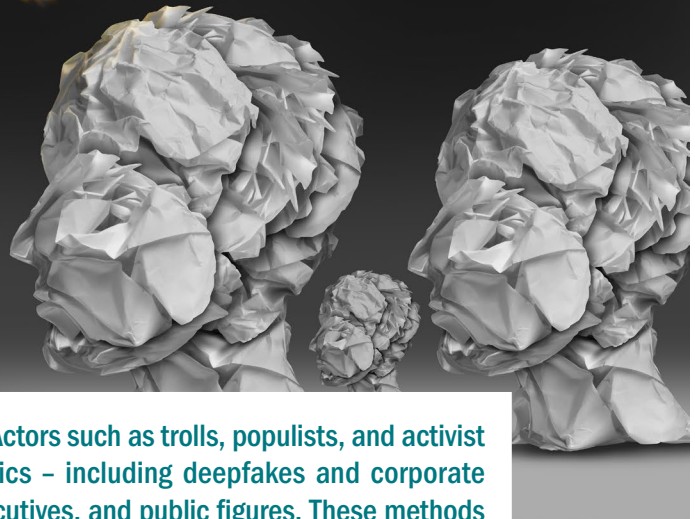
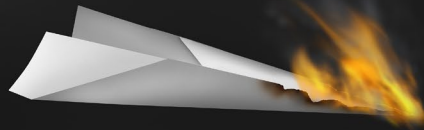


THE RISE OF SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

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The landscape of reputational threats has evolved. Actors such as trolls, populists, and activist groups are increasingly deploying subversive tactics – including deepfakes and corporate character assassination – to target companies, executives, and public figures. These methods amplify the speed, sophistication, and impact of reputational crises, making them more difficult to manage. This article examines the implications of these tactics for reputational risk management and explores strategies such as inoculation approaches to help communication professionals strengthen their pre-crisis planning and respond to emerging digital threats.

CORPORATE CHARACTER ASSASSINATION AS SUBVERSIVE STRATEGY

In the United States, corporate negative campaigning has a long history. For example, Coca-Cola and Pepsi have historically been engaged in an intense marketing rivalry known as the “Cola Wars,” which has extended beyond advertising to include lawsuits, rumors, and negative advertising campaigns such as the “Pepsi Challenge.” Legal battles have included accusations of unfair competition and trademark infringement. Claims of ambush marketing and sabotage have also arisen, with each company attempting to disrupt the other’s events (Bhasin, 2013). These practices

have sometimes crossed ethical boundaries, attracting public criticism and calls for fair competition.

Smear campaigns are deliberate attempts to damage reputations, degrade targets, and isolate them. The rhetoric of character attacks – sometimes referred to as “subversive rhetoric,” according to Fisher (1970) – is considered one of the primary purposes of human communication. As Benoit (2025) notes, persuasive attacks in both society and politics are common occurrences because human behavior frequently provokes criticism.

THE META CASE – AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE OF SUBVERSIVE EFFORTS

In 2022, Meta, the parent company of Facebook, hired the Republican consulting firm Targeted Victory to orchestrate a nationwide public opinion campaign against its competitor TikTok. The campaign aimed to portray the Chinese-owned app as a danger to American children and society by emphasizing its foreign ownership as a national security risk. It took place at a time when Meta was losing users for the first time in its history to TikTok and other competitors. The campaign was intended to deflect scrutiny from Meta's own problems, including data privacy issues and antitrust concerns.

As reported by The Washington Post, the smear campaign included news stories and op-eds in local U.S. media outlets about dangerous trends allegedly originating on

TikTok (such as the “devious licks” or “slap a teacher” challenges), letters to newspaper editors from citizens presented as concerned parents, and efforts to lobby politicians and the public to put further pressure on TikTok (Lorenz & Harwell, 2022). This was not the first time Facebook had secretly attacked its competitors; according to CBS News (2022), the company hired another PR firm in 2018 to conduct opposition research on its opponents, including billionaire philanthropist George Soros. This case serves as an illustration of subversive efforts that take place in the business world, typically falling under the broad category of “negative” or “stealth influence” campaigns, both of which pose challenges for corporate reputation management.

