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Reactive Public Relations Strategies for Managing Fake News in the Online Environment

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Abstract: The aim of this conceptual paper is to discuss the issue of managing fake news in the online environment, from an organizational perspective, by using reactive PR strategies. First, we critically discuss the most important definitions of the umbrella term fake news, in the so-called post-truth era, in order to emphasize different challenges in conceptualizing this elusive social phenomenon. Second, employing some valuable contribution from literature, we present and illustrate with vivid examples 10 categories of fake news. Each type of fake news is discussed in the context of organizational communication. Based on existent literature, we propose a 3D conceptual model of fake news, in an organizational context. Furthermore, we consider that PR managers can use either reactive PR strategies to counteract online fake news regarding an organization, or communication stratagems to temporarily transform the organization served into a potential source of fake news. The existing typology of reactive public relations strategies from the literature allow us to discuss the challenge of using them in counteracting online fake news. Each reactive PR strategy can be a potential solution to respond to different types of online fake news. Although these possibilities seem to be extensive, in some cases, PR managers can find them ineffective. In our view, this cluster of reactive PR strategies is not a panacea for managing fake news in the online environment and different strategic approaches may be need, such as communication stratagems. In this context, communication stratagems consist in using organization as a source or as a vector for strategic creation and dissemination of online fake news, for the benefit of the organization. We conclude that within online environment PR managers can employ a variety of reactive PR strategies to counteract fake news, or different communication stratagems to achieve organizational goals.

Keywords: *Fake news; organization; 3D conceptual model; reactive PR strategies; communication management.*

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1. Introduction

Any social investigation should be both reasonable and useful. An investigation is reasonable only if its object can be discriminated – clearly enough – from other social phenomena, is relatively stable and has a significant factual content. Under these conditions, the assertions formulated in regard to it can be (at least in principle) supported or refuted by means of evidence. An investigation is useful only if it is relevant at present and increases the valid knowledge about the phenomenon studied by confirming, correcting, augmenting or refuting the existent knowledge. Researching the fake news phenomenon, in general, and the management of fake news in the online environment, in particular, meets the requirements of reasonableness and utility. Despite the fact that many articles on fake news are unclear and verbose, fake news are considered to be a real phenomenon that can be better known by refining existing knowledge.

The facticity of information has become a long-standing issue affecting organizations, both in online and offline environment (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017), but new communication technologies have dramatically changed the interactions between social actors and the valences of fake news phenomenon. The sophistication of fake news production, the scale on which it is being produced, the amazing variety of fake news formats (e.g., texts, photos, videos, infographics, memes, bots, gifs, etc.), the speed and effectiveness with which it is being disseminated (McGonagle, 2017) have made the effects of information spread online at a fast pace, amplified, and very often distorted. Consequently, the unverified, inaccurate, or false information has the potential to impact upon any political, commercial, or nonprofit organization, by influencing stakeholders' cognitions, attitudes, and behaviours (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017).

The unverified, faulty, or fake information is ambivalent; it can have either negative or positive effects. On the one hand, in the absence of any public relations response, organizations may suffer serious damage from fake news if they come from the organizations' external environment and are designed or disseminated online in order to discredit them (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). On the other hand, an organization can greatly benefit from fake stories if they are produced and spread from internal sources to achieve certain public relations objectives. Taking into consideration the destructive potential of fake news, many politicians, journalists, academics and other opinion leaders strongly recommend introducing legal restrictions, developing and using various "anti-fake news" software (e.g., Décodex), or adopting self-regulating professional codes. In our opinion, it is quite

difficult to manage fake news effectively solely or primarily with the aid of legal, technological, or moral devices. As a *semiotic* phenomenon, fake news can be partially controlled by means of *semiotic* strategies, tactics and tools. Therefore, the task of managing fake news, especially in the online environment, should be entrusted to public relations specialists, who know what kind of reactive PR strategies could neutralize the negative effects of different types of fake news. The same public relations specialists should know how to correlate different types of fake news with different proactive PR stratagems in order to achieve specific organizational objectives. Of course, PR practitioners would show prudence in using fake news with due regard to the legal, moral, and professional framework.

