

MISINFORMATION

In the Purple Ridge Mountains



A Navigate Your Fate Story

In collaboration with The National Insider Threat Task Force and the Department of Defense Counter-Insider Threat Program, The Threat Lab created this novel to strengthen critical thinking skills and help protect our organizations from the negative effects of misinformation and disinformation.

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Navigate Your Fate and Choose Wisely

As you read this book, you are responsible for navigating your own fate. The decisions you make will determine the path the story takes and its outcome. Choose wisely.

You are the regional director for a cellular communications company that is expanding its service into a new area. Your company is constructing a series of advanced communication towers on top of a low mountain range known as the Purple Ridge Mountains. On one side of the range is the small coastal town of Waverly; on the other, a rural valley made up of several communities. The towers will offer high-speed internet and cellular coverage to the coastal communities and to the rural valley.

Your company made a deal with the Federal Government that allows you to build on Federal land in return for cheaper rates for the residents. This deal is part of a Federal program to increase internet and cellular connectivity for underserved communities.

This is the largest project that you've been responsible for and it's a huge opportunity. To make sure everything runs smoothly, you've spent the past several months working with local leaders, town councils, Federal and State government officials, and environmental groups that expressed concern about the red-crested warbler, a native bird. Today, you're halfway through a much needed week-long vacation when you get a frantic voicemail from your site supervisor asking you to call back immediately.

▶ Turn to the next page to return the call.



You call back and your site supervisor tells you that a firestorm of opposition has bubbled up, seemingly out of nowhere, with fierce concerns about the towers being raised from all sides.

This takes you by surprise because construction has already started, and, just months before, you went out of your way to obtain support from all of the involved parties.

Now, though, you apparently have a group of farmers worried about the health implications of the towers, a group of anti-government folks who follow and monitor your construction workers who are housed nearby, politicians and homeowners' associations (HOAs) concerned about property values, environmental groups claiming you didn't conduct the appropriate surveys, and widespread social media outrage claiming that the towers are being built on the grave site of the beloved State founder.



▶ Continue to the next page.



You know that any disruptions will push the project into the region's upcoming rainy season, which will delay construction and lead to wasted money and potential penalties for not completing the work within the Government-approved timeline.

Your company has provided a limited contingency budget to manage unexpected expenses. You'll have to choose where to spend that money as you work to resolve these new concerns.

If you can't manage your time and resources and successfully navigate each of these issues, the planned construction will be derailed, costing your company time and money and maybe even costing you your job.



► Turn to the next page to head back to work.



You return to Waverly, stopping at your rental house just long enough to drop off your bags before heading back out.

Your head is spinning as you think about the best way to approach all of these new issues, but, before you even make it back to your office, it becomes clear which issue is the most immediate. As you drive up to the only road leading to the construction site on top of the remote Purple Ridge mountaintop, you see that the concerned farmers have parked their tractors in front of the narrow roadway, blocking all access and halting construction.

You park across the street and watch the group of resolute farmers, trying to figure out the best way to approach them. Some of your construction workers are milling about, unable to get to work but clearly not sure what to do with themselves.

▶ Continue to the next page.



The farmers are standing in several groups around their parked tractors. As groups of hikers pass by, the farmers call them over and talk about the effects of extreme radiation and deadly cancers. You see that even some of your own employees have been drawn in and seem to be listening closely to the farmers.

You'd better get in there before they scare everyone away.

While the farmers seem approachable and are clearly willing to talk about their cause, it's a pretty big group and you wonder if you should call for reinforcements.



Decide

- ▶ To hear the farmers out first, turn to the next page.
- ▶ To call the police first, just to be safe, [turn to page 8](#).



The farmers seem peaceful so you decide to approach them first.

You cross the street and move toward them. The farmers all step forward as a group, eager to let someone new know the truth about the towers. “Hey, there, what’s going on?” you ask.

One farmer steps out front and shakes your hand.

“Hey there. Name’s Rick,” he says. “We’re concerned about the cellular towers they want to build at the top of the mountain. You’re welcome to join us if you’d like to learn more.” He points to each person standing next to him and rattles off a list of names. You try to catch them all but the only one that stands out is the last. “And over there is Sheriff Roberts,” Rick says proudly.

Your heart sinks. You had hoped to get the sheriff on your side. You look at him and are encouraged to see that he doesn’t look fully convinced.

You turn back to Rick, smile winningly and try unsuccessfully to make a joke. “Worried your internet will be too fast?”

▶ Continue to the next page.



Rick's face grows grave, and you know your joke fell flat. "We're trying to protect our families," he says as he pulls out his phone to show you something. "These towers they're trying to build...the radiation isn't messing around."

You take the phone and see a blog post with the headline: "New breed of high-speed cellular towers increases radiation by 1000% and is linked to an increase in cancer rates."

You're positive this claim isn't right (or at least you're nearly positive), but it's clear the farmers will need more than just your assurances.

"Wow. It would be terrible if that were true," you say to the group. You note the name of the blog, Peurpel People Readers, as you hand the phone back to Rick.

Rick launches into the rest of his speech, but, before you have to fake a phone call or your own death to extricate yourself, a group of hikers goes by and Rick flags them down.

You take the opening and walk quickly back to your truck. You're going to have to look into these claims and come up with some convincing evidence to get the farmers to head home, and you'll have to do it quickly if you want to stay on schedule and keep your crew.

► To investigate who exactly is making the claim, [turn to page 13](#).



You're a little nervous about approaching a group this large on your own, and you want to avoid making enemies of the people who live nearby.

You decide you'd better call the non-emergency police department number for help. Maybe they can clear the farmers out without your direct involvement.

After a few rings, a woman answers.

"Hi, um, I'm at the base of the..."

"I'm sorry," she interrupts you. "You're breaking up a little."

You sigh. They really do need these towers. You jog to the other end of the street. "I'm at, well, near, the base of the mountain and there's a group of farmers blocking access to the road. Isn't that some kind of, I don't know, public safety issue? Can you send someone out?"

There's a long pause, presumably as she figures out if that is, in fact, "some kind of public safety issue." She finally says, "The sheriff's on his lunch right now, but, actually, it looks like he's already out there. I'm sure anyone in the group would be happy to point you to him."

▶ Continue to the next page.



This is great. The sheriff's already here and your people will be back at the top of the mountain and at work in no time.

As you head toward the farmers, you realize what you should have put together immediately: the sheriff might be here to support the farmers.

When you spot the sheriff, you see he isn't actively recruiting volunteers like the farmers. In fact, it looks like he's on the receiving end of a farmer's speech intended to persuade him.

As you walk toward the sheriff, another group of farmers moves toward you, clearly eager to let you know their concerns.

Decide

- ▶ To start by hearing the farmers out, [turn back to page 6](#).
- ▶ To talk directly with the sheriff, turn to the next page.



You dodge the farmers and make your way toward the sheriff.

“Excuse me, sir.” You wave to get his attention. “Could I borrow you for just a minute? I’m the director of this construction project, and…” He pushes away from the tractor he’s leaning against and starts walking toward the squad car that you now see is parked down the street.

“I was just about to head out,” he says, despite having seemed pretty settled until you mentioned who you were. The farmers all wave and call out to him as he leaves.

“This will only take a minute,” you say following him, relieved to be moving away from the crowd at least. “I was hoping maybe you could encourage the farmers to reopen the road, so we could get back to work. Aren’t they breaking some kind of traffic law?”

“They’re not really causing any danger and nobody uses that road.”

Except our construction crew, you think. You’re trying to tread lightly. You really don’t want to get on the sheriff’s bad side, especially so early in the project.



▶ Continue to the next page.

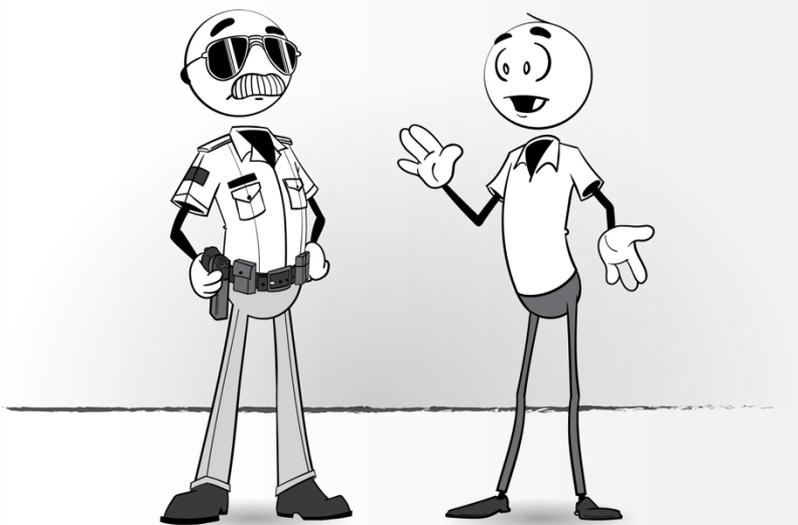


“They have a right to be here, and I think maybe we should consider what they’re saying,” he continues.

“So you believe all that about the radiation?” you ask, trying to keep your voice calm.

“Rick’s a smart guy,” he says pointing back to the farmer leading the demonstration. “If he believes it, well, I think we need to be certain on something so important. That blog makes some strong points.”

This is actually great news. The sheriff’s not totally convinced by Rick’s radiation claims, and it’s clear the farmers respect him. Maybe if you had the right information you could convince him and he could help you convince the others.



▶ Turn to the next page.



“Thank you for your time,” you say. “Oh, what’s that blog you mentioned? It sounds like something I should look into.”

The sheriff tells you the name of the blog is Peurpel People Readers as he gets back in his car, and you quickly pull it up on your phone.

You read, “New breed of high-speed cellular towers increases radiation by 1000% and is linked to an increase in cancer rates.”

This is a good place to start. If you can counter the blog’s claims, maybe you can get construction back on track. But the clock is ticking and you need work to resume.

Decide

- ▶ To head back to your rental and do some research of your own, continue to the next page.
- ▶ To call your lawyers and get the problem resolved as quickly as possible, [turn to page 15](#).



Once you get back to your rental house you pull up the blog on your computer and read through it; you know you can't rely on just the headline.

The blog argues that cellular towers, like the ones you are trying to build, introduce new and dangerous levels of radiation into the environment that harm humans, plants, and wildlife. Further on you read that radio waves can change your DNA.

You're ready to write off the blog immediately and come up with a plan to reopen your mountain route when the next couple of paragraphs catch your eye. You see statistics and several quotations from people with seemingly reputable titles.

▶ Turn to the next page.



The post is full of quotations from a Dr. C.J. Winters. He makes general statements about how high levels of radiation cause cancer, and he claims that recently activated 5G has harmed the environment in a nearby county. None of his statements or the statistics seem to be substantiated or cited.

Some of those numbers are pretty high, though. And really, who are you to argue with the experts? How much do you actually know about electromagnetic radiation and the towers you're building? You start to see why the farmers are concerned after reading this blog.

Decide

- ▶ To take the doctor at his word and move on, turn to page 16.
- ▶ To look into this doctor's credentials and see if other sources agree with him, [turn to page 17](#).



You don't even wait to get home to get corporate on the phone. Your bosses agree pretty readily that this is a big issue and are quick to connect you to legal.

The legal department agrees that, given your contract with the Federal Government, they should be able to have the farmers removed, but pulling in all of the associated bureaucracy slows everything down to a snail's pace. You watch helplessly as days turn into weeks and the farmers keep up their vigil.

