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TEDIC is a non-governmental organization founded in 2012, whose mission is the defense and promotion of human rights in the digital environment. Among its main issues of interest are freedom of speech, privacy, access to knowledge and gender on the Internet.

Sculptors of reality: the structural role of advertising agencies in the disinformation ecosystem

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Introduction: From intermediaries to architects of reality

We began telling stories at the same point in history when we started communicating. We have always used our ingenuity, or whatever resources we have at hand, to share what we feel, believe and imagine. Advertising was born from that very same fire: that ancestral ability to tell stories. But it did so with a powerful distinction: the ability to connect stories with people and products, with the potential to improve the lives of those who listen and buy, and also of those who produce and sell.

When done with creativity and purpose, advertising can do a great deal of good. It can help a great idea reach more people. It can help a useful service find its audience. It can educate, entertain and inspire. It can introduce new ways of doing things, new ways of seeing the world, of consuming responsibly, of connecting with our surroundings. Often, it is a driving force, a leading player in improving the quality of life in societies and in building a healthier and stronger industrial, entrepreneurial and commercial ecosystem (iBlueMarketing, 2023).

But like any powerful tool, it can also be misused. The history of advertising, like that of any other influential profession, has chapters in which the stories told were not at the service of the common good, but of personal interests. Sometimes, masking the truth, and at other times, exaggerating virtues. And not infrequently, hiding negative consequences. It can breed distrust, reinforce inequalities, polarize. It can sell an image of progress while perpetuating systems that benefit few and harm many. It can confuse, overwhelm or simply exhaust a society that is already navigating an ocean of contradictory and confusing messages.

In Paraguay, this phenomenon is particularly relevant due to a media ecosystem characterized by a weak regulatory framework and high media concentration (BTI Transformation Index 2024), alongside a population that primarily accesses information through digital platforms, which prioritize interaction at any cost and are constantly undermining fact-checking structures. According to Datareportal (2025), approximately 83% of the Paraguayan population uses social media as a source of information, creating fertile ground for the rapid and widespread circulation of content, including misinformation. This reality has a significant impact and complexity in electoral contexts, where the political battle is increasingly shifting to the digital realm, and advertising strategies play a central role in shaping public opinion.

It is important to clarify from the outset that this work does not seek to demonize the industry, nor to take a cynical or hypocritical stance, as I have been part of the industry for more than 15 years. Quite the contrary. **This article is based on the conviction that advertising, for the most part, is carried out with good intentions, and that those who work in it do so with passion, judgment and professional ethics.** But it also stems from the need to recognize that the potential for harm exists, not only as a hypothetical possibility, but as a concrete practice that does happen and, in many cases, has become normalized.

If we accept that advertising plays an active role in shaping public discourse, and not just in commercial terms, then we must also accept that this role comes with responsibilities, as Uncle Ben once told Peter Parker (Spider-Man). This text aims to highlight some of the ways in which the narrative power of advertising can be used to misinform, manipulate or distort. Not as a general rule, but as a constant or at least latent risk. That risk is real, and thus deserves to be observed, addressed and framed within frameworks that help minimize harm. Because if storytelling is part of what makes us human, so is caring about how and why we tell stories.

1. When storytelling transforms the world

Since we learned to speak, humans have been telling stories, to understand each other, to move each other, to share what we know and what we dream. Advertising was born from that same root: telling a story that connects with someone else. But with one powerful difference: doing so in order for a product, idea or service to find its place in someone's life, home or refrigerator. And when done well, the impact is real.

Over the last few decades, some advertising campaigns have managed to transcend the logic of sales and become agents of cultural change. They did not just focus on positioning products; rather, they sparked new conversations, redefined collective values, and brought important issues to the public agenda. Here are some examples of how a powerful campaign can truly transform more than just a market:

In a market dominated by unattainable beauty standards, Dove decided to change the script. With its "Real Beauty" campaign, which has been running since 2004, it committed to showcasing real women with diverse bodies, ages and features, challenging the traditional stereotypes of the cosmetics industry (Unilever, 2024). Far from being a mere decorative strategy, the campaign sparked a global conversation about self-esteem, body image and representation. Of course, behind all this was an extensive line of products for sale, but in parallel, it introduced a new way of talking about the body in the media and in households, encouraging brands, advertisers and audiences to question inherited aspirational models. It was a campaign that placed empathy at the center and achieved sustained cultural impact.

