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Disinformation and communication specialists

Report

Disinformation and communication (Public Relations) specialists

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INTRODUCTION

The category of disinformation is most often considered in the context of social media or the right to information (or information literacy) more broadly. The predominant research associated with disinformation, therefore, is either concerned with the use of social media or, more broadly, with analysing the phenomenon in the context of journalism and news media (genres).

It is worth noting, however, that disinformation also has different social and professional contexts and thus also has relevance for other social groups, especially those who professionally communicate in the media. One of the most relevant professional groups of this type are public relations specialists. There is no doubt that their activities (especially within the framework of media relations), which are formally close to what journalists do, have a huge impact on the quality of the information to which the public has access. Moreover, PR specialists, who are professionally responsible for building the image of brands or entities, often face ethical dilemmas, a significant part of which concerns precisely the veracity of the information provided.

RESEARCH - OBJECTIVES, QUESTIONS, METHOD

The survey, the results of which are presented in the report below, covered the Public Relations environment in Poland. It was conducted in cooperation with the Polish Public Relations Association (Polskie Stowarzyszenie Public Relations, PSPR), which is the largest professional organisation in Poland. The survey was carried out using the CAWI method, with a questionnaire consisting of 22 closed, semi-open and open questions (including 4 questions concerning the professional status of respondents). The PSPR, using its communication channels, invited respondents to complete the questionnaire and indicated the importance of the problem addressed by the survey.

The **aim** of the survey was to answer the question of how Public Relations professionals in Poland perceive disinformation in the context of their professional activity.

Accordingly, the following **research questions** were asked:

1. How do Public Relations professionals define disinformation and what types of activities do they include in its field?
2. How do they assess individual phenomena in the area of disinformation in terms of the risks they pose to the public, professional standards and the image of the industry, clients, etc.?
3. Which public relations tactics do they consider to be disinformation?
4. How do they assess the popularity of disinformation techniques and tactics in Polish Public Relations?
5. How do they evaluate particular techniques and tactics, potentially disinformative, in the context of PR ethics?
6. What actions, potentially disinformative, and in what contexts do they consider justifiable (excusable)?
7. Do they have, and what competence in detecting disinformation?
8. Do they consider competence in the area of countering disinformation to be important for Public Relations professionals?

RESULTS

Q1 Please complete the sentence: disinformation is....

The first question was an open question and asked respondents to define the category of disinformation. Representative responses are shown below:

Podawanie celowo zniekształconej, nieprawdziwej, wyrywkowej wiadomości, chcąc osiągnąć konkretny cel.
Informacja celowo wprowadzająca w błąd odbiorcę
... ogólna nierzetelność lub celowe działanie w ograniczaniu dostarczania interesariuszom istotnych informacji w danej kwestii lub dostarczanie informacji nieprawdziwych czy zmanipulowanych. Podkreślam, że nierzetelność (wynikająca z pośpiechu, lenistwa czy braku kompetencji) również jest działaniem dezinformacyjnym.
zamierzone wprowadzanie w błąd w określonym temacie i ogłaszanie tego publicznie
celowe wprowadzanie odbiorcy komunikatu w błąd.
celowe wprowadzanie w błąd, najczęściej na szerszą skalę (większych grup), w celu osiągnięcia korzyści, wywołania/zaniechania działania, wpływu na poglądy społ.
celowe przekazywanie informacji tak, żeby wprowadzić w błąd odbiorcę i przekazać mu wiedzę pozornie prawdziwą. Jest to forma manipulacji.
celowe wprowadzanie kogoś w błąd.
rozprzestrzenianie fałszywych informacji, często w towarzystwie prawdziwych, które mają je uwoarygodnić. Dezinformacja często służy ściśle ustalonym celom mającym ośmieszyć, zdyskredytować jakieś zjawiska, grupy ludzi, wprowadzić zamieszanie.

As can be seen, the Public Relations industry strongly defines disinformation as a deliberate act to mislead the recipient. This definition is in line with the dominant framing of the issue, which pays attention to the intention of the sender and the communication of false

information/interpretations of the world. It is worth noting, however, that broader approaches have also emerged, which consider as disinformation any misrepresentation, including those resulting from haste or lack of professional competence.

Question 2 (Q2) was based on the document 'Code of Good Practice. Together against disinformation' (Kodeks Dobrych Praktyk. Razem przeciwko Dezinformacji), which was adopted in April 2022 by a coalition of organisations fighting disinformation in Poland (<https://www.nask.pl/pl/wlaczweryfikacje/kodeks-dobrych-praktyk/4991,Kodeks-Dobrych-Praktyk.html>).

