



# Educating the Public in the Age of Disinformation

Peter Sarosi

Rights Reporter Foundation

# DRUG POLICIES WERE ALWAYS DRIVEN BY MORAL PANICS RATHER THAN EVIDENCE



1870s

Anti-Opium Laws in San Francisco & Canada: Targeted Chinese immigrants



1930s

Cannabis is prohibited in the US: anti-Mexican and anti-Black



1960s

Nixon declares the war on drugs: "acid casualties"



1980s

Draconian crack-cocaine laws: "crack baby" scare



1990s

Meth epidemic: Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act (2005)



2010s

Bath salts panic: banning new psychoactive substances

Panic → Policy → Stigma

# Zombie ideas: Why failed policy ideas persist?



- ▶ Peters and Nagel (2020) call “ideas that will not die, no matter how often they are disproved” zombie ideas
- ▶ Drug policies are rarely driven by evidence (only) - ideas without evidence base often drive drug policies

# Zombie ideas in drug policies

- ▶ Cannabis is the gateway to “hard” drugs
- ▶ Drug-free society
- ▶ Illicit drugs are more dangerous
- ▶ Legalisation/decriminalisation is a public health/security disaster
- ▶ Harm reduction condones drug use

Alex Stevens, 2024.



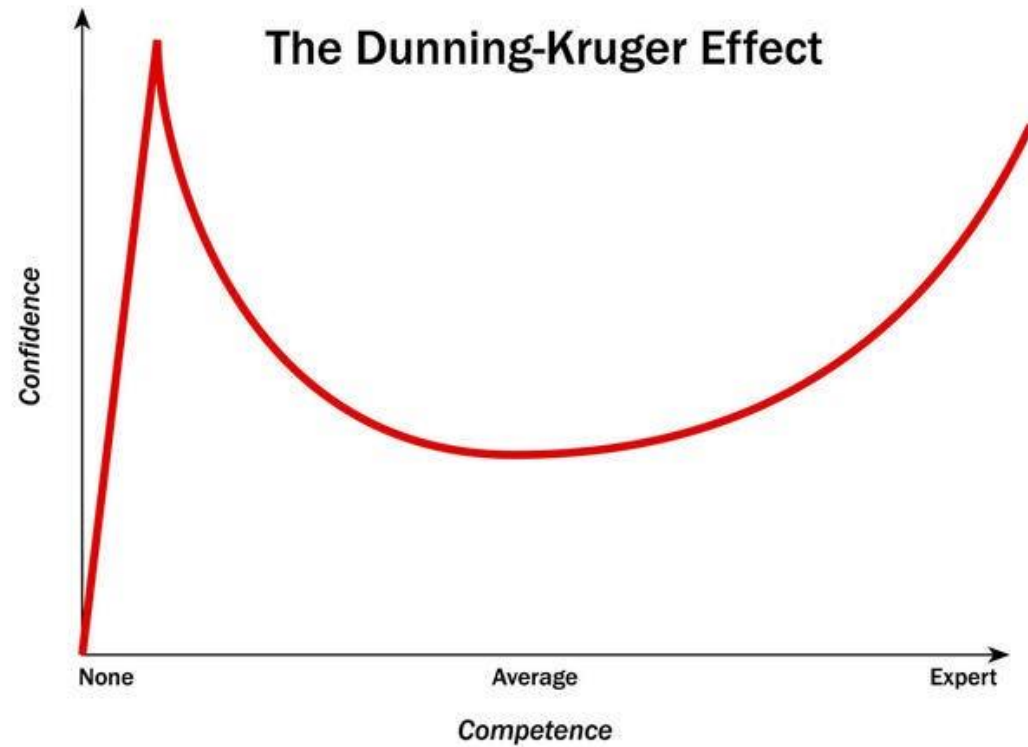


# It is difficult to debunk misconceptions

- ▶ 2013, Alberto Brandolini:  
"The amount of energy  
needed to refute bullshit is an  
order of magnitude larger  
than to produce it."

