

# Can Corrections Repair the Damage to a Corporate Image Caused by Negative Publicity?

**Hans Hoeken**

*University of Nijmegen, Department of Communication*

**Jan Renkema**

*Tilburg University, Discourse Studies Group*

## ABSTRACT

*Negative publicity in newspapers can cause severe and lasting damage to a company's corporate reputation. Judges can order a newspaper to publish a correction if they find the publication to be unjustified or incorrect. The goal of this correction is to repair the damage to the company's reputation. The question may be asked whether corrections achieve this goal. Previous research has shown that people tend to stick to their initial beliefs regardless of whether they are contradicted by new information or not. An experiment was conducted to study whether corrections succeed in repairing such damage. The ratings of a company's reputation were obtained after the subjects had read either an objective newspaper report or a subjective one, or after reading the same subjective report followed by a correction. The results show that reading the correction results in similar corporate reputation ratings as reading the objective version does. Reading the subjective version leads to more negative ratings of the company's corporate reputation. Therefore, the results show that, at least under certain circumstances, a correction can repair the damage caused by unjustified negative publicity.*

## INTRODUCTION

Newspapers frequently publish articles about possible misconduct by companies,

for instance, paying bribes or evading taxes. Such newspaper reports can result in severe and lasting damage to the company's reputation, as was shown in a study by Renkema and Hoeken (in press). They studied the image-damaging effect of reading a newspaper article on an alleged case of bribery. As long as three weeks after reading the article, readers rated the company as less trustworthy, less competent and less attractive. Such damage is especially annoying if the accusations prove to be unwarranted. In that case, a judge can order a newspaper to publish a correction. The correction is intended to repair the damage caused by the unwarranted accusations. However, the question may be asked whether a correction can achieve that goal. Research on the so-called 'belief perseverance effect' shows that people stick to their initial beliefs even when the information on which they have based their beliefs turns out to be incorrect. This may severely limit the effectiveness of corrections: readers stick to their judgment based on the incorrect information, regardless of whether this information is later retracted. In fact, a correction may do more harm than good because it only reminds the readers of their negative judgment. In this paper, we report on an experiment in

which the effects of corrections were studied.

### **THE BELIEF PERSEVERANCE EFFECT**

Several studies have shown that people tend to stick to their initial beliefs even when they learn that the basis for those beliefs is incorrect (Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980; Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975). This effect is known as the belief perseverance effect. In a typical belief perseverance study, subjects receive information supporting a certain claim, for instance, people who like to take risks make outstanding firemen. The subjects accept the claim. They then learn that the information supporting the claim was made up. Nevertheless, they keep believing that daredevils make good firemen. This effect is also found in studies about how people process corrections in newspaper reports. Wilkes and Leatherbarrow (1988) had subjects read a series of reports on a raging fire in a warehouse or on a car accident. In the experiment, some of the information given earlier was later retracted. For instance, subjects first learned that the fire was started by a short circuit in a storeroom containing cans of oil-based paint and pressurized gas cylinders. This information was corrected later: the storeroom had been empty. Despite this correction, the subjects' answer to the question why the fire had been fierce was that the fire started in a room containing oil-based paint and gas cylinders. In their responses, they clearly ignored the correction.

People tend to ignore corrections especially when they rate the false information as a plausible or more plausible explanation for the events. For instance, people may reason that firemen do their work in risky circumstances and that risk-seeking behavior is therefore a precondition for being a good fireman. Likewise, they may reason that a fierce fire presupposes the

