



ΛΟΓΟΣ  
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**The Dangers of Disinformation:  
How Professional Communicators Can  
Preserve and Promote Civic Order**

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.. Audience is 950 communication professionals from 34 countries.

Communication has power.  
Communication. Has. Power.  
And with power comes responsibility.

Communication has power.  
    To change people.  
    To change societies.  
    To change the world.  
And with power comes responsibility.

Communication has power.  
    To comfort. Or to terrify.  
    To inspire. Or to demoralize.  
    To liberate. Or to oppress.  
And with power comes responsibility.

Some leaders use communication to help their followers overcome fear.  
Some to provoke fear.  
Some leaders use communication to unite. Some to divide.  
Some leaders use communication to appeal to the better angels of our nature.  
Some to appeal to the worst demons within us.

Communication has power.  
And power can corrupt.  
Corrupt leaders can harness power as effectively as honorable leaders. But to dishonorable ends. Or through dishonorable means. Or both.

Some leaders change what people feel, think, know, and believe through deception, through dishonesty, through pursuing hidden agendas.

Some leaders change what people feel, think, know, and believe by pitting groups against each other. Divide and conquer. Divide **to** conquer.

Communicators have power.  
Communicators. Have. Power.  
And with power comes responsibility.



Communicators have the power to elevate our leaders - to give them wings to soar and to bring their followers with them.

Communicators also have the power to equip leaders with the means to oppress.

Those means are weapons of mass distraction.

Weapons of mass deception.

And these, ultimately, become weapons of mass destruction.

Communicators have power.

And with power comes responsibility.

Today that responsibility calls on professional communicators to recognize that the world faces a pandemic of disinformation and misinformation. And that the stakes have never been higher.

To further recognize that we professional communicators are called to do something about it. And to avoid - to resist - becoming misinformation mercenaries. And to call out... to push back... when we see disinformation being spread.

Let's define the terms.

Disinformation is intentionally communicating dishonestly in order to deceive or manipulate the public to achieve a political end.

Misinformation is members of the public picking up on the disinformation and passing it along without necessarily being aware that it is false. This includes the news media, social media, journalists, and communication professionals of all sorts, including us.

Purveyors of disinformation count on others to spread misinformation. And many commentators use the words disinformation and misinformation interchangeably.

And disinformation kills. Both people and democracy. As the French philosopher Voltaire warned, those who can make people believe absurdities can also make people commit atrocities.

Both disinformation and misinformation are implicated in hyper-politicization and violent extremism. In the North America. In Latin America. In Europe. In Africa. In Asia. Around the world.



In the United States disinformation and misinformation inspired thousands of people to attack the U.S. Capitol on the day that the 2020 presidential election was to be certified. Some of the January 6 terrorists sought out and threatened to assassinate the Vice President of the United States, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and other members of Congress.

That misinformation was abetted by professional communicators.

And consider what we now know about Fox News. Its executives and its stars all knew they were spreading disinformation about the presidential election. They knew they were spreading lies. They justified it to themselves. They said that their audience expected to hear the lies and would go elsewhere if they didn't get them from Fox. Viewer defection would hurt ratings. It also would hurt the company's stock price. So Fox continued to lie.

Fox literally went from, We Report, You Decide, to You Decide What We Report.

But disinformation doesn't just put human life at risk. Disinformation risks killing democracy itself.

What does this have to do with each of us?

We are each professional communicators. We have power. You have power. And with power comes responsibility.

The International Association of Business Communicators Code of Ethics notes that professional communicators have the potential to influence society and affect lives. And with that power comes responsibility.

The first two principles of IABC's Code are:

- Number 1. I am honest. My actions bring respect for and trust in the communication profession.
- Number 2. I communicate accurate information and promptly correct any errors.

And even on issues that are not specifically business issues, businesses continue to have a critical role in societal stability.

The top conclusion of the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer was this: Societal leadership is now a core function of business.



The Trust Barometer notes that distrust is now society's default emotion. And that of all the institutions it studied, business is once again the most trusted.

