamics in the editorial office. On the one hand, the verification of political discourse, or the “listening process”, for which they use a trained algorithm that helps locate potentially

verifiable statements; on the other, the process of verifying content that arrives through social media or the WhatsApp service. According to Joaquín Ortega, one does not take priority over the other because both are part of its “foundational DNA”.

Continuing with the methodology adopted, the qualitative analysis of the verifications published by the sites showed that, in all cases, there was sufficient relevance to refute or confirm the veracity of the checked content, and the conclusion is genuinely debated –as it is based on data and information obtained from reliable primary sources and experts’ contributions in 100% of the analysed cases in the four outlets. Similarly, in Newtral and Maldita, it is common to find references to previous verifications on the same topic by that site or other IFCN-affiliated sites. On the other hand, EFE Verifica, which deals with content originating from different countries in Latin America, employs contextualisation to situate the audience within the local context.

As previously explained, EFE Verifica’s and Maldita’s fact-checking primarily concerns viral content circulating on social media rather than statements made by politicians or prominent public figures in the economic and/or social sphere. As such, the person making the “claim” being fact-checked is usually not contacted. This approach differs from Newtral, where the publication of an article is contingent upon consulting with the press office of the political party in question (in 147 pieces –95%– when fact-checking political claims), as well as Verificat –which contacts with the source in 63% of the pieces focused on fact-checking political claims.

According to Joaquín Ortega, politicians’ responses are extremely important for Newtral, and they are given up to three days to respond: if one is received after the article’s publication, it is added to the piece. In addition, the contact itself is often a very enriching experience, as it often helps the verifier to realise that they had been focusing on the issue incorrectly or had overlooked certain elements. Verificat, which is also interested in giving a voice to sources, waits up to 48 hours for a response from the offices of the centres of political power affected by issuing questionable information.

On the other hand, regarding article authorship, or by-line policy, Maldita does not include the authors’ names who produce the content. Among other reasons, Pablo Hernández highlighted that Maldita was set up as a non-profit organisation with a clear vocation for public service, in which individualism takes a backseat, and all articles necessarily pass through four filters before publication. Verificat follows the same model and does not include a by-line, as Martí Odriozola explained, “as a reflection of a work style that passes through various hands, is edited, and often involves several people”.

Conversely, Newtral justifies the inclusion of a by-line in all the articles it publishes for two reasons. First, to avoid the inconsistency that would mean alerting the public not to trust content circulating online without a by-line or known source; and second, to acknowledge that journalists in Spain, unlike those in other countries who live in fear, they will not “get into trouble” for doing their job. The only case when Newtral does not publish the name of the fact-checker responsible for a text is within the framework of the collaboration with Verificat. “There, we had to reconcile two methodologies, and in the end, they were not teamwork, and we wanted to promote the alliance somehow,” explains Joaquín Ortega.

EFE Verifica also signs its fact-checks, although it has been slowly incorporating this practice because it stems from a culture of informative companies, as Sergio Hernández explained: “At EFE, we are used to the brand coming first, and our signature is not important. But transparency is always good, and I believe a by-line on a fact-checking site is better”.

3.2. *Transparency in the use of sources (RQ2)*

The analysed sites show a high level of transparency regarding the use of sources since the four of them identify all key sources, include the sources' links, prioritise the use of primary sources and cross-check information with more than one source (100% in all cases).

From the analysis of the verifications published in the selected periods, it is evident that none of the four outlets studied provides information about the interests of the consulted sources and their mutual commercial relationship (100% in all cases). However, there is a logical explanation because they usually work with official sources and experts.

In the specific case of consulting experts, several examples were found in all the sites. Verificat publishes the highest number of pieces in which the fact-checker turns to experts to clarify any aspect(s) 10 pieces, 29% of the total. For its part, EFE Verifica used information provided by experts in 9 pieces (17%) of the total published, while Maldita consulted experts in 8 pieces (4%) –four of them being users.

