



Informing Science:
the International Journal of
an Emerging Transdiscipline

An Official Publication
of the Informing Science Institute
InformingScience.org

Inform.nu

Volume 29, 2026

WHY ARE WE SO DIVIDED?
OBSERVATIONS ON TRUST DECAY
IN INFORMING SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

Aim	This paper examines the decay of trust as a central feature of contemporary social division.
Methodology	This paper employs an integrative conceptual review methodology, synthesizing ideas from published and accessible sources to develop a broader account of trust decay. The paper draws on current published and other accessible sources. It employs a non-database-centric strategy that uses Google Scholar and other search engines.
Background	The paper traces this crisis through three related developments: the postmodern challenge to objective truth, the weaponization of communication through disinformation and narrative manipulation, and the erosion of confidence in institutions that once helped stabilize public knowledge.
Findings	The paper argues that polarization is not only a disagreement over facts but also a breakdown in the shared standards by which facts are judged. It shows how emotionally charged framing, motivated reasoning, group identity, and digital amplification contribute to fragmented realities and deepen mistrust.
Contribution	The paper also considers the implications of this trust crisis for democratic discourse, education, journalism, and civic life. It concludes that rebuilding trust requires more than fact-checking.
Impact on Society	It requires a renewed commitment to critical thinking, transparent institutions, media literacy, and shared standards of evidence to support meaningful public debate.
Future Research	Misinformation and disinformation often reveal underlying narratives, experiences, and socio-political tensions. Therefore, a study of anthropological misinformation could provide useful insights.

Accepting Editor: Francesco Tommasi | Received: June 17, 2026 | Revised: September 8, September 9, 2026 | Accepted: September 11, 2026.

Cite as: Cohen, E. (2026). Why are we so divided? Observations on trust decay in informing systems. *Informing Science: The International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline*, 29, Article 14. <https://doi.org/10.28945/5879>

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Keywords: trust decay, post-truth, polarization, disinformation, information warfare, critical thinking, media literacy, institutional trust, narrative framing, motivated reasoning

Fragmentation occurs when a civilization is in decline.

Payne (1975)

Truth is being bent, blurred, and synthesized ... Even history is no longer trusted.

Rosenbaum (2026)

INTRODUCTION

The paper argues that today's social division stems largely from the decay of trust in institutions, experts, media, and shared standards of evidence. Disinformation, emotional framing, group identity, motivated reasoning, and algorithmic amplification create competing versions of reality that deepen polarization. Rebuilding trust requires more than fact-checking: it calls for critical thinking, media literacy, transparent institutions, and renewed standards for evaluating evidence.

Media organizations, universities, governments, and other institutions may appear to be strong and reliable guides to truth. Nevertheless, they are increasingly vulnerable to smaller, more agile actors that seek to sabotage public trust through disinformation, narrative manipulation, and digital amplification (Grant, 2020; Innes, 2020; Jankowicz, 2020; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Winchester, 2023). Disinformation fuels division by blending truth with falsehood and spreading emotionally charged stories faster than verification and correction can keep pace (Cohen, 2024; Jankowicz, 2020; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Bentzen (2018) describes tactics such as coordinated bot-nets, troll mobs, and the strategic use of false news reports across multiple platforms.

In today's asymmetric information environment, influence depends less on size or authority than on narrative agility, emotional appeal, and the exploitation of cognitive bias (Kunda, 1990; Sunstein, 2017). Narratives employ selective framing, rumors, and ambiguity to shape public understanding and prolong uncertainty (Anderson, 2021; Innes, 2020).

While disinformation is false or materially deceptive, a broader term is misinformation, which can include falsehoods without intention to deceive (Cohen, 2024). The misinformation crisis is often described as a crisis of truth. For example, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017). While this is true, it is also a crisis of trust (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Lukianoff & Eduardo, 2025). As trust in institutions, experts, the media, and shared facts weakens, so does the knowledge system that supports democratic debate (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). The damage is not only informational. It also affects the standards people use to distinguish between knowledge and opinion, evidence and dogma, and reality and fabrication (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Winchester, 2023). In that environment, people ask not simply, "Is this true?" but "Who is saying it?" and "Does it come from my side?" (Haidt, 2022; Lukianoff & Eduardo, 2025).

