

Listening In: Fostering Influencer Relationships to Manage Fake News

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Executive Summary

As fake news is used to corrupt communication, organizations can suffer reputational and monetary losses. This onslaught of fake news has significantly impacted the public relations industry, and practitioners are left scrambling to address the causes, symptoms, and consequences of exposure relative to the brands they represent. Social media platforms have been a bane to public relations because organizations often face an uphill battle to prove their communication is credible (Sprout Social, 2018). The backlash from select groups can lead to disinformation campaigns and other deliberate efforts to mislead the public.

News reports and case studies developed from external viewpoints reveal some insights about how organizations can manage fake news crises. Without first-hand accounts from public relations practitioners, it's impossible to know what actions a company can take to prevent and manage fake news. We fill this gap by exploring the experiences of public relations practitioners who have successfully navigated fake news and other crises. We view our findings through the lens of the Social-mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012), a framework of social media tools to manage communication before, during, and after a crisis.

Our study used a qualitative approach to gain insight into preventing and managing fake news through influencers and social media monitoring. Interviews were conducted among 21 public relations practitioners—12 from corporations and organizations and nine from agencies—who had at least five years' experience in crisis management. To classify the interviews, we used a multistage *thematic analysis* approach, posited by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify and analyze patterns within data.

The study revealed listening online can help detect potential issues that could attract fake news, inform response strategies and identify online influencers who can change the narrative. The findings suggest best practices for influencer relationships to manage fake news, which includes building goodwill, inspiring advocacy, being responsive and transparent, and integrating media relations and social media strategies. Study findings are consistent with key tenets of the SMCC model, conveying how organizations can effectively prepare for a social-mediated crisis. For example, the SMCC model and the public relations practitioners who participated in the study recommend online monitoring of social conversations to learn about areas of vulnerability and potential triggers for a crisis.

This study builds a compelling business case for public relations practitioners to invest resources facilitating online listening and building relationships with online influencers to manage fake news. The study participants emphasized the spread of digital fake news isn't going away. As public relations scholars and practitioners, the more we understand the motivations behind the spread of fake news and best practices to prevent and manage it, the more we can safeguard honest and transparent communication and the ethical practice of public relations.

Keywords: *Crisis management, Digital influencers, Digital media crisis, Fake news, Fake news crisis, Online influencers, Online listening, Misinformation, Social listening, Social media crisis, Social media influencers, Social media monitoring*

Introduction

Influencers have long-held importance in public relations. Stakeholders, opinion leaders, and subject-matter experts facilitate media coverage, extending public relations practitioners' messaging capabilities. These influencers have gained prominence in digital spaces, where high follower counts and engagement levels equate to amplified messages. Social media platforms have been a bane to public relations because organizations often face an uphill battle to prove their communication is credible (Sprout Social, 2018). "The biggest challenge facing publicists, the media, the public, and businesses today and in the future is the explosion of fake news" (Wynne, 2016, p. 105). Today's fake news producers are unique in their intentions to target specific entities (Ott, 2017), particularly online.

Conceptualizing fake news

The term *fake news* is increasingly evident in news and everyday discourse, usually describing attempts to restrict information flow, diverse views, and ultimately, democratic debate (Brummette, DiStaso, Vafeiadis, & Messner, 2018). The denotative meaning of fake news continues to be debated. For corporations, fake news sometimes emerges as *paracrises* (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), i.e., reputational threats such as rumors that accuse organizations of practicing unethical behavior. These threats require responses but do not warrant a full crisis communications effort. Corporations also experience fake news in a literal sense, as "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" (Lazer, et al., 2018). Fake news is sometimes used interchangeably with misinformation and disinformation; however, in the inaugural *Disinformation in Society* report issued by the Institute for Public Relations (2019), McCorkindale defines disinformation as "deliberately misleading or biased information" and misinformation "as false information that is spread, regardless whether there is an intent to mislead" (p. 3). In a typology of academic literature, Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) found six distinct definitions for fake news, settling on two dimensions: The degree to which fake news relies on facts, and the degree to which the creator of the news intends to mislead. According to McCorkindale (2019), "Americans identify false information as a problem in society regardless of whether there is an intent to mislead" (p. 8). For the present study, the authors adopt the Lazer, et al.'s (2018) definition, which avoids intentionality altogether. The scholars describe fake news as "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" (p. 1094).

