Corporate Disinformation: Concept and Typology of Forms of Corporate Disinformation

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Abstract. This paper deals with the links between disinformation and business. It starts from the premise that companies are important players in the post-truth era, not merely as "victims" of fake news and other forms of disinformation. Companies can also be an active source of disinformation and deception. Our work seeks to move forward in two directions: finding the link between the practice of disinformation by companies and, secondly, offering a proposed typology of eight possible current types of disinformation practiced in the business world.

Keywords: Disinformation · Misinformation · Deceptive · Fake news · Brand management · Greenwashing

1 Introduction

In 2018, the European Commission designed a plan to combat disinformation (European Commission 2018a, b, c), which it defined as "an ecosystem of production, propagation and consumption of false, inaccurate or misleading information that is profit-driven or seeks to cause public harm." Disinformation and infoxication (information overload), "infodemia" (as referred to by the World Health Organization, WHO), and "infopollution" spoken of by Bennet and Livingston (2018) are a threat to the normal operation of the democratic order. Information has become a kind of garbage; it is indiscriminate, useless and uncontrollable (Lasn 1999).

Companies are a target for fake news and disinformation, but they are also the "subject" or source of deception, falsehoods, false beliefs and half-truths. When referring to the business world, much of the literature on fake news and disinformation focuses on the first role: the company as a "victim" of disinformation, suffering the consequences of lies, hoaxes and falsehoods which almost always distort the perception of economic, commercial and business affairs (Rapoza 2017). Of course, actions involving disinformation can alter the commercial and reputational results of the affected brands (Olivares 2018, 2019; Rodríguez-Fernández 2019). However, there are few contributions looking at the second role: the company as an active source of disinformation, whether it occurs

deliberately and consciously or involuntarily and unintentionally. This has an influence on the reputational aspect, which also remains to be explored.

Fetzer (2004) and Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) refer to "disinformation" as false information, created and disseminated deliberately with specific intentions. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define fake news as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and likely to mislead readers. Fake news intentionally presents misleading or false information, with the desire to mislead the audience (Bakir and McStay 2018; Horne and Adali 2017; Kumar and Shah 2018). For other authors such as Tandoc et al. (2018), the term "fake news" also refers to satirical news, parody news, news fabrication, photo manipulation, advertising and public relations, and propaganda. Others, such as Hannah et al. (2015), use the term disinformation to cover this same definition. We will call disinformation arising within a company and disinformation issued by a company "corporate disinformation" or business disinformation. Following from this, corporate fake news would be only one of the possible forms of corporate disinformation, as there are other forms of information beyond corporate news through which falsehood or deception can flow.

2 Literature Review

2.1 What Do the Studies of Fake News and Disinformation Cover?

Throughout history, the strategic dissemination and publication of false information has been practiced in the form of manipulation and propaganda by political and ideological powers (Arendt 1968; Burkhardt 2017), and military and religious authorities (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Park et al. 2020). More recently, it has also been practiced by economic, financial and corporate powers (Lasn 1999; Bakan 2005). McLuhan (1970) predicted that World War III would be an "information guerrilla war"; or rather, as we are seeing, a "disinformation guerrilla war." McLuhan (1970) predicted that "the next war will be fought not in the sky or in the streets; not in the forests or around the international fishing frontiers of the high seas (…) but in newspapers and magazines, on radio, television and cyberspace." It will be a dirty, unrestricted propaganda war in which different world views and alternative views of the world will be pitted against each other. We are witnessing a war between unreality and reality (Lasn 1999), with intangibles such as credibility, trust and reputation on the line.

The post-truth era, and disinformation and fake news as its most obvious manifestations, are being researched from different epistemological points of view using different frames of reference in information and communication studies; sociology; politics; humanities; economics and management; the sciences of behavior and influence; cybernetic technologies, digitalization and artificial intelligence; and health science. There is an interest in knowing the origins of fake news (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) and the link between propaganda and disinformation (Darnton 2017; Goldstein 2021; Erlick 2021). There is also an interest in advancing its conceptualization (Jack 2017; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017; Nemr and Gangware 2019), and in deception and lying from philosophical (Turri and Turri 2015) or ethical perspectives. Another significant development is on the subject of the impact of disinformation (Spiegelhalter 2017) or its different types and forms (Tandoc et al. 2018; Park et al. 2020; Brennen et. al. 2021).

