The Importance Of Public Relations In The Post-Truth Era And The Strategies Followed

Post-Truth Çağında Halkla İlişkiler'in Önemi ve İzlenen Stratejiler

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Özet

Genelde farklı konularda belirli bir amaç doğrultusunda oluşturulan "Yalan haber"ler sosyal medya platformları ve arama motorları aracılığıyla hızlı bir şekilde yayılıp, kamuoyunun gerçek bilgiye ulaşmasına engel olmaktadır. Tarih boyunca yalan haber ve yanlış bilgi çeşitli amaçlar için kullanılmıştır. Ancak sosyal medyanın hayatımıza girmesiyle doğruluğu henüz kanıtlanmamış enformasyonunun ya da yalan haberin yayılımı hız kazanmıştır, bu tarz içerikler hem profesyonel içerik sağlayıcılar hem de kullanıcılar vasıtasıyla kısa sürede geniş kitlelere ulaşmıştır. Sağlık ve beslenme konularında oluşturulan yalan haberlere rağmen bilinçli tüketen ve beslenen, sağlıklı toplumlar meydana getirmek için farkındalık oluşturmak ön koşuldur ve sürdürülebilir halkla ilişkiler ile bu daha kolay hale gelebilmektedir. Bu çalışmada, Hakikat sonrası çağda yeni medya ortamında yayılan bu tarz bilgilerin önlenmesinde doğrulama platformlarının nasıl bir işlevi olduğu incelenmiştir. Çalışma kapsamında teyit.org doğrulama platformunda sağlık ve gıda ile ilgili iddialar üzerine yapılan incelemenin sonuçlarının ne olduğu ortaya konmaya çalışılmıştır. Çalışmada, internet ve sosyal medyada paylaşılan sağlık ve beslenme konusundaki 14 iddianın sadece dördünün doğru bilgi olduğu, bu tür enformasyonun en fazla sosyal medya üzerinden yayıldığı görülmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hakikat Öncesi Çağ, Halkla İlişkiler, Sağlık ve Gıda, Yalan Haber, Yeni Medya.

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Abstract

'Fake news', which are generally created for a specific purpose on different topics, spread rapidly through social media platforms and search engines and prevent the public from accessing real information. Throughout history, fake news and misinformation have been used for various purposes. However, with the introduction of social media into our lives, the dissemination of unproven information or fake news has accelerated, and such content has reached large masses in a short time through both professional content providers and users. Despite the fake news about health and nutrition, raising awareness is a prerequisite for creating healthy societies that consume and eat consciously, and this can be made easier with sustainable public relations. In this study, the function of verification platforms in preventing such information disseminated in the new media environment in the post-truth era is examined. Within the scope of the study, the results of the verification platform teyit.org on health and nutrition claims were analysed. In the study, it was observed that only four out of 14 claims on health and nutrition shared on the internet and social media were found to be true information, and that such information was mostly disseminated through social media.

Keywords: Post-Truth Era, Public Relations, Health and Food, Fake News, New Media.

Introduction

The history of 'fake news', which has become widespread on a mass level, is at least as old as the history of the media. The New York Sun achieved a huge circulation with its 'There is life on the Moon' discourse and maintained this rise for a long time. Today, this situation, which is obviously unrealistic from the point of view of scientific truth and whose credibility is not understood by newspaper readers at first glance, attracts a lot of attention. Rumors about whether there was life on the Moon were common in those years. Many popular texts presented many speculative claims about the moon as scientific fact. On the other hand, the fact that readers lack the ability to distinguish truth from lies is another problem. The newspapers of that time did not openly deny that the news was fake; they preferred to remain silent, relying on popular beliefs (Taş & Taş, 2018: 188).