Digital environments facilitate fake news because of the rate of message diffusion in online platforms (Berghel, 2017; Berman, 2017; Guess, Nylan & Reifler, 2018; Ott, 2017; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Some reasons for the spread of fake news involve a shift in how people obtain news and the malicious intent of conspirators and content creators. According to the Pew Research Center (2018), more Americans now obtain news from social media than print newspapers. Further, in a 2018 Knight Foundation Report, a study of more than 10 million tweets from 700,000 Twitter accounts found links to over 600 fake and conspiracy outlets. False news on Twitter spreads quicker than the truth in an analysis of true and false news online (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Public relations practitioners have voiced concern about the growth of fake news and its reputational threat for organizations. Fencl (2018) noted, "Ignoring the ascendance of social media as a news source can have a deep, lingering impact on your company's reputation – its most valuable uninsured asset." No organization is immune to fake news, but influencer relationships can reduce the risks of fake news crises. "Organizations

should strive to be first in sharing crisis information with their publics (Spence, Sellnow-Richmond, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2015, p. 211).

Missing thus far in the body of knowledge is a first-hand account of how public relations practitioners who represent corporations and organizations navigate fake news crises with influencer publics. Monitoring social media, preparing statements, identifying effective spokespeople, and developing messages can help organizations act quickly and effectively if rumors begin to spread (Alva, 2017; Haber, 2017). This study shares public relations practitioners' insight into the roles of social media monitoring and online influencers with effectively managing a crisis originating from fake news.

Theory

The social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012), a structure of social media tools to manage communication before, during, and after a crisis, is the framework for this study. Designed to aid organizations in social-mediated crisis preparation through issues monitoring, SMCC functions as an assessment tool for influencer response strategies and crisis recovery metrics to investigate interactions with influential social media creators, social media followers, and those who consume crisis information indirectly (Liu, Jin, Briones, & Kuch, 2012). The SMCC model explains how publics transmit information and how organizations communicate with publics during crises. Audiences use social media during crises for insider information, so third-party influencers are critically important for social media crisis response. Further, these scholars determined that both traditional and social media are needed in crisis response (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012).

Literature Review

Social media monitoring involves monitoring online conversations about an organization to better understand public opinion (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009), and monitoring online interactions by following and analyzing social media discourse (Ruggiero & Vos, 2014). Similarly, listening online includes attending to online discussions and debates (Crawford, 2009) and monitoring what and where people post by collecting comments across social media (Schweidel & Moe, 2014). Thus, the authors of this study use *social media monitoring* and *listening online* interchangeably because scholarship makes little distinction between the terms.

Public relations practitioners employ a variety of tools to aid corporations or organizations in crisis. Research reviewed for the present study indicates that social media monitoring and online influencers are critically important for crisis management.

Usage of Social Media Monitoring

Social media monitoring can vary according to the tools used (e.g., Lariscy, et al., 2009), but the monitoring process involves preparation of search guidelines and parameters, collection of relevant social media data, analysis of data, and reporting of findings (Ruggiero & Vos, 2014). Senior-level public relations practitioners use social media for listening to what is being said about their organizations, the industry, and the competition (Wigley & Zhang, 2011) which helps them handle risks or crises (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). According to Ruggiero and Vos (2014), monitoring can vary based on the stakeholder, the message, and the platform.

Engagement Significant in Social Media Monitoring

Barnes and Jacobsen (2014) assert that monitoring online conversations should occur on digital platforms that foster engagement. While Crawford (2009) agreed, the scholar emphasized the responsibility of corporations or organizations to regularly address online discussions because of the expectation for responsiveness among users. Similarly, Macnamara (2014) encouraged organizations to use interactive digital platforms that invite feedback, and employ individuals to participate in online conversations. Researchers have found a positive relationship between having dedicated social media staff and effective electronic conversation monitoring (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2014).

Fröhlich and Schöller (2012) recommended online brand communities as a way to engage and build relationships through various stakeholders, which may help identify the highlights and pressure points for stakeholders. The authors noted that organizations must respond and act quickly to any issues that evolve among online communities. Favorable relationships can be cultivated with stakeholders through using a human voice on social media, according to Park and Lee (2011).

“For companies, the value of listening could be considered in three ways: being seen to participate in a community and hearing people’s opinions; utilizing a rapid and lower-cost form of customer support (as compared to the telephone); and gaining a dispersed global awareness of how a brand is discussed and the patterns of consumer use and satisfaction” (Crawford, 2009, pp. 531-532). Social media monitoring enables organizations to understand the impact of electronic conversations. Barnes and Jacobsen (2014) found a significant positive relationship between plans to increase investments in social media and listening to pertinent online conversations.

Inherent Challenges of Social Media Monitoring

Both Crawford (2009) and Macnamara (2014) noted the difficulty of listening to an ever-expanding online public. “Failure to monitor can lead to crises, including, but not limited to, inappropriate content on a website or in blogs, negative information being retweeted or posted on popular forums, and misinformation being disseminated online regarding the company or its products” (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2014, p. 150). Another challenge social media monitoring presents is users who gather followers as they exchange messages. De-centralized information gathering among unofficial sources can be harmful, inadvertently driving misinformation online (Houston et al., 2014).