It notes further that there is a collapse of trust in democracies. That societal fears are on the rise. And that businesses need to step up on societal issues.

The Trust Barometer concludes that business must lead in breaking the cycle of distrust.

This year's Edelman Trust Barometer goes even further. It concludes,

"A lack of faith in societal institutions ... has brought us to where we are today - deeply and dangerously polarized. And business is the only institution seen as competent and ethical. Business is under increasing pressure to step into the void left by government."

This keynote address focuses on the challenges that we professional communicators face in an environment of increasing distrust and political turmoil. And it focuses on strategies that professional communicators can deploy to avoid becoming misinformation mercenaries and to help our clients and employers more likely communicate honestly and in ways that build trust, rather than erode trust.

But first, a bit of historical context. Disinformation is not new. It has been with us for a long time. By studying lessons from the past, we have greater ability to recognize disinformation when we see it. To name it. To call it out early. And to hold leaders accountable for the consequences of that disinformation.

The Greek philosopher Plato gave us a method for understanding difficult concepts. In the *Republic*, Plato said,

"To understand something difficult, study the biggest instance of it that we can. That's because the patterns are easier to see. And the patterns are then laid up in heaven for any who wish to contemplate them."

So, I will focus today on large, visible, and consequential examples of disinformation. Most of my examples involve the United States. I've worked in dozens of countries, including many of yours. But these are the examples I'm most familiar with. Also, I intend to shine a harsh light on these practices. And it is far more fair for me to shine a light on my own country's failings than on other countries. But I invite you to note the patterns and examine similar instances in your own countries.



I will start historically. Then I will move to the present. Then I will provide strategies and tools for professional communicators to recognize and confront disinformation, of whatever magnitude, anywhere in the world. And I'll challenge us all on what to do about disinformation.

The Greek dramatist Aeschylus warned,  
"In war, truth is the first casualty."

And he was right. But he was incomplete. Truth is often the first casualty in the run-up to war itself; in the very justifications for war.

In the United States, disinformation played a critical role in persuading Americans to support going to war: in Vietnam. In the first Gulf War. In the War in Iraq.

I'll show you how. We can see the pattern writ large.

But before I do, let me share a bit about me, and why this topic matters to me. My family emigrated to the United States when I was a young child. My father was an employee of the United States Army for 30 years. For 25 of those years, he was a professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I grew up.

My two brothers and I were the only three-altar boy family in the West Point Catholic church. It takes three altar boys to serve a Catholic wedding. And a Catholic funeral. We served all the Catholic weddings of recently-commissioned first lieutenants in West Point in June of 1967. We served all the Catholic funerals following the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam - a fierce series of battles that made 1968 the year with the most American fatalities. Some of these funerals were for first lieutenants whose weddings we had served nine months earlier.

My brothers and I came of age at the graveside, with weeping brides and parents clutching triangles of blue fabric with bright white stars. We came of age living the consequences of civilians lying a nation into war - and lying to a nation at war.

For the last 32 years I have advised and taught thousands of members of the United States armed forces. I teach them the same things I teach my civilian graduate students: Ethics. Leadership. Communication. Crisis.

Four years ago, on the anniversary of 9/11, I gave a speech similar to this one at the Pentagon, to hundreds of senior military and national security leaders. My topic was the dangers of disinformation - of incendiary language that provokes lone wolves to



commit acts of terror. And one year ago this week I was part of the National Security Seminar of the U.S. Army War College.

I am a big supporter of and advocate for the U.S. armed forces, including those who served bravely and honorably in these wars. Especially those who gave the last full measure of their devotion. But I am also a sharp critic of civilian leaders who send our women and men into harm's way based on lies, and who keep them in harm's way with further lies.

In my lifetime, it started with Vietnam. And in the Vietnam War we see a persistent pattern. A playbook.

The United States had flirted with war in Vietnam throughout the early 1960s.

In August 1964, two U.S. Navy ships claimed to be under attack by North Vietnamese gunboats in the Gulf of Tonkin. There was a lot of confusion, but those closest to the incidents quickly concluded that there were no actual attacks. Within hours of the initial reports the commanding officer on the scene wired the Pentagon. He warned that there had been no attack. Just false radar and sonar readings, panic, and confusion.

