

# The Role of PR In Stopping The Spread of Misinformation

*Danielle Ruckert, Account Director at [Raffetto Herman Strategic Communications](#)*

Fake news is all around us, from disinformation related to election security to misinformation about effects of the COVID-19 vaccine. As PR professionals, every one of us in this industry has a responsibility to adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and communicating with the public – hell, it's clearly in the PRSA Code of Ethics.

I have to believe that the anger and malice we saw January 6 at Capitol Hill, when rioters and domestic terrorists invaded the U.S. Capitol, was a direct result of the misinformation that continues to poison our nation. Kudos to Twitter and Facebook for taking a stand against the sitting U.S. president and blocking his posts that violated civic integrity. By showing leadership here, perhaps we can break through to others with similar opinions and prove they should reconsider. Social media platforms have a responsibility to maintain ethics and integrity, and PR people have the same responsibility when managing organizations' profiles and recommending tactics.

Time and time again, we see the public challenged with the quick spread of fake news. By slowing down campaign videos, a tactic known as "deep fakes," people have made president-elect Joe Biden appear as though he's stumbling over his words and hesitating when faced with challenging questions. This narrative even earned him the nickname "Slow Joe." What's important here, is that the video was altered by splicing segments of Biden speaking – a move that is clear when viewers take the due diligence to compare the video to the original.

The role of a PR person here? Don't share deep fakes. Check your sources. Don't just jump on the latest news cycle without being sure you understand all of the nuances.

Take for example Theranos. Many of us have heard the story about Elizabeth Holmes' fraudulent path to success. The Stanford-dropout started a diagnostics company and claimed it could screen for hundreds of diseases with a finger-prick blood test. Interviews with former colleagues shed light on situations that just didn't seem right and a lack of proof for the company's claims. Yet many invested in what they believed was a fast-track to rapid financial success through the evolution and growth of the company. Theranos changed the game in health-tech reporting, and made more reporters wary of covering startups without evidence or efficacy to back their product.

For [PR](#) people, this was yet another reminder that while our job is to help frame a story in a positive light, spreading false hope of a product that doesn't yet exist, claiming life-saving solutions that haven't been proven to work, and flat out lying to the public are surefire ways to discredit yourself, your company and possibly end up in jail.

## So, as PR professionals, what is our role?

1. **Fact check, then fact check again.** As a tendency, people across PR tend to move quick – it's a fast-paced industry and we often support timely, high-stakes campaigns. Don't sacrifice deep understanding of a story to try to get a client into a news cycle.
2. **Ask the hard questions.** When clients push you to earn positive coverage of a product or a vision that you aren't sure will live up to its promise, ask for a demo, look for evidence, and find third party validators to back up the story.

3. **Trust your gut.** If a news cycle is breaking but something about it seems off, trust your gut and take the time to dive deep into the story. Don't pitch media offering an expert's perspective on a breaking story if you may be perpetuating fake news or adding fuel to a fire that you're not willing to die on.
4. **Words matter.** The words we choose as communicators make a key difference in the tone, sentiment and perspective of the ultimate story that is told. Be accurate.

While our roles do include spin, it's important we adhere to the ethical and moral standards across our industry. What PR professionals do to influence the public and shape narratives can have a lasting effect, and we all need to do our part to ensure that effect is true and positive.

---



**About the Author:** Danielle Ruckert leads public relations campaigns for innovative healthcare and cybersecurity organizations at Raffetto Herman Strategic Communications' Washington, DC office.