The post-truth condition is the result of the convergence of three interrelated developments (Fuller, 2018; Grant, 2020; Jankowicz, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017):

- critiques of objective knowledge;
- the strategic development of political disinformation and information warfare; and
- the uneven erosion of trust that destabilizes the modern knowledge system.

This paper explores those three developments and ends by asking how societies can rebuild trust, strengthen critical thinking, and resist the erosion of Western epistemic standards (Haidt, 2022; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Sunstein, 2017). It begins with a definition of post-truth.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses an integrative conceptual review methodology. Rather than reporting original empirical data, it synthesizes ideas from books, peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and accessible online resources that address trust, truth, disinformation, polarization, communication, social cognition, and contemporary societal conflict. The purpose of this approach is to bring together perspectives from communication studies, informing science, social science, political analysis, media studies, and interdisciplinary research in order to develop a broader account of trust decay. It is not and does not claim to be a literature review.

Sources were selected for their relevance to three central questions: how shared standards of truth have weakened, how narratives and disinformation shape public understanding, and how declining institutional trust contributes to social division. It did not rely on any database. The review emphasizes works that explain conceptual relationships rather than those that provide a single statistical test or narrow empirical measurement. Key themes were identified across the literature, compared for points of agreement and tension, and then organized into a framework linking post-truth conditions, information warfare, motivated reasoning, institutional distrust, and the need for renewed critical thinking.

Because the paper is conceptual and integrative, its contribution lies in interpretation and synthesis rather than in hypothesis testing. The analysis uses the reviewed literature to clarify concepts, connect related bodies of research, and explain how trust decay operates across epistemic, psychological, institutional, and civic dimensions. This method is appropriate for examining a complex social problem that crosses disciplinary boundaries and cannot be fully understood through a single field, data source, or methodological lens.

THE BREAKDOWN OF COMMON UNDERSTANDING: TRUTH, POST-TRUTH, AND THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE

Traditionally, Western civilization treated truth as objective: something discovered through reason, evidence, and empirical confirmation. In other words, people judged claims by how well they corresponded to reality.

The question, then, is who decides what is real. Institutions such as science, journalism, and academia have long served as arbiters of credibility (Fuller, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Winchester, 2023). However, truth and reality can also be understood in other ways.

In the post-truth view, objective facts matter less. It is being replaced by appeals to emotion, identity alignment, and narrative coherence (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Oxford English Dictionary, 2016; Sunstein, 2017). The central question becomes not whether a claim is accurate, but whether it affirms prior beliefs or strengthens group identity (Haidt, 2022; Lukianoff & Eduardo, 2025) (Figure 1). The overabundance of even accurate information complicates our sense of reality (Gradoń et al., 2021).

How does this happen? Traditional journalistic standards such as fact-checking, multiple sourcing, and editorial gatekeeping are fading as speed replaces them. Speed replaces rigor, and financial incentives can displace accuracy. As attention spans shrink, nuance is often penalized. Journalism also operates under social pressure. People fear public shaming, reputational attacks, and ideological policing for holding unpopular viewpoints. Social pressure discourages open discussion and narrows the range of legitimate voices.

Today's post-truth environment discourages rigor, trust, and open debate. Bjola and Papadakis (2020) theorize that digital propaganda, such as the use of algorithms and automation, strengthens and expands misleading information. Profit motives, algorithmic amplification, and ideological

policing all work against Traditional journalism. Traditional journalism now competes with social media for attention.

Pearn and Verity (2022) note that misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech (MDH) have become more pervasive across social media. In the digital age, anyone can publish at little cost, and many do so without regard for standards or verification. Hara et al. (2019) write that social media have dramatically altered the way that people obtain information.

