Disinformation and Credibility in the Digital Age: New Information Consumption Habits and their Impact on Organisations

Desinformación y credibilidad en la era digital: nuevos hábitos de consumo informativo y su impacto en las organizaciones

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Abstract:

This study offers a revised perspective of disinformation and its effects in the organisational sphere, using a mixed-methodological approach that included the Delphi method to assess specialists' perceptions in Spain and Portugal. The results show that advances in digital technologies facilitate the spread of organisational and advertising disinformation, especially on social media and digital platforms. Strategies to combat it are often slow and ineffective, affecting the credibility of official sources and traditional media. The study emphasises that media literacy is essential for strengthening citizens' critical thinking skills and that disinformation can also become an opportunity for organisations if reactions are managed in an ethical and responsible manner.

Keywords:

Advertising; disinformation; ethics; fact-checking; media literacy; organisation.

Resumen:

Este estudio ofrece una visión revisada de la desinformación y sus efectos en el ámbito organizacional, utilizando un enfoque metodológico mixto que incluyó el método Delphi para evaluar la percepción de especialistas de España y de Portugal. Los resultados muestran que el avance de las tecnologías digitales facilita la expansión de la desinformación organizacional y publicitaria, especialmente en redes sociales y plataformas digitales. Las estrategias para combatirla suelen ser lentas y poco eficaces, lo que afecta la credibilidad de las fuentes oficiales y de los medios tradicionales. El estudio subraya que la alfabetización mediática es fundamental para fortalecer la capacidad crítica de la ciudadanía y que la desinformación también puede convertirse en una oportunidad para las organizaciones si se gestionan las reacciones de manera ética y responsable.

Palabras clave:

Alfabetización mediática; desinformación; ética; fact-checking; organización; publicidad.

1. Introduction

1.1. State of the art

Disinformation poses a major threat to the health of democracies, institutional trust and decision-making, both individual and collective. Its rapid spread across digital platforms distorts public agendas, amplifies false narratives and makes it difficult to distinguish between verified and misleading information, thereby affecting public deliberation (Lazer *et al.*, 2018). Evidence suggests that fake news spreads faster than real news, particularly on social media (Catalina-García *et al.*, 2021; Vosoughi *et al.*,

2018), due to a preference for novel content and algorithmic amplification dynamics (De Sola Pueyo, 2023). Interaction between users and platforms reinforces pre-existing beliefs and polarises opinions (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Even interventions such as content labelling can generate unintended effects, such as the implied truth effect (Gomes-Gonçalves & Sánchez-Gey, 2025; Catalina-García *et al.*, 2024; Pennycook *et al.*, 2020). This highlights the need for multidisciplinary approaches that integrate regulation, media literacy and improvements in platform design (Morejón-Llamas, 2020).

Disinformation is part of our everyday lives and has gained considerable prominence due to its expansion and the intensive use of information technologies and social media, which facilitate the circulation of false or manipulated content (Salaverría *et al.*, 2024). The development and accessibility of artificial intelligence (AI) have fostered the use of disinformation across various domains for diverse purposes, particularly in cybersecurity (Román-San-Miguel & Sánchez-Hunt, 2026), where a wide range of free tools is available to the general public (National Cybersecurity Centre, 2023). However, in everyday life, it is quite common to encounter situations involving disinformation (Fallis, 2015).

Since the late 20th century, large-scale disinformation campaigns have emerged on issues such as climate change, vaccines, food, health, nuclear energy, immigration, pandemics and armed conflicts (Valero & Oliveira, 2018; Notario Rocha & Cárdenas Rica, 2020). This phenomenon has gained social and communicative significance, with negative effects on both individuals and organisations, including companies, brands and institutions (Pennycook *et al.*, 2020; Gomes-Gonçalves *et al.*, 2025). In this context, having access to rigorous information and professional practices becomes essential in the digital age (Montemayor & García Jiménez, 2021), particularly in the field of organisational communication, where accuracy and truthfulness are key to trust and credibility.

Corporate information and communication should be strategically structured, faithfully reflecting the organisation's values and managing brand, identity and reputation in an integrated manner, aligned with transparency, credibility and social responsibility (Reyes Hidalgo, 2023). This requirement is intensified by globalisation and digitalisation, which make it essential to incorporate social media and digital platforms to optimise engagement with strategic audiences and internal teams (Mattelart, 2007). The internal and external dimensions of communication are crucial, as they shape the relationship between internal groups and external *stakeholders* (González-Fabre, 2015; Silva-Robles & Elías-Zambrano, 2011). Although the generation of economic value remains central, corporate communication increasingly incorporates the expectations of employees, customers and local communities (Sendra-Duro, 2025).

There are various forms of deception in corporate communication. Among the most common is fraud relating to products or their marketing conditions, particularly when organisations maintain links with political actors who facilitate preferential treatment or monopolistic positions. There is also evidence of strategic alliances with stakeholders being concealed for economic interests, as well as the manipulation of expectations to make people believe that a product satisfies exaggerated or non-existent needs (González-Fabre, 2015). However, a negative reputation may legitimately arise from public dissatisfaction with the brand or internal services (Blikstein *et al.*, 2018).

Some advertisers fund disinformation content to increase their reach and visibility (Berthon *et al.*, 2018), although brands may also be the target of external disinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Peterson, 2019). Collaboration with influencers,

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including fake influencers, adds risks and complicates strategic relationships between advertisers and agencies (Sanz-Marcos *et al.*, 2021; Ju *et al.*, 2024; De Castro &Sousa, 2025).