Social Media Monitoring and Listening Benefits Corporations in Crisis

Environmental scanning remains integral to crisis management today, but now, corporations or organizations can use the same tools to monitor as well as respond to emerging crises (González-Herrero & Smith, 2010). Organizations use listening for reputation assessment and tracking rumors as early warning systems (Houston et al., 2014; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Individuals whose organizations rely heavily on social media for crisis communication convey greater confidence in their organization’s ability to handle a crisis compared with those in organizations that do not rely heavily on social media (Wigley & Zhang, 2011). Social media monitoring sometimes serves as an alternative to traditional media, providing quick information about a given disaster (Houston et al., 2014). Stakeholders can play an important role during crises as well. Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2011) found that some companies allow online communities to correct misinformation during crises.

What is unclear from the literature is the difference between social media listening during crises originated from fake news versus other crises.

RQ1: How do public relations practitioners listen online during fake news crises?

Defining Online Influencers

In one stream of literature about online influencers, scholars have assessed how to define these individuals. Plowman, Wakeman, and Winchel (2015) adopted *latent diffused publics* from Esman (1972) and Grunig (2006) to describe the phenomenon of disparate publics developing organically in digital platforms. These fragmented publics can quickly find one another, formulate around shared interests, and amplify their voices (González-Herrero & Smith, 2010; Kaul & Chaudhri, 2015). But in K. Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and L. Freberg's, (2011) assessment, online influencers are constructed more deliberately. The scholars operationalized the term *social media influencers* as independent endorsers who use digital media to shape public opinion. Kadekova and Holienčinová (2018) defined social media influencers as subject matter experts who have earned their reputations, and they organized them into four categories: celebrities, industry experts and thought leaders, bloggers and content creators, and micro-influencers. Chen (2016) advocated micro-influencers who have a smaller following than a macro-influencer (like a celebrity) tend to be perceived as more authentic and drive more engagement with audiences. Further, a new segment of social media influencers, nano-influencers or "nanos," are gaining popularity in the marketing industry because of their high engagement rate among a small group of 1,000 or fewer followers (Maheshwari, 2018).

By understanding audience perceptions of influencers, the scholars assert, organizations can determine the significance of various influencers. Further, influencer significance merits understanding because some online stakeholders function simultaneously as members of the media and respected influencers. Intervention strategies have called for identifying influencers who could encourage honest news reporting (Shu, Bernard, & Liu, 2018).

According to the World Federation of Advertisers (2018), multinational brands prioritize the quality of followers, credibility, and reputation when choosing influencers for campaigns to increase awareness, enhance brand advocacy, and/or connect with new audiences. Past research indicated the reliance on human intelligence to research influencers. A 2019 survey among 400 U.S. public relations practitioners indicated 59% of the respondents used manual research to identify influencers (PR Newswire & Meltwater). This survey also indicated 67% of these practitioners reported relying on employees as influencers as well as company representatives. Employees can serve as influencers and assist with strengthening organization's reputation and brand when employees share content with external audiences (Ewing, Men, & O'Neil, 2019; Gibbs, MacDonald, & MacKaky, 2015; Neill, 2015). If employees feel informed about social media guidelines and are encouraged to use social media in the workplace, they are more likely to serve as advocates for their employers. McCorkindale and DiStaso (2014) noted, "Thanks to policies and training programs, employees are successfully advocating for their organizations on social media" (p. 4). Ewing et al. (2019) found that many global companies are using social media platforms to encourage employees to serve as content creators and social ambassadors. Each employee functions as a brand ambassador because they serve as stand-ins for companies, particularly among individuals who have no direct experience with a company. Companies are empowering such employees to speak on their behalf because positive words from these brand ambassadors can lead to financial growth (Flanagan, 2010).

Building Influence among Publics

The clout of online influencers has been another focus of influencer research. Online influencers hold substantial power if their views differ from a corporation's or organization's, according to González-Herrero and Smith (2010), because the online audience can easily join forces to speak out against companies. Extending this idea, Kaul and Chaudri (2015) assert stakeholders hold equal power with organizations in social media platforms because they can demand continuous feedback, communicate through multiple digital platforms, and sometimes affect organizational reputation by driving perception about companies and brands (e.g., Booth & Matic, 2010).

