Understanding the Firehose of Falsehood: Strategies for Communicating the Truth in the Gun Violence Discussion

Introduction

Over the past 50 years, and particularly since the early 2000s, the gun lobby has notched substantial successes in weakening gun laws and promulgating firearm ownership across the country. These successes have been due in large part to a coordinated and well-funded disinformation campaign targeted at revising legal scholarship interpreting the Second Amendment and flooding Americans with false information about the benefits of owning and carrying firearms. This campaign uses what is called a "Firehose of Falsehood" strategy, which is challenging to counteract.

However, a coordinated campaign at the strategic and personal level that draws on the insights from academic studies of persuasion can counter a Firehose of Falsehood despite the inherent advantages the promulgation of disinformation has over accurate information and the gun lobby's more than 50 year head start.

This paper will explore in depth the history of disinformation, how the gun lobby has used disinformation through a Firehose of Falsehood campaign, and what can be done both at the strategic level and at as an individual to counteract the falsehoods.

We'll get into much more detail about these strategies further along in the paper, but to give you a hint of what is to come, organizations can use the following strategies at a strategic level to overcome a Firehose of Falsehood:
1) Match the breadth and scope of the disinformation campaign with their own Firehose of Truth.
2) Deploy inoculation campaigns to counter disinformation, involving informational "vaccines" that expose people to a piece of disinformation in a controlled setting and then thoroughly explain why it is inaccurate.
3) Enact "deep canvassing" tactics that rely on canvassers listening attentively and encouraging empathy instead of traditional canvassing techniques.
4) Focus on the populations most at risk of being swayed by the ongoing disinformation campaign rather than directly challenging the Firehose of Falsehood.
5) Avoid attempting to overtly silence the opposition, as such efforts will most likely prove ineffective, and may actually substantially strengthen the disinformation campaign.

Conversely, at the personal level, individuals can employ the following 4 step process for persuasion:
1) Circumventing tribal barriers by meeting people where they are, establishing emotional credibility through personal narratives, and building trust.

2) Exploring the other person's beliefs and core values by respectfully questioning, [listening](), and [affirming]().
3) Building a fact-based foundation that aligns with the other person's values and using [inoculation techniques]() to protect against future disinformation.
4) Motivating the person to action with a single [emotionally powerful story]() and having them commit to at least a [small action]() that can be built on over time.

A Firehose of Falsehood

The Firehose of Falsehood, a term coined in 2016 by The RAND Corporation, a global policy think tank, in a [report]() detailing an evolving strategy deployed by Russian propagandists, is a coordinated disinformation campaign with several key elements. While various elements of the strategy had been used by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the Firehose's specific combination of propaganda elements and sophisticated use of new media platforms have made it even more dangerous than previous disinformation efforts. It is important to note that simply because an organization is using a Firehose of Falsehood does not mean it is a Russian front. RAND defines the Firehose of Falsehood as a propaganda/disinformation campaign that has four features. It:
1. Is high-volume and multichannel
2. Is rapid, continuous, and repetitive
3. Lacks commitment to objective reality
4. Lacks commitment to consistency

The Firehose in Action

To understand how the gun lobby is using the Firehose of Falsehood – and learn how to counter it – we turn to a recent example on the global scale. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 highlights how a coordinated disinformation campaign went hand-in-hand with a military campaign. It also demonstrates successful efforts to counter it.

For months before the February invasion, Russia argued that its troops were merely on the border with Ukraine to conduct military exercises. At one point, the Kremlin indicated that it was pulling troops back in order to defuse tensions. Simultaneously, Russia mounted a media blitz accusing Ukraine of committing a genocide against ethnic Russians in the Donbas region. It weaved tales of Ukranian aggression and planted the seeds for hundreds of potential false-flag operations that provide the requisite justification for a "peacekeeping" operation. Russia sought to sow discord within Ukraine and the rest of Europe more broadly, creating a cloud of confusion that could mask its true intentions and movements.

When the full invasion came, the disinformation campaign became part of a combined arms approach to 21st century warfare. Propaganda and disinformation were critical elements of the attack, alongside actual military hardware and cyber-warfare. Russia amplified the claims of genocide, and that Ukraine was the true agressor. According to Russia, its forces were needed in the separist regions of Ukraine to stop aggression. There were supposedly no Russian troops

invading elsewhere, and when those allegedly non-existent troops faced staunch resistance, no casualties were admitted until days into the war. The full scale invasion wasn't a war according to the Kremlin – it was a "special military operation." Russia claimed that the only resistance it was encountering was from hardened "Nazis" outside of the traditional military. Rather than the heroic resistance being mustered in reality, the narrative the Kremlin pushed told of Ukrainian military units laying down their weapons in mass. Simultaneously with the narrative that there was no invasion, false narratives swept social media about a massive naval landing near Odessa as an attempt to distract and confuse Ukrainian resistance. Chaos and demoralization within Ukraine was the objective.

However, unlike Russia's previous disinformation campaigns, this campaign ran into staunch resistance and a coordinated counter-attack. In previous cases, the US and its allies did little to counter the Russian propaganda machine in real time. However, every Russian informational move in 2022 was met with a rapid response of declassified intelligence and debunking. The US put a spotlight on Russia's tactics and demonstrated their dishonesty in a swift and efficient manner. By the time the invasion began, which US intelligence predicted, all of Russia's credibility had deteriorated while US credibility was vindicated.

Winning the information war before the ground war had even begun provided Ukraine with a substantial advantage in credibility and propaganda, an edge the Ukranians adroitly exploited. Rather than driving a wedge between Western allies and sowing confusion, the Kremlin faced a united front prepared to supply Ukraine with substantial firepower and enact crippling sanctions. There was no doubt who the aggressor was and any pretext or justification the Russians could call on evaporated. While countering Russia's Firehose of Falsehood did not stop the horrific bloodshed, it did substantially weaken the Russian geopolitical position and ensured that any military victory the Kremlin achieved would be pyrrhic at most.

What Makes the Firehose Different from Traditional Propaganda

As RAND explains, Russia's Firehose of Falsehood is relatively novel and runs counter to traditional theory on influence and communication. The first two elements of the Firehose (high volume and rapid, continuous, and repetitive) are broadly accepted as important for persuasive communication, regardless of whether you are promoting fact or fiction. However, the last two elements (lacking commitment to objective reality and consistency) are a substantial deviation from tradition. While all governments lie and attempt to put positive spins on their actions, governments do typically want to maintain some form of consistency and credibility in their communications. Yet the Russian Firehose of Falsehood appears to care very little about how credible it appears, and is willing to offer up multiple mutually exclusive explanations for an event. Despite the lack of credibility and consistency, the Firehose proved extremely successful in advancing Russia's interests during their 2008 military incursion into Georgia, their 2014 annexation of Crimea, and even their efforts in the 2016 American election.