In 2012, Red Bull financed Felix Baumgartner's stratospheric jump from 39,000 meters (Red Bull, n.d.), which not only generated one of the most-watched events in YouTube history, according to the Marketing News portal (2012), but also redefined what a brand could do in terms of content, science and entertainment. "Stratos" was more than a sporting feat: it was a commitment to human exploration, technical challenge and innovation, all under the banner of the spirit of adventure. Instead of promoting its energy drinks, the campaign focused on breaking boundaries, and that message became ingrained in global culture.

If we look at the local level, we can point to examples that are recent in time but may feel somewhat distant in perception: during the most challenging moments of the pandemic, there were campaigns in Paraguay that did not aim to sell anything, but simply to offer support. Brands that spoke about care, empathy and the importance of standing by one another. It was advertising, yes, but it was also about humanity. And that is no small thing.

Even the great slogans, the ones that stick around for years, don't last just because of their cleverness; they endure because they strike a chord, because they represent a moment and a place. Because they resonate with something deeper, turning the commercial into the cultural. I think we can all recall a brand slogan or even a jingle that we remember from our childhood.

That's why it is worth starting here, because if we are going to talk about the power of advertising, we must first recognize that this power exists and is not insignificant. It can do good. It can transform the world, even if only a little, every time it connects someone with something that serves them, represents them, or improves them.

Advertising is not a minor appendage of society. It is part of the vast political, social and cultural machinery that shapes how we communicate with each other, what we imagine and what we aspire to or desire. It not only reflects who we are, but also suggests who we could be. And that, perhaps, is its greatest strength.

2. The other side of the coin: when advertising spreads disinformation

The same talent that can excite, inspire or transform can also be used to deceive, manipulate or sow mistrust. **And that is the discomfort that rarely appears on the agenda of marketing conferences**, creativity events or during coffee breaks among colleagues: the very real possibility that a well-executed advertising campaign not only sells, but also misinforms or directly lies or conceals something harmful.

Because if a story can connect someone to something that improves them, it can also connect them to a false illusion, a broken mirror, an empty promise; to a partial, distorted or outright false version of reality. And it does not have to be an extreme case of fake news for that to happen. Sometimes, it is enough to choose what to say and what not to say, how to say it, to whom to say it and how many times to repeat it.

Advertising, by definition, works on desire. And desire is fertile ground for bias, exaggeration and emotion over evidence. There is nothing inherently wrong with that: it is part of the game. But when what is at stake is not just a purchasing decision, but public perception on complex issues such as education, the environment, health or human rights, the potential for harm becomes much greater.

In political campaigns, for example, it is common to use emotional advertising formats aimed at mobilizing voters more through fear or anger than conviction. This is not new, but current technologies have taken it to a new level. With the ability to segment messages, tailor discourse according to psychographic profiles and measure reactions in real time, a different narrative can be created for each individual. And in that process, the truth, or at least a socially shared version of the facts, is often sidelined.

This is not theory, it is everyday practice. In Paraguay, during the 2023 elections, hundreds of sponsored posts with manipulated, distorted or simply false information circulated on social media. Some came from anonymous accounts, others from websites posing as legitimate media outlets. In many cases, the design, tone and structure of these messages mirrored professional advertising logic: effective use of news-style graphics, short and catchy phrases, precise segmentation. They did not appear to be improvised posts; they looked like campaigns. And if they look like campaigns, it is because they probably are. A report by International IDEA documents that during the 2023 general elections in Paraguay, "coordinated disinformation campaigns deployed by satellite pages on social media" were identified, designed to give the appearance of trustworthy digital media while promoting specific narratives against candidates vulnerable to defamation.

The line between advertising, political communication and disinformation has become blurred. An advertising agency can participate in the process without even realizing it: designing pieces or elements that are later reinterpreted, outsourcing services without knowing who they ultimately benefit, advertising in spaces that simulate neutrality but are aligned with hidden interests. It can also do so fully aware of what it is doing. And that is where the discomfort becomes urgent to address.

