



AS RECORD-BREAKING WILDFIRES destroyed trees, property and lives on millions of acres in the American West last year, the world was facing another type of wildfire: the continued viral spread of misinformation and disinformation. No less destructive in its own way, the rise of disinformation has repeatedly put assets, lives and public safety at risk.

Like forest fires, false narratives thrive in combustible conditions—political polarization, poor-quality information sources and high levels of public distrust in institutions are the dry tinder. Misinformation may spread from an honest mistake, while disinformation is deliberately wrong—a kind of arson. Social media picks up the sparks and spreads them across the internet. Disinformation can grow into a conflagration threatening society, corporate reputations and even basic functions of government—as witnessed in the US Capitol insurrection of January 6. Fueled by a months-long surge of false information, the violence that day resulted in the deaths of five people, the temporary suspension of congressional activities, threats to the safety of elected officials

Disinformation WILDFIRE

The metaphor for how disinformation spreads can be applied to combating it.

and the ransacking of the iconic halls of US democracy.

In a recent Brunswick survey, 53% of US respondents agreed that “CEOs and business leaders should do whatever they can to stop the spread of misinformation, even if it comes from public officials.” Yet only 25% thought business leaders were doing a good job of it. We at Brunswick have had many opportunities to describe how companies can fight back. Forest fires offer a conceptual framework: (1) know your risk level, (2) prioritize which fires to fight and (3) build firebreaks to protect key assets and to prevent the fire from spreading.

Know your risk level: Drought conditions make forests a higher risk than times of normal rainfall. Similarly, leaders should take stock of how risk to their organization’s interests changes around shifting

controversial financial, political and societal issues.

The first task in a counter-disinformation playbook should be an audit of vulnerabilities. This would include past controversies involving the organization, social media around the sector and specific actions planned or underway by the company.

Prioritize high-risk narratives: Which fires should you fight and which do you let burn themselves out? Those that threaten key or sensitive areas are a priority. Likewise, the fake narratives that matter most are the ones that threaten your license to operate, while others are only worth monitoring. We recommend a risk assessment framework to decide which false narratives can do the most damage. What is the potential impact of the narrative? Is it credible to key audiences? What is the penetration of the narrative?

Build firebreaks: Smart action in advance can create obstacles to the threat of misinformation and potentially contain the spread. This requires understanding your audiences, identifying your advocates and those who are undecided but persuadable, and then

optimizing your communications to ensure these audiences know your narrative.

At its heart, disinformation is aimed at eroding trust by assaulting motives and intentions. Disinformation narratives are often emotionally engaging. The counter is to clearly communicate your values and motivations to key audiences—the “why” of what you do. This can build reservoirs of good will and trust that are harder for fake narratives to penetrate.

As with all corporate communications crises, it is better to have a plan of action in mind before an actual need arises—in this case, a disinformation playbook. This detailed action plan—even if it needs to be adjusted to handle unforeseeable events—can be a critical, calming guide for handling a fake news inferno. Ultimately, such preparation will also help clear away the combustible material, making you less appealing for the fire-starters of false information and conspiracy, and more resilient in the event your organization becomes a target. ♦

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