



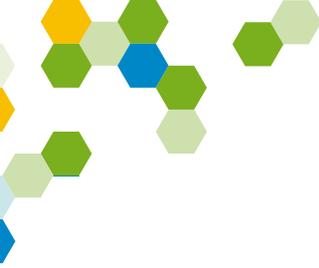
SPECIAL REPORT

Fighting Fake News in the corporate world: Real Advocacy

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE FAKE NEWS PHENOMENON

“On an ordinary Sunday in December 2016, Edward Welch, a twenty-eight-year-old father of two and volunteer firefighter, left his house in North Carolina determined to sort out for himself what he had been hearing on the news. He drove his car 370 miles to Washington, D.C. and entered the pizzeria Comet Ping Pong during peak business hours armed with an AR-15 assault rifle, a hand gun, and 29 rounds of ammunition. He shot into the air three times, fortunately without hitting anyone, and started looking for Satanic signs, underground chambers and passageways. He was convinced that there were children hidden inside the restaurant who had been kidnapped and sexually abused by a pedophile ring led by Hillary Clinton’s campaign manager.”

This is how the journalist [Marc Amoros](#) starts the third chapter of his recently published book *Fake News. La verdad de las noticias falsas* (The truth about fake news), in which he warns us that fake news is no joke and has very real consequences. For Edward Welch, those consequences meant a four-year prison sentence for the incident now known as “PizzaGate,” which *The New York Times* closely examined in this [report](#).

In an interview for LLORENTE & CUENCA’s “Developing Ideas” section, Amoros defined fake news as: “false information that is published with the appearance of real news so that we will believe it, and spread with a specific objective in mind. Without an objective, there is no fake news. Basically, there are two main objectives: financial, trying to make money; or ideological, trying to manipulate, implant, or transmit to a large sector of the population an idea about a particular thing, person, or policy.”

Another trademark of fake news is its power and potential to go viral compared with real news. According to a [study](#) carried out by researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), in which they analyzed 126,000 Twitter stories shared by 3 million people between 2006 and 2017, fake news has 70 percent more chances of being retweeted, and it is real people (not bots) who are responsible for spreading this information.

The explosion of this cascade of disinformation is affecting traditional media outlets and internet giants alike. In his [editorial](#) as new director of *The New York Times*, Arthur Gregg Sulzberger shines the spotlight on fake news as one of the main challenges

of the “Gray Lady”: “Disinformation is increasing and confidence in the media is declining as digital platforms prioritize clicks, rumors, and propaganda over real research (...) Just like our predecessors at *The Times*, my colleagues and I will not give in to these powers.” In the case of Facebook, Google and Twitter, at the end of last year [they announced](#) their commitment to using trust indicators to help users verify the reliability of the publications and journalists responsible for the articles that appear in the news feed.

According to Marc Amorós: “What we must understand is that the digital tools are readily available to all, making it extremely easy to create fake news. You just need a little resourcefulness, the ability to lay out the information in a professional-looking way, and Photoshop to tamper with photographs; there are even software programs that put words into people’s mouths, creating statements that they never uttered using their voice. It is becoming increasingly hard to detect what is true and what is false. If we reach the point at which we can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is fake, we will only believe that which confirms our own opinions.”

The fake news empire has even flooded TV fiction. In seasons 6 and 7 of the series *Homeland*, in which Claire Danes plays a CIA agent, fake news [sets the pace of the storyline](#) (**spoiler alert**). Other series such as [The Good Fight](#) and [Quantico](#) have also chosen fake news as their preferred narrative mainstays, recreating a real issue that has seriously impacted the course of political and social life in the United States in recent years.



“On different social media platforms, it has managed to become a sanctioned, official voice for exposing fake news”

2. BEYOND POLITICS. FAKE NEWS AND BUSINESS: THE REIGN OF THE RUMOR

The impact that fake news has had in the political sphere is widely known—the victory of Donald Trump or the pro-Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom being prime examples—signaling a turning point in our recent history.

Fake news is not a temporary phenomenon, but rather a perfect storm brought on by technology which is not going to die down in the upcoming years. The IT consulting firm Gartner assures us in *Top Strategic Technology Trends for 2018* that “by 2022, the majority of individuals in mature economies will consume more false information than true information.” They also warn that **beyond the global impact on politics and media demonstrated in 2017, fake news also represents a serious concern for companies.**

“Companies need to closely monitor what is being said about their brand and the context in which it is being said. Brands will need to cultivate a pattern of behavior and values that will reduce the ability of others to undermine the brand,” the report stresses.

