

COVID 19 OUTBREAK: THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ON HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS REPUTATION, CHALLENGES

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Abstract: Health organizations face several challenges including economic crisis, new patients' demands and fake news. These companies resort to corporate communication initiatives to protect their brands and this way reinforce their strategic positionings. Since the COVID 19 outbreak started in 2020, many of these organizations have been accused of lying concerning masks, vaccines or side effects. This literature review paper aims to analyse how quality information is a priority for health organizations interested in building a reputed brand. To do that, we carried out a literature review about health communication (interpersonal, internal, and external initiatives), health education, post-truth and fake news; we analysed some fake news spread since December 2019 concerning the COVID 19 outbreak, as well as their impact on health organizations' reputation; and, finally, we proposed a Decalogue for these organizations on how to implement corporate communication strategies for facing fake news. We concluded that these organizations should prioritize a corporate communication approach, promote research on communication and establish multidisciplinary teams integrated by expert in communication and public health.

Keywords: public health, health organizations, corporate communication, stakeholders, fake news

Introduction

The fragmentation of media companies, the development of social media as a new source of information, and the decline of citizens' trust in public and private corporations have facilitated the emergence of several concepts including post-truth, fake news and fact-checkers, as key agents in today's journalistic profession. The difficulty in accessing quality information constitutes a risk for citizens from a moral, democratic, economic, social and health point of view. Protecting citizens' rights to access reliable information has become a priority for media companies, as well as for public authorities and private organizations. In this context, since the COVID 2019 outbreak started in January 2020, many health organizations have faced credibility related problems. Public hospitals, private clinics, public authorities, pharmaceutical companies, health insurance companies and even patients' organizations have been forced to deal with stakeholders more and more demanding in terms of quality information. This literature review paper aims to analyse how quality information have become a priority for health organizations interested in building a reputed brand. To do that, we carried out a literature review about different concepts such as health communication (interpersonal, internal and external initiatives), health education, post-truth and fake news. Then, we analysed some of the fake news spread since December 2019 concerning the COVID 19 outbreak, as well as their impact on health organizations' reputation. And finally, before conclusions, we proposed a Decalogue

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that all health organizations should implement to disseminate a meaningful content allowing them to build a reputed, credible brand.

Health Organizations' Corporate Communication Initiatives

According to Van Riel and Fombrun (2007), Corporate Communication refers to external and internal initiatives aiming to create positive links between an organization and its stakeholdersⁱ. Corporate communication integrates in a consistent way several initiatives including public relations, journalism and marketing.ⁱⁱ All of them allow the company to fix some organizational problems related to business, human resources and management.ⁱⁱⁱ Most companies around the world have integrated a Corporate Communication Department where different experts in public relations, economics, reputation, and marketing work in an integrated way and according to protocols, annual plans and key performance indicators.^{iv} The Corporate Communication Director takes part in the company's board and is in charge of different responsibilities such as designing the brand architecture and establishing rich relationships with internal and external stakeholders.^v In health organizations, the Corporate Communication Department integrates three main units: external, internal and interpersonal communication.

External communication. In most countries around the world, patients are already considered as opinion leaders who can influence health organizations' reputation.^{vi} That is why, the Corporate Communication Director in these organizations tries to reinforce the company's brand through establishing strategic communications with all external stakeholders, especially with patients.^{vii} These external communication activities allow hospitals to influence patients' perceptions about the organization, its services and employees.^{viii} Besides, health organizations utilize several key performance indicators to evaluate external stakeholders' attitudes and this way adapt constantly their external communication strategies.^{ix}

Internal communication. Health organizations' internal communication initiatives aim to promote the company's brand architecture (identity, mission, vision, values and culture) in order to influence internal stakeholders, especially employees.^x These last ones constantly communicate through their behaviors, attitudes and performance.^{xi} This why, health organizations need implement efficient internal communication initiatives allowing employees to work in an integrated and corporate way.^{xii} These initiatives should be especially useful for health professionals, given that they directly interact with patients and many other employees.^{xiii} Thanks to internal communication, health organizations can also adapt to new internal and external changes taking place in the health industry: patients' empowerment, cyberhealth, new business models, etc.