It is important to note that disinformation campaigns such as the Firehose of Falsehood outlined by RAND are not unique or exclusive to Russia, and others have independently arrived at the

same general strategy. As Steve Bannon, the former chairman of Breitbart News and White House Chief Strategist for President Donald Trump, infamously articulated in a 2018 interview with Michael Lewis: "The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit." This is the main tactic employed by a Firehose. In a formal debate setting, a localized version of a Firehose (or flooding the zone with shit) is known as a Gish Gallop, named after the creationist Duane Gish who would attempt to overwhelm his opponents with so many falsehoods that they couldn't muster a response to all his points.

As this paper will explore in greater detail, the gun lobby has also been using a Firehose of Falsehood to advance its agenda for many decades now, long before RAND labeled the strategy being employed by Russia. This paper should not be interpreted in any way as suggesting a conspiracy between the gun lobby and Russia. Such accusations are far outside the purpose of this paper. That being said, the similarities between Russia's disinformation campaign and that of the gun lobby provide a useful framework for analyzing and understanding the power of a Firehose of Falsehood and how best to counter it.

The Overall Power of Disinformation

The Firehose of Falsehood's success largely stems from the inherent advantages of disinformation over factual information:
- Disinformation is often surprising and memorable
- Disinformation typically has more emotional appeal
- Disinformation is more likely to be promulgated than fact on social media
- People typically care more about signaling loyalty to their political tribe than being factually accurate
- People are bad at distinguishing between fact and fiction
- Disinformation can be tailored to perfectly fit an existing narrative, therefore feeling more "true" than truth
- Disinformation is easier and faster to produce

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 campaign can last for decades and influence large swathes of a population.

The potent combination of disinformation and tribalism

People are primarily tribal creatures. We have a deep-seated need to be a part of a group, a member of a team; it is a desire that extends beyond just family. This elemental desire expands to almost all aspects of life, ranging from nationality, ethnicity, religion, and politics to more mundane matters such as school, sports, where you live, and what vehicles you drive. If you can create a group of people with a shared interest or identity, tribalism will swiftly emerge as any number of psychological experiments have confirmed.

While tribalism can be fun in the realm of sports, or a useful shortcut to connect with people that have a shared interest or outlook on life, tribalism is a powerful motivator that can have a pernicious influence when it becomes a main focal point of personal identity. While tribalism can help us empathize with people we have never personally encountered before, it has the opposite effect for those outside our drawn tribal boundaries.

New York University social psychologist Jonathan Haidt deeply explored how tribalism influences thinking and reasoning in his bestselling and award winning book *The Righteous Mind* in 2012. Haidt succinctly explains: "Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second." These intuitions are deeply rooted and shaped by our upbringing, culture, and tribal identities. As such, "people care a great deal more about appearance and reputation than about reality." We'd rather look right than be right.

Haidt further [expounds](), "Once group loyalties are engaged, you can't change people's minds by utterly refuting their arguments. Thinking is mostly just rationalization, mostly just a search for supporting evidence." Particularly in today's information saturated world, when any argument supporting any position can be found with a few keystrokes, finding supporting evidence is not challenging even for the most outlandish beliefs. As senior fellow at the Brookings Institution Jonathan Rauch writes in *The Constitution of Knowledge*: "If your social reputation and group identity depend upon believing something, then you will find a way to believe it. In fact, your brain will help you by readily accepting and recalling congenial information while working to bury and ignore uncongenial information."

A [2017 paper]() titled "Liberals and Conservatives Are Similarly Motivated to Avoid Exposure to One Another's Opinions" highlighted the power of staying within one's own tribal comfort zone. The study examined the willingness of both liberals and conservatives (in the United States and Canada) to interact with "crosscutting" information (ie information that the study participant would disagree with). The researchers found that there were no major differences between liberals and conservatives in seeking to avoid information from the other side, and that "Approximately two thirds of people gave up a chance to win extra money in order to avoid hearing from the other side." This applied to a broad range of topics such as "same-sex marriage, elections, marijuana, climate change, guns, and abortion" and was not a product of participants feeling that they were already knowledgeable enough about the subjects at hand.

Further exacerbating the daunting synergy tribalism and disinformation create is the unfortunate reality that disinformation is often crafted to perfectly align with a pre-existing tribal narrative. Reality is often nuanced and accurate information is necessarily constrained to reflect such complexities regardless of their tribal implications. Disinformation has no such constraints: if a fact is inconvenient to the narrative, it can easily be jettisoned. If a well-placed embellishment makes a story more powerful, a disinformation agent can easily include it. Truth is not a limiting factor for disinformation. As such, particularly for politically divisive topics, a piece of disinformation can often appear more true to observers in a given tribe than the truth itself. This

is a substantial reason that "alternative facts," "poetic truth," and "truthiness" – all of which are incarnations of disinformation – abound across the political spectrum.

Compounding the psychological bias towards tribalism and the ability to carefully craft disinformation is the additional problem that generally, people are quite bad at distinguishing between fact and fiction. That's not to say that people are incapable of sifting out misinformation, particular when it is especially outlandish; however, the overall track record is not promising. This holds even when people are aware that misinformation abounds. As a 2012 study expounded: "The public seems to have some awareness of the presence of politically motivated misinformation in society, especially during election campaigns…. However, when asked to identify specific instances of such misinformation, people are often unable to differentiate between information that is false and other information that is correct…. Thus, public awareness of the problem is no barrier to widespread and lasting confusion."

In addition to its ability to be carefully crafted, disinformation can also be assembled far quicker than accurate information. Events are often complex and require time for the full picture to emerge. Disinformation agents, though, do not need to wait on such details as they can manufacture their own. While everyone else is waiting for additional clarity in the aftermath of an event, disinformation can easily be deployed to align perfectly with an existing narrative and seize a first-mover advantage over factual information.

The Strengths of the Firehose

In addition to the inherent strength disinformation has over factual information, the Firehose of Falsehood strategy has several more advantages that make it particularly challenging to counter. RAND's Firehose of Falsehood report summarizes the psychological research demonstrating that the more often people hear a message, the more likely they are to be persuaded by it.

In addition to the pure quantity of messaging, the number of sources disseminating a message has a major impact as well. Many sources (or at least the appearance of many sources) churning out disinformation is more powerful than a single source, even when the amount of messaging remains constant.

The power of multiple sources using multiple arguments that all point to the same conclusion is further bolstered in the context of a Firehose of Falsehood campaign as people don't pay enough attention to the underlying credibility of sources. These psychological underpinnings allow a disinformation campaign to launder low-quality and discredited sources of information into powerhouses. An original disreputable source or handful of such sources can be transformed into an army that spouts variations of the same talking-points.