Other works focus on the sources of fake news broadcasting (Waisbord 2018) and possible social causes and triggers (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). There is also interest in learning about the processes and structures of "organized lying," in which "disinformation farms" in Veles, North Macedonia are particularly prominent (Silverman 2016; Kirby 2016; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Subramanian 2017; Millet 2021; Bendiksen 2021). Another open front involves research on the role of social media in making fake news go viral (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) and the crystallization of post-truth, as well as the use of artificial intelligence, algorithms and deepfakes (Paschen 2020; Di Resta 2020). In response, an entrepreneurial ecosystem is emerging to combat fake news and misinformation (Annenberg School for Communication 2017; Vosoughi et al. 2018), including the identification (Ladeira, et al. 2021) and factchecking of news and competitive intelligence and security consultancies, such as Blackbird.AI. Another recurring aspect discussed is the health of the journalistic profession (Martens et. al. 2018) and the associated ethics and deontology. In psychology, there have been studies of the motivation for sharing and spreading false news (Nelson and Taneja 2018; Talwar et al. 2019); confirmation biases, the social influence of lies (Ekman 2009); media and information literacy (Roozenbeek and Linden 2019; Kajimoto and Fleming 2019; Valverde-Berrocoso et al. 2022); the impact of misinformation or "infodemia" in false social beliefs concerned with refusal to vaccinate (Lewandowsky et al. 2012); and conspiratorial states in public opinion, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic (Guan et al. 2021).

2.2 The Company as a Target or Victim of Fake News and Disinformation

Given the clear scarcity of literature on disinformation and the economic, financial, commercial and business world, another question arises: how can we improve our knowledge of the disinformation arising within and issued by companies themselves? How much of the progress in theories of disinformation in news consumption is valid when we are talking about to disinformation concerned with product consumption? To provide answers, we have to identify the part of the literature on fake news and disinformation that alludes in one way or another to the business world. Then we can explore and make progress on corporate disinformation, for which companies are the active and conscious source. This is our focus of interest in this study.

We reviewed the literature on fake news, disinformation and business, especially that published in the last five years (2017–2021), finding 235 articles mentioning a combination of the following keywords: fake news, brand communication, corporate misinformation, reputation, greenwashing, brand management, corporate disinformation, false advertising, information transparency, deepfakes, lies, deception, post-truth, hoaxes and culture jam. In addition, 15 reports on this topic including at least two of these terms were reviewed. They came from international institutions (European Commission 2021) and global consulting firms (Gartner, Deloitte, PWC, McKinsey or EY), as well as news or columns in prestigious global media outlets (NYT, WSJ, TWP, The Times, The Guardian etc.). The different papers come from various scientific fields. The most abundant are in marketing (Domenico and Visentin 2020; Flostrand et al. 2021); business and management, corporate communication and public relations (Edwards 2021); and journalism and computer languages, artificial intelligence and deepfakes (Chesney

and Citron 2019; Di Resta 2020). The texts mentioning companies as a source of disinformation in any of their practices were then explored. On this basis, a non-definitive typology of seven possible forms of corporate disinformation has been proposed. One of these forms is specifically focused on the food sector, due to its particular propensity for misleading information, especially in corporate and product advertising and packaging labels.

Work on the Implications of Disinformation on Communication Professionals and Company Brands

Within the topic of disinformation and business, the most common studies deal with the professional consequences and implications of post-truth for business and corporate communication and marketing managers (Mills and Robson 2020; Domenico and Visentin 2020; Flostrand et al. 2021; Berthon and Pitt (2018). Dreger (1981) stated that disinformation poses an ethical dilemma for managers who practice it. In particular, Borges-Tiago et al. (2020) suggest the need for brand managers to adapt the brand's presence on social networks depending on users' degree of media literacy and predisposition to consume fake news. Domenico and Visentin (2020) offer notes on consumer behavior, strategies and marketing ethics in the context of fake news. Mills et al. (2019) consider that, beyond the ethical conflict, there is a potential loss of credibility for brands. As brand managers are increasingly losing control of digital media planning, there are consequences resulting from a digital media presence that is awkward or not aligned with brand values, as Kellogg's argued when pulling its advertising from *Breitbart News* (Tode 2016; Helmore 2016). *Breitbart News* is blacklisted for encouraging hate speech on the basis of race, gender and religion.

