



Responding to ‘Fake News’ in the Post-Truth Era

Accusations that have no basis in reality can be surprisingly damaging. But there are some ways to weaken them.

There is little debate that we are entering a new era in crisis communications. The proliferation of algorithmically-driven social media platforms allows erroneous claims and “fake news” reports to propagate with unprecedented speed. This is being made all the more worrying by Donald Trump’s White House, which not only lends credence to questionable information to further its narrative but is, in many cases, an instigator of fake news.

Not long after Trump became president, his counsellor Kellyanne Conway introduced the phrase “alternative facts” when defending inflated claims about attendance numbers at his inauguration by White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer.

Trump’s recent assertion that Sweden was having “problems like they never thought possible” because “they took in large numbers” of refugees went viral and was largely disputed. But what makes the spread of this information particularly dangerous is that, according to research, misinformation takes hold more rapidly and more easily in populations that perceive themselves to be in an insecure position. Trump’s base, therefore, ran to his support.

Given that fake news instigators thrive on stoking their followers’ confirmatory bias, the tendency to favour information that confirms existing beliefs, they present serious challenges to the reputations of

those they attack. In his book, ***On Rumours: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, and What Can Be Done***, Cass Sunstein, a professor at Harvard and formerly President Barack Obama’s administrator of information and regulatory affairs, suggests corrections or counter-information to false rumours, lies, or “alternative facts” are very difficult, and should be a matter of public concern. In many cases, therefore attenuating them may be the only hope.

Correcting fake news

These alternative facts can also be durable. In a paper, ***The Continued Influence of Misinformation in Memory***, Colleen Seifert at the University of Michigan noted that there is a “continued influence effect”, where misinformation continues to influence judgments even if that information has already been corrected by the accused.

This is one reason why conventional communications tactics of responding to fake news or false claims with condemnation and retort have so far proven inadequate in the post-truth era. Responding with outrage has also fallen short, making the accused appear to be “crying wolf” and easily painted as hypocritical or over-reactive, as Hillary Clinton learned in the presidential debates.

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Successful correction, Seifert goes on to state, “appears to require assisting the reader in resolving this contradiction.”

Ways to respond

These powerful “barrage” tactics, therefore, require a new kind of response, suggestions for which I have listed below. These are not exhaustive, nor are they a process to follow, but considerations for responding when under attack. In many cases, however, responding can only go so far so there are limits to the effectiveness of these counter strategies. Your counter information may never make it past the biases of the hardened followers of the accuser, no matter how clear the message or pure the intentions. Your aims should be to target those in the middle who are either undecided or interested in furthering rational debate.

1. Condemn and turn the argument on the accuser. While condemnation may be necessary, be careful not to repeat the instigator’s claims lest your outrage become fodder for their followers’ entertainment. Turn the argument around by making strong points or asking pointed questions to demonstrate that the emperor is not wearing any clothes.

Trump’s recent claims that something happened “last night in Sweden” elicited a very calm yet pointed response. The Swedish embassy in the U.S. tweeted in response, “we look forward to informing the U.S. administration about Swedish immigration and integration policies.” Even to those not following developments, it served as a stand-alone statement that might simply be construed as an act of friendly information sharing, staying well clear of the original claims. Even Trump, the accuser, was forced to admit the source of his claim, which turned out to be a widely debunked Fox News report.

2. Communicate your values. **Research** by INSEAD Professor of Organisational Behaviour Charles Galunic found that when companies differentiated their espoused values from their peers and updated them over time, they outperformed their peers.

The response of U.S. CEOs to Trump’s first proposed immigration ban on citizens from seven majority-Muslim countries both produced a memorable response that loomed larger than claims that immigrants were bad for America, but also drew a line in the sand when it came to values. This also builds on the traditional crisis communications strategy of taking the moral high ground, especially if you have it. If you engage in the same sort of pettiness, you’ll end up **with the dirt on you too**.

3. Be funny. It may be tempting when responding to fight fire with fire, but in the increasingly divisive nature of fake news, this often reinforces the

accuser’s narrative, confirming stereotypes or negative beliefs that their followers already have about you. Refusing to play the “enemy” role makes it more difficult for the instigator to pin you down and demonise you to stoke more support for their ideas.

One very effective way to respond is with humour. Research on humour shows that when people in a conflict situation are exposed to humour and given pause to laugh, convergent thinking (the tendency to believe in only one solution) gives way to divergent thinking, which unveils other possible outcomes for the conflict. This is also reflected in other research on schools and offices showing humour as an efficient aid for creativity.

4. Or consider not responding at all. There is also such a thing as engaging too much. Depending on the ludicrousness of the claim, it could be better to wait it out. McDonald’s learned this lesson when a series of fake stories spread online that it was using **worms as filler in its burgers**. Eventually it stopped responding and let the story run out of steam. It was subsequently found to be false. It will be important to pick your battles and set a cut-off point for making further counter claims. Consider whether it is something that is likely to die out in the news cycle or something you need to kill.

All aboard the fake train

Preparing for the day of a fake news attack will be challenging as it will be difficult to anticipate exactly what form it will take and where it will come from. But a good start for companies will be forming a holistic perspective on what their reputation looks like, especially to their biggest detractors. This will also reveal the kind of “alternative facts” already circulating among the audience so they can start readying counter arguments. A crucial part of such an exercise should be to unearth the saliency of your messages. In essence, question if people listen to or believe in your narrative.

Used wisely, humour is often a good response to fake news attacks, which can involve seeding funny content to fans that will come to your aid in the event of an affront. It may not always be necessary to respond. In the event of a barrage of negative attacks, it is wise to pick your battles, remaining pointed in the narrative framework of the accuser and building memorable responses. Hitting back could be necessary, but not with a direct attack. This redirects a potential vicious cycle into a virtuous cycle for your reputation.

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