The largest research stream about influencers has focused on influencer engagement. Kadekova and Holienčinová (2018) contended influencers can impact decision making because of their authority, expertise, position, and/or relationship with the audiences. According to these scholars, ambassadors are the most effective influencers. Kupfer, Pähler vor der Holte, Kübler, and Hennig-Thurau (2018) conducted a study confirming the value of a social media influencers level of engagement with their audiences. While the size of a network is important, these scholars recommended also considering the level of social media activity to select influencers. As with crisis communication, González-Herrero and Smith (2010) encourage companies to engage with influencers before an issue has arisen and been intentional about communicating on multiple online platforms. This approach raises their credibility among online audiences and enables them to build relationships with individuals who can become advocates. Organizations must provide differential engagement strategies with their various stakeholders, according to Luoma-Ahu (2015). This means cultivating relationships by enabling, rather than enforcing, dialogue. McCorkindale and DiStaso (2014) noted the benefits of influencers to disseminate organizational messages. Further, Kaul and Chaudhri (2015) noted companies can manage their corporate reputations through consistent engagement and other relationship-development activities with stakeholders on the digital channels these audiences frequent.

While communication practitioners and scholars have analyzed the power of online influencers, minimal research has been conducted about the role of online influencers in fake news crises. A gap exists in research focused on influencer engagement related to managing a fake news scenario.

RQ2: How do public relations practitioners engage with online influencers during fake news crises?

Method

To explore how public relations practitioners manage fake news crises through listening online and influencer relationships, the authors interviewed 21 public relations practitioners—12 from corporations and organizations (C1-C11) and nine from agencies (A1-A9). The interview method was well-suited to the sensitive nature of the phenomenon of study because it is a natural, open communication process that allows participants to reconstruct their world, providing access to their multiple realities (Guba, 1990). As senior-level public relations practitioners, all participants have an average of 11 years' experience in crisis management, ranging from five to 25 years. Public relations practitioners at agencies, corporations, and organizations were chosen as the study population because of their shared status within the industry and the knowledge they have about the particulars of fake news (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The authors developed the data collection instrument, an interview guide with a semi-

structured design, to foster dialogue in the direction of study goals (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). All of the interviews, each lasting from 30 to 45 minutes each, were digitally recorded upon consent of the participants. The interviews were transcribed by an online transcription service.

The authors used thematic analysis, a multistage approach posited by Braun and Clarke (2006), to describe and classify the data. The first stage of analysis involved becoming familiar with the data by reading the transcripts multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding and noting initial ideas. In the second stage of analysis, the authors categorized interesting features of the dataset, systematically coding relevant items. The third stage of analysis involved gathering data that were thematically relevant to combine categories into broader themes. The authors used inductive analysis for the fourth stage, reviewing categories and themes alongside the interview transcripts, to allow for additional themes before the final read-through. This stage required several close readings of the transcripts one by one, noting related words, phrases, or sentences. During the fifth stage of analysis, the authors generated definitions and labels by reviewing the transcripts and referring back to their initial categories.

It is important for researchers to balance interview quotations and their insights during qualitative analysis (Brennen, 2013). In the sixth and final stage of analysis, the authors produced a selection of participant quotations by relating back to the research questions and academic literature. Quotes illustrating the thematic categories are covered next.

Findings

Study participants revealed real-world benefits of social media monitoring and influencer relationships to manage a fake news crisis and/or an issue related to the spread of inaccurate information.

RQ1: How Do Public Relations Practitioners Listen Online during Fake News Crises?

Potential fake news crisis scenarios are outlined to implement a proactive listening strategy involving targeted issues. This approach entails monitoring to identify potentially fake news issues and relevant influencers' social conversations. Findings indicated senior-level public relations practitioners are highly involved in the analysis of listening reports and determining if and when response strategies are implemented to address fake news or other false information. Response strategies may involve waiting for influencers to set the record straight, informing employees, customers, news media, and other audiences about the fakes news, or directly correcting the false information via owned channels. The following are guidelines for listening strategies to minimize and manage fake news.

Listen for potential issues. The communication practitioners who participated in the study explained that their strategic approach with online listening is built into crisis contingency plans. Participants identified certain topics or issues that could potentially involve a fake news attack or disinformation campaign. "We think through a couple of easy targets. We all know our vulnerabilities," said a digital communication executive for an integrated communications and public relations agency (A2). "It doesn't necessarily mean that that's going to be the one that's exposed, but if we have them, think through them. That's your preparation."

Interestingly, the U.S. political climate has impacted listening strategies. For example, many participants shared their organizations have planned for a scenario if the current White House administration includes their brands in a social media post. "The monitoring is key. You certainly don't want something out there that's festering on social or in the media. You're caught ... Sorry to use this kind of a crass phrase, but with your pants down. You want to be ready to go

and have that messaging in place. We have built those elements into all our contingency plans,” explained a communication executive for a consumer packaged goods corporation (C11).

