

Managing corporate communication amid the rise of disinformation industry

Dr. Leticia Rodríguez Fernández

University of Cádiz (Spain)

Leticia.rodriguez@uca.es

Abstract

Disinformation has become a strategic threat to organizations, yet its impact on corporate communication remains underexplored. This study examines the characteristics of disinformation targeting companies and institutions in Spain and analyzes the organizational responses developed to counter it. A longitudinal content analysis was conducted on 630 fact-checks published by the main Spanish fact-checking organizations between 2023 and 2025. The findings reveal that companies are the primary targets of disinformation, particularly in the retail, banking, digital services, and media sectors. The results also show an increasing sophistication of attacks, driven by the use of artificial intelligence, deepfakes, and voice cloning to exploit organizational reputation and public trust. Although organizational responses have increased over the period analyzed, they remain largely reactive, with social media serving as the dominant response channel. The study highlights the need to strengthen preventive communication strategies, foster public-private cooperation, and integrate disinformation management into corporate communication, crisis management, and organizational security policies.

Keywords: Disinformation; Strategic communication; Corporate communication; Organizational reputation; Fact-checking; Crisis communication; Artificial intelligence; Corporate resilience.

1. Introduction

Organizational communication is fundamentally built upon the trust of its stakeholders. In digital environments, the opinions of users and consumers have reshaped the information ecosystem, making it more participatory and decentralized. Consequently, user-generated content and online recommendations have become key factors influencing stakeholders' perceptions of organizations.

Within this context, digital disinformation has emerged as a significant threat due to its high virality and its capacity to shape public perceptions. Although its role in electoral

interference has been extensively examined, comparatively little academic attention has been paid to its impact on organizational communication and corporate reputation.

According to the Global Risks Report 2025 published by the World Economic Forum, misinformation and disinformation rank among the world's most critical risks. Over the next two years, they are identified as the second most severe global threat, surpassed only by geoeconomic confrontation and ranked ahead of societal polarization, extreme weather events, and interstate armed conflict.

The economic consequences of disinformation are equally substantial. According to estimates by Sopra Steria, the global cost of disinformation reaches approximately US\$500 billion annually. The largest share corresponds to economic losses, estimated at between US\$353.5 billion and US\$456.4 billion, driven by fake reviews, market manipulation, artificial intelligence-enabled fraud—including deepfakes—and the digital advertising ecosystem that financially supports disinformation websites. These economic costs are compounded by a social impact of up to US\$19.9 billion, associated with adverse effects on public and mental health, increasing societal polarization, and the erosion of trust in public institutions. Political costs are estimated at up to US\$40.1 billion, resulting from electoral interference, propaganda campaigns, election reorganization, and growing investments required to safeguard democratic systems.

2. Objectives and Methodology

To identify the types of disinformation that target organizations, this study adopted an exploratory research design. An initial review of the conceptual literature was conducted to establish the theoretical framework and inform the second phase of the research, which was based on content analysis. Given the complexity of identifying digital disinformation, the sample comprised fact-checks published by Spain's leading fact-checking organizations—Maldita, Newtral, EFE Verifica, and RTVE Verifica—between January and December 2023, focusing on content concerning companies, public institutions, and public figures. This first-stage analysis provided an overview of the main forms of disinformation targeting organizations.

To strengthen the longitudinal perspective of the study, the quarter with the highest volume of fact-checks (April–June) was selected, and equivalent data were collected for the same period in 2024 and 2025. This approach enabled comparisons across time and facilitated the identification of trends and patterns in the evolution of organizational disinformation.

A total of 630 fact-checks were analyzed, including 456 from 2023 and 88 and 86 from the selected quarters of 2024 and 2025, respectively. All content was manually coded and analyzed.

The complete study examined the organizations most frequently targeted by disinformation (companies, public institutions, public figures, and society at large), the temporal distribution of disinformation, the business sectors most affected, the predominant types of disinformation, and the response strategies adopted by organizations. Given the breadth of the project, this paper presents a representative selection of the findings. The full results are available in the article *Disinformation Targeting Companies and Institutions and Their Response Strategies: A Longitudinal Analysis of Fact-Checking in Spain (2023–2025)*, published in *Revista de Comunicación*.

3. Results

3.1 Disinformation Targeting Companies

In 2023, a total of 456 fact-checks were identified, comprising 506 references to 326 companies, public institutions, and public figures. Business organizations accounted for the largest proportion of the entities targeted. Overall, 156 different companies appeared in at least one fact-check, accumulating 244 references throughout the year.

As companies were the most frequently mentioned entities—and therefore the primary targets of disinformation—they were subsequently classified by economic sector to determine whether certain industries were more vulnerable than others. The analysis identified the retail sector as the most affected, followed by banking, fashion, digital applications and services, media organizations, transportation, the food industry, freight transport, technology companies, and energy firms.

