



PRSA | ✖ yonder present

A Dialogue on Disinformation

Introduction

In June 2021, PRSA and its Voices4Everyone initiative in partnership with Yonder invited a group of thought leaders to discuss an issue of critical importance to the communications profession — the proliferation of disinformation.

During a lively 90-minute virtual roundtable moderated by Ray Day and Jonathon Morgan, the panelists provided valuable insights into this serious threat to our democracy and our society. They also offered actionable takeaways on future resiliency against false and misleading claims levied against brands and organizations.

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CONVERSATIONS**

Civic Engagement,
Civility, DE&I
and Disinformation

PRSA

FOREWORD

The past year has presented some of the most extreme and ubiquitous examples of disinformation and misinformation our country has ever seen. Whether related to how the COVID-19 virus could be transmitted, the effectiveness of masks or the overall impact of the new vaccines, policymakers, media and everyday people seem to have a vast array of perspectives and a myriad of conflicting “facts” and “studies” to back them up.

Even for someone with my background in quantitative social sciences, working with organizations like DARPA and the State Department to study extremism and terrorist organizations operating online, the evolution of how false and misinformed narratives are spreading online feels intense. In fact, Yonder has seen false narratives travel 10x faster in these times of crises.

In this information chaos, the entities that the general public is looking to most now to help understand what information to trust are brands and brand leaders. A recent [Kearney report](#) shows consumers actually put more trust in small and large brands than government and media. The stances businesses and their leaders take and the words they use matter more than ever. In this environment, the role of a business’s strategic communications team has been expanded and elevated.

Navigating the increasing barrage of content, messages, misinformation and disinformation is still a relatively new muscle for brands and strategic communications teams to build, and I’m thankful that PRSA has prioritized being part of the evolution. [The Voices4Everyone forum](#), website, resources and hosted conversations are the kind of catalyst our community needs to uplevel our abilities and be a part of fostering mutual understanding, trust and civic engagement through more inclusive and civil discourse.

The conversation highlighted in this white paper is a prime example, covering the current state of disinformation, the evolution of misinformation, new intelligence and tools being used, as well as emerging tactics being leveraged by top brands to combat and manage the spread of potentially damaging narratives and information.

This is a real moment for strategic communicators to rise to a new challenge and be an active part of creating clarity in the market, driving alignment with company leaders, and furthering a free, democratic and civil society.



Jonathon Morgan
CEO, Yonder



PRSA 2021 Chair Michelle Olson, APR, on Disinformation and Voices4Everyone

In my speaking engagements around the country, I talk a lot about the international crisis that we have with disinformation. It has become industrialized. This spring, PRSA launched Voices4Everyone to provide more proactive advocacy so that we can represent our profession in a way that's not just creating statements or speaking out when something happens, but instead giving our members the tools they need to manage the issues that they're faced with today.

Voices4Everyone is designed to leverage the expertise, creativity and collective voice of the PR profession as we tackle and address the complex issues of civil discourse, civic engagement and ethical behavior; embrace diversity and inclusion in their broadest sense; and combat misinformation and disinformation.

Studies have shown that most Americans view disinformation as a serious threat to democracy, the nation's economy and how we recover from the pandemic. While professional communicators have a responsibility to share impactful, truthful information, we also have the responsibility to pre-bunk and debunk false or harmful information. Voices4Everyone will help PR practitioners do just that.

The new initiative will also help PRSA members develop the cognitive muscle to build resistance to the onslaught of content that is intended to trigger an emotional response. If you feel yourself getting really angry when you see something and immediately want to hit share, just take a beat. Because it's probably created to make you feel that way.

With the world shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic, social unrest and a flood of false information, PR professionals guided by truth and accuracy are more important than we have ever been.



Michelle Olson, APR
2021 PRSA Chair



Co-Moderators



Jonathon Morgan
CEO, Yonder



Ray Day
Vice Chair, Stagwell

Participants



Sabrina Browne
Vice President, Corporate
BCW Global



Fred Cook
Chairman Emeritus, Golin
Director, Annenberg Center for
Public Relations at the
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Elizabeth Marsh
Assistant Professor/Associate Chair
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Tina McCorkindale, Ph.D, APR
President and CEO
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Matt Prince
Senior Manager, Public Relations
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Taco Bell



Lisa Seidenberg
Vice President, Media Relations
Green Target Global Group

On Recognizing Disinformation

The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

JONATHON MORGAN: Are you frequently seeing adversarial narratives or disinformation campaigns impact your clients?