This document was used because it contains a very broad view of disinformation, listing and defining more than 20 activities in the area of media communication that can/should be considered disinformation. These activities are as follows:

- The use of bots to boost the reach of specific narratives;
- The use of trolls to give credibility to content and create new narratives;
- Manipulation of context (primarily through images and videos);
- Polarisation of society by addressing and antagonising socially sensitive topics (LGBT people, refugees, etc.);
- Presenting extreme and unpopular views as the norm in society;
- Generalising and generalising;
- CheapFake (simple image manipulation using cheap and widely available tools);
- DeepFake (advanced image manipulation using artificial intelligence, e.g. by superimposing and animating someone's face onto other visual material);
- Presenting false information as the result of independent thinking, not succumbing to trends, etc;
- Using/creating false experts/authorities;
- Undermining and eroding trust in state institutions and international expert organisations;

- Cherry picking - using selective data that supports a position or thesis, ignoring other research material that contradicts it;
- Using anecdotal evidence - publishing anonymised stories with a similar pattern, where someone credible (a friend, family member, person in some position) is attributed with an experience that relates directly to the current situation;
- Putting up a chariot - attacking, ridiculing or undermining views; of an opponent that they have never actually expressed;
- Mocking/diminishing the importance of the issue;
- Whataboutism ("but what about?", "but for you") - diverting attention from the topic of discussion by accusing the opponent of hypocrisy (you raise funds for refugees from Ukraine, but what about funds to support poor families in Poland?);
- Promoting low-quality blogs or websites, often posing as local, news or trade media;
- Promotion of emotional opinions, questions or quotes;
- Gish-gallop - publishing long lists of alleged evidence (e.g. cherry-picking studies) in support of a given thesis, with the aim of overwhelming and inundating the opponent with arguments, regardless of their reliability (a method used mainly in the vaccination discourse);
- Sea-lioning - the constant demand from the interlocutor for further clarification of earlier statements, with the aim of tiring the opponent and diluting the gist of the discussion (a method used mainly in the vaccination discourse);
- Stating untrue, long-debunked claims, which nevertheless still provoke strong emotions.

The questionnaire presented the disinformation methods listed above (with definitions) and asked the following questions:

Q2#1 Is this action rightly included in the area of disinformation?

Q2#2 Have you encountered this action (an action based on the described scheme) in the PR industry?

Q2#3 How do you assess its harmfulness to the client?

Q2#4 How do you assess its social harm?

Q2#5 How do you assess its harm to the image of the industry?

Q2#6 Is it contrary to PR ethics/professional PR?

Regarding the inclusion of the activities in question in the area of disinformation, respondents indicated as **unjustified** the recognition of the following activities as disinformation in particular: "manipulation of context", "drawing false conclusions on the basis of correct data", "presenting extreme and unpopular views as the norm in society", and "publicising out of context quotes from generally recognised authorities" and "drawing false conclusions on the basis of correct data". As for the remaining activities - the majority of respondents considered them to be disinformative.

Of the activities listed, respondents from the Public Relations industry primarily encountered the following: manipulation of context, using trolls to lend credibility and create new narratives; generalising; drawing false conclusions from real data; and cherry picking (selective use of data). The least frequent activities included: drawing false conclusions from real data; inciting and undermining trust in state institutions and expert international organisations; and deep fake (advanced image processing using artificial intelligence).

The vast majority of activities were considered by respondents **to be harmful** or moderately harmful to the customer. Only the promotion of low-quality blogs and the use of anecdotal evidence were among the harmless activities. On the other hand, the use of trolls and deep fake were considered particularly harmful to the customer, followed by manipulation of context and cherry picking.

The disinformation methods presented were generally considered to be **socially harmful** (the exception being the use of anecdotal evidence). The following were considered to be the most socially damaging: polarising society by raising antagonising topics; as well as: the use of trolls and 'whatabouism'; promoting emotional opinions and undermining trust in international institutions; putting up cherry picks; and passing off long-debunked claims as true in order to arouse emotions.

In terms of damage to the **industry's image**, the responses were no longer so clear-cut. While still few of the listed activities were considered harmless, more than before were considered

only moderately harmful (especially: generalising and generalising and sea lioning). The polarisation of society and deep fake and cheap fake were again considered to be very harmful; as well as the presentation of false information as the result of independent thinking and the weakening and undermining of trust in state institutions and international authorities.

