Coping with fake news
Communication departments need to prepare for the growing threat of fake news

▶ Fake news is by no means a new phenomenon – it's posed a challenge for centuries. However, due to the growth of the internet, fake news now spreads faster, reaches far more people in total, and does more harm than ever before.

▶ Fake news destroys trust by sowing doubt and inconsistencies, be it in politics, the media, science, or business. Corporations need to find ways to safeguard trust and engage in dialogue with critical stakeholders.

▶ The thesis by Dr. Martin Fensch at Leipzig University sheds light on the historical development of fake news, its recent growth, and its relevance to (health) communication by studying disinformation on vaccination.

What is fake news?

Fake news is false information that serves the anticipated perceptual patterns of recipients. It's deliberately manufactured and disseminated in the media. Disguised as real news, fake news is often intended to deceive and to manipulate opinions. By definition, we distinguish between…

▶ **Misinformation:** False or misleading information (false news)

▶ **Disinformation:** False information shared intentionally to deceive (fake news)

Fake news past and present

Although fake news isn't a new phenomenon, its scope has been altered immeasurably by the possibilities of today's digital world. Computer technology, global access to information, search algorithms, and digital (especially social) media have opened up new dimensions for the creation and dissemination of fake news.

Whereas in the past, fake news was mainly published in mainstream media, this has now changed. **Today, anybody can spread fake news.** It's predominantly published in non-mainstream media, especially on social media platforms, blogs, and special-interest websites, where there are hardly any rules ensuring the quality and truthfulness of content.

Why has fake news grown?

There are several reasons why fake news is no longer a niche topic and is spreading faster than ever, threatening social cohesion:

Global dissemination: Fake news spreads more dynamically, faster and wider than in the early days because it frequently addresses highly controversial, often emotional subjects that have the power to polarize society. What's more, digital and social media channels enable information to spread almost everywhere in next to no time.

Algorithms & search recommendations in social net-works replace journalistic selection and bypass the gatekeeper function. Likes, dislikes, and share rates are the new currency – and are susceptible to manipulation (see social bots below).

They can create **echo chambers** (where people only encounter information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own) and **filter bubbles** (websites and social media that primarily show content similar to what the user has already expressed interest in). This can prevent people from finding new ideas and views online.

Social bots (algorithms that simulate human behavior in social media) automatically like and forward fake news. This stimulates a higher response rate, which in turn makes these false statements appear more credible. It also causes search algorithms to rank such posts higher, helping to create more buzz.

As **journalistic quality standards** are often absent in non-mainstream media (e.g., social networks), false statements can spread easily.

Deepfakes: Using advanced technology (e.g., artificial intelligence), audio and video files can be manipulated such that they are almost indistinguishable from real content.

» Across all 27 European member states, 70 percent (fully) agreed that they often came across news and information that misrepresented reality or was false. «

Statista 2022

A false balance is created by devoting equal coverage to opposing opinions in (public) media. The idea is to always present the two sides of an issue, even if the journalist realizes it might be fake news. False information then appears side by side with substantiated information. Similarly, established media might pick up on fake news with good intentions to correct it, but in doing so reinforce messages with a lasting impact on public confidence.

Clickbait as a business model: As content creators get a share of the advertising revenue generated on YouTube, etc., fake news serves as a way to make money. The wider it spreads, the higher the revenue.

Why do people believe fake news?

When humans process information, a complex interplay of moral beliefs (which are very stable and difficult to change), faith, and knowledge takes places. Several studies have analyzed how people deal with fake news:

▶ **Theory of cognitive dissonance** Content that fits one's worldview is less likely to be questioned. According to the theory, people try to avoid contradictions as they make them feel uncomfortable. They therefore try to reduce this dissonance by avoiding certain situations or information. Even if people realize that someone else is spreading fake news, they don't necessarily change their opinions or attitudes regarding this person to maintain cognitive consonance.

▶ **Mere exposure effect:** When people hear (false) information many times, they're more likely to believe it to be accurate and true. The more frequently they're exposed to this information, the more pronounced this effect can be. Even if recipients are skeptical of a source, (persuasive) information can stick in their memory and change attitudes in the long run.

Takeaways for corporate communications

✓ As it has become so easy to fake and spread false information, it's not so much the question of whether a company will be confronted with fake news, but rather when and to what extent.

✓ Communication departments need to **monitor** the growing number of media outlets, identify false content, and devise effective **channels** to spread their (correcting) message.