The corporate lawyers comb through contracts and policies, making sure that you truly have the standing and documentation to have the farmers removed. Eventually they find the language you need to clear the farmers out, but it's too late. The rainy season has begun, making work impossible and forcing you to relocate your crew to other active jobs. Even worse, your legal team has eaten up your entire discretionary fund.

The project is temporarily stalled and given a new project director, all but sealing your career's fate and ceasing your meteoric rise through the company before it actually began.

THE END



You read the post again and then dig further into the blog. The more you read, the more sense it starts to make and the more you think the towers may not be worth the risk. Maybe the farmers are right about the radiation after all. Why aren't more people talking about this?! You quit the project and start lead-lining your basement.

THE END





Even though some of these ideas feel plausible and sound scary, you want to learn more. You decide to start by looking into Dr. Winters, who is cited throughout the blog as an authority and is quoted several times. The blog doesn't have a named author or cite any other sources, so you Google Dr. Winters.

The first thing you find is Dr. Winters' own website, which makes similar claims to those on the blog. He provides some links to external sources, but one of them takes you back to the blog and the other takes you to a Twitter thread that doesn't include any sources. You notice that, so far, the websites all seem to cite each other.

Returning to Dr. Winters' website, you see he lists the publications where his work has been printed. However, when you visit the publications' websites, you notice that each of them seems to publish the same four or five names, including Dr. Winters'. You finally find Dr. Winters' bio on one article titled "Ideal Ecological Environment for the Bunyip." It's the educational credentials that really jump out at you:

Doctor of Metaphysical Humanistic Science, specializing in Cryptozoology.

▶ Turn to the next page.



You wonder what a cryptozoologist is doing writing about electromagnetic radiation and its effect on human physiology.

You return to Dr. Winters' website and see a link to what seems to be his keystone paper, which he says was published in a prestigious journal. However, when you open the paper, you see it's an opinion essay that was published in a non-academic journal. The essay is full of spelling and grammatical errors and is 15 years old.

You have more than enough proof that Dr. Winters' claims aren't backed up by evidence. You're anxious to convince the farmers to clear out because you're getting increasingly frantic text messages from your site supervisor wondering what to tell your construction crew, and you've also ignored calls from your boss, Janet, who is probably wondering what's going on.

But you haven't actually found any data to *counter* the farmers' claims. Maybe you should look for information about the safety of the cell towers just to be sure.

Decide

- ▶ To trust the blog anyway, [turn to page 16](#).
- ▶ To see if other sources agree on tower safety, continue to the next page.



You decide to see what you can find about the towers being safe before returning to the farmers. The first thing you find is a series of funny videos created by a cell phone company, debunking some of the same theories you read on the blog. The videos are not enough proof on their own, but they point you to statements from established organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP), and the American Cancer Society (ACS).

These organizations confirm what you already thought: adverse health effects have not been observed in extensive studies as long as radiofrequency electromagnetic exposure remains below established thresholds, and your cell towers' distance from the ground and technology radiofrequency are well within this threshold.

You also look at some of the specific claims made and uncover that the area suffering negative environmental impacts hadn't even activated the increased cell service when the negative changes were noted.

You collect the statistics and study references from these organizations and prepare to make your case.

▶ To take this information back to the farmers, turn to the next page.



Triumphant, you return to the farmers. You're sure that if they'll listen, you'll not only get your job site back but also ease the hearts and minds of the concerned people. It will be a win for everyone.

In the few hours since you've been gone, the group blocking the roadway has grown in number and intensity. People now have signs that read "Honk if you're opposed to the towers" and "We value our kids over internet speeds." Rick and the others are approaching passers-by with greater fervor, and you see some of your workers fully immersed in the action.

All of this increases your sense of urgency. It's now or never to convince these folks that there's nothing to worry about.

You see Sheriff Roberts again standing with the farmers, but this time he seems more removed and watchful. He looks a little concerned and you wonder if he's more primed to listen to you than he was before. Who does it make the most sense to start with?

Decide

- ▶ To take your evidence to Rick and the other farmers, continue to the next page.
- ▶ To see if you can get the sheriff on your side first, [turn to page 22](#).



Rick steps forward as you approach the group. You tell him you've been looking into their claims. You also tell everyone that you're the director of the construction project, which means it really matters to you that you do things right. Before you can show them what you've found, though, they all start talking at once. You realize you shouldn't have opened with your connection to the project as they begin to yell.

"The only thing that matters to you is getting your money and getting out of here!"

"The sooner you finish construction, the sooner you can get out of the radiation range!"

"We're not interested in your corporate propaganda!"

Soon the farmers' voices completely drown you out, and you can see it's pointless to try and reason with them at the moment.

You spot Sheriff Roberts still off to the side. He's not exactly rushing to your defense, but he isn't yelling at you. Maybe you can win him over.

▶ To see if you can get the sheriff on your side, turn to the next page.



You pull Sheriff Roberts aside and tell him that you've given some serious attention to the issues that the local farmers identified, and you are hoping he'll look at some of what you found.

You tell him it's important that the communities feel safe and are safe and you want to equip them with the information to do that.

"Let's hear it then," he says. "I think this could be a tough crowd to convince, but what have you found?"

The sheriff is right; it could be difficult to change anyone's mind. Where's the best place to start?

Decide

- ▶ To start with the information on Dr. Winters, continue to the next page.
- ▶ To start with the data on tower safety, [turn to page 24](#).



You decide to start by pointing out Dr. Winters' lack of credibility. "I noticed something about this doctor who is making a lot of these claims. I'm not sure he's really an authority on the subject."

You walk through the details you've found about Dr. Winters, his dubious sources and his time spent hunting the chupacabra—a mythical creature purported to drink the blood of livestock.

Sheriff Roberts listens thoughtfully as you talk, but, when you're finished, he's not as convinced as you hoped he'd be.

"That's all well and good, but these numbers still are concerning. I need to see some evidence to the contrary," he says.

You have that information and you're ready to share it, but you're a little bit concerned that the sheriff doesn't fully understand how unreliable Dr. Winters is. You wonder if you should try to emphasize that point a little more before going on.

Decide

- ▶ To transition to the tower safety data, [turn to page 25](#).
- ▶ To keep talking about Dr. Winters, [turn to page 28](#).



You walk through the information you collected on cell tower safety, grateful that you heavily cited your own information so you can give Sheriff Roberts further resources to back up your claims.

You show how credible the information you've found during your own search is, in sharp contrast with the unreliable claims Dr. Winters is making.

When you finish, you hold your breath, waiting to hear what the inscrutable sheriff says.

"You make some good points," he says. "Can I have these?" He points to your notes. You hand them all over. "I don't see any reason to hold up your work any longer, but I'm going through all of these, and if anything doesn't add up, the farmers will be back," he promises.

You thank him. You did your research. You're not worried.

"I'll clear everyone out," he says.

▶ To follow the sheriff and get back to work, [turn to page 26](#).



“Oh, of course,” you say. “That’s all right here.” You put away the information on Dr. Winters, glad that it opened the door to this new discussion.

You walk through the information you collected on cell tower safety, grateful that you heavily cited your own information so you can give Sheriff Roberts further resources and back up your claims. After sharing the poorly supported data that the farmers started with, the information you’re sharing seems especially scientific.

When you finish, you hold your breath and wait to see what the inscrutable sheriff says.

“You make some good points,” he says. “Can I have these?” He points to your notes. You hand them all over. “I don’t see any reason to hold up your work any longer, but I’m going through all of these, and if anything doesn’t add up, we’ll be back,” he promises.

You thank him. You did your research. You’re not worried.

“I’ll clear everyone out,” he says.

▶ To follow the sheriff and get back to work, turn to the next page.



You follow the sheriff over to the crowd of waiting farmers but stay far enough away that it doesn't look like you're trying to tell them what to do.

"All right, folks," he says. "I'm satisfied that our concerns have been addressed, and I'm happy to explain to you exactly how over lemonade in town."

Rick is clearly torn; you imagined he'd like to escape the hot outdoors but he hasn't heard the evidence yet. "But what about the facts we found?"

"I have some information that will explain all of it, right here. And if you're not happy with it, I'll escort you back here personally."

Rick nods at the other farmers and before long the tractors have cleared out, leaving a smattering of your employees who quickly act like they were just observing. You see one of them throw a sign into a nearby bush before you have a chance to read it.

You're thrilled to get your people back to work and more than a little relieved to have confirmed that the cell towers aren't going to harm the community.

▶ Continue to the next page.



You head back toward your home office, ready to get the project back on track. You're feeling pretty pleased with yourself for having cleared the roadway without making any enemies or significantly delaying the project, and you're just in time for lunch.

As you drive, you call your site supervisor to share your victory and tell her that it's time to call your crew back to work.

She doesn't seem as buoyed by your news as you were hoping. "It's great that the road is clear, but I'm not sure we're going to have a crew for much longer," she says. Your own enthusiasm dims and then disappears completely as your site supervisor tells you that a small but active group of people in town has been following and monitoring some of your construction workers.

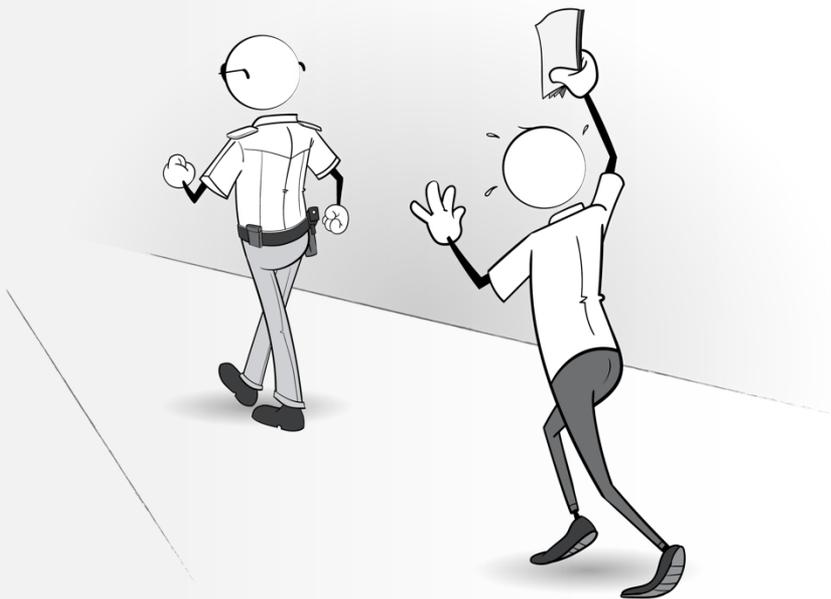
▶ To find out what's going on, [turn to page 29](#).



“We can talk about all that,” you say, “but don’t you see that Dr. Winters is lying? How can anyone think he’s an authoritative source?”

“I’m starting to think maybe you’re attacking him because you don’t have anything convincing in your favor or you’re trying to hide something,” Sheriff Roberts says as he walks away.

You chase after him, waving the safety data that you didn’t get a chance to share, but he’s not interested.



-
- ▶ That didn’t go as you’d hoped. To start with the safety data first, [turn back to page 24.](#)



“What’s going on?” you ask.

Apparently this group is convinced that your project is part of some nefarious scheme, and some members have been hanging around the area where your construction materials and vehicles have been parked since the farmers blocked access to the mountains.

She goes on to say, “I talked to a number of employees who no longer feel safe at their local hotels and I’ve heard whispers that a couple are even considering other jobs. I’m not sure what the best way is to reassure them, but now that the farmers have moved, maybe you can resolve the issue?”