If anyone in Spain has declared the war on fake news, it is [Maldito Bulo](#). With over 465,000 followers on different social media platforms, it

has managed to become a sanctioned, official voice for exposing fake news. And it does so with the same recipe as the enemy: by using ingenuity, making an impact, and going viral. Behind this army of fake news “detectives” is a group of journalists whose purpose is, in their own words, “to provide readers with the tools to avoid getting duped.”

The journalist Julio Montes is one of the co-founders of Maldito Bulo: “We receive at least 15 unfounded rumors a day, without including the ones that are repeated. We don’t have enough resources to review them all, so we try to debunk the ones making the largest impact. At present, we have debunked around 500 fake news stories. Hopefully this year we will be able to debunk even more, and especially do so quickly, which is our ultimate goal: to stop the fake news cycle before it hits its peak.”

3. HOW TO TACKLE FALSE INFORMATION. THE ACTIVE ROLE OF COMPANIES

At present, there is a growing debate about **how to tackle the fake news** that exists online. Some authors, like [Darrell M. West](#), the director of the Center for Technology Innovation at the Brookings Institution, points to the need for involving governments, institutions, the media, companies, and

“Silence is no longer an option, and only by taking an active stance can companies tackle the disinformation that lurks around them”

private citizens in order to solve this problem. According to West, governments and educational institutions must promote information literacy; the media must provide quality journalism and fight disinformation; technology companies must invest in tools that help identify fake news; and finally, citizens must contrast information.

So, must companies wait for these measures to be put into place while they continue to be negatively affected by unfounded rumors and fake news stories? We believe that in the age of hyper transparency in which we live, **silence is no longer an option, and only by taking an active stance can companies tackle the disinformation that lurks around them.**

Maldito Bulo is quite clear about the mechanism to fight it: transparency, early detection, and a sweeping denial of any fake news by trusted sources in the community. “We must learn to fight disinformation using its own weapons. By making the refutations go viral and promoting communities that are willing to help,” says Montes.

In this regard, Marc Amorós offers three key pieces of advice for companies that want to win the battle against fake news. **The first recommendation is to listen closely and constantly to what’s being**

said on social media. “We need to monitor your positioning and your brand’s dialogue with consumers to ensure that if any fake news story is spread, it can be quickly detected. The sooner you detect a rumor, the sooner you can react.”

The second recommendation is taking action and denying false information: “The brand must never opt for silence when faced with damaging fake news. There are brand names, just like people, who think that something is not going to go viral and choose to sit back and wait for it to go away. Before you know it, the rumor has spread like wildfire and become so big that you’re left with the paralyzing notion: how can we deny all this now?”

And the final recommendation is to respond in the same way, within the same mental framework as the fake news: “Just saying that something is a lie doesn’t work.” Amorós points out that “You can’t try to refute false information that appeals to an emotion or a feeling with hard, cold data.”

4. FIGHTING DISINFORMATION WITH ADVOCACY. SOME KEY NOTIONS

In addition to the considerations made by Maldito Bulo and Marc Amorós, **we would like to add the need to work on prevention.** In addition

“The logical response is to take on the lies endorsed by fake profiles/ interested parties/ uninformed parties with truthful information promoted by real-life, well-informed brand ambassadors”

to applying the refutation protocols after the rumor has been detected, we need to build preventive mechanisms that put us in a better position to deal with fake news. What are these mechanisms and how are they coordinated? In our opinion, they necessarily involve developing **digital identity programs** that promote the presence of the company’s managers and employees on social networks. The logical response is to take on the lies endorsed by fake profiles/ interested parties/ uninformed parties with truthful information promoted by real-life, well-informed brand ambassadors. **Basically, fighting fake news with real advocacy.** We can summarize the main benefits of this perspective in four key points:

1. Humanize the communication

Authenticity, transparency, credibility, and trust are values that have come into play in the new digital age. However, how should they be applied? Recently, [Iván Pino](#) provided the key in his report *Digital Experience*: “the message is not the vehicle. The person is the vehicle”. This concept has already been applied to perfection by the leaders of Tesla and Amazon. Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla, denied on his Twitter

profile [the information](#) published by *The New York Times* about the Model S car. The same strategy was used by Jeff Bezos, who ironically denied on [Twitter](#) news related with Amazon’s intention to open automated supermarkets. The tweet got more than 1,000 “likes” and 478 RTs. They are both examples of how companies have managed to limit or even reverse the impact on their reputation by personalizing the message and making the most of the digital identities of their CEOs. In the digital environment, **companies who opt for a “human voice” as a value proposition increase their credibility.**

2. Promote the leadership and increase the influence of your organization

In addition to the corporate communication channels that companies have available, their ambassadors can become qualified spokespeople with the ability to highlight certain attributes of their companies. An example of this is [Antonio Llardén](#), the chairman of Enagás who shares his vision about the present and future of the energy sector on a personal blog,

“The personal brand projects of managers and spokespeople developed by companies are a key element for promoting a dialogue with consumers and a relationship with their main interest groups”

highlighting the aspects that are being developed by his own company.