RAND also finds that: "When information volume is low, recipients tend to favor experts, but when information volume is high, recipients tend to favor information from other users." This is especially problematic in the context of a disinformation campaign because it can create its own

volume of information. Merely the act of increasing the flow of disinformation can weaken the standing of experts who would otherwise be the best placed to counter flawed arguments and data. Further, research finds that attacks on an expert's credibility are unfortunately quite successful in reducing said expert's perceived credibility. All of these factors combined mean that a Firehose of Falsehood can elevate and launder talking points from disreputable sources, diminish the effectiveness of isolated experts attempting to counteract the flow of disinformation, and generally overwhelm any opposition with disinformation.

Reality is typically complex and requires time to analyze and figure out what actually happened. Then more time is needed to verify and double-check data before it is ready for public consumption. Meanwhile, disinformation can be made up on the spot and promulgated widely with a couple key-strokes. Countering that disinformation once it is out in the world requires even more time, effort, and often independent research to check the veracity of the claims. All of which is time intensive and costly. Meanwhile, a disinformation campaign will already have likely saturated the information market and moved on to the next claim.

The Asymmetric Battle for Reality

Oftentimes the purpose of a Firehose is to sow confusion, where people don't know what information to believe, if any. A Firehose can also be deployed as a scorched-earth tactic in which the topic of discussion becomes so overwhelmed with falsehoods and toxicity that people throw up their hands in despair and refuse to engage in the discourse. People avoiding a topic or not believing any information at all are both wins for a Firehose, particularly if the organizations deploying the tactic wish to preserve the status quo on the subject or already have a motivated base of support that won't be swayed by any information.

As such, a Firehose of Falsehood cannot counter another Firehose of Falsehood. The side that requires more public engagement, wants to make progress on the issue, and relies more on fact-based discourse will automatically lose such a struggle.

While "facts don't matter" is a popular refrain for the world-weary and cynical, such a view is a victory for the Firehose of Falsehood. Fortunately, as we will examine, it is also false. Facts do matter and can make all the difference, if used correctly. Also, it isn't too late to reach across the partisan divide when it comes to subjects such as gun violence. Indeed, 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.

How the Gun Lobby has deployed the Firehose of Falsehood

Over the past 50 years, the gun lobby has deployed at least two Firehose of Falsehood campaigns that have many of the hallmarks listed above. These disinformation campaigns have achieved substantial success in the judicial system, legislative system, and in shifting public opinion on guns and gun laws. The first campaign turned the 2nd Amendment from a collective right to an individual right capable of overturning gun safety laws. The second campaign

transformed public and legislative perception of firearms from a risk to public and personal well-being to the epitome of self-defense and safety.

The Second Amendment Firehose

In *The Second Amendment: A Biography* , Dr. Michael Waldman details the history of the 2nd Amendment and its interpretations, beginning at the Revolutionary War. By the end of the war, Congress was faced with the difficult task of paying homage to the militia system that led to American victory while creating an effective defensive force to maintain security. In spite of what some gun advocates contend, gun control was an integral and ubiquitous element of early American life.

As the US expanded westward, violence dramatically increased in border towns where rule of law was not as firmly established. Western states quickly began adopting explicitly individualistic language in their versions of the Second Amendment, meaning they provided a right to individual gun ownership not contingent on service in a state-based militia. This violence and individualistic language sparked the first debate (almost exclusively at the state level) of whether the right to bear arms was solely in the context of militia service. An early case in Kentucky that adopted an individualistic interpretation prompted the state legislature to rebuff the "perfectly ridiculous" decision as they called it, and the legislature eventually modified the State's constitution to override the ruling. Cases in Tennessee and Arkansas solidified a collective right consensus that would last more than a century.

Between 1888 and 1960, every single law review article written on the Second Amendment rejected an individual rights interpretation. The 1934 National Firearms Act and subsequent Supreme Court Case US v. Miller were exemplars of this legal consensus. During the debate over the bill, the president of the National Rifle Association (NRA) explicitly stated that he had not given any thought over whether the bill violated the constitution and later wrote that the right to personal firearms could not be found in the Constitution. By the 1960s, the old militia system was long dead and the Second Amendment itself was an archaic relic irrelevant to modern society. As Dr. Matthew Lacombe writes in his book *Firepower*, in 1955, NRA chief Merritt Edson commissioned an internal study on the 2nd Amendment and whether the individual rights interpretation was valid. The study returned minimal evidence for such a reading, a finding the NRA decidedly ignored.

The settled nature of the 2nd Amendment would change thanks to a decades long Firehose of Falsehood campaign funded primarily by the NRA that emerged in the 1960s. Despite knowing that the 2nd Amendment was not an individual right, that was not a barrier for the gun lobby to reforge it as such. All they needed was a handful of sympathetic legal scholars, conservative justices, a large public platform, and some patience.

Even before the Revolt at Cincinnati of 1977, in which the NRA underwent a massive political upheaval that threw out its relatively moderate, hunting-focused leadership and replaced it with firebrands, Second Amendment scholarship underwent a dramatic shift financed by the gun

lobby. From 1970 to 1989, more than 27 law review articles were written supporting the individual rights interpretation, versus only 25 for the collective/civic view.

More than half of these articles were written by a handful of lawyers employed by the NRA or various other pro-gun groups. These lawyers would then cite each other's articles extensively, despite quoting from mostly the same handful of sources, thus creating the illusion of an extensive body of research, despite it resting on quite weak historical underpinnings and frequent distortions. As Waldman details:

> "Among the most prominent was Stephen Halbrook. He served as a lawyer in the NRA's general counsel's office, a fact unmentioned in his biography in many of his law review essays. By one estimate, three strikingly prolific writers—Halbrook, Don Kates, David Hardy—wrote thirty law review articles in the 1990s and received a million dollars in funding to back their work on gun issues. One lawyer, David Kopel, wrote or co-authored nineteen law review articles over the decade. Funds flowed freely. The NRA Foundation provided $1 million to endow the Patrick Henry professorship in constitutional law and the Second Amendment at George Mason University Law School. The NRA Civil Rights Defense Fund's annual "Stand Up for the Second Amendment" contest offered $25,000 for the best essay. In 1992, it partly funded the founding of a group, Academics for the Second Amendment, which held conferences and filed briefs. The NRA paid one lawyer $15,000 to write a harsh book review of Saul Cornell's *A Well-Regulated Militia*, among other tasks.
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> It is hard to convey fully the circular nature of these writings. One after another, they plumbed the same material, extracted the same quotes, and piled up citations to one another. Soon they began to include self-congratulatory explanations of how many other articles made the same point. Joyce Lee Malcolm bragged to a magazine writer, 'There is no one for me to argue against anymore.'"

Given the relatively scarce nature of research in the field (the 2nd Amendment wasn't considered particularly interesting intellectual terrain before the flurry of gun lobby sponsored material), the small band of legal scholars, combined with the public megaphone the NRA possessed, were more than sufficient to overwhelm their opponents. The gun lobby successfully shifted the field of 2nd Amendment scholarship from a low-volume information environment in which people typically favor experts to a high-volume information environment in which quantity takes on its own quality.