In what follows, we will review some recent and relevant scientific papers in order to determine as clearly as possible the sphere of fake news. Afterwards, we will build a conceptual model of fake news taking into considerations the following three dimensions: (a) the level of facticity (in other words, the degree to which fake news relies on real state of affairs), (b) the author's immediate intention, and (c) the impact on the audience. Our conceptual model will integrate ten types of fake news and seven communication objectives. The more PR objectives are once pursued, the greater the impact of fake news on the audience is. Thirdly, we will correlate each type of fake news with specific reactive PR strategies that can neutralize it effectively. Finally, we will present 18 PR stratagems that can help organizations to achieve their main communication objectives. Each PR stratagem will be associated with the use of particular types of fake news.

Aware of the fact that the complexity of social reality defies any attempt at classifying and modeling, we accept that our distinctions are more methodological than ontological. Obviously, it is possible to discriminate more than ten types of fake news depending of its level of facticity, and these types partially overlap. Also, PR strategies and stratagems are used in clusters rather than individually. Often, strategies metamorphose themselves into stratagems, and vice versa, or strategies have particular stratagems as intended extensions. However, despite the disparity assumed between the real phenomenon of fake news and its theoretical replica, we believe that our conceptual model makes a real contribution to the problem of managing fake news in the online environment.

2. An overview on fake news phenomenon from an organizational perspective

The amount and quality of factual content in news articles have a

great influence on media consumers both in online and offline environment. Inasmuch as media consumers constitute the stakeholders of different types of organizations, PR specialists working for these organizations have become increasingly focused on the growing tide of fake news.

McGonagle (2017) explains that fake news is not a new phenomenon. The press, particularly the partisan press, has always peddled biased opinions and stories lacking factual basis (McGonagle, 2017) regarding certain organizations. At present, such opinions and stories are produced and disseminated on an exponential scale in the online environment. Inaccurate, false, or grossly distorted information spreads at a fast pace acquiring a tremendous potential to cause real impact (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017) on organizations. In this context, PR specialist should understand and manage this phenomenon that affects organizational communication.

Unfortunately, in public relations literature there is a lack of studies for understanding the effects of online fake news on different types of organizations. As mentioned above, organizations can be involved in fake news phenomenon in different ways, especially as a source of fake news or as the target of fake news. Before striving to understand the vital role of managing online fake news, academics and PR practitioners have to answer the basic question “What is fake news?”.

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 213) define *fake news* as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers”. After reviewing 34 definitions mentioned in the literature, Tandoc, Lim & Ling (2018) concluded that these conceptualizations vary according to the *domains of facticity* and *intention*. Moreover, Figueira & Oliveira (2017) argue that for a better understanding of fake news phenomenon, we need to consider 3 factors: content type, source credibility, and content diffusion.

2.1. Content type

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007, p. 11) define *news* as “independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information” regarding an organization. Because news is socially constructed, and journalists often exercise subjective judgment on which bits of information to include and which to exclude (Tuchman, 1978), news is vulnerable not only to journalists’ own preferences (White, 1950), but also to external forces, such as the government, audiences, and advertisers (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). On the other hand, McGonagle (2017) conceptualizes fake news as information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or

doubting verifiable facts; it is disinformation that is presented as, or is likely to be perceived as, news (McGonagle, 2017). Tandoc, Lim & Ling (2018) argue that we can identify *different types of fake news varying on a continuum*, from high to low, by considering 3 dimensions: facticity (i.e., refers to the degree to which fake news relies on facts), (2) author's immediate intention (i.e., the degree to which the creator of fake news intends to mislead), and (3) role of the audience (i.e., passive or active).

In this paper, based on these three dimensions, we propose a 3D conceptual model of fake news, mapping 10 types of fake news discussed in the literature, in an organizational context, such as: (1) clickbait, (2) satire or parody, (3) imposter content, (4) misinformation, (5) misleading content, (6) false connection, (7) false context, (8) manipulated content, (9) disinformation, and (10) fabricated content.