presence of inflammable products. After they have formulated such a plausible explanation for the sequence of events, it is difficult to alter their beliefs by means of a correction. If, on the other hand, the correction gives a more plausible explanation of the events, readers replace the initial information with the correction. This was shown in a different condition in the experiment by Wilkes and Leatherbarrow (1988). In this condition, subjects first read that the fire was started by a short circuit in an empty storeroom. The correction stated that the storeroom had not been empty but contained inflammable products. This correction provided a more plausible explanation for the fierceness of the fire. In response to the question why the fire had been fierce, subjects again answered that the room contained inflammable products, thereby showing that they had processed and assimilated the correction. The explanatory power of the correction is an important determinant of whether readers adopt the correction or not. Johnson and Seifert (1994) showed that subjects will adopt the correction if it contains an alternative explanation. They used the Wilkes and Leatherbarrow (1988) material. As in that experiment, subjects first read that the fire was started by a short circuit in a storeroom containing inflammable products. The correction mentioned that the storeroom had been empty, but that there were several clues suggesting that arson had been committed. The possibility of arson functioned as an alternative explanation, and subjects adopted this information.

Now suppose that a newspaper report suggests that a company has been successful simply because it paid bribes. Paying bribes is offered as an explanation for the company's prosperity. When a judge orders the newspaper to publish a correction, this correction will state that the company's success is not due to paying bribes. Therefore, the

correction does not provide an alternative explanation for the company's success. As a consequence, readers may stick to their initial belief about the reasons for the company's success, and the correction does not achieve its goal.

### **THE IMPACT OF CORRECTIONS ON EVALUATIVE JUDGMENTS**

The studies discussed above concerned the effects of corrections on factual beliefs. As a result of learning that a company has paid bribes, people may also form a negative attitude toward that company. That is, the negative (factual) information damages the company's image; people may regard the company as less trustworthy, competent, and attractive. At least from the judge's perspective, a correction should repair any damage to the company's image that was caused by the initial negative publicity. (The company may want to damage the newspaper's or journalist's image as well.)

In this regard, a correction is comparable to an instruction to a jury to disregard certain information when forming their judgment. Whether people are successful at disregarding information is the central question in a number of studies on the American jury system. Thompson, Fong, and Rosenhan (1981) had subjects watch a video of a lawsuit in which the defendant was accused of robbery with murder. One piece of evidence was the fact that, shortly after the crime was committed, the defendant had in his possession an amount of money approximately equal to the loot. The defendant claimed that he got the money from his bookmaker after winning an illegal bet. A police officer then made a statement that either incriminated or exonerated the defendant. The incriminating statement ran that the defendant often gambled and usually lost, so that he owed a large amount of money to that particular bookie. The exonerating statement read

that the defendant had indeed won a large amount of money around the time of the crime. In both cases, the police officer was asked how he had gotten this information. The officer had to admit that he had obtained his information through an illegal telephone tap. The judge therefore instructed the members of the jury and, consequently, the subjects in the experiment, to disregard the officer's statement. Disregarding the incriminating statement was easier than disregarding the exonerating statement. Subjects who had heard the exonerating statement passed less severe judgments compared to a control group which did not hear the officer's statement. Subjects who had heard the incriminating statement passed equally severe judgments as the control group.

Thompson et al's results lend themselves to the interpretation that the evaluated person receives the benefit of the doubt. When instructed to ignore some information, subjects do so if the information is negative, but not if it is positive. The results reported by Wyer and Budesheim (1987) show a similar pattern. Their subjects had to evaluate persons on the basis of descriptions of actions performed by these persons. During the experiment, the experimenter stated that an error had been made and that a number of the actions were performed by some other person. Therefore, the descriptions of these actions had to be ignored. When the actions to be ignored were positive, they still influenced the evaluation positively. That is, subjects who did receive the information rated the person more positively than subjects who did not receive the information. When the actions to be ignored were negative, subjects again rated the person more positively than would be expected on the basis of the remaining information. This effect was even more pronounced than when the information to be ignored was positive. Wyer and Unverzagt (1985) found a simi-

lar boomerang effect when negative information had to be ignored.