Visentin et al. (2019) issue a reassuring message to brand managers, because, according to their analysis, the brand does not suffer even if it appears in the spatial context of a fake news story, provided the media or the source are credible. However, the situation is not the same when algorithms and artificial intelligence "decide" to take the advertisement to dark or fake media with zero reputation and credibility. Brand managers should be more vigilant about identity theft in their brand advertisements (Grigsby 2020). Petrov and Fehon (2021) state that combating disinformation requires a concerted effort by executives in charge of customer relations, brand protection, crisis management, and security and privacy monitoring. Peterson (2020) suggests "slow" brand management, which would be more thoughtful, to combat the speed inherent in the VUCA context.

Another of the issues of interest studied has to do with lies outsourced to other organizations working in the disinformation business. According to Fisher (2021), this a booming industry that produces even more unreal situations, with clandestine companies propagating falsehoods. There is increasing interest worldwide in the on-demand production and dissemination of disinformation and fake news from these fake news hubs, such as Veles in North Macedonia (Amorós 2018, 2020; Millet 2021; Bendiksen 2021).

Studies on the Effect on Corporate Reputation of Clickbait and Presence on Fake News Ites

From the perspective of fake news and brands, we measure how advertising or sponsorship presence on the internet via clickbait in media that spread fake news and inflammatory information influences the brand's credibility and reputation (Tode 2016; Nicas 2016; Flostrand et al. 2021; Visentin et al. 2019). Berthon and Pitt (2018) establish links between fake news and corporate brands: false information from outside the company and advertising or sponsorship of the company in fake media. Chen and Cheng (2020) find that trust in the medium can determine the credibility of fake news and brand impact. Social media such as Facebook are under suspicion for favoring these practices that promote disinformation and post-truth (Kirkpatrick 2016; Stevenson 2019). According to a report by Cohan (2016), Facebook makes considerable financial profits from advertising revenue under fake news.

3   Companies as a Source of Disinformation

After reviewing the current literature, we find that there is an area that has hardly been addressed: disinformation with its source or origin in the company. Deceptive practices by the corporate world have almost always been revealed by critical voices such as Baudrillard (1970), Lasn (1999), Klein (2000) or Bakan (2005). Shell (1992) and Dishman and Nitse (2001) consider that disinformation in corporate communication is unjustified, and they warn those who practice it of the risks. Jackson (2017) believes that deception should be strictly prohibited in strategic communication and that the use of disinformation should never come under the heading of strategic communication. Oreskes and Conway (2010) consider that the first corporate providers of disinformation were operators in the tobacco and oil industries. Chelliah and Swamy (2018) explore the sources of corporate deception.Durandin (1983) considers that in both propaganda and advertising it is in advisable to lie as little as possible "because in general it is easier to tell the truth than to construct a lie." Dishman and Nitse (2001) review several works on the internal sources of corporate disinformation, concluding that there is no single source of disinformation in organizations, but that it may originate in various departments, such as corporate communications, advertising or public relations (Cook 1990; Cranberg 1987; Shell 1992), sales (Dreger 1981), financial publications (Weiner 1992) or competitive information and security (Vella and McGonagle 1986). In *Fake & Business* (2019 and 2021), a biennial forum on fake news, disinformation and transparency in the FMCG sector, one of the conclusions was that there are companies interested in generating noise or adulterated or misleading information to distort the course of the markets for their own benefit. Dreger (1981) states that misinformation "sells." Amorós (2018 and 2020) thinks fake news exists because a benefit is obtained from it, ideological and economic benefits being among the most frequent kinds. Along these lines, Petrov and Fehon (2021) consider that sometimes the aim is to disrupt the natural dynamics of competition, alter market values or promote certain self-interested narratives. In the mid-1990s, it was noted that Microsoft practiced disinformation to differentiate itself from its competitors (Novak et al. 1995) (see Table 1).

