



TARGETING

UnTRUTHS

It's a depressing fact that facts don't carry the weight they once did, and still should. But there are ways to fight back against mis- and disinformation, says Brunswick's **CHAD GIRON.**

TEN MINUTES ON FACEBOOK OR TWITTER is all it takes to diagnose the communications landscape as infested with “fake news.” The line between truth and fiction is heavily blurred by deepfakes, partisan media outlets and old-fashioned lies, emanating even from individuals empowered to lead governments and institutions.

Professional communicators and journalists are trained to believe that “the truth” is a kind of curative tonic for their audiences. If individuals

could only be exposed to the truth about a topic then, surely, their passions and opinions would orbit around the gravitational pull of facts and reason. This is simply not true.

“The truth,” and its foot soldiers, facts, face several opposing forces. Some are endemic to our modern media environment and the mechanics of social media. Some are simply human nature. All contribute to a dynamic wherein relying upon “the truth” and facts to convince audiences is a risky if not a losing strategy.

The most powerful opposing force is reach. Misinformation is more popular—way more popular—than truth. It reaches many, many more people.

Recently, a client was the subject of a large volume of false and misleading online content. Their media team then dedicated a significant amount of time helping reporters source and substantiate the accurate content.

At Brunswick, we examined the reach and engagement of the accurate articles versus the articles with false or misleading information, and the result was dispiriting. On average, the corrected content received only 2 percent of the engagement of the most popular misinformation articles. In other words, “the truth” sells nowhere near as well as falsehoods.

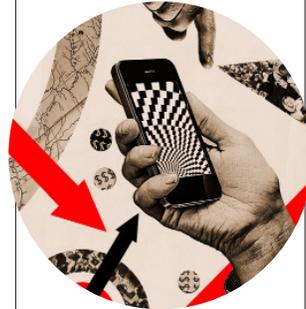
Follow-up focus group research revealed that many individuals in the client’s target audience weren’t aware of the existence of fact-checking websites. Those who were aware of fact-checking sites perceived their content to be no more trustworthy than misinformation. Among these individuals, an affinity for misinformation lingered even after being shown that it was false.

This brings us to a second force opposing the effectiveness of truth: human nature. Misinformation is more widely shared because it is more interesting. Whether it’s today’s tabloids or the penny dreadfuls of the Victorian era, salaciousness sells. Misinformation is often filled with narratives featuring powerful, well-known individuals and organizations allegedly engaged in outrageous activity. These fantastic stories are designed to generate clicks regardless of the cost to reputations, public discourse or public policy. They are packaged to look like news to lend their content legitimacy—all the better to influence you—but they are not remotely beholden to journalistic integrity.

A third force opposing truth is the economic value of clicks. Social media platforms are built on algorithms that encourage “engagement,” regardless of content veracity. Let’s face it, cute cat videos aren’t being shared because they inform public discourse. The structure of social media favors content that is often crafted to inflame emotions, reinforce existing prejudices and entice users with irresistibly amazing assertions. The more clicks, the more dollars.

In an environment where fighting falsehoods with fact-checking is disadvantaged at best and doomed at worst, what are some ways to push back against the tide of misinformation?

First, understand that truth does bear power. In



THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FAVORS MISINFORMATION CRAFTED TO INFLAME EMOTIONS, REINFORCE EXISTING PREJUDICES AND ENTICE USERS WITH IRRESISTIBLY AMAZING ASSERTIONS. THE MORE CLICKS, THE MORE DOLLARS.

fact, the most successful misinformation contains a kernel of truth. For organizations, misinformation often revolves around distortions or misrepresentations of actual products or operations. Activists, competitors or even disgruntled employees are apt to misrepresent executive motives, how a company operates or how it sources materials. In these cases, the misinformation may brush up against a truth while presenting a distorted vision of it.

Second, recognize the power of narrative. In correcting the record or checking facts or rebutting misinformation, what often works best is the creation of a competing and more compelling narrative. To maintain integrity and trust, that story should absolutely be fact-based, but it should elucidate motivations.

In the case study mentioned previously, we researched what elements of storytelling would help build trust and neutralize the negative effects of misinformation. One of the most effective narrative ingredients was to explain motivations and clearly state positive values and intentions.

Once a competing narrative has been created, it must be distributed at scale to relevant audiences. This needs to be a multi-channel effort involving earned media, paid media and owned channels, including websites and social media channels.

When it comes to reaching audiences at scale, traditional media outlets, also known as mainstream media, are invaluable for their large reach and relatively high trust levels.

Aside from earned media, the two most important channels in sharing a narrative are Google search and YouTube, respectively the number one and number two search engines in the world. They are the first place a wide range of audiences turn to research an issue or verify information.

Another way to neutralize misinformation is to use third parties to help amplify the reach of your narrative and bolster your reputation online with their implied or explicit support. When pushing back against misinformation, third parties with large, engaged and loyal social media audiences can serve as force multipliers.

In a world of unscrupulous media, malicious actors and algorithms seemingly programmed to reward falsehoods, it isn’t enough to know in your heart the truth about you and your organization. You must be prepared to broadcast that truth in a long and complex war of information. ♦

.....
CHAD GIRON is a Director in Brunswick’s office in Washington, DC, specializing in digital strategies content development.