Advertising disinformation has gained prominence in the contemporary communication ecosystem. The intensive use of digital marketing (Guilbeault, 2018) and the promotion of false content by some advertisers (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) allow disinformation campaigns to undermine corporate reputation, achieving successful positioning and generating significant impacts on organisations and brands (Mills & Robson, 2019; Peterson, 2019; Xifra, 2020).

The proliferation of disinformation narratives affects both public and private institutions by challenging their narratives and credibility frameworks through the systematic distortion of reality, fostering social mistrust and disrupting democratic coexistence (Marchal González, 2023). Organisations are showing growing concern about the proliferation of false content and its potential negative effects, particularly in the economic sphere (Christov, 2018). The rapid development of digital technologies and the internet, coupled with the massive expansion of social media, has significantly intensified disinformation (García-Marín *et al.*, 2025; Reig Cruañes, 2025). In this context, the use of disinformation to influence organisational reputation has become more common, whether to undermine or boost competitors, or because of consumer dissatisfaction with the brand or internal aspects of the organisation (Blikstein *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, in a manner that is ethically questionable and at odds with professional communication principles, certain organisations resort to public relations strategies aimed at disseminating disinformation with the aim of persuading their audiences (Castro-Martínez, 2025). This situation is particularly problematic because disinformation can have severe consequences and pose a critical risk to companies and brands, which are forced to manage reputational crisis processes more effectively (Mut Camacho & Rueda Lozano, 2022). Indeed, disinformation messages have the capacity to damage corporate reputation for various reasons (such as financial, political, social or psychological, among others), eroding trust and organisational legitimacy (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

1.2. Objectives

The rapid advancement of digital technologies (including emerging developments such as deepfakes) has heightened organisations' vulnerability to disinformation, which can significantly compromise their reputation (Gomes-Gonçalves, 2022; Ferreira *et al.*, 2021; García-Ull, 2021; Galston, 2020; Westerlund, 2019). In this context, reputation constitutes a strategic risk for companies, brands, institutions and other organisations, reinforcing the need to strengthen trust with their audiences (Xifra, 2020). Both corporate social responsibility (CSR) and media responsibility (Sánchez-Gey, 2019) play a central role in organisational behaviour and the governance of digital channels. Organisations and platform providers, search engines and web browsers should make ethical commitments regarding moderation and transparency (Safieddine *et al.*, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2021). However, the limited profitability of these tasks hinders their systematic adoption, thereby facilitating the proliferation of disinformation (Doncel-Martín *et al.*, 2023). However, CRS can contribute to rebuilding trust and promoting informed engagement among the public (Estanyol *et al.*, 2025).

In this context, the overall aim of this research is to ascertain expert perceptions of organisational disinformation (both advertising and non-advertising), drawing on the judgements of specialists in Spain and Portugal, to develop a coherent interpretative framework for understanding the nature, scope, and implications of the phenomenon in contemporary society.

The following specific objectives derive from this general objective:

To ascertain the degree of recognition, visibility and social problematisation of disinformation in the organisational context.

To highlight the consequences of disinformation for the strategic management of corporate communication.

To assess the perceived vulnerability of organisations and the extent to which communication professionals are prepared to address scenarios of information manipulation.

To evaluate the role, scope and effectiveness of fact-checking platforms in mitigating the phenomenon.

To appraise the adequacy and relevance of the European and national regulatory framework regarding organisational disinformation.

To consider the effectiveness of media literacy and educommunication programmes run by public institutions to strengthen citizens' informational resilience.

On this basis, the study is structured around the following research questions:

PI1. What is the current situation and the level of recognition of the phenomenon of disinformation – whether advertising-related or not – in contemporary society?

PI2. To what extent can disinformation affecting organisations be regarded as a threat or an opportunity for organisational communication management?

PI3. In the context of informative manipulation and advertising disinformation, are organisations in a more vulnerable position? Are communication managers prepared to address the challenges arising from these phenomena?

PI4. What is the role and level of effectiveness of fact-checking platforms in curbing organisational disinformation?

PI5. To what extent are European and national regulations sufficient to regulate disinformation within organisations?

PI6. Are the media literacy and educommunication programmes promoted by the authorities adequate for enhancing citizens' critical capacity in the response to disinformation?

2. Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods design that incorporates a two-phase Delphi study as its central technique: an exploratory phase with open-ended questions and a second phase with closed-ended items for structured assessment. The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches allows for analytical pluralism, facilitates the triangulation of perspectives, and contributes to a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

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2.1. Delphi method: consultation with a panel of experts

After defining the central problem of this research (disinformation), criteria were established to select a panel of experts and conduct a Delphi study, following Landeta (1999). This method is considered useful as an exploratory technique for theory building in areas with limited or scattered evidence (Gaitán Moya & Piñuel Raigada, 1998). The Delphi method allows for the controlled gathering of expert opinions, prioritising the identification of consensus and refining views through successive iterations. It is frequently applied in the study of emerging phenomena, such as disinformation, as it facilitates theoretical validation and contributes to research design. The iterations ensure greater consistency and depth in the results (*ibid.*).

Following the recommendations of Landeta (1999, 2006) for the selection of experts, we first identified Spanish and Portuguese universities in the EDMO – European Digital Media Observatory database (EDMO, 2023), an independent platform created by the European Commission to enable fact-checkers, academic researchers and other relevant stakeholders to tackle the problem of disinformation in Europe.

