

Understanding the Firehose of Falsehood

*Strategies for Communicating
the Truth in the Gun Violence Discussion*

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The Problem

Over the past 50 years, and particularly since the early 2000s, the gun lobby has successfully weakened gun laws and promulgated firearm ownership across the country. These actions have been due in large part to a coordinated and well-funded disinformation campaign targeted at flooding Americans with false information about the benefits of owning and carrying firearms, partially through inaccurate academic studies. The campaign uses the same tactics as the “Firehose of Falsehood” strategy currently deployed by Russian propaganda, and is challenging to counteract. Existing efforts to counter this well-funded campaign have been disjointed and strategically unsuccessful. In order to effectively counter this campaign, we must first understand the Firehose of Falsehood strategy and how we can use these tactics to introduce the truth to the common narrative.

What is a Firehose of Falsehood?

In 2016, The RAND Corporation, a global policy think tank, released a [report](#) detailing an evolving strategy deployed by Russian propagandists, which it coined the “Firehose of Falsehood.” RAND defines the Firehose of Falsehood as a propaganda/disinformation campaign that has 4 features:

1. High-volume and multichannel
2. Rapid, continuous, and repetitive
3. Lacks commitment to objective reality
4. Lacks commitment to consistency

As RAND explains, this strategy is novel and runs counter to traditional theory on influence and communication. However, it proved extremely successful in advancing Russia’s interests during their 2008 military incursion into Georgia, their 2014 annexation of Crimea, and their efforts in the 2016 American election, while being [less successful](#) in their invasion of Ukraine in 2022 when it encountered staunch resistance.

The Gun Lobby’s Firehose of Falsehood

Over the past 50 years, the gun lobby has deployed disinformation campaigns that include hallmarks of this strategy. These campaigns have achieved substantial success in the judicial system, legislative system, and in shifting public opinion on guns and gun laws.

The first Firehose deployed by the gun lobby was interpreting the Second Amendment itself. As Michael Waldman describes in his [book](#), *The Second Amendment: A Biography*, between 1888 and 1960, every single law review article on the Second Amendment rejected the “individual rights” interpretation touted by the gun lobby which claims that the second amendment should be applied to an individual not just to a group (such as a militia). Yet from 1970-1989, this narrative was flipped with a majority of such articles arguing for the individual rights interpretation. More than half of the individual rights-supporting articles were written by a handful of scholars funded by the gun lobby. Yet the volume of articles they produced provided the illusion of an emerging consensus that the gun lobby was then able to widely market and flood legal scholarship with disinformation. Despite having very little [historical support](#), the individual rights interpretation was codified in the 2008 Supreme Court Case [DC v. Heller](#) and is now treated as legal consensus.

The other Firehose the gun lobby has deployed is convincing people that firearms make people safer. The U.S. has a long history of gun ownership for hunting, but in the 1970s and 80s, the gun lobby's [focus shifted](#) substantially to promoting guns for self-defense. When research funded by the CDC demonstrated that a firearm in the home substantially increased the risk of death, the gun lobby [successfully petitioned](#) their allies in Congress to threaten the CDC with massive funding cuts if such research continued. This greatly [hampered](#) the production of new research, as well as the dissemination of such research to the public. Simultaneously, the gun lobby seized on research from a handful of scholars indicating that millions of defensive gun uses occurred each year and that gun-carrying reduced crime. It did not matter that such research was rejected by the overwhelming majority of researchers. With substantial resources and a multitude of media channels to propagate their message, the gun lobby has successfully drowned out reputable research on firearms with a torrent of falsehoods.

The Power of Disinformation

The Firehose of Falsehood's success largely stems from the inherent advantages disinformation has over factual information:

- People are [bad at](#) distinguishing between fact and fiction.
- People typically [care more](#) about signaling loyalty to their political “tribe” than being factually accurate.
- Disinformation is [often](#) surprising and memorable.
- Disinformation typically has more [emotional appeal](#).
- Disinformation can be tailored to perfectly fit an existing narrative, therefore feeling more “true” than truth.
- Disinformation is easier and faster to produce.
- Disinformation is [more likely](#) to be promulgated than fact on social media.

When the inherent advantages of disinformation are leveraged into a coordinated campaign, the resulting strategy is more powerful than disinformation alone. While truth is likely to eventually prevail over isolated incidents of disinformation without too much societal damage, a disinformation campaign can last for decades and influence large swathes of a population.

The Asymmetric Battle for Reality

A main strength of the Firehose of Falsehood strategy is that unlike factual information, it [does not need to be believed](#) in order for the campaign to be successful. Therefore, a disinformation campaign cannot be countered by another disinformation campaign, as such a scenario would eventually result in mass disillusionment on the topic in question, a sense that both sides are lying, and a conclusion that nothing can be believed. This makes the fight against disinformation asymmetrical, as people avoiding a topic or not believing any information at all is a win for the original disinformation campaign.

