

THE WORK OF VERIFICATION OF NEWS FROM THE COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT. A CASE STUDY IN THE AGRI-FOOD SECTOR

LA LABOR DE VERIFICACIÓN DE NOTICIAS DESDE EL DEPARTAMENTO DE COMUNICACIÓN. ESTUDIO DE CASOS EN EL SECTOR AGROALIMENTARIO

Paula Vázquez Almendros. *Universidad de Málaga. Spain*
paulava@uma.es

 Francisco Javier Paniagua Rojano. *Universidad de Málaga. Spain*
fjpaniagua@uma.es

How to cite this article:

Vázquez Almendros, P. y Paniagua Rojano, F. J. (2022). The work of verification of news from the communication department. A case study in the agri-food sector. *Revista de Ciencias de la Comunicación e Información*, 27, 1-23.
<https://doi.org/10.35742/rcci.2022.27.e238>

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the importance of the verification of news and information from the communication departments of companies and organizations, in order to combat disinformation and hoaxes that are generated with different intentions, either from outside -competitors, clients, and other agents- or from within. The objective of this research focuses on defining the organization, structure, tools, and action plan to combat these hoaxes, rumors, and disinformation about companies and institutions. To this end, this research is based on the case study of the Dcoop cooperative. Specifically, based on direct observation, content analysis, and a questionnaire to members and employees of the company, the aim is to design a strategy to fight against disinformation and hoaxes, with the involvement of the different stakeholders. As a solution, it is proposed to reinforce the communication strategy with their complicity and a proposal of organization and action protocol from the Communication area of the company, also reinforcing permanent communication and transparency.

KEYWORDS: strategic communication, corporate communication, disinformation, internal communication, DIRCOM

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo analiza la importancia de la verificación de noticias e informaciones desde los departamentos de comunicación de empresas y organizaciones, para combatir la desinformación y los bulos que, bien desde fuera -la competencia, clientes y otros agentes- o desde dentro, se generan con diferentes intenciones. El objetivo de esta investigación se centra en definir la organización, la estructura, las herramientas, los planes de acción para combatir estos bulos, rumores y la desinformación sobre empresas e instituciones. Para ello, esta investigación se basa en el estudio de caso



de la cooperativa Dcoop. En concreto, partiendo de la observación directa, el análisis de contenido y el cuestionario a socios y empleados de la sociedad se pretende diseñar una estrategia para luchar contra la desinformación y los bulos, con la implicación de los diferentes grupos de interés. Como solución se propone reforzar la estrategia de comunicación con su complicidad y una propuesta de organización y protocolo de acción desde el área de Comunicación de la empresa, reforzando también la comunicación permanente y la transparencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: comunicación estratégica, comunicación corporativa desinformación, comunicación interna, DIRCOM.

Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. INTRODUCTION

In this context, with the arrival of the Internet and web 2.0, in which organizations have lost control over their public discourse (Losada, 2018), and the company will never again be the only transmitter of information about the brand and the communicative process will no longer be unidirectional" (Aced, 2013, p.18); communication management in crisis situations has been installed in the daily work of companies and organizations (Álvarez, 2009).

In this new media panorama, "the brand is the expression of a company's commitment to its stakeholders, a kind of promise towards them" (Villafañe, 2004, p. 39) and, in this new system, in which not only the traditional media take center stage, there are new actors who have the power to co-produce, both positively and negatively, the reputation that an entity projects to its audiences.

The arrival of web 2.0 and the use of social networks have led to a change in mentality regarding the way of communicating. The role of sender and receiver has become interchangeable between the different actors that intervene in the communication system and that communication is now based on conversation (Aced, 2013). "The public abandons its state of passivity and now thinks of itself as the protagonist" (Álvarez, 2012).

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2021, during the past year, the trust placed in the media and the information received from the leaders has decreased. One of the most relevant data of the study is that, in 18 of the 27 analyzed countries, companies have a higher trust index in the information they issue than the government itself. Now, in this scenario, in which companies are positioned as reliable sources of information for citizens, they must adopt new measures of commitment with their audiences and adapt new communication strategies in which transparency and the dissemination of truthful information stand out, and focus on solving the concerns that affect their interest groups and addressing the fight against misinformation with the help of those same stakeholders.

A very relevant role in the dissemination of misinformation and hoaxes falls on emotions. The importance that emotions have on the public is enormous since they

are present in the interpretation of the events that can cause a crisis, as well as in the interpretation that different audiences make about the responsibility of those events together with the response that the affected organization adopts at all times. (Losada et al., 2020).

There are many examples where misinformation, fake news, and rumors have affected companies in all sectors. Over the years, there have been several very serious crises within the sector. An example of this was the one suffered in 1981 with the so-called Toxic Oil. Later, there have been many others that have put the food and beverage sector in check, the well-known "mad cows", the different Coca-Cola crises, bird flu, and other more current ones such as the case of Danone. And in all these cases, the damage that fake news can cause is greater, since the credibility of the image is based on healthy products.

The types of crises that are caused by misinformation and fake news are becoming more frequent. This type of information derives from the change in the consumption of information. In this way, Wardle (2017) classifies misinformation as satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, manufactured content, false connections, false context, and manipulated content. This classification can be completed, in the case of public relations, with the proposal by Rodríguez-Fernández (2019) that proposes the study of the identification of facilities outside companies, fake job offers, identity theft, gift of false product/service and promotions, search for influencers by the brand, fake accidents, and publication of misinformation and false covers in generalist media.

Why this type of information can have such a high level of repercussion on the reputation of companies is conditioned by the ease with which it is disseminated through new media and social networks. Some studies agree that fake news is more interesting than real news, so people are more attracted to it and more willing to share it (Vosoughi et al., 2018). But we must bear in mind that online disinformation is not only a technology-driven phenomenon (Humprecht, 2019), it is also conditioned by national information environments. It should be noted that a large part of the articles published by fake news sites are very similar to traditional news (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2021) since most of these articles contain news values such as current affairs or negativity, where emotions play a fundamental role (Losada et al., 2020).