A search on the platform yielded results for ten Spanish and two Portuguese universities. All the institutions identified herein constitute integral members of the *Iberian Digital Media Research and Fact-Checking Hub* (IBERIFIER) project, an observatory dedicated to the study of digital media in Spain and Portugal, promoted by the European Commission and affiliated with EDMO.

Table 1. Spanish and Portuguese universities participating in the IBERIFIER project

	NAME OF UNIVERSITY	COUNTRY
1	Carlos III of Madrid University	Spain
2	CEU San Pablo University	Spain
3	ISCTE – Lisbon University Institute	Portugal
4	Miguel Hernández University	Spain
5	Polytechnic University of Madrid	Spain
6	Polytechnic University of Valencia	Spain
7	Rey Juan Carlos University	Spain
8	University of Aveiro	Portugal
9	University of Granada	Spain

10	University of Navarra	Spain
11	University of Santiago de Compostela (USC)	Spain
12	University of Valencia	Spain

Source: Compiled by the authors (2025)

Subsequently, the academic staff and researchers responsible for the IBERIFIER project, coordinated by the University of Navarra, were identified. Nine specialists from various academic institutions took part, eight of them in Spain and one in Portugal. Given that the specialists exhibited markedly heterogeneous profiles (a result of the diversity of subtopics related to disinformation in which each participant conducts their research), the discourse generated and the findings obtained were significantly enriched. To foster greater convergence in the assessments, a mixed methodological approach was adopted, structured in two successive rounds: a inical round consisting of open-ended exploratory questions and a final round based on closed-ended items for structured evaluation.

The application of the Delphi Method in this study was designed with two distinct rounds to gather and structure the opinions of specialists on disinformation and credibility in the digital age. In the first round, open-ended questions were employed to identify relevant dimensions, categories, and criteria based on the participants' experience (7 March–24 April 2023). The second round consisted of closed-ended questions, with a binary scale for most items and a specific scale for a particular item, administered via an online form sent on 5 June 2023 and responded to until 5 July 2023. Although this sequence allowed for the systematisation and prioritisation of aspects perceived as most relevant by the expert panel, it was not a classic Delphi study aimed at building statistical consensus; consequently, measures such as the interquartile range or reduction in variation between rounds were not calculated. The methodology, therefore, focuses on the identification and structuring of qualitative and quantifiable perceptions, rather than on reaching formal consensus. This methodological choice is justified as a hybrid approach, aligned with recommendations for adapting the Delphi method for exploratory studies in communication and organisations (Landeta, 2006; Rowe & Wright, 2001).

The questionnaire for the first round consisted of fourteen open-ended questions and was designed in accordance with Landeta's recommendations (1999), so that each item was formulated clearly, concisely, and directly, with the aim of allowing the experts maximum freedom of expression on the topics addressed. Once this phase was complete, the responses were analysed, interpreted, systematised, and classified according to the criteria that guided the selection of the questionnaire items. This procedure made it possible to verify that one of the fundamental premises of the Delphi method had been met: consensus, understood as the convergence of opinions among the participants (Landeta, 2006).

Given that a high degree of consensus (95%) was achieved in the first round, exceeding the usual threshold of 75% considered in the literature to be an indicator of agreement among experts (Diamond *et al.*, 2014), it was decided to conduct two rounds of questionnaires, a number which, according to Landeta (1999), is considered appropriate for this type of study. Analysis of

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the responses from the second round allowed us to verify compliance with the two essential criteria of the Delphi method: consensus and stability of opinions (*ibid.*).

The following table shows, by topic, the questions posed to the participants, with the aim of compiling the views of the most renowned academic experts in the field of disinformation.

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Table 2. Questions posed to the panel of experts on the subject under study

TOPIC ADDRESSED	QUESTIONS
Current situation and recognition of the phenomenon	Q1. Do you believe that the phenomenon of disinformation is on the rise?
	Q2. To what extent do people recognise fake news?
	Q3. Do people easily recognise fake news containing advertising?
Disinformation affecting organisations: Threat or opportunity?	Q4. Can fake news be a threat to companies, brands or institutions?
	Q5. What kind of threats can fake news pose?
	Q6. Can fake news be an opportunity for companies, brands or institutions?
Vulnerability of organisations	Q7. Can discussion forums increase the vulnerability of companies, brands or institutions to fake news?
Advertising disinformation	Q8. Do you think the phenomenon of online advertising fake news is increasing?
	Q9. To what extent can the appearance of advertising fake news on the official websites of companies, brands, or institutions be harmful?
	Q10. Do you consider that companies, brands or institutions encourage the spread of fake news when they associate themselves with pages that disseminate it?
Preparation of communications managers	Q11. Are organisational communications managers prepared to deal with fake news (whether advertising-related or not)?
Fact-checking platforms	Q12. Are existing verification platforms sufficient to tackle the challenges of disinformation?
Adequacy of European and national regulations	Q13. Do you consider that current regulations, both European and those of Spain and Portugal, are sufficient to combat the phenomenon of disinformation?
Media literacy and educommunication: efforts by the authorities	Q14. Do you consider the efforts made by the competent authorities in the field of media literacy and educommunication are sufficient to combat fake news?