Newtral acknowledges that it always consults them whenever it is exploring “new territory”, even where the data from the primary source is evident, as the fact-checker may be unaware of the existence of other sources. This outlet consulted experts in 9 pieces –6% of the total. The most used source in political verification is the INE (The Spanish National Statistics Institute), which provides most of the figures that politicians try to “torture” until they say what they want them to say. In addition, to avoid possible biases by expert opinions, a minimum of two are usually consulted.

In the case of Verificat, if it is a dubious statement, they also contact the source to request any necessary clarifications, which are then cross-checked with official data and, if needed, with an expert. However, as EFE Verifica notes, it avoids fact-checking certain health-related disinformation with the source, such as with Covid-19, to prevent the spread of disinformation.

Maldita also considers it counterproductive to fact-check certain coronavirus-related hoaxes that clearly appear false from the start. In contrast, Newtral's obligation is to combat the “search engine vacuum” by providing verifications of false myths and treatments to prevent or cure coronavirus, ensuring that citizens searching for information on the Internet find not only websites spreading misinformation but also truly contrasted information.

All four sites studied identify the essential information sources on which they base their articles (100%), and in all cases, they add the link to them, usually at the end of the text (alongside a screenshot if it is a tweet, image, or video fragment, for example). At the same time, the sites prioritise primary sources and cross-check with other sources (100% in all cases). For example, in the case of fact-checking hoaxes maliciously attributed to political figures or relevant social media accounts, the official account is traced to check the veracity of the content. If the person in question issues a denial, this is usually reflected.

3.3. *Transparency in funding and organization (RQ3)*

In this subsection, the results are based on the detailed reading of the respective methodology sections of each outlet analysed, along with first-hand information gathered from the interviews with their respective representatives.

Regarding the transparency of economic data, striking differences were found among the sites. Maldita provides the most transparency in this area, including all its annual balance sheets and the origin of each income stream obtained, regardless of the amount. Similarly, Verificat provides annual balance sheets and a list of entities that contribute to their budget with amounts greater than 10,000 euros per year, which are itemised. The logos of all donor entities are also included.

Newtral does not specify all its economic figures, although it does disclose its revenues and results for the financial year 2023, along with some of the expenditures and investments made. When queried why it does not disclose its balance sheets or the exact source of its earnings, Joaquín Ortega explained that this is not a concern for the organisation since the accounts “are public and can be consulted by anyone”. Furthermore, while he acknowledges that there is speculation surrounding the issue, he justifies that the organisation is a for-profit company and complies with the minimum transparency requirements established by the IFCN, in addition to not receiving public funding or requesting subsidies.

Collaboration agreements with other media outlets or entities are reflected on the websites of both Maldita and Newtral, although the latter does not explicitly state the number of revenues received. Maldita also includes the amount received from subscribers in its annual balance sheets.

EFE Verifica provides no economic data on its finances and the amounts obtained from its services. As it is considered a section of the EFE news agency, it does not have its own accounts. However, it reports on its website the “remunerated agreement with Facebook to combat disinformation on its platform”, as well as agreements and services with the IFCN and Meta (Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), although it states that “these funds are not directly intended to finance the verification service’s activity” but are included in the EFE news agency’s general accounts. Sergio Hernández pointed out, moreover, that “verification as a new activity is more profitable than other journalistic genres”.

Regarding alliances with third parties and how this could affect the independence of the fact-checkers’ work, Pablo Hernández (Maldita) claimed that whenever an agreement is signed, “one thing we make very clear is that we demand complete editorial independence, we choose what to do, what not to do, and in our process, they cannot direct us in any way”. Both Verificat and EFE Verifica also expect such editorial independence.

The websites of the outlets under study include the name and photograph of all their team members, as well as a summary of their responsibilities and/or the department they belong to and their contact information. Newtral also adds the names and professional experience of former team members. Verificat and EFE Verifica present their team members and provide information about them, although EFE Verifica omits photographs and its staff’s work email addresses. Biographies, in all cases, are limited to each person’s training and work experience.

As for the commitment that fact-checkers do not make public statements of a political nature, which could logically call into question their professional independence, both Newtral and Maldita follow the IFCN’s guidelines and allow journalists to

express themselves as they wish, as long as they do so on a personal basis. In this regards, Pablo Hernández (Maldita) said: “The underlying idea of ideological diversity at Maldita is less about being all neutral, but that we seek a balance so that there are different ideological sensitivities”.