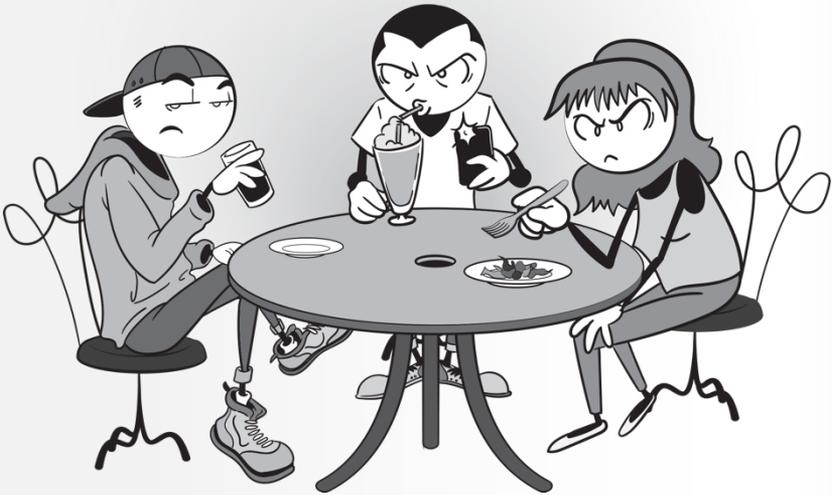
You promise her you’ll take care of it and head to downtown Waverly, the coastal town where most of the action is taking place.

▶ Turn to the next page



You park your truck and walk toward the little café that's popular for lunch. Sure enough, you find a group of your employees sitting at an outdoor table. At first, everything seems all right and you wonder if your site supervisor has blown things out of proportion. As you get closer, though, you see that the construction workers are visibly uncomfortable, and it only takes a second to identify why.

Camped at two nearby tables are a few of the people causing the problem. They're sitting mostly silently and intently staring at your crew. Occasionally they whisper to each other and point or scribble something on a paper in front of them. Two of them keep trying to take sneaky pictures, but they are failing miserably at the sneaky part of the task.



▶ Continue to the next page.



Even from a distance and without being the target you feel unwelcome. One of the people gets up and goes inside the restaurant, muttering something you can't hear as they pass your crew's table. Your employees try to ignore it and continue eating, but it's clearly unsettling.

The more you think about it, the angrier you get. Your employees don't deserve this kind of abuse for trying to do their jobs.

The people watching your crew get up and start to leave. You feel pulled to confront them on behalf of your people, but maybe you should get more information from your crew first.

Decide

- ▶ To tell the people with too much time on their hands what they can do with their cameras, turn to the next page.
- ▶ To talk with your employees first, [turn to page 34](#).



You're too worked up to let them get away without giving them a piece of your mind. You charge toward the people before they can leave, catching them and your employees by surprise.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" you yell.

The person nearest to you looks stunned for a moment but quickly recovers and steps forward, trying to look casual.

"We're just eating lunch. Do you have a problem with that?" he asks. "If you need the table, we're leaving."

"You're not just eating lunch. You're taking pictures of my construction crew and making them feel unwelcome. Lay off." You're still yelling and other people are starting to gather to see what's going on.

The group is emboldened by the crowd and by the knowledge that you're part of the construction they're trying to oppose.

"Listen," says the group's unofficial spokesperson. "You can't come in here and bully us out of finding the truth about those towers."

"What are you talking about? Those radiation claims are ridiculous."

▶ Continue to the next page.



They look surprised and start whispering to each other. You realize they're not talking about the radiation claims at all and you have just made things much worse.

You double down in the hopes of getting them to leave. "Leave my people and our equipment alone or we'll call the authorities and have you removed," you say.

"Oh, sure, bring in your authorities. We won't be scared off!"

"What are you trying to hide?!" someone in the back of the group yells, and it's then you realize they're filming you. You sputter and yell that you aren't hiding anything and that they need to stop recording you. You're totally unable to come up with anything cogent to say.

The group leaves, seemingly satisfied that they have captured what they need to support whatever it is they're worried about by painting you as an angry, irrational, and secretive character. You know now that you should have paused to make sure you had the information you needed and to collect yourself so you could approach the situation objectively

You turn to your nervous crew, not sure what to say. You've given these people even more reason to assume that you're part of a big conspiracy and more ammunition to convince others to join them.

-
- ▶ Maybe starting with them was a mistake. To talk with your employees first, turn to the next page.



Confronting the people that are already suspicious of you probably won't change their minds. Especially if you approach with hostility.

You decide to talk to your crew, to reassure them and gain more information on the problem.

"Hey, guys," you say to the group. "Everything okay?"

"Welcome back," says Bill, your foreman, dodging the question. "How was your vacation?"

"Short." You laugh. "But we've got the roadway back up to the mountain clear now."

This news is, again, not met with as much excitement as you'd been hoping for. Your crew is still distracted by the people and their cameras even as they leave, each taking their time to pass by the table where you're standing. "We're on to you," one says in a near-whisper on the way by, dropping a piece of paper onto the table as she goes.

"What's their problem?" you ask once the lurkers have finally left.

▶ Continue to the next page.



Bill sighs and hands you the piece of paper left on the table. It's a printout of a Facebook page. You scan it quickly and read claims that your workers are government spies sent to collect information on the locals. Whoever wrote the post also claims that the new cell towers will continue to monitor them after the construction is over. There's no evidence cited but the ideas have obviously gained traction with the people who are following your crew around town.

"This isn't what we signed up for," Bill says. "They're doing this everywhere. It's really just a few people, but this town isn't big enough for us to get away from them when we're off duty."

"I'll make sure it's taken care of. Don't worry."

They thank you and you leave to let them finish their lunch in peace. Now you just have to figure out how you'll make sure it's taken care of. What's your next move?

Decide

- ▶ To clear up what must be a misunderstanding by jumping onto Facebook and dealing with the misinformation being spread there, turn to the next page.
- ▶ To call the sheriff and see if you can get some extra security, [turn to page 37](#).
- ▶ To move your crew's lodging to a nearby town, [turn to page 39](#).



You're sure this is just a misunderstanding. These people just need to learn the truth! You get to your car, fire up your phone, and find the Facebook page. You click through, searching for any information about the author without any luck.

You give up and start arguing with people in the comments section below the post, disputing the idea that you're spying on anyone.

The same handful of people go back and forth with you for a while, and, in pretty short order, you are branded a cog in the machine intended to collect data on the people in town to use for malicious purposes.

It's clear this hasn't gotten you anything other than a wasted afternoon and a weird sunburn through the window of your parked car. You log off and decide to try another approach.

Decide

- ▶ To call the sheriff and see if you can get some extra security, continue to the next page.
- ▶ To move your crew's lodging to a nearby town, [turn to page 39](#).



You think the best way to make your crew feel safer is to have more people looking out for them. If you can get some local support, maybe it will scare off the harassers.

The sheriff seemed pretty friendly with you earlier when he helped clear out the farmers. Maybe he would be willing to help you out again.

You call and ask if he's willing to send a deputy to the job site to keep an eye on the people and machinery.

"We're not a big department, and no one has actually done anything yet," he says. You can hear that you're losing him.

To emphasize your point, you decide to embellish the reports of people hanging around your machinery, making it sound like sabotage was only barely avoided (and perhaps it was, who are you to say). Finally, the sheriff reluctantly agrees to send someone by every now and then to check it out.

▶ Turn to the next page.



“But we aren’t in the business of doing favors. Don’t think you can call me any time you run into trouble,” he says as he hangs up, and you know you’ve already pushed this professional relationship too far.

Unfortunately, engaging the sheriff does the opposite of what you’d intended. When the deputy drives by, it ratchets up the tension and legitimizes your antagonists’ concerns about being monitored. More people join their cause and your crew feels even less safe.

Within just a few days, the tension reaches an untenable level and Bill, your foreman, quits and takes a lot of the crew with him. The company demotes you and has to figure out if the project is still even worth it.

THE END





A look at the Facebook page that seems to have started the problem confirms what Bill told you: there are only a few people actively involved in the campaign.

You decide that your top priority should be to reassure and protect your team rather than try to fight back and risk making the situation bigger than it actually is.

You work with your boss Janet and your site supervisor to have the construction workers moved to a different hotel in a nearby town. You have to dip into your contingency budget, but it's cheaper than having to rehire a whole crew if yours gets fed up and quits.

The new lodging is only 10 minutes from the job site, but it's far enough away to avoid being followed and harassed.

The Facebook page remains up and somewhat active, but engagement peters out quickly as the construction crew is no longer around to follow after hours.

Work starts back up in earnest and everyone, including you, feels more relaxed and works to get the job done. But only a few days after putting out the last fire, you receive an urgent email from your friend Angela. She works in the mayor's office and tells you that, although the mayor had originally supported your project, now he isn't so sure.

▶ To call Angela and find out more, turn to the next page.



You call Angela who tells you that there are a number of communities with fairly wealthy residents who have been opposed to the towers for some time.

She says that the opposition is coming mostly from local homeowners' associations worried about property values.

She forwards you an email from one HOA that cites statistics claiming properties near cellular towers drop in value by 20% on average within the first year and never recover.

You're ready to write off the email as a misguided nuisance, but then you read the HOA's call to action.

A Waverly town council meeting is coming up in the next few weeks where the HOA plans to, according to the email, "make our voices heard" and "take control of what happens in our community."

This is not good news. You know you need to address this as quickly and simply as possible, before it gets fully off the ground.

Decide

- ▶ To stop wasting time and reach out to the HOA president who sent this email, continue to the next page.
- ▶ To take some time to figure out where they got their statistics and see if there is any truth to the claim, [turn to page 43](#).



Before doing anything else, you draft an email to the president of the HOA. Your message starts out fairly measured, but grows increasingly angry as all of your annoyance and weariness finds a singular target.

In the email, you ask how someone can have enough time to send baseless attacks against people and companies working to benefit the community. You question where they got their statistics and how they plan to “take control of what happens in our community.” You start addressing them as the neighborhood busybody association.

By the time you finish, you feel much better. You hit send without looking back and then wait impatiently for their response.

▶ Turn to the next page.



After lunch, you still haven't received a reply, but when you visit the HOA's social media page, you see they've amped up their posting about the project. Even worse, they now claim they are being "openly harassed" and "intimidated" by the construction project director. They even go so far as to post excerpts from the email you sent, along with your name and email address!

You suddenly have a headache. You have made a messy situation much worse. You wonder how you can most effectively run damage control.

Decide

- ▶ To jump into the social media fray to present the truth and defend your company, [turn to page 44](#).
- ▶ To look into the statistics the HOA is citing and build a plan, continue to the next page.



A quick search takes you to the page where the HOA got the data, and you can see how it would be concerning.

But as you read beyond the pull quotes, you see that the 20% drop happens when cell towers are built among the houses and are not disguised in any way. Your cell towers aren't going to be in anybody's actual neighborhood. They're being built at the top of the mountain, far away from houses. If anything, the faster cellular and internet speeds could potentially increase property values for the communities.

You feel confident that you have the truth on your side, but you aren't sure what to do with it. You need a strategy to change the narrative that's currently out there, and scattershot social media posts or graphic-heavy flyers nobody will read don't seem like your best bet (even though you are a clipart whiz). The way you see it, you need to deal with the people who are spreading irrelevant data.

Decide

- ▶ To stop wasting time and reach out to the HOA president who sent this email, [turn to page 41](#).
- ▶ To take it slow and find out more about the HOA, [turn to page 46](#).



You can't let this slide. You've got to fix the mess you helped create before it gets any worse. You start with a fairly gentle question, "Are you sure about that number?" that you post below another misleading statistic, but you accidentally do it from your own account with your full name.