In 1870, German chemist Erich von Wolf measured the amount of iron in green vegetables. However, a mistake was made in the decimal numbers when the study was published. As a result of this typo, spinach became an 'iron storage' and became a myth. In the 1930s, cartoonists created the character Popeye based on this myth. Spinach consumption in America increased threefold. An article was published in 1981, after noticing the error in von Wolf's study and presenting the correct results. However, many people still know spinach as an iron storage (Bıçakçı, 2019: 62). Even if this example is wrong, it has become a myth and it has become very difficult to change the information. The issue of health and nutrition is very important as it concerns humanity. The spread of misinformation on this subject is actually not so innocent. People who do not have sufficient awareness of health, food and nutrition issues are easily deceived by these false news and other communication activities (Bernard & Bernard: 2010:457). In a study conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it was found that fake news spread faster than true news in the social media environment (Vosoughi, et al., 2018:1147).

When we encounter fake news, Public Relations emerges in two different positions: On the side that deliberately produces fake news, or on the other side that tries to eliminate the effects of fake news. In order to understand the role of public relations that we first mentioned, it is necessary to look at the history of public relations, especially the concepts of propaganda (Bıçakçı, 2016:37; Özgen and Bayraktar, 2014:3). Public relations professionals who act far from the principles of 'considering the public interest' and 'mutual benefit' included in their definition by serving only one person or institution unilaterally while carrying out strategic communication activities have caused those who practice this profession to be perceived as a

group 'far removed from moral values' who only work on behalf of institutions. An example of this is the situation where, after the nuclear explosion in Chernobyl in 1986, the tea produced in the Black Sea region was contaminated and sales decreased, and the government representatives of that time appeared on television and drank tea, acting as if there was no problem (Bıçakçı and Hürmeriç, 2013:91). Public relations are of great importance precisely in this sense. The strategies used in the field of public relations can also be used in the field of activist public relations for the development of civil society.

1.   Post-Truth Age and The Concept of Fake News

The concept of 'post-truth'can be seen as a conceptual need shaped by social reality in terms of making sense of today's social, political and cultural dynamics and explaining the relationship between media, power and truth that takes shape in the face of events and facts (Paktin & Karaca, 2018). The Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, who is considered the founder of modern philosophy of history in the West, based the framework he drew on how to understand and establish reality in human history on myths in his fundamental work 'The New Science' published in 1725. According to Vico, the history of all nations begins with fable, that is, story and myth (Vico, 2007:87). Vico emphasized that to discover how to obtain accurate knowledge and where to start, it is necessary to examine everything that humans produce and create without belittling it, thus trying to show that everything that humanity produces is worth investigating first (Paktin and Karaca, 2018:78). Post-truth, which is portrayed as a kind of problem for some, a new situation for others, and as the last stop in the adventure of truth for now, has caused radical changes in the field of communication as in all areas of life (Çelik, 2024:72).

To understand the concept of 'fake news', it is useful to first explain what 'real news' is. 'News' is a field that is expected to provide independent, reliable, accurate and comprehensive information (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021:11). Nowadays, the fake, which is followed with curiosity and found worthy of attention, has occupied the place of the real, and the real has thus become ordinary (Çelik, 2024:73). Although presenting objective and accurate information is the basic notion of journalism, Herman and Chomsky (2002) state that news is socially constructed and that journalists often make subjective judgments about which pieces of information to include in the news and which pieces to exclude. In fact, it is not only the journalist's preferences that affect the subject of the news; the government, the audience and advertisers also have an impact.

Wardle and Derakshan (2017) explain in their comprehensive report that they find the concept of 'fake news' incomplete and inadequate and use the term 'information disorder' as a more inclusive term. The concepts of misinformation and disinformation, both of which are translated into Turkish as false information, were examined within the scope of fake news. The difference between the concepts is that the person or groups producing the news content intend to harm the other party, while in misinformation the intention is consciously bad, in disinformation the information given is false but does not intend to harm the other party. According to Wardle (2017), fake news can be grouped under seven headings based on content type: satire and parody journalism, misleading content/distortion, imitation content, fabricated content, manipulated content, incorrect context, and incorrect link.

Conceptualized as 'information produced and disseminated to mislead or deceive people', 'fake news' is usually produced for a specific purpose with financial, political or social motivation. 'Fake news' spreads rapidly through communication technologies such as social media; as a result, it threatens the public's access to real information (Figueira ve Oliveira, 2017:817).