**Bullshit  
Asymmetry  
Principle**

Dunning-kruger effect: superficially educated people have the most confidence

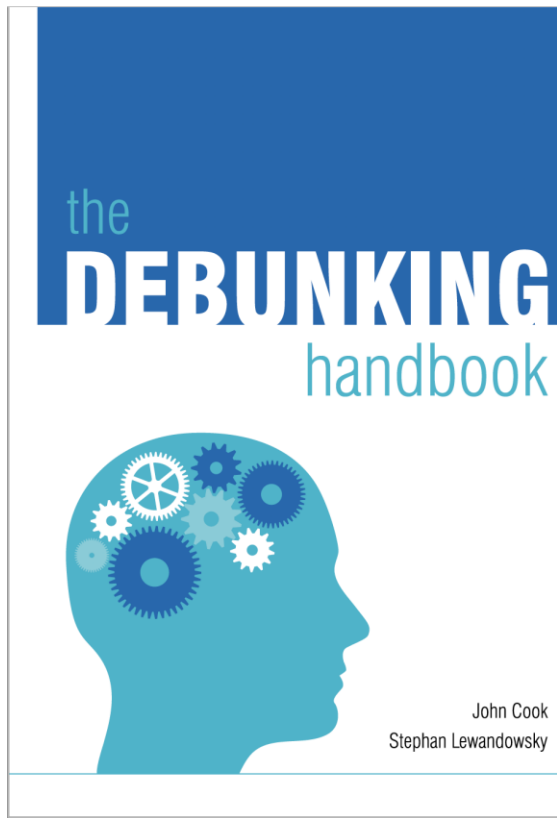


# How to respond - common pitfalls

- ▶ **Reacting impulsively** - aggressive communication can be counterintuitive
- ▶ **Overloading with data** - numbers alone don't change minds
- ▶ **Unintentionally reinforcing stigma** - using dehumanizing imagaries and metaphores of the opponent
- ▶ **Focusing only on rebuttal** - can set the agenda for the opponent - instead, pro-actively set your own narrative



# Debunking handbook



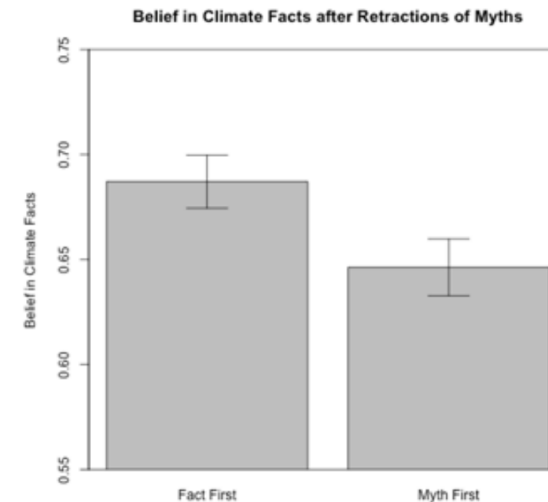
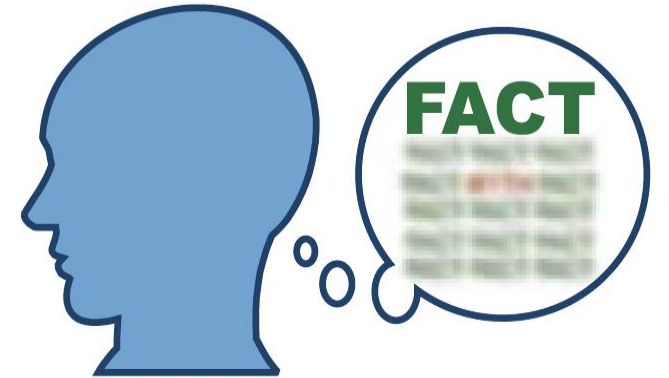
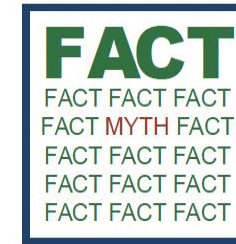
It's not just  
*what* people  
think that  
matters, but  
*how* they  
think.

