Disrupting Deception: 5 Ways to Elevate Evidence and Trustworthy Voices

Julie Sweetland

Trust in science and support for public health have always ebbed and flowed, but the current high tide of misinformation and manufactured controversy threaten to undermine it even further. When ideas rooted in political ideologies are presented as grounded in science—and promoted from the highest levels of government—people's trust in institutions erodes, and they struggle to make sense of health policies and recommendations. Problematic policies make it harder to protect the public's health and less likely that people will seek and receive the care they need.

It's vital that voices for public health and medical science retool for these realities—as well as the ways in which information moves today. In today's fragmented, partisan, and personalized media environment, we can't safeguard information integrity using strategies built for a bygone era when there were more consistent opportunities for shared meaning-making. Unless we collectively learn the "new basics" of dealing with deceptive discourse, we don't stand a chance of turning the tide, and there's a risk of making matters worse. Classic rhetorical moves—like challenging popular misconceptions head-on—can amplify misinformation, entrench existing beliefs, deepen political polarization, and reinforce harmful "us vs. them" thinking.

A more powerful and productive approach is available: to move from a defensive posture to a proactive one. Strong, evidence-based framing can spark more productive dialogue on health and science issues. When we adopt the conscientious practice of listening well and engaging more strategically in the public square, we open the door for explanations, evidence, and construction of shared understandings.

We relieve ourselves of the burden of litigating the past or fact-checking every bad faith claim. That frees us to execute a proactive strategy of affirmative explanation. Instead of losing our voice by trying to outshout deceptive ideas, we can gain ground by outframing it.

This guide offers five practical steps we can take to disrupt deceptive discourse, elevate evidence-based ideas, and reinforce public trust in trustworthy voices.

1. We can diagnose before responding.

To start, we can update our approach to "diagnosing" and "treating" different types of dangerous and deceptive discourse. When we distinguish between common types of harmful language, we can choose a well-matched, well-timed response.

Mis- and disinformation: Disinformation and misinformation both refer to repeated falsehoods. Disinformation carries with it the intention to mislead. Misinformation refers to incorrect i nformation that is spread without intent to deceive or mislead.

> *For example:* Pain medications cause autism. Pregnant women should avoid these medications at all costs.

Manufactured controversy: A manufactured controversy is a contrived debate designed to create c onfusion or uncertainty in cases where there is already solid scientific consensus.

> *For example:* We need to dedicate more resources to determining whether pain medications cause autism.

Moral panic: Moral panics are disproportionate, hostile social reactions to perceived threats, fueled by the fear of becoming a victim of those threats. The threat is usually a scapegoated "outsider," but it can be a larger social condition, such as "the modern world."

> *For example:* Medical researchers are hiding the data that pain meds cause brain damage in innocent babies!

Put another way: *Misinformation* spreads false facts; *manufactured controversy* creates doubt about facts; and moral panic centers on fear of people or social conditions.

It's worth distinguishing between these types of deceptive discourse because the strategies for responding to them vary. Addressing a technical misunderstanding of science is one thing; de-escalating a moral panic that targets human beings is another.

Strategically Correcting Misinformation

To counter mis- or disinformation, it's vital to provide a correction that offers people a logic to follow, not just a different fact to remember. A simple negation ("The lie isn't true") may be too weak an intervention and comes with some risk of reinforcing the falsehood. Instead of just saying "X isn't true," provide a causal explanation of how things actually work. Fill in the gaps in people's mental models of the issue so the misinformation no longer fits, as in the following example:

For example: "Autism is a natural variation in brain development that begins in the earliest stages of pregnancy. By looking at family histories, studying twins, and sequencing genomes, researchers have concluded that autism is mostly genetic. Researchers are still studying the other factors that shape how genetic dispositions play out. While some have worried aloud that pain relievers might 'cause' autism, these medications work on entirely different pathways in the body and do not impact the fundamental 'wiring' of the brain."

Defusing a Manufactured Controversy

To defuse a manufactured controversy, it's usually best to starve it of attention. Manufactured controversies are designed to trap you in a "they said, we said" debate over a nonissue. A direct response to a bad faith debate can lend the topic credibility that it doesn't deserve and makes it easy for casual observers to conclude that "there are two sides to every issue." The smart move in this scenario is often to pivot toward a topic that genuinely deserves resources and attention.