Despite the Navy's' recognition that its ships had not in fact been attacked, President Lyndon Johnson and his Secretary of Defense used that event - the Gulf of Tonkin Incident - as a pretext for escalating the American presence and for retaliating against military and naval targets in North Vietnam.

A thorough examination long after the war by the U.S. Navy concluded the following:

"Senior government officials distorted facts and deceived the American public about events that led to full U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War."

It said,

"The evidence suggests a disturbing and deliberate attempt by Secretary of Defense to distort the evidence and mislead Congress."

President Lyndon Johnson became a purveyor of disinformation. He took the misinformation from the Gulf of Tonkin initial reports to lie to Congress and the American people. To persuade Congress to authorize the U.S. going to war in Vietnam.



Within a few years there were more than a half million American troops in Vietnam at any given time.

The lies continued. By 1967 there was public resistance to the war. So President Johnson directed his commanding general to address Congress and the American people. The general said that the Vietcong army - domestic adversaries against the South Vietnamese government and the United States - had been reduced to 280 thousand men. We had half-a-million. Conclusion: The United States was winning.

But his intelligence analysts in Vietnam were telling him a much different story: the truth. The enemy force was actually twice as big.

But this intelligence - this inconvenient truth - was suppressed, and the officer in charge of intelligence analysis was reassigned.

So the United States was caught completely unprepared when in late January 1968 the North Vietnamese and Vietcong launched the Tet Offensive. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong launched simultaneous attacks on all the major cities in South Vietnam. In the capital of Saigon, they even penetrated the grounds of the U.S. embassy.

The gap between the disinformation and the truth revealed that the nation had been lied to by its political and military leaders. This changed the course of the war. One month after the Tet Offensive, CBS News Anchor Walter Cronkite - the most trusted person in the United States - declared that the war was unwinnable.

President Johnson concluded, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America." One month later, President Johnson quit his race for re-election.

But Johnson's withdrawal was not the end of disinformation about the war in Vietnam. The disinformation continued when presidential candidate Richard Nixon said he had a secret plan to end the war. He was elected. He did not have a secret plan to end the war.

And the disinformation continued further when President Nixon escalated the war, secretly invading Cambodia and Laos. He then lied about both invasions.

The U.S. eventually lost the war in 1975, 11 years after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident.

In the Vietnam disinformation we can see a pattern; a playbook. And it has four stages:





- Stage 1: Publicize a provoking incident, a pretext.
- Stage 2: Exaggerate the incident, the significance of the incident, and the threat the incident represents.
- Stage 3: Position the response as necessary, honorable, even noble.
- Stage 4: Continue to lie to justify continued involvement.

So... did the United States learn its lesson from Vietnam? Not really. Just fifteen years later the same pattern re-emerged. The United States followed the same playbook.

In 1990, with the Cold War still underway, Iraq was an ally of the United States. A buffer against Iran and The Soviet Union. Then on August 1, without warning, Iraq invaded its neighbor, the kingdom of Kuwait. It seemed to be on its way to invade Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. and allies quickly came together to prevent Iraq from moving into Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, the government of Kuwait, in concert with the administration of President George H.W. Bush, began a disinformation campaign to convince the American people to support going to war in the Gulf. To be clear, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was a menace to the region. And Iraq was a pariah nation. The invasion itself would have justified action to prevent his attempted expansion.

But rather than focus on the legitimate threat that Iraq and its dictator represented to the region, the George H.W. Bush administration followed the Vietnam playbook.

It invented an atrocity, a pretext. It exaggerated the significance of it. And it justified military action in terms of that invented atrocity. All of this was abetted by professional communicators.

That invented atrocity became one of the largest ethical scandals in public relations in my lifetime and caused serious reputational injury to the profession of professional communication.

At the time, the public relations firm Hill & Knowlton was the largest and one of the most respected PR firms in the world. Its Washington president at the time had been chief of staff to George H.W. Bush when he was vice president.