Another increasingly common factor faced by companies that suffer attacks based on disinformation focuses on the fact that many times, it is not known who is behind it so it is difficult to be able to combat them (Sánchez-Silva, 2019). The *Industrialized Disinformation 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation* report, ensures that there are cyber troops that are in charge of carrying out communication strategies, including the creation of so-called "fake news" websites.

From this study, the four categories of activities that these types of profiles develop are extracted; creation of manipulated content; create defined strategies to target specific segments of the population; online harassment or trolling, and, finally, content censorship through mass complaints. "Disinformation is a business for agencies that are dedicated to offering disinformation services, for organizations that are dedicated to certifying content through fact-checking, and for researchers who study disinformation and seek solutions." (Francois-Fogel, 2020).

Because of all this, it is essential that companies are proactive and position themselves in the battle against misinformation with a well-defined strategic plan. Have a communication plan that includes a communication policy for each crisis. Transparency in the dissemination of content, the availability to answer the media, and always telling the truth are the signs of a proactive communication policy that must be included within a crisis prevention plan for every company. Furthermore, the development of the internet for crisis management shows great potential in the strategy of being proactive (Rodríguez González et al., 2013).

Being proactive will make it easier to deal with crises increasingly caused by misinformation and rumors. The study by Llorente & Cuenca (2018) shows that transparency and early detection of hoaxes are key to combat this type of crisis. Perform active listening on social networks, act and deny false information, and, lastly, respond in the same direction as misleading content. Additionally, it is important to work on the prevention of this type of information, to humanize communication; enhance the leadership of the company; position the brand ambassadors in such a way that they faithfully convey the reality of the company and at the same time are a defense against hoaxes, and always have transparency to create a good reputation.

Thus, active listening is essential to achieve ethical public communication. You need to use two-way communication to be ethical and influence each other. You cannot be influenced by a group if you do not listen (Coombs and Holladay, 2007, as cited in Macnamara, 2016). And it is that two-way communication is not only increasingly demanded by the public, but it is highly efficient in organizations when it comes to listening and responding to the broader perspectives that are key to operationalize the social responsibility of the companies (Macnamara & Gregoru, 2018).

From the European Communication Monitor (2018) it is extracted that 22.5% of European organizations have been affected by fake news, of which the main sources of dissemination of said content were social networks. Of all of them, only 12% have implemented a series of measures to identify them. The majority of professionals surveyed in this same study, but prepared two years later, European Communication Monitor (2020), recognizes that the new digital communication channels bring with them new ethical challenges, but confesses that they do not have the updated resources to address them.

1.1. The new functions of DIRCOM

Over the years, the figure of the Director of Communication has been strengthened and made more essential in all types of companies and organizations. With the arrival of web 2.0 and the Internet, the communication model has undergone a change that demands new responsibilities from DIRCOM. According to the Dircom Yearbook (2014), the new functions include updating the corporate website, recurring communication via the internet, managing the corporation's blogs, and controlling and being present on all types of social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn, among others. Thus, Taddicken & Wolff (2020) demonstrated the importance of having an adequate level of knowledge about the media and the Internet.

The figure of the new communication professional must be willing to acquire the competencies that are demanded in the new informational landscape. Along with these new functions already mentioned, Ufarte-Ruiz et al., (2018) collect that another of the competencies that all these profiles must acquire due to the arrival of this digital system in which everything is connected is training for the fight against misinformation and the development of fact-checking. "The evolution of fact-checking initiatives has developed rapidly in recent years" (Magallón, 2018, p. 45).

This is because it is these professionals who must establish and reinforce strategies that focus on training users to develop an adequate use of information and the correct validation of the different sources. This will allow reaching a series of projects that focus on the training of digital and media competencies (A. López, & J. Vives, 2018).

1.2. The role of internal audiences as brand ambassadors

"Reputation is the crystallization of the corporate image of an entity when it is the result of an excellent corporate behavior maintained over time, which gives it a structural character in the eyes of its strategic stakeholders" (Villafañe, 2004, pp. 32- 33). It is important to bear in mind that, in any organization, the role of the first stakeholder is made up of the employees themselves. These, like partners, customers, shareholders, or suppliers are considered as a group whose opinion must be valued when analyzing the reputation of an organization. This fact must be considered by all companies and organizations since the reputational performance carried out by these employees is reflected in many aspects such as social networks, their behavior at work, or in their personal interactions. For this reason, it must be ensured that this interest group has the necessary knowledge, criteria, and reasons that allow them to defend and explain the company's position. (Communication study, 2020). "The future of companies will mean an increasing interconnection of those who work in them" (Vilanova, 2013, pp. 118).

That is why the communication plans of companies establish the people in charge of speaking on behalf of the organization when there is a crisis situation, but it must be taken into account that all employees are informal spokespersons for that company. And it is that, in today's multi-connected and online society, what the employees of a company transmit obtains more credibility than what the company itself can offer in official statements. (Communication Study, 2020).

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this work are to propose the creation of a news and information verification unit within the communication offices of companies and organizations in the agri-food sector; and the definition of the strategy that companies and organizations must follow in these cases, as well as the main tools they can use, and what steps must be taken and how to involve the different stakeholders in the co-production of the reputation of the organization. In this sense, the following are proposed as complementary objectives:

- Define the necessary indicators to carry out a complete analysis of the different crisis cases
- Identify different information verification tools

- Identify stakeholders that can become allies of the communication department in the strategy to combat rumors and misinformation against the company
- Strengthen active listening with the different stakeholders
- Propose internal and external communication tools to strengthen communication with stakeholders and strengthen the credibility of the organization

3. METHODOLOGY

This work is based on the hypothesis that companies in the agri-food sector, like any other, must face the new digital crises based on misinformation and fake news; from an ethical point of view, encouraging transparency and involving all their stakeholders, such as ambassadors and spokespersons on social networks and the media. In this way, they will reduce the impact of these crises on their reputation, which must be addressed on a daily basis and not only in critical and risky situations.