It is not a matter of criminalizing the industry or assuming that every campaign with political intentions is dishonest. It is about recognizing that there is a real and proven **potential** for advertising resources to be used to spread disinformation. That there are briefs (documents that summarize the objectives and tone of an advertising campaign) that do not tell the whole story. That there are objectives that are glossed over. That there are decisions which, without breaking any laws, can still be deeply irresponsible.

Recent history is full of examples: from the Cambridge Analytica scandal to the widespread dissemination of conspiracy theories with a campaign-like aesthetic. But there is no need to look to the Global North to understand the phenomenon. In Brazil, in 2018, one of the most effective tools of disinformation was WhatsApp groups fed with posts that combined advertising tone with false information, according to an article in The New York Times (2018). A special report by the media outlet Chequeado (2024) in Argentina identified "astroturfing" operations during several elections, a term used to describe campaigns that appear to be spontaneous but are orchestrated by professional teams. In Paraguay, as shown in the TEDIC report on disinformation in electoral contexts (2023), disinformation does not come only from marginal actors: it is often financed, segmented and produced with digital marketing tools.

Advertising has power. And like all power, it can be used to build or to harm. What I am trying to highlight in this section of the article is that this is not a flaw in the system, but a possibility that is integrated into the system itself. It is not enough to say "we just follow the brief" or "we meet the client's objective," because if that objective is to misinform, confuse or polarize,then the industry must decide if it is willing to be part of that.

Storytelling always carries responsibility. And when those stories are backed by money, carefully crafted aesthetics and precise targeting, that responsibility multiplies. And when public debate is damaged, what is eroded is not just an election, but the possibility of coexisting, trusting and building something together.

3. Agencies as architects of reality

When we think of disinformation, we tend to imagine a troll in a basement, a bot responding to messages based on a script or a politician spreading lies from a stage. But we rarely look at the other side of the stage: the professional teams, the creatives, the strategists and consultants, the agencies that, without always having malicious intent, can end up actively participating in the architecture of a false or biased narrative.

An agency, or a communications structure that operates with the logic of an agency, does not need to lie to misinform. It is enough to shape a message, select what is said and what is omitted, play with emotions, choose the right words to reinforce a prejudice or soften an omission. And if all this is done with the skill and emotional pulse of a good campaign, with a spark of creativity, the impact can be deeper and more lasting than that of a direct lie. Because it does not generate rejection, it generates trust. Because it does not seem false, it seems professional.

This narrative construction power has historically been used not only to sell products, but also to shape beliefs, protect interests and spread disinformation on a massive scale. Some of the most emblematic cases in history make this clear:

For decades, the tobacco industry pursued a disturbing strategy of associating its products with health (RGA, 2020). In the 1930s and 1940s, advertisements featuring doctors "recommending" cigarettes, describing them as less harmful or even beneficial to the throat, were commonplace. Advertisements such as "Just what the doctor ordered" went so far as discrediting scientific studies that had already linked tobacco to cancer. This is a paradigmatic case, as it was not a matter of blatant lies, but rather a strategic design, embellished with medical authority, that constructed a misleading and deeply dangerous narrative.

In 1996, the pharmaceutical giant Purdue Pharma launched OxyContin onto the market, backed by misleading communications that downplayed the risk of addiction, promoting it as a safe painkiller and presenting it as a solution with almost no side effects. They sold doctors and patients on the idea that less than 1% of users would develop an addiction, a figure based on questionable samples. The result was catastrophic: millions of prescriptions, an opioid epidemic and a chain of deaths and social consequences that led Purdue to admit criminal charges and pay multimillion-dollar fines. However, its owners, the Sackler family, were not convicted (STAT, 2019).

In the 1980s, major oil companies like Exxon, Chevron and BP invested in marketing campaigns that denied or downplayed climate change, despite knowing internally that it was a real phenomenon. They used messaging that positioned natural gas as a clean fuel, even though their internal reports acknowledged that methane emissions were just as harmful as those from coal. This example illustrates how advertising can serve a function designed to protect economic interests, employing sophisticated strategies of doubt and confusion.

The agency thus becomes an architect of meaning. It designs the visual framework, the emotional rhythm, the tone of the message. It decides whom to address, how to address them and what aesthetic to use in presenting the information. In this construction, nothing is left to chance. There is strategy, intention and technique.