FRED COOK: We have a podcast at USC called “PR Future.” We interviewed Amanda Ripley, who was a reporter at Time magazine for a decade. She wrote a book called “High Conflict,” in which she uses the term “conflict entrepreneurs.” They’re people making their reputations or a lot of money based on the conflict of polarization.

There are forces out there who are profiting in one way or another from this divisiveness that we all are experiencing. And when you begin to understand that that’s the rationale for some of these attacks, it’s a little easier to understand how to deal with them.

From a brand perspective, we work for McDonald’s and Walmart and they’re constantly being attacked with misinformation on a massive scale. We do all the social media and monitoring for Walmart, analyzing and responding to about 7 million posts a year. It’s a gigantic operation for

ELIZABETH MARSH: Disinformation rapidly becomes misinformation because people think it’s the truth and spread it. They’re not doing it maliciously. But when a correction comes back, they’re, like, “No, I’m telling the truth.” Everyone wants to believe that they are telling the truth.

COOK: Amanda Ripley said that during her entire career as a journalist, she thought she was representing the facts. And what she’s learned through her research about conflict and polarization is that the facts don’t matter much anymore. Everybody has their own set of facts. It’s much more about who’s delivering the story than what the factual content is. The idea that you can counter disinformation with facts is not very effective anymore.

MARSH: It’s tribalism. It’s more important to belong than to be accurate.



“Disinformation rapidly becomes misinformation because people think it’s the truth and spread it.”

— ELIZABETH MARSH



a brand that size to respond to all of the information out there in a way that’s responsible and helpful to create some sort of credibility.

TINA McCORKINDALE: At IPR, we are clear about the definitions of disinformation versus misinformation. Misinformation is not necessarily deliberate on the part of the actor. Whereas we define disinformation as deliberately false or misleading information. We don’t use the term “fake news” because it also means, depending on who uses it, information that is true, but is not liked by the person who it’s about.

First Draft is a great nonprofit resource. They have guidelines for what constitutes disinformation and what the motivators are when people use disinformation. For example, if headlines and visuals don’t support the content, they’re doing it as click bait, which drives ad revenue. The motivations of people spreading disinformation are critically important to how companies manage it.

On a Game Plan to Combat Disinformation

RAY DAY: If your company, your brand or your client is the target of disinformation, do you have a game plan and best practices on what to do?

MATT PRINCE: I don't know if there are rules that will cover every situation. Every piece of misinformation and disinformation is probably going to be treated a little differently. For us, we listen to start off. And then we use the power of data and statistics and knowledge to understand the plan of action.

Social-media monitoring is a huge tool for us. In our office we have 12 monitors running 24 hours a day, monitoring across social media all the temperature-checks on the brand, what people are talking about, the key words, the sentiment, where conversations are coming from, etc.

We bring the proper teams together, whether operations or communications or social or legal, to have the right people in the right room. And then we watch and listen and monitor. You have to understand whether it's the opinion of one or of many. That's a big driver of how we decide.

We could exacerbate an issue by responding or commenting on it. We follow the trend of conversations and where it's going. It starts with research, getting all the information and facts to make the proper decisions and to bring in the right people and make a plan of action.

DAY: Take the Walmart example and the sheer volume coming in that you mentioned. How do you prioritize which ones can be ignored and which ones represent an all-out crisis?

COOK: We have a huge team on this. We also work with a call center and a technology platform that analyzes all of the social media posts into different categories. After a while, you see patterns in these tweets. Our people are trained to deal with them in a certain way.

You have to decide what to do with this information. But the advantage of being on top of it is that sometimes you can stop things before they go viral. You can respond to someone and keep their statements from being shared over and over by trying to correct it in the beginning.

Sometimes the information is very positive. If somebody says something nice about Walmart, we can amplify it. But the social-media monitoring is a big undertaking. A lot of brands don't have the interest or the horsepower to manage something on that scale.

SABRINA BROWNE: We represent clients across the financial sector, travel sector, retail and technology. It's certainly not a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to misinformation and disinformation. We're constantly asking ourselves: "Do we want to get ahead of this and put out the fire? If we respond, will we add more fuel to the fire?"