For example: "Children with autism are loved and valued members of our families and communities. When it comes to setting research priorities, our focus should be on what actually helps autistic children thrive. Like all of us, children with autism should have access to the resources needed for their best possible health and wellbeing. Families who are navigating systems that weren't designed for autistic people need support. We have plenty to learn about how to design our schools, health care settings, and communities so that children with autism can participate, learn, and thrive. Let's study that."

Disrupting a Moral Panic

In a full-blown moral panic, a general social anxiety is transformed into a specific fear of a "demonized other." To disrupt the escalation of actions against the scapegoat, it's vital to shift the focus from the "threat" back to the humanity of the people involved. The goal is to replace fear with empathy.

For example: "Falsely accusing medical researchers of hiding or ignoring evidence on the causes of autism has a corrosive effect. First, it treats autism like a 'tragedy,' which hurts the very people we claim to care about. People with autism are our neighbors, our students, and our friends and family members—not problems to be solved. Scapegoating scientists creates a climate of fear that stalls needed research. The way forward is to listen to the perspectives and priorities of people with autism and to support the people who have the skills to find the answers the community is looking for."

2. We can respond strategically and selectively.

When a falsehood emerges in public language, we have three basic response options: counter it directly, counter it indirectly, or choose not to engage publicly. The most strategic choice always depends on context and should be intentional, though it may not always be intuitive or obvious.

For instance, when your evidence-based approach is unfairly attacked as being harmful, unsound, or unjust, it's natural to want to deny the accusation directly, countering the exact points being made. A defensive public posture, however, can be a trap. A "that's not true!" reaction lends credence to those contriving a "debate" out of thin air. It can also end up reinforcing a false accusation. Because the human mind tends to conclude that often-repeated information is true, restating false information increases its presence in public understanding.

In most cases, it is more effective to respond affirmatively and advance a true narrative than to engage directly with a false one. That means we need to master the art of the indirect challenge: offering a clear, compelling alternative perspective that directs attention to a productive topic.

Look at the example below. The text on the left gives its air time to the manufactured controversy about vaccine safety. Since research into mindsets on childhood immunizations shows that Americans already focus on safety and risks when making personal vaccine decisions, addressing those concerns directly seems logical. Yet it turns out that talking about safety only heightens people's attention to risk because it activates risk-oriented mindsets.

An alternative is to reframe in a way that shifts the terrain: focusing on policy barriers, not psychological ones, and channeling public attention to a shared responsibility to ensure access, rather than blaming the misinformed for their choices. FrameWorks Institute research shows that this approach builds understanding of the structural barriers to vaccination, which in turn boosts support for science-based vaccine policy.

Engaging in the contrived debate	Advancing a new narrative
Across the nation, health care providers are getting more and more questions from families about whether vaccine ingredients, vaccine combinations, and the cumulative set of recommended vaccines are safe for their children. Doctors, nurses, and researchers agree: The answer is yes, in general vaccinations are not only safe, they are highly effective. (Some children have severe allergies or immune system conditions that make them the rare exception to the rule.)	Across the nation, health care providers are hearing more and more stories from families about practical difficulties in keeping up or catching up on routine vaccinations. Sometimes the issue is a lack of insurance coverage. Sometimes medical records aren't available. It doesn't have to be this way; there are steps we can take to ensure that childhood vaccinations are widely available, easily accessible, and always affordable.

3. We can challenge false ideas, not the people influenced by them.

When it comes to engaging on issues that have been politicized or painted as controversial, it's important that both messengers and messages follow one guideline: Don't further or fuel polarization.

At a minimum, this means staying away from ridiculing, blaming, or shaming people who believe demonstrably false claims. Sarcasm is tempting when pointing out misinformation. But to the person who believes it, snark feels like an insult. The result: We hit a psychological trip wire called identity-protective cognition. When people feel attacked, their brains treat your information like a physical threat. They stop processing facts and start building a wall to protect their sense of self.

