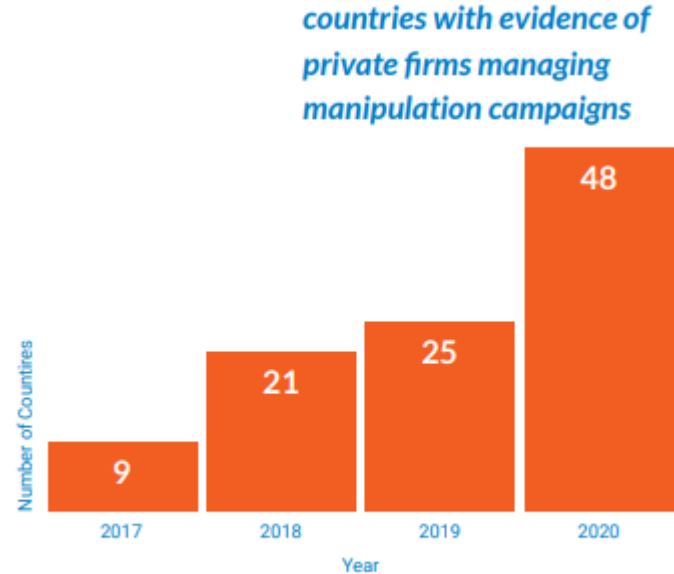"How disinformation is transforming public relations industry:
Black
&Dark PR"

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Disinformation: a growing problem

- "Industrialized Disinformation 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation" (Oxford Internet Institute):
  - During the year analyzed, the use of computational propaganda was detected in 81 countries and in 48 the mediation of a specialized firm was observed.
  - Since 2009, more than 65 companies offering computer propaganda services were detected, reaching an investment of 60 million dollars.

countries with evidence of private firms managing manipulation campaigns

Note: Growth of private firms operating in countries around the world overtime. Based on data presented in the annual cyber troops inventory between 2017-2020.

Disinformation and PR cannot go together

Helsinki Declaration

ICCO — INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANCY ORGANISATION | About | Membership | Ethics

Ethical codes. Example: principles 3, 6 and 8 of the Helsinki declaration (International Organization of Communication Consultants) allude to respect for truth and honesty; not to use practices such as astroturfing or not to participate in the circulation of disinformation.

1. To work ethically and in accordance with applicable laws;
2. To observe the highest professional standards in the practice of public relations and communications;
3. To respect the truth, dealing honestly and transparently with employees, colleagues, clients, the media, government and the public;
4. To protect the privacy rights of clients, organisations, and individuals by safeguarding confidential information;
5. To be mindful of their duty to uphold the reputation of the industry;
6. To be forthcoming about sponsors of causes and interests and never engage in misleading practices such as "astroturfing";
7. To be aware of the power of social media, and use it responsibly;
8. To never engage in the creation of or knowingly circulate fake news;
9. To adhere to their Association's Code of Conduct, be mindful of the Codes of Conduct of other countries, and show professional respect at all times;
10. To take care that their professional duties are conducted without causing offence on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, origin, religion, disability or any other form of discrimination.

Black & Dark PR

➢ The use in the media of the terms Black and Dark PR to refer to negative influence and disinformation campaigns has been observed.

Background

Disinformation and organizational communication: a study on the impact of fake news. Revista Latina de Comunicación Social (Rodríguez-Fernández; 2019).

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- "Digital propaganda. Communication in times of disinformation"
- (Chapter V. Reputation in times of disinformation) study of different cases that affected the reputation of various organizations (Rodríguez-Fernández; 2021).

Other authors:
- Communication strategies developed by companies in the food sector to manage image crises caused by the spread of disinformation (Martín-Herrera and Micaletto; 2021).
- How disinformation is transforming crisis communication. Showing the need to "create new methodologies adapted to the casuistry of disinformation" that respond to these situations (Mut and Camacho; 2022).

COMUNICACIÓN

LETICIA RODRÍGUEZ FERNÁNDEZ

PROPAGANDA DIGITAL

COMUNICACIÓN EN TIEMPOS DE DESINFORMACIÓN

EDITORIAL UOC

Objectives

Study the use of the terms "Black PR" and "Dark PR" identifying similarities and differences.

Are they terms used by the academy, by the media or Internet users?

Collect different examples of practices and techniques used to affect the reputation of adversaries and competitors.

Methodology

Content analysis on searches for the terms "Dark PR" and "Black PR" in Google and Google Scholar.

Google (general) search engine: normally offers 10 page results.
In this case:
- 13 pages of results (for both terms)
- 129 indexed contents for "Black PR"
- 115 for "Dark PR".

Google Scholar. First 10 pages. We collected 100 results for each term.

The searches and the extraction of information to be analyzed were carried out between April 14 and 16, 2022.