The HOA president attacks immediately and the two of you get into a sharp back and forth. Every time you post you get an almost immediate response.

No matter how hard you try to turn things in your favor—through well-reasoned comments, sharp rebuttals, and finally, desperately, carefully chosen gifs—the HOA president manages to turn things back on you and make you look like the villain. Judging by the responses of other people on the page, you aren't gaining any fans. At one point your mom gets into the middle of things, which really doesn't help the situation.

▶ Turn to the next page.



After an embarrassingly long time, you realize you're engaged in a death spiral. You are making the same points over and over, but you keep looking worse and worse, so you finally log off.

You've gotten no work done today, and now there's an entire internet community that sees you as the evil out-of-town developer who has come to crush a small town's dreams in a made-for-TV holiday movie.

You wonder how you should proceed while you wait for your boss's daily check-in call.

Decide

- ▶ To come up with a plan to fight the HOA, [turn to page 49](#).
- ▶ To take a step back, evaluate the statistics being cited by the HOA, and build a plan, [turn to page 43](#).



You click through the HOA's website and social media pages. It takes all of your willpower not to respond to their posting of irrelevant statistics, but you want to stay on task.

You piece together that the HOA's plan is to force the town council to vote on whether or not they should sue your company in an attempt to halt the project.

A lawsuit would be catastrophic for the project. Your career flashes before your eyes. You have to come up with some way to counter the HOA before they sway the town council. Maybe if you knew more about this meeting you could present your own case.



-
- ▶ Continue to the next page to learn more about the town council and the upcoming meeting.



You call Angela again, hoping she'll have more information. "Do you know what the town council thinks about this?" you ask.

"There are five council members, and they're split. Two of them live in the neighborhoods that are part of this HOA and they're pretty worried about the decline in property values. Two of them are definitely pro-construction," she says.

"It could be worse, I guess," you say, trying to figure out how you might be able to persuade the HOA loyalists on the council. "What about the fifth council member?"

"From everything I can tell, she's on the fence. She thinks the project could benefit the community in many ways, but she doesn't want to get on the wrong side of the HOA."

▶ Turn to the next page.



As someone who has recently gotten on the wrong side of the HOA, you can understand this. “They do seem formidable. Any idea how to try and tip her to our side?” you ask.

“Here’s what I’m thinking: I can get you in to present at the same meeting, so at least you can make sure the council hears from both sides, and hopefully you can sway the swing vote.”

You consider your next move. You could put together a presentation for the town council that provides people with the true alternative explanation for the way the towers impact property values, but maybe you should just try to convince the HOA to lay off and avoid the vote completely?

Decide

- ▶ To take the presentation spot and start preparing using the key content you’ve found, [turn to page 51](#).
- ▶ To try and avoid a meeting confrontation and approach the HOA first, [turn to page 53](#).
- ▶ To ask for the undecided council member’s information, [turn to page 54](#).



Through a little more detective work, you see that HOA elections are coming up soon. You don't live in the neighborhood and aren't eligible to vote to replace the current president, but you've made some friends in the town and might have some pull. Plus, how hard could it be to unseat someone who spends the whole day arguing with strangers on the internet?

You also find out that the HOA is presenting at the upcoming town council meeting and intends to force the council to sue your company and halt construction.

You could certainly show the HOA that they don't have as much power as they think they do if you can get the town council on your side and keep your project on track.

Decide

- ▶ To go all in and take control of the homeowners association, turn to the next page.
- ▶ To find out more about the town council and the upcoming meeting so you can strategize how to debunk the misleading statistics, [turn to page 46](#).



You don't want to just quash the HOA's complaints about your project, you want to crush them entirely.

You scroll through the Neighbors app where people voice complaints about their neighborhoods, and you find several posts by a person named Wendy Harper who's clearly annoyed at the HOA's ban on lawn ornaments. You reach out to Wendy and forge a friendship based on your mutual enemy and love of pink flamingos.

You throw all of your extra time, money, and energy into a campaign to oust the HOA president and get Wendy elected. Turns out, you're a pretty great campaign manager and your foe suffers a crushing defeat (Wendy wins by two votes).

Unfortunately, while you were out campaigning, an environmental group's hike-in and misinformation campaign snowballs and makes national news. Your construction project is accused of not having done its due diligence. Corporate decides that neither the project, nor you, are worth the risk and that it's better to cut company losses and move on.

You're left without a job, but maybe it's for the best. You're going to be pretty busy secretly running an HOA from now on.

THE END



“Please get me on that meeting agenda,” you tell Angela, who promises to arrange for you to speak. You hang up and immediately start thinking about your presentation. This might be your one chance to change people’s minds and save your project from a world of legal trouble.

Over the next week you prepare a clear and concise presentation for the town council meeting.

You fact check your own information using multiple sources and make sure everything you cite is current. You even create a handout that explains why the drop in property values is not a concern for this project, and you print off enough copies for everyone.

You also include the data you found for the farmers just in case anyone raises any health concerns, and you point out that better cell service and faster internet connections will benefit everyone in the community. Improved technology may even bring in more businesses and increase property values in the long term.

▶ Turn to the next page.



The afternoon before the town council meeting, you're feeling pretty good about your PowerPoint skills and your argument. You just need a strong ending to leave everyone certain which way to vote.

You can think of two options to close the presentation, one that aligns you with the HOA's big goals or one that shows the HOA does not really care about the community's best interests. You just need to pick the one most likely to convince your audience and set your project up for success in the long term.

Decide

- ▶ To push back against the HOA, [turn to page 55](#).
- ▶ To come up with a compromise that benefits both the project and HOA, [turn to page 56](#).



You collect the information you've amassed to counter the HOA's claims about property values and respectfully email the information to the HOA board members. You include links to relevant information and measurements to show them that the distance between the cell towers and their neighborhoods well exceeds the distance in the report they have been sharing.

By the end of the day, you haven't received a response. Members continue to post on social media, so you are pretty certain they're ignoring you. Maybe they'll get around to you eventually, but for now you need to come up with an alternate plan.

It's clear that the town council meeting is going to happen, and you need to be ready. You're going to have to come up with an argument.

Decide

- ▶ To come up with a plan to fight the HOA, [turn to page 49](#).
- ▶ To call Angela, take the presentation spot, and start preparing using the key content you've found, [turn to page 51](#).



“Maybe we can just cut out the middle step and I can talk to the council member directly?” you ask.

“Are you trying to get me in trouble?” Angela asks. “I can’t give out council members’ personal information. I shouldn’t even tell you what their likely votes are. The best way to communicate with them is in an open forum, and there isn’t a HOA meeting scheduled until after the town council.”

You still wish you could go into the town council meeting knowing you have the votes you need, but you’ll take what you can get.

-
- ▶ To take the presentation spot and start preparing using the key content you’ve found, [turn to page 51](#).



You decide to end your presentation by illustrating point-by-point how the HOA has been fear-mongering and cherry-picking statistics to serve their own purpose. You think this will prove that they aren't really looking out for the community at all.

You point to moments when the HOA attacked your company and ignored your pleas to work together. You don't even need to embellish or stretch the truth. You have a strong case that the HOA engaged in a dishonest smear campaign.

You know it's unlikely that you'll sway the council members who are part of the HOA, but hopefully you will convince the swing vote that she should stand up to the HOA and vote in favor of your project. You're a little nervous, but you think you're ready.

-
- ▶ To make sure everyone knows how wrong the HOA is and deliver this presentation, [turn to page 57](#).



You decide to swallow your pride and try to come up with a solution that pleases everyone. You know that sometimes cell towers are disguised as trees; in fact, this even came up in some of your research about how to build neighborhood towers without affecting property values.

It's not too late to build the towers this way, but it will require some clever budget work and a little more than what your contingency budget covers.

You call your boss, Janet, dreading the conversation, but as soon as you mention the word "lawsuit," and your plan to prevent one, she agrees to approve the switch in design and its associated costs.

You include this idea in your presentation as a way to show that you're listening in good faith to the HOA. Maybe if they see that you're paying attention to not only the health and environmental implications but also to the aesthetic ones, there may not be a vote at all.

Your finished presentation logically addresses the concerns and complaints, avoids personal attacks, and offers a workable solution. You are ready to present it to the town council.

► To propose a compromise and deliver this presentation, [turn to page 58](#).



The first half of the presentation goes off without a hitch. You can tell that people are listening, and you even think some of the HOA representatives are squirming. But when you get to the part that directly attacks the HOA, you can tell right away that you've gone too far. You suddenly see that, from their viewpoint, you're hammering points you've already made, but now you've identified a villain.

Because of your harsh words, the vote is no longer about your construction project. It's about you and your corporation versus local folks who take pride in their town.

Even before the vote is taken, you know you've lost. They vote to sue your corporation and halt the project, and you have a feeling the lawyer's retainer will be coming out of your paycheck.

THE END



The first half of the presentation goes off without a hitch. You can tell that people are listening, and you even think some of the HOA representatives are reconsidering their opinions. When you get to your proposed solution you fully reel them in.

You address the HOA president directly and propose that they work with your team to come up with the best way to camouflage the cell towers. Even though the towers are far away, you can see that the HOA president is interested.

The members of the town council call for a short break before they vote, and you can see what appears to be a tense conversation.

When the meeting reconvenes, the HOA president reluctantly steps to the front.

“Given the concessions that the construction company is willing to make to maintain our community’s natural and designed beauty, we’d like to accept their proposal to disguise the cell towers. We no longer think a vote is necessary, provided they follow through with this plan.”

▶ Continue to the next page.



The HOA won't be inviting you to a potluck any time soon, but things could not have gone better.

You can't wait to tell Janet how much time and money you saved them in legal fees and project delays.

But you can't take a victory lap quite yet. No sooner have you prevented a costly and drawn out lawsuit with the Waverly HOA, when your phone rings again. It's your site supervisor, and she's got some bad news. Apparently a regional hiking group, the Purple Ridge Protectors, has decided to do a "hike-in" protest against the new cellular towers. They are pushing other groups to participate in protests that they claim will happen year-round.

▶ To learn more about this newest hurdle, turn to the next page.



While you're on the phone, your site supervisor sends you a link to the group's social media page. Their post calling for protests has gotten thousands of supportive reactions, and some of the responses call for people to destroy equipment, chain themselves to equipment, or harass workers. Your site supervisor tells you that there's no way the project can afford round-the-clock security. There's a very real possibility of work stoppages, sabotage, and negative press. A Please-Fund-Us page to support the hike-ins has already raised \$6,000 in one day!

You sigh and wonder what they've been told about the towers to make them protest. You're also very confused, as you distinctly remember going through a long environmental impact assessment with the State and local governments last year. You ask your site supervisor for a copy of the assessment so you can read it over. You also ask your communications specialist to dig up what he can about the Purple Ridge Protectors. After a few hours, he sends you an email with a few links to the group's website, previous activity, estimated membership size, and posts about the hike-ins. There's also quite a bit about why the group is protesting, which takes some time to sort through. You settle down in your office with some coffee and begin to go through the report.

▶ To investigate the group's claims, continue to the next page.



Reading through the report, it looks like the PRP is actually an association composed of several different groups — a hiking group, bird watchers, environmentalists, and hunters. There's also another group involved that is a bit more extreme and generates a lot of media attention. The PRP appears to be a very popular association. They host environmental tours through the different trails, run summer camps, and have educational programs for people on both sides of the Purple Ridge Mountains. Your communications specialist has summarized the PRP's claims for you:

- Construction will restrict hiking access.
- Construction will disrupt the mating cycle of the red-crested warbler whose mating season coincides with construction.
- Pollution from the construction will damage the environment.
- The mountaintop will be irreparably damaged and its look forever changed.
- Habitats of other animals and plants will be destroyed.