This shift in legal scholarship and pro-gun lobbying coincided with an almost equally dramatic rise of conservative justices in federal courts. The stage was set for a legal showdown. In 2008, DC v. Heller, a case that sought to overturn Washington D.C.'s strict laws for having a firearm in the home, represented the climax of the battle between the old "collective" consensus backed by more than a century of legal precedent and a significant majority of historians, and the new "individual rights" view bolstered by a wave of recent scholarship and public support. With a

conservative court and a now well-established Firehose campaign by the gun lobby in support, the individualistic interpretation proved victorious.

The June 23, 2022 Supreme Court ruling in New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen further highlighted the power of the gun lobby's Firehose campaign. The decision enshrined a 2nd Amendment right to carry firearms outside the home and struck down New York's "proper cause" regulation that allowed police to reject concealed carry permits who did not have sufficient cause to obtain such a permit (self defense outside a response to specific threats was not considered sufficient). In so doing, the court adopted a new framework that completely discarded any public health rationale for gun laws, and relied heavily on pro-gun scholarship and amicus briefs. As The Trace reports, of the 49 pro-gun amicus briefs filed, 12 of them were directly financially supported by the NRA. Only one disclosed the financial tie. This lack of disclosure allowed the gun lobby to provide the illusion of widespread support outside of the NRA. Further compounding this tactic is the fact that the overwhelming majority of the briefs extensively cited a handful of pro-gun scholars and lawyers paid by the NRA. As Patrick J. Charles, senior historian for the U.S. Air Force, described in an interview with The Trace:

"They take a few facts, hype them, and assert that they have what they do not have…They do this again and again, it's just ridiculous. It's completely dishonest. The NRA understood this early on, that you just have to keep putting information out there, insisting that it's true, and people come to believe it."

The Guns Make You Safer Firehose

The idea that firearms are beneficial for self-defense and reducing crime more broadly has likely been around since their invention. American culture is replete with stories of self-defense and "good guys with guns" stopping bad guys. However, the increase in people owning firearms for self-defense and the weakening of firearm laws at the state level as a crime prevention strategy didn't begin until the past 40 to 50 years. As we will see, this trend, which became an ever quickening cascade at the turn of the millennium, was substantially fueled by a Firehose of Falsehood campaign from the gun lobby.

This shift in the conversation – from hunting to self-defense – is highlighted in a pair of studies led by Dr. David Yamane. In this work, the authors analyze advertisements in *The American Rifleman*, the NRA's flagship publication, and the popular magazine, *Guns*. They sampled publications over each magazine's lifetime for advertisements that fell into four broad categories: hunting, sport/recreation, self-defense, and concealed carry. These categories are then grouped into what the authors call "Gun Culture 1.0" and "Gun Culture 2.0." Gun Culture 1.0 is about sporting and hunting, whereas Gun Culture 2.0 is about self-defense, both in public and at home. After tabulating the number and size of the ads, the researchers plotted the results over the lifetime of each magazine.

While the number and size of ads fluctuate substantially from year to year, there is a clear downward trend in Gun Culture 1.0 ads after the 1960s and a substantial increase in Gun

Culture 2.0 ads during the late 1980s and 1990s. Although Gun Culture 1.0 ads still maintain more of an absolute presence during upswing of Gun Culture 2.0 in the 80s and 90s, eventually the two trend lines cross in the early 2010s when self-defense and concealed carry take a decisive advantage. There is a curious statistical artifact in both studies where ads on self-defense spiked upwards in 1989, and then again in 1996 along with concealed carry ads. This is interesting as Dr. Gary Kleck published a [study](#) on widespread defensive gun use (DGU) in 1988 (this was a precursor to his more famous [paper](#) in 1995 erroneously arguing that there were 2.5 million DGUs annually). Further, 1996 was the year that John Lott published his famous [study](#) arguing that weakening concealed carry laws decrease crime (which he would later turn into his book *More Guns, Less Crime*).

The data is too choppy to draw any causal conclusions about whether these studies influenced the advertisements in those years. However, both Kleck and Lott's work provided crucial support for the gun lobby's interest in advancing gun ownership for self-defense and by the new millennium, the narrative that firearms made people safer was being advanced by all levels of the gun lobby, from the NRA and other lobbying groups to gun manufacturers themselves. Given the movement in advertisements in addition to the increasing percentage of people explicitly stating they owned firearms for self-defense ([63%](#) in 2019 for an open-ended question, [88%](#) in 2021 when prompted in polls), it is clear the Gun Culture 2.0 narrative achieved dominance.

Where the shift in gun culture from 1.0 to 2.0 becomes a Firehose of Falsehood is in the gun lobby's widespread promotion and promulgation of false data and disreputable research, while attempting to silence legitimate scholarship.

While the four main disinformation themes of the Firehose – 1) widespread defensive gun use, 2) the danger of gun free zones, 3) more guns resulting in less crime, and 4) gun laws not working – have been around for many decades (if not centuries), they were granted substantial intellectual heft by a series of surveys and studies conducted by Dr. Gary Kleck, John Lott, and a few other associated academics. Their work from the late 1980s to present provided the gun lobby with core sources that they could then cite at will in public debates, court hearings, and legislative testimony. Despite the fact that Kleck and Lott's work has been debunked by a multitude of scholars, the gun lobby was successfully able to leverage its large platform to push out its overarching false claim that firearms make you safer while maintaining the appearance that at the very least "both sides" had data as such. Each of the underlying themes mentioned above also supported a host of other smaller myths that would overwhelm attempts at refutation. Further, given the sheer number of outlets and spokespeople the gun lobby could draw on, tracing any one claim back to its original source became highly challenging, providing the illusion of many different sources making the same claim.

With one hand the gun lobby elevated the work of Gary Kleck and John Lott, and with the other, used their legislative clout to stifle research they found disagreeable. While the 1996 Dickey Amendment is fairly well known for defunding gun violence research, that attack was merely one aspect of a broader campaign. Dr. Arthur Kellerman, a main target of this gun lobby

campaign, wrote a [letter](#) in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook school shooting explaining how successful these efforts were in dramatically reducing research funding.

As *The Trace* [reported](#), an internal [NRA document](#) highlights the organization's deliberate sabotage of legitimate gun research:

> "But in a January 2021 report to board members gathered in Dallas, NRA Research and Information Division director Josh Savani acknowledged that the group's lobbying has created a major obstacle.
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> 'All firearms research suffers from one problem: we do not know how many firearms are in the United States or how they are distributed,' Savani wrote in a brief report titled "Assessing Firearm Research." '[The] NRA has long supported various federal laws and appropriation riders as well as laws at the state level to prohibit the collection and centralization of firearms records. While these laws are intended to prevent the creation of firearms registries, they also prevent researchers from conducting accurate studies with the number and distribution of firearms as a variable.'"