These results imply that corrections may be successful in repairing a company's reputation. If a newspaper has to admit that its previous allegations were unfounded, readers review their judgment about the company's image. The image may become even more positive as a result of the boomerang effect of incorrect negative information. These results seem to contradict the results on the belief perseverance effect. As discussed in the previous paragraph, corrections of bits of information are often ignored. Apparently, a correction can alter people's evaluative judgment without altering the information on which it was based. This is exactly the claim made by Fiske and Taylor (1991, p. 151): 'The judgment becomes an integrated whole that is not afterward unpacked into its discredited and valid parts, with people then using only the valid parts.' Instead, when information is discredited, people directly reevaluate their judgment without reconsidering the information on which it was based (Wyer & Budesheim, 1987). When people have had a chance to integrate all information, it is especially difficult to recompute their judgment (Schul & Burnstein, 1985).

#### **THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The studies discussed above provide only indirect clues about the effectiveness of corrections in newspapers. None used newspaper articles about a company's possible misbehavior. Furthermore, none employed corrections as they usually appear in newspapers. In the experiment described below, we used articles about possible bribes that were actually published in Dutch regional newspapers. We used corrections as they appeared in newspapers. Finally, we assessed the subjects' beliefs as well as their evaluations of the company's image.

The experiment was designed to answer two questions:

- What is the effect of a correction on beliefs about a company's misconduct?
- What is the effect of a correction on the company's image?

#### **METHOD**

##### **Material**

The material consisted of three texts, all concerning bribery scandals. All texts were based on articles in regional dailies. The first article consisted of four paragraphs and was about a building contractor who was accused of taking an alderman and civil servants on a trip to a Formula 1 race in order to get public work contracts. The contractor claimed that he did not pay for the alderman's and civil servants' travelling expenses. The second article ran for six paragraphs and was about a large building company that was accused of frequently paying bribes in order to win contracts. The company claimed that the accusations did not stand up in court and that therefore it was innocent. The third article contained four paragraphs and was about a building contractor who had given a local politician an envelope containing money. The contractor claimed that he had no knowledge of any envelope. The length of all three corrections was one paragraph. In order to prevent subjects from basing their judgments on prior knowledge about the scandals, the names of the people concerned were replaced by fictitious names, and the scandals were located in a different town or region in The Netherlands. None of the subjects mentioned that they recognized the actual scandals.

Two versions of each article were constructed: a subjective version and an objective version. A correction was written as well. In the subjective version, the journalist had not heard both sides: the accused

company did not have the opportunity to tell its side of the story. In addition, this version contained bits of incorrect information. Therefore, it was dubbed the subjective version. The objective version did contain the company's side of the story, and all the information was correct. The correction contained the company's side of the story and the incorrect information was explicitly retracted. An example of the manipulation is found in Table 1.

### Participants

Eighty-nine participants took part in the experiment, 40 men and 49 women. They were not paid for their participation. Their ages ranged from 18 to 65, with a mean of 36. All participants were native speakers of Dutch. They lived in the same region in The Netherlands and subscribed to a newspaper. Education ranged from primary education to a master's degree. The majority had completed at least secondary education.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire operationalized the belief that the company had done something illegal, the company's image, and the perceived objectivity of the article. Finally, some general questions about the article and the subject were asked.

#### *The belief of illegality*

After reading each article, subjects were asked to estimate the likelihood that the company had performed an illegal act. For instance, in the Van Seeters case, subjects were asked: 'How likely do you think it is that Van Seeters offered bribe money?' Subjects responded on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 'very unlikely' to 7 'very likely'.

#### *The company's image*

After reading each article, subjects were asked to rate the company's image. The three most important aspects of image are

**Table 1: An example of the subjective and objective version and the correction**

<i>Subjective version</i>	<i>Objective version</i>	<i>Correction</i>
Last year at the start of the building trade holiday, Van Iersel is alleged to have found an envelope in his mailbox containing five thousand guilders along with a letter of appreciation from Van Seeters' company Vanco Bouwmaterialen B.V. Van Iersel's wife allegedly gave the envelope back to Van Seeters' son the same day.	Last year at the start of the building trade holiday, Van Iersel is alleged to have received an envelope containing five thousand guilders along with a letter of appreciation from Van Seeters' company Vanco Bouwmaterialen B.V. at his home. Van Iersel's wife allegedly gave the envelope back to Van Seeters' son the very same day. From testimony given by Van Seeters, Sr., it appears that he had no knowledge about the envelope containing five thousand guilders. According to him, the money did not come from his company.	The judge has ordered this newspaper to retract certain claims made in the article 'Bribe scandal in Vught is about 7500 guilders.' From testimony given by Van Seeters, Sr., it appears that he had no knowledge about the envelope containing five thousand guilders. According to him, the money did not come from his company.

trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (see O’Keefe, 1990). Each aspect was measured using five seven-point Likert scales. In each case, a positive statement about the company was made, for example: ‘According to me, the Van Seeters company seems honest.’ Under trustworthiness, the five items were ‘honest,’ ‘incorruptible,’ ‘trustworthy,’ ‘honorable,’ ‘behaving properly.’<sup>1</sup> The reliability of this scale was good (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ). The five items relating to the firm’s expertise were ‘capable,’ ‘proficient,’ ‘skilled,’ ‘expert,’ and ‘competent.’ The reliability of this scale was also good (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .88$ ). The five items used for the company’s attractiveness were ‘appealing,’ ‘pleasant,’ ‘friendly,’ ‘nice,’ and ‘attractive.’ The reliability of this scale was good as well (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .81$ ). The items for the three image aspects were randomly ordered.

*The article’s objectivity*

Ten statements were given as to the objectivity of the report; for instance, ‘The article gives an objective report of this affair.’ The subjects were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale the degree to which they agreed with each statement. The reliability of the objectivity scale was good (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .80$ ).

At the end some personal information was requested: sex, age, and highest completed education.

**Design**

A within-subjects design was used. Employing a latin square design, care was taken that each subject read a subjective version, an objective version, and a subjective version followed by a correction. The versions were about different scandals. Each version was read by some subjects as the first article, by others as the second, and by a third group as the third article. The design is given in Table 2.

Subjects were assigned randomly to one of the three groups.

**Procedure**

Each subject was run individually. Subjects were told that the study was about news reporting on bribery scandals. They would have to read a number of newspaper articles and answer some questions about them. The questionnaire contained the instructions on how to respond to the different item types. Subjects read the first article and then answered the items about their beliefs, the company’s image, and the report’s objectivity. They then read the second article and again responded to those items. Finally, they read the third article, responded to the belief, image, and objectivity items, and provided answers to the general questions. The correction was always printed on a separate page. In that condition, subjects responded to the items after reading the subjective version and the correction. After completing the experimental booklet, subjects were told the true

**Table 2: The within-subjects design of the experiment**

<i>Group</i>	<i>Scandal 1</i>	<i>Scandal 2</i>	<i>Scandal 3</i>
1	Objective	Subjective & correction	Subjective
2	Subjective	Objective	Subjective & Correction
3	Subjective & Correction	Subjective	Objective

purpose of the experiment and were thanked for their cooperation.

## RESULTS

First, it was investigated whether the nature of the three scandals led to different ratings of the companies involved. With respect to the belief that the company had performed an illegal act, no difference among the three was found. The different scandals, however, did affect the companies' image differently: the company accused of paying bribes frequently (scandal 2), was rated as less trustworthy than the other two companies ( $F(2, 176) = 9.08, p < .001$ ). This company was also rated as less attractive than the company involved in the Formula 1 trip (scandal 1):  $F(2, 176) = 3.20, p < .05$ . The company accused of delivering an envelope containing money (scandal 3), was rated as less competent than the other two:  $F(2, 176) = 6.10, p < .01$ . Finally, the reporting on the third scandal was rated as more objective than the reporting on the other two.

These main effects of scandal could distort the effects of the correction if the statistical analyses were conducted on the raw scores. For instance, subjects who had read the objective version of the second scandal would rate the company's image as lower

than subjects who had read the subjective version of the first one. That difference would not be the result of differences in the manner of reporting, but simply because the nature of the second scandal was considered to be graver than the nature of the first one. To prevent such distortions, the scores on the image and objectivity ratings were standardized. In this way, the differences between the scandals were neutralized, and any differences between the versions could be ascribed to differences in the way of reporting.