▶ Turn to the next page.



You'll have to think hard about how to tackle this issue. The social media report shows that the PRP has a big social network and is able to mobilize a lot of people, so running afoul of them is a bad idea. You have some ideas about what to do.

Decide

- ▶ To read through the whole environmental impact assessment and evaluate the information, continue to the next page.
- ▶ To call the sheriff and ask if he can provide protection for the worksite, [turn to page 72](#).
- ▶ To call corporate and ask if they can pay for security for the worksite, [turn to page 75](#).



Your start leafing through the environmental impact assessment. It's not an exciting read, but it provides a good overview of the issues and equips you to address them from an informed perspective. You had not read it in its entirety before, and you see now that it mentions some of the items the PRP is protesting: the red-crested warbler's mating season, the temporary closure of one hiking route, and the possibility of soil erosion due to the first half of the construction taking place right before the rainy season.



▶ Turn to the next page.



Overall, the report concludes that the impact will be minimal and the economic benefit of the towers far outweighs any environmental degradation. There is no mention of other species of animals or plants being threatened by the construction. Thankfully, earlier in the project your team insisted on bringing in external experts to ensure an unbiased assessment. On the list of co-signers you see the Federal, State, and local officials, along with a few other groups, including John Bishop with the American Hiker United Club (AHUC). You pick up your phone.

Decide

- ▶ To call the sheriff: these people are wrong! [Turn to page 73.](#)
- ▶ To call your social media manager to post the report online, [turn to page 76.](#)
- ▶ To call the AHUC and request their help to calm tensions and convince the PRP that the assessment is accurate, continue to the next page.
- ▶ To call on the Federal, State, and local officials to go on record in support of the project, [turn to page 77.](#)



After a bit of phone tag, you eventually reach someone at the AHUC who puts you in contact with the signer. You hope the PRP will trust a respected organization without a stake in your project. While a little taken aback that you've reached out, John Bishop is friendly and is happy to chat. You explain the situation to him, and John is happy to help. In fact, he is excited because very few companies actually reach out after an environmental impact assessment is done. He asks you what you need from him but tells you that he is not authorized to talk on behalf of the AHUC.

Decide

- ▶ To ask him to have the AHUC make a public statement about the planned construction on Purple Ridge, including the environmental impact assessment, [turn to page 78](#).
- ▶ To ask him for advice on how best to approach the PRP and stop their story from spreading out of control, turn to the next page.



John sighs and says, “Well, you have to understand that big companies like yours are the perfect bad guys. You’re coming into their home and mucking about. Try to do something to assuage their fears, show them that you’re serious about not trying to harm their favorite spot, and say that you actually care. If it were me, I’d do a little face time, maybe get some of that mountain air yourself.”

John offers to make a call on your behalf to one of his friends in the PRP and says he would be happy to facilitate a conversation between you and the PRP leadership.

Your conversation ends after a 30-minute lecture on the mating habits of the warbler and how the spring really is a sensitive time for the bird. You put the phone down and consider your options. Pressing your finger to your lips you look at your phone again.

Decide

- ▶ To call the sheriff, [turn to page 72](#).
- ▶ To call your social media manager and ask him to post the report online, [turn to page 76](#).
- ▶ To call on the Federal, State, and local officials to go on record as supporting the project, [turn to page 77](#).
- ▶ To call your communications specialist and organize your own hike-in with the PRP, continue to the next page.



Your communications specialist is a little taken aback by your request, but soon enough you're on the phone again with John, who facilitates a call with the PRP. While initially frosty, the leadership agrees to meet.

You lay out your plan: You and your staff are going to go on a group hike to the top of the mountain, and you would like the PRP to join you. The PRP, a very fit and tanned bunch, are skeptical but agree to do it Saturday morning. You also enlist one of your staff to take photos of the event — that way you can counter the information that has been spread by the PRP with a positive, true narrative.

Saturday morning comes and you're quite excited and nervous. You're fit, and the mountain should not be too difficult — after all, there's a trail! Early in the morning you meet up with a group of 30 people, including the PRP leadership all decked out in their hiking gear, logos, backpacks, and water bottles.

The hike is initially pretty easy, but within an hour you are sweaty and tired. The other hikers snicker at you, and your staff grumble about overtime. It's painful and slow but by late afternoon you've managed to summit the mountain!

▶ Turn to the next page.



A few jokes and congratulatory backslaps later, you've finally caught your breath. You're at the construction site, with the earthmovers, trucks, and building materials all laid around.

The hikers pull out their lunches and begin to eat. Now is the time to talk — but about what? Thankfully, you had an assistant bring up several copies of the environmental impact assessment.

Decide

- ▶ To explain to them in careful detail all the ways they are wrong, [turn to page 79](#).
- ▶ To discuss the hiking route closures—and let them know you arranged for hiking routes to remain open except for when a vehicle is coming through, continue to the next page.
- ▶ To discuss the red-crested warbler—you're moving up the timetable on construction so it finishes before the bird's mating season; it will be more expensive, but it beats losing one of your machines to sabotage, [turn to page 70](#).



After you finish explaining that the hiking trails won't close, the leader of the PRP grins at you.

“Well that’s all well and good, but we’ve been hiking on closed trails for years. You think a little red tape on the trailhead is going to stop us? What else do you have to say?”

He and the rest of the hikers await your response.



Decide

- ▶ To call the sheriff and evict these troublemakers, [turn to page 74](#).
- ▶ To explain to them in careful detail all the ways they are wrong, [turn to page 79](#).
- ▶ To discuss the red-crested warbler and hopefully get to the true root of their concerns, turn to the next page.



After you stop talking, the leader of the PRP stands and puts his hand out.

“Listen, we figured all you corporate types are the same: a press release here, blah blah blah ‘we take the environment seriously’ blah blah blah, but then you do something awful. We really appreciate you actually taking the time to talk with us. You just coming out here says a lot. We have a few other concerns we’d like to talk about, but if John Bishop is fine with your project, so am I.”

As you shake hands though, his grip tightens on your still sweaty hand and he says, “But you’d better keep your promise. There’s a few more, ah, radical members of our group who we didn’t invite along. They’re just looking for an excuse to cause trouble. Don’t give it to them. You understand?”

You nod in understanding, and the afternoon is spent talking about the additional environmentally conscious steps your site supervisor will be taking to ensure as little is disturbed by your work as possible.

You offer full copies of the environmental impact assessment to anyone who wants it, and one person takes it off of your tired assistant’s hands.

▶ Turn to the next page.



Some of the hikers talk about the Please-Fund-Us donations. “I can’t believe that we got \$6,000 in one day! Do we know who donated?” One of the hikers says, “Someone with the name Da Mann donated almost \$5,000.” None of the other hikers know who this benefactor is, and the hiker says, “Dang, we’re going to have to refund all of that.”

After another hour or so on top of the mountain, you start to head back down, but not before you briefly consider calling the site supervisor to come pick you up. You decide against it

On the way down the mountain, your phone rings. It’s Janet again. “Have you seen the news? The construction is all over! Apparently we’re building the towers right on top of Theodore Peurpel’s grave site! How could we not have known that? Did anyone do any background research before we greenlit this project? My goodness, this whole thing is a disaster. The board is meeting in 2 days to decide if we’re just going to pull the plug on this whole thing.” You admit you’ve not heard anything about Theodore Peurpel and will look into it. You had been wondering how the mountaintop got its name, since there’s nothing purple about it.

► To find out what’s going on down the mountain, [turn to page 80](#).



You call the sheriff and tell him about the concerning social media posts. He understands your concern, but dismisses the threat. “Listen, people post extreme things on social media all the time. I can try to talk to these people, but I’m not even sure who some of them are! Heck, they may not even be in the same state.”

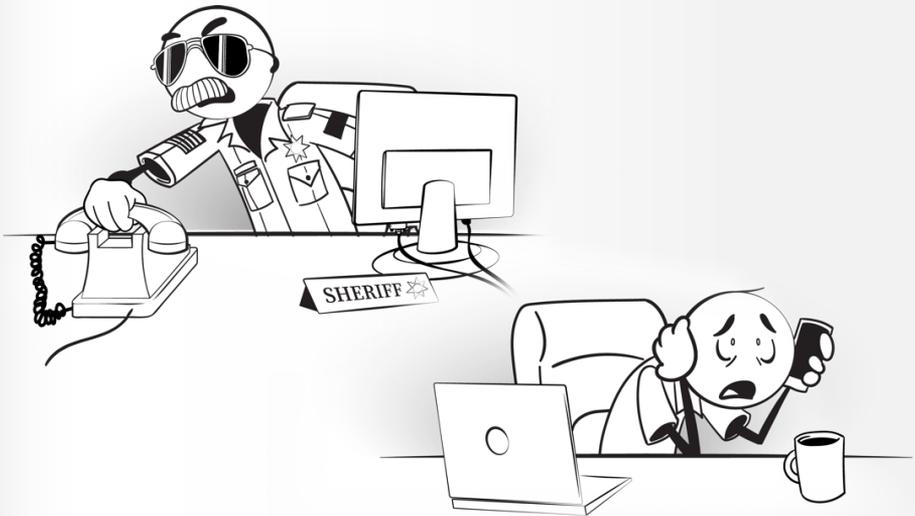
You reiterate that there’s a clear and present danger and he should really provide protection. The sheriff does not take this well. “Just how many deputies do you think I have? I’m not your security guard. If you think someone is going to threaten your equipment, buy a camera or get a security company to guard it like everyone else. If your stuff gets broken, we can prosecute them criminally.” He hangs up the phone.

-
- ▶ That did not end how you hoped it would. To investigate the group’s claims, [turn back to page 60](#).



You describe the threats to the sheriff and repeat many times how grossly wrong the PRP is about the construction site. The sheriff acknowledges the threats and says he will follow up when he can. “But otherwise, what are you asking me to do? It’s not a criminal offense to be wrong about something.”

You plead for him to make a public statement, but the sheriff quickly cuts you off, “I’m not an environmental scientist and I’ve got a county to protect.” He hangs up the phone.



-
- ▶ The sheriff was the wrong person to ask. To double check you got your facts right, [turn back to page 63](#).



In full view of everyone, you pull out your phone and walk away. You tell the sheriff that there are 30 radicals trespassing on your property right now and that he needs to come arrest them. Further, you just heard them admit to using closed trails and you have witnesses who will testify against them. The sheriff yells at you through the phone, “I happen to be friends with one of those ‘trespassers,’ and he let me know where he was hiking today. If you ever call this office again and it’s not an emergency, I will have you arrested.” The sheriff slams down the phone.

You turn around to see five of the PRP members standing behind you listening with their arms folded across their chests. “Boy, it will be a shame to see that tractor turn into a huge paperweight.” They quickly finish their meals and depart down the mountain, taking pictures of the site as they go. “Thanks for the tour you corporate tool!” one of them yells as they leave. Your staff shake their heads in disappointment.

One month to the day after the hike, your site supervisor calls you up and tells you that none of the machines work — they all appear to be missing components, all of which were found smashed nearby. Every few days something else goes missing, halting work again. Eventually your company hires a security detail, but not before the construction has ground to a halt for the year, at great cost to the company. You update and start posting your resume on job search sites . . .

THE END



You call Janet and inform her of the ongoing situation with the PRP. You get about as far as telling her that there may be a need for more security when she stops you. “We aren’t hiring security. We can’t afford it. Don’t you have a friend in the sheriff? Why don’t you call him?” She apologizes and has to end the call for a meeting with shareholders.