- Debunking is a problematic concept: if we do it carelessly, debunking effort can reinforce the very myths we seek to correct



# Familiarity backfire effect

- ▶ A backfire effect is where a correction inadvertently increases belief in, or reliance on, misinformation relative to a pre-correction or no-correction baseline
- ▶ "If you repeat a lie often enough it becomes truth." - attributed to Joseph Goebbels



Preliminary data; Cook et al. (2014)

# Fact first approach

- The best approach is to focus on the fact you would like to communicate

## FACT

Lead with the fact if it's clear, pithy, and sticky—make it simple, concrete, and plausible. It must “fit” with the story.

## WARN ABOUT THE MYTH

Warn beforehand that a myth is coming... mention it once only.

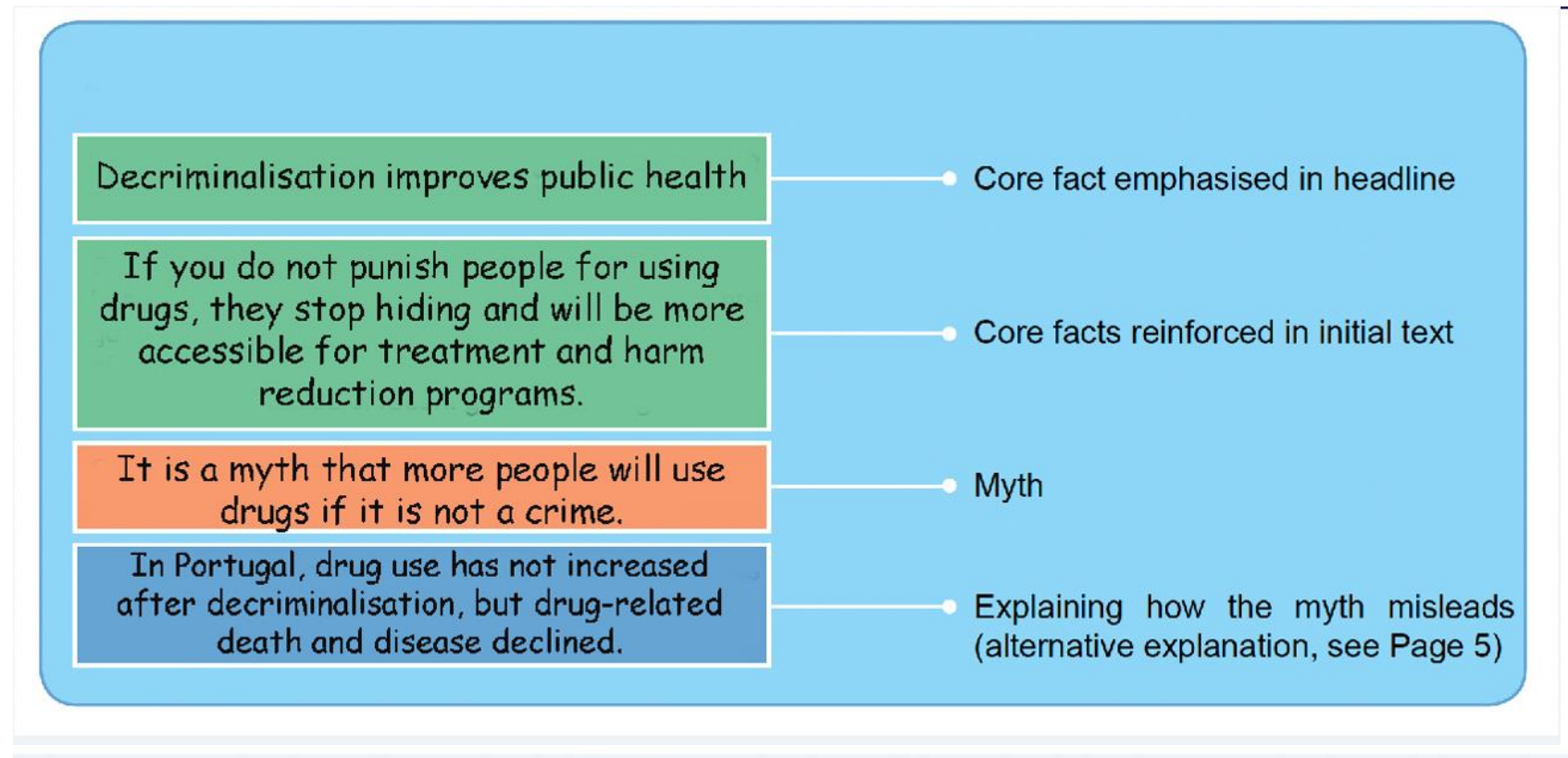
## EXPLAIN FALLACY

Explain how the myth misleads.

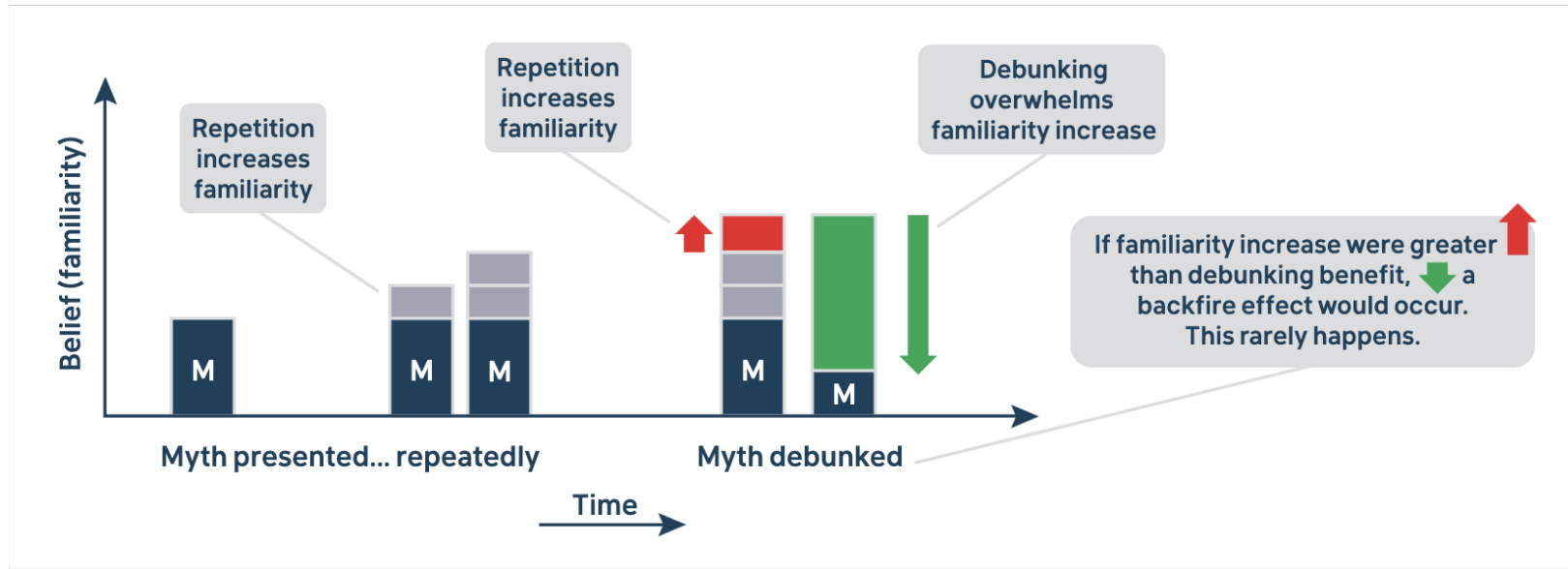
## FACT

Finish by reinforcing the fact—multiple times if possible. Make sure it provides an alternative causal explanation.