Source: Compiled by the authors (2025)

The questionnaire was distributed with the following note: "The term *'fake news'* is used to refer not only to false news, but to all types of false content; that is, manipulated information or hoaxes, rumours spread to deceive, and advertising and announcements containing false content, amongst others". Although the term *'fake* news' was used in the questions, this study prefers the term 'disinformation content' due to its broader conceptual scope.

3. Results

The results obtained through the application of the Delphi Method are presented organised by thematic categories, in accordance with the questions posed to the experts who comprised the panel and the analysis of the responses corresponding to the first round. The contributions of the participants are quoted, identified by the letter "E" (for expert), followed by a sequential number, as reflected throughout this paper. Considering the consensus reached in the second round, an overall analysis of the collective perspective of the experts' voices is undertaken. It should be noted that only one of the questions did not achieve full consensus; nevertheless, this issue still received a significant majority of agreement. At this point, it is worth noting that, although these are individual opinions, some of the participants speak in the royal plural. However, to avoid any interpretative intervention, the comments of each participant are recorded faithfully and verbatim. Thus, although the quotations are used to summarise the consensus, it is evident that the text in quotation marks represents an individual opinion, regardless of whether it is in the royal plural or not (and is therefore either an individual consensus or an endorsement by groups of experts).

3.1. Current situation and recognition of the phenomenon

The experts' view on the rise of the phenomenon of disinformation is unanimous. And this increase is since "disinformation in almost all its forms is inextricably linked to the rise of mass communication (...) and social media and internet-based platforms have been an unprecedented breeding ground for catapulting its proliferation" [E1]. Furthermore, "the speed, wide penetration and audience segmentation of social media are contributing to this rise" [E2].

The rise of this phenomenon is linked to the "increase in communication flows, automated devices, users... and it is bound to increase because efforts to contain the multiple open channels are very slow and come too late" [E3].

Disinformation is growing exponentially because "robotics has made it possible for individuals, organisations and even states to create and disseminate disinformation on a large scale" [E4] and "there are increasingly more tools to spread disinformation" [E5].

Furthermore, "there is evidence that the phenomenon of disinformation is growing (...). This quantitative growth is evident, for example, in the rise in false content verified by fact-checking organisations, which have observed a proliferation of hoaxes linked to recent events such as COVID-19 or, more recently, various armed conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine. As for the effects, there is a growing awareness among the public regarding disinformation, as well as certain related phenomena, such as the increasing discrediting of official sources and the media" [E5].

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Concerning recognising the phenomenon, experts believe that most people do not recognise disinformation content. For this reason, it is important to highlight the role of media literacy and to continue promoting it "so that citizens can be better prepared to combat disinformation messages" [E1].

Often, "disinformation goes unnoticed because we are poorly equipped to detect it, and awareness of the problem is only high if we have had bad experiences" [E3].

"In fact, people's ability to identify fake news can vary significantly depending on several factors, such as their level of education, their prior knowledge of the subject in question, their biases and prejudices, and the source of the information or the channel through which they receive the news" [E4].

But "there are various levels of fake news" and, as such, "various levels of media literacy or awareness of the issues" [E6]. The fact is that "the ability to recognise fake news is closely linked to the convenience of such recognition" [E2] and "a significant proportion of the public do not have appropriate habits to help them identify false content and, in any case, to avoid sharing it indiscriminately" [E5].

There are studies showing that people do not recognise disinformation [E5, E7]. "Sometimes, even when fake news is recognised, it is still shared. What is not recognised is the harm that can be caused by continuing to spread the fake news" [E8].

About recognising advertising disinformation content, experts believe that, just as people generally fail to identify disinformation, recognition in the advertising sector is very limited. There is also a noticeable lack of interest.

"Fake news with advertising content can be particularly difficult to identify, as it is often presented as misleading advertising. Typically, may include false or exaggerated claims about the products or services being promoted, and are often presented in a way designed to deceive the consumer and lead them to make a purchasing decision. Furthermore, some advertisements may be designed to resemble news stories, with eye-catching headlines and persuasive language intended to grab the reader's attention. These advertisements can be particularly difficult to identify, as they often appear on websites or social media platforms that seem credible, but are in fact created by groups or individuals seeking to deceive the public" [E4].

"There is a significant lack of media literacy needed to properly distinguish between these concepts" [E5] and, at times, there is a lack of interest on the part of the public: "people are suspicious, but if the information pleases them, they are not interested in checking it" [E6].

Experts believe that platforms must be held accountable "so that they do not continue to give credence to content whose falsehood has already been established, simply because they are paid to promote it" [E1].

3.2. Disinformation affecting organisations: Threat or opportunity?

Experts agree that disinformation poses a threat to organisations: "In recent years, numerous hoaxes have been detected that sought to discredit brands, companies and, in particular, institutions" [E6].

They emphasise that the greatest threat is reputational: "There is no doubt about it: it is a threat to democratic societies, and all the ramifications we can imagine, because it calls into question the very value of truth and, once we accept that, everything becomes uncertainty (something which, in business terms, in particular, is not advisable)" [E1].

"Fake news can damage a company's reputation by spreading erroneous or misleading information about its products, services, policies, or actions. If shared on social media, for example, false information can go viral quickly and damage the image of the company or institution. Fake news can also undermine public trust in a brand or institution, which can have long-term negative consequences for the business or organisation. A company's or institution's ability to detect and respond quickly to fake news is also crucial to mitigating its potential impact" [E4].