Hill & Knowlton promoted a front group called Citizens for a Free Kuwait. More than 99 percent of the group's funding came from the government of Kuwait. Most of that money was paid to Hill & Knowlton.

Hill & Knowlton coordinated with both the White House and Kuwait's Washington embassy to launch a disinformation campaign. One centerpiece was a public meeting masquerading as a congressional hearing. The star of that event was a 15-year-old girl identified only as Nayirah, whose full identity was being withheld - they said - to protect her family in Kuwait.

Nayirah told a harrowing story of being in a Kuwait City hospital when the Iraqis invaded. She said she witnessed soldiers removing pre-mature babies from incubators, leaving the babies to die, and stealing the incubators to take back to Baghdad. It was gripping television.

In the run-up to war, President Bush repeated the baby incubator story at least ten times. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International reported on the incubator story as a massive human rights violation. The United States Senate authorization to go to war against Iraq passed by five votes. Six senators said that the baby incubator story was a reason to go to war. Four others invoked the Amnesty International report.

There was just one problem. It was all a lie. The baby incubator story was a lie. It never happened. And Nayirah's identity was also a lie. She was a member of the royal family; the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the U.S., who was Hill & Knowlton's client.

The disinformation was discovered by a journalist who called it out. John R. MacArthur discovered the fraud and published it in a book about propaganda in the Gulf War. MacArthur said,

"When the Kuwaitis hire Hill & Knowlton, [they] desperately need a defining moment; a defining atrocity. Something that is so emotional that the American people will not be able to ignore the plight of Kuwait."

MacArthur concluded,

"The significance of the baby incubator story, in the larger propaganda campaign against [Iraqi dictator] Saddam Hussein, cannot be underestimated. To make the case effectively, one has to prove Hussein's utter depravity."



The White House, Kuwait, and Hill & Knowlton had all become purveyors of disinformation. They followed the Vietnam playbook:

- Stage 1: Publicize a provoking incident, a pretext. In this case, they invented a defining atrocity.
- Stage 2: Exaggerate the incident, the significance of the incident, and the threat the incident represents. They did.
- Stage 3: Position the response as necessary, honorable, even noble. The president, senators, and congresspeople all justified going to war by referencing the baby incubator story.
- Stage 4: Continue to lie to justify continued involvement. Even after they were caught, Hill & Knowlton, the White House, and Kuwait continued to lie.

Eleven years later we saw the same playbook deceive the American public and take us to war against Iraq once again.

As in Vietnam nearly 40 years earlier, the United States had flirted with invading Iraq for years. Six days into his presidency in 2001, George W. Bush directed his military leaders to prepare military options for Iraq.

On the morning of the 9/11 attack, Vice President Dick Cheney told his head of counter terrorism that now we could invade Iraq. His counter terrorism chief was baffled. He told Cheney that Iraq probably had nothing to do with the attack. Later that day the Secretary of Defense directed his military leaders to “look for evidence justifying attacking Iraq.” And to “get information about links between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.”

By late September 2001, both the CIA and military leaders told President Bush and other senior officials that there was no evidence of an Iraq link to 9/11 or to any significant ties with al-Qaeda.

Yet, the disinformation campaign began. Its strategy was simple. Conflate the 9/11 attacks, carried out by Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda, with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Make Americans believe that the two were in cahoots.

Throughout 2002 and early 2003 the Administration spread disinformation about Saddam Hussein’s purported weapons of mass destruction. They said he had massive stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons and was close to developing a nuclear bomb.



The Defense Secretary insisted that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction:

“We know they have weapons of mass destruction. We know they have active programs. There isn’t any debate about it.”

In late July 2002 there was a secret meeting in London.... of senior British government, defense, and intelligence officials. The head of MI-6, the British Secret Intelligence Service, reported about a recent visit to Washington. According to notes made of the meeting, later leaked, the British intelligence chief said that the U.S. was seeking a pretext for regime change in Iraq:

“Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.”

Think about this for a moment. The intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.