Guess and Lyons (2020) see disinformation as "a statement that contradicts or distorts the common understanding of verifiable facts." Wardle and Derakhshan (2017)

Table 1. Disinformation and business topics identified in the literature.

Disinformation and business		
The company as recipient of disinformation		The company as source of disinformation
Impact of fake news and disinformation on management and on corporate reputation Dreger (1981) Berthon and Pitt (2018) Berthon et al. (2018) Domenico and Visentin (2020) Flostrand et al. (2021) Mills et al. (2019) Visentin et al. (2019) Borges-Tiago et al. (2020) Grigsby (2020) Petrov and Fehon (2021) Paterson (2020) Rodríguez-Fernández (2019)	Reputational consequences of clickbait and brand presence in "fake" media Tode (2016) Nicas (2016) Flostrand et al. (2019) Visentin et al. (2019) Berthon and Pitt (2018) Chen and Cheng (2020) Kirkpatrick (2016) Cohan (2016) Berthon et al. (2018)	– Propaganda and manipulation – Growing business interlocution in prestige press – Greenwashing and other image washing – Corporate opacity (lack of transparency) – Typified misleading advertising – Deception in corporate information (tendentious data) – Misleading omission of fundamental aspects (black brands) – Infoxication (saturation with information or arguments) – Decontextualization or illegibility (small print) – Ambiguity, vagueness and half-truths in narratives – Unfounded visual imagination supplanting reality Baudrillard (1970), Lasn (1999), Klein (2000), Bakan (2005) Shell (1992), Dishman and Nitse (2001) Oreskes and Conway (2010), Olivares (2018, 2019) Durandin (1983). Drager (1981). Amorós (2018 and 2020) Bezbaruah et al. (2021). Berthon et al. (2018) Chelliah and Swamy (2018)

define "disinformation" as false information, deliberately created and disseminated, to generate harm, confuse and misrepresent. Based on Guess and Lyons (2020) and Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) we could define "corporate disinformation" as the process of issuing verbal or visual messages with an intent to inform or persuade, including false, inaccurate, imprecise or misleading content, created by the company or on its behalf. The messages may be disseminated by the company itself or by others on its behalf and the disinformation contradicts or distorts the common understanding of verifiable facts affecting the company in order to obtain a benefit. This benefit normally promotes the perception of the company or its reputation, but may also harm competitors. Some companies and brands practice certain forms of deception in sectors as important for our health as food (Olivares 2018, 2019; Alonso 2019; Flostrand et al. 2021). A recent paper by Bezbaruah et al. (2021) studies the relationship between consumer values and fake news risk and trust in the media context of natural food and concludes that brand trust is negatively associated with fake news risk.

One of the first contributions on disinformation was made by Watzlawick (1976), when he mentioned the concept of misinformation to refer to unintentional or involuntary disinformation. The intention to deceive has to do with the deliberateness of the act (Lazer et al. 2018; Paschen 2020), both in terms of production (writing, design, composition, etc.), and the promotion, propagation or dissemination of falsehoods, far from the true facts. And such an act seeks to achieve benefits for the company or to erode or harm the reputation of others, usually rivals, opponents or competitors. Park et al. (2020) conducted a study on "the faces of fake news" and proposed a typology based on two variables: "intent to lie" and "intent to harm" a) *Misinformation,* false content without intent to deceive; b) *Disinformation,* false content with intent to deceive and harm; c) *Mal-information*, content that is not false but with intent to harm and damage and d) *Non-information,* with a high intent to deceive, but low intent to cause harm – irrelevant information that hides or masks the real or true information sought by the audience.

Apart from involuntary errors, mistakes, ignorance, negligence, or lack of control, a large proportion of corporate communications, whether they be internal and external, institutional or commercial, informative or persuasive, are almost always intentional, conscious and deliberate – strategic, in other words. This means there is virtually no room in companies for disinformation as understood by Park et al. (2020).