2.2. Source credibility

In the literature, scholars (e.g., Lokot & Diakopoulos, 2016) argue that online information sources blur (i.e., propagation of unverified information) and affect organizations communication by spreading online false stories that can discredit organizations (i.e., negative effects) (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018), or they can be used to achieve some PR objectives (i.e., positive effects). In our view, in this complicated context of organizational communication, the issue of information sources is even more important due to sender intention. For example, an organization can be affected by fake news spread by external publics, such as journalists (i.e., can reach a mass audience by disseminating fake news, in order to increase the number of clicks and advertising revenues) or non-journalists (i.e., citizen journalists, that can reach a mass audience online pursuing different objectives, by posting positive or negative reviews) (Robinson & DeShano, 2011; Wall, 2015). In this paper, we argue that PR specialist can counteract to these online fake news regarding an organization, by using a set of reactive public relations strategies.

Furthermore, based on "Four Models of PR" (i.e., the press agent/publicity model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetrical model, two-way symmetrical model) proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), we argue that PR managers can use communication stratagems to temporarily transform the organization served into a potential source of fake news. For example, in the press agent/publicity model, PR specialist, acting as spin doctors, use persuasion to shape the thoughts and opinions of key audiences. In this model, facticity is not important and organizations do not seek audience feedback and can create and spread online fake news in order to achieve different PR objectives. We conclude that organization can

be the targets of fake news (i.e., external sources), or can supply fake news (i.e., internal sources). Thus, fake news constitutes an important phenomenon to be considered by PR specialist working in different types of organizations.

2.3. Content diffusion

In order to diffuse the fake news online, some organization use *individuals* or even *bots*. For example, Kang, Keunmin, Shaoke, and Sundar (2011) argue that an organization could publish a news-based article, but that article can reach an individual through a dedicated news site, via the news organization's Facebook site, or through a "shared" posting of their social network. Receiving information from socially proximate sources can help to legitimate the veracity of information that is shared on social networks (Kang, Keunmin, Shaoke, & Sundar, 2011). Moreover, in the online environment, influencers can post fake news regarding an organization and thus, this type of content can receive more attention from others. Because it is more likely to be further liked, shared, or commented (Thorson, 2008), this kind of posts can be used effectively to the propagation of fake news regarding an organization. Lokot and Diakopoulos (2016) note that some organizations can use *news bots* to diffuse fake news in online environment, adding legitimacy of the information. Understanding content diffusion is important for PR specialists on one hand to counteract online fake news, on the other hand to disseminate fake news to achieve various PR objectives.

3. Types of online fake news and content-producers from an organizational perspective

In this section we discuss *different types of fake news* that can be related with an organization, and the potential internal or external content-producers. After critically reviewed the literature, we identified 16 types of fake news. Each type of fake news is analyzed from its relevance in an organizational communication context. From these 16 types of fake news, we selected 10, considered to be more relevant for our study: (1) clickbait, (2) satire or parody, (3) imposter content, (4) misinformation, (5) misleading content, (6) false connection, (7) false context, (8) manipulated content, (9) disinformation, and (10) fabricated content. Scholars proposed the following conceptualizations for these types of fake news:

- **clickbait** – articles with dubious factual content, presented with misleading headlines, designed for the simple goal of generating many views. The more extreme is the virality, the higher is the reach, the click numbers and the advertisement revenue (Rehm & Declerck, 2018);

- **satire or parody** – pieces of writings in which authors use humor, irony, exaggeration, ridicule, and false information to comment on current events (Zimdars, 2016);
- **imposter content** – when genuine sources are impersonated with false, made-up sources (Wardle, 2017);
- **misinformation** – inaccurate information that can mislead people whether it results from an honest mistake, negligence, unconscious bias, or (as in the case of disinformation) intentional deception (Fallis, 2014);
- **misleading content** – disingenuous use of information to frame an issue or an individual (Wardle, 2017);
- **false connection** – when headlines or visuals of captions fail to support the content (Wardle, 2017);
- **false content** – when genuine content is shared with false contextual information (Wardle, 2017);
- **manipulated content** – when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive (Wardle, 2017);
- **disinformation** – intentional misleadingness, inaccuracy, or falsity (Søe, 2018);
- **fabricated content** – outright false information (Wardle, 2017).