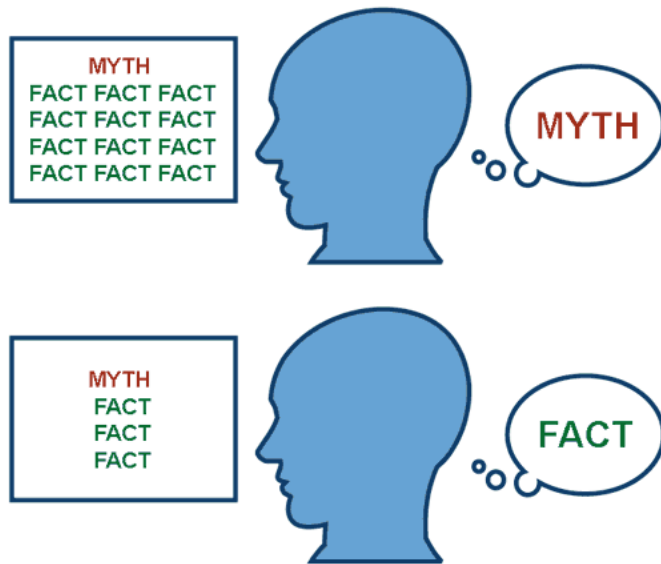
# Example: myth first approach vs fact first approach



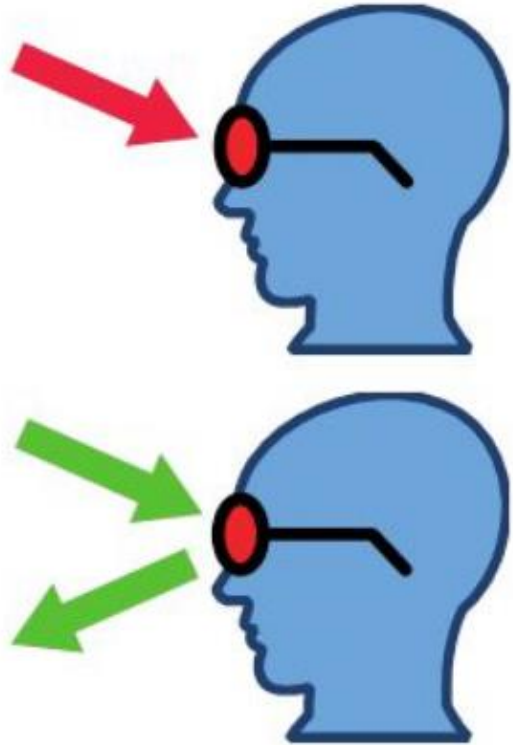
# Repeating the facts can overcome the effect



# Overkill backfire effect



- ▶ “too many” counterarguments against a false claim might produce unintended effects or even backfire