Interpersonal communication. Most employees working in hospitals, clinics or pharmaceutical companies have a direct contact with patients and their relatives, which constitutes a risk in terms of communication^{xiv}. For example in hospital, health professionals share with patients several messages about treatments, diseases and scientific research.^{xv} To do that in an efficient way, some of them should improve their skills in interpersonal communication: nonverbal communication, cultural elements, how to explain different kinds of information, etc.^{xvi} Health professionals' skills in this domain are strategic for health organizations interested in building a reputed brand.^{xvii}

In health organizations, the Corporate Communication Director prioritize health education as a main value for integrating all interpersonal, internal and external communication initiatives.^{xviii} Promoting health education (conferences, learning programs, etc.) positively influences stakeholders' perceptions about the company.^{xix} On the other hand, these initiatives help employees to become more efficient,^{xx} that is why health professionals should actively participate in these activities.^{xxi} Integrating health education as a main value for health organizations' corporate communication strategies helps them to reinforce their brand reputation.^{xxii} And building a reputed brand is a priority for these organizations because this asset allow them to establish trust relationships with stakeholders,^{xxiii} improve the consistency among all communication initiatives^{xxiv} and achieve the organization's goals in a more efficient way.^{xxv}

Health organizations in the post-truth era

The concept of post-truth refers to lies promoted by some people and institutions to influence the public opinion and this way gain support for certain causes.^{xxvi} The concept appeared because of different reasons: decrease in social capital, increase in inequality, decline of trust in science, fragmentation of media companies, etc.^{xxvii} In this framework, Internet and social media platforms have make the "governance of shared information" more complicated,^{xxviii} which has led journalists to change their work methodologies and practices.^{xxix} Now, journalists need to understand the effects of post-truth, and to do that, they have to improve their skills in technological and psychological aspects.^{xxx}

In 2016, several American journalists began to use the concept of "fake news" to refer to the erroneous information disclosed by some media companies.^{xxxi} This concept encompasses a double phenomenon: on the one hand, it is a journalistic genre whose objective is to intentionally create false information; and, on the other hand, fake news are also considered a journalistic style called like that by some institutions using social media platforms to criticize the true journalism.^{xxxii xxxiii} Fake news is a direct consequence of media companies' decline as well as the current chaos in the public opinion.^{xxxiv}

Because of social media, more and more people do not trust media companies: the social media users' poor reasoning capacity prevents them from differentiating between information and fake news.^{xxxv} Some users suffer from the syndrome of the "illusory truth": the more times they see false news, the more they think that it is true, even when there is data that showing that such information is false.^{xxxvi} On the other hand, some users use social media to deliberately produce and disseminate fake news with the aim of harming companies or people.^{xxxvii} To cope with this situation, media companies and other institutions implement three main measures: a) publishing guidelines on how to use social media in a professional;^{xxxviii} b) training users through workshops and learning initiatives;^{xxxix} and c) monitoring digital advertising as well as the different data shared with commercial brands.^{xl}

In this framework, more and more citizens and organizations resort to fact-checkers to detect fake news and this way protect values such as objectivity and transparency.^{xli} In the framework of media companies, fact-checkers help to reform journalism and improve its reputation as well as its credibility.^{xlii} Thanks to these applications, journalists can offer truthful and contrasted information helping citizens to better understand some issues,^{xliii} reinforce their objectivity and social commitment^{xliiv} and better adapt to the language used by social media users.^{xliv} Despite the advantages

provided by fact-checkers, it is necessary to highlight three problems that these programs cannot solve: a) sometimes, different fact-checkers evaluate the same information in a different way, which means that disclosing objective information on some topics is rather complicated;^{xlvi} b) fact-checking programs cannot evaluate personal intentions or motivations, that is why media companies should collaborate with people specialized in evaluating these intangible issues;^{xlvii} and c) most fact-checkers base their searches on linguistic characteristics, but do not consider other aspects such as social context or space-time relationship.^{xlviii}

Health organizations also face all fake news related problems: from 2012 to 2017, 40% of the most prominent health information contained false data, which represented a risk to public health.^{xlix} To face this situation, health organizations need to update their crisis manuals and learn to correctly manage people's unpredictable behaviors when they read false information about health issues.¹ On the other hand, promoting civic values also helps these organizations to combat fake news: values such as the truth and transparency constitutes a moral shield against misinformation.^{li} Finally, health professionals also play an important role in combating fake news: they should disseminate information based on reliable sources and help citizens understand scientific concepts in a clear way.^{lii}