Disinformation, Social Media and Public Relations Relationship

The purpose of public relations is to spread information, eliminate conflicts or strengthen mutual understanding (Grunig, 2005: 17). Public relations consist of four models. Of these, the press agency model, public relations creates an opportunity for the organization to appear in newspapers by any means. The second model, public information, provides the flow of objective but positive information about the organization by using journalists. The third model uses research to create messages that will persuade the public to behave as the organization wants. The fourth model, known as the symmetric model, uses dialogue to manage conflicts, develop mutual understanding and build relationships with the public (Ertekin, 2016: 25).

The field of public relations fulfills its purpose by using the media in all models and using the method of informing the public (Gülcan, 2022:1442). Therefore, in terms of information, false information and disinformation can be a threat for public relations practitioners. This threat is observed through social media applications, which it has recently included in its own methods and tools.

Social media, while it serves as an important channel in the field of communication with the increasing number of users every passing day, also brings with it the possibility of encountering undesirable situations due to the lack of control and boundaries (Peltekoğlu, 2019:

1044-1045). False news, information, disinformation have become an area that public relations practitioners should pay attention to with the fast nature of the internet. Digital public relations, on the other hand, disseminates information via the internet to inform the public using time, communication and interaction channels (Gifford, 2010: 63). With its feature of providing communication opportunities to large masses in a short time, removing boundaries and reducing distances, public relations has included online media in its methods in the shortest time. Public relations practitioners have a number of responsibilities. Part of their responsibility is to monitor and address fake news that could harm an organization or individual (Waymer & Heath, 2019:255). When looking at fake news, it poses potential threats to organizational functions and reputation, and therefore public relations practitioners become relevant in their role to monitor the environment as part of organizational crisis prevention (Jahnga, Leeb, & Rochadiatc, 2020: 2). Unverified, false information has the potential to impact any political, commercial, or non-profit organization by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of stakeholders (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017: 821).

2.   Review on Health And Food News in Teyit.org

The increase in the spread of fake news and misinformation has become an important problem in recent years, causing discussions, and the number of tools, applications, initiatives and platforms related to the verification of information on the Internet has started to increase. Teyit.org is one of the verification platforms that analyses suspicious news in new media in Turkey. Among the truth platforms that examine dubious news in the new media field in Turkey is Teyit.org. Teyit.org, which started its operations in November 2016 with the aim of being a "verification platform that examines dubious information on the internet," is stated to work to "provide the reader with filtered information by verifying many areas from known mistakes to zdubious information that has become a trending topic on social media, from claims brought up by the mainstream media to urban legends." It is also stated on the website that there are three basic principles determined by this site. These are objectivity and openness, correction policy and economic transparency.

The platform's website states in the "methodology and principles" section that a verification process consisting of 4 different stages is carried out. In the first of these, the screening stage, suspicious information circulated on social media with the contribution of both editors and readers is determined through a software called Dupito. The Teyit.org team states that they have determined three criteria for which suspicious news they will consider in the next stage, the selection process. Accordingly, elements such as virality, importance and urgency

are important in terms of examining the subject under consideration. After the subject to be evaluated is determined, the research stage is started. In the result and analysis section, it is stated that results were obtained in 4 different categories regarding the claim under consideration. Accordingly, the "Correct" label in the title section of each content on teyit.org indicates that the claim under consideration is true, while the "False" label indicates that the claim is false. The "Mixed" expression indicates that both true and false information are present regarding the claim under consideration, while the "Uncertain" label indicates that the data obtained is not sufficient to reach a conclusion about the claim (Ünal & Taylan, 2017:89-90).

Method

In this study, content analysis method was used. Content analysis, which is used in the field of social sciences and frequently used in qualitative research, is a systematic, repeatable technique in which some words of a text are summarized with smaller content categories with coding based on certain rules (Büyüköztürk et al. 2013:88). "The basic process in content analysis is to bring together similar data within the framework of certain concepts and themes and to organize and interpret them in a way that the reader can understand." (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011:227). Çalık and Sözbilir (2014) discuss content analysis under three headings: meta-analysis, meta-synthesis (thematic content analysis) and descriptive content analysis. In this study, the contents in the health and food category on teyit.org will be analyzed.