Public relations practitioners use a variety of online tools to uncover specific issues and monitor influencers. “I’ve used social media tools to identify crisis as almost like an early alert system,” noted a corporate communicator for a fine products retailer (C10). The practitioners conveyed while social listening tools are helpful to monitor social media conversations, manually reviewing the conversations and conducting environmental scanning is needed. “Largely, it’s the team—hand-to-hand combat—the team watching, not any sort of sophisticated digital tool,” explained a communicator in the broadcasting industry (C4). The tools may misinterpret keywords, sentiment, context, and other aspects of digital content. “We need somebody’s eyes on social media all day, all evening in case of something ... So having those people here, that’s their full-time job,” said a practitioner in education (C12).

Listen to identify influencers. Participants combine human intelligence and technology to find and analyze key online influencers. Some online tools, like Quid and BuzzSumo, are employed to analyze relevant content and conversations, assess influencers’ reach, authority, and engagement, and then build lists of influencers. “We have media monitoring reports that we get in every day,” shared an agency public relations executive (A8). “Then, [we have] our regular engagement with our stakeholders—whether it’s NGOs or policy-makers—that also serves as an early warning system for us.”

This pre-crisis research helps practitioners identify who is driving relevant discussions. Communication practitioners can then work to build relationships with these influencers before a piece of fake news surfaces or another type of crisis. Also, practitioners can monitor potential initiators who may intentionally share misleading or false information. A communication practitioner for a marketing agency (A6) noted social media monitoring helps determine who is perpetuating the false narrative or acting as advocates for the organization. This practitioner said social media monitoring offers “a better sense for what are they talking about, what’s their influence and how are they helping us or hurting us in a crisis.”

Include diverse perspectives. Practitioners listen to many viewpoints to identify online influencers, including employees, customers, bloggers, traditional media, policy-makers, and others. Influencers, ranging from subject matter experts to people with thousands of followers, can drive the narrative of traditional and social media news stories.

Many study participants discussed the value of employees playing an influential role in minimizing and managing fake news. First, the employees could inadvertently contribute to the false narrative if they aren’t aware of the facts. Second, the employees can help spot fake news, alert the communication team, and share factual information and/or links to resources to counter the false narrative. “A company is no longer the only thing you have to track when it comes to your reputation management,” shared a public relations consultant (A1). “You have the company, but then if you go to their LinkedIn page, you have 500, 1,000, 1,500 employees that are also—whether that brand likes it or not—part of that company.” If employees are appropriately trained with using social media in the workplace, they can assist communication practitioners with identifying and managing fake news.

Study participants also shared that fake news and misinformation can often be a result of a disgruntled customer or an influencer who opposes an organization’s service, product and/or behavior. “Having an influencer strategy is really important,” advised a corporate communicator for a finance corporation (C6). “You are paying attention to the swell of comments, like we tend

to have flags for people who have 5,000 or more followers because for us it's a predictor of how much faster it [false narrative] spread as they become part of the conversation."

RQ2: How do Public Relations Practitioners Engage with Online Influencers during Fake News Crises?

Build goodwill in advance of a fake news crisis. Participants identified "engaging stakeholders" as a strategy for minimizing and managing fake news crises. Stakeholder engagement involves internal and external influencers. "Having partnerships with influencers who are trusted sources, I think positions companies, in a consumer's mind, to be more likable and more trustworthy because they have those relationships," said a corporate communicator for a fine products retailer (C10). "So it's not really something I would activate during a crisis scenario, but I think it's a good approach for building those audiences, building awareness, and generating more engagement, which could potentially help you in a crisis scenario because you've built some of that brand love through that influencer."

Fostering relationships with online influencers helps public relations practitioners monitor online behavior and identify potentially fake news risks. Targeted outreach to online influencers opens the dialogue with individuals driving narratives through digital channels. Study participants emphasized managing relationships with multiple stakeholders. "A lot of conversations can happen in social, and influencer marketing is getting bigger every day so you want to have those people that aren't necessarily media people but they control some of the narratives in the conversation and can influence media conversations," said a corporate communicator for a public broadcasting organization (C4). "You want to be out there engaging with them."

Inspire advocacy. Further, influencers may serve as effective advocates for an organization. Study participants explained that influencers will become involved to defend the organization or brand. These influencers can help set the record straight when inaccurate information is shared. "We'll actually sit back and choose not to respond because we see that there's a contingency of advocates and people who do have a sense of the truth and the wherewithal to effectively actually speak to the naysayers..." noted an agency public relations practitioner (A6).

Correct false information. This study's findings conveyed the importance of changing the false narrative to help audiences find factual information. "You need to get your news for your side of the story, your set of facts out there," said an agency executive (A5). Study participants use owned channels like websites and direct communication to stakeholders to ensure facts relevant to the fake news topic were easily accessible. An agency practitioner noted, "One of my first things is to say, 'Who needs to know this and who needs to know this first?' So I start going through employees, board...and then customers, clients, donors ...and the media's certainly in there...you want to make sure you're talking first to those who are closest to you." These internal and external audiences can serve as effective influencers to counter the false narrative.