In the run-up to the U.S. invasion in March 2003, the U.S. Secretary of State told the United Nations Security Council:

“The facts and Iraq’s behavior show that Saddam Hussein and his regime are concealing their efforts to produce more weapons of mass destruction.”

When asked whether there was a smoking gun, the National Security Advisor warned that the next smoking gun could be a mushroom cloud.

The United States invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003.

And the disinformation worked. By September 2003, six months into the war, 72 percent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in 9/11. In 2006, fully three years into the war, 90 percent of American soldiers believed that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks.

A professor at the United States Air Force Air War College, published an analysis five years into the war. He concluded,

“There was no evidence of a functioning Iraqi nuclear weapons program—much less an imminent Iraqi bomb. Saddam Hussein’s purported nuclear intentions thus were simply *wished* into imminent capabilities. On the eve of the U.S. invasion, Saddam Hussein was contained and deterred. He posed no significant



threat to the United States and no unmanageable threat to regional U.S. security interests.”

On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American invasion *Foreign Policy* magazine called the Iraq war one of the most consequential strategic mistakes in U.S. history.

It's the same playbook as we saw in Vietnam and in the first Gulf War.

- Stage 1: Publicize a provoking incident, a pretext. In this case, they invented a relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda that did not exist. And a Weapons of Mass Destruction capacity that did not exist.
- Stage 2: Exaggerate the incident, the significance of the incident, and the threat the incident represents. They did. Even the British Secret Intelligence Service said that the intelligence was being fixed around the policy.
- Stage 3: Position the response as necessary, honorable, even noble. The invasion was initially positioned as the prevention of an attack on the United States; later, as the liberation of an oppressed people.
- Stage 4: Continue to lie to justify continued involvement. They did.

That’s the pattern. And patterns have two kinds of power: Explanatory power, to help us make sense of what came before. And predictive power, to be able to recognize in real time what is likely to come next. And with that ability to see what will come next, we can intervene and change the pattern by changing what will come next.

We saw precisely the same Playbook when Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine. He invented a pretext for the invasion.

But the United States knew the playbook and read the play. It sounded the alarm. Not only with our European allies, but publicly. Three weeks before the invasion *The New York Times* reported that Russia planned to stage a fake attack by Ukraine either on Russian soil or against ethnic Russians in Ukraine.

One week before the invasion, the United States Secretary of State told the United Nations Security Council that Russia, a permanent member of the Security Council, was planning to invade Ukraine. And to manufacture a pretext, an invented justification for invasion.

One week later Russia did just that.

- Russian leader Vladimir Putin claimed, without evidence, that Ukraine was committing genocide against ethnic Russians.



- Putin falsely claimed that Ukraine was not a country. That Ukraine had been created by the Soviet Union under its first leader, Lenin.
- Even though Ukraine had in the 1990s returned to Russia all the nuclear weapons that the Soviet Union had based there, Putin claimed that Ukraine had a knowledge of and desire to obtain nuclear weapons to attack Moscow.
- And he continues lying to this day.

Putin followed the disinformation playbook.

In this case, the United States took the lead. It called out the pattern. It rallied allies to expect what Putin would say next and what Russia would do next. As a result, we saw unprecedented international cooperation quickly. Including Germany reversing course and committing not only to military assistance but also to sanctions that caused itself potential hardships in the short term. But it worked. It isolated Russia in the world. The disinformation did not take root.

This is an important part of the pattern: Disinformation may not take root when confronted early with sufficient force and clarity and when those whom disinformation seeks to deceive can be alerted quickly.

The disinformation playbook, applied for wars by political leaders, can be used to spread disinformation in any situation, big or small. By leaders or communicators. In real life or on the Internet. Anywhere in the world.

One final example of the dangers of disinformation. One that has led to more fatalities than the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Ukraine combined. I am talking about COVID-19, in the United States.

COVID-19 came to public attention in the United States while President Donald Trump was under impeachment by the U.S. House of Representatives. While he was on trial by the Senate, his National Security Advisor warned him that COVID-19 would be the single largest national security threat of his presidency. Trump later said he didn't remember that briefing.

