

**The Quest for the California Crown:
“Dark” PR Storytelling in the 2021 Newsom Recall Election**
Full Report | Cassandra Hayes

In June 2020, an official petition to recall California Governor Gavin Newsom began circulating, driven by a campaign to oust the governor from office, citing issues such as homelessness, high taxes, water rationing, and other concerns (Rosenhall, 2021). By August 2021, the recall campaign had gained steam, with an election held on September 14, Larry Elder emerging as the main Republican opponent to Newsom. Although contextualized by a successful gubernatorial recall effort in 2003, many derided the manufactured nature of the grievances against Newsom, framing the election as a plot point in the ongoing unsubstantiated claims of mass voting fraud that some Republicans continue to voice after the 2020 presidential election (Brownstein, 2021). Newsom survived the recall effort by a sure margin, with 61.9% voting to retain him (“California Recall Updates,” 2021), but the lingering impact of the recall’s dark PR campaign on the reputation of California and the stability of US democracy continues to echo.

During my recent fellowship with Cision’s Insights team and using Brandwatch’s digital tool that allows for sorting and tracking vast amounts of traditional, digital, and social media content, I examined the conversation about the California recall election against Newsom. With help from Brandwatch’s AI tool Iris, I analyzed 1.12 million social media mentions from August 1 to November 30, 2021, uncovering a variety of narrative trends that shed light into the phenomenon of “dark PR,” as discussed by Solomon (2021), casting a bad light on modern PR strategies and haunting our public discourse.

Past literature on the diffusion of innovations has examined how textual features facilitate the spread of information on social media (Fan et al., 2020; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), noting that damaging news about subjects spreads faster and often becomes more entrenched in people’s minds than positive news framing subjects in a good light (Hornik et al., 2015). Following such research, my narrative analysis examined the structure, elements, and dissemination of dark PR stories, providing lessons to help guide PR practitioners combating destructive campaigns against individuals, organizations, and brands.

Dark PR Narrative Trends

The narrative elements I uncovered in the general social media conversation about the recall election and in the identified dark PR stories reflect quest narrative structure. In his treatise on archetypal plots universal to all human beings, Christopher Booker (2004) defined the Quest as when an everyday hero sets out through a hazardous environment to obtain a sacred object or reach a certain location, accompanied by a ragtag crew of friends. Within traditional media and in the packaged narratives of political campaigns, Booker’s Overcoming the Monster plot might still reign—resembling what other camps call “horse race journalism.” However, on social media, audience members no longer need to sit on the sidelines and watch the forces of good and evil duke it out. Rather, everyday citizens log on expecting to participate in their own perilous journey for truth and justice.

Characters

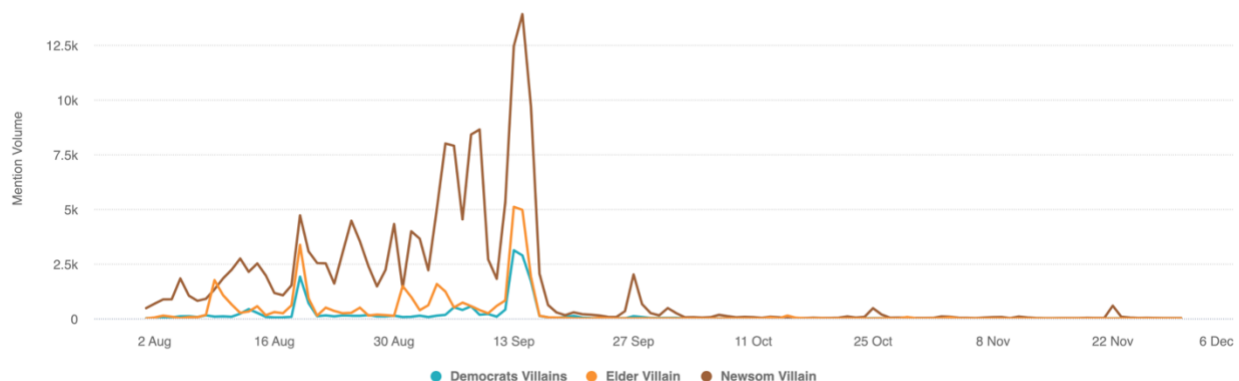
Among the general conversation about the recall election, 648.09K mentions included prominent character frames, while the remaining content used anecdotes (first-person “I” stories or hearsay, 226.04K) and/or news coverage of the election (123.56K).