As regards the nature of threats that disinformation content can pose, these are "of all kinds, but above all they affect the reputation and prestige of those involved; for those who read and spread it, it leads to ignorance, scepticism about any news, and a lack of engagement with current affairs. And, for the media, it leads to a lack of credibility and manipulation. It is a problem for society, in one way or another" [E8].

The experts point out that "the main threat is inducing erroneous or harmful decisions for citizens" [E3]. But there are others: "reputational risks, fraud, political polarisation and indoctrination" [E9], as well as "distrust in communication channels" [E2].

They also highlight "distrust of institutions, threats to public health and the polarisation of society itself" [E7]. Furthermore, they point out that "disinformation causes various types of social harm, such as 'discrediting institutions, political polarisation and hate speech, amongst others'" [E5].

They also note that "the most common threats posed by fake news are:

Damaging reputation, as the spread of erroneous or misleading information about a person, company, brand or institution can damage their reputation and cause long-term harm.

Putting people's safety at risk (…) and seriously damaging the reputation of the company or institution.

To also be used to manipulate public opinion and influence the outcomes of elections or referendums.

Increasing polarisation and public mistrust, which can have long-term negative consequences for social and political stability.

Contribute to perpetuating negative stereotypes and prejudices about certain social groups, which can contribute to discrimination and inequality" [E4].

Finally, regarding the possibility that disinformation content could present an opportunity for organisations, the experts acknowledge that it "can be a weapon to be used against opposing organisations, which should not be permitted" [E2]. "As malpractice, it can become an opportunity, but only in the very short term" [E8], as it would be "an opportunity rooted in lies" and with "the intention to deceive" [E6].

However, "as with any issue affecting ethics, (…) those who behave more ethically will tend to be perceived more positively by the audiences they are targeting" [E1].

In some specific cases, "companies or brands can capitalise on the situation of fake news to their advantage". In these cases, "it is important that companies act ethically and responsibly, ensuring they do not spread further false information and verifying the information before capitalising on the situation" [E4]. And, to this end, they can be "countered with scientific information" [E7].

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The fact is that "in the face of rising disinformation, every institution has the opportunity to become a credible source, thereby strengthening its public reputation" [E5]. In fact, "every threat opens opportunities if the challenge is met with the right response. This means acting before the flood of falsehoods wipes you off the map" [E3].

3.3. Vulnerability of organisations

Experts agree that discussion forums can increase the vulnerability of companies, brands, institutions and other organisations to disinformation content.

They understand that these "provide a platform for users to share information, including fake news and rumours, quickly and widely. In discussion forums, fake news can spread rapidly through multiple users and be shared on other websites and social media, increasing the likelihood that fake news will go viral and spread even further" [E4]. Indeed, the capacity to disseminate disinformation is very great" [E5].

Experts understand that vulnerability may increase because "it is a narrative they do not control [E1]". In forums, "false content may appear" [E2], particularly because "users can easily hide behind anonymity or assume a false identity" [E5].

They argue that "we must intervene in these forums with a series of measures to protect vulnerable areas" [E3].

3.4. Advertising disinformation

Regarding whether there has been an increase in online advertising disinformation, most panel participants note that they lack specific data on the subject and are not specialists in advertising. Nevertheless, they agree that there has been an increase in this type of content disseminated on the web.

The experts believe that "everything related to disinformation is on the rise" [E8], "especially clickbait" [E6].

They state that "it is quite likely that the phenomenon of advertising fake news disseminated online is on the rise, as the use of social media and other online platforms for advertising has become increasingly common in recent years (...). Some studies suggest that companies and advertisers often seek to reach specific audiences through targeted advertising, which could increase the likelihood of fake news or misleading information being shared" [E4].

In this regard, all the experts agree on the significant harm caused by the appearance of advertising fake news on organisations' official websites. They understand that it is highly damaging because it is synonymous with "loss of credibility" [E2/3/7/8] and "lack of seriousness" [E8]. These "trigger reputational crises, damage the brand or spread hoaxes" [E9], affecting "its reputation, the privacy and security of its users, and its legal and financial standing" [E4].

They assert that "it will hinder efforts to regain trust" [E3] and lament: "it is terrible because that is a narrative they do control, and if they use it as a platform to give voice to something that is not true, the reputational damage is much harder to reverse" [E1].

The choice to use advertising disinformation content is seen as a mistake: "When an organisation publishes content that turns out to be false, it seriously damages its social reputation. It is a mistake that no organisation can afford" [E5].

They explain that this approach, "harmful in all cases", "while it may lead to a loss of credibility, can also be used to attract a certain demographic or even undermine other organisations" [E2].

Therefore, they argue that "it is important for companies, brands or institutions to take effective measures to combat the spread of fake news online and promote transparency and accountability in online advertising" [E4].

The experts' view on organisations that associate themselves with websites spreading disinformation is that they implicitly encourage or endorse the dissemination of disinformation.

They believe that "endorsing in any way sites dedicated to spreading falsehoods makes the endorser an accomplice to those hoaxes" [E5], because if "they associate themselves with these sites, they are collaborators" [E2].

They recommend that organisations "should be careful about this, both from an ethical point of view and from a practical point of view regarding their own reputation" [E1].

They note that "it is important to bear in mind that not all companies, brands or institutions have the knowledge or resources to verify the quality of the information sources with which they associate. It is very important that companies and institutions are aware of the risks associated with the dissemination of fake news and that they take measures to avoid association with websites or information sources that may spread disinformation" [E4].