Within the social sciences, and more specifically within journalism and social communication, scientific research is approached from two methodological perspectives; quantitative and qualitative methodology. Each one presents characteristics according to the different objects of study, but they are not exclusive but complementary methods (Monje Álvarez, 2011). In this work, a collection of information has been carried out by means of quantitative methodological techniques in which data are collected and analyzed and use numerical measurement to establish patterns between the studied sample, and qualitative techniques, such as observation and description, which allow defining and discovering research questions without relying on numerical measurement (Hernández et al., 2004).

This research is based on the case study as a technique that allows a compilation and interpretation of all the information about an individual, company, or movement (Reyes, 1999). According to Yin (1994), case studies are: the preferred strategies when the questions “how” and “why” are asked, when the researcher has little control over the events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (p.2)

The case studies can be classified into two types according to Reyes (1999). The first attempts to derive general conclusions that are drawn from the analysis of a series of cases and the second when it is intended to specifically reach conclusions from a single case.

There are five elements that must be taken into account when designing the case study. In the first place, the case study must have a study question, this will be the basis of the case study; secondly, there is the study of propositions, that is, the proposition that is going to be examined and on which attention is directed, however, not all studies have to have this element; the third component is the unit or units of analysis and, lastly, the logic that joins the data and the criterion by which the results are interpreted (Yin, 1994).

Several authors acknowledge that the case study may present a duality that is characterized as problematic. On the one hand, the case study expresses both the

particular and the specific and, in turn, can involve a population and even refer to other cases. These factors lead to the findings going well beyond the limits of researchers themselves (Forni, 2010).

The case study of this work focuses on the DCOOP cooperative, to carry it out a series of analytical variables have been established in accordance with the references already mentioned, to study how the structure is defined, the tools, and the different actions to combat hoaxes, rumors, and misinformation from the different communication offices of companies and organizations and what professional profile the person who manages it should have.

In the first place, it starts from a participant's direct observation motivated by the professional practices carried out in the second-degree cooperative DCOOP by one of the authors of the research. This fact allows us to know from within the operation of the cooperative, its communication department, strategies carried out, management of the website, use of social networks, etc., which served to define the case study.

To complete the work methodology, content analysis is developed that focuses on establishing an object of study for whose representation it uses the selection and analysis of communicative elements (Piñuel Raigada, 2002) to study the specific case of Dcoop and the fake news published in some media during 2018, and, at the same time, assess their strategy in these cases and under normal circumstances. According to Krippendorff (1980) and Lozano (1994), this research technique facilitates the acquisition of new knowledge, increases the researcher's understanding of the subject, and informs about practical actions. Specifically, 51 news items published in various digital, general, economic, and specialized media were analyzed - *Agrodigital, Agroinformación, Agropopular, Alimarket, Almaceite, Crónica Global, Deoleo, Diario de Jaén, El Economista, El País, El Plural, Expansión, Ideal, La otra Andalucía, La Vanguardia, Mercacej, Merca2, Olimerca, Okdiario, Servimedia, Viva, Voz Populi*-, between June 3rd, 2018, and January 3rd, 2019, dates on which different fake news about the company under study were published.

Finally, two questionnaires were prepared for a series of relevant profiles inside and outside the cooperative -workers and partners with more activity on social networks-, to find out their perception of its communication and on the strategy carried out in social networks, and involve them in the active strategy in the fight against misinformation against the company. Thanks to this technique, data was collected on a specific population of the company -partners and employees with presence and activity in social networks-, despite the difficulties in bringing the subjects together, either due to their distance or dispersion (García, 2003). The questions are presented in an organized way and focus on a particular case, that of Dcoop, its strategy in social networks, and in the fight against misinformation, and is, therefore, based on the analysis and treatment of data obtained from a group of people representing a population (García, 2003; Meneses & Rodríguez, 2011).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Case study. Hoax and misinformation crisis suffered by DCOOP in 2018

The case study, as mentioned in the objective of this work, has focused on the analysis of a set of news published from June 2018 to December of the same year whose objective was to damage the reputation of the cooperative. In total, 74 news items that damaged the cooperative's reputation by containing inaccurate or false information have been analyzed.

Knowing the history of the cooperative is necessary to be able to analyze the situation in which DCOOP found itself at the time when its reputation was seriously damaged by the publication of a series of misinformation items. In 2017, the cooperative had reached a 50% stake in the Pompeian brand, the brand with which it markets in the US, it had also merged with the Interprovincial Orujera de Fuente de Piedra together with the creation of the section of dried fruit, industrial milk, and pomace, and the integration of new international partners and companies of the De Prado group in Córdoba, Chile, and Portugal had taken place.

In 2018, the cooperative acquired stakes in leading olive companies in the US (Bell-Carter) and Portugal (Maçarico) and inaugurated the new oil laboratory together with the start-up of the Dos Hermanas oil mill.

A series of conclusions are drawn from the analysis carried out. In the first place, the newspapers from which the 74 pieces of information analyzed in the case study came were classified into groups. Thus, 44.59% of the analyzed content came from the same media outlet, specifically from the digital newspaper Crónica Global, it stands out that the news that this media outlet published was later shared by other newspapers.

The newspapers Merca2 and EIPlural belong to a second group, from which 12.16% of the content came. The case of the newspapers Revista Almaceite, OKDiario, and Diario de Jaén also stands out, the percentage of content published by each of them amounts to 4.05% of the total, along with 2.7% of those published by Servimedia, El País, or Voz Populi. The last group of news, which represents 1.35% of the analyzed content, came from the newspapers Olimerca, Alimarket, Viva, and El Expansión.

It should be noted that in most of the news analyzed, anonymous sources predominate (66.21%). In 12.16% of the contents, the source that provides the information is another of the analyzed media outlets, and in 9.45% the statements of public figures in the sector are collected as sources.

It is important to highlight that, among the news analyzed, 12.16% is based on statements from DCOOP, either from the president or from some other position in the cooperative. In all cases, the statements coming from the company focus on defending the reputation of the company against the fake information that is disseminated about it.

