

# **FRACTURED AMERICA**

**The Damage Caused by False  
Information and Conspiracy Theories**



**John Allen**

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# How Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories Spread

When several large wildfires broke out in the Los Angeles area in January 2025, social media sites became filled with startling images of the destruction. Some video clips were offered as proof that the fires were deliberately ignited by a military laser weapon or microwave system. One clip showed the famous Hollywood sign engulfed in flames. An aerial video focused on a red-roofed building, supposedly a mosque, that remained untouched by the fire while all the structures around it burned. Panic about riots and looting arose in response to videos that showed thieves emptying out houses in the path of the flames. Many online observers rushed to share these videos with friends or followers.

There was a problem, however—the videos were either falsified images or taken out of context. The flame-engulfed Hollywood sign was a deepfake video, which anyone could have discovered by checking Google or the sign’s own website. The video of the mysteriously untouched building with the red roof did not show the Los Angeles blazes. It was shot during the wildfires on the Hawaiian island of Maui in August 2023. And the footage that claimed to depict looting actually showed friends and workers removing items from houses in the path of the Los Angeles inferno. Experts have often debunked claims that laser or microwave weapons

have ever been used to ignite wildfires. Yet certain conspiracy-minded individuals continue to spread these false stories and fake videos. Such people need to find a scapegoat for disasters that seem dangerously out of control. “People blame the government or company executives because it’s easier than facing structural problems, like drought conditions,” says Geoff Dancy, a political science professor at the University of Toronto. “That is more attractive to people that are desperate for order amid catastrophe.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Erosion of Faith in America’s Institutions**

The growth of misinformation and conspiracy theories has played a large part in creating today’s political and social divisions in the United States. Worst of all is disinformation, or deliberate attempts to mislead people or spread propaganda. The sheer volume of falsehoods and distortions of the truth threaten to erode people’s faith in American institutions, including democracy. A July 10, 2024, survey by the Pew Research Center found that 72 percent



*After the 2025 Los Angeles fires broke out, as pictured here, many social media sites contained images of the fires that were falsified or taken out of context.*

of Americans no longer believe that the United States is a good example of democracy. Another 8 percent maintain that it has never been a good example for other countries to follow.

Americans also consider misinformation to be a significant threat to society. A November 2023 survey conducted by the School of Thought International, a nonprofit that studies critical thinking, found that 84 percent of Americans worry about the impact of misinformation. Seventy-eight percent see it as an existential threat to American society. The survey also discovered that people trust family members and friends more than traditional news sources such as CNN, *The New York Times*, and Fox News. “Many are concerned about misinformation and disinformation but don’t know what to do about it,” says Sander van der Linden, a Cambridge University professor who led the survey. “We’re advocating for governments, organizations, and people around the world to join us in taking an evidence-based approach to address this problem and work together to mitigate its effects.”<sup>5</sup> One bright spot

van der Linden and his colleagues found was that a majority of respondents saw the need to develop critical thinking skills, including the ability to spot fake news and propaganda.

Misinformation and disinformation can also affect citizens’ ability to cast informed votes. False claims about candidates or their policies can leave voters confused and even convince them to vote against their own best interests. Personal attacks on candidates based on lies and exaggerations tend to increase voter hostility and feed into extremism. Fake stories about rigged elections and security problems

with voting machines, vote counts, and mail-in votes lead people to distrust the whole election system. Too often the true story gets less attention than the scandalous lie. “Truth is boring, facts are boring, and outrage is really interesting,” says Utah Lieutenant Governor Deidre Henderson, a Republican who supervises elections in her

**“Many are concerned about misinformation and disinformation but don’t know what to do about it. We’re advocating for governments, organizations, and people around the world to join us in taking an evidence-based approach to address this problem.”<sup>5</sup>**

—Sander van der Linden, professor at Cambridge University

## Fake News That Spreads like a Virus

Virtually everyone has heard about stories or memes that go viral on the internet, meaning they spread rapidly across social media platforms in a short time. But experts on information sharing say that fake news really does spread like a highly contagious virus. Such viral content is quick to generate millions of likes, shares, views, and comments, often before efforts to debunk the stories can even begin. “Scientists have found a close analogy between the spread of misinformation and the spread of viruses,” say British academics Sander van der Linden and David Robert Grimes, who have led surveys of social media use. “In fact, how misinformation gets around can be effectively described using mathematical models designed to simulate the spread of pathogens.”

So if misinformation is like a human virus, then the solution is finding a way to counter its spread. Researchers have turned to an approach called psychological inoculation, or prebunking. This means introducing and then refuting common falsehoods about election fraud or other issues so that people gain immunity to certain kinds of fake news. “It’s similar to vaccination,” say Van der Linden and Grimes, “where people are introduced to a (weakened) dose of the virus to prime their immune systems to future exposure.”

Sander van der Linden and David Robert Grimes, “Misinformation Really Does Spread like a Virus, Suggest Mathematical Models Drawn from Epidemiology,” *The Conversation*, November 5, 2024. <https://theconversation.com>.

state. “It’s like playing whack-a-mole with truth. But what we try to do is just get as much information out there as possible.”<sup>6</sup>

A healthy democracy depends on the losing side accepting the results—and not launching wild conspiracy theories about voting fraud and stolen elections. Such reckless falsehoods, even when countered with facts, tend to sow doubts among potential voters. They can also lead to violence, as with the January 6 storming of the Capitol by Trump supporters. Repeated on message boards and in podcasts, these falsehoods inevitably have a corrosive effect. Recent polling by the Pew Research Center and others indicates that many people are starting to lose faith in democratic norms.

### Tracking the Spread of Misinformation

The internet and social media make up the digital superhighway that allows misinformation and propaganda to flow almost unimpeded twenty-four hours a day. False information and deliberate disinformation can spread like a virus through social media

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