Newtral claims to draw a clear distinction between a verification editor and any other type of collaborator:

No verifier can ask for votes for any political party or advocate any political idea or initiative through a social media account or a platform that identifies them as such (...) And we make it quite clear before we hire someone by asking them to read the code of principles that guide our in-house operations.

As Martí Odriozola pointed out, Verificat asks for “neutrality” when hiring editors, but it is up to each person to decide how to interpret this. For EFE Verifica, however, as a section of the EFE news agency given over to verification, there is no need for neutrality beyond what is already expected of all the agency’s journalists.

3.4. *Accountability and public participation (RQ4)*

From the reading of the websites of the analysed outlets, the content analysis and the interviewees’ responses, it is noted that their respective correction policies strive to be as transparent as possible and ensure that readers have all the information about the piece and any modifications made to it. Pablo Hernández (Maldita) said that the aim is not to hide such correction “but to publish it as if it were normal content”.

Joaquín Ortega told us that Newtral always explains where, how and why a piece of information has been updated. Although the outlet sometimes makes errors, it is often due to additional information received later or a delayed response from an expert. He also drew attention to the fact that complex verifications sometimes take a long time (with resulting criticism from outside), which could explain why there is less likelihood of error.

When asked why the sites do not inform as insistently about the possibility of rectifying errors with the same emphasis as they do, for example, with requests for participation, Maldita claims that the channels open to the audience are several and well-known, both on the website and mainly on social media. Newtral insists that its corrections policy exists and works and that they are is the first interested in ensuring this is the case. Verificat also specifies that its channels for submitting complaints are clear and follow the IFCN model.

Regarding the right to rectification, Maldita acknowledged that they have occasionally received calls from politicians requesting them to amend inaccurate information, although this happens much less often since they moved away from the “political fray”. Martí Odriozola from Verificat also remarked on the importance of verifying information about statements made by authorities and politicians, as they pay close attention to the results, an influence that defines the sites’ identity and role.

On the other hand, EFE Verifica approaches user complaints in an entirely different way from the other three sites analysed. As part of a major organisation, the EFE news agency, this outlet refers complaints and corrections to the channels of the organisation it belongs to, as explained on its website, rather than through its own specific channel on its own website, as required by the IFCN guidelines. However, its website does include some examples –three at the time of observation– of verifications that were corrected following a formal complaint. While these do not seem like many given its uptime, Sergio

Hernández attributed this again to the “company culture”, which prefers to wait a little longer, but be more rigorous in its checks, something he associates with EFE’s “informational conservatism”. In any event, the verification it carries out for Facebook originates over the telephone, and the final decision is made externally to EFE Verifica.

Newtral insists it has never received a formal right-to-rectification request, which it believes may be due to two factors. First, the verifications they perform are on clear-cut topics with no room for interpretations or, therefore, a different explanation by the politician. Second, the outlet always calls the communications office in question, offering the possibility to justify their data.

Regarding media literacy, Maldita Educa has launched various initiatives to reach all segments of the population, particularly “the two age extremes: the elderly and the young” (Pablo Hernández). To reach a younger audience, their site is on Twitch and TikTok.

Newtral also sees media literacy as a cornerstone of its strategy: “In the articles themselves, we try to explain to people why we drew the conclusions we did, and we explain what tools we used so that they themselves can learn with a single fact-check how we reached that conclusion,” said Joaquín Ortega, who acknowledges that there is currently only one person in charge of the Newtral Education project. However, this has not prevented Newtral from launching a master’s degree in fact-checking in collaboration with the San Pablo CEU University, holding regular talks in schools and institutes, as well as helping students with their final degree and master’s degree projects.

Verificat focuses a good deal of its strategic objectives on media literacy initiatives. Alba Tobella explained that the teaching materials they have designed for secondary school education (Desfake) are based on using TikTok against disinformation and are complemented by performances, conferences and courses for teenagers. Verificat also carries out media literacy activities for the elderly. Five of the 16 editorial staff members are tasked with these various agreements and services, and media literacy has become a core factor in the site’s growth.