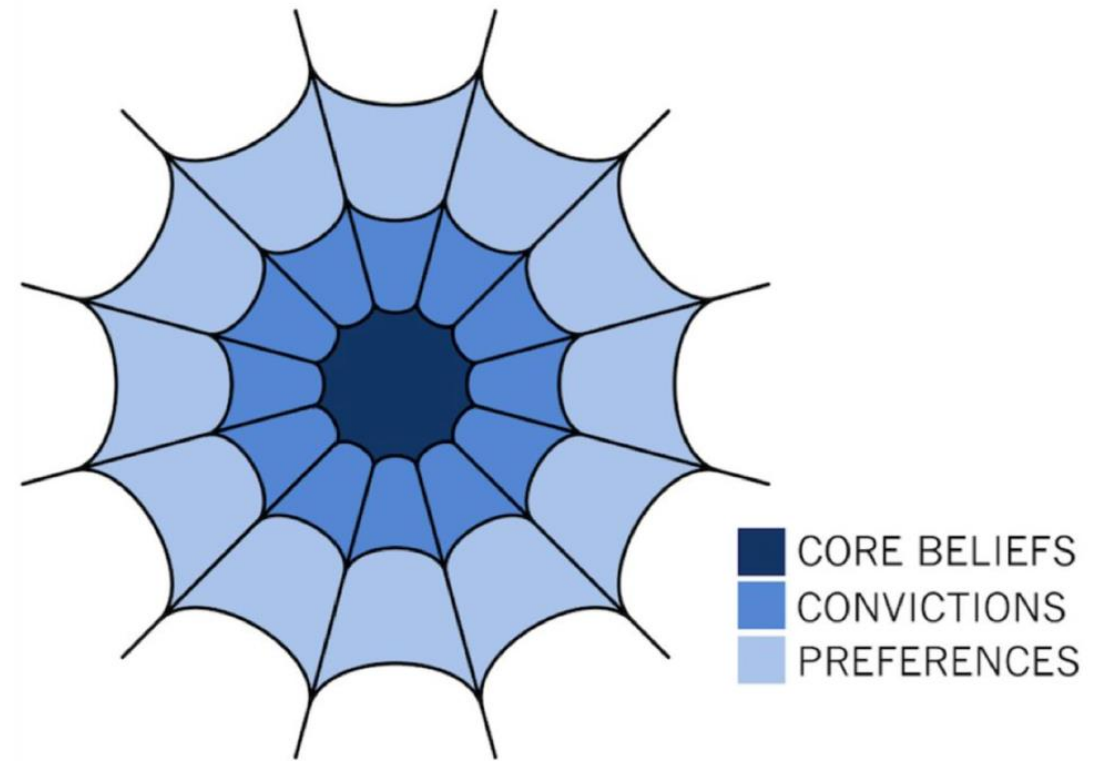
# Worldview backfire effect

We accept facts that reinforce our beliefs/identity about the world

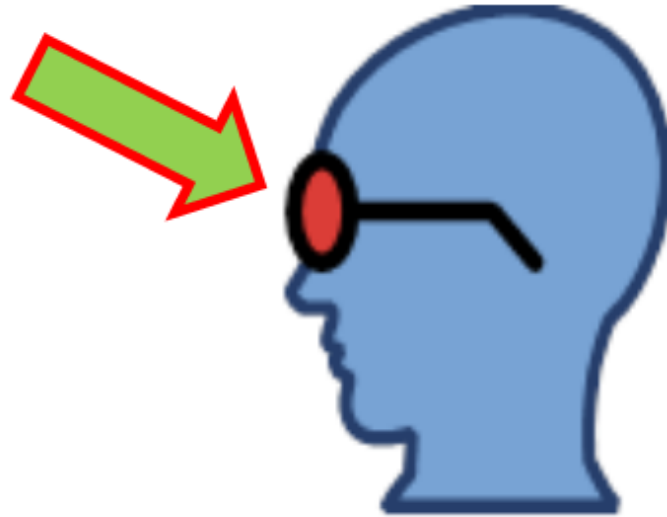


# Web of belief: do we address the core beliefs?

- ▶ Willard Van Orman Quine coined the term: a metaphor for our belief systems, which include core beliefs (at the web's center), intermediary beliefs, and peripheral beliefs.
- ▶ Often there are genuine concerns and fears behind the moral panic hysteria - people feel that some values are threatened



# FRAMING



- Try to make your argument in a way that is less threatening to the identity/values of people