✓ **Internal guidelines** should be developed as to what is considered fake news and how to respond to it. Responses range from ignoring false or fake information, to simply correcting it on their own corporate channels, to taking legal action.

✓ Communication departments should address different **groups individually** and adapt content and channels according to their needs and expectations. A one-size-fits-all communication is not helpful to reach an understanding.

✓ When fake news destroys people's overall trust in information, this limits the possibilities of corporations to be trustworthy partners and good corporate citizens. Intensified **stakeholder and reputation management** is required and can be a buffer against disinformation.

✓ Society is well advised to **preserve quality journalism** as an indispensable element of democratic societies. This applies in particular to corporate communications departments with their close links to media companies and journalists.

About the author and the study

Dr. Martin Fensch is Head of Health and Value at Pfizer Germany.

He wrote his doctoral thesis "News and fake news regarding vaccinations" at Leipzig University from late 2018 until March 2021. He studied the historical development of fake news and gathered social and psychological findings on how people react to false information. Moreover, he performed a content analysis of 635 print articles and 231 YouTube videos on vaccination topics to find out whether they spread fake news.

Organisationskommunikation

RESEARCH

Martin Fensch

News und Fake News zum Thema *Impfen*

Theorie und Analyse deutscher Print- und YouTube-Inhalte mit Fokus auf Moralbezüge

MOREMEDIA ▶   Springer VS

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Spotlight: Fake news on vaccination

Epidemics and pandemics are major social events in which myths, rumors, and fake news thrive. People have been **anxious about vaccination** ever since the first smallpox vaccine was tested in the late eighteenth century. Lately, the internet (social media platforms in particular) has made it possible for people to share their own personal views and experiences regarding vaccination (both positive and negative), thus directly influencing risk perceptions and vaccination decisions.

The empirical study by Martin Fensch was conducted before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Between October 2017 and October 2019, he evaluated 635 articles on vaccination from seven national and six regional print media, as well as 231 YouTube posts on vaccination.

Key findings:

▶ Analyzing the **content and tonality** of the print articles and YouTube videos reveals different worlds. While the number of negative articles in print media represents is less than 1% of the sample, the figure for YouTube is 35%. The proportion of ambivalent posts is also significantly higher on YouTube (14% vs. 9%).

▶ Just under half of all **YouTube** posts on vaccination topics contained false information (even though 18% of them were intended to correct fake news or report on it). The share of YouTube coverage classified as fake news was 31%.

▶ In **print media**, false information was found in only 11% of the articles, while 9% of the articles were intended to correct or report on it. The share of critical articles, pro and con pieces, or letters to the editor was 2%.

▶ Print coverage is dominated by **aspects** of protection, concern, and precaution, followed by fairness, loyalty, and authority. YouTube coverage is highly emotional, with vaccines frequently being associated with harm, deceit, and degradation.

Tonality of content

Print media

1%
9%
13%
77%

YouTube

35%
45%
14%
6%

■ Positiv ■ Neutral ■ Ambivalent ■ Negativ
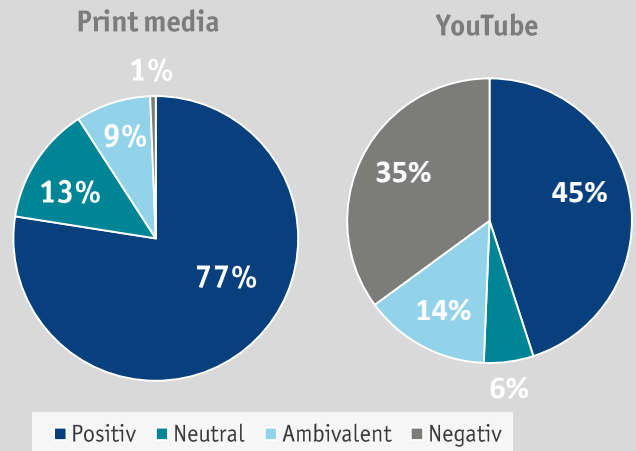
Print coverage of vaccination is overwhelmingly positive. In contrast, YouTube posts are predominantly negative, neutral, or ambivalent.

Share of false information

	Print Media	YouTube
Misinformation (false news)	11%	49%
Disinformation (fake news)	2%	**31%**
Rectifications	9%	18%

False information was found in 114 of 231 YouTube videos, with 72 of them classified as fake news. In print media, the percentage was much lower.