The vast majority of activities were found to be **contrary to PR ethics** (including in particular: cheap feak; deep fake; presenting false information as the effects of independent thinking; and passing off long-debunked claims that provoke emotions as true). The following were considered to be least incompatible with PR ethics: generalising; promoting emotional opinions; and sea lioning. Interestingly, a significant proportion of respondents had no opinion in the context of the question asked about the use of anecdotal evidence.

Q3 - In your opinion, what are the main sources of disinformation that PR professionals encounter in their professional activities (please indicate three)?

Question three asked about the main sources of disinformation that respondents encounter in their professional activities. The survey clearly indicates that the main sources of disinformation in their opinion are politicians (26% of indications) and public media (20% of indications). This is followed by alternative news portals and institutional state principals (e.g. the Kremlin or China) (around 13%). Institutional commercial principals (business) and bots and trolls are considered the least likely source of disinformation (around 4%). It is interesting to note that commercial media and other PR agencies are not indicated as sources of disinformation. The above results clearly indicate negative opinions regarding politicians and public media. The latter is probably related to a general lack of trust in the public media in Poland due to the poor quality of journalism and ideological dependence on the ruling party. It is interesting to note that PR people seem to underestimate the disinformation threats coming from Russia and have a lot of trust in business institutions.

Q4 - To what extent, in your opinion, is disinformation from the following sources harmful / dangerous to professional Public Relations?

Respondents considered disinformation that comes from social media users and trolls to be relatively harmless (though not always very harmless). Disinformation that comes from professional PR agencies, institutional commercial principals and institutional state principals,

as well as from politicians, public media and bots was considered much more harmful. As can be seen, sources of disinformation that are not considered common are simultaneously defined as the most harmful. This apparent contradiction may indicate an awareness among respondents that much depends on the efficiency of the sender in generating disinformation messages. Thus, senders who are not very active in this field, but who are communicatively efficient and who enjoy public trust, are perceived as the most dangerous.

Q5 - In your professional activities, how often do you encounter fake news in the media, talking to clients, social media, etc.?

The next question asked how often respondents encounter misinformation in their professional activities. None of the respondents chose the answer 'I do not encounter'. 1/3 of respondents encounter disinformation daily, 1/3 several times a week. These results indicate the prevalence of disinformation in the information and media environment in Poland and its important role for the practice of Public Relations.

Q6 - How do you most often react when confronted with a message that seems disinformative (please indicate one answer)?

When reacting to disinformation, 40% of Public Relations professionals check the source. This is by far the dominant response. Public Relations professionals also use available technology (e.g. Google lens) and fact-checking portals. Interestingly, they do not rely on knowledge from journalists or PR colleagues. Around 10% of respondents also declare that they ignore the disinformation they encounter. As can be seen, respondents show a good understanding of how to respond to disinformation, using methods and actions that are most often recommended by professionals in this context. The use of fact-checkers deserves positive attention. On the other hand - there is clearly a decline in trust in journalists as sources of verified information.

Q7 - In your opinion, how important is the recognition of disinformation in the professional competence of a Public Relations specialist?

Approximately 70% of Public Relations professionals rate the competence related to checking disinformation as particularly important for PR professionals (10 points on a 10-point scale). The remainder of the respondents indicated 8 or 9 points, which is also very high. This

demonstrates a high awareness of the role of this type of competence for professional PR practitioners today. On the other hand - the results obtained correlate with the answers to the previous question, in the context of which public relations professionals demonstrated a relatively high level of competence in the analysed scope.

Q8 - Using the slider, please indicate to what extent you trust:

The answers to the following question clearly indicated that respondents trust to the highest extent recognised authorities in the respective fields (doctors, epidemiologists, international security specialists, etc.); representatives of international organisations (EU, WHO, etc.); representatives of scientific and research institutions, but also unofficial information obtained through private contacts. Least of all: the public media, politicians and social media.

