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Maintaining Factual Information in Public Discourse Amidst a National Crisis

National Security During a Global Pandemic

Accurate public information remains critical to agency missions.

Factual information is critical in guiding the public through the federal government's response to a crisis, to explain what resources are available to the public and how the federal government is protecting its citizens. Public safety efforts shouldn't be complicated by false information. Our adversaries aim to sow doubt in the strength of American democratic institutions and can do so by leveraging a public health crisis to skew Americans' perceptions of their government's ability to successfully uphold its mission. Agencies have a responsibility to provide the public with facts. While uncertainty remains about how and when a crisis will be resolved, federal agencies must stay vigilant to maintain factual information in public discourse. Doing so will be a key component in ensuring agencies are able to effectively execute their missions.

Impacts to Perceptions of Public Services

National emergencies serve as a key opportunity for threat actors to influence public discourse, harming Americans through the spread of disinformation.

As a part of the disaster response life cycle, federal agencies are inherently charged to provide clear, consistent, and timely communication that cuts through prominent falsehoods and guides U.S. citizens through a crisis. Agencies remain key nationwide influencers in the crisis conversation, reaching millions of customers across various social media platforms.

While real-time information remains readily available to most Americans, threat actors exploit the low barriers to entry by flooding disinformation into public discourse. According to Johns Hopkins University's Thomas Rid, "There is a long history of [foreign] governments taking advantage of infectious diseases for disinformation purposes. ... We should expect [foreign] governments to take advantage of the current pandemic for disinformation purposes. It is clearly happening." While there is hope that many Americans remain uninfluenced by falsehoods, agencies must remain a legitimate resource for factual information, while simultaneously interacting with their customers in a way that thwarts attempts at spreading malicious information. Fulfilling this goal extends beyond just publicizing the facts. It also includes understanding how customers interact with this information after its release.

Opportunities for Capability Growth

Agencies have an opportunity to operate more effectively in the information sphere, building stronger connections with their stakeholder base beyond a public health crisis.

As the American public relies on its institutions to provide an effective response to a public health crisis, there is a strategic opportunity for agencies to build more resilient structures around their customer interaction. Countering the spread of disinformation remains a monumental task. The key pillar toward doing so is a government that ensures and promotes strong, free, and independent journalism without censorship. On a smaller scale, federal agencies should maintain a focus on how the public interacts with their pertinent information. Gaining a foothold on public discourse will allow an agency to better identify disinformation, ultimately identifying sources and developing techniques to counter it.

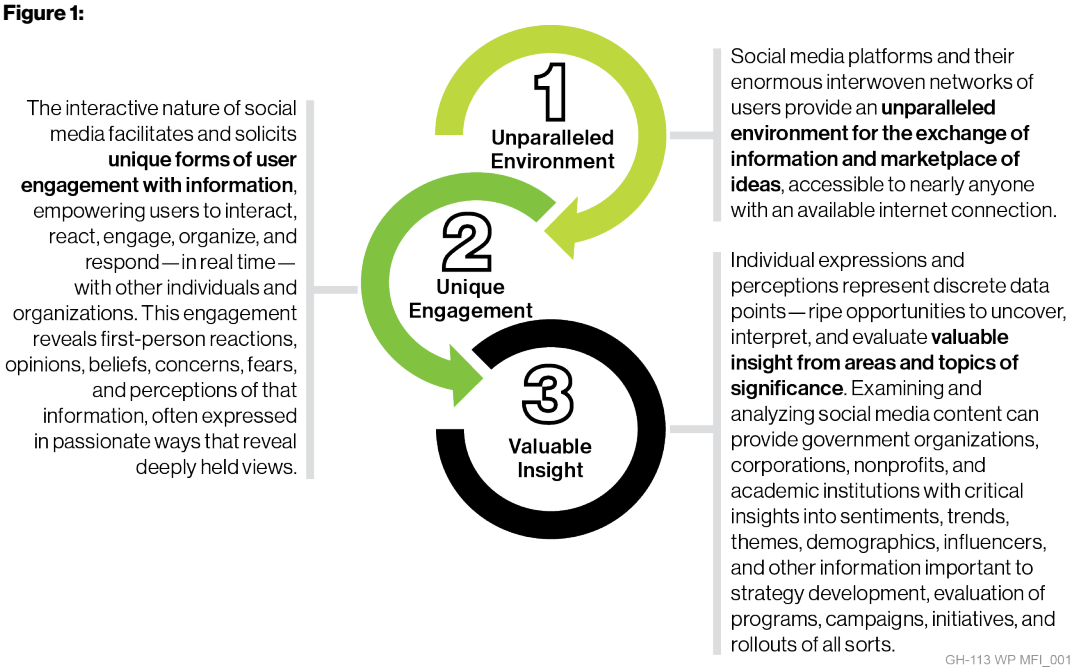
The first step in combating disinformation is developing a social media research and analysis (SMRA) capability. SMRA is anchored in the use of social media data to find and identify perceptions, sentiments, and needs of the American public during the COVID-19 crisis, helping drive and calibrate agencies' communications. Capability to capture and analyze information, discussions, and interactions across an array of digital platforms, and to integrate and deploy state-of-the-art technologies and tools to develop insight, can combat the disinformation challenges the national security community faces.