-
- ▶ You must have missed something in your analysis. To investigate the group’s claims with an open mind, [turn back to page 60](#).



You get on the phone with your social media manager. You let him know that you want him to pull out the relevant sections of the environmental impact assessment and start posting them on social media, flood the group and all their associates with the truth.

The manager starts posting everywhere, working around the clock to engage with the local social media community. After a few days of pushing out content, you check in again on the group's Please-Fund-Us page: donations have risen to \$8,652! You check the PRP's posts and find that, far from putting the issue to rest, even more people are involved. About one third of the people thinks the environmental impact assessment is fake, another third is still actively issuing threats to action, and the other third is in a deep philosophical discussion on steady-state economics.

-
- ▶ It does not appear your social media engagement worked. To regroup and see if you missed something in the environmental assessment, [turn back to page 63](#).



You start dialing the offices of the Federal official, but the official is out of the office on annual leave for the next 3 weeks, so there is nothing to do but wait. The State official has changed jobs and now works for a different department, and his former office no longer has his contact information.

Frustrated, you call on Rick Moore, the county official, but find that he is the same Rick you met who leads the local association of farmers. After a brief conversation, Rick says, “Listen, I’d love to help but I’m right in the middle of a campaign to implement sustainable farming practices in the valley and it’s not popular. I kind of have to pick my battles here. I signed the report—that will have to do.”

You hang up the phone, dissatisfied.

-
- ▶ That got you nowhere. To regroup and see if you missed something in the environmental assessment, [turn back to page 63](#).



“Listen,” John Bishop says, “I can’t speak for AHUC, and we can’t exactly turn on a dime. I can put in a request to say something, but someone else will have to read through the report again, and they may find something I missed. Also, it’ll have to go through public affairs before we can say anything.”

You insist that there needs to be a public statement. “I’ll see what I can do,” John Bishop says, “but in the meantime, what else can I help you with?”



-
- Maybe Bishop has some other ideas. To ask him for advice on how best to approach the PRP and stop their story from spreading out of control, [turn to page 66](#).



You pull out the report and all the copies of it that your assistant brought up and start handing it out to the gathered hikers. They take it and start reading through it, curious and a little confused. You launch into point one of your 12-point argument, but halfway through one of the hikers interrupts you. “Did you bring us all the way here just to lecture us? We read the report. We know what it says. We aren’t going to be talked down to.”

You ask, “If you’ve read the report, then what’s the problem?” The same hiker replies, “Listen, we get people like you parachuting in here all the time from companies promising the moon, then they get their profits and leave us holding the bag. Plus, they don’t even care about this place — and you don’t either.”

You stand, shocked, in front of the hikers and your staff.

Decide

- ▶ To call the sheriff and evict these troublemakers, [turn to page 74](#).
- ▶ To discuss the red-crested warbler and show that you’re listening to their concerns, [turn to page 70](#).
- ▶ To discuss the hiking route closures and let them know you arranged for hiking routes to remain open except for when a vehicle is coming through, [turn to page 69](#).



When you get down off the mountain and back to your office, a quick search shows that Theodore Peurpel was not only a local hero, he was one of the State's founding fathers! You must have forgotten his name from history class, but it's right there, plain as day. His name is on the original State constitution and everything. In fact, there's a Theodore Peurpel Foundation run by his estate with a picture of the mountain range splashed across the homepage.



▶ Continue to the next page.



You gulp and wonder how none of this was discovered during the planning stages for the towers. You click on videos of recent news coverage of the construction. They all seem to repeat the same messages about the “controversy” that has erupted over the construction being right on top of Peurpel’s grave. There are also splashy memes, gaudy ads, and images of your company’s logo smothering a portrait of Peurpel. Frustratingly, you cannot find any information about where on the mountain Peurpel is buried.

You rub your temples and consider your next moves.

Decide

- ▶ To learn more at the local library — you know it’s a great place to find creditable information, [turn to page 84](#).
- ▶ To call your media consultant — time to go on a media blitz talking about the benefits of your new towers, [turn to page 82](#).
- ▶ To call up the Theodore Peurpel Foundation and find out where this man is buried, [turn to page 85](#).
- ▶ To call on your social media manager to investigate the new burst of anti-tower content, [turn to page 97](#).



You issue press releases about the tower and organize interviews with local and national news organizations. The interviews are hit or miss, and, despite your pleas, the interviewers all ask why you chose to build on Peurpel's grave. Without much information, your interviews sound clipped and unconvincing, and the news stations often cut footage so you look even less prepared. You come off as insincere, and other historical and conservation groups start complaining publicly.

You get a notification on your phone: the board of directors is meeting soon, and they are expecting a full report.

-
- ▶ To go to the board meeting without doing your due diligence, [turn to page 91](#).



You issue press releases about the towers and organize interviews with local and national news organizations. The interviews are hit or miss, and, despite your pleas, the interviewers all ask why you chose to build on Peurpel's grave. Without much information, your interviews sound clipped and unconvincing, and the news stations often cut footage so you look even less prepared. You come off as insincere, and other historical and conservation groups start complaining publicly.

The message of "we don't know for sure he's buried here, so let's keep going" does not seem to resonate.

The board of directors decides to cancel the project because of the continued media coverage and additional costs. You are transferred to another project. The coastal and valley communities will go without the newest technologies and your company has to eat considerable costs.

THE END



You and your assistant descend on the local library and ask the librarian for help finding anything you can about Theodore Peurpel. The librarian hands off dozens of books on the deceased elder statesman and, after a full day of skimming straight to the back of books to see what happened after his death, the best you can find is a very old book saying that he spent his last days on his ranch in relative quiet. There is no note on where he is buried, but the book is a product of the Theodore Peurpel Foundation. The last sentence of the book is: “Theodore wanted to return to his beloved mountain, and anyone who wants to find him need only walk among his favorite trails.”

Bleary-eyed, you confer with your assistant on what to do next.

Decide

- ▶ To call up the Theodore Peurpel Foundation and find out where this man is buried, continue to the next page.
- ▶ To call your media consultant — time to go on a media blitz talking about the benefits of your new towers, [turn to page 82](#).
- ▶ To call your media consultant and suggest a media blitz (Theodore’s burial site is a mystery, so your company is off the hook), [turn to page 83](#).



It takes a few phone calls, but you are able to set up a meeting with the foundation director, Annette Peurpel. You and your team explain the situation to her, and she is sympathetic to your troubles and listens intently. You mention all the research you've done to try to track down Theodore's grave site and she laughs. "I'm impressed with all your hard work! But I'm afraid you won't find it in any book. You see, his final resting place is a secret. He did not want people making pilgrimages to his grave like he was some kind of great man, so he swore his family to secrecy." You ask if she would be willing to reveal it to you and she refuses. "I'm sorry about all the trouble, but I can't. I don't want to be the one who gives up the ghost, so to speak."

▶ Turn to the next page.



You suspect that just shrugging and saying the grave site is a secret won't solve your problem. You talk to Annette a bit more and she mentions that, because his grave site is a secret, there's a legend that Theodore hid his wealth in his tomb. It has become somewhat of a hobby for amateur treasure hunters. They go up and down the mountains, often disrupting the very wilderness that Theodore loved. It's become quite a problem lately, especially because many treasure hunters are active right when the red-crested warbler is usually mating.

Decide

- ▶ To call your media consultant and suggest a media blitz (Theodore's burial site is a mystery, so your company is off the hook), [turn to page 83](#).
- ▶ To ask Annette if there's anything you can do about the treasure seekers — perhaps you can offer a commemorative plaque or memorial, continue to the next page.



You explain that your leadership is going to cancel your project if you can't find a solution to this issue.

Annette thinks for a while and you hear her flipping through some papers. “Well, if you must know, there’s nothing in his final will and testament that says we can’t make a commemorative landmark to him. I know he’s gotten short shrift when compared to the other State founders...” She pauses and thinks it over. “His favorite hiking trail was actually located on another mountaintop, not the one you’re building on. I think if you wanted to build a memorial, like a small garden with a bench overlooking the valley somewhere, that location might draw the treasure hunters.”

▶ Turn to the next page.



You talk about what a good garden might look like when she suddenly interrupts you. “A puzzle! These treasure hunters think there’s some kind of buried treasure and use clues from his life to go on wild goose chases. What if we left some obscure lines from his diary and some oblique references to locations on the benches or in the garden that would just lead them around the already existing trails like a scavenger hunt? That would be brilliant! They wouldn’t be rooting around the poor warbler’s habitat that way.” You agree that would be fun, if the foundation can provide the text. When you ask her what should be at the end of the scavenger hunt, you can hear her get exasperated. “I don’t know, leave a plaque at the end that says some nonsense like ‘The spirit of Theodore Peurpel was inside you all along’? They’ll eat that up, right?”

Before you can reply, your phone buzzes with a reminder: the board of directors is meeting to discuss this project and needs answers from you. It’s time to face the music.

-
- ▶ Continue to the next page to go to the board meeting — you’ve done due diligence.



You start the video call and all the familiar faces are there. The entire board is waiting for you, and they do not look happy. Janet gives a short presentation on the project's issues, describes the steps you've taken in response, and says she believes there will be a successful conclusion to this project. After she's given her presentation, the president of the board asks you about the latest problem with the burial site. "So what do you have to report? This seems like quite a mess. How could we not have known this was Theodore Peurpel's burial site?"



▶ Turn to the next page.



You report that, in fact, Theodore's grave site is a closely held secret. As a result, no one knows where Theodore Peurpel is actually buried.

Decide

- ▶ To suggest a memorial garden on another mountaintop near Peurpel's favorite hiking trail (costing about \$30k and enabling a media event), [turn to page 94](#).
- ▶ To call your media consultant and suggest a media blitz sharing the truth (the actual burial site is a mystery, so we shouldn't hold up construction on something because of uncertainty), [turn to page 93](#).
- ▶ To stay the course (nothing in the environmental impact assessment report or anything else ever came up about Theodore Peurpel, so as far as you're concerned there's no problem), [turn to page 95](#).
- ▶ To follow your intuition that there's something fishy going on — you've seen the name We the Peurpel Media all over lots of anti-tower messages — maybe you should ask the board to hire some private investigators to learn more about the company, [turn to page 98](#).



You start the video call and all the familiar faces are there. The entire board is waiting for you, and they do not look happy. Janet gives a short presentation on the project's issues, describes the steps you've taken in response, and says she believes there will be a successful conclusion to this project. After she's given her presentation, the president of the board asks you about the latest problem with the burial site. "So what do you have to report? This seems like quite a mess. How could we not have known this was Theodore Peurpel's burial site?"



▶ Turn to the next page.



You try to explain that there was no evidence to show that this was the mountaintop where he is buried. You haven't seen it in any of the original construction research and planning documentation, and there's nothing marked on the mountaintop. The board listens and still looks irked. "So what do you recommend then?"

Decide

- ▶ To call your media consultant and continue the media blitz sharing the truth (the actual burial site is a mystery, so we shouldn't hold up construction on something because of uncertainty), continue to the next page.
- ▶ To stay the course (nothing in the environmental impact assessment report or anything else ever came up about Theodore Peurpel, so as far as you're concerned there's no problem), [turn to page 95](#).



You issue press releases about the towers and organize interviews with local and national news organizations. The interviews are hit or miss, and, despite your pleas, the interviewers all ask why you chose to build on Peurpel's grave. Without much information, your interviews sound clipped and unconvincing, and the news stations often cut footage so you look even less prepared. You come off as insincere, and other historical and conservation groups start complaining publicly.