A 2x2 analysis of variance was conducted using Subject group and Text version as factors; the factor Text version contained repeated measures. There were no main effects of Subject group, nor were there any significant interactions between Subject group and Text version. Therefore, only the main effects of Text version are reported.

Table 3 contains the mean belief, image, and objectivity scores as a function of Text version.

There was a main effect of text version on the belief that the company had performed an illegal act:  $F(2, 146) = 3.40, p < .05$ . Contrasts revealed that after reading the subjective version, subjects rated it more likely that the company had performed an

**Table 3: The mean scores on belief, image, and objectivity as a function of text version (belief: minimum = 1, maximum = 7; image and objectivity: minimum = -1, maximum = 1)**

	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Subjective</i>	<i>Subjective &amp; Correction</i>
Belief	5.24	5.65	5.05
Image aspects			
Trustworthiness	0.14	-0.38	0.23
Expertise	0.07	-0.22	0.15
Attractiveness	0.10	-0.29	0.19
Objectivity	0.35	0.15	-0.50

illegal act than after reading the objective version ( $p < .05$ , one-tailed tested) and after reading the correction ( $p < .01$ ). The likelihood ratings after reading the objective version did not differ from the ratings after reading the correction ( $p = .39$ ). Therefore, the correction was successful in decreasing the perceived likelihood that the company had acted illegally.

There were main effects of text version for each of the image aspects: trustworthiness,  $F(2, 172) = 14.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ; expertise,  $F(2, 172) = 6.49$ ,  $p < .01$ ; attractiveness:  $F(2, 172) = 9.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ). First, employing contrasts it was investigated whether reading the subjective version did more harm to the company's image than reading the objective version. For each of the image aspects, this was the case; after reading the subjective version, subjects rated the company as less trustworthy, less competent, and less attractive (all  $p$ 's  $< .05$ ).

Secondly, it was tested whether the correction could repair the damage caused by reading the subjective version. Again, this proved to be the case: after reading the correction, subjects rated the company as more trustworthy, more competent, and more attractive (all  $p$ 's  $< .05$ ), compared to reading the subjective version only. Finally, it was investigated whether reading the correction had a boomerang effect, that is: does reading the correction lead to more positive ratings of the image aspects than reading the objective version does? Although the means are in accordance with such a boomerang effect, none of these differences were significant ( $p$ 's  $> .42$ ).

For the objectivity ratings, again a main effect of text version was obtained:  $F(2, 172) = 22.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, contrasts revealed a different pattern of results. The objective version was not rated as more objective than the subjective version by itself ( $p = .13$ ). The objective version was rated as more objective than the subjective version when the latter version was

followed by a correction ( $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the subjective version was rated as more objective than exactly the same version but now followed by a correction ( $p < .001$ ). It appears that subjects take the correction as a cue to rating the text's objectivity. In the presence of a correction, the article is rated as subjective, but when a correction is absent, it is rated as objective regardless of whether it is more or less objective.

## DISCUSSION

In the discussion, the answers to the research questions will be dealt with first. This will be followed by a discussion of the ecological validity of the experiment and the implications for its generalizability.

### Answers to the research questions

The first research question related to the effects of the correction on subjects' beliefs. Previous experiments had shown that readers are relatively insensitive to corrections. They only adopted the correction when it contained a more plausible explanation for the events described in the article. When the correction simply negated previous information, it was not adopted. In our experiment, the correction did exactly what it is supposed to do: after reading the correction, readers were less certain that the company had performed an illegal act. In fact, their likelihood estimates were equal to those of readers of the objective version. Since the readers of the objective version and those of the subjective version plus correction based their judgment on the same information, that should not be surprising.