Within the analytical variables of the case study, the topics, both general and specific, on which the published news items are focused, were also analyzed. When referring to general topics, two predominant topics stand out, the purchase and sale of oil (94.59%) and its production and distribution (5.4%). For its part, and regarding the individual level of each of the information pieces, the analysis shows that 50% of the published content focuses on declaring that the cooperative is carrying out practices that trivialize the sector to cause prices to fall and establish a monopoly. Second,

21.62% of the information includes a fine imposed on the cooperative for importing oil from non-EU countries, 17.56% focuses on importing oil from countries such as Morocco or Tunisia to sell it as a Spanish product, while 13.51% talk about the intention of the cooperative to encourage the creation of tariffs in the US.

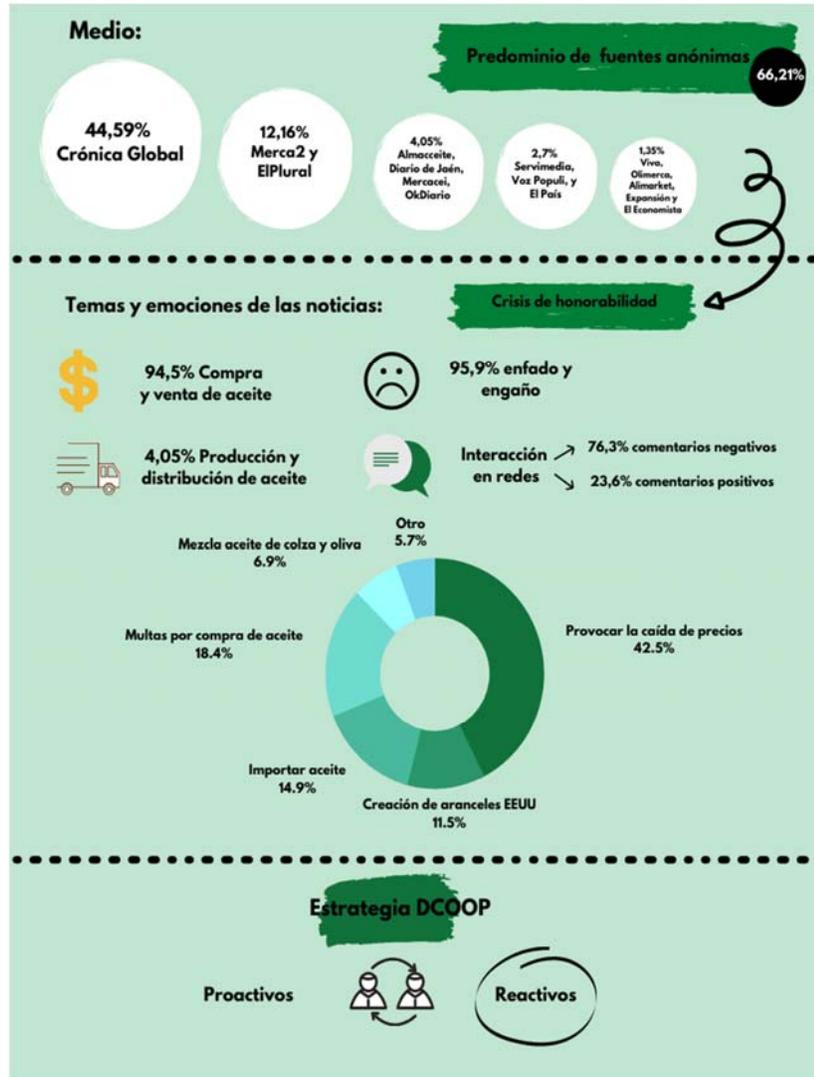


Figure 1. Analysis of hoaxes published in different media about Dcoop in 2018.
Source: analysis of fake news about the company. Self-made

The rest of the analyzed news items include a less representative variety of topics, the most prominent of which is the mixture of olive oil and rapeseed oil and its sale in the American market (8.1%).

Another of the analyzed variables is based on Wardle's (2017) classification of the different types of fake news or misinformation pieces that are disseminated in the digital system, within the case study it has been identified that 86.48% of the published content corresponds to fake context disinformation. This means that truthful content is being offered, but surrounded by fake context information. On the other hand, 12.16%

of the remaining news is classified, following the typology of this author, as manufactured content, whose objective and design is focused on deceiving and doing harm. Likewise, Rodríguez (2019) establishes a classification on the types of hoaxes that affect companies, in this case, all the news items collected here fall within what this author reflects as *misinformation publications and false covers in generalist media*.

Once the type of hoax or misinformation that has been published has been analyzed, it is necessary to analyze and study the type of crisis that this situation causes and the impact it has on the cooperative. According to Villafañe (1998), crises are classified according to the causes that originate them, which is why, and following the classification proposed by this author, the set of 74 news items analyzed in this case study led to an honor crisis for the cooperative, whose intention was to damage its reputation and provoke enmity between the cooperative and its partners.

In the same way, the dissemination of these misinformation pieces on social networks has been taken into account when carrying out the case study. Thanks to the tracking tool, *CrowdTangle*, it was possible to count the times that these contents were shared on social networks and the type of comments they have received. It is important to note that this case study focused exclusively on the social network Facebook, as it was the one that offered sufficient tracking data.

Therefore, when counting the times that the news items were shared on this social network, a total of 108 posts were published, in which a set of 241 comments have been registered, 184 of them negative and 57 positive ones.