3.5. Preparation of communications managers

The experts believe that "it is important for communications managers to be aware of the risks associated with fake news and how this could affect the company's reputation. They should be prepared to identify and evaluate online information, as well as to communicate effectively with the public if false news arises that could affect their company" [E4].

They acknowledge that these professionals, who often find themselves in a working environment characterised by significant job insecurity and unfavourable conditions [E6], "play a key role in the prevention and management of fake news, whether it is advertising-related or not" [E4]. They assert that, despite being "better prepared than the general public", they suggest that "they need to promote their education and awareness of the issue" [E4], as well as "further training because new forms of disinformation and renewed strategies are emerging" [E3]. In other words: "media literacy can also be applied to professions that work with material particularly sensitive to the impact of disinformation" [E1].

But "disinformation has too many tentacles to be 'controlled' without resorting to censorship. It is a very complicated issue to resolve without crossing the lines of freedom of expression" [E8].

3.6. Fact-checking platforms

Most experts agree that existing fact-checking platforms are not sufficient.

Both E2 and E4 explain that fact-checking platforms are a vital tool in the fight against disinformation. In fact, in the exact words of E2, "fact-checking platforms are essential", a point emphasised by E4 when stating that "this is almost a war, and these platforms represent a fight against disinformation". Along these lines, it is also stated that "when used properly and with a commitment to service, they can help" [E1].

However, "unfortunately, their capabilities are limited, and the speed, volume and variety of disinformation make it impossible for them to tackle this problem adequately" [E2].

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Experts emphasise that fact-checking platforms "constitute only one additional actor; however, their positive contribution must be complemented by other domains, without which disinformation cannot be effectively addressed. These domains are essentially threefold: legislation, technology, and, above all, public education" [E5].

The experts recognise that "the ability of these platforms to reach a wide audience may be limited" [E4], as "the platforms play a significant role, but they are only one of the means of combating disinformation. We must strengthen the credibility of professions in the field of communication, we must regulate, and we must intervene using current tools" [E3].

"Ultimately, it is the judgment of the recipients that will prevent many of the effects sought by those who disseminate disinformation for strategic purposes. That is why, (…) the key is media literacy" [E1].

They suggest making greater use of semi-automated tools [E7] and ask: "Who oversees fact-checking organisations? Why are certain news items verified whilst others go unnoticed? I believe there is still much to be done regarding fact-checking organisations and that many lack the independence they should have. I believe more tools are needed for verification, and that it should be the users themselves who manage these tools. In Spain, there are some examples of fact-checking organisations that raise doubts, which means that they are all called into question. I do not believe that fact-checking organisations are the solution. We are at a stage where we take journalistic malpractice for granted. It is important to train journalists to be rigorous, competent and independent professionals" [E8].

3.7. Adequacy of European and national regulations

To obtain the experts' views, a single question was posed regarding the potential adequacy of European and national regulations. Once again, in the first round of responses, no consensus was reached, although it was very close (67%).

Most participants believe that current regulations are insufficient. They therefore argue that "more comprehensive legislation is needed, namely, legislation that properly classifies the various forms of disinformation and establishes sanctions where appropriate" [E5].

"Current regulations, both at European level and in countries such as Spain and Portugal, have taken significant steps towards combating the phenomenon of disinformation, but there is still much to be done" [E4].

They state that "we have been working on this issue in Spain for over a year, but current regulations are not sufficient to combat disinformation. It is complicated due to the fine line between censorship, media control and freedom…" [E8].

Therefore, the regulations "are an indispensable part of a broader process and undoubtedly help, but they will need to be constantly updated" [E6].

The experts highlight the institutional commitment to combating disinformation: "For example, European institutions, through *hubs* such as EDMO and other initiatives, have clearly demonstrated this commitment. They have also done so by funding projects managed by experts rather than politicians, and I believe that is important, as it is a way of ensuring that the aim is truly social and not self-serving" [E1].

They point out that "regulation is lagging. Action is being taken in many countries, but new measures must be adopted because deregulation has had disastrous consequences" [E3].

Thus, for some experts, "rather than tackling the problem from a legal perspective, it is important to make efforts towards media literacy, education and communication" [E7] and "to better develop regulations to adapt them to current means of dissemination, in particular the internet and social media" [E2].

3.8. Media literacy and educommunication: efforts by the authorities

All experts agree that, in the field of media literacy and educommunication, efforts are also insufficient, and that the relevant authorities could therefore devote more resources to combating disinformation.

They believe that "although regulations and codes of ethics exist in all countries to tackle the problem of fake news, there is still much to be done in terms of media literacy and educommunication" [E4].

Although "efforts are being made by the relevant authorities", often "insufficient resources are allocated, both in terms of personnel and funding". It is often voluntary work motivated by a sense of commitment and professional ethics" [E7].

The truth is that, although "failings may stem from many areas, those in positions of authority within governments, supranational bodies and social and political organisations bear greater responsibility. And the relevant authorities have not risen to the challenge" [E3].

Experts point out that "in many countries, educational programmes do not teach students to critically evaluate the information they consume from the media, including identifying fake news. Therefore, it is necessary to continue investing in media literacy and educommunication programmes that teach students and the public to be critical and to evaluate information objectively and based on evidence" [E4].

As such, disinformation specialists consider that "in terms of media literacy, Spain is unfortunately lagging other countries in our European neighbourhood (…). The interest shown by national and regional authorities in this issue leaves much to be desired" [E5].