Furthermore, each type of fake news can be ordered, from low to high, according to the extent to which fake news relies on facts. Next, we analyse the content-producers of online fake news, from an organizational perspective, considering them as potential internal or external sources (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Types of online fake news and content-producers from an organizational perspective

Types of fake news	Internal Sources	External Sources
Clickbait	xxx	x
Satire or parody	x	xxx
Imposter content	xxx	x
Misinformation	xxx	xxx
Misleading content	xxx	x
False connection	x	xxx
False context	xxx	xxx
Manipulated content	xxx	x
Disinformation	xxx	xxx
Fabricated content	x	xxx

Third, based on sources immediate intention, we argue that fake news producers can achieve various PR objectives, such as: attention (Atte), comprehension (Com), retention (Ret), interest (Int), attitude (Atti), opinion (Opi), and behaviour (Beh) by using them, in an organizational communication context (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Types of online fake news used to achieve various PR objectives

Types of fake news	PR Objectives						
	Atte	Com	Ret	Int	Atti	Opi	Beh
Clickbait	x			x			x
Satire or parody	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Imposter content	x		x	x	x	x	x
Misinformation	x				x	x	
Misleading content	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
False connection	x		x	x	x	x	x
False context	x	x		x	x	x	x
Manipulated content	x	x		x	x	x	x
Disinformation	x		x	x	x	x	x
Fabricated content	x			x	x	x	x

Fourth, based on potential impact of these various types of fake news, we argue that if a type of fake news can lead to accomplish a large number of PR objectives, they have a greater potential impact on organizations stakeholders (see **Figure 1**).

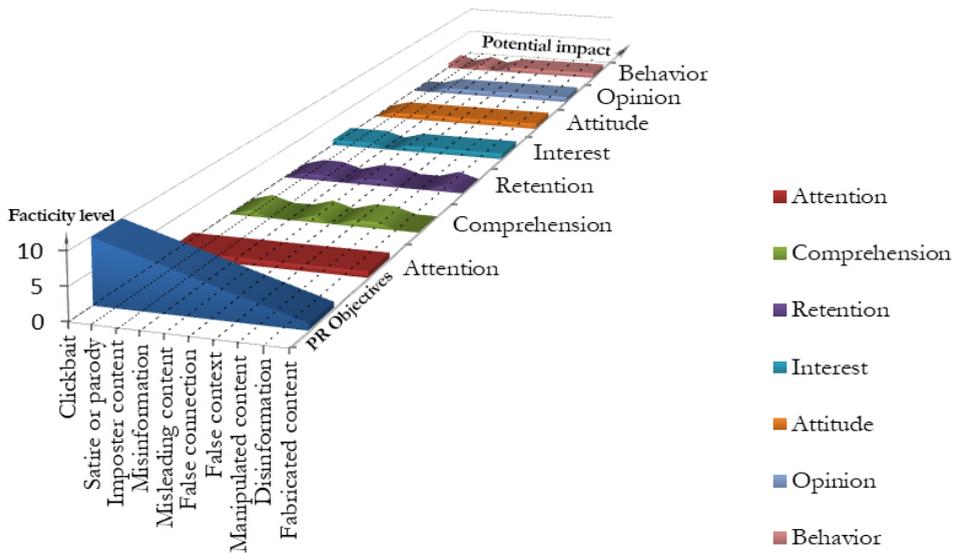


Figure 1. 3D conceptual model of fake news, in an organizational context

Considering these 3 dimensions, we propose a conceptual model of fake news, in an organizational context, depicted in **Figure 1**.

4. Reactive public relations strategies for counteracting online fake news

PR specialist can use reactive PR strategies to counteract online fake news regarding an organization, or PR stratagems and different types of fake news to achieve various communication objectives (i.e., awareness, acceptance and action objectives).