Attacks on companies and their CEOs, however, are not limited to instances of intercorporate asymmetrical warfare; they also include negative campaigns by external actors, such as journalists, social media influencers, and activist groups. These kinds of attacks can be subsumed under the umbrella term of “corporate character assassination,” which is defined by Coombs and Holladay (2020) as “deliberate destruction of organizational credibility and reputation through character attacks.”

Coombs and Holladay (2020) identify two main forms of corporate character assassination:

1. Actions by activist stakeholders, who seek to change organizational practices by aligning corporate values and behavior with stakeholder expectations; and
2. Actions by angry stakeholders, who seek revenge by deliberately damaging an organization's character or reputation.

Stakeholders can even pressure management to change their organizational behavior by threatening to harm the corporate image of their company.

However, corporate character assassination represents only one example within a wider range of subversive strategies and tactics that have been enabled and accelerated by social media. Social media platforms have created new forms of visibility that, in turn, produce recurring threats to

corporate reputation. These threats may come from various sources, including faux pas, gaffes, or leaked personal data circulated by media outlets that profit from corporate scandals.

Media enterprises, driven by audience expansion, often show little concern for regulating disruptive clickbait content. Negative content naturally attracts attention and therefore carries greater value for media producers. Clickbait content centered on scandalous news, rumors, or character attacks involving politicians and celebrities remains in constant high demand.

Today, media platforms are populated by trickster figures and agents of disruption, including populists, trolls, and pranksters who target politicians and business executives. Cancel culture has brought another surge of public callouts and boycotts targeting companies that fail to articulate their positions on current events or take political stances in a timely manner (Samoilenko & Jasper, 2023). Both the radical left and radical right have turned into agents of disruption and subversion, orchestrating nationwide efforts to shame and cancel prominent public figures.

Eric Dezenhall (2014), founder and CEO of Dezenhall Resources, argues that social media has made reputational crises worse for three primary reasons (the three Vs of social media crisis):

- **Velocity:** The speed with which information can be shared;
- **Volume:** The sheer volume of this information; and
- **Venom:** The hostility behind many allegations.

These factors may combine to create what he calls a “fiasco vortex,” – a runaway crisis in which destructive information accumulates and spreads beyond the point of no return. According to the 2025 Aon Global Risk Management Survey, reputational risk is increasingly driven by digital acceleration; environmental, social, and governance scrutiny; and intense geopolitical volatility, with 65% of organizations naming cyber-attacks as their top reputational risk (Aon, 2025). As risks have become more interconnected, damage to brand reputation now ranks among the top ten global business risks, often exacerbated by AI-enabled misinformation and social media dynamics.

The expansion of alternative online platforms and narratives, along with broader media fragmentation, has created a situation in which news users are confronted with an abundance of outlets with different ideological leanings that distort perceptions of the political public sphere (Habermas, 2022). These digital gated communities often form around particular topics or personalities, allowing users to insulate themselves from disagreement or alternative viewpoints. As seen in the well-known Pizzagate case (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), internet users’ propensity to follow like-minded individuals in echo chambers exacerbates polarization and conspiratorial thinking, which can quickly escalate into real-world violence. Pizzagate is a debunked conspiracy theory that emerged during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, alleging that Hillary Clinton’s campaign chair, John Podesta, had leaked emails containing coded messages that linked Democratic officials to a child sex ring in a Washington, D.C. pizzeria.

Szakolczai (2022) describes the contemporary moment in which these frequent online attacks take place in terms of “permanent liminality”, a condition in which temporary crisis situations become enduring states. This state of affairs is fertile ground for various agents of disruption who produce new liminal situations to attract media attention

and promote their agendas through emerging forms of subversive strategic communication.

WHAT IS SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION?

Botan (2017) defines strategic communication as the deliberate planning of campaigns that originate from an understanding of the public’s thoughts and desires. Unlike traditional models that focus on a sender-receiver relationship or on “crafting” messages to achieve organizational goals, this model places publics – and their ability to cocreate meaning – at the center of the practice. Subversive elements of persuasive communication are crucial for achieving strategic objectives. Subversive attacks often require actors to convince diverse audiences of their own moral superiority – and, by extension, their legitimacy – by undermining the character and integrity of opponents and competitors. The goal is to force the target to expend time, energy, and resources responding to accusations.