They therefore argue that it is important "to ensure that educational plans are, on the one hand, long-term; and, on the other, not dependent, once again, on the ideological whims of each legislature" [E1]. One solution could be to "introduce literacy tools from a much earlier age than is currently the case, especially given that a few decades ago it was much easier to monitor children's consumption of content. Now it is much more difficult, so those children who are going to face an avalanche of information must have the tools to be able to discern its value from a very early age" [E1].

Nevertheless, they lament that the issue is "so multifaceted that it is difficult to monitor disinformation without censoring or controlling it". The fact is that "efforts are beginning to be made, but there is still a long way to go before we see any light at the end of the tunnel on this issue. But it is certainly true that when it comes to media literacy and educommunication, everything is a problem. Trying to introduce changes into the education system is almost an impossible task. Civil society has put forward numerous proposals for changes to combat disinformation, yet none have come to fruition due to all the red tape involved. Any change one wishes to make takes years to be implemented, and I believe the authorities are not up to the task of tackling these changes because of all that it entails" [E8].

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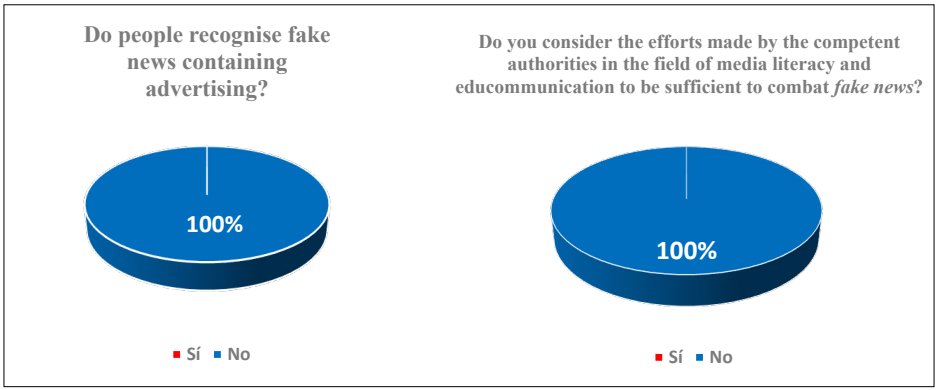
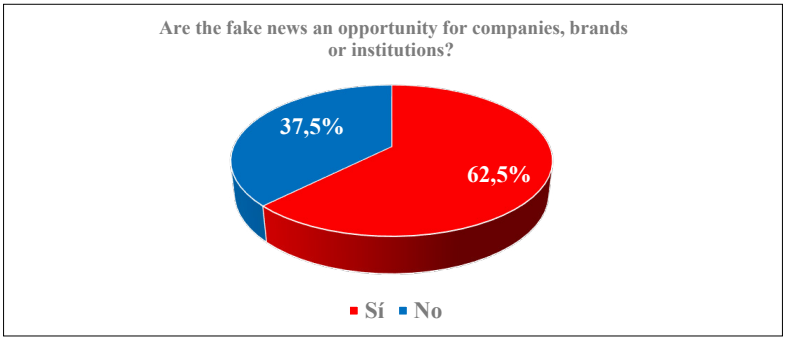
Of the results obtained in the second round, the questions on which absolute consensus (100%) was reached and the questions where the degree of agreement is below 75% are particularly noteworthy:

Fig. 1. Questions where absolute consensus has been reached



Source: Own elaboration (2025)

Fig. 2. Question with a degree of agreement of less than 75%



Source: Own elaboration (2025)

4. Discussion

The results allow us to assert that, according to the experts, the phenomenon of disinformation (whether advertising-related or not) is set to increase, and most people are unable to effectively recognise disinformation content (PI 1). The expansion of the media and the impact of social media and digital platforms have created an environment conducive to the rapid dissemination of false content, due to their ability to target specific audiences and ensure the almost instantaneous dissemination of

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information. This proliferation is fuelled by the exponential growth of communication flows, automation and the use of robotic technologies, as well as by the proven increase in false content detected by fact-checkers and the lack of credibility and mistrust towards official sources and social media. Given that most people are unable to effectively detect disinformation, the commitment to media literacy remains important. The degree of recognition varies according to educational level, prior knowledge, preconceptions and the credibility attributed to sources. Often, people identify false content but continue to share it without realising the harm it may cause.

In the advertising sphere, recognition is even more limited. Advertising disinformation content is easily confused with reliable information. The use of native advertising (that is, advertising integrated naturally into the format of the medium in which it appears) is also common. For this reason, digital platforms must be held accountable so that they do not continue to promote false content for financial gain.

Experts agree that disinformation poses a serious threat to organisations, particularly in terms of reputation and public trust (PI 2). The rapid spread of false or misleading information about products, services or policies exacerbates the loss of credibility, leads to poor decision-making and fuels social and political polarisation. However, if organisations respond ethically, swiftly and transparently, disinformation can become an opportunity to strengthen institutional communication, consolidate reputation and demonstrate accountability to the public.

Furthermore, information manipulation and advertising disinformation increase organisational vulnerability (PI 3). Discussion forums and targeted advertising facilitate the spread of rumours and misleading content that affect organisations' reputation, public trust, and legal and financial security. Proper management of these situations strengthens credibility, ethics and institutional transparency.

As such, they warn that it is essential for those responsible for communication to be prepared to intervene strategically and preventively, implementing measures that combat the organisation's vulnerabilities and reinforce institutional credibility in the face of the constant challenge of disinformation (PI 3).