The Firehose of Falsehood thrives on political balkanization, where opposing political tribes create their own impenetrable information silos. When each side has its own “experts” and is unwilling to listen to the other side, the resulting “us vs them” struggle empowers apathy and destroys compassion. It also alienates anyone on the fence. Without some level of compassion, persuasion becomes impossible and a partisan stalemate ensues. This means significant progress on a topic becomes unattainable.

Against a Firehose of Falsehood, truth can only prevail through rigorous adherence to factual accuracy and a willingness to reach across political and cultural fault lines.

Countering the Firehose at the Strategic Level

While challenging, countering a Firehose of Falsehood is possible, and the 2016 RAND report provides several strategic recommendations.

As RAND states, one cannot “expect to counter the Firehose of Falsehood with the squirt gun of truth.” Isolated fact checking, a smattering of infographics and memes, and disjointed short media campaigns [will not be sufficient](#) to counteract a coordinated disinformation campaign, particularly one with a several decade head start. A Firehose of Falsehood can only be met by a Firehose of Truth. As such, any disinformation countermeasures must match the breadth of the disinformation campaign by being well-funded, comprehensive, rigorous, and coordinated to meet long-term objectives.

The second strategy RAND offers is to “find ways to help put raincoats on those at whom the firehose of falsehood is being directed.” There is robust [academic literature](#) on “inoculation

theory” that treats disinformation as a virus that can be protected against with a mental vaccine of sorts. In this strategy, people are exposed to disinformation they are likely to encounter alongside a detailed refutation of said disinformation. This “inoculation” is then paired with the accurate information researchers want people to know. Multiple studies find that not only does inoculation theory help counter the deleterious impact of disinformation, it also helps guard people against related falsehoods.

The third insight RAND offers is: “Don't direct your flow of information directly back at the firehose of falsehood.” Instead, one must identify the communities being targeted by the disinformation campaign, and primarily focus efforts in those areas. Directing messaging resources at the gun lobby itself is unlikely to yield results other than reinforcing existing information silos.

RAND also recommends that governments take significant action to shut down (or at least directly interfere with) Russian propaganda channels. However, this advice does not translate to the gun lobby's disinformation campaign, as the gun lobby is not a foreign actor and is too deeply entrenched in today's media ecosystem to excise. Further, attempts to censor gun lobby messaging would likely only add to increase political polarization and information silos, hampering persuasion.

That being said, unlike Russian propaganda which can effortlessly transition from topic to topic, easily shift narratives, and swiftly replace any outlets or voices that are discredited, the gun lobby is entrenched on a single topic with a comparatively small set of related false narratives, most of which come from a mere handful of disreputable sources. While attempting to silence the gun lobby would prove ineffectual and counterproductive, directly exposing the underlying sources of the gun lobby's disinformation portfolio can help stymie the Firehose of Falsehood.

In addition to RAND's recommendations, the academic literature on persuasion offers a few more strategic options:

- Find trusted messengers and leaders who already agree with gun violence prevention in communities targeted by disinformation.
- Cultivate “[reality allies](#)” in communities targeted by the Firehose who can disrupt disinformation echo chambers with correct information.
- Use “[deep canvassing](#)” techniques that emphasize meeting people where they are with long, empathetic conversations involving open-ended questions and listening to the other person.
- Train existing advocates on how to counter disinformation at the personal level.

A successful Firehose of Truth campaign is going to require all of the recommended elements in a coordinated effort.

Countering the Firehose at the Personal Level

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that not everyone is persuadable. However, the academic literature on persuasion indicates a large percentage of the electorate can be swayed. That does not mean it is easy, and the process can take multiple conversations given how polarized the United States has become over the past several decades. Despite the complications, persuasion at the personal level is essential to counteract the Firehose of Falsehood and is something everyone can do.

It is crucial that these persuasion tactics not be used in a disingenuous manner or merely as a ploy. Sincerity is paramount, otherwise the foundation of trust will shatter and dramatically decrease the likelihood of successful persuasion in the future.

A broad array of psychological literature indicates that a 4 stage process for persuasion can be effective, with each stage requiring its own distinct approach:

Stage 1: Circumventing Tribal Barriers

The core paradox at the heart of persuasion is that in order to change someone's mind, you need to be seen as a trusted source of information. However, in order to be seen as a trusted source, you need to share the preexisting beliefs of that person, or at least be seen as a member of their tribe. At least at the outset of an interaction, personal experiences are more persuasive and trusted than facts. Until trust is built, facts are not persuasive.

In order to build a foundation of trust, there are three types of personal narratives that are effective at removing or circumventing barriers:

1. Demonstrating that you have been [personally impacted](#) by gun violence.
2. Demonstrating that you used to have the same beliefs as the person/people you are talking with, but have since [changed your mind](#).
3. Demonstrating that you have something else in common and agree on with the other person/people that is relevant to gun violence (ie you are both parents who want to keep your children safe).