Today, subversive campaigns aimed at influencing public opinion are becoming increasingly strategic and collaborative, as they are shaped by the contributions and interactions of various motivated stakeholders, including influencers, activists, and competitors. Even negative campaigns often labeled as “dark” or “dirty” – because their methods contravene societal norms and ethical principles – still operate within strategic and co-creational frameworks across multiple digital platforms. For instance, hashtag cancellation or deepfake prank campaigns often rely on networked audiences to go viral, incite outrage, and provoke controversies.

Subversion can be either transparent and lightning-fast or covert and slow-moving, gradually eroding a reputation by a thousand cuts. Manipulation and deception have long been the centerpiece of information warfare, often relying on the spread of misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories. The objective is to introduce an issue about the target into the existing consensus of a community by gradually circulating false or damaging information. Deceptive strategies can be deliberately employed by pragmatic actors seeking to attain their goals within the contemporary

media ecosystem. In corporate conflicts, for instance, identity theft through “brandjacking” is a highly subversive tactic that replaces a brand’s original identity with a fake one, thereby weakening the brand’s operational capacity and value (Samoilenko & Langley, 2023). Impersonators often engage in brand piracy by taking over a brand’s visual identity or social media accounts and then promoting false corporate statements or campaigns.

The rise of synthetic media technologies has transformed visual disinformation campaigns into highly sophisticated operations of deception and influence. These operations are increasingly effective in altering human psychographic profiles and persuading audiences on complex political and social issues. For example, “hacktivists” may use deepfakes to advance political or social objectives by producing altered media that bolster their causes or undermine their opponents (Samoilenko & Suvorova, 2025). The use of AI in this way allows subversive actors to craft targeted, persuasive, and intimidating messages with unprecedented precision. The rise of amateur deepfake creators is particularly alarming, as many AI-generated videos are made for illegal entertainment, deception, or smear campaigns (Sandoval et al., 2024).

EXAMPLES OF SUBVERSIVE COMMUNICATION TACTICS

- › **Corporate character assassination:** Targeted smear campaigns to damage a person’s or company’s reputation.
- › **Deepfakes:** Creating realistic fake audio or video to misrepresent someone or spread misinformation.
- › **Hashtag cancellations:** Coordinated social media attacks using specific hashtags to amplify criticism and mobilize public backlash.
- › **Brandjacking:** Typically associated with the disruption of a brand’s narrative and the appropriation of corporate identity by third parties.
- › **Astroturfing:** Faking grassroots support or opposition to manipulate public perception.

Subversive strategic campaigns generally consist of three stages that can be implemented sequentially, from communication disruption to complete ideological subversion, or deployed separately, depending on the plans and objectives of the strategists.

THREE STAGES OF SUBVERSION

Disruption

This phase includes strategies and activities that aim to interrupt an event, conversation, or relationship. Typical actors of disruption include trolls, pranksters, and media hijackers who seek to derail ongoing conversations while advancing their own opinions or agendas.

Trolling, once described as playful, ironic, and transgressive identity play (Phillips, 2015), has become increasingly associated with the posting of provocative content, including deliberately misleading or pointless comments intended to provoke and mock other users for the purpose of dragging them into an empty argument or quarrel.

Political activists have also used disruption to challenge dominant narratives. Such tactics have been used, for instance, to protest the tyranny of oil, recast debates over healthcare reform, and question the rituals of organized religions. “Media-jacking” is one popular activist strategy, which involves hijacking an opponent’s media event in order to seize control over the narrative and draw public attention to alternative topics and issues (Boyd, 2012).

Pranks can also serve as powerful tools for disrupting hegemonic narratives, deplatforming political opponents, and promoting alternative viewpoints. In 2020, for instance, TikTok users coordinated a prank by registering hundreds of thousands of tickets for Donald Trump’s campaign rally in Tulsa in an effort to leave seats empty during the event. Similarly, when the Trump campaign set up a hotline for voters to report election fraud, trolls flooded the line with calls mocking him for losing the election (Bugeja, 2022). Political pranksters may also operate as state proxies in information warfare. In recent years, their pranks have targeted several notable politicians, including Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and numerous European parliamentarians (Mishra, 2020).