He spent the entire year focused solely on getting re-elected. And he saw COVID as a barrier to re-election. So he denied that it was real.

And he followed the disinformation playbook, but with his own twist. In Stage 1, instead of inventing a fake crisis, he falsely characterized an actual crisis as fake.



- Stage 1: He denied that COVID was real. It was a pretext for inaction.
- Stage 2: He continuously downplayed the significance of the threat. He discredited science, scientists, and U.S. public health experts. As a result, many of them needed to heighten their own personal security because of persistent death threats.
- Stage 3: Even as the death toll skyrocketed, he dismissed critics, rivals, state government officials, and the news media as exaggerating the threat. Fake news. Enemies of the people.
- Stage 4: He continued the disinformation. A few days before election day, with more than 300 thousand Americans dead of the disease, the White House announced that COVID was over, and that the president had prevailed over the pandemic.

Here's a summary: in early February 2020, two days after he was acquitted by the Senate, Trump confided to the American journalist Bob Woodward that COVID was real; that it was transmitted through the air; that it was caught by breathing; that it was deadlier than "even your most strenuous flus."

But Trump shared none of that with the American public. Instead, he said the disease was a hoax.

By mid- March, when there were already 260 American fatalities, Trump told the same journalist that COVID was deadly, contracted through breathing, five-times more deadly than the flu, and that even young people could get it. But he also told the journalist that he was intentionally playing down the risks.

Indeed, when the U.S. public health authority – the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – urged people to wear a mask to prevent transmission, he over-ruled them and told people that it was only a recommendation that they could ignore. He refused to wear a mask himself, and his followers did the same.

And he lied. He said that COVID was a hoax invented by the Democrats. That it would magically disappear by April. That it would not spread around the country. That it was safe for him to speak in front of large groups, without masks. And as he lied, people believed him. And people died.

Cornell University's Alliance for Science studied more than one million English-language news stories from January to June 2020 that contained COVID misinformation. The largest source of that misinformation, accountable for 37 percent,



was Donald Trump. If you add those who repeated what Trump said, he was responsible for fully half of all the disinformation.

The Cornell scientists explained the dangers:

“If people are misled by unscientific and unsubstantiated claims about the disease, they may attempt harmful cures or be less likely to observe official guidance and thus risk spreading the disease.”

And that proved to be the case. Even as vaccines became available in early December, Trump, who had lost the election, was focused 24/7 on staying in office by any means possible. On the day he left office, one year after the first confirmed COVID case in the U.S., more than 400 thousand Americans had died. Or one out of every 809 Americans. Public health experts estimated that about 300,000 of these deaths could have been prevented.

Misinformation kills.

The misinformation that led to these hundreds of thousands of deaths was abetted by professional communicators.

The World Health Organization warned in 2020 that misinformation, especially based on conspiracy theories, can circulate and be absorbed quickly, putting health and life at risk. And it warned that once people believe the misinformation, it is very hard to change their minds.

In 2021, disinformation and misinformation about the COVID vaccine, fueled by conspiracy theories, persuaded millions of Americans to refuse to be vaccinated against COVID. In a ten-month period after the vaccine became universally available at no cost in the United States, more than 250 thousand Americans who had refused to be vaccinated died. This led the head of the United States Food and Drug Administration one year ago to warn that misinformation had become the leading cause of death in the United States.

To date, more than 1.1 million Americans have died of COVID. Or one out of every 291 Americans. Public health experts say that at least 800 thousand of the deaths were preventable.





This is the tangible cost of disinformation and of misinformation. And in each of the examples we've seen, professional communicators abetted the deception, either intentionally as in the case of Fox and Hill & Knowlton, or indifferently because of self-interest. This included journalists, government spokespeople, government officials, marketers, and social media platforms operators.

Even one of my heroes, American journalist Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post*, abetted in the misinformation. He conducted more than a dozen recorded interviews with Donald Trump. From February to August 2020 Trump admitted to Woodward that he knew that COVID was real and showed that he had an accurate understanding of the disease, its risks, and how it was spread.