Furthermore, ambassadors not only boost the leadership position of the company they represent, they can also increase its influence. According to the Oxford Dictionary, influence is: “The capacity [of someone] to have an effect on the character, development, or behavior of someone or something, or the effect itself.” Therefore, it is a quality pertaining to people and not corporations. **Working on the influence of a company in the digital arena necessarily involves working on the digital identity of its managers and/or employees.**

3. Position the ambassadors as mentors and points of reference

The development of a solid digital identity consistent with the values of the company’s ambassadors makes their opinion in certain communities, the ones with which they share interests, take on a perceived quality of expertise and influence in regard to certain issues. This is the case of [Rosa Maria Garcia](#), chairperson of Siemens España,

who defines leadership, corporate management, and innovation as the pillars of her discourse on social media. Or [Mary Barra](#), the CEO of General Motors, who has positioned herself in the terrain of women’s empowerment and their development in STEM areas.

4. Promote transparency and enhance reputation

The personal brand projects of managers and spokespeople developed by companies are a key element for promoting a dialogue with consumers and a relationship with their main interest groups (*stakeholders*) –and consequently, for promoting a commitment to transparency. Basically, as [Adolfo Corujo](#) put forward in *UNO Magazine #13*, “the managers who handle this cultural shift intelligently **will make a decisive contribution to improving the corporate reputation of the companies they lead.**”

As we become aware of the benefits –but also the cultural stress– that this perspective entails for corporate organizations, **how should we approach the creation of a digital identity program?** Our colleagues Luis González

and Jon Pérez recently developed *The Ten Golden Rules of Employee Advocacy*, which is an extremely useful guide for approaching programs involving employees. Based on these principles, we will now define the steps

for managing a successful ambassador network that communicates the reality of the company with honesty and authenticity, but can also serve as a protective shield against false information if the need should arise.

False rumors and companies. Some examples

McDonald's	The ingredient in McDonald's french fries that will help cure baldness	"A group of Japanese scientists says it has found a possible solution to baldness in McDonald's french fries." Several media outlets picked up the false story about french fries being a permanent solution to baldness.
Heineken	Heineken and the pigeons sucked in by a grain grinder	The video, which shows how hundreds of pigeons drawn by barley mix ended up being sucked in and ground up by the machine circulated rapidly on WhatsApp and became news. The company had to issue a press release to deny that this video had been recorded at any of its facilities.
Kebab	The European Union may ban kebabs owing to health risks	Just as the Crisis Department mentioned in its blog, the alleged ban on kebabs in Europe was embraced by the media to the point where the European Commission and Parliament had to deny it on their social media accounts.
Mercadona	The Mercadona cream recall	This is a recurring rumor that circulates every now and again on Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The Health Ministry and Mercadona have already denied it on social networks. What's more, the Spanish National Police Force has warned the public on several occasions, via their @policia account, about spreading this false information.
Zara	Zara discount coupons	Gift cards or discount coupons for certain stores are scams that are also repeated every so often and spread quickly via WhatsApp and social media.

“The effectiveness of communication involves clearly marking the limits of the conversational territories in which a company wishes to position itself, and beyond this, which communities it wants to reach”

5. DEVELOPING AN ADVOCACY PROGRAM STEP-BY-STEP

STARTING POINT. DEFINE YOUR CONVERSATIONAL TERRITORIES AND IDENTIFY YOUR COMMUNITIES

A few years ago, our colleagues Adolfo Corujo, Ivan Pino, and David Gonzalez Natal [reflected on the new communication frontiers](#) and introduced two new concepts into the debate: conversational territories as stable bodies of conversation, and communities of speakers who are not identified according to demographic criteria, but rather by a sense of belonging to a particular group which shares their values, interests, and goals.

Today, the effectiveness of communication involves clearly marking the limits of the conversational territories in which a company wishes to position itself, and beyond this, which communities it wants to reach.