Detailed data is presented in the table below:

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
1	Politicians	0.00	32.00	19.30
2	Officials (state, local government)	0.00	61.00	38.80
3	Representatives of international organisations	0.00	100.00	73.70
4	Recognised authorities in the relevant fields (doctors, epidemiologists, international security experts, etc.)	25.00	100.00	80.50
5	Public media	0.00	50.00	9.80
6	Commercial media	0.00	70.00	43.50
7	News agencies	0.00	90.00	53.50
8	Recognised journalists	0.00	50.00	39.70
9	Other PR professionals	0.00	80.00	46.20
10	Representatives of scientific and research institutions	25.00	100.00	78.30
11	Representatives of NGOs	21.00	90.00	62.00

12	Informal information obtained through private contacts	50.00	83.00	70.00
13	Social Media	0.00	66.00	28.20

Declarations by public relations specialists on the one hand indicate a professional and informed approach to information sources. Again, the low trust in politicians and public media is confirmed. It is interesting (and potentially worrying) that unofficial information obtained through private contacts is considered to be reliable sources of information. On the one hand, this is understandable in the context of the public relations industry, but on the other hand, it makes the industry potentially vulnerable to leaks and manipulation.

Q9 - Using the slider, please indicate for whom (what) and to what extent disinformation is a threat?

In the opinion of respondents, disinformation poses the greatest threats to democracy (democratic political processes), human security, and the wider recipients of PR activities (the public). The least for: business and clients using PR services.

Detailed data is presented in the table below:

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
1	Clients using PR services	20.00	100.00	53.40
2	Broadly understood recipients of PR activities (society)	40.00	100.00	84.30
3	Governments and administrations (local, national, supranational)	25.00	100.00	70.20
4	Democracy (democratic political processes)	75.00	100.00	91.60
5	Image of the PR industry	35.00	100.00	72.90
6	Human security	68.00	100.00	89.10
7	Quality of people life	25.00	100.00	73.20
8	Proper functioning of the free market	46.00	100.00	78.40
9	High working standards in Public Relations	3.00	100.00	70.10

10	Media (freedom, credibility, quality of coverage, etc.)	26.00	100.00	82.10
11	Bussines	7.00	100.00	62.70

The results obtained clearly indicate that Public Relations specialists perceive mainly generalised threats resulting from the spread of disinformation (political or social). On the one hand, this indicates a high awareness of the importance of disinformation activities, but on the other hand, it is worrying that the phenomenon of disinformation is to a limited extent treated as a threat to activities close to the industry, such as business.

Q10 - Do you encounter disinformation deliberately spread by public relations professionals as part of unfair competition?

The majority of respondents encounter disinformation deliberately spread by PR professionals, according to their declarations, very rarely (around 50%). It is worth noting, however, that there are very few indications of "never" in this context. About 10 per cent of respondents chose the indication "often" and 40 per cent "sometimes". The overall picture therefore appears to be not very optimistic, and deliberately spreading disinformation is not an uncommon phenomenon in Public Relations.

Question Q11 was based on the identification of a number of tactics that are common in the Public Relations industry (the indicated tactics were selected after consultation with PR specialists).

The following tactics were listed:

- Advertising text as non-advertising (this also applies, for example, to rankings or awards)
- Sending instructions to journalists on how to act, how to behave, etc.
- Regimenting information (e.g. not inviting representatives of a particular editorial office to press conferences)
- Gossiping to journalists about competitors
- Creating a media fuss about a particular company/ institution

The following questions were asked in the context of the above-mentioned tactics:

Q11#1 Would you describe this activity as disinformation?

Q11#2 How common is this phenomenon in the PR industry in Poland?

Q11#3 Do you consider this action to be unprofessional (unethical)?

Q11#4 Do you consider such action to be justified under certain circumstances?

Of the tactics listed above, the following were considered to be definitely disinformative: slipping journalists rumours about competitors; advertising texts as non-advertising and creating media confusion around the company. On the other hand, those that do not fall into the area of disinformation were considered to be: sending instructions to journalists and rationing information.

Of the above-mentioned techniques, preparing and publishing an advertising text as non-advertising and sending instructions to journalists were considered to be the most common; creating a media fuss around a company or institution and rationing information were considered to be moderately common; sending instructions to journalists and slipping them rumours were considered to be not so common.

In general, respondents considered the above activities to be unethical, with the most unethical being slipping journalists rumours about competitors, and the least unethical being rationing information. It is also worth noting that for all activities, with the exception of slipping journalists rumours, there were indications that such activities could be considered ethical (around 10-15 per cent of indications).

The vast majority of respondents felt that there were no circumstances that justified the use of the tactics in question. The exception to this is the rationing of information, which was considered to be justified in certain circumstances. The following were considered particularly difficult to justify: planting rumours about competitors with journalists, creating a media fuss around an institution and publishing an advertising text as non-advertising.