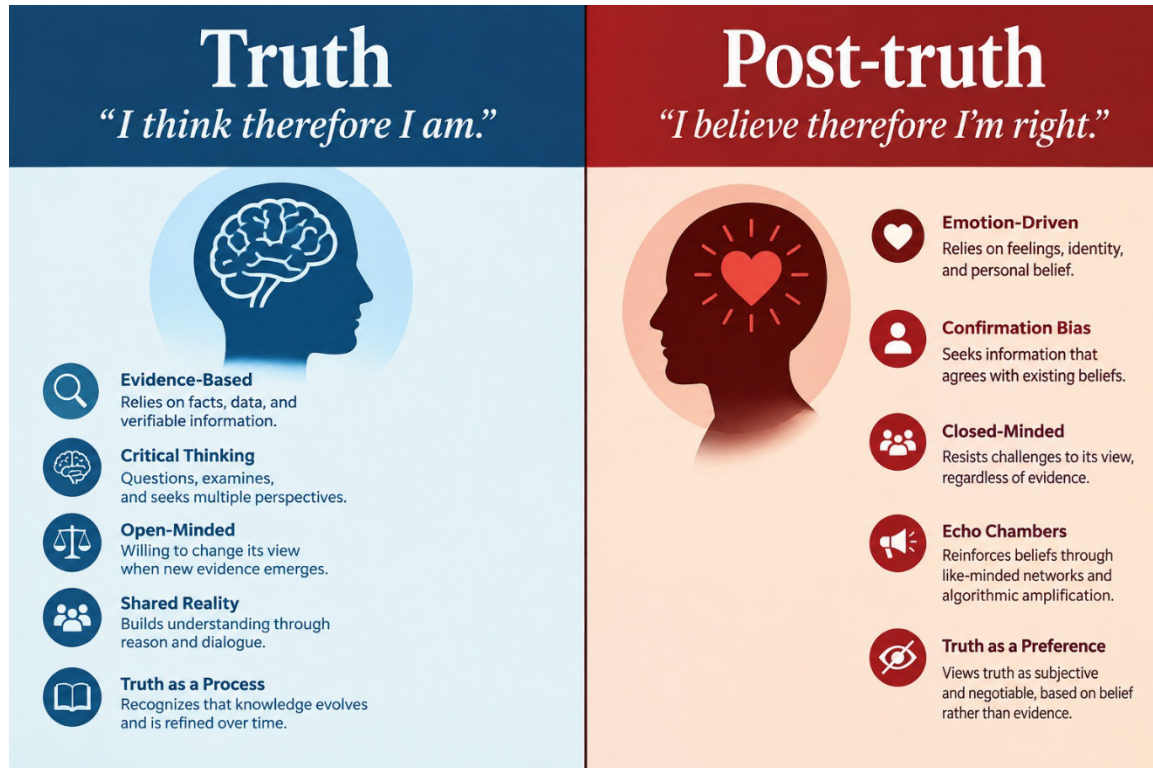


Figure 1. Image created by ChatGPT from author's description of what to draw to contrast truth and post-truth on various criteria

Motivated reasoning helps explain dissent (Kunda, 1990). It leads people to process information in ways that confirm existing beliefs rather than assess it objectively. People readily accept evidence that supports their views and often dismiss, minimize, or reinterpret evidence that challenges them (Kunda, 1990). As a result, reasoning typically serves to defend prior conclusions rather than discover new ones (Kunda, 1990). Modern media, especially social media, magnifies this tendency. In a world of competing claims, people can choose information that reinforces their worldview, increasing epistemic fragmentation and polarization (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2017). In practical terms, people begin to inhabit different knowledge worlds. Personalized feeds, targeted ads, and partisan media narrow what each person sees, leaving less common ground for public discussion (Milano et al., 2021).

WHY DOES THIS MATTER? POSTMODERNISM AMPLIFIES POLARIZATION.

While it is true that polarization existed long before postmodernism, religious conflict, nationalism, class warfare, colonialism, fascism, communism, and Cold War politics all produced intense political division under explicitly modern – not postmodern – worldviews. However, postmodernism is better understood as a possible cultural-intellectual condition that can amplify fragmentation, including media fragmentation and digital misinformation.

The media environment has changed. Much of today's media no longer follows traditional journalistic practices such as cross-checking facts across multiple sources and often favors emotional or symbolic expression over sustained analysis. In the TikTok era, images, memes, and short videos often persuade more effectively than data or carefully reasoned arguments. As a result, journalists and institutions have lost much of the authority they once held as arbiters of truth.

Communications as a Weapon

Words can function as weapons. Paul and Matthews (2016) describe the Russian “firehose of falsehood” propaganda model. Goebbels is purported to have noted that by repeating a lie often enough, people will believe it. Psychologists call this the “illusory truth effect.”