The fact that the correction in our experiment proved successful, whereas corrections in previous experiments were often ineffective, may be the result of differences in the nature of the correction. In the experiment by Wilkes and Leatherbarrow (1988), corrections were concerned



with the possible causes of an event, for instance, what caused the fire? The occurrence of the central event is undisputed, that is, the warehouse did burn down. The correction is directed towards a less important aspect. In our experiment, the correction was directed towards the central event of the report: did the company perform an illegal act or not? Maybe corrections directed towards the most important aspects of a report are more likely to be adopted than corrections directed towards less important aspects. Still, it should be noted that despite the correction, subjects find it much more likely than not that the company has performed an illegal act.

The second research question related to the effects of the correction on the company's image. Again, the correction appears to do exactly what it is supposed to do. After reading the correction, readers rate the company as more trustworthy, more competent, and more attractive than the readers of the subjective version do. In previous research, a boomerang effect was reported. After correcting negative information, subjects passed more favorable judgments than expected on the basis of the remaining information. In our experiment, we did not observe such a boomerang effect: readers of the correction give similar ratings of the company's image as readers of the objective version.

The absence of a boomerang effect can, again, be explained by the nature of the correction. In the experiments reporting a boomerang effect, it is clear to the subjects that incorrect information is indeed incorrect. Wyer and Budesheim (1987), for instance, told their subjects that some of the information was about a different person than the one they had to evaluate. In our experiment, the company simply denies that it has tried to bribe someone. This leaves some doubt about whether the company is telling the truth or not. As evidenced by the belief ratings, readers rate it

as more likely than not that the company has performed an illegal act. Therefore, it is not surprising that no boomerang effect occurred. However, there is a boomerang effect with respect to the objectivity ratings. Exactly the same report is rated as much more objective in isolation than when followed by a correction. Apparently, the fact that a judge has ordered the newspaper to publish a correction is sufficient reason for the readers to rate the report as subjective.

#### **Remarks on the experiment's ecological validity**

There are several aspects of the experimental situation that may have been responsible for the success of the correction. First, a correction may be less successful when the judgment it is intended to correct is based on a careful evaluation of the information. Such judgments are hard to change (Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995). The probability of a judgment being based on a careful evaluation is higher when people are highly involved in the issue. In this experiment, the subjects were probably not very involved with the topic. Several of them noted spontaneously that they would skip these articles if they had been published in their newspaper. Therefore, it is unlikely that the ratings of the company's image are based on a careful evaluation of the information in the news report. In normal reading conditions, readers can decide to ignore the article or to stop reading halfway. They will read reports on bribes only when they are interested in such a topic. Moreover, as interest increases, the probability that they form a well-based judgment will increase as well.

Related to this concern is the time lapse between reading the article and reading the correction. This is different from normal circumstances as well. In our experiment, readers read the correction immediately after reading the newspaper article. If a judge orders a newspaper to publish a cor-

rection on a previously published article, some time will elapse between the two. As a result, it is more probable that readers have had the opportunity to integrate the bits of information which makes it more difficult to correct certain bits of that information (Schul & Burnstein, 1985). Corrections will have less impact when readers have had ample time to elaborate upon the previous information. Finally, all participants read the correction. In reality, some readers of the original article will miss the correction, whereas some will read the correction without having read the original article. It would be interesting to assess the corporate image for those people who have read only the correction.

Despite these reservations on the ecological validity, this experiment is a valuable first step on the way to a full understanding of the effects of corrections in newspapers. The experimental conditions favored the occurrence of a correction effect. Had no effects of correction been obtained under these circumstances, it is very unlikely that corrections have the desired effects in real life. The extent to which the correction effects obtained are viable outside the laboratory is an interesting question for further study.

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#### ENDNOTE

1 Only positive statements were used for the Likert scales. As one of the reviewers noted, this may have encouraged the subjects to take more extreme positions on both ends of the scales to show that their judgment is balanced. However, because this balanced-bias would occur for each of the three versions, and we were interested in the differences between these versions rather than in the absolute scores, this does not pose a problem for the answers to the research questions.

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