The juxtaposition of the data below indicates that public relations tactics that are considered disinformative are at the same time environmentally popular, which should be considered a worrying phenomenon. At the same time, these tactics are considered unethical. Thus, one

can see a gap between internalised beliefs and professional ethics and the professional practice in the environment. Particular attention should be paid to the specific position of rationing access to information, which may be related to a very strong polarisation of the media system in Poland, which leads to a situation in which refusal to cooperate with a given medium (also at the level of, for example, an expert) is the order of the day and is sometimes even socially expected.

Q12 - Can you think of any other tactics that occur in the PR industry in Poland that can be described as disinformation? If so, please briefly describe them.

Examples of other disinformation activities (open-ended question) included:

- Negative, anonymous comments against other PR agencies
- Deliberate omissions of information (silence)
- Avoidance of dialogue with stakeholders in order to make the information process more shallow and limit opportunities to express opinions
- blatant information overactivity in order to dominate stakeholders who communicate a different opinion and are not as communicative
- selection of illustrative photos for publication - to show many participants in the event, although there were not many;
- selection of figures in competition entries - one that puts the company in the best light, rather than objectively being the most representative;
- selection of a quote from a long speech - not to summarise it, but to grab attention, to arouse emotion)
- economic stalking - persistent harassment of a competitor or business partner with lawsuits, media actions, denunciations
- use of false accounts in SM for both negative and positive actions

Q13 - Using the slider, estimate what proportion of public relations activities carried out on the Polish market are deliberately disinformative?

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
1	What proportion of public relations activities carried out on the Polish market are deliberately disinformative	5.00	40.00	20.10

As can be seen, this indication oscillates at around 20 (in scale to 100). It is worth noting, however, that it does not exceed 40 . Are these figures optimistic? The answer to this question should be formulated in correlation with other data and the opinion of those concerned themselves.

Q 14 Can you imagine a situation in which a disinformation action would be justifiable from the point of view of professional public relations principles?

Approximately 50% of respondents answered the above question: definitely not. About 20% of the answers were: rather yes and I have no opinion, the remainder: rather no. It is therefore evident that the position of the Public Relations community is not unequivocal and that acceptance of the justification of disinformation activities from the point of view of professional PR principles is not low.

Q 15 Can you imagine a situation in which a disinformation action could be justified from the point of view of the client's interests?

With that said, we see a much higher acceptance of disinformation actions in the context of justifying them in terms of 'client interest'. A disinformation action could generally be justified in terms of customer interest (around 50% of 'rather yes' responses and 50% of rather no and no).

The difference in responses to Q 14 and Q 15 again represents a significant disconnect between professional PR principles and the ultimate commitment to the client.

Q 16 Using the slider, please indicate to what extent you think the use of misinformation in PR practice is acceptable in the situations concerned:

The purpose of the question was to obtain a broader context for the answers from the previous questions and to identify other possibilities that - potentially - justify, in the opinion of PR practitioners, the use of disinformation.

As can be seen from the respondents' answers, the use of disinformation for social good and in self-defence may be justified to the greatest extent, while the use of disinformation for short-term efficiency gains may be justified to the least extent.

Detailed results are shown in the table below:

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
1	For customer benefit	0.00	30.00	7.10
2	For the public good	0.00	50.00	17.40
3	For the benefit of the PR agency	0.00	53.00	9.30
4	In self-defence - in response to other disinformation	0.00	53.00	12.70
5	For short-term effectiveness	0.00	20.00	2.30

This juxtaposition, in turn, shows that 'client welfare' is one of the least acceptable justifications for the use of disinformation. Overall - as can be seen - the question of the acceptability of disinformation activities in different contexts is not obvious or clear-cut for the surveyed community.

Q17 - Have you encountered organised efforts in the Public Relations industry to counter disinformation (e.g. by industry associations, research centres, etc.)?

Q18 - To what extent do you think there is a real need in the industry for such activities?

Half of the respondents have encountered efforts to counter disinformation undertaken in the PR industry, with around 70% recognising that there is a need for such efforts (high or rather high). These figures clearly indicate that the public relations community is interested in disinformation issues and considers them relevant to its industry. Actions (training, events) to deepen competences and knowledge in this area would probably also find fertile ground.

The group of respondents (Q19-Q22) represented various forms of employment (with the dominant one being a PR agency), they were also employed in various industries (with the dominant one being financial services), with the dominant period of employment being 5-9 years. The majority of respondents belong to industry associations.

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