The interviews confirmed that audience involvement is essential for the fact-checkers as it provides them with a good portion of the content they verify, creating “a core of committed collaborators” (Pablo Hernández). The website frequently makes calls for collaboration, which are regularly reiterated. For example, Maldita, EFE Verifica and Verificat request user participation at the bottom of each website page. For its part, Newtral seeks participation through social media networks (Twitter and Facebook), WhatsApp and Menéame, in addition to the possibility of commenting on published verifications –although it only asks directly for the readers’ participation when carrying out political fact-checks.

As Newtral and Maldita point out, the prevalence of hate speech on social media may lead to a certain amount of toxic interventions, although it does not detract from the interest and the collaboration they receive. Joaquín Ortega assures that the “citizen journalist-user relationship” provides positive feedback.

3.5. *Evolution and prospects (RQ5)*

Despite the attention given to audience engagement, subscriptions are gradually becoming a less substantial part of the sites' funding resources. However, funding is generally growing thanks both to contributions from various private and public entities focusing on combating disinformation, as well as the sale of services to major social media companies that commission and pay for verifying certain types of viral information that fall within the fact-checkers' spheres of influence. Even EFE Verifica, whose business culture has always involved selling services to other companies, has entered into a collaboration agreement with Meta.

The second main source of funding that has been increasing in recent years comes from media literacy courses and initiatives, which have found a reliable and constant form of funding from various administrations, allowing them to reach an increasing number of citizens. This trend is crucial, for example, for Verificat, which has already developed a programme to implement educational activities in secondary schools, accompanied by a remote advisory system that has become, according to Alba Tobella, "the strategic axis of the organisation's growth". At the same time, donations are now "residual". Only Maldita's budget continues to rely almost exclusively on individual contributions.

The four fact-checking outlets have also evolved from conducting verifications to creating systems for storing and reusing the knowledge generated in successive verifications. In addition, they have implemented storage systems organized by themes, with added options for filtering and advanced search capabilities by keywords or tags for quick and easy access.

In addition to enhanced search options, there is a trend towards the development of more elaborated yet simple and instructive texts containing basic informational content on specific areas. These "explanatory" texts typically address essential information repeatedly used in previous verifications on subjects that are traditionally the focus of much disinformation, such as immigration or health. From this basic information, simple presentations are developed to counter the more prevalent forms of disinformation, which are often recurrent. They can sometimes be in the form of frequently asked questions or doubts for easy consultation by any user. Verificat's section on immigration, for example, presents essential data on Spain and provides initial information to counter the most common misinformation in just a few minutes of reading.

According to Newtral, these explanatory texts arise from users' doubts sent to the WhatsApp service, "things that aren't very clear, or that require so much context and information that it's impossible to summarise it in a rating". Maldita uses the explanatory reports "serve to fill the gap that arises from always being late and always trailing disinformation", providing "tools for the public to combat disinformation".

The interviewees agreed on the importance of the IFCN's international network for their work. According to Pablo Hernández, it "provides a certificate of credibility". Joaquín Ortega believes the network has conferred quality and uniqueness to the fact-checking profession, as well as a spirit of constant collaboration that is atypical in other information ecosystems. EFE Verifica even suggests a future in which international collaboration increases, citing the recent creation of a European network of eight digital media and disinformation observatories of supranational collaboration carried out in autumn 2022, in which Spain has been included in Iberifier.

Regarding the annual verification processes carried out by the IFCN to accredit sites, Newtral defines the process as an “extremely transparent process that helps both parties”. Maldita acknowledges that having a developed methodology and being with the IFCN for some time helps pass these annual reviews almost “effortlessly”.

4. Discussion

This research proves a high level of compliance with the IFCN Code of Principles among the four Spanish fact-checking sites that are signatories by using a triangulation method –based on content analysis, observation and semi-structured interviews– that goes beyond previous studies on the topic based on the observation of the methodology included in the platforms’ websites (Moreno-Gil & Salgado-de Dios, 2023; Torres-Toukoumidis et al., 2021) as well as others focused on different geographical areas (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2023; Ye, 2023).