A corporate participant for a utilities company (C3) explained the value of listening to concerns shared in social conversations and tailoring particular responses: "It's a customer service approach to media management where we can keep an eye on any questions that come in and address those issues...Those messages are shared through social media and become part of our broader public relations and communications message."

Be responsive and transparent. When dealing with a fake news crisis, study participants noted the challenge of determining if taking action may spread the false narrative rather than control it. To determine the response strategy, the study participants recommended analyzing the scope of the issue, volume, and sentiment of the conversations, and credibility and reach of the sources. Senior public relations practitioners should be involved in the assessment and deployment of response strategies.

Digital media has reduced the response time for public relations practitioners. “[Response time is] expected to be between one and 12 hours, explained an agency executive (A4). “So we try to work really hard within that 12-hour window.” Ideally, influencers may take the lead to counter the false narrative and defend the organization.

Responsiveness is central to employing reactive stakeholder engagement. The study participants discussed the value of openly addressing comments shared about the organization in social conversations. A corporate communicator (C10) discussed the importance of organizations being transparent and responsive: “It means responding to things publicly so people can see...I think being able to be involved in those conversations builds credibility both for the company that you’re representing, and also for PR as a whole...it’s our job to make sure that we’re not ignoring those conversations, and that we do have social media listening tools in place, and we are engaging and interacting with those audiences.”

If an organization ignores these comments, news media influencers may see the conversation and use those comments in a story. “I think that’s where the idea of fake news goes down a slippery slope,” noted a corporate communicator (C10). “It’s interesting to have human reactions to things, but when those reactions aren’t voicing the truth, and you’re only telling one side of the story, I think that’s when it gets really tricky...it’s really important, going back to social media listening, to understand what is being said and to respond to those people. So, if you do have a reporter or someone looking for a story, they’re seeing that there are both sides.”

Integrate media relations and social media strategies. The online and offline influencer roles of traditional news media were emphasized; the news media can either amplify the false narrative or help clarify the issue using credible sources and factual information. “You can’t completely change the narrative, but when it comes to major fake news, organizations can at least mitigate it and get on the record with their core public in other ways to help to shoot it down,” noted a communication practitioner in education (C12). This practitioner discussed a fake news crisis involving news media sharing false information. The organization had to reach out to the media to convey the facts: “There were some (news media) that didn’t believe it. Even though they were told that it wasn’t true they still didn’t take their stories down because they were getting lots of hits out of it. They were getting lots of traffic out of it. We were forever chasing that. That’s not in the PR playbook.” Still, this study participant and others emphasized the need for public relations practitioners to follow media relations best practices by acting transparently and proactively working with journalists at all times and ensuring that journalists have access to credible sources.

“We’ll use social and traditional in a very integrative way to respond to an issue or a crisis,” said a corporate communicator in the consumer packaged goods industry (C8). “Whether it’s posting something to our page, and putting paid support behind it to help drive eyes to that content. Or, you know, your traditional media relations; getting our statement into news coverage.”

Both online and offline strategies are used to build credible relationships with the news media and other influencers. “They (employee representatives) have good relationships with

community officials in different areas that we serve,” said a corporate communicator (C3). “They have relationships with the media in those areas as well as with our media relations team, and...are helpful in providing information and alerting us on when issues might come up that we need to address from a communication standpoint.”

Discussion

Study findings regarding the value of listening online for potential issues are consistent with academic literature (e.g., González-Herrero & Smith, 2010; Houston et al., 2014; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Using listening online as an early warning system to detect issues suggests that public relations practitioners are making a direct link between issues management and crisis management, rather than treating the two as distinct phenomena. As part of communicators’ crisis management plans, listening online is a notable strategy because it grants communicators warning—and thus additional preparation time—to develop an appropriate response.

Research suggests that it’s wise for public relations practitioners to include White House officials in their crisis preparation efforts. Although White House officials were not identified as influencers in the literature reviewed for this study, certain officials match the characteristics of a social media influencer that Freberg, et al. (2011) offered: they function as third-party endorsers and opinion influencers (e.g. Kaul & Chaudri, 2015) who shape audience attitudes. Study participants have witnessed powerful political influencers organize online publics against corporations or organizations, consistent with findings from González-Herrero and Smith (2010). The digital age has increased the power and reach of online influencers exponentially, requiring public relations practitioners to adapt their crisis management plans accordingly.

Despite the significance of technological advancements in improving environmental scanning capabilities, research continues to reveal the centrality of human involvement for the success of social media monitoring (e.g., Ruggiero & Vos, 2014; World Federation of Advertisers; 2018). Perhaps industry issues that occur offline, and related public opinion, are equally predictive of potential crises. Public relations practitioners in the present study include search parameters to monitor what is said about their industries, their companies, and their competition, consistent with Wigley and Zhang (2011). It would seem that public relations practitioners hold industry knowledge that cannot be replicated by a machine.