Health organizations assume a new responsibility: democratize the access to information and strengthen citizens' participation in medical decision-making processes.^{liii} Since January 2020, fake news related to COVID-19 has caused many scenes of panic.^{liv} These fake news constitute a threat for public health, hence the importance that health organizations only disseminate information based on scientific evidence.^{lv} On the other hand, these organizations need to define ethical codes that help health professionals to disseminate scientific information on social platforms in a professional way.^{lvi} Finally, they also need to define crisis communication manuals allowing them to establish rich relationships with internal and external stakeholders.^{lvii}

Fake news related to COVID 19

From January to March 2021, more than 6.000 people around the world were hospitalized because of fake news about COVID 19, and more than 800 passed away because of the same issue

^{lviii}Some of these fake news linked vaccines to social and religion related issues, such as those claiming that some vaccines contained products from aborted fetus or traces of pork.^{lix} These phenomenon has changed peoples' behaviours and, for some of them even reading warning information about fake news has not avoid them to trust this false information.^{lx}

According to the Reuters Institute and the University of Oxford, 30% of users in the UK thought that they had seen a lot of misleading information about COVID 19 on social media.^{lxi} Trust in news from these platforms contributed to increasing belief in COVID 19 false information, which accelerated the Infodemic.^{lxii} From January to June 2021, Facebook has removed more than 18 million pieces of COVID misinformation, and they have also cancelled thousands of accounts that constantly broke objectivity rules.^{lxiii} According to different researchers, only 12 people were responsible for the 65% of misleading claims and outright lies about COVID 19 vaccines that proliferated on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.^{lxiv} Concerning YouTube, more than one in four vides contained misleading or inaccurate information, which represented 62.042.609 views.^{lxv} According to Macquarie University's

professor Mark Alfano, people who did not fall for COVID-19 misinformation had two qualities in common: they were curious, and they did not cling to their views.^{lxxvi}

Besides media companies and social media platforms, public authorities all around the world also tried to fight fake news. The World Health Organization (WHO) increased its efforts in monitoring social media platforms and implementing different programs in collaboration with Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to develop links to official pages anytime someone looked for COVID 19 or coronavirus.^{lxxvii} WHO also launched, in collaboration with the United Kingdom Government, an online game called Go Viral, in which players learnt to resist three manipulations techniques used to spread faked news related to coronavirus: fearmongering, the use of fake experts, and conspiracy theories.^{lxxviii} Besides, WHO also created a website to help people report misinformation.^{lxxix} On the other hand, UNICEF organized different online seminars with worldwide experts to explain to citizens, parents and doctors all COVID 19 risks for children.^{lxxx} Finally, UNESCO carried out many efforts to counter misinformation and promote facts about the COVID 19 disease: they used the hashtags #ThinkBeforeClicking, #ThinkBeforeSharing and #ShareKnowledge, and promoted the idea that the right to freedom of expression and the access to information were the best ways for combating fake news.^{lxxxi}

Since this outbreak started in 2020, all countries are fighting fake news related to COVID 19. In China, the government has established collaboration programs with social media platforms such as We Chat and Douyin to stop rumours and fight false information.^{lxxxii} In Brazil, from January to June 2020, more than 330 fake news about COVID 19 were retrieved on two websites (Globo Corporation, Ministry of Health) and the most frequent thematic were politics (20.1%), epidemiology and statistics (19.5%) and prevention (16.1%).^{lxxxiii} In the UK, 46% of adults reported that they had been exposed to misleading information, and 40% claimed that they find it hard to know what it is true or false about COVID 19.^{lxxxiv} In Italy, in December 2019, the concept “coronavirus laboratory” accounted for 55 fake articles and more than 1.039.224 total shares.^{lxxxv} And finally, in Spain, 92% people detected COVID 19 related hoaxes on their own: the main media used to disseminate this false information were WhatsApp (86%) Facebook (58%), Twitter (31%), online press (23%), Instagram (19%), television (17%), websites and blogs (15%), and YouTube (14%).^{lxxxvi}