Although we find the diagram put forward by Park et al. (2020) useful, we would add that in the provision of truthful content there may also be an intention to hinder understanding or perception, as in the case of infoxication, illegibility or out-of-context data, which for us are also assumed to be forms of corporate disinformation. For us, these three "informational dysfunctions" (infoxication, decontextualization and illegibility), which can occur with or without intentionality or awareness, would be types of what might be described as subtle or weak corporate disinformation.

4   The Eight Types of Corporate Disinformation

(1) *Corporate fake news.* Based on Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017) definition of "fake news," corporate fake news would be false corporate news officially issued by a company. This refers to news articles that are intentionally, knowingly and verifiably false and that may mislead stakeholders, including consumers (e.g., the

false information issued by Volkswagen conditioned the response of several of its stakeholders, including shareholders and consumers).

(2) *Greenwashing*. The Oxford English dictionary defines "greenwashing" as "the creation or propagation of an unfounded or misleading environmentalist image." Even companies that claim to be committed to sustainable development are unlikely to come close to this illusory goal, so commitment to environmental policy can often be a form of greenwashing (Ramus and Montiel 2005). Becker-Olsen et al. (2013) refer to greenwashing as "environmental disinformation." In food, for example, consumer expectations when consuming products with differentiated quality attributes must be adjusted to what these actually provide (AECOC 2019). We propose the term *"foodwashing"* for the transmission of false, uncertain or confusing information, not based on empirical evidence, which may mislead about certain principal characteristics of a food product involving the way it is made, its origin or its nutritional or health attributes or benefits. This compromises the perception of the product, as well as the economic behavior of an average, attentive and discerning consumer.

(3) *Deceitful Advertising*. We follow Directive 2005/29/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of May 11, 2005, concerning unfair business-to-consumer commercial practices in the internal market in order to look at deception as an unfair practice. Article 6 (Deceptive actions) specifies: a commercial practice shall be regarded as misleading if it contains false information and is therefore untruthful or in any way, including overall presentation, deceives or is likely to deceive the average consumer, even if the information is factually correct, in relation to one or more of the following elements, and in either case causes or is likely to cause him to take a transactional decision that he would not have taken otherwise. The "average consumer" is assumed to be aware that advertising encourages exaggeration and is not always literally true. This is tolerated, considering that the consumer possesses reasonable levels of perspicacity and is capable of decoding the doses of unreality, exaggeration, verisimilitude or simulacra inherent in advertising. This is not advertising deception, as the advertising is easily identified and there are therefore defense mechanisms. Bakan (2020) states that advertisements distort the truth and Lasn (1999) believes that the news tells only part of the story. According to this author, companies lie, steal and kill without remorse or hesitation when it serves the interests of their shareholders. Lasn (1999) points out that advertisements are the most widespread and toxic mental pollutant – "psycho-waste," or anti-language that can annihilate truth or meaning whenever it finds it.

(4) *Misleading Omission*. According to the same regulatory framework, there is misleading omission when essential or important information about a product is concealed or is offered in a manner that is unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous, confusing, or at an inappropriate time, or fails to disclose the commercial purpose of the commercial practice in question; if it is not clear from the context; and if, in any of these cases, it causes or is likely to cause the average consumer to make a decision about a transaction that they would not otherwise have made.

"Black brands" as misleading omission concerning the true manufacturer of the product:

Olivares (2018, 2019) proposes the term "black brand" to refer to corporate brands or companies that deliberately omit the identity of the real manufacturer of their branded products in their communications, causing confusion over the real origin or provenance of the product. This can be understood as an unfair practice because, through such an omission, the economic behavior of the average consumer is compromised and the proper operation of the market is altered. The main falsehood of black brands is, according to Olivares (2018, 2019), that well-known companies present themselves in society as manufacturers, receiving social recognition for this, when in fact they are not because they secretly subcontract production. Al Ries (2019) sees black brands and transparency, alongside privacy, as the two most important corporate issues at the moment.