The message of "we don't know for sure he's buried here, so let's keep going" does not seem to resonate.

Even worse, one news station reaches out to a group of local treasure hunters who have been looking for Theodore Peurpel's grave site for years and they are very eager to share their theories – including ones that suggest his grave is at your construction site. This prompts even more attention, and a cable network proposes a new show that follows the treasure hunters in their search for fame and fortune: "Red, White, and Peurpel."

The board of directors decides to cancel the project because of the continued media coverage and additional costs. You are transferred to another project. The coastal and valley communities will go without the newest technologies and your company has to eat considerable costs.

On the plus side, you may get a cameo in "Red, White, and Peurpel."

THE END



You tell the board about your idea: basically, if we can't find out where the grave is, others can't either, so it will always be a mystery no matter what you do. You explain that the Foundation is looking for an opportunity to highlight Theodore's role in the founding of the State and are open to putting a memorial garden and quiet space with benches on another mountaintop — the location of one of Theodore's favorite hiking trails. You figure that if you can't prove otherwise, you might as well let someone else suggest an alternative to undo the narrative that you're desecrating a sacred space. You also tell them about the Foundation's idea to hide messages and puzzles in the garden to make it into a scavenger hunt around the mountain trails and away from the warbler.

The board discusses your proposal. Finally, the president says, "We agree with your approach. In fact, take \$60K and make the memorial garden something truly nice to look at. Just let us know what happens, and if you do happen to unearth Theodore's body, please don't advertise that..."

▶ Great job! You did it! To celebrate, [turn to page 99](#).



You point out that of all the problems you've had to handle these past few weeks, this is the least worrisome. You don't see anything that would lead you to believe that this will really affect the project. This will blow over as soon as the next big thing happens. You point out that the farmers were pretty easily convinced to lift the roadblock, the HOA withdrew its complaints before the town council even voted, and the PRP got on board with just a single hike up the mountain and a slight schedule change. A press release and some strategic silence afterwards should be all that is necessary.

The board accepts your argument and decides to trust your judgment because you've successfully navigated these other problems. They're actually surprised because they did not even know about some of these problems until you mentioned them. While a little nervous, they decide that you're probably right and you're the expert in the field.

▶ Turn to the next page.



Unfortunately, anger over the grave site continues as you stay strategically silent. You are also the victim of a very slow news month. The continued reporting attracts other, more active and angry groups. A hashtag on social media, #peurpelpain, starts making the rounds locally to boycott your company and eventually has over 10,000 likes and comments, which goes strong for months. You get a call from Janet and she tells you that the board has run the numbers: surveys show that not enough people in the area will subscribe to the new cellular services to make this project worth the effort. The project is pulled and you are reassigned to another project.

THE END



You call up your social media manager and ask him to investigate this onslaught of anti-tower content that seems to have appeared out of nowhere over the past few months. The manager agrees and does some digging. A day later, he sends you a report. Some of the content seems to be organic and created by a mix of locals and other interested people, but there's a lot of content that seems to come from the same source. One of these posts even has a watermark from DragunFyre, a company that actually competed for the tower contract. It's going to take some extra time to learn more and confirm the watermark is real. The same social media accounts seem to share this suspicious content, which includes stories about Theodore Peurpel's grave, how cell towers cause cancer, and how your company is spying on the locals. This all sounds problematic, but there's not enough to go on. You're not even clear what you would do with this information.

-
- ▶ It's good that you have this, but it's not enough information to move forward. To plot a new course, [turn back to page 80](#).



The president of the board listens to you as you speak and goes from impatient to skeptical to interested. The board discusses this new information for a while before the president say, “That’s very disturbing. We’ll hire someone to help you out, but that could take a while. In the meantime, what do you recommend that we do?”

Decide

- ▶ To call your media consultant and suggest a media blitz sharing the truth (the actual burial site is a mystery, so we shouldn’t hold up construction on something because of uncertainty), [turn to page 93](#).
- ▶ To stay the course (nothing in the environmental impact assessment report or anything else ever came up about Theodore Peurpel, so as far as you’re concerned there’s no problem), [turn to page 95](#).
- ▶ To acknowledge that you need a new plan and suggest a memorial garden on another mountaintop near Peurpel’s favorite hiking trail, [turn to page 100](#).



You get off the video conference and immediately start making calls. By the end of the day, you've delivered the good news to Annette and your team. Later that week, her Foundation announces the new landmark at the top of the nearby mountain, which is picked up by local and national media. Because this issue got so much attention the past few weeks, and probably because it was a slow news month, several media outlets and local and State officials attend the event. The press event has the intended effect: the narrative shifts from your company stomping on the grave of a historical State leader to the mystery of where Theodore is buried. There's even talk of a mini-series, "Red, White, and Peurpel."

With all the problems solved, or at least mitigated, there are no more roadblocks. Under your watchful eye, the towers go up and you're finished, as promised, before the red-crested warbler's mating season. Aside from a few scattered troublemakers, and the occasional social media post garnering a few hundred views, there are no issues. You've successfully navigated all the problems, built something new for the community, and learned something new about American history. Now it's time to see if you can take the rest of your vacation...

THE END



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▶ Great job! You did it! To celebrate, continue to the next page.



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But, before you can check on changing those travel tickets, you get an email from the private investigator the board hired.

▶ To read the email, turn to the next page.



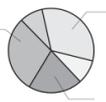
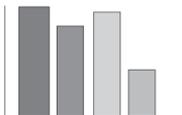
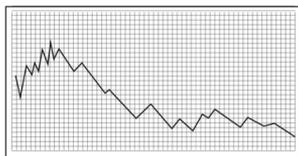
The report in the email is comprehensive: the investigator details how digital forensics found that the DragunFyre watermark appearing on one social media post was legitimate and appears on many other company products. He concludes that it was probably included as a mistake on what you saw. He also found out who owns the company: Mann Lichen.

The private investigator discovers that Mann Lichen, whose recent financial troubles have been in the news, was in competition to build the cell towers, a job that would have turned his finances around if he'd been able to win the contract. As a result he's been forced to list many of his personal properties, including his summer villa.

The investigator also talked to former employees and learned that Lichen has been forced to lay off a large percentage of his staff in recent months.

The investigator shares with you his bottom-line conclusion: Mann Lichen is at risk of losing his company, which only increases his anger at having lost the project. With no new prospects and the possibility of having to sell his existing properties to get by, Mann Lichen launched a vengeful misinformation campaign to kill the tower construction and make your company suffer. He was so desperate to ruin your project and your reputation, he ended up spending even more money he didn't have, as the investigator found that Lichen was one of the main donors for the hiker's Please-Fund-Us. You suspect Lichen is hoping to destroy your company's public image so that the next time you both compete for the same contract, he wins.

THE END



Mann Lichen

Born: August 4, 1960
 Derry, ME USA
 Education: MA Business,
 King University
 Employer: DragunFyre Ltd.
 Known Aliases: None

Mr. Lichen is the founder and current CEO of DragunFyre Ltd. which is a direct competitor to your company. In fact DragunFyre Ltd. was a finalist to be awarded the contract of the Purple Ridge project.

Further research shows that DragunFyre Ltd. is financially overextended and the recent loss of the Purple Ridge project has led to wide spread layoffs, and divestitures within the company.

Personally, Mr. Lichen is shown to have financial troubles, forcing him to list many of his personal properties, including his summer villa in the Napa valley.

Mann Lichen is at risk of losing his company, which only increases his anger at having lost the project. With no new prospects and the possibility of having to sell his existing properties to get by, Mann Lichen launched a vengeful misinformation campaign to kill the tower construction and make your company suffer. He was so desperate to ruin your project and your reputation, he ended up spending even more money he didn't have, as the investigator found that Lichen was one of the main donors for the hiker's Please-Fund-us. You suspect Lichen is hoping to destroy your company's public image so that the next time you both compete for the same contract, he wins.

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ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel takes the reader on a journey that demonstrates the value of critical thinking skills in the face of misinformation and disinformation.

The reader must use their critical thinking skills to assess the credibility of information and seek out the best way to overcome the challenges that arise along the way to finding the truth.

What Is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking is the ability to evaluate information, using reasoning and logic. Using critical thinking skills allows individuals to

- Comprehend various sources
- Ask clear and rational questions
- Identify problems and reach sound conclusions
- Collect and accurately assess information
- Distinguish between fact and opinion

What Are Misinformation and Disinformation?

Misinformation and disinformation use deception as a tool to influence their targets. Misinformation is information that is false but is believed to be true by the person disseminating it. It is shared without malicious intent. Disinformation is the dissemination of information that is deliberately manipulated, fabricated, inaccurate or misleading, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm. The distinction between these two terms is in the intent.



Critical Thinking Cheat Sheet

The scenarios you encountered in the preceding pages feature different kinds of misinformation and disinformation. Many types of these information disorders feature one or more components that make them effective. To understand what makes an effective information campaign and how you might be able to identify or disrupt a malicious information campaign, this section breaks the scenario down.

First, it is helpful to conceptualize how messages are created and why. The following section presents a model for where messages originate and how they interact with an audience. This section also goes into more detail about disinformation and misinformation.

Finally, be careful – there are spoilers ahead!



A Model of Messaging

In general, messaging campaigns are comprised of three components designed to influence behavior: the Agent, the Message, and the Interpreter (Wardle, 2017). The agent is the entity that creates and distributes the message, either directly or through a network, based on a particular motive or set of motives. Agents may be individuals, companies, “states looking to influence events beyond their borders, politicians and their supporters looking to win power, [or even] extremist groups ... trying to recruit or radicalize members” (Tanner, 2020, p.2). Agents generally want to bring about some end-state by psychologically influencing a target population. The goal may not be obvious.

The second component is the message. It is information packaged to align with both the agent’s motives and experiences. Messages can be subtle or direct: sometimes they are direct calls for action, other times they can simply leave an impression without the message being obvious. Messages are sent through a medium such as email, radio, speech, or any other means of conveying information. The medium is usually tailored to either maximize exposure across large groups or target a select group.

The message usually aligns with the views of the third component, the interpreter. Like the agent, the interpreter may be a specific individual or group. The interpreter processes the message through its own unique cultural, social, or psychological lens, which imbues the message with meaning. If the agent is successful, the message will motivate the interpreter to take action or avoid taking action in accordance with the agent’s motives (Wardle, 2017).



Disinformation is a coercive message intended to further the agent's goals through deception. When agents transmit disinformation, they do so often to gain a strategic advantage by creating conflict between the target and the target audience. That is, an agent may spread disinformation about one group—the target—to the other group—the target audience. Prolonged disinformation campaigns that intentionally interfere with inter- or intra-group cooperation and consensus-building efforts may irreparably compromise trust in people and institutions (Wardle, 2017).

Most messaging campaigns are not maliciously misleading or false. Advertising campaigns for a product are innocuous. False information spread without malicious intent is generally termed misinformation. An agent may be deceived by misinformation and spread it to others. Even if there was no malicious intent, misinformation can have dire consequences. Misinformation can be as dangerous as disinformation because it can be shared by agents sincerely hoping to inform those they care about.

References:

- Tanner (2020). *10 things to know about misinformation and disinformation*. <https://www.odi.org/publications/17330-10-things-know-about-misinformation-and-disinformation>
- Wardle, C., & Derakshan, H. (2017). *In Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Council of Europe Report DGI (2017)09.