In Paraguay, this is not theory: it is documented practice. During the 2023 electoral process, multiple social media pages were activated with the aim of influencing public perception of certain candidates. Many of these pages pose as news outlets, but they are not. They have generic names, news-like aesthetics, and bold headlines, but their messages are precisely targeted at segmented audiences, and their content is designed to reinforce specific emotions: fear, mistrust, indignation. **This may not seem to come from an "agency" in the traditional and most commonly used sense of the word, but it is worth noting because these are structures that use the same tools.**

According to a report by La Precisa from El Surti (2024), there was significant investment in paid promotion on accounts such as Despierta Paraguay, PyElige and Sucia Política. All of them shared a polished aesthetic, with designs that imitated news graphics, short videos with an informative tone and a very strategic use of language.

Who produces this content? Who promotes it? Who designs it? These questions remain difficult to answer with precision, as the traceability of money in digital advertising remains opaque. Platforms like Meta offer a political ad library that allows users to see who has placed certain ads, but **this tool does not clearly reveal who is actually financing each campaign**, nor does it guarantee that all political ads are properly labeled. As documented in the Policy Brief prepared by TEDIC (2024), the lack of robust identity verification requirements and the possibility of using intermediaries further hinder tracking the flow of money in digital campaigns. But the result is clear: these are advertising campaigns disguised as information, with political objectives and professional execution.

And this does not only happen in electoral contexts. A report by El Surti (2022) also shows the same situation in social debates, such as the one on the Educational Transformation Plan, where manipulated content appealing to fear was spread: "they want to impose gender ideology," "they are going to teach children pornography," "they want to destroy the family." Short, powerful phrases, without evidence, but with careful design and perfect timing.

Behind many of these pieces, there is aesthetic decision-making, targeting and audiovisual production. **And although their origin cannot always be traced back to a registered agency, they do respond to the logic and tools of the advertising world.** They are, in fact, campaigns. And if they are campaigns, then someone conceived them, executed them and approved them.

This does not mean that all agencies are complicit in disinformation. But it does imply recognizing that they can be, because there are gray areas where the message is legal but deeply manipulative. Where the client pays, but the one executing it is the one who chooses how to convey it.

Taking on this role does not mean attacking the industry, but strengthening it. Because if agencies are capable of building powerful narratives, they must also be capable of questioning what they are helping to build. Of looking at the impact beyond the KPI (Key Performance Indicators). Of understanding that the problem is not in using powerful tools, but in not asking what they are being used for.

Being an architect of reality is a great responsibility. And perhaps the first step in exercising it well is to stop saying that we only do advertising. Because advertising, as we have always known, is not just advertising: **It is culture, it is politics, it is power.**

> "I would love for agencies to take on a much more prominent and active role in issues that matter to society. It frustrates me that we remain on the surface."

P., creative director at an agency.

> "A red flag alert can be raised when a request comes disguised as institutional, but actually aims to instill fear or discredit someone. That happens more often than people acknowledge."

J., creative director at an agency.

4. The factory: how a disinformation campaign is built

When thinking about a successful disinformation campaign, it would be a mistake to imagine it as something improvised, chaotic or marginal. These campaigns work because they are built with the same tools, processes and principles as any professional advertising campaign. There is strategy, segmentation, storytelling, audiovisual production and planning.

We can think of a disinformation campaign as a factory. And like any factory, it has production phases. What changes is the product: instead of a brand or a consumer good, what is produced is an idea that seems plausible but is designed to manipulate, distort or confuse.

Below, I propose a simplified description of this process in four phases, which could look something like this:

PHASE 1. Data extraction and emotional identification

It all starts with knowing who you are going to talk to. To do this, all kinds of data are gathered: audiences, previous segmentation, behavior on social media, interactions and dominant emotions. Sometimes this involves formal studies; other times, it involves the intensive use of digital analysis tools like Meta Ads Manager, Google Trends or social listening software.

The goal is to detect which topics generate the strongest emotions, which words are repeated in tweets and comments, which cultural codes hold the key to unlocking the castle of emotions. At this stage, messages are not yet created; instead, the emotional map of the target audience is defined.

Local example: In 2023, prior to the public discussion on the Educational Transformation Plan, it was identified that one of the most effective triggers was the term "gender ideology" (ABC, 2022). That simple label activated a set of fears that were then exploited in the following phases.

