

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

What is a Firehose of Falsehood?

In 2016, The RAND Corporation coined the term “Firehose of Falsehood,” defining it 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

How the Gun Lobby Has Used the 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.

For example, the gun lobby [funded](#) a handful of scholars to reinterpret the Second Amendment as an individual right starting in the 1960s. 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.

In addition, the gun lobby has deployed a Firehose strategy to convince people that guns make them safer. One way they have achieved this goal is by deliberately [hampering](#) and [blocking](#) funding for accurate research. Simultaneously, the gun lobby seized on discredited research from a handful of scholars indicating that millions of defensive gun uses occurred each year and that a culture in which individuals carry guns reduced crime. With substantial resources and a multitude of media channels to propagate their message, the gun lobby successfully drowned out reputable research on firearms with a torrent of falsehoods.

The Power of Disinformation and the Firehose of Falsehood

The Firehose of Falsehood strategy’s success largely stems from the inherent advantages of disinformation over factual information, which are amplified when used in a coordinated campaign. Some of these advantages are:

- 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.

Countering the Firehose of Falsehood at the Strategic Level

To counter the Firehose of Falsehood, organizations should enact the following strategies:

- Match the [breadth and scope](#) of the disinformation campaign with their own Firehose of Truth.
- 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.
- Enact “[deep canvassing](#)” tactics that rely on canvassers listening attentively and encouraging empathy instead of traditional canvassing techniques.
- Focus on the populations most at risk of being swayed by the ongoing disinformation campaign rather than directly challenging the Firehose of Falsehood.
- Avoid attempting to overtly silence the opposition, as such efforts will most likely prove ineffective, and may actually substantially strengthen the disinformation campaign.

Countering the Firehose of Falsehood at the Personal Level

At the personal level, a 4 stage process for persuasion can be effective, with each stage requiring its own distinct approach. For example:

- 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.

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 a 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.