In protest settings, slogans and chants reduce complex issues to emotionally compelling, easily repeated phrases (Haidt, 2022; Sunstein, 2017). This phenomenon has been widely studied. Van De Velde (2024) argues that slogans condense claims, project political identities, and evoke emotion. Slogans are a combination of linguistic text, images, symbols, colors, layout, and culturally shared meanings.

From the perspective of framing theory, placards operate by foregrounding selected dimensions of a situation: defining the problem, attributing responsibility, advancing moral evaluation, and, in some cases, proposing a remedy. Al-Naimat (2020) studied protest signs using semiotic analysis.

In short, protest placards and high-impact chants often prioritize memorability over nuance or precision. In this respect, they resemble the social act of labeling someone as having “cooties”: once the label is applied, it can encourage ostracism. Engel (2026) writes that calling a person or nation racist can frame a controversy in emotionally charged, easily repeated terms, casting the person or nation as an outcast.

Although these formats are effective at attracting attention and building solidarity, they often conceal complexity and discourage critical thought (Haidt, 2022; Winchester, 2023). Postmodern and post-structuralist thought helped shape this shift in communication (Fuller, 2018; Lyotard, 1984). Foucault (1980) challenged the idea of universal, objective truth, arguing that societies define “truth” through power relations and that knowledge systems commonly reinforce institutional authority. In this view, truth is not simply discovered; it is constructed within specific historical and social contexts. It is constructed within specific historical and social contexts (Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984). More broadly, postmodern thought is skeptical of grand narratives – broad frameworks that claim universal authority over truth, progress, or human nature (Lyotard, 1984). Whereas modernism emphasized reason, progress, and objective knowledge, postmodernism rejects any single, definitive account of the world. It treats reason, objectivity, and universalism as historically situated constructs often entangled with power, exclusion, and colonialism (Foucault, 1980; Fuller, 2018). As a result, the Western concept of truth — that is, a statement is true if it matches reality or the facts — becomes not a universal standard but one perspective among many (Lyotard, 1984; Winchester, 2023).

As expected, this intellectual shift creates tension. When one treats truth primarily as socially constructed and situation-dependent, resolving conflicting claims becomes more difficult (Fuller, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). As shared standards for evidence and verification weaken, the knowledge landscape fragments, and multiple competing “truths” coexist (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Institutions that once established credibility lose authority, and public debate becomes less about empirical evidence than about persuasion, identity, and power (Haidt, 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

The consequences are far-reaching. Polarization deepens as groups operate inside separate informational worlds, and media systems reinforce those divisions while weakening trust in institutions such as science and journalism (Haidt, 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2017). Communication increasingly rewards emotional force and political mobilization over accuracy, which strengthens post-truth habits of thought (Haidt, 2022; Jankowicz, 2020). This shift reveals both philosophical

challenges to objectivity and practical changes in how information is produced, distributed, and consumed (Fuller, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Postmodern perspectives can illuminate the role of power and standpoint in shaping knowledge. However, their broader cultural influence also raises a pressing question: how can societies preserve shared standards of truth and sustain meaningful public argument (Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984; Winchester, 2023)?

When people no longer agree on who is telling the truth, they become more vulnerable to manipulation. Public life is recast in binary terms: in or out, with us or against us. Groups frame their own narrative as “good” or “true” and opposing narratives as “evil” or “false.” This pattern reflects group narrative identity. It deepens moral polarization, strengthens internal cohesion, and helps justify exclusion or hostility toward outsiders.

The next section examines how narratives, framing, and bias shape what people accept as true.

NARRATIVES, FRAMING, AND BIAS

“Deception” includes stating untruths, concealing the truth, and paltering, which lies between the two (Cohen, 2019). Paltering means misleading someone by making statements that, while technically true, are arranged or presented in a way that creates a false impression. Paltering is a type of framing, though framing is a more comprehensive, more neutral term. Framing refers to the way information is presented. How information is presented shapes how people interpret what they hear, how they feel about it, and what they decide to do. Consequently, the same facts can lead to different choices depending on how they are presented.

People are not fully impartial. Instead, they are biased, which affects the evidence they trust and how they interpret facts. Bias is closely related to values. Values are what people consider good or important. People’s values, desire for cognitive consistency, and motivated reasoning all shape both belief and behavior (Cohen, 2020). Homophily is the tendency for people to form connections with others who are similar to themselves. As McPherson et al. (2001, p. 415) observe, “Similarity breeds connection.”