Senger (2005) explains the difference between the strategy and stratagem concepts. According to Senger (2005), *strategy* is a long-term planning with regard to basic company targets, as opposed to tactics, which is a short-term planning. *Stratagem* is a neutral word for “trickery” or “cunning”, a form of trickery that is free of deception. Trickery is an artful, unusual, cunning means of solving problems, which sometimes - but by no means always - entails the use of deception (Senger, 2005). In our view, PR specialists can be a source of fake news, thus using different types of fake news.

We consider that PR practitioners can use a *cluster* of reactive public relation strategies to *neutralize* the negative effect of online fake news on organizations: (1) pre-emptive action, (2) offensive response strategies, (3) defensive response strategies, (4) diversionary response strategies, (5) vocal

commiseration strategies, (6) rectifying behavior strategies and (7) strategic inaction (Smith, 2002). It can be easily noticed that the most effective strategies for managing fake news are also communication strategies in crisis situations. In this article, it seemed convenient for us to discuss such PR (or communication) strategies following an excellent classification proposed by Ronald Smith. We could have adopted the typologies of communication strategies proposed by William Benoit (1997) and Timothy Coombs (1995) as well.

4.1. Counteracting clickbait

Organizations can be affected by articles published on different websites by external sources with the aim to obtain advertisement revenue – called *clickbait*. We consider that PR specialists should monitor this dubious factual content, presented with misleading headlines, because it can influence stakeholders' attention, interest, and behaviour. In our opinion, in these cases, PR planners can use *silence* as a reactive strategy. Smith (2002) explains that *strategic inaction* is an appropriate public relations response, a strategy of patience and composure, if the organization is one time affected. However, if the content producer repeatedly affects the organizations image and reputation, by using this type of fake news, PR specialist can use even *threat*, promising that harm will come to the accuser or the purveyor of bad news, by lawsuitsing for defamation (Smith, 2002).

4.2. Counteracting satire or parody

In some cases, organizations can be the target of satire or parody content produced by external publics. PR practitioners should not underestimate the potential negative effect of this type of online fake news on stakeholders: *satire* or *parody* can influence attention, comprehension, retention, interest, attitude, and opinion. In order to neutralize these potential negative effects of satire or parody, PR specialists can use reactive strategies, such as: *prebuttal*, *embarrassment*, or *threat*.

Smith (2002) argues that PR specialists sometimes use *embarrassment* or *threat*, offensive response strategies, to counteract criticism, if the organization is operating from a position of strength in the face of opposition. *Prebuttal*, a pre-emptive action strategy, can be used before the opposition launches its first charge against the organization, and when bad news is inevitable (Smith, 2002), as a countermeasure for online fake news.

4.3. Counteracting imposter content

Organizations can be affected also by fake news in which genuine sources are impersonated with false, made-up sources. By using *imposter content* external sources can negatively influence stakeholder's attention, retention, interest, attitude, opinion, and behaviour regarding an organization.

PR practitioners can use response strategies, such as *attack*, *embarrassment*, and *threat* to neutralize the negative effect of imposter content. For example, when imposter content is attributed to a made-up source (i.e., an organization) and affects the organization's image, reputation and even its financial performance, the content producer risks legal consequences and can be *attacked* and *threatened* with a lawsuit for defamation. In some situations, PR planners can use *attack* if they have a strong case that accusers have grossly overstated the organization's involvement in a problem (Smith, 2002), using imposter content. However, if the effects on organization are not severe, PR specialists can use *embarrassment* to lessen an opponent's influence. Smith (2002) notes that this reactive strategy should be used with caution because it can backfire if the public believe an organization is acting unfairly against its opponents.

4.4. Counteracting misinformation

Organizations can be a target of online *misinformation* of different external publics. Although misinformation is a result of an honest mistake, negligence, or unconscious bias, this type of online fake news can have a potential negative impact, by drawing stakeholder's attention, influencing their attitude and behaviour regarding an organization. In our view, PR specialist can use *attack*, *threat*, and *denial* as potential countermeasure. For example, if the opponent misinforms the stakeholders in online environment, PR specialists can use denial. Smith (2002) argues that by using *denial*, the organization refuses to accept blame, claiming that the problem doesn't exist or didn't occur, and can prove it. Furthermore, if the content producer refuses to withdraw his *misinformation* and to *apologize* for his honest mistake or negligence, thus affecting the organization's image, reputation and its financial performance, can be *attacked* and *threatened* with a lawsuit for defamation.