Findings

As of July 12, 2024, there are 14 contents in the health and food categories. 16 content is related to the results of verification processes related to posts on news websites and social media.

Content Title	Sharing Platform	Claim	Analysis Result
Canide shock in apricots	*Social Media*	The European Union detected high levels of cyanide in apricots.	Correct
Record increase in meat prices	Socail Media	lamb meat has increased 210% in the last year	Correct
Fig problem	Social Media	Mold detected in figs sent to France	Correct
The tea sent to Italy	News Site	Banned substance detected in tea sent to Italy	Correct

Healthy honey	Social Media	honey is now organic, no glucose	False
Raise claim	Social Media	Alleged increase of 60% in examination co-payments and 70% in medicine co-payments	Uncertain
Plastic rice is produced in China	News Site	plastic rice is produced	False
Nutella	News Site	Palm oil in Nutella causes cancer	Uncertain
Magnum recalls ice cream	News Site	Claims of presence of plastic and metal in it	False
No one dies from cancer in Israel	Social Media	The claim that cancer is very rare in Israel	False
Syrians benefit from free in vitro fertilization treatment	Social Media	Syrian immigrants receive free IVF treatment in state hospitals	False
	Social Media	showing the chemical ratio in toothpaste	False
Coloured markings on toothpaste tubes	Social Media	E-104 Quinoline yellow coloring agent used in cosmetics causes skin diseases	Mixed
	Social Media	Monkeypox disease causes death in Turkey	False
The colorant E-104 causes skin diseases and is banned			
Monkey pox virus			

Tablo 1: Teyit.org doğrulama platformu

As a result of the verification activity conducted by Teyit.org, 7 of the claims were determined to be false, 2 were determined to be uncertain, 1 was determined to be mixed, and 4 claims were determined to be true. It was determined that 10 of the claims examined were

content spread through social media and 4 were content spread through news sites. When we look at the content spread through social media, we see that it is an important sharing area for the dissemination of information on health and food-related issues.

According to the news in the health category of Teyit.org, it is titled "The claim that colored markings on toothpaste tubes indicate the chemical content in the paste." The claim in social media posts that "colored boxes at the bottom of toothpaste tubes indicate the chemical content in toothpaste" was examined by Teyit.org editors. The article, which included previous claims, also included the statement made by the Ministry of Health Communication Center to Teyit.org editors about the claims, and reported that the claim was false.

According to another report, there was no cancer in Israel or no one died from cancer. The World Health Organization announced that this news was wrong (Hür, 2024). The claim that the colorant named E-104 causes skin diseases" was evaluated as mixed by teyit.org editors. In the examination, it was stated that "the information that the quinoline yellow, also known by the code E-104, is used in the cosmetic products mentioned in the claim and more is true", but it was emphasized that the claim that it causes a skin disease was not completely confirmed.

Conclusion

Although discussions about the use and consequences of fake news and misinformation existed in the pre-Internet era, in the new media age we live in, the speed at which such content spreads has increased and its prevention has become more complicated. The rapid spread of fake news and misinformation to large masses, especially in the context of health communication, is a problem that should be addressed meticulously, considering the negative consequences it will cause. Today, much misinformation about health is circulating through messaging applications such as websites and social media platforms.

The concept of fake news is an inseparable whole with the discussions of the post-truth era. The concept of fake news is an inseparable whole with the post-truth era discussions. In this study, we tried to evaluate the fake news produced in the food and health fields. In this sense, Public Relations managers should be in the role of a "Truth Manager" who constantly seeks accurate and true information; who keeps accurate and objective information at the focal point in communication aimed at both internal and external target audiences. Truth managers are people-centered, attach importance to professional ethics, actively use alternative channels, and reach accurate news through cooperation with news fact-checking/verification institutions.

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