The results of this study prove a high level of compliance with the IFCN Code of Principles among the four Spanish fact-checking sites that are signatories. However, there are some differences, especially those related to transparency in funding and organisation. The analysis also shows key findings regarding their level of maturity, current funding sources and new formats linked to media literacy efforts.

All four Spanish fact-checking sites excel in terms of their commitment to transparency of methodology (RQ1). Broadly speaking, when selecting content to verify, journalistic criteria and potential virality and danger of the content are prioritised, which typically arrive through two main channels: the WhatsApp chatbots open to readers, and social media. Efforts are concentrated on verifying questionable online content rather than monitoring possible errors in reputable media outlets. While political fact-checking remains one of the sites’ main remits, the trend is towards fact-checking hoaxes and bogus content on social media and private messaging channels. While the editors of Maldita and Verificat do not sign the content they publish, EFE Verifica and Newtral do.

Without exception, the platforms demonstrate high compliance regarding transparency in the use of sources (RQ2). Primary and official sources are consulted as a priority, and links to them are included. In addition, the studied organisations usually consult experts when the subject is new to them, when doubts arise, or when they need to confirm something while running the verification. When fact-checking politicians, Newtral and Verificat always offer them the opportunity to clarify their position before the verifications are published. None of the sites, however, discloses the interests of the consulted sources (Moreno-Gil & Salgado-de Dios, 2023), which could be explained by the fact that they rely mainly on primary sources.

There are notable differences regarding transparency in funding and organisation (RQ3), where EFE Verifica and Newtral do not provide a detailed account of all their funding sources or annual balance sheets (Moreno-Gil & Salgado-de Dios, 2023). However, all four outlets do list the most relevant collaboration agreements with third parties. As for the “neutrality” required of their personnel, although there is some disparity of opinions, they are usually required not to make any overt statements on social media about their ideology or political leanings when presenting themselves as fact-checkers.

All the sites scrupulously follow their corrections policy and rectify errors openly and transparently (RQ4). However, they do not recall having received requests to correct errors based on the exercise of the right to rectification since the outlets’

audience usually alerts them to errors. The companies are all firmly committed to fostering media literacy (RQ4) among their audiences through training courses in various areas and incorporating new formats, such as explanatory material. They are all also aware of the need to involve the public throughout the verification process as “content providers” and “watchdogs” against disinformation.

As a result of all the above, and specifically in relation to the IFCN Code of Principles, there is no evidence from this study proving that the transparency of the NGO model is much higher than that of the newsroom model as Ye do point out (2023).

According to the interviewees, users’ participation (RQ4) remains as one of the pillars of their activity since readers provide a good part of the content they verify. However, the role of audiences of fact-checking sites is also undefined. Indeed, these outlets are served by information and communication professionals rather than the public, who do not appear to be regular consumers of these websites, but rather promoters of information that may concern them. Consequently, the concept of audience is far from being defined and seems to be dissociated from the sites’ funding. The actual audience will depend on the strategies of the verification outlets, which could consist of the people who are part of their social media community or those who access the media literacy activities, which are gaining in popularity and becoming ever more widespread. Despite the uncertainties identified, the general tenor of the interviews was optimistic about the initial growth and the international and even academic collaboration in the fight against misinformation.

Our study on the four fact-checking sites, founded between 2018 and 2019, indicates they have overcome the initial uncertainty associated with the creation of a new information agent in Spain. This early consolidation has been achieved thanks to their ability to obtain funding (RQ5) from various public and private institutions, both Spanish and supranational. These outlets are not growing thanks to grassroots participation solely, as indicated by the balance sheets and confirmed by the interviewed directors, but rather by external funding, sometimes public and sometimes produced in exchange for agreements with major international social media players such as META (Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram), Twitter or TikTok, which hire them to verify their own content. The second main source of funding comes from media literacy courses and initiatives, which have become an inherent part of these sites’ activity. Among the new trends (RQ5) within Spanish fact-checking, there is the implementation of storage systems to improve advanced searchers or the development of explanatory pieces to combat narratives of disinformation. Finally, all the respondents agreed on the importance of being part of the IFCN since it provides a certificate of credibility and quality to their work.