# AFFIRM SHARED VALUES - EXAMPLES IN DRUG CONTEXT

**Value:** *We all want our loved ones to come home safe at night.*

**Value:** *Every life has dignity and worth.*

**Value:** *Strong communities look after each other.*

**Value:** *Young people deserve honest information to make safe choices.*

**Value:** *Everyone should have access to healthcare without fear.*

*“That’s why we support supervised consumption facilities — they keep people alive and connected to help.”*

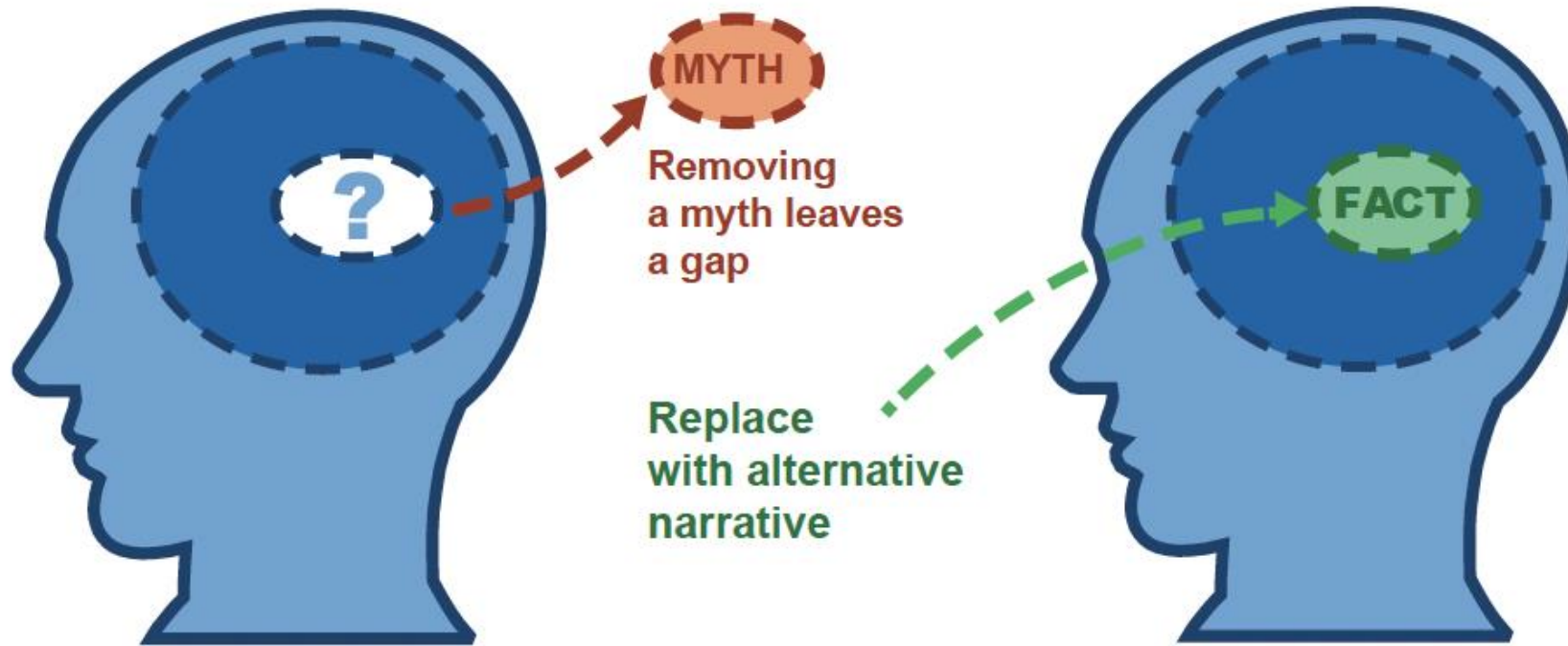
*“People who use drugs deserve the same chance at health and safety as anyone else.”*

*“Providing naloxone isn’t just good policy — it’s neighbours protecting neighbours.”*

*“When we give them scare stories instead of facts, we put them in greater danger.”*

*“Criminalisation pushes people away from services — harm reduction brings them in.”*

Not enough to debunk - you should provide alternative explanation!