Some of the analyzed comments, both negative and positive:

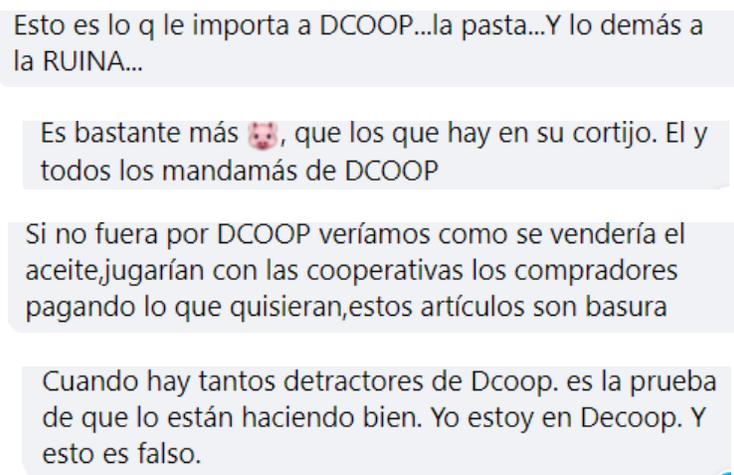


Figure 2. Examples of comments on the Dcoop Facebook page

The comments considered negative discredit the brand and the cooperative and are based on the analyzed news items, they attribute everything to that content. In the case of positive comments, it stands out that a large majority refer to the critical view that helps differentiate misinformation from truthful and verified information, another part of these comments correspond to partners of the cooperative who defend their reputation as brand ambassadors.

It is important to highlight the importance of the emotions that are projected in the news items. Thus, in the information analyzed within the study, the emotions to which it intended to appeal are sadness and anger since negative and judgmental language is used.

The last part of the case study focuses on analyzing the response offered by the DCOOP cooperative to deal with this type of hoax and misinformation that jeopardized its reputation.

The company issued a series of internal statements and even held a meeting with the media to defend the image of the cooperative from the accusations to which it was being subjected. Additionally, after the publication of some of these contents, there were media that interviewed people in charge of the company to learn about and collect the cooperative's version of those accusations. An example of this was Mercacei, which published an interview on June 18th, 2018 in which the cooperative's version of those accusations was collected.

Some examples of the use of the language that was presented in this information.



Figure 3. Examples of news published in Global Chronicle

4.2. The involvement of stakeholders in the strategy against disinformation

The questionnaire was sent during the week of April 5th. An online questionnaire was sent to partners of the company to know their vision of the information they receive from the organization, work on the alignment of the corporate philosophy, and reduce the impact that misinformation and hoaxes can have on the image of the cooperative and its business. In total, the questionnaire was sent to 12 partners of different cooperatives of the group, who usually have activity in social networks, of which 10 of them answered. 40% of the responses corresponded to women and 60% to men, with the prevailing age ranges between 35-44 and 45-54 years old, both accounting for 40% of the total. Followed by 10% of the 55-64 age group and another 10% who are over 65 years of age.

In the first place, the questionnaire asked the partners to define the figure of the cooperative in three words. The following infographic represents the selection of the chosen words. Great Cooperative, Services, Project, or Disinformation, among others, stand out.

When talking about the frequency with which partners say they find out about Dcoop, it stands out that 10% never usually look for information about the cooperative and 30% say that they do, but once a week. In contrast, 40% admit that they do it every day and 20% two or three times a week.

When referring to the usefulness of the information they receive from the cooperative, the partners value it with an average of 6.5 out of 10. It stands out that 10% of the respondents rate this information with a 0 when thinking about the usefulness that it brings them.

Regarding the information that they would like to receive from the cooperative, knowing the achievements and advances together with its history are the two types of information that arouse the most importance and interest in the partners, followed by the economic progress, the activities that may affect their image, and the entity's version in the face of any hoax, misinformation, or attack.

When analyzing the channels through which the cooperative reports, meetings are the preferred and best-valued modality among the partners, their percentage of valuation is 2.25% followed by WhatsApp, newsletter, the media, and face to face, each with 1.8 out of 5.

In the same way, when selecting the channels through which they would like to receive the information that comes to them from the cooperative, meetings and WhatsApp are the two most selected media with 90 and 80% respectively. On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind that 100% of the partners have a profile on Facebook and 90% on the WhatsApp social network. On the contrary, among the rest of the channels, only 20% of the partners have a Twitter presence and 10% on Telegram.

To find out if the partners feel involved with the information, they were asked if they share information about the company on social networks and 80% say they do, compared to 20% who say they do not. But when analyzing whether, when they share that information on social networks, they consider that they have all the arguments to do so, only 33% consider that they do, compared to 33% that do not, and the other 33% consider that perhaps.

Against this, 80% of those surveyed say they request information from an official source of the cooperative when they want to reply to a message on social networks and consider that they do not have the necessary and sufficient information. It should be noted that 80% of the surveyed partners would like to have one or more channels through which to make inquiries and find information. WhatsApp and email are the two preferred channels to develop this function.

Regarding the question of whether they have ever found, on social networks or in any media, false information or a rumor that would damage the reputation of Dcoop, 90% of those surveyed affirmed that they had and the remaining 10% declare not remembering. In the case of having found them, 22.2% confessed that they consulted the communication department of the cooperative compared to another 22.2% who affirmed that they answered the first thing they thought at that time.



Figure 4. *What do partners do when they find fake news about the company.*

Source: Questionnaire made to DCOOP partners. Self-made

For 80% of partners, finding a hoax or rumor on social networks or the media affects them directly because they feel part of the cooperative, on the other hand, 70% are concerned that it affects the reputation of the entity and they would be willing to change that published opinion with arguments. It stands out that 10% affirm that this type of misinformation is not a problem for them.

Given the growing presence of hoaxes and misinformation, 80% of partners say they know how to recognize fake news that wants to damage the image of the cooperative. Checking the media outlet, the date, or the sources that appear in the news are the key elements that help them identify if the information is true or not.

In the same way, having the help, from the cooperative, of all the possible information to differentiate this type of misinformation from real news is something very important for 60% of partners.

When assessing whether they would consult a blog that has information, training, and tutorials on possible hoaxes, rumors, and information that damage the image of the company, on how to respond and at the same time know the position of DCOOP, 80% of those surveyed affirms that they would, compared to the 10% who consider that a more direct channel would be better, and another 10% who would do so if it remains updated and is agile.

Lastly, the partners were asked how they would value from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest score, the different actions that can be carried out from the communication department to face any crisis in social networks and combat fake news and rumors about the company. Working more on the reputation of the cooperative and having an internally defined protocol are the two actions considered most important.