The same pattern was observed during the second quarters of 2024 and 2025. In 2024, 88 fact-checks referred to 140 entities, generating 127 references, whereas in 2025, 86 fact-checks mentioned 83 organizations, with a total of 87 references. Companies continued to be the most frequently targeted organizations, with 38 companies fact-checked during the second quarter of 2024 and 50 during the same period in 2025. By comparison, public institutions were involved in 25 and 22 fact-checks, respectively.

Regarding sectoral distribution, the patterns identified in 2024 and 2025 closely mirrored those observed in 2023. The retail industry remained the sector most affected by disinformation (13 references), followed by the banking sector (10 fact-checks). Companies providing digital applications and online services were mentioned 11 times, while media organizations appeared in nine fact-checks.

The analysis also reveals a marked increase in the sophistication of disinformation attacks, driven by the convergence of artificial intelligence technologies and identity impersonation. The growing use of deepfakes and voice-cloning technologies to facilitate financial fraud represents not only a significant technological advance but also a deliberate exploitation of the symbolic capital and credibility associated with public figures and highly trusted sectors such as banking and retail.

3.2 Organizational Responses to Disinformation

Of the 456 fact-checks analyzed for 2023, 160 documented some form of response issued by companies or public institutions to counter false or misleading content. This represents only 35% of all fact-checks involving organizations and provides a relevant baseline for the longitudinal analysis. A comparison with the data from the second quarters of 2024 and 2025 reveals a substantial increase in organizational responses, with the proportion of fact-checks documenting a response rising to 66.9%. Overall, across the entire dataset (n = 630), organizations responded in 52.6% of the cases analyzed.

Publishing corrective messages through social media remained the dominant response strategy throughout the three periods examined. In 2023, this channel accounted for nearly 40% of all identified responses. The publication of explanatory statements on corporate websites consistently ranked as the second most frequently adopted communication strategy.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that disinformation targeting organizations is not an isolated or sporadic phenomenon but rather a persistent and highly strategic practice. The corporate sector—particularly the retail and banking industries—has emerged as the primary target of disinformation campaigns.

Despite the growing impact of these attacks, organizational responses remain largely reactive. Across the three-year period analyzed, only 52.6% of the fact-checks involving organizations were accompanied by an identifiable response from the affected company or institution.

From the perspective of strategic communication, these findings highlight the need for further research into disinformation targeting organizations, both to better understand its effects and to examine the communication strategies developed to mitigate its impact. The results also underline the importance of strengthening preventive communication capabilities, fostering collaboration between public and private stakeholders, and

integrating disinformation management into organizational communication, crisis management, and security policies. Such measures are essential for enhancing organizational resilience in an increasingly complex and contested information environment.

5. Acknowledgments

This article is part of the Research Project “Strategic Communication against the Challenge of Disinformation: Challenges, Innovation and Responses (COMDESIR)” FEDER-UCA-2024-B1-01 funded by Programa Operativo FEDER Andalucía 2021-2027 and by Consejería de Universidad, Investigación e Innovación, Junta de Andalucía.



Cofinanciado por
la Unión Europea



MINISTERIO
DE HACIENDA



Fondos Europeos



Junta
de Andalucía



UCA
Universidad
de Cádiz

6. References

- Jahng, M. R., Lee, H. & Rochadiat, A. (h0h0). Public relations practitioners' management of fake news: Exploring key elements and acts of information authentication. *Public Relations Review*, 46(h). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.h0h0.101907>
- Rodríguez-Fernández, L. (2019). Desinformación y comunicación organizacional: estudio sobre el impacto de las fake news. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, 1714-1728. <https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2019-1406>
- Rodríguez-Fernández, L. y Establés, M. J. (2023). Impacto de la desinformación en las relaciones públicas: aproximación a la percepción de los profesionales (The impact of misinformation on public relations: an approach to practitioners' perceptions). *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* 29(4), 843-853. <https://doi.org/10.5209/esmp.88661>
- Rodríguez-Fernández, L. (2023). Desinformación y relaciones públicas. Aproximación a los términos Black PR y Dark PR (Disinformation and public relations. Approach to the terms Black PR and Dark PR). *ICONO 14. Revista Científica De Comunicación Y Tecnologías Emergentes*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v21i1.1920>
- Rodríguez-Fernández, L., Robles Marquez, I., y Rodríguez de Austria Giménez de Aragón, A. M. (2026). Disinformation targeting companies and institutions and their response strategies: a longitudinal analysis of fact-checking in Spain (2023–2025). *Revista de comunicación*, 25(1). <https://doi.org/10.26441/RC25.1-2026-4171>