4.5. Counteracting misleading content

Organizations can be the target of different external sources, which use *misleading content* to intentionally affect its image and reputation. In this

case, content producers use information to frame an issue, an individual, or an organization. We consider this type of online fake news to be extremely dangerous due to its negative potential to draw stakeholder's attention and to influence their attention, comprehension, retention, interest, attitude, opinion, and behaviour. Thus, PR specialists should react using appropriate strategies to this type of online fake news, by employing strategies, such as: *attack*, *threat*, *denial*, *disassociation*, *ingratiating*, *relabeling*, or *silence*. We argue that due to its complex mechanism to influence stakeholders misleading content requires an appropriate response. For example, if the content producer refuses to withdraw it and to apologize, thus affecting the organizations image, reputation and its financial performance, PR specialist can *attack*, *threaten* with a lawsuit for defamation, or use *denial*. These three strategies can be used only if the organization can prove its innocence.

In other cases, organization may not have a strong case against opponents or it cannot prove its innocence. PR specialist could use *ingratiating* to manage the negative situation by charming its publics or “tossing a bone,” to turn the spotlight away from the accusations and criticisms (Smith, 2002). Sometimes, PR planners could try to distance an organization from the wrongdoing associated with it (Smith, 2002), in the misleading content, by using *disassociation*. If the situation permits, PR specialist can distance the organization from criticism, offering an agreeable name in replacement of a negative label used by others, using *relabeling* (Smith, 2002). In rare situations, PR planners can use *silence* as a reactive strategy to counteract misleading content because usually this type of fake news requires an appropriate response.

4.6. Counteracting false connection

Organizations can be the target of *false connection*, a type of fake news used sometimes by external source, when headlines or visuals of captions fail to support the content. In our opinion, false connection have a potential negative high impact on stakeholder's by drawing attention and influencing their retention, interest, attitude, opinion, and behaviour.

PR practitioners can use a cluster of strategies to neutralize false connection, such as: *attack*, *embarrassment*, *threat*, *denial*, *disassociation*, *relabeling*, or *silence*. In rare cases, PR specialist can prove the intention and the damage of this type of fake news on organizations, and employ *attack* or *threat*. However, in practice, this situation may occur. Sometimes organization use *denial* and refuses to except blame, and that the problem suggested by false connection it's not related to the organization. More often, PR planners can use *embarrassment* to lessen an opponent's influence on stakeholders, denial,

or *disassociation* to distance the organization from the wrongdoing suggested by false connection. Also, PR practitioners can distance the organization from criticism, offering an agreeable name in replacement of a negative label used by false connection producers, using *relabeling*.

4.7. Counteracting false context

In the online environment, organizations can be affected by external sources that spread the genuine content with false contextual information. The potential negative impact on organization is high because this type of fake news can draw stakeholders' attention, and influence the comprehension, interest, attitude, opinion, and behaviour. To counteract these organizational communicational risks, PR specialists can use reactive strategies, such as *ingratiation*, *disassociation*, or *relabeling*.

Ingratiation can be used to neutralize the effect of *false context* by *charming* stakeholders or "tossing a bone," to turn the spotlight away from the accusations and criticisms (Smith, 2002). Furthermore, if the false context negatively presents the organization, PR planners could use *disassociation* to distance the organization from the negative context. Finally, another solution to counteract false context is employing *relabeling* strategy by offering an agreeable name in replacement of a negative label used by source for the context.