PHASE 2. Narrative and aesthetic design of the message

With the emotional data in hand, the narrative begins to take shape. An enemy (real or invented) is chosen, the tone is defined (alarmist, concerned, etc.), the formats are selected (memes, clips, fake news, audios, reels) and the aesthetics are worked on to ensure the content is not immediately dismissed.

An effective campaign pays close attention to the "how." This is why many pieces of disinformation imitate journalistic graphics, media headlines, surveys and false yet credible testimonials. The goal is not just to convey content, but also to build visual trust. Lies and food first reach us through the eyes.

Currently, with the rise of artificial intelligence tools like Sora, Midjourney, ElevenLabs and many others, the ability to create hyper-realistic images, voices, and videos has been democratized and reduced to a cost that borders on absurdity. What once required a full audiovisual production team can now be accomplished with a prompt (a message containing instructions for artificial intelligence). This enables disinformation campaigns to achieve a professional aesthetic with minimal resources, lowering the barriers to mass deception.

PHASE 3. Segmentation and intelligent distribution

This is where the real power of digital advertising comes into play. Through platforms like Meta Ads, the target audience for each message is carefully selected. Different pieces can be targeted to men over 50 in rural areas, young women in urban centers or people with specific religious beliefs.

The same content is subtly adjusted to appear tailor-made for each audience. And as with any good advertising strategy, it is tested, optimized and refined. But this time, the goal is not to sell a product. It is to instill suspicion, reinforce prejudice and sow doubt or mistrust.

PHASE 4. Automated or emotional amplification

Once the message is in circulation, something ironic happens: the goal is to make it seem like it is not advertising, but rather to spread it through WhatsApp groups, or posts shared among friends. Bots or fake accounts are often used to amplify the message, and in other cases, it is enough for the message to strike a chord with the public for them to share it on their own. Then, some media outlets pick up the reactions of the public as genuine, giving the campaign a new boost.

This phase is key because it transforms an apparently isolated campaign into a social conversation. At that point, it no longer matters whether the message is true or not, because if it is on everyone's lips, it has already done its job.

The cycle can be repeated with new variants, new audiences and new channels. Most importantly, it does not necessarily involve marginal actors. Many of these campaigns are designed with professional resources, using tools available in any medium-sized agency, and with objectives as clear as any commercial campaign brief.

Understanding this process is not just a diagnostic exercise, but a wake-up call, because if messages can be fabricated to cause harm, alerts can also be fabricated to prevent it. And if we understand how this factory operates, then we can begin to imagine how to deactivate it or at least reduce its potential impact.

5. Who listens to what?: targeting, polarization and echo chambers

Digital advertising not only enables communication; it allows for deciding with great precision who is told, how, when and how many times. This capability, which in many cases is a legitimate tool for optimizing resources, can easily become a form of manipulation when what is distributed is not useful information, but content that seeks to divide, reinforce prejudices or feed false narratives.

In digital environments, especially on social media, news consumption is mediated by algorithms that use our preferences, interactions and personal data to offer content tailored to each user. This can lead to two people in the same country, even in the same neighborhood, **having very different information diets.** Research such as that by Flaxman, Goel and Rao (2016) shows that platforms like Facebook and Google are linked to an increase in ideological distance between users, reinforcing echo chambers. Meanwhile, studies on algorithmic filtering (Pariser, 2011) warn about "filter bubbles" that isolate users in confirmatory views of their own world.

When a campaign aims to instill fear, it will do so with different pieces for each audience. To parents, it will speak of children. To young people, about the future. To older people, about the loss of values. To each, what triggers the most instinctive and immediate reaction. **Not everyone needs to believe the same thing. It is enough for everyone to feel the same thing: doubt, rejection, anger.** This is how emotional polarization works as a strategy, and if we learn to recognize this formula, we can fight against it.

This issue is highlighted because it brings together many points that are important for understanding what is happening, but it is worth noting that during the debate on the Educational Transformation Plan, for example, different pieces were scheduled according to age, region, religious affinities and political preferences. The underlying message was the same: oppose change, but the reasons given were different. Some were told that "they are going to destroy the family," others that "this is being imposed from outside," and others that "they want to indoctrinate your children." Each message can be seen as a different tentacle of the same octopus of disinformation and manipulation.