But Trump told the opposite to the American people - to devastating effect. Woodward knew that Trump was lying, and that people were dying. But he didn't reveal the truth or release the audio recordings until his book was published in August 2020. By then millions of Trump followers believed the misinformation. And about 180 thousand Americans had died.

As an ethics professor I have struggled with this question: Does a journalist like Woodward have a duty to warn? He clearly had a ground-rule that said he'd keep the audio recordings private until his book was published. He published the truth. But before publication he was silent about what he knew to be lies. Even as people died.

We ethics professors talk about how to navigate among conflicting duties. Which is the higher duty? To honor his deal with Trump? To warn that what the president was saying publicly was the opposite of what he said privately? Was there another path he could have taken? For example, could he have confronted Trump; make it clear that he knew the president was lying to the American people? I invite journalists and journalism schools and departments at universities to consider these conflicting duties.

But, as the World Health Organization warned, people believed the lies, and continue to believe them. So early warnings are important, to prevent disinformation from taking root. But once disinformation takes root, the same warning may be ineffective. Why?

Neuroscientists, psychologists, and sociologists have a number of ways to explain why people believe things that harm them, even when warned: motivated reasoning; biased assimilation; backfire effect.



But the best explanation I have found is by the late American astrophysicist Carl Sagan. Nearly 30 years ago Sagan described it this way:

“One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we’ve been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We’re no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It’s simply too painful to acknowledge, even to ourselves, that we’ve been taken.”

Sagan concludes: “Once you have given a charlatan power over you, you almost never get it back.”

So these are the patterns. The Playbook. The consequence. Once disinformation takes root it is very difficult to neutralize its negative effects. But as we saw in Ukraine, confronting disinformation early can keep it from taking root.

Per Plato, we have looked at big examples in the United States so we could see the pattern clearly. Now that you know what to look for, you can begin to recognize it in smaller situations everywhere in the world, especially before disinformation has taken root.

Disinformation and its consequences will only get worse if we don’t stop it or slow its spread. Digital technology and social media have increased the reach, the speed, and the power of disinformation and misinformation. It once took years or months to get society to embrace a false narrative. Now it takes days; hours; minutes. And disinformation is now global. Disinformation anywhere can affect people virtually everywhere.

Social media has never been very good at stopping disinformation. When Elon Musk took over Twitter last year, he abandoned Twitter’s tepid policy of blocking COVID disinformation. Last month Twitter backed out of a European Union policy on combating disinformation.

And generative artificial intelligence will create disinformation on steroids.

And this is where you come in - where we all come in.

The profession of professional communicators is at a turning point. The stakes have never been higher. We will define whether professional communicators remain respected or become a discredited profession. Whether our employers and clients will



remain respected or discredited. Whether we will remain true to the first two IABC values... or become misinformation mercenaries.

Disinformation detection will now be a core capability of professional communicators.

Per the Edelman Trust Barometer, societal leadership is now a core function of business:

- Business is the only institution seen as both competent and ethical.
- Business must lead in breaking the cycle of distrust.
- Business must fill the void left by government.

We who advise businesses; we who communicate for businesses; we who communicate about businesses... We have power. And with that power we have responsibility.

We have a responsibility...

To know that disinformation is real. To know that disinformation is dangerous. To know that disinformation destabilizes society and puts lives at risk.

We have a responsibility...

To recognize the patterns. To detect disinformation quickly. And to prevent it from taking root. To avoid being misinformation mercenaries who pass along the disinformation, either for personal gain or because of indifference.

We have a responsibility...

To help our own organizations resist when tempted to engage in disinformation or to spread misinformation.

We have a responsibility...

To raise the alarm. To call out disinformation in politics. To call out disinformation in business. To call out disinformation on social media. And to promote accurate information.

Here's my ask of you: Can you commit to becoming a disinformation detector? And an accurate information defender? Truth matters. And as an IABC member you are



expected to tell the truth. To communicate accurately. This means heightening our vigilance; verifying the accuracy of what we communicate.