Following Jones et al. (2014), villains include individuals causing problems or blocking solutions, while heroes actively solve problems. The “You” Hero frame represents mentions in second person, directly calling on audience members to act or describing how audience members have acted. The following frequencies of character frames may total over 100%, as some frames, such as the Newsom Hero and Republicans Villain, may overlap.

Character Frame	Total Volume	Frequency (Out of Character Frame Mentions)
“You” Hero	279,400	43.11%
Newsom Villain	176,110	27.17%
Newsom Hero	168,500	26.00%
Republicans Villain	98,600	15.21%
Democrats Villain	56,230	8.68%
Larry Elder Villain	36,230	5.59%
Larry Elder Hero	14,700	2.27%
Democrats Hero	10,090	1.56%
Republicans Hero	3,558	0.55%

Importantly, evidence suggests that dark PR campaigns can backfire, as the most prominent trend for the Larry Elder Villain frame, in which volume was 79,561% higher than usual—higher than the median volume of mentions for this frame in the general conversation—was driven by content about Elder’s campaign website promoting misinformation about election fraud before the September 14 election. However, the same misinformation also caused a prominent peak in the Democrats Villain frame, with 15,029% higher volume, and contributed to the prominent peak in the Newsom Villain frame, during which volume was 8,173% higher than usual, as depicted in Figure 1. Such trends indicate that negative stories do cause an increase in audience engagement. In addition, the quest narrative structure that frames “you,” or individual audience members, as heroes represented the most prominent frame overall in the analyzed data.

Figure 1. Trends in the Elder, Democrats, and Newsom Villain frames.



Plots

A variety of narratives characterized the dark PR against Newsom in the recall election, which included a total of 99.7K social media mentions. Within the identified dark PR stories, 72,340 (72.56%) framed Newsom as a villain and 30,270 (30.36%) framed the Democratic Party as villains, actively conspiring to harm California and causing problems in the state. Although Newsom was framed as villain more, contextually he often stood as a symbol of broader corruption in the Democratic Party.

Identified subplots of the dark PR stories specific to the Newsom recall include:

Subplot	Total Volume	Description
Crooked Help	51,760	Throughout the election, stories spread that powerful actors such as the Teachers Union, Hollywood elites, Nancy Pelosi, and Kamala Harris had conspired to help Newsom cheat to survive the recall. Further aligning Newsom with such forces, in early September, a story circulated that Newsom's wife attempted to silence Rose McGowan's allegations of sexual assault against Harvey Weinstein.
Media Propaganda	27,400	In the immediate aftermath of the election, stories spread of votes for Elder disappearing from CNN's broadcast, contributing to ongoing grumbles of media bias.
The Tyrant	24,740	A variety of stories focused on various grievances characterized Newsom as a hypocritical tyrant governor, using examples such as prevalent homelessness, water restrictions, and vaccine mandates.
Specter of 2020	12,550	Even before the September 14 vote, stories circulated comparing the recall election to the 2020 presidential election, with implications that corruption led to President Biden's win.
Mail-In Voting	10,580	A video began spreading around August 19 with claims that a stolen USPS (often spelled "USPO" in mentions) master key had allowed Democrats to steal Newsom recall ballots. Then, on August 23, a story spread that 300 unopened mail-in ballots had been found in a man's car, sparking rumors of voting fraud. After the election, Newsom signed a bill extending mail-in voting, which spurred rumors he was easing voting fraud.

While traditional political stories worked because of their unity, dark PR stories work due to their fractured and sensationalist nature and their allusions—links and references to other stories, made in offhand, subtle ways to grant the illusion of quest-like agency to audience members.

Setting

Between August 9 and September 17—the build-up to and immediate aftermath of the September 14 election—social media users discussed California with 16,270% higher volume than usual, driven by 15,483 mentions of #votenoontherecall, 9,866 shares of the link www.electelder.com, and various other posts relating to the election. Such a trend implies that negative stories relating to the head of a brand, such as Newsom as governor of California, can drive increased engagement with the brand itself.

