

# LONG LIVE THE (SHORT-SIGHTED) KING?

The 2018 European Communication Monitor sheds a paradoxical light on how the continent's communications professionals respond to the challenge of fake news. Are they over-due a wake-up call?

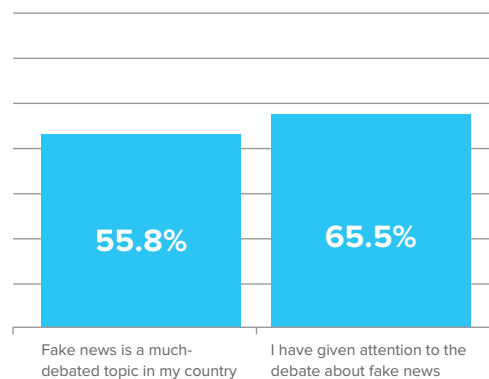
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**T**he one eyed man is king, but only in the kingdom of the blind. In today's fast moving social media world, are corporate communicators inhabiting such an apocrophal place when it comes to dealing with fake news? In other words, are they merely short sighted or dealing with a more significant corporate blindness when managing fake news in Europe? This is a critical question following worrying findings from the 2018 European Communication Monitor report, which shows that a quarter of organisations have been affected by fake news in Europe in some form or other.

**“It is time more European practitioners to ask how to strategically respond to fake news.”**

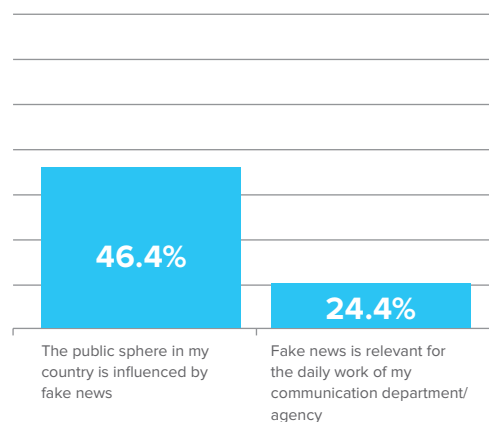
## How communication professionals assess fake news

Fake news is strongly debated across Europe: many communication professionals focus on the issue and believe that trust building is gaining in importance. However, even though the public sphere seems to be influenced by fake news, it seems to be less relevant in day to day work in communications.



‘Fake news’ = news in mass or social media that is intentionally and verifiably false or with low facticity, intended to mislead recipients.

**39.5% rate “Building and maintaining trust” as one of the most important issues for communication management in the near future**



**Only 12.3% rate “Dealing with fake news and false information” as important future issue for communication management**

www.communicationmonitor.eu / Zerfass et al. 2018 / n = 3,096 communication professionals. Q1: Fake news has become a buzzword, especially in the political field (US presidential elections, Brexit debate, etc.), but also related to reports about celebrities, brands and organisations. We define ‘fake news’ as news in mass or social media that is intentionally and verifiably false or with low facticity, intended to mislead recipients. Please rate these statements based on your experience. Scale 1 (Not at all) – 5 (To a great extent). Percentages: Frequency based on scale points 4-5. Q 6: Which issues will be most important for communication management / PR within the next three years from your point of view? Please pick exactly 3 items. Percentages: Frequency based on selection as Top-3 issue.

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**“Social media was the main source of misleading content, followed by the mass media.”**

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From the perspective of European communication practitioners, fake news is not only a buzzword in political debates, but also a daily threat for companies and other organisations across the continent. Moreover, what is the role of communication professionals, departments and agencies in generating, facilitating and/or propagating fake news? Instances across the globe of political elections being influenced by fake news stories, fake news attacks on corporations and the interference of organised management and communication strategies (for example by Cambridge Analytica) have fueled concern that fake news is subversive and potentially dangerous to organisations and society. As such, protecting the reputation of an organisation is evolving as an even more important key task for corporate leaders and their communication advisers in today's volatile world.

## **Findings behind the fake**

A review of previous studies that have used the term 'fake news' reveals six ways in which they appear: (1) news satire, (2) news parody, (3) fabrication, (4) manipulation, (5) advertising, and (6) propaganda (Nielsen & Graves, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). What is common across these definitions is how fake news appropriates the look and feel of 'real' news: from how websites look, to how articles are written, to how photos include attributions. Fake news clearly hides under a veneer of legitimacy and attempts to appear like traditionally trusted content. By misappropriating the credibility of curated media, fake news could also undermine journalism's legitimacy, especially in a social media envi-

ronment when the actual source of information is often removed.

The findings from the 2018 European Communication Monitor clearly demonstrate that fake news is debated across Europe, with the majority of respondents (65.5 per cent) giving close attention to the issue. The debate over fake news has the highest intensity in Scandinavia and western European countries like The Netherlands, United Kingdom, Ireland and Belgium. Older professionals follow the fake news debate more intensely, but younger communicators report its social influence as being much stronger. Despite this awareness and debate fake news does not filter into the day to day experiences of communications practitioners, with just a quarter (24.4 per cent) citing its daily relevance. Only 12 per cent of the organisations surveyed have established advanced routines to identify threats.

**“Older professionals follow the fake news debate more intensely, but younger communicators report its social influence as being much stronger.”**

The survey further revealed that fake news has the strongest impact in Russia (53 per cent), followed by Serbia, Slovenia and Poland (all more than 40 per cent). The UK, along with France, Norway and the Czech Republic, were the least affected (below 17 per cent).

The majority of organisations in Europe are not affected by fake news (77.5 per cent) on a daily basis. Of the organisations impacted, most of them were only once, with only some of them multiple times (10 per cent). Those most affected were government-owned, public sector and political organisations; companies and consultancies are least affected. Social media was the main source of misleading content (81 per cent), followed by the mass media (60 per cent). These results shows that the mass media, according to communication professionals, also play a substantial role in the distribution of fake news. Surprisingly, in even 14 per cent of organisations misleading content was promoted through internal media like intranets and employee social media.

Despite the threat fake news represents for the reputation and trust in organisations and their brands, it is striking that one third of communication professionals across Europe have not paid closer attention to the debate. As such, although fake news was a daily occurrence at a quarter of the organisations surveyed, only a small portion of them have established advanced routines to identify threats. All of this suggests it is time more European practitioners not only pay attention to the issue of fake news but also ask themselves how to strategically respond to it. ●

Further details about the ECM are available at [www.communicationmonitor.eu](http://www.communicationmonitor.eu)

#### References:

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