4.8. Counteracting manipulated content

Another type of fake news produced by external sources that can target an organization is the *manipulated content*. In this situation, the intention is the deceive stakeholders by using manipulated genuine information or imagery. We argue that manipulated content can also have a high potential negative impact on organization, as false context, by drawing stakeholder's attention, and influence the comprehension, interest, attitude, opinion, and behaviour. In our opinion, the strategic options available for PR practitioners to neutralize its negative effect are: *attack*, *embarrassment*, *threat*, *denial*, *disassociation*, *ingratiation*, or *silence*. For example, if the organization can prove the sources intention and the negative consequence of this fake news on organizations image, reputation or its financial performance, PR practitioners can use *attack* or *threat* with a lawsuit for defamation. To lessen an opponent's influence on stakeholders *embarrassment* can be used as a reactive strategy to discredit opponents, the content-producers of manipulated content. Furthermore, *ingratiation* strategy can be used to neutralize the effect of manipulated content by spotlight away the organization from the accusations and criticisms. Also, if the manipulated

content depicts a negative image of the organization, PR specialist can use *disassociation* to distance the organization from that negative image. Finally, another solution to counteract manipulated content that can be used in rare cases is *silence*. This reactive PR strategy is a potential solution only when the organization is motivated by higher intentions such as compassion for victims, respect for privacy or other noble considerations (Smith, 2002).

4.9. Counteracting disinformation

Organizations are targeted from time to time by different external sources that intentionally mislead and disseminate inaccurate or false information in the online environment about their activity. The potential negative effect of on stakeholders can be achieved by drawing attention on a negative aspect regarding an organization and influencing their retention, interest, attitude, opinion, and behaviour. In order to counteract these potential negative effects, PR planners can use a cluster of reactive PR strategies, such as: *prebuttal*, *attack*, *embarrassment*, *threat*, *denial*, *disassociation*, *relabeling*, *silence* and *concern*.

First of all, by monitoring different external publics, organization could use *prebuttal* strategy before the opposition launches its first charge of online disinformation against the organization. Sometimes, PR specialists fail to monitor carefully the potential external sources of *disinformation* and this type of fake news is already spread online. In these cases, they can use a set of reactive strategies depending on the specificity of the communication situation. For example, PR practitioners can use *attack* or *threat* with a lawsuit for defamation if they can prove the damage caused by source of disinformation to the organization. Also, in order to decrease the opponent's influence on stakeholders they can use *embarrassment*. Moreover, if they can argue that the issue doesn't exist or didn't occur, or it's not related to the organization, PR specialist can use *denial* or *disassociation*. In more complex situation (i.e., in which organizations lack of implication is difficult to argue), PR planners can use *relabeling* strategy by offering an agreeable name in replacement of a negative label used by the source. Finally, PR planners can use *silence* as a reactive strategy to counteract disinformation because usually this type of fake news requires an appropriate response.

4.10. Counteracting fabricated content

Sometimes, organization can be the target of *fabricated content* or false information spread online. In this case, the intention of the content producer is to affect the organizations reputation, trust and image. Usually, external sources achieve a potential negative effect on stakeholders by

drawing attention and influencing their interest, attitude, opinion, and behaviour. Without employing an effective PR reactive strategy, this type of online fake news can cause real damage to organization. However, fabricated content has a limited effect if PR specialists act strategically, using an appropriate response, such as: *attack*, *embarrassment*, *threat*, *denial*, *disassociation*, or *concern*. In **Table 3** we synthetically present potential solutions (i.e., reactive public relations strategies) for each type of fake news that can affect an organization from external sources.

For example, organization can easily prove the lack of facticity in fabricated content. If this is correlated with other evidence that prove the sources intention and the negative consequence on organizations image, reputation or its financial performance, PR practitioners can use *attack* or *threat* with a lawsuit for defamation. Because fabricated content is quite easy to prove, some PR specialist can use *embarrassment* to reduce opponent's influence on stakeholders and discredit.