Likewise, the same day the questionnaire was sent to members, the same questionnaire was sent to 15 workers of the cooperative to know the vision of the

internal public about the information they receive from the organization, the work in alignment with the corporate philosophy, and know their assessment to reduce the impact that misinformation and hoaxes can have on the image of the cooperative and its business.

In total, 8 responses were received. In this case, 25% of the responses correspond to women and 75% to men, with the age group between 35-44 and 55-64 years old predominant.

In the case of workers, when defining the figure of the cooperative in three words, the words that stand out the most are Trust, Leadership, Stability, Union, and Quality, among others.

Regarding the question about the frequency with which employees say they find out about DCOOP, it stands out that 13% do not usually seek information about the cooperative and another 13% say that they do, but once a week. In contrast, 62% admit that they do it every day and 12% two or three times a week.

It should be noted that, unlike the partners, the employees value the usefulness of the information they receive from the cooperative with a score of 7.1. It is also striking that 12.5% of the respondents rate the usefulness of this information with a 2.

When analyzing the information that they would like to receive from the cooperative, knowing the company's version of any hoax or attack and its achievements and advances are the two types of content that workers value the best, with 4.75 out of 5.

Concerning the channels through which employees receive the information that comes to them from the cooperative, the best valued is Face to Face with 4.42 out of 5, followed by the Media, with 4.12, and email and meetings both scored 4 on average.

Like the surveyed partners, employees value WhatsApp (75%) and meetings (50%) as the best communication channels to stay informed of new facts and events. A similar case is that of social networks in which employees have active profiles, since, like partners, WhatsApp with 87% and Facebook (62%) are the two social networks in which they have the greatest presence.

In contrast to partners, employees share less information about the cooperative on their social networks. 63% say they do it compared to 37% who say they do not. On the other hand, 75% of the surveyed employees admit that they feel informed when sharing information on social networks, compared to 13% who say they do not.

When asked if they request information from an official source of the cooperative when they want to reply to a message on social networks and consider that they do not have the necessary information, 87% of the employees admit to doing so.

Regarding communication channels, 100% of the respondents would like to have one or more channels through which to make inquiries and find information. The preferred channels to develop this function are WhatsApp and the website.

100% of the surveyed employees claim to have found fake information or rumors on social networks or in some media outlet that are intended to damage the reputation of the cooperative. 88% acknowledge that they consulted the communication department before offering any response, compared to the remaining 12% who say that they contested malicious information on their own

This type of misinformation directly affects employees. 100% acknowledge that they are concerned because it damages the image and reputation of the cooperative, along with 75% who acknowledge that it affects them because they feel part of the company. Similarly, 37% of those surveyed are concerned about the economic aspect in which the cooperative may be damaged.

When talking about hoaxes and misinformation, 75% of employees say they know how to recognize fake news, for this it is important to analyze the date, the reliability of the source, and the origin of the information.

Furthermore, like the partners, 75% of the employees consider it very important to have help from the cooperative that makes it easier for them to differentiate this type of misinformation, the remaining 25% consider it quite important. Due to this factor, 50% of the surveyed employees would be willing to consult a blog directed by the communication department, which has information, training, and tutorials on possible hoaxes, rumors, and information that damage the image of the company, and on how to respond and know the positioning of DCOOP. It stands out that 13% assure that they would consult it as long as they were notified that the contents were updated.

Finally, and like the partners, the employees were asked how they would value from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest score, the different actions to be carried out by the communication department to face any crisis in social networks and combat fake news and rumors about the company. Training partners and employees so that they know how to face these situations and have an internally defined protocol involving employees would be, in the opinion of workers, the two best ways to face crises in social networks and combat fake news and rumors about the cooperative.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this work focused, on the one hand, on analyzing the steps that had been taken so far in terms of verification and action against misinformation and hoaxes from communication offices. And, on the other, it was intended to establish an action protocol from the different offices of companies and institutions to deal with possible cases of hoaxes, rumors, and misinformation that are published and disseminated with the ultimate objective of damaging the reputation of a company.

Thus, it is considered that having a communication plan is a fundamental piece in any strategy of a company and it must also be aligned with its business model. Within this, having a crisis plan that also includes a transparent and proactive strategy is essential to achieve effective communication. This is clear from the responses of partners and employees, who also show their willingness to get involved in this task in the strategy on social networks.

Thanks to the completion of the questionnaires, it is observed that the reputation of the company or organization must be reinforced within the entity, and maintained through internal communication, also encouraging active listening on social networks to identify any misinformative fact or rumor about a company. This will be one of the keys to fighting against misinformation. Employees and partners can become, in this case, the true eyes and ears of the company in digital media, as well as the voice that responds and completes, in some cases, the position of the company itself.

Regarding the different misinformation items that were analyzed in the case study, it stands out that they all had a great impact due to the role played by the Internet and social networks. As Burkhardt (2017) stated, misleading or manipulated content has always existed but those known as fake news reach a much greater diffusion due to this digital landscape in which everyone is interconnected.

Likewise, and coinciding with what Losada et., al (2020) collect, misinformation is more widely disseminated than other types of content due to how it appeals to emotions. Thus, as observed in the case study, the different published misinformation pieces were shared a large number of times thanks to the feelings of anger and deception that they projected. It is important to note that, as Tapia Frade et al. (2011) conclude, the role of the website as the main communication channel must be transparent and periodically updated with relevant content for all its audiences. So, in crisis situations such as the one experienced by the cooperative in 2018, direct and permanent contact with the public of interest significantly mitigates the damage that this crisis may cause.

Thanks to the development of this work, it becomes clear, as pointed out by different consulted experts, that it is increasingly necessary to establish a team dedicated to monitoring the image of a company, together with the creation of an action protocol with the necessary tools to deny possible misinformation, hoaxes, and rumors that are spread and that damage the reputation of the company or institution.

It is convenient to highlight the need to permanently inform the different audiences, more constantly, on issues such as the economic progress of the cooperative, the achievements it has achieved, and be aware of the company's version in the face of any hoax or misinformation that's spread about it, it helps any company face any crisis based on rumors and misinformation.