Homophily is seen in friendship, work, advice, support, information exchange, and group membership. However, there is a darker side to homophily. While shared cognitive maps and shared understanding can improve coordination and reduce conflict (van Rensburg et al., 2022), they can indirectly lead to intimidation and social pressure. People often accept or dismiss facts not on the basis of truth alone, but on whether those facts support a goal, protect identity, or reinforce group belonging. According to Kahan (2017), identity-protective cognition (IPC) is the largely unconscious tendency to evaluate information in ways that preserve one’s membership, status, and sense of belonging in an important social group.

Sherman and Cohen (2006) argue that people display IPC when they adjust their beliefs to preserve their standing within an affinity group. Similarly, Noelle-Neumann (1974) found that people often remain silent when they believe their views are opposed by the majority, out of fear of isolation or reprisal. She called this the “spiral of silence.” (For more on how social networks shape cognition, see Smith et al., 2020.)

For homophilic groups and cultures, their narratives guide how they organize facts to understand reality. Narratives are the larger story or worldview. Framing is the particular way information is presented within that story.

Let us see how these terms interrelate:

- Narratives provide stories through which groups understand events.
- Framing shapes how particular facts are presented within those stories.
- Bias influences which evidence people notice, trust, or dismiss.

- How we understand evidence relies on underlying values, that is, shared beliefs about what is good, important, or worth defending.
- Homophily reinforces this process by drawing people into networks of similar others, where common values and repeated frames strengthen group narratives and make alternative interpretations less persuasive.

These concepts form a reinforcing system for how people interpret information and decide what feels true. **Narratives** give events meaning; **frames** highlight some meanings over others; **values** make particular frames feel important; **biases** tilt attention and judgment; **homophily** concentrates people among similar others; and **perceived truth** is the credibility judgment that can emerge from the whole cycle. A useful, but simplified, causal model might be as shown in Figure 2.

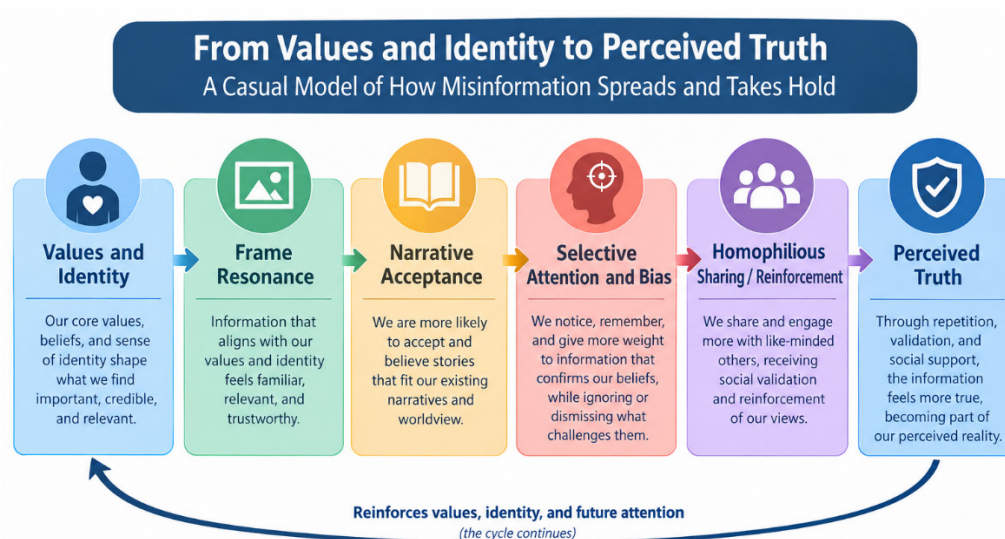


Figure 2. A Causal Model, illustration by ChatGPT from the query to create an image to show a causal model of values and identity leading to frame resonance, to narrative acceptance, to selective attention and bias, to homophilous sharing/reinforcement, to perceived truth

In this way, people's sense of truth is formed not from facts alone but from the interaction among stories, selective emphases, moral commitments, and social ties. Together, they guide how reality is perceived and judged.

POLITICAL DISINFORMATION AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF MODERN INFORMATION WARFARE

These dynamics help explain how political disinformation has become such a powerful instrument in modern information warfare (Bayer et al., 2019; Forest, 2021; McNutt, 2022; Pickard, 2020).