Table 3. Counteracting different types of online fake news using reactive PR strategies

Types of fake news	Reactive PR strategies
Clickbait	silence, threat
Satire or parody	prebuttal, embarrassment, threat
Imposter content	attack, embarrassment, threat
Misinformation	attack, threat, denial
Misleading content	attack, threat, denial, disassociation, ingratiating, relabeling, silence
False connection	attack, embarrassment, threat, denial, disassociation, relabeling, silence
False context	ingratiating, disassociation, relabeling
Manipulated content	attack, embarrassment, threat, denial, disassociation, ingratiating, silence
Disinformation	prebuttal, attack, embarrassment, threat, denial, disassociation, relabeling, silence, concern
Fabricated content	attack, embarrassment, threat, denial, disassociation, concern

Also, probably in this case the organization can use *denial* and refuse to except blame by arguing that the reputed problem doesn't exist and that the evidence support this position. Additional to strategically responses those mentioned above, PR planners can use *disassociation* and *concern* to neutralize this type of fake news. First, they can distance the organization from that fabricated content and to express their *concern* regarding the danger of using this type of content by opponents.

5. PR stratagems correlated with different types of fake news for achieving various PR objectives

In our view, public relations specialists do not just have to react to the multitude of fake news coming from the outside environment. They also can use fake news for achieving *legitimate* organizational objective within a very complex, confusing, and competitive environment. Reviewing public relations literature, we noticed that some scholars already discussed certain manipulative or *innocuously* deceptive PR practices as possible instruments for reaching important organizational objectives. Some of such communication practices seek to hide the true source of the public relations message by using front groups, failure to disclose sponsors and fake blogs (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006; Gower, 2006; Palenchar & Fitzpatrick, 2009). Other communication practices are intended to influence others' opinion by the selection of information designed to create the right impression (Richards, 2016), by applying the following PR principle: the way we perceive the world beyond our personal experience is shaped by the media, the media is shaped by spin, and spin can be provided by you (Richards, 2016). Hence it appears to be acceptable for PR practitioners to use communication stratagems (that involve fake news) in a *proactive* manner provided that *they avoid telling lies to hurt others*.

Inasmuch as public relations are rather an *art* than a descriptive science, it is not recommendable to strive for a complete taxonomy of PR stratagems. However, it could be useful to test, by trial and error, the effectiveness of different classes of stratagems used successfully in military, managerial, commercial, or political context. Moreover, these communication stratagems could be associated in a relevant manner with different types of fake news as possible means of implementing the stratagems. Within organizational environment, PR specialists have at their disposal (i.e., to achieve *proactively* their goals) the following public relation stratagems (adapted from Senger, 2005): (1) camouflage, (2) indirect attack, (3) using opponent resources, (4) capitalizing on the situation of chaos, (5) dribbling, (6) creating

something out of nothing, (7) dissimulation, (8) opportunism, 9) provocation, (10) sabotaging the comfort zone, (11) demoralizing the opponent, (12) gaining control from inside, (13) using a straw man, (14) acting dumb, (15) embroidering, (16) charming, (17) sowing discord, and (18) retreat on short term. Each of the stratagems mentioned above can be also considered as a source of fake news. In a future article, we intend to match the (proactive) communication stratagems with the corresponding types of fake news on the basis of relevant examples from the PR practice.

6. Conclusions

Managing fake news in the online environment on behalf of different political, commercial, or nongovernmental organizations is a *must-do* in our post-truth era. Regardless the legal, technological, or moral devices that would be designed in order to prevent fake news production and dissemination or to limit its negative impact, it seems necessary to treat fake news as a *semiotic* phenomenon that may be controlled, at least partially, by means of *semiotic* strategies and stratagems. In this article, we argued that public relations specialists can manage online fake news by inspecting the valences of different types of fake news and skillfully apply the most appropriate strategies or stratagems related to particular PR objectives.

Our 3D conceptual model of online fake news could be used to better understand this elusive social phenomenon. Analyzing online fake news in correspondence with three essential dimensions – the facticity level of news, the source's immediate intention, and the impact on the audience, PR specialists are able to identify, on the one hand, effective reactive strategies for *neutralizing* the fake news coming from external sources, and on the other hand, effective proactive stratagems. These stratagems also involve fake news, but they are produced by internal sources and are employed for achieving specific organizational objective.

A new *conceptual* approach to a given phenomenon is worth considering only if it adds new clarifications and indicates practical ways to illustrate its applicability. The three-dimensional framework of online fake news discussed within this article seems to fulfill these requirements.

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