To bolster understanding of public discourse through SMRA as a first step to monitor and ultimately combat disinformation, agencies should:

- Perform trends analysis on the most commonly searched keywords, phrases, and other terminology used by the public as related to the agency and the situation (in this case, COVID-19).
- Identify and diagnose search trends over time, linkages between major agency or situation-specific announcements/events and online searches, and the evolution of search terms across the evaluation period.
- Seek to contextualize agency and situation-specific internet searches comparatively based on metadata analysis of user searches and internet queries (e.g., "testing center near me," "economic injury disaster loan application," and "unemployment").
- Identify topics and queries in internet searches related to circulating or emerging misinformation and disinformation associated with the situation and agency.
- Identify public sentiment of the agency and themes in public perception across Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit, by qualitatively identifying themes through random sampling of content, unsupervised clustering of content, and iterative classification of themes and influences to quantify results.

Figure 1 outlines why social media is a unique and valuable source of information, furthering the importance of the maturation of SMRA capabilities.

Figure 1:



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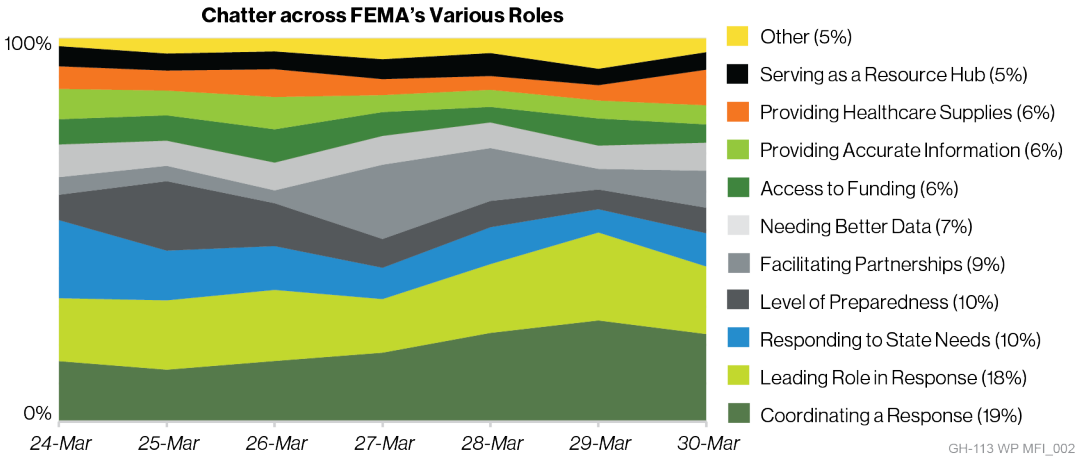
Use Case: Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

FEMA worked with Guidehouse to conduct analysis on the public's perception of its role in the COVID-19 crisis, capturing the nationwide activity around FEMA and COVID-19 across FEMA-related social media channels. Unique reports collected all social media activity from the start of the COVID-19 crisis, cataloging the data into logical groupings that center around perceived roles that FEMA should play in this disaster (**Figure 2**). The results of the social monitoring report have provided useful insight regarding the public's perception of FEMA and the positive impact the agency is making against its mission related to preparing the nation for the pandemic. Furthermore, this information allows FEMA to further analyze its current position in the public eye and be cognizant of both its ability to change the public's perception of itself and the ability for malicious actors to influence discourse.

Figure 2:



Moving Forward

Effectively executing the mission while enhancing capabilities to characterize and monitor customer relationships.

A national crisis like COVID-19 can become an opportunity for an agency to think critically about the way it serves the American people, as customer engagement is vital to enabling an agency to achieve its mission. Conducting SMRA is one example of how an agency can utilize a crisis to better understand how it is perceived by the public, while simultaneously laying the groundwork to thwart the intentions of malicious actors and mitigate the risk of major shifts in public discourse. Leveraging SMRA capabilities allows an agency to better connect with its customers, bolstering its ability to execute its mission in a timely and effective manner without interference from disinformation.

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