(5) *Opacity.* Trifts and Häubl (2003) and Hung and Wyer (2009) defined information transparency as "a firm's willingness to provide customers with information about the product, service, or the firm as a whole…". Transparency has to do with the disclosure or communication of information that is clear and comprehensible (Bushman et al. 2004), precise and accurate (Bloomfield and O'Hara 1999; Madhavan et al. 2005; Pagano and Roell 1996) and timely (Granados et al. 2005).

(6) *Infoxication or Information Overload.* Transmission of information which, although truthful, is incomprehensible and difficult to assimilate because it is overwhelming. There is often a degree of infoxication in texts about legal terms and conditions of use of products or services. Many contractual legal texts resort to providing full information, which is more likely to amount to disinformation than information.

(7) *Decontextualized Information and Data.* Transmission of ambiguous or clear but untrue information or messages, or messages not based on data or empirical evidence, which may mislead about certain features of the product or company concerning the way it is made or its origin. Such information compromises the perception of the product and the economic behavior of an average, attentive and perspicacious consumer. There can also be misrepresentation in advertising or product packaging labels (Polonsky et al. 1998), using inaccurate or misleading, out-of-context or ambiguous data, as well as unintelligible, overwhelming or false data. Accessibility barriers are a way of interfering in correct perception, for example the use of illegible body text and difficulties in the usability of digital spaces.

(8) *Illegibility and Inaccessibility.* Sometimes, important information is illegible or unclear due to type size, font, contrast, or the fact that important information is kept in a remote or awkward location. (For example: drug package inserts, the small print of financial and insurance service contracts, legal information on telephone services, and so on). Comprehension is directly related to linguistic readability. Accessible design is one of the trends in inclusive design aimed at improving the average individual's ability to read texts. This does not include inaccessibility or legibility problems due to people's visual dysfunctions. 71% of consumers interviewed indicate that the font size is poor, with small print being the main reason for not reading the label or legal text of a digital contract. According to the study by the Spanish Confederation of Organizations of Housewives, Consumers and Users (CEACCU). A minimum font size of 1.2 mm (body 4) is established for mandatory information. However, if the maximum surface area of a container is less than

$80 \, cm^2$, the minimum size is reduced to 0.9 mm. Mandatory food information must be prominently displayed so it is easily visible, clearly legible and, where appropriate, indelible. It must in no way be concealed, covered or separated by any other indication or image, or by any other intervening material (EU Regulation 2011).

5 Conclusions and Future Agenda

The business world is an active player in the post-truth era. A growing proliferation of works in the literature on fake news and disinformation allude in one way or another to companies. However, it should be noted that most of these studies deal with the company as an object or recipient of disinformation, mainly because of its impact on the reputation of companies. There are very few works like ours, focused on companies as a subjects or issuers of disinformation, and this makes our study an important one. We propose a typology of eight forms of corporate disinformation: corporate fake news, greenwashing, deceptive advertising, misleading omission, opacity, infoxication, decontextualization, illegibility and inaccessibility.

Another professional implication of our work is to encourage companies' self-diagnosis of disinformation, perhaps within the perspective of reputational risks. This should take place in a context that encourages quality information so that all stakeholders can make free, unadulterated decisions, particularly consumers or end users, but also others. The aim of our study is to lay the foundations for further reflection, to encourage future research, and to measure, for example, the frequency of each of these types of misinformation in different productive sectors, the credibility or prestige of the company concerned, and other structural variables, such as size or country of origin. Another future avenue of research consists of analyzing the types of misinformation depending on the information medium used by the company to get its messages to its stakeholders: corporate websites, social media and apps, advertising and the packaging and labeling of the company's brands under analysis. Finally, another possible area for future research would be to measure whether there are significant differences in reputation if the company practices disinformation consciously or unconsciously. Of course, the real difficulty would be, as always, identifying or demonstrating deliberateness, intentionality or consciousness in any corporate misrepresentation and deceit.

It would be convenient to delve into the role of design in each of the proposed forms of disinformation and deception. Who designs falsehood? What working conditions do those who knowingly work to design scenarios of deception and questionable ethics have? What academic profile and skills do these professionals have? Is the designer co-responsible for deception and corporate misinformation?

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