All these fake news have damaged health organizations' reputation. According to NewsGuard, some of the most common misinformation published concerning COVID 19 were: a) COVID-19 was stolen from a Canadian laboratory by Chinese spies, b) COVID-19 contains 'HIV insertions' which suggests the virus was created artificially, c) COVID-19 pandemic was predicted in a simulation, d) a group funded by Bill Gates patented the virus causing COVID-19 and e) The virus causing COVID-19 is a human-made biological weapon.^{lxxxvii} All these misinformation affected some health companies' reputation, especially public authorities, pharmaceutical companies and even hospitals. For instance, the American Government decided to leave the World Health Organization, which provoked a true credibility problem for this public health authority.^{lxxxviii} Pfizer faced thousands of critics who accused the company to focus on business, rather on public health and people's needs.^{lxxxix} And, in France, thousands of people protested against the Government because of public health measures and the lack of transparency.^{lxxx}

Decalogue

Health organizations should manage corporate communication in a professional way to protect their brand and this way reinforce their strategic positioning in the health industry. Having a reputed, credible brand constitutes the best weapon against organizational crisis, such those provoked by the COVID-19 outbreak and all fake news published about this issue. After analysing this topic from both an academic and professional point of view (literature review and fake news about COVID 19), we propose ten ideas for helping health organizations to manage fake news and protect their own corporate brand.

Corporate Communication Department. Implementing this structure, assigning an official budget, recruiting experts in different communication related activities (public relations, marketing, public health, etc.) and designing plans, protocols and evaluations systems.

Corporate Communication Director. Recruiting an expert in corporate communication and public health able to implement annual plans for each department and business unit, as well as for the whole organization.

Promoting the brand's architecture. Integrating the brand architecture (identity, mission, vision, values, culture) in every communication initiative, and finding synergies between these elements, stakeholders' needs in terms of information and the company' strategic priorities.

Communication based on evidence. All communication initiatives (public relations, press releases, events, etc.) should be based on scientific information, and should follow a scientific logic (sources, citations, data, etc.).

Health professionals' engagement. Establishing an active collaboration with these professionals and designing internal procedures allowing them to participate in different stages of the communication process (research, strategy, creativity, media planning and evaluation).

Integrating social sciences. Analysing people's motivation from a social sciences point of view (sociology, anthropology, philosophy) and integrating this knowledge in every communication decision.

Transparency. Sharing with stakeholders all the information they need to understand the reality and take decisions, recognizing when they do not have data about an issue and helping them to find new sources of information.

Crisis communication plans. Defining a crisis communication plan that specifies objectives, tasks, responsables, budgets, timings and key performance indicators for every single crisis that the company could face (economic crisis, legal issues, fake news, etc.).

Monitoring feedback. Analysing stakeholders' comments, reacting to all of them and creating a CRM program for doing a follow up about this information.

Legal procedures. Defining collaboration models with national and international authorities to fight fake news from a legal, social and economic point of view.

Respecting these 10 criteria could help health organizations to deal with fake news in a more professional way. Anticipating crisis, being proactive and respecting strategic plans previously established is essential to protect these organizations' brand as well as the legacy they have built during last years. Besides, thanks to this positive public image, health organizations can engage with internal and stakeholders and build their brand in a collective way, which is essential to survive as a company in the long-term.

Conclusions

Managing corporate communication in a professional way has become a true priority for health organizations interested in establishing good relationships with internal and external stakeholders, and this way build a reputed, credible brand. Nevertheless, these organizations face several challenges such as economic crisis, patients' complaints and fake news. This paper aimed to analyse how quality information constitutes a priority for health organizations interested in building a reputed brand. Considering our literature review as well as the qualitative analysis carried out about fake news related to COVID-19 published since December 2019, we can propose three last ideas to conclude this paper. First, health organizations need to evolve from a journalistic approach to a corporate communication one, which means integrating their brand in every single communication initiative they implement to face fake news. Second, conducting research before, during and after organizational crisis related to fake news constitutes a mandatory activity that all health organizations should assume to reduce the risk when taking strategic decisions related to crisis communication. And third, establishing multidisciplinary teams integrated by health professionals trained in corporate communication as well as experts in communication trained in public health should be a common practice to make health organizations' communication strategies more scientific and credible.

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