



University of Victoria

# FAKE NEWS! Misinformation in the Era of Trump

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## Methodology

This thesis uses discourse analysis with a social constructivist lens. Discourse analysis explores how language communicates ideas, and a social constructivist lens allows me to understand how shifting ideas and norms influence democratic change and decay. I also draw greatly on social and political psychology with special attention to models explaining the interaction between news media and perception. Lastly, I use quantitative analysis to analyze word frequency in Donald Trump's social media presence.



## How does misinformation spread?

When processing political information, attachments to ideologies, worldviews, or political parties or candidates all shape directional motives. Directional motives contribute to the spread of misinformation because they imprint biases on people about how to evaluate the information presented to them. Digitization changes how audiences consume and interact with information in three ways. First, the sheer amount of contradicting narratives in digitized informational environments is far more than non-digitized environments. Due to the nature of consumer engagement on digitized platforms, the line between content-consumers and content-producers is also blurred. As a result, we get change number two, where information disseminated online becomes distorted, and it becomes nearly impossible to find (and investigate the accuracy of) the original source. Further deteriorating consumers' ability to discern facts from falsehoods is the rise of audio and image editing technology, and more recently, AI-generated misinformation. Third, AI-assisted algorithms target consumers with customized content feeds that either promote controversial, emotionally-charged content, or content that affirms consumers' worldviews, creating "bubbles" of (mis-)information. Because social media platforms and influencers make money off of user engagement, controversial, emotionally-charged, polarizing content is profitable regardless of any socio-political consequences.

## January 6th: From Hashtag to Coup Attempt

Between November 2020 and January 2021, Donald Trump posted a frenzy of 1,718 tweets declaring the election fraudulent. #Stopthesteal began as a misinformed Twitter hashtag and eventually became an offline attempt at overturning the results of a free and fair election. An over-abundance of contradictory information regarding the results of the election combined with a digital landscape that made it difficult to verify informational content while algorithmically targeting consumers laid the foundation for 2000-5000 people to storm the U.S. capitol. Trump first painted himself as a fraud victim during the 2016 election primaries. He later insisted that he won the popular vote over Hilary Clinton. He repeated these allegations of systematic fraud and rigged elections again in the 2018 midterm elections and again in 2020 when he said, "the only way we're going to lose this election is if the election is rigged" (Trump 2020). By normalizing the idea of a rigged election in the minds of his base before the election even occurred, he primed them to trust him more than the electoral system in the event that he lost. To someone with a directional motive to believe that Trump is a trustworthy figure (perhaps due to affective ties to the candidate or his party), such a bold statement from him could inform her negativity bias against the democratic system, and eventually the results of the 2020 election. Considering that Trump championed the use of mail-in ballots in Florida, where the people voting by mail were largely voting in his favour, while decrying the same practice in New York and Nevada, one can conclude that Trump was knowingly lying.

## WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF MISINFORMATION ON US DEMOCRACY IN THE ERA OF TRUMP?

## Discussion and Conclusion

The two main threats posed to democracy by misinformation come in the form of misinformed or politically apathetic members of the polity. Maati et al. coin the term informational learned helplessness (ILH), which is when people are so overwhelmed with contradictory, emotionally charged informational content that they disengage altogether. Because a healthy democracy gains and reproduces legitimacy through civic engagement, political apathy lends itself to democratic decay. Many responded to the #Stopthesteal narrative and the contradicting narrative that Joe Biden fairly won the 2020 election with some degree of ILH. 68% of U.S. adults said that the 2020 election was a great source of regular stress and one-third reported they "[knew] little about Jan 6th" (Maati et al 2023 p. 931-2). Those who are confidently misinformed, respond to overwhelming contradictory information by embracing misinformation as fact. Misinformation and the confirmation bias through which the misbeliever interprets information amplifies political polarization. Democratic crises are more likely to occur in politically polarized democracies, pushing the democratic system to non-workability. The January 6th insurrection serves as an example of misinformation mobilizing misbelievers to attack democracy while believing that they are defending it. What spurred the insurrectionists to action was not singularly a call to action from Donald Trump, but radicalization nurtured by rampant misinformation in a digitized informational landscape.

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