Critical Thinking Strategies

Critical thinking can be a bulwark against misinformation and disinformation. Critical thinking is the ability to (a) identify and formulate problems and solve them, (b) recognize and use inductive reasoning, (c) draw reasonable conclusions from information found in various sources, (d) defend one's conclusions rationally, (e) comprehend and use concepts, and (f) distinguish between opinion and fact (Rudd, 2006). Each of these skills requires practice, but the simplest place to begin is to ask a series of questions rather than accept a message or a claim at face value (Kiely, 2016). For instance, according to the PARCS approach, there are five useful questions you can ask about any message (Zucker, 2019):

- **Purpose:** What is the author's goal or the message's purpose?
- **Author:** Who is making the claim? What are the author's qualifications?
- **Relevance:** Does the claim apply to you?
- **Currency:** When was the claim published?
- **Source:** Is the claim supported by reliable references and do well-qualified people agree with the claim?



The PARCS approach is just one of many approaches, but most critical thinking involves asking questions! For instance, a reader should note where information was published (e.g., newspaper, magazine, blog) to help evaluate its veracity. A reader should note if the title is unclear or misleading because the title is the first impression viewers receive and it can serve to frame the content. Finally, once we consume the information, we should reflect on whether it seemed to only tell us what we wanted to hear. We are not always aware of our implicit biases, and it is easy to fall into the trap of confirmation bias.

Critical thinking skills, such as the question-based approach here, are not a silver bullet against misinformation and disinformation, but they can help blunt the worst consequences of the spread of misinformation and disinformation disorders. Critical thinking is invaluable in protecting organizations and people.

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Kiely, K., Robertson, L.. (2016). How to spot fake news.

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Zucker, A. (2019). Using critical thinking to counter misinformation.

Science Scope, 42(8), 6-7, 9.



Scenario 1: Radiation Worries

The Message – What are the claims being made?

Cell phone towers emit dangerous amounts of radiation, increasing rates of cancer. The towers should not be constructed to save the town from this danger!

Misinformation Components – What makes it effective?

- A blog post mentions the danger of tower radiation with a strong claim of harm mentioned in the headline. There are many excerpts about the dangers of radiation cited in the blog post.
- The blog post cites a doctor as a source – usually a trusted source of information.
- Radiation is a well-known hazard, but how dangerous it is over long distances is not common knowledge. U.S. citizens have long been skeptical of nuclear power, which is often associated with dangerous radiation.
- You, the manager, are not known by the townsfolk and therefore do not have any rapport with the community. You are not a trusted person here.



Useful Critical Thinking Tools

- **Check the claims themselves.** Find out what people believe and examine the blog itself. You could try to reassure people of the tower's safety, but it will help immensely to know the specific claims being made.
- **Check who is making the claim.** The Peurpel People Readers blog is making the claim, a small local blog. A review of their content does not show any clear bias. It is not clear what, if any, motive they may have.
- **Check the sources cited.** The sources are reliant upon one source—Dr. Winters, who has made claims about 5G internet causing cancer. Overreliance on one source can be a red flag that the author has not done quality research.
- **Check if the source is an expert in a relevant field.** Dr. Winters is a Doctor of Metaphysical Science, specializing in cryptozoology. A quick google search would reveal that this has little, if anything, to do with radiation. The source is likely unreliable on the subject of radiation.
- **Check other authoritative sources.** Using guides from the World Health Organization and the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection, the towers should be well within acceptable and safe levels. These bodies often show their work and provide guides for the public to understand complex phenomena.
- **You might not be the best messenger.** Even with evidence, it may be difficult to persuade people that the towers are safe. It is crucial to understand how others perceive you. If you are not seen as reliable, even strong evidence might not help. Find others that are trusted in the community. They might know how to help convince others to give your evidence fair consideration.



Scenario 2: Mistrustful Residents

The Message – What are the claims being made?

The company is a front for the U.S. Government to collect data on the residents. The towers are just a way to spy on the community, and the workers are all spies.

Misinformation Components – What makes it effective?

- The Facebook post makes a number of strong but unverifiable claims.
- The Facebook post seems to prey on people's preexisting fear of government spying or intrusion. Given that communications technology is always getting more complex, it is easy to believe technology can be used to spy on people, especially by governments.
- The group behind the Facebook post is a small but tight-knit group of people in the community. They likely all trust one another, more so than you unfortunately.
- The towers are being built with government permission, which could give the claims of government spying a veneer of truth.



Useful Critical Thinking Tools:

- **Remind yourself of your objectives.** While the locals thinking of you as a government agent is concerning, it is not one of your project's goals to convince them that the government isn't spying on them, or that you don't spy for the government. You are there to build the towers safely, not to change every heart and mind.
- **Check the sources of the claim.** There are none, which may mean that their claims are not based on any reliable sources. It may be a belief or belief system instead.
- **Check your assumptions.** Don't just assume it's a lack of information that is causing tension. If their claims are based on belief instead of information, confronting them with information will likely not work. It is difficult to reason a person out of a position.
- **Ask whether there are alternative explanations.** Ask yourself if there are alternative explanations for the behavior you see. The suspicious activity you may be seeing only seemed to start once your crew showed up. There could be other things driving the tension. Maybe the community is naturally distrustful of outsiders, or just this group. If so, simply moving your people away might help dissolve the tension.
- **Prioritize your goals.** Just because the information may be wrong does not make it harmless. If you cannot dispel the concerns about government spying, then the best thing to do might be to ensure that you and your teams are protected from any threats that may arise out of the misinformation.



Scenario 3: HOA Worries

The Message – What are the claims being made?

The towers will cause the property values of the homes in a nearby HOA to drop by up to 20%. Construction of the towers must be stopped to preserve home values.

Misinformation Components – What makes it effective?

- An email from HOA representatives cites statistics about how property values drop when towers are constructed nearby.
- The claim is built on two strong emotions: fear of loss of property value and the “common sense” knowledge that ugly things will lower the value of those things around it.
- The message seems to be built specifically to stoke fears in an HOA, since maintaining property values is an explicit part of its purpose.
- There is a very clear call to arms to call on the local town council to sue to stop construction.



Useful Critical Thinking Tools:

- **Examine who is making the claim.** The HOA is making the claim, but it cites excerpts from another source. The HOA has a sincere motive to protect property values.
- **Examine whether the source is cited properly.** The claim about the loss in property value seems to come from a reputable source. There does seem to be a caveat – that the loss only happens when the tower is not disguised. The source was good, but only a small piece of the overall report was used to come to a misleading conclusion.
- **Check whether the claims are substantiated.** An investigation of the source material is good, but looking for other sources to corroborate the claims is better. Further investigation finds that property values actually increase with cell towers – the exact opposite conclusion!
- **Corroborate the claim with other sources.** It's one thing to prove a source is not reputable or that it's taken out of context. It may be more effective to find more sources supporting your claims on the same issue.
- **Fact-check yourself and embrace complexity.** You may be tempted to dismiss those things you disagree with or that are inconvenient for your bottom line. But often there can be a kernel of truth in misinformation: for instance, there was some truth to the original claim that towers that aren't disguised do have a small impact on the property values. Acknowledging this and putting it in its full context could show that you are willing to compromise and won't dismiss the audience's fears out of hand. This can help build trust where there is none.



Scenario 4: Environmental Worries

The Message – What are the claims being made?

An environmental group claims that the towers will cause untold environmental damage by disrupting the mating habits of the red-crested warbler, increase pollution locally, change the look of the mountaintop, and destroy habitat. Construction will also restrict hiking, a favorite pastime for locals.

Misinformation Components – What makes it effective?

- The messaging takes advantage of a familiar narrative: environmentalists fighting against a greedy corporation that's earning profits at the expense of the environment. It has all the hallmarks of a good-vs-evil tale that has strong moral implications and does contain some truth: your company is trying to make a profit off the endeavor!
- The messaging seems to either be coming from, or aimed at, a coalition of environmental groups representing many groups locally. Most seem to be educational, but one seems to be particularly radical.
- There seems to be strong backing on a social media crowd-funding website, Please-Fund-Us. They were able to raise \$6,000 in one day!



Useful Critical Thinking Tools:

- **Check the sources.** In this case, there are so many claims that it's hard to know what to respond to. Many claims have no source and are hard to prove or disprove.
- **Check your assumptions.** The absence of clear evidence supporting the claims of environmental damage is not evidence that there will be no environmental damage. The environmental groups could actually be correct.
- **Look for outside assessments.** There is little evidence either way. An outside assessment, such as a government environmental assessment, may lead you to strengthen your own arguments or reassess your assumptions.
- **Reach out to experts.** The assessment highlights the possibility of environmental damage without proper care. This does corroborate the environmentalists' claims that there are risks, but there is no guarantee of damage. Reaching out to an expert for their opinion can help highlight new opportunities to mitigate risks.
- **Read past the print.** It might be helpful to reexamine the strong reaction to the construction as cell towers are a common sight across the country. The benefits to the community are clear. There could be other explanations. Environmentalist groups may be reacting to what seems to be an unequal distribution of benefits and costs: the tower goes up, the company receives profits and the community is left with the environmental costs. Sharing the costs and benefits could help immensely to build trust.
- **Check the audience.** The money raised on the Please-Fund-Me page seems impressive, but the majority of the money came from one source! This suggests opposition might be limited.



Scenario 5: Monument Worries

The Message – What are the claims being made?

The mountain the towers are being constructed on is actually reputed to be the burial site of a famous State Founder, Theodore Peurpel. The company is going to desecrate a famous site for the sake of profits!

Misinformation Components – What makes it effective?

- There seems to be sudden and strong claims making their way through social media that the mountain is a burial spot. They seem to be very well made and professional.
- The claims have attracted enough attention to be picked up by national media sources.
- While news coverage can be in-depth and fair, not all outlets are made the same. When an issue gets national news coverage, news companies are not always able to do justice to an issue. There are deadlines and limited time to present issues over TV, so editors have to compress an issue, which can leave out critical contextual information.



Useful Critical Thinking Skills:

- **Check your own sources.** The mountain being a burial site is a surprise. By consulting your company's documents, you may discover prior research on the matter.
- **Check public sources.** The library is always an excellent source of local knowledge. Often libraries host programs to highlight local history and culture. It's never a bad idea to check the local library for the best local information. In this case, the library cannot confirm the claim about Peurpel's burial site, but it does help point you toward someone else.
- **Check with an expert.** If there is a subject to be studied, there is almost always an expert! In this story, the library cannot give you a definitive answer, but an expert may have more in-depth knowledge. In this case, the expert acknowledges that there is uncertainty – Peurpel may have been buried there, but she cannot know for certain.
- **Embrace uncertainty.** Peurpel's gravesite is a mystery, but that does not mean your work is done. The public perception is that he could still be at your tower's site, and that is the challenge. Uncertainty can be an asset here.
- **Check your priorities.** In this case, the national news coverage threatens to undermine your project. You cannot prove your construction site is not the burial site, but you do not have to! In fact, trying to prove it might be counter-productive. Without lying, you can change the narrative in a fundamental way: instead of a company desecrating a burial site, the headline will be that the company honors a respected State founder. Without making a claim either way, you can change a negative story into a positive one without being dishonest.

The Threat Lab: A Brief History

The Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC) founded The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the Department of Defense (DoD) Counter-Insider Threat Program Director's vision to incorporate the social and behavioral sciences into the mission space.

Our team is headquartered in Seaside, California, and includes psychologists, sociologists, policy analysts, computer scientists, and other subject matter experts committed to workforce protection.

Our business model is simple: We work with stakeholders to transform operational challenges into actionable research questions.

We then design and execute research projects that result in accessible, concise findings and recommendations that we integrate into training and awareness materials for organizations to use as is or to customize for their own purposes.

For more information or to request a briefing,
please email us at

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