Because of this "identity-protective" response, our goal isn't just to be right but to be relatable and reasonable. Put-downs only put up barriers to the very facts we want people to accept. As science communicators, we need to stop making fun of people and start making sense to them.

It's also important that we recognize that countering a misconception with "because science says so" comeback sounds elitist to most. This only plays into the hands of opponents who paint scientists as elitist, public health as paternalistic, and medical experts as dismissive.

This doesn't mean science communicators should stop sharing facts or shy away from scientific views. We can and should take clear positions on issues—especially when human rights, human dignity, and human lives are at stake. The point is to remember to advance scientific ideas with empathy and generosity. We can show that we see this as a public conversation for everyone—not just for those who already agree with us.

Framed with "scientists are smarter than them"	Reframed with "here's how scientists think about this"
Anyone who follows Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s delusional "cure" for measles clearly failed basic high school science. Clinging to the fantasy that vitamin A is the way to go, despite mountains of scientific proof that vaccines are more effective, is not only surrendering to internet fads and dubious claims, it's sacrificing children's lives.	Because measles is an incredibly contagious virus, widespread immunization is the most reliable safeguard against its spread through day cares, schools, and communities. Home remedies popularized on the internet don't keep kids from getting this serious disease—and they can be dangerous.

4. We can position science as discovery rather than authority.

Many manufactured controversies succeed by tapping into how people think about science and its institutions. FrameWorks' research shows that Americans hold conflicting mental images of science at the same time:

- **Science is discovery.** On one hand, people view science as a practical, fascinating way to solve problems and understand the world. These ways of understanding science promote trust.
- **Science is biased.** At other times, the very same people reason in ways that give rise to suspicion, focusing on the possibility that researchers can hold hidden biases or scientific institutions allow inquiries to be driven by a pursuit of profit, not knowledge.

When the "science is biased" mindset is active, people don't necessarily reject science—they try to rescue it from perceived bias. This leads to the "do your own research" stance, which is often a defensive move in what they perceive as a "fair fight" against industry influence, embedded biases, or other hidden agendas.

This distrust isn't random; it is often earned. Less productive mindsets are often rooted in the following:

- Lived experiences of harm at the hands of the health system
- Legitimate cynicism about an approach to health care that puts profit over people
- Frustration over paternalistic or top-down approaches to public health.

Past missteps—ranging from medical racism to the role of pharmaceutical companies in the opioid crisis to perceived inconsistencies during the pandemic—shape how people think about public health and health care broadly. Distrust doesn't stay contained within these specific concerns; it spills over to the entire sector.

Once we grasp the tug-of-war between "science is discovery" and "science is biased" mindsets, we can also take hold of new ways of viewing resistance, pushback, or skepticism. We're better poised to distinguish between the moments where it's essential to acknowledge and redress the harms that caused distrust and those where bad actors are stoking or weaponizing distrust. We can approach the issue of institutional skepticism with a more nuanced perspective, understanding that people can distrust "the system" but still value science as a tool.

From here, different framing strategies come into view. Avoid language that pushes people to decide if they trust scientists. Instead, frame around how science solves specific problems.

5. We can show the process, not just the conclusion.

The mindsets on science lead us to another strategic insight: It's important to show up as collaborative partners who offer expertise, rather than as scientific authorities who expect to be believed.

To do this, one powerful tool at our disposal is an explanatory approach. Instead of simply asserting facts, help people see how an issue operates. Show, don't tell. For example, rather than stating a study's conclusion, explain the process that led to it. Or use straightforward language to explain the *mechanisms* of a problem, building health literacy and support.

The difference between an assertion and an explanation is subtle but significant. The difference boils down to relying on authority versus relying on transparency. To see the difference, look at this example of two ways of making the same point:

Framed with assertion of facts	Reframed with explanation
Researchers agree that gun ownership doesn't make people safer or more secure. Rather, it makes people more vulnerable to firearm-involved injuries, child deaths, homicides, and suicides in the home.	When there are unlocked firearms in a home, it's easier for unintentional child shootings to happen or for someone to reach for a gun in a volatile moment.