For this, it is important to make use of social networks, since coinciding with what Pablo et al. (2021) say, establishing a strategy for each of them is essential when facing a crisis. Furthermore, the role that social networks play in communication today is essential to achieve a connection between companies and institutions and their stakeholders.

As Rodríguez-Pérez (2021) and Lara (2021) pointed out, the different publics of interest of the entity or institution will be the best spokespersons for society when they have to speak in their own groups. This relationship is achieved if reliable information is provided so that they have their own arguments.

It is important to bear in mind that the main axis of any communication plan and communication strategy focuses on permanent communication. Being proactive and

transparent in everything that is communicated is very important to maintain the reputation and avoid, especially in cases of crisis, the damage that may befall it. In the case of the second-degree cooperative DCOOP, it would be a good complement to its communication strategy to align the business model with the communication that it transmits to its partners and, of course, its customers.

As the main element to convey the communication strategy, the website is established as the main point of its relationship with the public, both internal and external. It must be the organization's means of communication par excellence. That is why, incorporating into the corporate website elements such as the annual report and the corporate social responsibility report, the agenda with the different events, the cooperative's appearances in the media, promotional videos, tutorials and surveys, making of videos of the different production processes, and way of working of the cooperative, etc.; so that all this encourages the creation of a virtual community, based on the planned exchange, as far as possible, of a permanent flow of messages between the entity and all its stakeholders. Spaces specially dedicated to each of these groups and other general ones can be created.

As for social networks, we cannot ignore the importance that these play in the new digital landscape. Social networks allow reaching the client and establishing a relationship with them, but, in the same way, if these social networks are implemented on a corporate basis, they become a point in favor of the virtual community, in this case, of the cooperative with its stakeholders. This implies that the company must strengthen and plan its presence in these channels with a more strategic vision, both in dissemination and active listening, turning these spaces into channels with quality and transparent information at the service of users, partners, employees, and customers.

Another of the proposals to be made, and which coincides with the objective of this work, is the creation of a Unit for the Verification of News and Hoaxes. For this, a protocol must be implemented in which the proactive role of the company or institution is very important, based on active and permanent listening to stakeholders, as well as training and digital literacy for, fundamentally, the partners and employees. Likewise, the steps to be taken when misinformation that can damage the image of companies or institutions is detected must be defined, which are summarized in the constant monitoring and identification of rumors and misinformation about the organization and similar entities to be on alert, defining the type of crisis and misinformation or rumor to prevent and anticipate its consequences, checking their impact, measuring the times, and the magnitude of the response.

To be able to develop this protocol effectively, it is necessary that there be permanent training among the employees and partners of the cooperative so that more and more people know how to identify misinformation and what is the appropriate way of fight it.

To complete the points of this protocol, it is essential to have the necessary tools to carry out the verification of the contents. Some of them can be Crowdtangle, TinEye, or DomainBigData.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aced, C. (2013). El perfil del dircom 2.0. En *Cuadernos de Comunicación Evoca, Comunicación Corporativa: Al otro lado de la información*. (pp. 17-22). Evoca Comunicación e Imagen.
- Anuario de la Comunicación. (2014). *Tendencias mundiales de la comunicación corporativa*. Asociación de Directivos de Comunicación. Dircom.
- Boyle, M., & Schmierbach, M. (2015). *Applied Communication Research Methods. Getting Started as a Researcher*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315718644>
- Burkhardt, J. M. (2017). History of Fake News. *Library Technology Reports*, 53(8), 1-33.
- Callejo, G. J. (2002). Observación, entrevista y grupo de discusión: el silencio de tres prácticas de investigación. *Revista Española Salud Pública*, 76(2), 409-422.
- Egelhofer, J. L., & Lecheler, S. (2019). Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon: a framework and research agenda. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 43(2), 97-116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2019.1602782>
- Espinosa, F. T. (2021). El aprendizaje basado en objetos como estrategia para la enseñanza de la historia en Educación Primaria. *Cuadernos de profesorado*, 14(28), 44-56.
- Estudio de comunicación. (2020). *Empleados comprometidos, eficaces*. Estudio de comunicación.
- Fita, J. (2002). *Comunicación en programas de crisis*. Ediciones Gestión 2000.
- Forni, P. (2010). Los estudios de caso: Orígenes, cuestiones de diseño y sus aportes a la teoría social. *Miríada: Investigación en Ciencias Sociales*, 3(5), 61-80.
- Fundación Gabo. (2021). *El Periodismo ante la desinformación*. Fundación Gabo.
- García, T. (2003). El cuestionario como instrumento de investigación/evaluación. *Página Del Proyecto de Apoyo Para Profesionales de La Formación (PROMETEO) de La Junta de Andalucía*, 28.
- Hernández, R., Baptista, P., & Hernández, C. (2004). *Metodología de la Investigación*. McGraw-Hill Interamericana, 533.
- Humprecht, E. (2019). Where 'fake news' flourishes: a comparison across four Western democracies. *Information Communication and Society*, 22(13), 1973-1988. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1474241>