# 3 Conclusions of a 2017 meta-analysis

Meta-Analysis > Psychol Sci. 2017 Nov;28(11):1531-1546. doi: 10.1177/0956797617714579.  
Epub 2017 Sep 12.

## Debunking: A Meta-Analysis of the Psychological Efficacy of Messages Countering Misinformation

Man-Pui Sally Chan <sup>1</sup>, Christopher R Jones <sup>2</sup>, Kathleen Hall Jamieson <sup>2</sup>, Dolores Albarracín <sup>1</sup>

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 28895452 PMCID: [PMC5673564](#) DOI: [10.1177/0956797617714579](#)

### Reduce

the generation of arguments in line with the misinformation

### Create

conditions that facilitate scrutiny and counterarguing of misinformation

### Correct

misinformation with new detailed information but keep expectations low

# Report from Liberties (2021)

- ▶ Attacks against NGOs and how to respond
- ▶ Shrinking space for civil society requires us to be more resilient
- ▶ <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/civic-space-guide/43904>





# MYTH BUSTING VS. TRUTH SANDWICH

- ▶ Don't repeat unhelpful frames
- ▶ Say what you stand for using a values statement
- ▶ Point out that the problem is that your opponent is lying for some malign reason (e.g. to divide or distract the public). Allude to but don't repeat the lie
- ▶ Return to what you stand for, expressing it as the solution or way forward

## Don't say

Hypothetical attack: Activists are spreading an ideology that harms our children. We must stop this propaganda.

Myth-bust response: We are not spreading harmful propaganda. Recognising LGBTQI persons is not an ideology. It is a human right recognised in international law and our constitution that every person should be treated equally, no matter their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Hypothetical attack: CSOs are corrupt. They take money donated by ordinary people and give themselves huge salaries and fancy dinners that most people can only dream of.


Myth-bust response: Our organisation is fully accountable and our finances are transparent. We are audited every year by independent accountants to check that all our funds are spent legally. Most of our funding comes from foreign governments and foundations. They also check carefully that we spend all their funds in line with their safeguards.

## Try instead

No matter who we vote for, most of us agree that our leaders should govern for all of us. But some politicians are so desperate to hold onto power that they try to divide us based on who we love. They hope we'll be too busy blaming each other to realise the problems they've caused while they've been in power. But we know, no matter who we love, most of us want the same things, like being able to support our families and pay the rent. When we unite across our differences, we can demand a government that works for all of us.

We're working to keep voters informed about how our representatives are using the resources we have contributed. Some politicians are giving lucrative contracts to their corporate friends to line their pockets without delivering the services we need. When we inform citizens how our resources are being misused, ministers point the finger at us. Join us to make sure this government funds the services our communities depend on.

# If you speak in public...

- 
- ▶ Metaphors: “Harm reduction is a safety belt that saves the lives of people even if they take risks.”
  - ▶ Stories/anecdotes: “This reminds me a story of our client who came to us...”
  - ▶ Expression of moral conviction: “We must protect the lives of the most marginalised people in our society.”
  - ▶ Contrasts: “Criminalisation disconnects people from society, harm reduction reconnects them.”
  - ▶ Reflection of the group’s sentiment: “I know what is going through your minds.”
  - ▶ Rhetorical questions: “Is it really more important to imprison people than to stay alive?”
  - ▶ Adapted from: WHO, How to respond to vocal vaccine deniers in public, 2017.

# IF you have to speak in the media...



# Harm reduction in communication

- ▶ Compassion - you need to empathise with your audience even if you disagree with what they think
- ▶ Pragmatism - you have to carefully choose what message you use for what audiences



[sarosip@rightsreporter.net](mailto:sarosip@rightsreporter.net)

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