"WATCHFUL WAITING": HOW PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS PREPARE FOR A FAKE NEWS CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

Fake news can be perceived as inclusive of misinformation and disinformation (e.g., Guo & Vargo, 2018); however, scholars have delineated between the terms. ***Disinformation*** is the act of intentionally presenting incorrect information (McCorkindale, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2019) while ***misinformation*** is information that is incorrect, or a misperception (Bode & Vraga, 2015). Fake news is "misinformation that has the trappings of traditional news media, with the presumed associated editorial processes" (Lazer et al., 2017, p. 4). Public relations practitioners prepare for the possibility of fake news stories impacting the reputations of the companies they represent (Adriani, 2019). Ewing and Lambert (2019) revealed strategies to minimize and manage a fake news crisis. Some approaches to manage potential fake news crises include monitoring social media, preparing statements, identifying effective spokespeople, and developing messages to help them act quickly and effectively (Haber, 2017; Truncale, 2017). A concept missing from literature is how practitioners prepare for fake news crisis.

PRACTICAL ORIENTATION

Fake news can damage corporate reputations and undermine trust. Crisis scholarship has established the importance of organizations developing crisis plans to prepare for, respond to, and recover from crises (Pang, Cropp, & Cameron, 2006). Public relations practitioners have integrated fake news strategies in crisis management plans (Kuchler, 2017).

DISINFORMATION
Act of intentionally presenting incorrect information

MISINFORMATION
information that is incorrect, or a misperception

FAKE NEWS
Misinformation presented in a traditional news format

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The authors chose ***Situational Crisis Communication theory*** (Coombs & Holladay, 2002): "SCCT assumes that an organization's reputation, that is, how the organization is perceived by its publics, is a valued resource that is threatened by crises. A strategic communicative response can best protect the reputational resource by assessing the crisis situation and selecting a crisis response strategy that fits the crisis situation" (p. 167). SCCT outlines 13 different crisis types (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), which can be grouped into three clusters (Coombs, 2004; Coombs, 2007).

First cluster: organization is considered a victim of the crisis. Examples of crises in this cluster include natural disasters, rumors, violence in the workplace, and external product tampering.

Second cluster: accidental cluster, which includes crises caused by unintentional organizational actions. These crises are caused by technical errors or challenges from stakeholders.

Third cluster: involves crises that could have been mitigated and are considered intentional. Crises in this cluster place the organization at a severe level of reputational threat.

SCCT offers several response strategies to be chosen depending on crisis type.

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Looking Back, Looking Forward: 20 years of Developing Theory and Practice

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METHOD

Eight senior-level public relations practitioners, with an average of 11 years' experience in crisis management, were chosen because of their shared industry status (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) and the knowledge they have about the particulars of fake news. They practiced public relations for agencies, corporations, nonprofits and the government. This approach was well-suited because focus groups often begin with a central concept and six to 10 participants is ideal for discussion quality (Lunt, 1996). A Twitter fake news chat among 11public relations professionals and educators was used to supplement the findings. The authors used thematic analysis, a multistage approach posited by Braun and Clarke (2006), to describe and classify the data.

FINDINGS

The speed of fake news crises and difficulties in predicting scenarios differs from traditional crisis planning, according to participants. They use a "***watching and waiting***" approach to decide whether a response is warranted.

Deciding if a response is warranted:

1. Is it an issue from the past that has re-emerged?

"People commenting on posts that were four years ago and resurfacing as if it was a new news item." (Participant 5)

"There's this period of watchful waiting because it's always Facebook for us, and there's three things that will come up on the hospital Facebook page and they're all about five years old." (Participant 8).

2. What is the status of the individual(s) sharing the story?

"Something that was actually kind of hot, after Trump become president, was dealing with Trump tweets, whether they were positive or negative, accurate or inaccurate. So, that's something that we had to think through for several clients." (Participant 3)

"Sometimes these bloggers were not... it wasn't fabricated, it's just they were uneducated. So they believe this to be true. They weren't making things up. It was purely they just weren't educated on what they were talking about." (Participant 6)

3. Is it a brief mention, or is it gaining momentum?

"Is it lasting a couple hours, is it like going on for days? When was the peak of the conversation, is it trailing off, is it starting to get more momentum building as more people hear about it, so I'm looking at that...Is it a moment or a movement?" (Participant 2)

Moving to the response stage:

1. Expedite the approval process on information dissemination.

"The longer it takes you to clarify what you're really trying to say, the worse it gets." (Participant 4).

2. Select the right spokesperson for the crisis.

"[If] the CEO made the comment, the CEO's got to follow up, first of all. You can't push that down to the SVP of communications and expect to get a credible response." (Participant 7)

3. Involve stakeholders in the process.
"You can't really battle trolls very effectively. So again, you just have to get out there, you have to look for allies who are on the social media space and third-party sources who can help amplify your story or leverage your story." (Participant 7)

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Fake news crises fit into the cluster of crisis types that Coombs (2004) and (2007) designate victim clusters. The organization is considered a victim of these crises, and they include unfounded rumors. The theory offers several response strategies to be chosen depending on crisis type. Similarly, study participants determine responses according to the status of those sharing the message, whether the story has gained traction, and whether the story has been addressed previously.

Practitioners facing fake news stories that have re-emerged would do well to follow Coombs (2007) bolstering crisis response strategy, which reminds external stakeholders of the organization's past efforts and successes, and that the company is a victim.