Study findings indicating that public relations practitioners identify and interact with influencers according to particular characteristics comports with extensive research about influencers (Chen, 2016; Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018; Kaul & Chaudri, 2015; Maheshwari, 2018). Rather than taking a solely quantitative approach by determining influencers according to their follower counts, industry experts appear to be adopting more qualitative measures to identify influencers. Corporations will be better equipped to manage potential issues if they are not overly reliant on the perspectives of one type of influencer.

The role of employees as influencers in this study is consistent with previous scholarship (Ewing, Men, & O’Neil, 2019; Gibbs, et al., 2015; McCorkindale & DiStaso; 2014; Neill, 2015, PR Newswire & Meltwater, 2019). Unlike other influencers whose perspectives are restricted to their physical location, employees are uniquely situated as internal and external stakeholders. They can access voices inside and outside the company, serving as important influencers of public opinion—or drivers of the company change.

The value of influencer engagement in the present study echoes findings in previous research (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2014; Crawford, 2009; Fröhlich & Schöller, 2012; Macnamara,

2014; Park & Lee, 2011). Interacting with these influencers in a substantive way, on a regular basis, builds goodwill among important publics. When companies face crises, for example, engaged influencers who vocalize their support have the power to shift a given media narrative. As third parties unconnected to a company, their perspectives hold more sway over public opinion than official corporate messages.

The decision of whether and how to address a fake news story remains a difficult one for public relations practitioners. The speed of online messaging has been noted elsewhere (e.g., Fröhlich & Schöller, 2012), but scholars have also identified the related challenges of audience size (Crawford, 2009; Macnamara, 2014; Plowman, Wakeman, & Winchel, 2015) and message diffusion (Houston, et al., 2014) in digital environments. To be effective, corporations must adapt their messaging so that they can communicate on multiple fronts—sometimes responding, sometimes correcting, and sometimes allowing others to speak on their behalf (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011).

At first glance, the finding that public relations practitioners should engage with online influencers publicly during a fake news crisis seems counterintuitive, considering the importance of privacy in traditional crisis models. However, transparency in online engagement is supported by several studies (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2014; Crawford, 2009; Macnamara, 2014; Park & Lee, 2011). Perhaps stakeholders have come to expect the transparency they experience off-line in digital platforms.

Despite the expansiveness of digital media, public relations practitioners must ensure that messaging about their companies or clients remains accurate. The multitude of perspectives online necessitates consistent interactions (Booth & Matic, 2010; Kaul & Chaudhri, 2015). In addition to combating fake news with facts, open online communication could have the added benefit of improving corporate reputation among external stakeholders.

Study findings revealed the distinctiveness of media in digital environments. These media sometimes include influential bloggers (e.g., Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018) who can shape the news through their expansive platforms—usually quicker than traditional media (Houston, et al., 2014). Public relations practitioners would do well to redesign their media plans to better reflect the expansive social media environment. By continuing to use a mix of social and traditional media, though, they could be appealing corporate executives who are not yet ready to shift their focus to social media.

It was heartening to learn from study participants that employees hold essential roles in building relationships with external stakeholders. Consistent with findings from previous research (Ewing et al., 2019; McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014), such employees function as advocates whose perspectives are essential in conveying a particular corporate identity. Their views and advocacy are invaluable for corporations managing a fake news crisis.

Conclusion

Public relations practitioners who have first-hand experience with fake news accusations and/or crises assert that online influencers are an important public to avoid falling prey to a fake news crisis and to effectively manage crises originating from fake news. Further, these practitioners implement proactive online listening to identify potential risks and influencers, monitor content and social conversations and inform strategies to minimize or manage a fake news crisis.

Theoretical Implications

Building relationships with influencers and monitoring online interactions supports the SMCC model to manage communication before, during, and after a crisis (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). The study participants listen to a range of influencers' perspectives representing internal and external audiences and employ online and offline strategies to build relationships with influencers. The SMCC model supports the value of public relations professionals practicing effective media relations for crisis communication, noting that the "crisis information is transmitted directly between traditional media and social media" (p. 192). These scholars argued that "once participants notice a discussion trend in social media networks, they are more likely to seek out traditional media coverage of these crises" (p. 202). To minimize the spread of fake news, it is critical that traditional media coverage curtails the false narrative by communicating a factual perspective. Study findings also support the SMCC model by documenting the value of third-party endorsement through relationships with social media influencers and traditional news media during a crisis response. Finally, this study expanded the role of "social media creators" (influencers) in the SMCC model as findings indicated online influencers can drive the media narrative online and offline.