- Jiménez-Chaves, V. (2012). El estudio de caso y su implementación en la investigación. *Revista Internacional de Investigación En Ciencias Sociales*, 8(1), 141-150.
- Jiménez, E. (2013). Management Crisis in Social Networks. *Revista Orbis*, 24, 116-131.
- Kawulich, B. B. (2005). FORUM: qualitative social research. La observación participante como método de recolección de datos 1. *Fqs*, 6(2), 32.
- Losada, R. (2016). La labor del Dircom en la comunicación de crisis. *Más Poder Local*, 29, 12-13.
- Losada, D. J. C. (2019). *Comunicación de crisis en un mundo conectado*. Editorial: EDIUOC.
- Losada, D. J. C., Rodríguez, F. L. y Paniagua, R. F. J. (2020). Comunicación gubernamental y emociones en la crisis del Covid-19 en España. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 78, 23-40. <https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2020-1467>
- Macnamara, J. (2016) Organizational listening: Addressing a major gap in public relations theory and practice, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 28 (3- 4), 146-169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2016.1228064>
- Macnamara, J., & Gregory, A. (2018) Expanding Evaluation to Progress Strategic Communication: Beyond Message Tracking to Open Listening. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), 469-486. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1450255>
- Magallón-Rosa, R. (2018). Nuevos formatos de verificación. El caso de Maldito Bulo en Twitter. *Sphera Publica*, 1(18), 41-65.
- Merino-Poyo, M. J. (2016). *Tesis Doctoral. Comunicación y crisis: un plan estratégico*. <http://eprints.ucm.es/36040/1/T36709.pdf>
- Meneses, J., & Rodríguez, R. (2011). El cuestionario y la entrevista. *Construcció d'instruments d'investigació en e-Learning*, 5-31.
- Mitroff, I., & Pearson, C. M. (2002). *Cómo gestionar una crisis. Guía para mejorar la preparación frente a una crisis*. Ediciones Gestión 2000.
- Molina, C. J. P., Magallón, R. R., & Paniagua, R. F. J. (2020). Desinformación y fact-checking en las elecciones argentinas de 2019. El caso de la iniciativa Reverso. *Revista de estilos de aprendizaje*, 13(26), 33-49.
- Monje, A. C. A. (2011). Metodología de la investigación cuantitativa y cualitativa. Guía didáctica. *Universidad Surcolombiana*, 1-216.

- Morris, A. (2018). The what and why of in-depth interviewing. *A Practical Introduction to InDepth Interviewing*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473921344.n1>
- Nyilasy, G. (2019) Fake news: When the dark side of persuasion takes over, *International Journal of Advertising*, 38(2), 336-342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1586210>
- Pablo, P., Dueñas, M., & Carmona, D. G. (2021). *Comunicación digital en las cooperativas españolas*. 193-225. <https://doi.org/10.7203/CIRIEC-E.101.17638>
- Piñuel, R. J. (2002). Epistemología, métodos y técnicas del análisis de contenido. *Sociolinguistic Studies*, 3(1), 1-42.
- Regan, E. O. (2008). Capítulo cuarto Redes sociales: una herramienta para la comunicación estratégica. Uso de las redes sociales en la comunicación de la defensa Evangeline O' Regan. *El Mundo*, 83-102. <https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.v3i1.1>
- Reyes, T. (1999). Métodos cualitativos de investigación: Los grupos focales y el estudio de caso. *Fórum Empresarial*, 4(2), 74-87. <https://doi.org/10.33801/fe.v4i2.2913>
- Rodríguez-Fernández, L. (2019). Desinformación: retos profesionales para el sector de la comunicación. *El profesional de la información*, 28(3), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2019.may.06>
- Rodríguez-Fernández, L. (2019). Desinformación y comunicación organizacional: estudio sobre el impacto de las fake news. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 1714 -1728. <http://www.revistalatinacs.org/074paper/1406/89es.html>
- Rodríguez, G. D., & Valdeoriola, R. J. (2009). *Metodología de la investigación*. Universidad Oberta de Catalunya
- Rodríguez, P. C. (2019). No diga fake news, di desinformación: una revisión sobre el fenómeno de las noticias falsas y sus implicaciones. *Comunicación, revista científica*, 40, 65-74. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18566/comunica.n40.a05>
- Ruiz, O. J. I. (2012.) *Teoría y práctica de la investigación cualitativa*. Universidad de Deusto.
- Saura, P. P., & García-García, F. (2012). La comunicación de crisis como elemento clave de la comunicación empresarial. *Revista ICONO14. Revista Científica de Comunicación y Tecnología Emergentes*, 8(2), 42. <https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v8i2.245>
- Taddicken, M., & Wolff, L. (2020). 'Fake News' in Science Communication: Emotions and Strategies of Coping with Dissonance Online. *Media and Communication*, 8(1), 206 -217. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i1.2495>

- Tandoc, E. C., Wei, L. Z., & Ling, R. (2018). Defining "Fake News", *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 137-153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143>
- Tandoc, Jr. E. C., Thomas, R. J., & Bishop, L. (2021). What Is (Fake) News? Analyzing News Values (and More) in Fake Stories. *Media and Communication*, 9(1), 110-119. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i1.3331>
- Tapia-Frade, A., Gómez-Nieto, B., & Díaz, C. Ó. (2011). La página web como herramienta para la retroalimentación en las organizaciones: el caso de las ONGs españolas. *Doxa Comunicación. Revista Interdisciplinar de Estudios de Comunicación y Ciencias Sociales*, 12, 61-86. <https://doi.org/10.31921/doxacom.n12a3>
- Ufarte-Ruiz, M. J., Peralta-García, L., & Murcia-Verdú, F. J. (2018). Fact checking: un nuevo desafío del periodismo. *El profesional de la información*, 27(4), 733-741. <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2018.jul.02>
- Villafane, J. (1999). *La gestión profesional de la imagen corporativa*. Pirámide. Madrid: Pirámide
- Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2019). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359, 1146-1151.
- Wardle, C. (2017, 14 de marzo). *First Draft*. <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/noticias-falsas-es-complicado/>
- Weare, C., Lin, W., & Lin, W. (1987). Social Science Computer Review. *Social Science Computer Review*, 5(4), 608. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089443938700500420>
- Yin, R. (1994). Investigación sobre estudios de casos. Diseño y metodología. *Applied Social Research Methods Series*, 5, 1-35. http://www.polipub.org/documentos/YIN_ROBERT.pdf

AUTHORS:

Paula Vázquez Almendros

Journalism student at the *Universidad de Málaga* and is currently doing a professional internship as disinformation and social media analyst in the communication department of Dcoop.

Francisco Javier Paniagua Rojano

Professor of Journalism at the *Universidad de Málaga*, an expert in corporate communication and social networks. He is currently the coordinator of the section "Communication and organizational strategy" of the Spanish Association for Communication Research and has been director of communication for the Andalusian Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (2000-2003) and the *Universidad Internacional de Andalucía* (2011- 2014).

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7376-4536>