Making sure that we're working across our public affairs and crisis teams, our legal teams, our government relations teams and crafting that systematic approach is the best way and how we've addressed this, while also making sure we have the right social-listening tools in place.

What starts on Facebook can rapidly spread to Instagram or Snapchat. Having the processes and tools, but moreover, the right team in place, helps give us that comprehensive approach when we respond.

MORGAN: How often are you able to do scenario-planning in advance to be proactive about misinformation or disinformation attacks? And how often are you trying to be nimble and quickly respond to surprises?

BROWNE: We have a proven crisis-planning, misinformation/disinformation methodology. But I've found that with some clients, misinformation or disinformation tends to warrant a bespoke offering.

So you can have scenario-mapping for the year, but you also have to be able to pivot in real time — to monitor trends, listen to what's being said across social media and assure the client that, "We can stick with your plan but also move forward with adaptability and agility while being strategic." Because if we wait too long to respond, that may put us in a bigger situation than if we had responded the same day.

However, much comes down to that assessment of what's being said, who's saying it, where it's being said and its overall tonality. What starts for one of my clients in California could impact their locations in New York. Looking at that starting point plays a role in how we either adapt or continue with the current plan.



PRINCE: Totally agree. If you're starting to get comfortable with your crisis response, that's probably not a good thing, because it means you're not keeping your eyes peeled for what will happen next.

One thing that has challenged a lot of brands is that as different social platforms come up, who will be the spokespeople to represent the company? On Clubhouse, now anybody can represent any company at any time. TikTok has been a huge shift for how our team members leverage the social platform and how our brand is represented.

So when you get comfortable, things will shift and you'll get uncomfortable quickly. I think that's the accountability we need to ensure we're staying sharp and not resting on the laurels of how we do things.

COOK: Our research at USC shows that more and more companies are speaking out about political and social issues that are supercharged with polarization and disinformation. As companies put their feet in the water on climate change or gun control or immigration, they need some sort of guide to what the expected reactions will be.

McCORKINDALE: There's a global disinformation-index that tracks companies' spending on fake-news sites. A lot of companies need to get their own houses in order before they can combat disinformation externally. Part of it is where you advertise. If you're supporting these "media outlets," you're part of the problem. In Europe, nearly \$100 million was spent on fake-news sites. So a Merck ad appears on an anti-vax website that's completely made up.

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Everybody has their own set of facts. It's much more about who's delivering the story than what the factual content is. The idea that you can counter disinformation with facts is not very effective anymore.

— FRED COOK



When we did our annual study, we asked about the most trusted sources of information. Typically family and friends are number one. And then the most trusted news sources are local newspapers and local broadcast media. Companies are not investing enough into those trusted outlets. Companies can build better relationships with local audiences and have trusted relationships with media outlets.

A great researcher, Dr. Penelope Abernathy, looks at the devastation to the newspaper industry. Since its height in 2004, 2,100 newspapers have shut down. So now you have pockets of news deserts where people may get one weekly paper. Or it's ghost papers that have to get their news from other publications or from wire services, because they don't have enough people on staff to fill their own pages.

MORGAN: What I think is really interesting is that when evaluating whether or not action might be required, you're taking into account what the agenda behind this communication might be and whether your stakeholders or clients might be impacted. I wonder how do you all think about confidently assessing those agendas and evaluating whether or not your stakeholders might be engaged even before there's a media conversation?

And to the other point: People who subscribe to wild conspiracy theories — it's too difficult to change their minds. Emotionally heated topics make them angry and they share that. They don't share boring news stories. What spreads disinformation is the excitement.

I don't think you're going to be able to shift the agenda of a media publication that's on the far right or far left. But you can prepare your consumer, the fans of your brand. What we've often seen when misinformation or disinformation gets spread in social media is that we're not having to fight it or take a side on certain things. Our consumers are doing it for us.

On Countering a Disinformation Attack

DAY: Can you counteract a disinformation attack? Some of these situations get such a head of steam that they take on a life of their own. How do you deal with that?

LISA SEIDENBERG: I think the biggest thing is to first understand, “Where did this happen? What went wrong? And how can we stop it from happening again?” From there, if the information is true and you need to acknowledge it, take that responsibility and do so.