It is important to note that while the gun lobby's campaign did have a profound impact on gun violence research, it did not halt all of it. Hundreds of studies were still published in the late 1990s and into the 2000s that decisively refuted claims that firearms make people safer and that weakening firearm laws reduced crime. Yet the subject of gun violence, which was already under-funded even within public health, fell even further behind other academic disciplines. Data collection became more difficult, private funding withered, and few academics wanted to enter a field that could ruin their chances of receiving grants and draw the ire of coordinated gun lobby disparagement campaigns.

The gun lobby and its allies fully capitalized on their campaign to diminish legitimate research. When new gun violence prevention laws would come up for debate, lawmakers would point to a lack of research in order to vote no, despite being in the legislative body that had restricted that very research. While the overall research that exists clearly demonstrates that firearms pose a public health risk rather than a benefit, the gun lobby points to the few scholars that support their position and claim that both sides have evidence.

The Firehose of Falsehood has allowed such claims to appear within the realm of possibility and has even persuaded fact-checkers that the truth of where the research on gun violence stands is "unclear." As the Washington Post summarized in a 2021 [factcheck](#): "What role the "shall issue" laws played in these higher crime rates, if any, is unclear. We won't attempt to settle the academic debate over all the competing studies. The most responsible, factual course would be to acknowledge *all* the published research rather than cherry-pick from the most favorable studies, as some amicus briefs on both sides of this case do."

Yet had the Washington Post taken the most responsible, factual course of acknowledging "*all* the published research," they would've quickly [uncovered](#) in this case that a plurality of

academic research on weakening concealed carry laws find that such actions increase crime, and 66% of modern studies since the 2005 National Research Council report find such an increase. Instead, bothsidesism provided a win for a Firehose of Falsehood campaign.

The wins notched by the gun lobby's disinformation campaign in the realm of fact-checkers are minor in comparison to the effect it's had on public opinion. In 2014, 56% of Americans felt that more concealed firearms in public would make society safer and 63% felt a firearm in the home would make them safer, despite clear academic evidence to the contrary. Although there is still widespread support in polls for specific measures such as extreme risk protection orders, universal background checks, and safe storage laws, those majorities rarely materialize at the ballot-box or in legislative bodies.

Along with swaying public opinion, the Firehose of Falsehood has also notched staggering legislative victories over the past decades. While many of these victories have been stalling meaningful gun reforms at the national level, the biggest changes have been at the state level. In 1986, eight states had Right-to-Carry laws, and only Vermont had permitless carry. The vast majority of states either had May-Issue laws that give law enforcement discretion in providing concealed carry permits, or banned concealed carry altogether. By 2021, this reality had completely flipped, with 21 states having permitless carry and another 21 have Right-to-Carry laws. By the end of 2022, a majority of states will have passed permitless carry. A similar pattern has played out with Stand Your Ground (SYG) laws. Utah was the first to pass such legislation in 1994, with Florida being the next in 2005. After the passage of Florida's bill, the floodgates opened and now 30 states have Stand Your Ground statutes in place.

Both weakening concealed carry laws and expanding Stand Your Ground legislation are built on the foundational myths of the Firehose of Falsehood: that defensive gun use is widespread and effective, and that more guns results in less crime.

How to Counter the Firehose

The national conversation on gun violence has already seen the detrimental effects of the Firehose of Falsehood strategy. Countering such a strategy is possible, but requires a coordinated approach that operates on the strategic and personal level.

On the strategic level, organizations need to match the breadth and scope of the disinformation campaign with their own Firehose of Truth. This Firehose should draw on the lessons of Inoculation Theory (which "vaccinates" people with accurate information to counter disinformation), as well as "deep canvassing" tactics that have proven successful at changing attitudes on politically fraught subjects. A successful campaign needs to focus on the populations most at risk of being swayed by the ongoing disinformation campaign. It is important to note that attempting to overtly silence the opposition, at least in the case of gun violence, will most likely prove ineffective and may actually substantially strengthen the disinformation campaign.

Along with a coordinated strategic response, advocates should be trained on best practices for persuasion at the personal level. Such persuasion occurs in 4 distinct stages:

1) Circumventing tribal barriers, typically through personal narratives
2) Exploring the other person's beliefs and understanding their values
3) Building a fact-based foundation for new beliefs and inoculation against misinformation
4) Motivating the person to action, typically with a single pertinent story

The rest of this paper will explore both the necessary strategic campaign components as well as the personal level pathway to persuasion in much greater detail.

Countering the Firehose at the Strategic Level

The Firehose of Truth

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. An exhaustive [2012 literature review](#) titled "Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing" highlights the pitfalls of one-off attempts to counter misinformation. The study cites a broad range of papers that find retracting a piece of false information does little-to-nothing to stop its spread.

Instead of one-off retractions, the 2012 literature review reveals that the best ways to counter disinformation are:

1) Warning people when they are exposed to disinformation
2) Repeating retractions of inaccurate information
3) Providing corrections that tell a complete, coherent story

In each of these three strategies, highlighting factual information rather than repeating misinformation is typically best, with a notable exception for carefully dissecting inaccurate information in a classroom-like setting.

Misinformation can be confronted head-on and even repeated, but only when it is in a broader educational framework. Such a framework, along with the three core strategies highlighted above, all require a substantial amount of time, resources, and dedication. As such, disinformation countermeasures must match the breadth of the disinformation campaign by being well-funded, comprehensive, rigorous, and coordinated to meet long-term objectives. A Firehose of Falsehood can only be met by a Firehose of Truth.

Inoculation Theory

The second strategy RAND offers is to "find ways to help put raincoats on those at whom the firehose of falsehood is being directed." This strategy in the broader academic field is known as Inoculation Theory. This academic discipline [treats](#) misinformation as a virus or "thought

contagion," which can be protected against by "vaccinating" members of the public by exposing them to a weakened form of the misinformation in a controlled setting with a warning that said information is false, and then providing a detailed refutation.

A prime example of how inoculation functions is the 2017 study "Inoculating the Public against Misinformation about Climate Change." The study examined the impact of factual information and disinformation on changing perceptions around the scientific consensus on climate change. It also analyzed the effectiveness of inoculation strategies in countering the deleterious impact of misinformation across the political spectrum.

The persuasive factual message was straightforward: "97% of climate scientists have concluded that human-caused global warming is happening." To counter this factual information, the researchers used messaging from "The Oregon Global Warming Petition Project" that boasted "over 31,000 American scientists have signed a petition stating that there is no scientific evidence that the human release of carbon dioxide will, in the foreseeable future, cause catastrophic heating of the Earth's atmosphere." The short version of this misinformation was succinctly summarized by the researchers as "there is no consensus on human-caused climate change."