But we can also use our communication skills to become agents of change. Take what you heard here and discuss it with your colleagues in your own companies. And with the communication organizations in your countries.

Brainstorm with your colleagues in your countries what detecting disinformation looks like to you; what standing up against disinformation looks like to you; what promoting accurate information looks like to you.

And here's my further call to action:

I call on all organizations of professional communication: IABC. PRSA. IPRA. IPR. Page Society. Society of Professional Journalists... to recommit to the core value of truth and accuracy. To make that renewed commitment known to their members. And to develop programs to equip their members to be effective disinformation detectors. And accurate information defenders.

I further call on institutions of higher education... Journalism schools and journalism departments at universities; university programs that teach public relations, corporate communication, strategic communication, marketing, internal communication... To recommit to strongly embed the power of truth and accuracy into their curricula. But further to equip their students to be effective disinformation detectors. And accurate information defenders. And to know how to navigate among conflicting duties, including the duty to warn.

And I further call on media companies: Television networks; newspapers; blog companies; podcast companies; social media platforms... to not be seduced by the immediate gain from creating disinformation and spreading misinformation. To create structures to detect disinformation effectively. To prevent those who spread disinformation or misinformation from using their platforms.

I invite you to join me in this call to action.

Communication has power.

Communicators have power.

You have this power.



And with power comes responsibility.

How will you exercise your power; your responsibility?

This may be the most important question you face in your career. Please choose wisely....

Thank you.



## Helio Fred Garcia

For more than 40 years Helio Fred Garcia has helped leaders build trust, inspire loyalty, and lead effectively. He is a coach, counselor, teacher, writer, and speaker whose clients include some of the largest and best-known companies and organizations in the world.



He is the author of five books on leadership, crisis, trust, and communication. He has worked in dozens of countries on six continents.

Fred is the President of the crisis management firm Logos Consulting Group and executive director of the Logos Institute for Crisis Management and Executive Leadership.

Fred has been on the New York University faculty since 1988. He is an adjunct professor of management in NYU's Stern School of Business, where he was named 2016 Executive MBA Great Professor. He teaches crisis management in both the Executive MBA program and the MS in Risk Management program. He is an adjunct associate professor of management and communication in NYU's School of Professional Studies, MS in Public Relations and Corporate Communication program, where he has twice received the Dean's award for teaching excellence, and also awards for outstanding service and for 30 years' service in teaching. In that program he teaches courses in communication strategy; in communication ethics, law, and regulation; and in crisis communication.

Fred is also an adjunct professor of industrial engineering and operations research at Columbia University's School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, where he teaches leadership communication, ethics, and crisis for MS and PhD engineering students. For 23 years he has been a contract lecturer on leadership communication at Wharton/UPenn.

He is in his eleventh year as a contract lecturer at U.S. Defense Information School. He is a frequent guest lecturer at the U.S. Air Force Air War College, the U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College, U.S. Marine Corps General Officer Warfighting Course, U.S. Army Forces Command, commands of the U.S. Army and Air Force, and at other universities.



Fred is a highly sought keynote and motivational speaker. He has keynoted major conferences and events in North America, South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Fred speaks about leadership communication, crisis management, business ethics, journalist/source relationships, and ways to maintain trust in difficult situations.

Fred is a member of the Forbes Coaches Council. He received a Certificate in Leader Development - National Security and Strategy from the U.S. Army War College. He has received the Public Relations Society of America - New York's awards for mentoring and for lifetime achievement.

## **Logos Institute for Crisis Management and Executive Leadership**



Logos Consulting Group's mission is to build a better world by equipping people to become leaders who ignite change in the world for the good. We do this by helping our clients inspire those who matter to them to make a difference in their own industries and communities, and the world at large. We advise and coach our clients in three areas: crisis management, crisis communication, and leadership communication executive education and coaching.

The Logos Institute for Crisis Management and Executive Leadership is our research, publication, and executive education and coaching arm. The Logos Institute stands at the intersection of scholarship and practice, providing both rigorous analysis and practical application of key leadership principles. We illuminate best practices, current trends, emerging issues, and leadership skills.