Sentiment relating to California also shifted during the events of the recall election. From August 1 to September 30—the months of most discourse regarding the election—posts about California were 40% neutral, 37% negative, and 23% positive (Figure 2). However, following the election, from October 1 to November 30, the sentiment proportions shifted to 39% neutral, 47% negative, and only 14 % positive (Figure 3). Large drivers of the negative sentiment included an Occupy Democrats tweet shaming burger chain In-N-Out for donating to the Republican recall cause, and a tweet deriding the “shenanigans” of the election and claiming, “Newsom is a communist destroying the state.” The presence of highly polarized conflict contributed to the shift toward more negative sentiment.

Figure 2. Sentiment from August 1-September 30

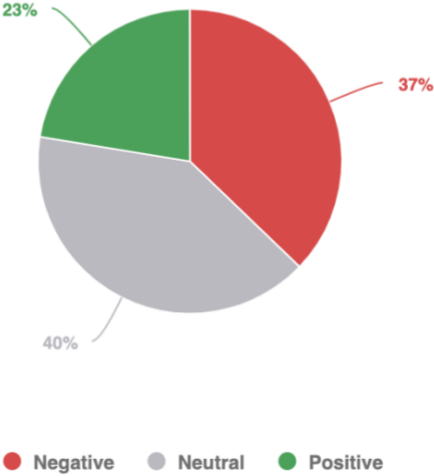
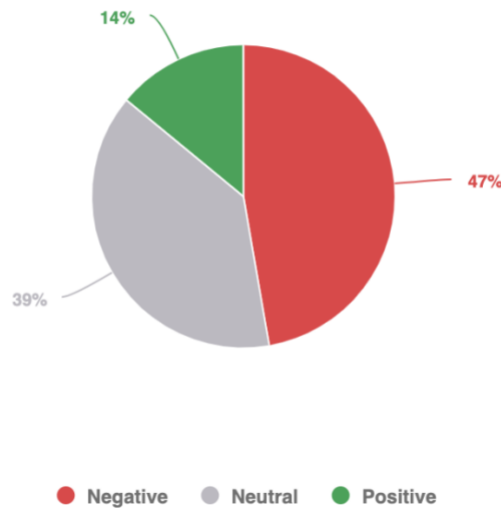


Figure 3. Sentiment from October 1-November 30



Thus, any press is not necessarily good press, as a brand's reputation may be damaged by an increase in negative stories relating to the head of the brand, especially in the aftermath of an immediate crisis.

With Great PR Strategies Comes Great Responsibility

Overall, better understanding of story structure can benefit public discourse about political events, especially in an era of rampant dark PR narratives. Through my narrative analysis and insight gleaned from Newsom's strong survival of the recall election, six recommendations for PR practitioners facing dark PR narratives emerge:

1. **Allow misinformation to peak and dissipate.** While inflammatory, dark PR stories are often short-lived due to their sensationalist and fractured nature.
2. **Recognize that dark PR stories work through allusions.** Combat dark PR through disconnecting references to other conspiracy theories and damaging narratives.
3. **Stay above the fray.** Do not fight fire with fire or "feed the trolls." Instead, consistently promote an alternative narrative without acknowledging the specific content of destructive stories.
4. **Use competing narratives to your advantage.** Call attention to the directed and unfair nature of the dark PR campaign to motivate your base (without repeating specific destructive claims).
5. **Have brand reputation management strategies at the ready.** Although dark PR campaigns against organizational leaders can be survived, they might dampen the reputation of the organization's brand as a whole.
6. **Know the distinct qualities of quest narratives.** In social media conversations, audience members expect to be active participants in piecing together the full story.

While dark PR stories formed only a fraction of the conversation about the recall election, they often drove peaks in the conversation, increasing audience engagement with the subject and framing how the election was discussed. Effectively combating dark PR involves telling more

constructive stories about individuals, organizations, and societies. Although stories often rely on conflict—struggles, angst, and villains—we don't have to settle for inflaming more and more division through storytelling. Rather, using the lessons learned from the dark PR stories of the 2021 California recall election, PR practitioners and everyday citizens can combat doomsday narratives of rampant distrust and conspiracy.

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