The results collected were read and categorized according to questions related to: (1) origin of the term and definition
(2) techniques used
(3) examples and case studies that allow the use of these practices to be explained.

RESULTS: Presence of Black PR and Dark PR terms in Google and Google Scholar.

BLACK PR

- It offers 13 pages of Google results with a total of 129 indexed contents.
- Eleven contents (14.19%) are identified that directly allude to the proposed field of public relations and negative influence.
- Google Scholar: 7 related contents.

DARK PR

- Thirteen Google results pages were collected with a total of 115 indexed contents.
- 23 allude to the object under study (26.45%), suggesting that this term is somehow used to a greater extent than "Black PR".
- Google Scholar: 11 related contents.

The **majority of results are concentrated between 2018 and 2021**, with 2020 being the year with the highest number of contents in the overall computation.
The oldest content is collected in a paper published in 2009 on Dark PR, although no more indexed content is observed until 2012.

Black PR: the "Russian" version of negative influence

Regarding the origins: in Russia, but also Ukraine and Poland, the term "Black PR" becomes part of the public relations vocabulary during the 1990s.
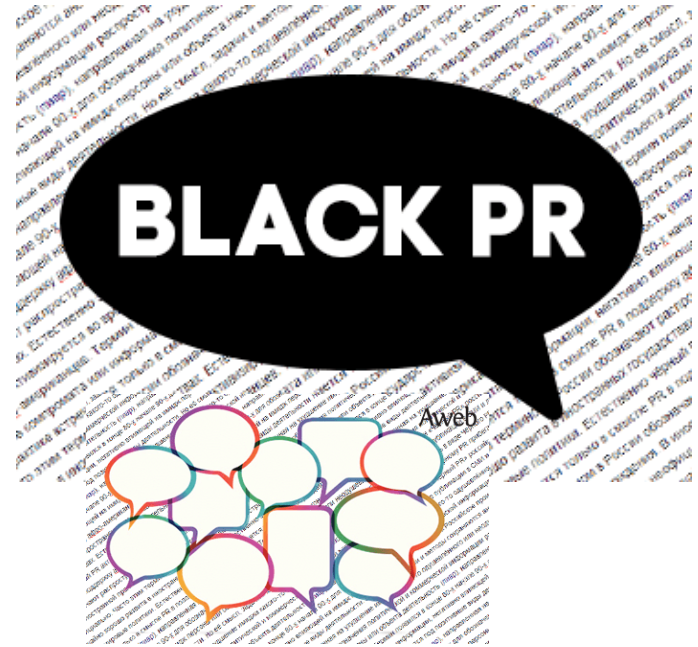
Black PR also alludes to African-American professionals demanding more visibility.

The term is directly linked to Russia, even used as a synonym for Black PR, "the Russian practice" (The Guardian; 2020). Only in one content is its synonym "Dark PR" exposed.

Most case studies are related to the world of politics.

Examples: China, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Georgia, Nigeria, Mali, Tunisia, Philippines, Ukraine and Puerto Rico.

Dark PR, synonymous with corporate Black PR.

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Few differences are noted between the definitions offered for Black PR and Dark PR (DPR), although in the latter case more mentions are made of agencies and firms dedicated to it. It is noted that firms specializing in DPR have increased since 2011 (Thompson and Weldon; 2022).

A greater diversity of cases is collected: business and political. Dark PR is understood as an evolution of Black .

Dark PR
and Agents
of Reputation
Destruction

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CONCLUSIONS

1 Firstly, and in relation to the number of contents indexed with the terms "Black PR" and "Dark PR", it is observed that **there are few references related to the field of public relations, disinformation and negative influence.**
Although they do not represent even 30% of the indexed information, the content is significant and numerous cases are provided to exemplify this type of practices.

2 Both definitions are used to refer to negative influence campaigns that seek to affect the reputation of a competitor or political adversary. In both cases it refers to its origins in the disinformation and smear practices developed by the Russian government in the 1990s and extending also to the business and corporate sphere.
- it seems that Black PR is used to a greater degree to describe these actions
- while Dark PR seems to have emerged later, also encompassing more areas of the digital sphere.

3 It is possible that the term Dark PR was born out of a need to bring together more techniques and to disassociate itself from new connotations, as Black PR is also used by African-American professionals seeking to give visibility to their work in the United States.

CONCLUSIONES

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There are also no particularly marked differences between the case studies collected under the two terms. Although there are examples from all over the world, there is a greater incidence again around the practices carried out in Russia.

5

Few recommendations or advice are offered to solve this type of campaigns or to establish policies from the associations or professional environments of public relations to prevent these unethical actions from tarnishing the general practice.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on what to do in the coming years, since disinformation and digital propaganda are here to stay and are clear predators of the ethical and professional practice of public relations.

Thanks!

For your time and attention!

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