5. Conclusions

The results of this study prove that, despite some shortcomings in source verification and economic clarity, the Spanish fact-checking platforms’ compliance with international principles on transparency –regarding methodology, sources, and accountability– is of a high standard (Moreno-Gil & Salgado-de Dios, 2023; Ye, 2023). Furthermore, they show new ways to improve users’ access and boost their fight against disinformation –e.g. with new formats such as explanatory pieces. All of them value the IFCN accreditation very positively as they consider the network to have conferred quality and uniqueness to the profession.

Nevertheless, the dependence of these sites on external funding from social media giants, such as META, Twitter or TikTok, raises serious concerns. Despite the potential for growth opportunities they offer, these agreements introduce a primary risk factor that will need to be investigated in the immediate future. On the one hand, the vast amounts of information that these companies accumulate may monopolise the work of fact-checker sites to the point of co-opting them, thus undermining the original objective of these organisations, which is focused on controlling the quality of the information in Spain. Moreover, some of these agreements may condition both the economic balance and the transparency of these outlets since, as the interviews confirmed, they could contain confidentiality clauses that would be at odds with the IFCN's principles of transparency.

Although new studies are needed in other geographical contexts to demonstrate the extrapolation of the main results of this research, this study should be understood as a model with which to approach the ethics of fact-checking in relation to the IFCN code of good practices, the first professionally established and the most internationally recognised within the movement.

Future research on this question should address compliance by fact-checking organisations with other ethical codes in Europe and internationally. Furthermore, this article paves the way for an in-depth analysis of the challenges that fact-checkers face in complying with these ethical and quality standards.

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7. Specific contributions of each author

	Name and Surname
Conception and design of the work	Victoria Moreno Gil and Francesc Salgado de Dios
Methodology	Victoria Moreno Gil and Francesc Salgado de Dios
Data collection and analysis	Victoria Moreno Gil and Francesc Salgado de Dios
Discussion and conclusions	Francesc Salgado de Dios and Victoria Moreno Gil
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Victoria Moreno Gil and Francesc Salgado de Dios

8. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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10. Appendix

Interview script

Commitment to impartiality and fairness

1. Do you consider that the selection criteria for verifying viral statements content to be verified are adequately defined? Are they applied consistently and without exception?
2. Where is the line drawn between political fact-checking and viral content verification? Which one does your organisation prioritise more?
3. When content be considered viral? How are the criteria of journalistic interest and relevance applied?
4. Can people working for the outlet freely express their opinions as members of civil society? Where should the limit be set, and where does the organisation they represent draw the line?
5. What criteria does the site adopt when signing verifications, and why?

Commitment to standards and transparency of methodology

6. What criterion do you use to measure the reach and importance of the content being verified?
7. How do you measure impact or virality? Do you monitor the 'temperature' of the content you receive through WhatsApp and other channels (such as social media)?
8. What problems and positive aspects do you encounter in your day-to-day interactions with the public?
9. Do you always contact the person making the claim before publishing the verification?
10. Do you verify disinformation published by other media? Why or why not?
11. Do you link to the source of controversial information when dealing with viral content about Covid-19? Would this not be a way of giving publicity to harmful sources?

Commitment to standards and transparency of sources

12. What type of sources do you use most frequently?
13. When do you consider it necessary to consult experts?

Commitment to transparency in funding and organisation

14. Does your organisation comply with the IFCN commitment to specify each source of funding that represents 5% or more of total revenues from the previous fiscal year?
15. Is the company's business relationship and any agreements with third parties reflected on the website?

Commitment to an open and honest corrections policy?

16. Do you believe the channel for submitting complaints and corrections is visible enough on the website?
17. How are corrections managed, and how many do you receive?
18. What happens when you have to modify a verification because an error was made, which also changes the verification result?
19. Have you received any requests under the right to rectification?

Other questions

20. Do you produce explanatory texts? If so, which ones and for what purpose?
21. Have you collaborated on or launched any media literacy initiatives? Which one(s)? What importance do you attach to media literacy?
22. Why is membership in the IFCN important for the organisation?
23. What requirements does the IFCN expect the site to fulfil, and what does the annual certification renewal procedure involve?