In this environment, the public not only receives segmented messages. They also share them, reinterpret them, and defend them. As a result, the content no longer circulates as advertising but as common sense, like what "everyone says," even though each group actually hears something different.

The "spiral of silence" theory, formulated by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in her book of the same name (Noelle-Neumann, 1995), suggests that when people feel their opinion is in the minority, they tend to keep quiet to avoid isolation. Segmented campaigns exploit this dynamic in reverse: they make each group feel that their view is the majority view. They reinforce the idea that "we all agree on this," even though that "all" is merely an algorithmic snapshot of reality.

This is how echo chambers are created: digital environments where one only hears what confirms what one already believes. And if, in addition, that content is designed by professional teams, with familiar aesthetics, friendly tones and catchy phrases, the possibility of questioning it is reduced. Why doubt something that sounds like me, looks like what I consume and says what I already thought?

In this type of campaign, truth does not disappear, but rather fragments and multiplies. Everyone receives their version of the story. And since each version is designed to seem the most reasonable, it becomes very difficult to find common ground for debate. Advertising, in this context, does not just sell products, it sells narratives. **And when those narratives are incompatible with each other, what gets eroded is the possibility of building basic agreements about what is happening.**

It is not a matter of giving up targeting as a tool, it is a matter of understanding that its use in the public sphere must be accompanied by responsibility, transparency and limits. Because when each person receives their own version of the truth, what we lose is shared conversation. And without shared conversation, there can be no citizenship.

> "We are more concerned with conversion than with consequences. The logic of data leaves no room to ask what we are contributing with that message."

- J., creative director at an agency.

6. And where do ethics stand?

In theory, advertising is governed by clear ethical principles: transparency, truthfulness and social responsibility. But in practice, these principles can be sidelined in favor of client objectives and market pressure. And when the quality of public debate is at stake, this set of elements becomes potentially dangerous.

The question is not just what can be done legally, but what should be done ethically. Because many campaigns that spread disinformation do not break any laws. They simply operate in gray areas: they exaggerate without lying, omit without falsifying, appeal to fear without explicitly stating it. And in these areas, ethics should not be an adornment; it should be the compass.

In Paraguay, as in many countries in the region, there are still no specific regulatory frameworks that govern digital advertising with an ethical approach. Political advertising on social media escapes the controls that apply to traditional media. Platforms are not required to disclose who paid for which message, to whom it was directed or how many times it was shown.

This is not an individual remark, but rather a structural problem. The industry operates with incentives that reward reach, efficiency and conversion, but rarely considers the consequences. A message that generates massive rejection can be seen as a success from the client's point of view, even if it further fragments the social fabric. A campaign that promotes a product with false or potentially harmful information for the consumer may be applauded at creative awards if it does so with enough ingenuity.

Some agencies have begun to incorporate internal codes of ethics, best practice manuals or review systems. Others have decided not to work with certain industries or clients. These are important steps forward, but they are still insufficient. Because disinformation does not always come from the extremes. Sometimes it comes disguised as an "awareness campaign," a "prevention message" or "institutional communication." And if there is no solid ethical culture, it is very easy to cross the line without realizing it or without wanting to acknowledge it.

In Paraguay, the Paraguayan Association of Advertising Agencies (APAP) has a code of ethics that aims to guide the professional conduct of its member agencies. The document establishes principles such as truthfulness, responsibility and respect for the consumer. However, this also raises a key question: what about agencies that are not part of APAP? Who are they accountable to? What criteria do they operate under? In a market where digital advertising is increasingly decentralized, the existence of multiple non-affiliated actors means that institutional ethical frameworks, while valuable, do not always manage to contain organizations deliberately created to deal with "problematic" clients.

The problem also relates to training. Many marketing and communication professionals are not provided with solid tools to think about the ethical impact of their work. They learn to segment, optimize and create effective messages. But there is rarely any discussion about the kind of society being helped to build with these tools. And this omission, in times of a crisis of trust and polarization, should no longer be tolerated.

Furthermore, the current context requires a rethinking of regulation. This is not about censorship or excessive state surveillance. It is about establishing minimum frameworks that ensure transparency, traceability and shared responsibility. What is advertised on social media, especially during electoral periods or on sensitive issues, should not operate in opacity.