The researchers would then deploy two distinct inoculation tactics:

Researchers would first warn participants about an impending threat to their prior beliefs. Then researchers would preemptively refute the disinformation the participants would be encountering. These two tactics were then used in a short-form (a couple sentences) and a long-form (a paragraph or more debunking multiple arguments) inoculation.

The study organized participants into six groups:
1) Participants who only heard the factual message about climate change
2) Participants who only heard the misinformation about climate change
3) Participants who heard both messages
4) Participants who heard both messages in addition to a short inoculation message refuting the information
5) Participants who heard both messages in addition to a detailed inoculation message refuting the information
6) The control group

Before and after the participants were exposed to their group's messaging package, they were asked about their perception of the scientific consensus. The results were powerful:

- Participants who were exposed purely to the factual message saw their perception of scientific consensus on climate change increase.
- Participants exposed purely to the misinformation saw their perception of consensus decrease.

- Participants exposed to both messages, with no inoculation, saw no statistically significant change in their attitudes. The correct information and misinformation essentially canceled each other out.
- When participants were provided with inoculation strategies (short and detailed), their perceptions of scientific consensus increased by a statistically significant margin (although participants who only encountered the factual information still had the biggest change).
- The detailed inoculation was more effective than the short inoculation strategy. In other words, inoculation protected factual information from the deleterious impact of misinformation.

The researchers then broke these results down by party affiliation. The results largely fit the above pattern, with accurate information and misinformation canceling each other out and inoculation strategies being effective for both Democrats and Independents. However, for Republicans, who as a group are more sympathetic to ideological direction of this specific misinformation, the factual information and misinformation did not cancel each other out. In fact, the misinformation proved more powerful than the factual information, and Republican participants who heard both messages saw their perception of scientific consensus decrease substantially. Yet when Republican participants were exposed to inoculation messaging, their results were consistent with Democrats and Independents. Inoculation protects factual information across partisan fault-lines. Importantly, the authors note that there was no evidence of a backfire effect for inoculation among Republicans, meaning exposure to detailed refutations did not harden pre-existing political beliefs.

There are several important ramifications of this research for countering the gun lobby's Firehose of Falsehood:

- First, ignoring disinformation doesn't work. On average, people who encounter disinformation without any exposure to factual information will have their beliefs altered to some degree, and it will sway some minds sufficiently to sway voting or advocacy outcomes.
- Second, only pushing factual information without any refutation of disinformation will at best maintain the status quo. For people who are already sympathetic to the ideological direction of the disinformation, the battle between factual information and disinformation without inoculation is a losing struggle.
- Third, using a more detailed refutation/inoculation of disinformation is the best strategy, though any inoculation is better than no inoculation at all.
- Finally, additional research finds that inoculation is not only effective at countering specific false claims, but also related falsehoods as well. This means that inoculating against one widespread myth can help counter a wide range of disinformation.

It is important to note that this is not a one-off study or that climate change is the only field in which Inoculation Theory has been tested. As a 2021 literature review demonstrates, there are dozens upon dozens of studies that have demonstrated the effectiveness and robustness of

Inoculation Theory, extending into fields such as climate change, anti-vaccination beliefs, agricultural biotechnology, and using animals in research. This area of study has received a newfound surge in interest after the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and then again during the COVID pandemic, and the field is continuing to expand and refine itself. While the research is still evolving, the overarching finding is incontrovertible: Inoculation is effective and applicable.

Directing the Firehose of Truth: Reality Allies

The third insight RAND offers is: "Don't direct your flow of information directly back at the firehose of falsehood." Countering disinformation already requires substantially more resources and time than does the disinformation campaign itself. But with finite resources and time, directing the firehose of truth at the source of the disinformation – the gun lobby and its allies – is unlikely to yield results other than reinforcing existing information silos.

Instead, one must identify the communities targeted by the disinformation campaign and primarily focus efforts in those areas. Broad educational and inoculation campaigns are still important to match the breadth of the Firehose of Falsehood and halt it at a societal level. However, particularly with limited resources, prioritizing key demographics and communities that are likely to be swayed by disinformation is essential. Fortunately, disinformation campaigns typically aren't subtle in which groups they seek to influence, and the same holds for the gun lobby's campaign. Women and Asian American communities in particular have seen direct outreach attempts by the gun lobby in the past couple years, a strategy highlighted in pro-gun [amicus briefs](#) provided to the Supreme Court case NYSRPA v Bruen that elevated the Asian Pacific American Gun Owners Association in addition to frequent references that firearms make women safer.

The most effective ways to counter these efforts in addition to inoculation are: cultivating "reality allies" and using deep canvassing techniques.

For our purposes, a "reality ally" is anyone with some form of platform in a community being targeted by the Firehose of Falsehood (or that has already been subsumed by the Firehose) who is willing to push back against the tide of disinformation. While people who are already leaders or trusted voices within their communities are the best sources to counter disinformation, with sufficient training anyone can be a reality ally.

The inspiration for the term "reality allies" comes from a series of psychological experiments conducted in the 1950s by Solomon Asch. These [studies](#) tested how susceptible participants were to group pressure when picking an answer in a "vision test." The participant would be faced with the choice of going with the objectively correct answer, or be swayed by the group. Overall, the experiment found that 76% of the participants were swayed by the group at least once.

In a follow-up [experiment](#), Asch put a twist in his methodology. Now instead of it being the entire rest of the group versus the one participant, each group would have a member that would

dissent from the group and pick the correct answer. The mere inclusion of this dissenting voice – a reality ally – changed the results dramatically. Now, almost none of the participants ever went with the group, a massive change from 76% conforming at least once. Having even a solitary voice standing up to falsehoods in a group can make all the difference.

In addition to forming a base of support through which accurate information can flow, cultivating reality allies within communities targeted by the Firehose of Falsehood can help disrupt the potential for a disinformation silo. Such a silo is a worst case scenario in which people aren't exposed to alternative viewpoints outside the Firehose. Academic research highlights the importance of information exposure in shaping how people view others they ideologically oppose as well as the certainty of their own views.

These studies have several implications for countering the Firehose of Falsehood, and the importance of outspoken reality allies. First, even if exposure to information outside the disinformation campaign is not sufficient to change someone's mind, ameliorating the negativity through which they see the political opposition can make future efforts at bridging the partisan divide more likely to bear fruit. Second, changing the information people are regularly exposed to can make a substantial difference in their political opinions. Third, exposure to such factual information needs to be consistent, otherwise people will revert to their previous beliefs over time. Reality allies within communities targeted by a disinformation campaign can help with all of these aspects by providing consistent counter-messaging.

In conjunction with creating a network of reality allies in targeted communities who can facilitate the flow of accurate information and disrupt the Firehose of Falsehood, substantial investments should be made in deep canvassing campaigns.