It is important to note that Stage 1 only applies if you do not already have an existing, trusting relationship with the other party in a conversation. Otherwise, jumping straight to Stage 2 is possible.

Stage 2: Exploring Beliefs and Understanding Values

After some element of trust has been established, the next step is questioning, listening, and affirming. It is critical at this juncture to avoid being confrontational or dismissive. Asking what people think about an issue and their reasons should come from a place of genuine curiosity. This approach is at the center of “deep canvassing,” which has shown remarkable success in shifting public opinion on politically controversial topics.

Questioning, listening, and affirming provides several key advantages:

- Having the other person [explain their beliefs](#) on a topic causes them to adopt a more moderate stance.
- Explanation also uncovers the [illusion of explanatory depth](#), in which a person thinks they know more about a subject than they actually do.
- Explanation reveals the other person’s [value system](#) and what types of evidence they find persuasive.
- [Affirming](#) (though not necessarily agreeing with) the person’s value system reduces tribal barriers and avoids falling into an “us vs them” framework in which you are on the other side.

It is important to note that avoiding being confrontational [does not mean](#) refusing to avoid controversy or not addressing substantive questions from the other party. Rather than a debate, the conversation should be approached as a mutual learning opportunity and trying to find the truth together. This often requires acknowledging when the other person is correct on something and being [willing to compromise](#) on areas that aren’t completely central to the main persuasive goal. A willingness to compromise demonstrates good faith is often reciprocated and leads to more moderation.

Stage 3: Building a Fact-Based Foundation and Inoculation

Establishing trust and listening eventually provides the opportunity to introduce persuasive evidence. This stage not only involves filling the knowledge holes exposed by removing the illusion of explanatory depth with accurate information, but also inoculating the person against any current and future myths they may encounter. This entails bringing up and refuting common gun lobby talking points in addition to providing direct factual information. Don’t shy away from disagreement, but always be respectful.

Respecting viewpoint diversity is essential, as is recognizing that evidence one person finds persuasive will be completely inert to another. Issue-based persuasion is far more likely to succeed when accepting a person’s value system as a given and tailoring the existing body of evidence to fit into their life narrative. Attempting to convert someone’s entire value system to

match your own is a losing battle. As such, proper persuasion requires a portfolio of supporting evidence, not a one-size-fits-all narrative.

Successfully implementing this stage is the most knowledge-intensive of the persuasion process. The illusion of explanatory depth is a double-edged sword if one is not careful and prepared. Addressing substantive points the other person brings up and [inoculating](#) them from disinformation requires some command of not only gun violence facts, but also of the myths surrounding the topic and how best to refute them. Stage 3 is unlikely to work if the other person knows more about the topic than you do and holds an opposing view, regardless of how well Stages 1 and 2 go. While memorizing academic studies and being an expert on every aspect of gun violence is far from necessary, having at least a basic understanding of gun violence statistics and myths is important.

To stabilize the new fact-based foundation and inoculation, it is helpful to also [point out](#) the [breadth of consensus](#) on many issues surrounding gun violence, even within gun-owning communities. When polled, gun-owners who voice support for gun violence prevention measures often see their views as being in the minority, even when there is broad support among other gun-owners. Highlighting widespread agreement helps reduce tribal barriers and alleviate concerns about being ostracized for changing one's mind.

Stage 4: Motivating to Action

After building trust, exploring their existing beliefs, and then providing accurate information, the final step is to motivate the person to action. Here, the scope of the conversation dramatically narrows. Rather than providing a broad base of facts and emotional stories to change the person's mind, academic studies on donation patterns find that a [single emotional narrative](#) is more powerful at convincing someone to give money than more facts or multiple stories. [In fact](#), adding more information to the single story or even trying to provide broader context reduces the amount of charitable giving.

In addition, while action typically follows from belief, psychological research also demonstrates that [belief can result from action](#). Having the other person do something for you that is related to the topic can help reinforce belief change, such as signing a petition or joining a newsletter. Further, people who have already taken a minor action are substantially [more likely](#) to commit to a larger action in the future.

Conclusion

Successfully counteracting a Firehose of Falsehood campaign is incredibly difficult and requires a multi-level, coordinated campaign. It also requires an absolute commitment to truth and a

rigorous application of persuasion techniques. It is essential to recognize that the battle between a Firehose of Falsehood and a Firehose of Truth is an asymmetric one. An increase in tribalism, bothsidesism, and chaos are all victories for the Firehose of Falsehood.

While combating the disinformation campaign requires a coordinated strategic response, it can also be fought at the personal level. Doing so requires stepping outside of one's own tribal space and engaging people with different views and value systems. Even more challenging, those engagements must be civil and focused on persuasion. While such a path forward may seem impossible in today's balkanized political and media environment, it is the only path that can lead to lasting change.