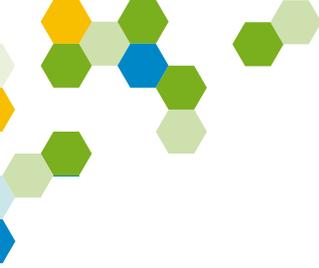
This point is essential to digital identity development programs. If we don't know who the people we wish to communicate with are, or the matters we wish to discuss, we will not be able to establish the influence of our advocates. As Pino and Gonzalez pointed out in [Digital Experience, effectively combining communication and marketing](#),

when implementing a process to transform our stakeholders into ambassadors, establishing a “time for reflection and exploration” is essential to “determining the types of people we wish to attract and win over, taking into account their interests, emotions, and personal characteristics. An outline of the members of the community we hope to create, and of the sense of belonging that could be cultivated among them in regards to certain shared values and goals.”

STAGE I. CREATE THE PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK

Once the conversational territories have been defined and we have identified the communities and people with whom we wish to communicate, we need to determine the participation framework within which we will develop the program.

It is likely that a company already has employee participation policies in place, but it is equally likely that said policies are a few years old and more restrictive and limiting than incentivizing and motivating. Is it worth developing advocacy programs in organizations with restrictive participation policies? The answer goes without saying. Although it seems like a minor issue, before tackling an ambassador program it is important to



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reassess internal policies and guidelines. In many cases, reviewing these standards and setting new, more stimulating ones is the real starting point for working on digital identity development programs for managers and employees.

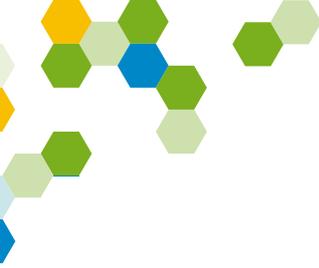
STAGE II. PROVIDE TOOLS TO YOUR EMPLOYEES AND SELECT EMPLOYEES WITH THE POTENTIAL TO BECOME AMBASSADORS

After determining the new policies, it is time for training and providing tools and know-how to potential ambassadors. **Training sessions are not only useful for providing instruction, but also for identifying those ambassadors with the greatest potential.** In this regard it is important to consider the following: **what makes an employee a good advocate?** In our opinion, there are two main qualities that define a good ambassador. On the one hand, their attitude; in other words, their predisposition to sharing content about the company and how they identify with the corporate goals. On the other hand, their influence; this concerns their ability to become a reference or influencer in one of the previously defined target communities.

Therefore, good training will focus on these two qualities and begin by communicating to the employees the mutual benefit (for both the company and the ambassador) of an advocacy program. It will continue by working on the right attitude and providing the necessary tools, techniques, and guidelines to increase the influence of their employees on social media platforms.

STAGE III. DEFINE THE PERSONAL EDITORIAL STANCE

A digital identity reflects who we are and how we present ourselves as professionals on the internet, consciously building a personal brand and controlling the footprint we leave behind. This is why, before embarking on an advocacy program with some of the managers or employees in your organization, you need to work with them to define their editorial stance and marketing channel plan. Which topics are they going to talk about and what will their contribution be? Who are they trying to reach and who should they interact with?—these are questions you need specific answers to if you wish to be successful.



“We are not facing a simple problem. Therefore, we must adopt more sophisticated solutions if (...) the idea is that if you want different results, you have to try a different approach”

STAGE IV. ORGANIZE, INCENTIVIZE, AND MONITOR PARTICIPATION

At this final stage, after having defined the territories and communities and created the participation framework, trained and selected the ambassadors and developed their editorial stance with them, your efforts must be focused on organizing, incentivizing, and monitoring said participation. The key is, on the one hand, to keep the program alive in order to activate it whenever necessary; and on the other hand, to measure the participation of your managers and employees to detect areas for improvement and identify the ambassadors who show the greatest potential.

We are not facing a simple problem. Therefore, we must

adopt more sophisticated solutions if we wish to be prepared. Albert Einstein is widely credited with saying, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.” In this context, the idea is that if you want different results, you have to try a different approach. As communication and reputation professionals, we need to tackle new problems with new solutions. And fake news represents a new problem that (unfortunately) looks like it is here to stay. In this case, the quote “truth is stranger than fiction” may fall short. Because if you repeat it often enough, fiction ends of becoming the new reality, and this new pseudo reality becomes our “shared truth.” It lies with companies and society as a whole to make a joint effort to fight this threat.

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