The European Union, for example, has made progress in implementing the Digital Services Act (DSA), which requires platforms to make their recommendation systems transparent and allows for the auditing of algorithms that can amplify disinformation (European Commission, n.d.). These are steps in the right direction. In Latin America, initiatives like TEDIC aim to promote similar models tailored to our contexts.

Until recently, we could at least recognize when something seemed fake, but today it is no longer that simple. AI tools can fabricate testimonials that never existed, faces that never lived and voices that sound familiar but are not. It is not just a matter of technique, but of trust. If every piece of advertising can appear real even when it is not, then the responsibility of those who design, approve or spread this content becomes even greater.

But beyond regulation, what is needed is an honest conversation within the industry. Not just about what can be done, but about what we want to do. Because if advertising has the power to shape reality, then its decisions cannot be left solely to the market. There is symbolic power at stake. And, we reiterate, where there is power, there is responsibility.

Taking on that responsibility is not a hindrance to creativity. It is, perhaps, the only way for creativity to remain relevant, valuable and respected over time. Because an industry that refuses to critically examine itself risks losing legitimacy. Ethics is not a limitation. It is a form of care. Caring about what is said, how it is said and why it is said. Ultimately, what is at stake is not just a campaign. It is the possibility of building a more fair, more honest, more humane form of communication.

> "There is a code of ethics at APAP, but no one knows about it, no one applies it. In practice, each agency does what it thinks is best."

- C., publicist and creative director at an agency.

7. What can we do?

After everything that has been said, the question that remains is both simple and complex: what now? Pointing out the risks and flaws is important, but it is not enough. The solution is not silence or resignation. The solution is conversation, intelligent regulation, professional self-criticism. **And above all, collective action.**

> **"The best way to improve is to commit to not working with media that spread disinformation. But that requires determination and consistency from all parties involved."**

- J., creative director at an agency.

This article does not aim to provide definitive answers, but rather to outline some possible paths forward. Proposals that are already being debated in the region and ideas emerging from international organizations working to reduce the impact of disinformation. Because if advertising wields such power, then it is worth considering how to channel it in a fairer, more transparent and more careful way.

The urgent: minimum rules to protect public debate

Transparency in digital advertising: all political or institutional campaigns on social media should be required to disclose who is financing them, with what budget, on what dates and to which audiences they are directed. While tools like Meta Ad Library exist, their reach remains limited. Many campaigns use pages without a clear identity or intermediaries that make it difficult to identify those truly responsible. Furthermore, not all ads with political intent are correctly labeled as such. As documented by TEDIC's research (2024), the lack of regulatory requirements and identity verification enables actors with opaque intentions to hide behind seemingly legal structures. For there to be an honest public conversation, it is essential that citizens can clearly trace who is paying to influence their perception.

Obligation for platforms to enable independent audits of the functioning of their algorithms and the circulation of sensitive content during key periods (elections, health debates, etc.).

Specific regulations for political and social advertising in digital spaces, including ethical limits on targeting, emotional manipulation and the use of sensitive data.

The possible: strengthening citizen capacities and tools

Media and advertising education from an early age, so that children and adolescents learn to critically engage with what they consume.

Ethical training within agencies, not as a decorative protocol, but as an integral part of the training for creatives, planners and directors.

Creation of citizen communication observatories that can monitor campaigns, report abuses and provide clear information to the public.

Spaces for agencies, civil society, academia and the public sector to come together and build consensus on best practices and shared responsibilities.

The ideal: a new culture of communication

That the success of a campaign is not measured only by its reach, but also by its ethical and social impact.

That agencies feel more empowered to reject briefs that spread disinformation, and that they can do so without fear of losing legitimacy or business.

That creative and industry awards include and expand ethical criteria, recognizing campaigns that not only innovate, but also demonstrate care.

That citizens regain their power to question, demand and choose. Because it is also our responsibility not to let them sell us anything, in any way.

These proposals are not utopias, they are decisions. Some require laws, and others, willpower. But they all stem from the same idea: that advertising wields the power to shape realities and that this power must be exercised with the utmost responsibility and a commitment to the common good. And that if we are going to continue telling stories, it is worth considering what stories we tell, for what purposes, and for whom. Because in that choice, what is at stake is our ability to continue living together in harmony and building a future that includes everyone.

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