MARSH: If you know your stakeholders, your target audience — and that includes media outlets — you can see a place where you might be able to intervene. You want to have that relationship so you can stop it there.

ling, it’s important not to shy away from humanizing the organization and your leadership team. Let it be known how this misinformation or disinformation is impacting you personally, your business, your stakeholders. Create that sentiment for people to recognize that we’re not just here to tell the truth and the facts, but also to create that sense of community, to let them know we’re addressing this through a lens that’s authentic to our organization.

Also, be aware of your company’s track record. It’s important to recognize how we have responded in the past. Can we improve that effort going forward? And how can we be consistent in the fight against misinformation and disinformation?



“People who subscribe to wild conspiracy theories — it’s too difficult to change their minds. Emotionally heated topics make them angry and they share that. They don’t share boring news stories. What spreads disinformation is the excitement.”

— TINA MCCORKINDALE, Ph.D., APR



COOK: You have a story to tell. You’re a caretaker of that story, which becomes more powerful than the facts. And if you can communicate what your organization is all about and its values, then people are more likely to take your side or trust you than they are if you just spout your version of the facts. It’s right in our wheelhouse as communicators to be telling those stories, but we have to do it in a way that makes people feel more trusting of the source than just saying, “Here are the facts.”

DAY: Sabrina, any thoughts from you? You’ve been on the front line with many clients.

BROWNE: I definitely agree with some of the points that Fred was just making. When it comes to misinformation and disinformation, make sure your initial response aligns with your mission and values. Lean into the fact that you are a trusted, credible, accountable organization. Be authentic.

We see the same mistake time and time again: Communicators want to quickly address disinformation, to condemn it, to reinforce that it’s not true. More often than not, the first thing we do as PR people is rush to respond. We want to get in front of it. But this is such a nuanced and complex situation that we’re all navigating in the industry today.

For the brands and organizations that I’ve had the pleasure of counse-

PRINCE: I couldn’t agree more. I would add the different dynamic that I have seen recently, which is that there’s no such thing as internal communications anymore. Everything you’re doing is externally facing and may be seen out of context.

You’re seeing so many screenshots now of PR practitioners and the work they’re doing, the damage control or whatever you want to call it — those messages, those emails are getting screen-shot and shared on social media to continue the conversation or to get people more riled up. You have PR people acting in the best interests of their brand or company, but maybe it comes off as inhumane or impersonal and makes the situation worse.

BROWNE: As I tell my clients, when you’re responding to something, assume it will be screen-shot. We’ve seen this occur with TikTok, with Snapchat, with Instagram DM-ing. Whether it’s your social team, crisis team or response team getting back to a consumer in a one-to-one or community-based forum, work under the assumption that it will be screen-shot. It could end up in *The New York Times*, ZDNet or on the wires.

COOK: And what happens in a situation like the one we’re in now, where things are so polarized, is that everyone tends to dehumanize the people on the other end. Once you do that, it’s easy to misunderstand what’s going on.

Regardless of what people are saying and as crazy as you may think it is, you have to listen to it respectfully. You’ve got to remove your own bias. Otherwise, you can’t even have a conversation. If you just reduce it to, “Those are the idiots on the other side and they’re crazy,” then your response isn’t going to be appropriate in this kind of environment. It’s easy to write people off because you think they’re insane. But they’re not insane; they just have beliefs that are different than your own.

On How Brands Can Respond to Disinformation

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If you're starting to get comfortable with your crisis response, that's probably not a good thing, because it means you're not keeping your eyes peeled for what will happen next.

— MATT PRINCE



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MORGAN: Is there an opportunity for brands to build coalitions, to activate their stakeholders and tell their own stories so that when disinformation inevitably comes, stakeholders say, “That information doesn't seem right to me; I already know what this brand is about”?

COOK: Business has a big megaphone. They haven't been using it on many of these issues and I think they're starting to. What we saw with the Georgia voting rights — that was a really interesting foray into something that's quite controversial and very political.

Gradually, but more and more, they're going to be speaking out and getting involved in these issues, because the government is not providing the solutions and people are looking elsewhere for them. And if they do it correctly, they will build trust and they will build advocacy with their customers and their employees.

SEIDENBERG: I agree completely, especially about the importance of getting out there so you are building that trust with your stakeholders. And there's also a responsibility for them to work with journalists to disseminate their point of view. Trust in the media isn't the highest right now, but because trust in businesses and CEOs is high, there is responsibility to use the authority they have to work with journalists and help the media bolster its own credibility.