Practical Implications

The study findings build a compelling business case for public relations practitioners to invest resources to conduct online listening and build relationships with online influencers to manage fake news. The insight gained through online listening helps public relations practitioners plan for various fake news crisis scenarios. Study participants recognized the challenge of planning because the motivations of content creators are often difficult to surmise, as is the nuance of digital communication. Still, these practitioners communicated the value of online listening and influencer relationships in managing crises originating from fake news. The findings indicate that online listening is used as an early detection system for potential fake news crises and to identify and engage online influencers. Practitioners should listen to internal and external audiences and use technology and traditional manual research to identify influencers. Environmental scanning can assist practitioners with pinpointing vulnerabilities for fake news crises. For example, the current U.S. political climate impacts listening strategies for fake news. Further, some organizations may be more exposed to fake news, and a proactive analysis can assess these risks. "I think companies that have some connection to social issues tend to probably have more risk to being associated with fake news because those are hot-button items today," noted a practitioner working in the finance industry (C6).

This study reinforces the value of relationship building online and offline. Public relations practitioners should build goodwill through listening and interacting with influencers consistently and work to inspire advocacy through these authentic relationships. A crisis communication plan for fake news should clearly outline steps to be responsive and transparent at all times and create opportunities for influencers to easily access factual information. An integrated approach should be used to plan for a fake news crisis. While a fake news crisis may originate in a digital environment, it can quickly spread offline. Relationships with news media can minimize amplification of false narratives and help control a fake news crisis. Also, informed employees, customers, and other stakeholders can serve as credible influencers who can help with identifying and managing fake news stories. As advocated in the SMCC model,

third-party endorsements can be effective in driving the narrative, and therefore protect a company's reputation.

In summary, public relations practitioners can assess their clients and/or employers preparedness to minimize a fake new crisis by:

- identifying potential triggers and vulnerabilities for fake news
- actively monitoring social conversations among stakeholders, influencers, and critics
- conducting social media training with employees and encouraging them to report and share factual information
- building relationships with influencers to inspire advocacy
- being transparent by responding publicly to comments
- directly communicating and correcting misinformation often
- integrating media relations and social media strategies to change false narratives

Limitations and Future Research

While the sample included public relations practitioners representing global companies, all of the study participants live and work in the United States. Future research should include an international sample of practitioners to explore how cultural differences might impact findings. It is unknown whether the distinctions between misinformation, disinformation, and “fake news” exist in other countries. Another key limitation involved the participants' apprehension with openly sharing details about their clients' or company's fake news crises. Study participants were concerned that publicizing these situations could result in stirring up the prior false narrative and/or trigger other fake news situations. The confidentiality granted by informed consent documents necessitated oblique references to specific cases. Future research should focus on an in-depth analysis of fake news case studies if cooperation can be secured. An opportunity to partner with a practitioner to research from inside a company should be explored. This study and prior research document how technology influences both the dissemination and management of fake news and inaccurate information. Future research is warranted to examine the role of technology to more effectively identify and manage the spread of intentional false narratives, which can provide valuable insights for communicators making decisions about investments in technology. Finally, study participants often interchangeably used fake news, misinformation, and social media crises; the literature also documented a lack of clarification for fake news. Tandoc et al. (2018); noted “A clear definition of fake news, one that matches its empirical manifestation, can help in testing and building theories in news production and consumption” (p. 149). Future research should further explore the definition of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, as well as fake news versus social media crises, to delineate between them. When the authors asked study participants about their definitions of fake news, responses ran the gamut from rumors to conspiracy theories to simple errors.

Fake news isn't going away. As technology continues to evolve, more fake news, misinformation, and disinformation challenges are foreseen. “I'm very fearful of the future of fake news because we've seen what fake news does to people, and we've seen what the hackers can get access to,” shared a practitioner in education (C12). “So, when I see the two of those things together, it scares me.”

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Table 1 Study Participants			
Area of Expertise	Agency/Corporation/ Organization	Years of public relations experience	Years of crisis experience
Public relations and marketing	A1	18	14
Integrated communications and public relations	A2	31	20
Public relations and marketing	A3	22	10
Public relations	A4	10	10
Marketing	A5	10	5
Marketing	A6	11	11
Public relations	A7	30	12
Public relations	A8	28	24
Digital marketing	A9	24	24
Healthcare	C1	25	25
Healthcare	C2	30	5
Utilities	C3	10	5
Broadcasting	C4	25	5
Consumer packaged goods	C5	28	25
Finances	C6	19	10
Oil & gas	C7	17	5
Consumer packaged goods	C8	13	10
Consumer packaged goods	C9	25	5
Fine products retailer	C10	9	5
Consumer packaged goods	C11	9	6
Higher education	C12	20	7