The first approach states the conclusion directly: Gun ownership increases vulnerability. This framing invites a "reject or accept" response by asserting *what* is true without offering an accessible *why*. In contrast, the second approach focuses on the mechanism that leads to an undesirable consequence, explaining *how* guns in the home increase risk, such as being accessible to children or close at hand during volatile moments. This reframe makes a strong point without directly confronting people's identities or assumptions. Instead, it offers a cause-and-effect sequence that people can follow for themselves.

Leading with explanation signals that we want and expect people to think for themselves, which is itself a powerful antidote to misinformation and manipulation. What's more, an explanatory approach reminds the public that scientific findings and approaches offer important insights into our world. The effect is that scientific voices are positioned as reasonable partners in an important, inclusive dialogue. Within this framing, people don't need to exist in a state of hypervigilance, engaging in personal research out of fear or self-protection rather than from curiosity or interest.

An explanatory approach also works with—rather than against—the way trust operates in health. Trust is contingent on the extent to which people feel in relationship with you. Explaining things well is one way to build a respectful relationship with audiences, signaling that you value everyone's curiosity, invite questions and alternative points of view, and trust in the audience's capacity to understand. Positioning science as a tool for understanding how the world works—and establishing health institutions as partners with people and communities—also helps to shield against bad faith accusations of being paternalistic or inflexible.

Communications Checklist for Building Trust in an Era of Skepticism

Don't do this	Do this
Rely on naked appeals to scientific authority, like "follow the science" or "experts agree."	Show how science works. Use concrete example of sicence solving problems, who helped, and why.
Rely on vague appeals to the importance of public health, like "public health is invisible" or "public health is everything."	Show the ways public health impacts people's everyday lives and how policies affect the health of many people at once.
Use dense vocabulary, technical language, or field-specific jargon.	Offer explanations and examples that invite people into how health and science work.
Assume the public shares your starting point and all they should need is "the data."	Back up a bit, orient people to how something works, and put data in context.
Presume that your credentials give you all the credence you need, so you are entitled to people's trust.	Show your work. Explain how you know what you know and how it serves the public.
Ignore emerging science, evolving understandings, or genuine debates in the field.	Acknowledge uncertainty and invite questions with respect. Respond with openness and ask questions. (What makes you uncertain?)

Conclusion

Ultimately, effectively countering misinformation and manufactured controversy requires more than just debunking individual falsehoods. It demands reframing issues to strengthen public understanding of how information systems work, foster critical thinking skills, and build collective resilience against deliberate attempts to exploit cognitive vulnerabilities and sow distrust. We can shift the narrative away from reactive defense and toward a proactive stance that protects the integrity of our public discourse and the foundations of public health and wellbeing.

More on This Topic

To dive deeper into how to counter misinformation, manufactured controversy, and moral panic, check out these resources:

- **Combating Misinformation: How to Talk about Science.** This report identifies the specific "cultural mindsets" Americans use to make sense of scientific information. It offers three core recommendations for moving past skepticism and building public trust.
- **Countering Chaos and Manufactured Controversy in Health.** This webinar, hosted by the Society for Health Communication, outlines a conceptual framework for understanding the stages of moral panics and illustrating strategies and tactics for interrupting them.
- **The Contrarian covers how to counter disinformation.** In this video interview, Jen Rubin talks with FrameWorks about the effect of disinformation on the scientific community and institutions like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The conversation offers practical insights on how to protect the integrity of scientific communication in a polarized environment.
- **The Public Health Communicators Guide to Misinformation.** This guide, developed by the Public Health Communications Collaborative in partnership with the Infodemiology Training Program, provides foundational insights into the misinformation landscape and tools for assessing risk and determining responses.
- **Talking About Young People in a Time of Manufactured Controversy.** A practical guide for advocates and scientists, this resource explains how to pivot away from "bad faith" debates. It shows how to keep the focus on shared values and healthy development.
- **Dr. Julie Sweetland: The Stories That Just Aren't True**. This article explains how a moral panic unfolds and illustrates tactics for neutralizing fear-based narratives, with examples from attacks on K–12 education.

Acknowledgment

This resource was supported in part by the Coalition for Trust in Health & Science. The views are those of the author.

About the FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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Sweetland, J. (2026). *Disrupting deception: 5 ways to elevate evidence and trustworthy voices.* FrameWorks Institute.

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