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— LISA SEIDENBERG



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Determining When Brands Need to Make a Statement on Social Issues

In addition to when and how brands respond to disinformation, **PRSA CEO Linda Thomas Brooks** discussed another top-of-mind issue during the roundtable: What factors should a company consider before weighing in on a social issue?



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A question that we get a lot and try to help moderate in the PRSA community is, ‘Where do companies feel they need to be a part of the conversation and where do they not?’ There's this impetus for everybody to jump in on everything that's hot, to be part of the dialogue. But that tendency contributes to the level of noise and the death of expertise. But if everybody has something to say about every topic, who's the expert?

“Part of our communications strategy should be to think about, ‘Do I or does my client have a role, an expertise that is valuable to this conversation?’ We have to be careful to put those forward, but not to feel that we need to have something to say about everything. Because in a lot of cases, we're just creating more noise.”

On a Potential End to Disinformation

DAY: Do we see an end someday of misinformation / disinformation? What do you think has to occur to turn the tide from what we're facing today? What do we do to effect change?

COOK: Everybody thinks that misinformation and polarization are going to stay the same or increase. For the foreseeable future, this is the reality we're living with. What Amanda Ripley said about this high-conflict situation is that it becomes a vicious circle. It's difficult to bring it back down to a level of constructive disagreement when you reach this level of conflict that we're in now. It could be with us for a long time.

SEIDENBERG: The interesting takeaway we got from a survey we conducted was that journalists felt it was their role to help fight disinformation and fake news. They thought they were the ones to help solve this problem.

How can we support reporters in this fight? We have an opportunity to help journalists tell their stories. In general, stress ethics and transparency. Never lie to a journalist. Make sure every source you're putting forth is credible. We should fact-check our work to make sure anything we're putting out is going to support what they're already putting out there.

The biggest thing is, continue to advocate against fake news and disinformation. Media literacy is something we're passionate about. We plan to go into a classroom in the fall and talk to high schoolers about how to differentiate real and fake news.

BROWNE: It comes down to those three A's of advocacy, accountability and action. We're all playing a role as PR professionals, driving that advocacy and reinforcing that this is a paramount situation that's impacting our clients, the brands we serve every day, but then also taking that action aspect of things.

We know this is an issue, so what can we do? We can convene this roundtable of experts, we can leverage the tools that are already available on PRSA's website and convene our own research to provide our clients with the latest insights.

But then we need to take it one step further and make sure we're distilling that information. We have the power to drive communication for some of the biggest and most incredible brands in the world. We are at the forefront of this with Gen Z and journalists.

And I encourage us all to continue not only having this dialogue, but also to think about those micro-actions we can take, whether with the clients we serve every day or reaching out to the next generation of PR and communication professionals so they're able to spot what is true and what is fake and how we can continue to move this industry forward.

PRINCE: I completely agree with everything that's been said. I'm hoping that Gen Z will come save us all. It seems like they have the power and potentially the ability. They look at the world a lot differently. I'm hoping that that is the turning point for a lot of what brands are doing and how they're reacting and how media companies are reacting as well.

I also think the responsibility is going to fall on the big tech companies and social media platforms. You can see some of the stuff happening now, that pops up and says, "Did you actually read this article before sharing it?" Things like that will hopefully become more pervasive for younger generations.

Gen Z will figure it all out. They just have that intuition. They know. So hopefully, we don't have to worry about it.

MORGAN: It's fascinating to hear your experiences and your well-informed and thoughtful points of view. I am also optimistic, both about Gen Z — and, based on this conversation — about the thoughtful work that PR practitioners are doing.

DAY: I would echo the points that so many of you made. Tremendous conversation, hearing from experts this mix of philosophical and provocative things to think about. But we can't just sit on a panel and have these provocative discussions where we all are kind of shaken. We need to go out and be the catalyst for change in the world. This is our role. We're practitioners, but we're also stewards. We're the people keeping the ethics and the civility together.

“ We have the power to drive communication for some of the biggest and most incredible brands in the world. We are at the forefront of this with Gen Z and journalists. ”

— SABRINA BROWNE





Voices4Everyone (V4E) is a strategic, evergreen community brain trust within PRSA; a positive space to address critical issues impacting the Society. A catalyst for creating social change, V4E offers a robust marketplace of ideas empowering PRSA thought leadership, and underscoring the role, value and power of public relations for advancing and serving the public good.

Learn more at

voices4everyone.prsa.org