Directing the Firehose of Truth: Deep Canvassing

Deep canvassing takes a very different approach than traditional canvassing that typically involves barraging people with facts or statistics about why they should support this particular issue. Instead, deep canvassers ask people about their thoughts on the topic in question and attentively listen. After giving people a change to express their views, they ask the person to relate to people directly impacted by the issue in some form, and offer personal stories. Each deep canvas takes around ten minutes and is much more of a conversation than a presentation.

The deep canvassing approach of listening attentively and encouraging empathy is in stark contrast to much of today's political climate in which calling out people with disreputable views and attempting to silence or verbally bludgeon them into submission is the norm across the political spectrum. Listening and forming a connection is difficult and time consuming. But it is essential. While a few percentage points might sound negligible, such a margin makes all the difference on a politically charged policy. And more importantly, research shows there is no viable alternative. A 2017 review of studies on campaigning, canvassing, and advertising in general elections found an average effect of 0. No other traditional strategies in the political space seem to work – or more charitably those efforts are canceled out by opposition

campaigns – and even the best advertising strategies produce vanishingly small effects that do indeed vanish after a [week](#).

An [initial study](#) in 2016 focused on deep canvassing to reduce transphobia, along with follow-up [experiments](#) in 2020 on the same issue in addition to immigration, found significant results. Deep canvassing reduced negative perceptions of the populations in question by several percentage points and the results were durable even up to 3 months after the initial 10 minute conversation. Deep canvassing was also [successfully](#) deployed in a 2018 Massachusetts effort to protect trans rights. Importantly, the initial 2016 study found that it didn't matter who the canvassers themselves were: they could be members of the impacted community or just trained allies.

The research clearly demonstrates that cultivating reality allies and deep canvassing are both essential tools to counter the Firehose of Falsehood at the strategic level.

Censorship is Likely to Backfire

The final recommendation RAND provides to counter the Firehose of Falsehood is shutting down or hampering propaganda channels. Reducing the Firehose to a squirt gun means less people will encounter the disinformation, and therefore be less likely to be swayed by it. Within the context of the Russian disinformation campaign that RAND addresses, this approach has merit as a way to protect citizens of Western democracies that are targeted. In fact, during the Russo-Ukrainian war, the US and its NATO allies followed this advice and all but shut down Russia Today (RT) and other Russian propaganda channels, significantly reducing the flow of Russian disinformation.

However, these censorship efforts have had substantial negative consequences as well. Russia has countered with its own censorship, cutting off its own citizens' ability to access Western media sources, while dialing up the Firehose within Russia itself. While many dissenters have fled Russia, they represent a small fraction of the overall Russian population. The [overwhelming majority](#) of Russians support Putin, and that support has only increased in the wake of the invasion. One of the consequences of directly stopping the outward flow of Russian disinformation has been cutting the Russian population off from accurate information.

The lesson this case presents is that censorship, which should be avoided, risks cutting off the population who needs to access accurate information the most. Particularly when one doesn't have a multinational coalition of governments, censoring would likely only add to increase political polarization and information silos, hampering persuasion. In *The Constitution of Knowledge,* Jonathan Rauch provides a historical warning about the pitfalls and potential backfire effects from censorship: "Adolf Hitler played the Weimar Republic's censorship laws like a violin, putting up posters with captions like 'Crooks can speak anywhere in Germany, but Hitler is banned.' (Later, when he came to power, he used the Weimar censorship laws to justify his own much harsher censorship regime.)"

Censorship is a dangerous approach in any circumstance, and in the gun debate it is a particularly bad idea. The gun lobby is not a foreign actor and is too deeply entrenched in today's media ecosystem to excise. Attempted censorship is extremely unlikely to produce any positive results and can only lead to further political balkanization, which itself is a win for the Firehose of Falsehood. The solution to disinformation is exposure and sunlight, not attempting to relegate it to the shadows.

Unlike Russian propaganda which can easily 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. Exposure, not censorship.

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, at least sufficiently to affect meaningful political change on a single issue such as gun violence. 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 not being easy, 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. Being honest and using factual information is also a fundamental aspect of personal persuasion. Taking informational short-cuts, while they may appear to be an easier path in the short-term, often have profoundly negative consequences when establishing a long-term factual foundation built on trust and integrity.

A necessary caveat is that these tactics are most effective when meeting someone in person, and likely completely ineffective in an online setting if the person you are attempting to persuade is currently in a different political tribe. The modern incentive structure social media provides that rewards outrage, shaming, and performative gestures is antithetical to persuasion principles. While the online universe is a very important tool for reaching people, in the end it is not remotely sufficient to carry out needed progress.

With these guidelines in mind, 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:

1) Circumventing tribal barriers by meeting people where they are, establishing emotional credibility through personal narratives, and building trust.

2) Exploring the other person's beliefs and core values by respectfully questioning, listening, and affirming.
3) Building a fact-based foundation that aligns with the other person's values and use inoculation techniques to protect against future disinformation.
4) Motivating the person to action with a single emotionally powerful story and having them commit to at least a small action that can be built on over time.

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. Public polling highlights the people's preference for messengers within their own perceived tribe. For example, a 2018 poll on safe storage practices found that: "Gun owners ranked law enforcement, hunting or outdoors groups, active-duty military, and the National Rifle Association as most effective in communicating safe storage practices." Essentially, gun owners trust other people who regularly handle firearms the most.

Earlier we explored the psychological power of tribalism and how it shapes our beliefs. Everything in people's lives leads them to their current tribal identity, which makes attempting to shift that identity a near impossible hill to climb. As such, for persuasion to occur, the focus needs to be on meeting people where they are, in a way that doesn't threaten their tribal identity. This is straightforward if the existing tribal boundaries align to where the messenger and audience are easily defined in the same group.

The problem is when the identities of the messenger and audience don't align sufficiently. While some tribal barriers are impossible to bridge, the lines between "us" and "them" can frequently be flexible with in-person communication. At least at the outset of an interaction, to form a tribal bridge, 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. In a 2021 study that examined a number of hot-button political issues (including gun violence), people consistently respected **personal experiences that were issue-relevant and harm-based.** In the realm of gun violence, this means survivors are the best messengers (outside someone who is already a gun owner). Further, these subjective personal experiences were seen as more trustworthy than objective facts. It is important to note that subject matter experts were still seen as more credible than lay-people presenting facts, but not as powerful as people with relevant harm-based stories.
2. Studies dating all the way back to the 1970s have demonstrated the power of "convert communicators." These are **people who used to share the same beliefs or behavior pattern as the target audience, but have since changed their minds**. In the gun

debate, these could be former gun owners or even current gun owners who used to be members of the NRA but are now disillusioned. It is important in this process to maintain self-congruency, "meaning people must square their behavior and choices with their identity." If messengers criticize or bash their previous beliefs too much, they will lose their credibility and not be seen as a "real" member of the tribe. Further, the conversion must be real as insincerity will eventually destroy any trust that is built.