Experts emphasise that fact-checking platforms play an important but insufficient role in the fight against disinformation (PI 4). They acknowledge their usefulness as a tool for detecting and correcting disinformation, provided they operate with rigour, independence and a commitment to public service. However, they warn that their capacity is limited in the face of the speed, volume and diversity of the disinformation circulating in digital environments, which prevents them from addressing the problem in its entirety.

They emphasise that fact-checkers are just one actor within a system that requires a broader response, based on three complementary pillars: effective legislation, technological development and media literacy. Furthermore, they point out that their reach may be limited and that it is necessary to strengthen the credibility of journalism and professions in the field of communication, as well as to promote critical thinking among the public, since the judgment of the audience is key to curbing the spread of disinformation.

Finally, some specialists question the independence and operating criteria of certain platforms, highlighting the need for greater transparency and oversight of their operations. They propose enhancing semi-automated tools and fostering users'

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own ability to verify content. In short, fact-checking platforms are useful, but they do not in themselves constitute the solution to the problem, which requires coordinated, ethical and long-term educational action.

Most experts consider that current European and national regulations are insufficient to effectively regulate the phenomenon of organised disinformation (PI 5). Although they acknowledge significant progress in the European Union and in countries such as Spain and Portugal, they agree that more comprehensive and up-to-date legislation is needed, capable of adequately classifying the different forms of disinformation and establishing clear penalties where appropriate. They believe that regulations still lag behind the digital reality and that the lack of regulation in some areas has had negative consequences.

The specialists emphasise that regulation must form part of a broader approach, combining legislation, constant updating, and ongoing institutional commitment. They highlight the positive role of European initiatives such as EDMO, which promote projects managed by independent experts and geared towards the public good.

Finally, the experts agree that the media literacy and educommunication programmes promoted by the authorities are insufficient to strengthen citizens' critical capacity in the face of disinformation (PI 6). They believe that, although efforts are being made by the competent authorities, insufficient resources are being allocated, both in terms of human and financial resources. They recognise that regulations and ethical codes exist, but institutional efforts are limited and lack adequate human and financial resources, often relying on the voluntary work of committed professionals.

As such, the authorities have not risen to the challenge, as in many countries, the education systems do not teach students to critically evaluate information or identify fake news. As such, the fight against disinformation requires a genuine and sustained commitment from the authorities and civil society, with long-term programmes free from ideological interests, which introduce literacy tools from an early age and prepare children to cope with today's information overload.

It is equally important to adapt regulations to new dissemination environments, particularly the internet and social media, where disinformation spreads more rapidly and widely.

5. Conclusions

The results of the Delphi method enabled the consolidation of a coherent narrative, reflecting the experts' consensus view on disinformation and summarising the challenges and opportunities identified. Disinformation is emerging as a growing problem, driven by the expansion of social media, the automation of communication flows and the speed at which digital information circulates.

In the advertising sector, online disinformation seriously affects the credibility of brands and institutions. Direct or indirect association with websites that disseminate false content may imply complicity in questionable practices, meaning that digital platforms must also take responsibility.

From an organisational perspective, disinformation poses a significant threat to reputation, credibility and public trust, causing reputational crises and eroding legitimacy. However, this threat can be turned into an opportunity if the organisation acts with ethics, transparency and rigorous communication, reinforcing its role as a reliable source of information.

Communications managers play a key role in managing and preventing disinformation. As such, it is important to ensure ongoing and specific training to tackle new forms of information manipulation, without overstepping the boundaries of freedom of expression.

Regarding fact-checking platforms, it should be noted that, whilst useful, they are insufficient on their own to curb the scale of the problem. They must be complemented by robust legislative frameworks, advanced technological tools and a media-literate public. There is also a need to ensure their independence and transparency to avoid bias or social mistrust.

Most people lack sufficient critical tools to recognise disinformation, both in general and in advertising, which reinforces the urgency of strengthening media literacy and educommunication. Although there are initiatives by the authorities, resources remain limited and efforts fragmented. More robust educational policies are needed (independent of ideological interests and with a long-term focus) that incorporate media literacy from an early age and foster a critical and resilient citizenry capable of resisting information manipulation.

Finally, it is important to note that European and national regulations are still insufficient to tackle disinformation effectively. Whilst progress and institutional commitments are evident, laws need to be continuously adapted to new digital dissemination channels, seeking an appropriate balance between regulating the flow of information and protecting freedom of expression.

As a line of future research, it is suggested that further study be conducted into the impact of disinformation on specific sectors, as well as into the evaluation of the effectiveness of media literacy and fact-checking strategies implemented in various socio-cultural contexts. This approach would enable progress towards comprehensive and sustainable models for managing disinformation, incorporating multidimensional and gender perspectives into the analysis of its effects and mitigation strategies.

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Methodology	Sónia Gomes-Gonçalves, Gloria Jiménez-Marín & Nuria Sánchez-Gey Valenzuela
Data collection & analysis	Sónia Gomes-Gonçalves, Gloria Jiménez-Marín & Nuria Sánchez-Gey Valenzuela
Discussion & conclusions	Sónia Gomes-Gonçalves, Gloria Jiménez-Marín & Nuria Sánchez-Gey Valenzuela
Writing, formatting, revision & approval of versions	Sónia Gomes-Gonçalves, Gloria Jiménez-Marín & Nuria Sánchez-Gey Valenzuela

9. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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