Transgression

During this phase, the aim is not only to disrupt conversations or divert attention but also to scandalize the target's words or actions that appear to violate social norms. The goal is to make the target appear morally or legally at fault, thereby generating a scandal that incites moral outrage. Scandals often reaffirm prevailing norms by publicly sanctioning moral transgressions; at the same time, they may function as social rituals that drive public outrage and encourage broader discussions about values, norms, and their violations (Michael & Haller, 2025). Public callouts and shaming rhetoric are frequently used to amplify ongoing controversies by exposing personal or organizational misdeeds, instigating lawsuits, and prompting activists to launch boycotts or protests (Samoilenko & Prigge, 2026). Cancellation campaigns, often emerging from perceived moral transgressions, may leverage user-generated hashtags to rapidly gather support, shame individuals or brands, and call for their social or professional exclusion.

Political marketing may also incorporate transgressive communication rooted in belligerent and uncivil rhetoric that violates social norms. For example, "intentional self-scandalization" (Haller, 2015) – the use of incivility and offensive attitudes as a calculated strategy – allows populist politicians to entertain voters, boost political ratings, and seize media attention. U.S. President Donald Trump frequently tweets insults and allegations that are efficiently converted into clickbait media content, providing sensational material for headlines. Unsurprisingly, such practices contribute to creating a media environment in which uncivil politics become the norm. Scholars argue that tabloid journalism and television entertainment have normalized personal ridicule and serve as a breeding ground for unjustified personal attacks, social judgment, and the character assassination of political actors (Lichter & Farnsworth, 2020).

Subversion

Subversive strategists use disruptive and transgressive strategies as milestones leading to the concluding stage, in which the goal is to reframe existing narratives, meanings, and cultural codes and replace them with new ones. In foreign affairs scholarship, subversion is understood as an attempt to transform the established social order and

its structures of power, authority, and hierarchy when the values and principles of a system in place are deliberately contradicted or reversed (Blackstock, 1964).

In cultural studies, subversion is often discussed in terms of resistance to political or corporate hegemony. Many activist campaigns and social movements have historically employed subversive tactics, such as "subvertising," to support protests and boycotts. It refers to altering or parodying a well-known corporate logo to critique, satirize, or comment on the company's practices or public image (Lievrouw, 2023). Due to their capacity for creative resistance, social movements seek to dismantle prevailing political and corporate narratives, conventions, and symbols, ultimately attempting to supplant them with a new set of rules and interpretations (Williams, 2011). For example, in March 2026, the appearance of a golden statue depicting Donald Trump and the infamous financier Jeffrey Epstein as sad lovers from the movie *Titanic* sparked a new mystery in Washington, D.C. The almost 12-foot sculpture, displayed on the National Mall, was the third piece of guerrilla art satirizing Trump's past relationship with Epstein, credited to *The Secret Handshake* – an obscure organization whose members remain anonymous (Smith, 2026).

Conspiracy theorists also engage in forms of narrative subversion by hijacking government or corporate narratives and reframing them through creative storytelling, often referred to as "conspiratorial fictioning" (De Zeeuw & Gekker, 2023). This storytelling practice uses the form and logic of conspiracy theories to provoke critical thinking about seemingly plausible narratives regarding hidden organizations controlling world events, blending real historical references with imaginative inventions. The 9/11 Truth movement and the anti-vaccine movement are examples of online communities that promote conspiracy theories as normative positions. For many, belief in such narratives provides a strong sense of identity and belonging. De Zeeuw and Gekker (2023) argue that the QAnon movement developed into an influential example of conspiracy fictioning, in which conspiracy theories are used to disrupt and subvert official accounts of reality. Recent research also suggests that playful fan theories in popular fandoms sometimes mirror the logic of political conspiracies. For instance, Taylor Swift fans, often referred to as "Swifties," have engaged in playful, conspiratorial forms of interpretation by searching for hidden messages and developing elaborate theories,

especially around Swift's queer identity (the so-called "Gaylor" discourse) (Stowell, 2025).

Within the context of digital activism and manipulated media, subversive strategic communication serves as a powerful tool for premediated campaigns that range from personal vendettas to attempts to undermine and reshape political and ideological structures. Given these developments, strategic communication scholars must reevaluate existing theories and models while integrating emerging perspectives that account for shifting sociopolitical dynamics, generational shifts, and rapid technological advancements.