3. The final pathway is **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). This strategy is not as powerful as survivor stories, being a convert, or being directly seen as a member of the same tribe; however, it can still weaken tribal barriers, and the evidence from deep canvassing campaigns shows that such bridge-building is possible and effective.

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.

Research shows that questioning, listening, and affirming provide several key advantages. For example, a 2013 study ran several experiments in which people were asked to explain policies they supported and why they held that position on complex political topics. When the participants were required to explain policies in a mechanistic fashion (i.e. how they actually functioned), they became more moderate in their positions. Further, the researchers found the illusion of explanatory depth was substantially undermined, meaning the participants realized they didn't know as much about the topic as they thought they had going into the experiment. It is important to note that participants' explanation of their reasoning, but not the mechanistic process, did not impact their behavior. All of these experiments combined indicated a substantial decrease in political polarization among the participants.

In addition to increasing moderation and revealing gaps in knowledge, listening to people explain their views on a topic helps highlight their value system. As Jonathan Haidt explains in *The Righteous Mind*, people across the political spectrum draw on a range of core values to justify their positions. Knowing which values are most salient to someone provides important information on what evidence they will find most compelling.

Finally, affirming the other person's value system is critical. A 2002 study found that self-affirmation helped reduce defensive biases in response to information that could be

threatening to a person's identity. This helps reduce tribal barriers and avoids the trap of falling into an "us vs them" framework. Importantly, a 2007 study demonstrates these affirmations need to be salient to their identity and the issue at hand in order to be effective at reducing closed-mindedness and inflexibility. Affirming an aspect of someone's identity that is irrelevant or relates to something completely different is unlikely to produce any positive results. It is worth mentioning that affirming is not the same as agreement. For example, you can affirm that someone's core values of wanting to keep their family safe are valid and important without agreeing that firearm ownership is an effective way at accomplishing that goal.

While listening and affirming are crucial, this does not mean avoiding controversy or not addressing substantive questions from the other person. A 2021 study found that when people believed their policy opponents rejected threats to their well being, they were more likely to morally condemn and dehumanize the opposition. On the flip side, a "threat acknowledgement" helps ameliorate negative beliefs about the political opposition. In short, taking people's concerns seriously and addressing them is indispensable for persuasion.

This effect is also seen in the Braver Angels Debate program. The program would create a space for good-faith discussion and debate, where differences in opinion were expected and encouraged. Through honest debate, one could learn about the other side, which tended to lead to more moderation and mutual respect. During these sessions, the creator of the program noticed an interesting trend in how Democrats ("Blues" as she calls them) and Republicans ("Reds") would approach the debates:

"Generally speaking, Blues prefer an emotion-forward, therapeutic framing, and Reds prefer an intellect-forward, argument-based framing. This is on the one hand a cultural and dispositional tendency, and on the other is driven by Reds' fear that Blues will condescend to them by "empathizing with their feelings" while refusing to engage their substantive points—as though there is no chance a rational person could be persuaded by them. Particularly in an era of (what is often experienced as) soft thought policing via social censorship, Reds seem very hesitant to engage in things that seem too Blue—too empathy-focused, too sameness-encouraging. They suspect that Blues want unity within certain parameters, and Reds fear being condemned if their moral intuitions fall outside them."

This is important, as Stage 1 (and even most of Stage 2) of the persuasion process is all about finding emotional common-ground. But as Braver Angels highlights, one cannot stop there. Engaging with substantive points is essential, as is respecting view-point diversity. While the Braver Angels case is in the context of a formal debate, one-on-one conversations are not going to have that same structure or rules. As such, rather than a debate, the conversation should be approached as a mutual learning opportunity and trying to find the truth together.

Another addition to this framework is the necessity of compromising on areas that aren't completely central to the main persuasive goal. Even if someone is fundamentally factually wrong about almost everything on a particular topic, there will still be opportunities to concede

that at least some of their concerns are valid and should be addressed. A willingness to compromise demonstrates good faith and 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. Just as the Braver Angels Debate case highlights, 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 how to counter 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 in fact there is broad support among other gun-owners.

A poll of gun-owners conducted in September 2021 found that 70% of the participants felt that gun violence was serious or very serious, and more than two-thirds supported five policies such as universal background checks, extreme risk protection orders, safe storage requirements, domestic violence restrictions, and guns having unique markings for tracking. This support was despite participants being evenly split on the question of whether the 2nd Amendment was absolute, and large majorities believing their firearms made them safer. The majority of gun owners owned firearms for self-defense (58% of the sample, which jumped to 76% of new gun owners), and a substantial majority rated their own gun safety skills highly.

Yet when it came to other gun owners, participants had little confidence in others ability to store their firearms correctly or use said firearms proficiently. Further, on extreme risk protection orders, 49% of gun owners thought most other gun owners opposed such regulations, despite actual majority support. This presents a significant opportunity for education on gun policies, even though the self-defense motivation for gun ownership is a powerful driving force behind gun owner identity.

As shown previously, research demonstrates that highlighting widespread agreement about policies is an effective strategy at encouraging more support. Further, much of the debate over gun violence is disagreement over facts and the effectiveness of various solutions, not the underlying problem. If such factual concerns are alleviated and gun owners are made aware of broad public support, proper messaging can help 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. Cognitive dissonance theory predicts that when our behavior and beliefs contradict each other, psychological tension is created that we try to resolve to make behavior and beliefs align with each other by changing them. For example, a 2009 study found that the mere act of voting for a candidate increases positive opinions of that political figure in the future, more so than people who supported the candidate but were ineligible to vote at the time. This psychological phenomenon indicates that having the other person do something for you that is related to the topic can help reinforce belief change. Additionally, research shows that 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.

At the strategic level, organizations should enact the following strategy:
1. Match the breadth and scope of the disinformation campaign with their own Firehose of Truth.
2. Deploy inoculation campaigns to counter disinformation, involving informational "vaccines" that expose people to a piece of disinformation in a controlled setting and then thoroughly explain why it is inaccurate.
3. Enact "deep canvassing" tactics that rely on canvassers listening attentively and encouraging empathy instead of traditional canvassing techniques.
4. Focus on the populations most at risk of being swayed by the ongoing disinformation campaign rather than directly challenging the Firehose of Falsehood.
5. Avoid attempting to overtly silence the opposition, as such efforts will most likely prove ineffective, and may actually substantially strengthen the disinformation campaign.

At the personal level, individuals should employ the following 4 step process for persuasion:
1. Circumventing tribal barriers by meeting people where they are, establishing emotional credibility through personal narratives, and building trust.
2. Exploring the other person's beliefs and core values by respectfully questioning, listening, and affirming.
3. Building a fact-based foundation that aligns with the other person's values and use inoculation techniques to protect against future disinformation.
4. Motivating the person to action with a single emotionally powerful story and having them commit to at least a small action that can be built on over time.

When the strategic and personal level approaches are used in harmony, a Firehose of Falsehood campaign can be defeated.