COUNTERING SUBVERSIVE TACTICS

There is currently no consensus among scholars on how best to respond to subversive strategic campaigns since they come in multiple shapes and forms. However, there is agreement among many that the most efficient strategy for companies to protect their reputation is to ensure that they are not compromised in the first place. That is why preparedness and prevention measures are critical for identifying issues and risks, mitigating negative sentiments, and advancing innovative proactive strategies.

In the age of deepfakes and cancel culture, new approaches to issues management must outline proactive steps for identifying and resolving high-priority issues before they escalate into full-scale crises. In cases where crises center on moral judgments or perceived violations of social norms, it is critical to understand the underlying principles that divide stakeholders from the organization involved. When stakeholders believe there is a significant value conflict between themselves and the organization, they may attempt to distance themselves from it publicly. It is therefore of the utmost importance to:

- **Monitor the broader environment** in order to identify the point at which an emerging issue transforms into a larger problem that exceeds the capacity of pre-crisis management.
- **Develop a synergistic relationship with the communities of interest** to anticipate subversive attempts.
- **Recognize early warning signs of dissatisfaction or fatigue with corporate messaging** and respond by acting as proactive agents of change when proposing new initiatives or strategies.

GUIDING FRAMEWORKS FOR COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS

1. **Scansis situation for detecting and managing smoldering issues:** Scansis (Coombs & Tachkova, 2019) helps organizations detect potential crises before they escalate. It does so by monitoring media and stakeholder interactions for early warning signs, evaluating whether issues might trigger moral outrage, and predicting how minor problems could develop into full-scale scandals. This allows companies to prioritize emerging concerns and take early action, such as proactive communication or targeted stakeholder engagement. For example, Mylan's decision to increase the price of the EpiPen in the US from \$100 in 2007 to \$600 in 2016 generated intense public backlash. The price hike was widely perceived as exploiting a life-saving medication for profit, triggering moral outrage and long-lasting reputational damage.
2. **Pre-crisis inoculation strategy to prepare stakeholders for potential attacks:** Inoculation theory (McGuire, 1961) provides a way to "pre-arm" stakeholders against reputational attacks (Samoilenko & Compton, 2025). Organizations can anticipate likely threats and expose key audiences to weakened forms of these attacks before they occur. Organizations can anticipate likely threats and expose key audiences to weakened forms of these attacks before they occur. These threats include online astroturfing, where coordinated attacks are carried out by trolls, paid pollsters, or social bots (Boman & Schneider, 2021); misinformation; or challenges to credibility.
3. **Image prepare to design preemptive image protection:** Compton's *Image Prepare* model (2020) adapts reactive image repair strategies for proactive use. By highlighting past responsible actions, anticipating criticism, and transparently addressing potential vulnerabilities, organizations can strengthen stakeholder trust and credibility before a crisis occurs. For instance, showcasing previous effective responses to challenges signals reliability and can act as a preemptive inoculation, reducing the reputational impact of future attacks.

CONCLUSION

Subversive strategic communication has become a defining feature of today's media environment. A wide range of actors – from activists to political and corporate players – use such tactics to disrupt business processes, damage reputations, and challenge corporate identities. For communication professionals, this means that reputational threats are increasingly complex and require continuous attention.

At the same time, this article approaches subversive strategic communication as a set of deliberate strategies employed by pragmatic actors to achieve specific goals. Rather than framing these practices as inherently “evil” or illegitimate, it highlights the ambiguity surrounding what constitutes acceptable communication. Behaviors associated with trolls, hackers, or activists may be perceived as

legitimate or deviant depending on whether they reinforce or challenge existing economic and ideological systems, making it more difficult for organizations to assess risks and respond appropriately.

Subversive communication should therefore be understood as a broader phenomenon shaped by contextual and technological factors. Its forms, acceptance, and impact vary across situations, underscoring the importance of monitoring how such campaigns emerge and gain traction.

For communication practitioners, this reinforces the need to address subversive communication in reputational pre-crisis contexts. As technological developments – particularly AI and deepfakes – advance, such campaigns are likely to increase in scale and sophistication, highlighting the importance of preparedness for effective response strategies.

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MORE INFORMATION

A detailed discussion of the potential of inoculation theory as a strategy against deepfakes can be found in Samoilenko & Suvorova (2025), as listed above.