As we have seen, philosophical assumptions, cultural values, and psychological habits all shape how people understand truth. Disinformation purveyors exploit those tendencies. They steer interpretation rather than simply inventing false claims, using rhetorical and cognitive techniques to influence how people judge events, evidence, and authority (Grant, 2020; Jankowicz, 2020).

For example, populist parties often frame politics as a moral struggle between “pure people” and a “corrupt elite,” reducing complex issues to a simple good-versus-evil narrative (Mudde, 2004). This strategy appeals to tribal loyalties and makes political support a matter of identity rather than policy

(Haidt, 2022; Mudde, 2004). Consequently, values, trust, and certainty take priority over factual accuracy. People form convictions based on dogma or belief rather than on evidence (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). The boundary between fact and opinion blurs, and the key question becomes whether a narrative affirms “who we are,” not whether it rests on compelling evidence (Haidt, 2022; Lukianoff & Eduardo, 2025).

Disinformation can appear even in reputable media outlets, often through the distortion or fabrication of content. Disinformation spreads more often through omitted context, manipulated data, questionable sourcing, and selective emphasis than through outright lies (Jankowicz, 2020). These tactics preserve an appearance of credibility while subtly misrepresenting facts. When other mainstream outlets repeat such material, it becomes hard to challenge propaganda precisely because it is presented as legitimate reporting (Grant, 2020).

What mechanisms are used? While not referring to information warfare, Butler (1990) emphasized the role of language and discourse in shaping reality. Her central claim is that categories such as “woman,” “man,” sex, gender, and heterosexuality acquire their apparent naturalness through repeated, rule-governed social and linguistic acts; those repetitions can regulate people, exclude others, and potentially be disrupted. These perspectives challenge the idea of fixed, universal meanings and call into question the stability of categories (Butler, 1990; Lyotard, 1984).

Historical research on political warfare shows that disinformation campaigns are designed to deepen destabilization (Grant, 2020; Jankowicz, 2020). Studies of Soviet era “active measures” show that state actors used disinformation, propaganda, and narrative manipulation not only to deceive but also to erode trust in institutions, poison information environments, and create competing realities (Grant, 2020). Effective political warfare does more than mislead individuals with isolated falsehoods; it damages the social processes by which societies test, transmit, and trust truth (Grant, 2020; Jankowicz, 2020; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). Once those mechanisms are weakened, public discourse becomes more vulnerable to myths, selective framing, language manipulation, and emotional steering, all of which accelerate the breakdown of trust (Haidt, 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

In this context, the collapse of the knowledge system is psychological, epistemic, and civic (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). It is epistemic in that societies lose confidence in their ability to distinguish reality from distortion. It is civic in that democratic life depends on a common basis for argument, persuasion, and legitimacy (Haidt, 2022; Winchester, 2023). A society cannot function when every standard of validity is treated as questionable. Its institutions appear irredeemably tainted. At that point, criticism no longer advances inquiry because it undermines the trust required for meaningful investigation (Fuller, 2018; Horkheimer, 1982; McLaren, 2015). The result is fragmentation of society into competing realities, each sustained by its own tribe, narratives, and moral certainties (Haidt, 2022; Lukianoff & Eduardo, 2025). Table 1 shows examples of the four dimensions of information warfare.

Table 1. Information warfare: four interacting dimensions

Dimension	Primary actors/ mechanisms	Typical tactics	Immediate effect	Longer-term effect
1. State Actors	Governments, intelligence services, military organizations, proxy groups	Disinformation, propaganda, influence operations, fabricated narratives, leaks, bots, covert funding, strategic deception	Introduces or distorts information in the information environment	Shapes political attitudes, creates division, weakens adversaries, influences policy

Dimension	Primary actors/ mechanisms	Typical tactics	Immediate effect	Longer-term effect
2. Platform Amplification	Social-media platforms, algorithms, influencers, coordinated networks, bots, recommendation systems	Viral content, algorithmic ranking, repetition, engagement optimization, coordinated sharing, microtargeting	Increases the visibility, reach, and repetition of selected messages	Creates information cascades, echo chambers, polarization, and perceived consensus
3. Psychological Mechanisms	Individual cognition, group identity, emotions, social cognition	Confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, identity-protective cognition, fear, anger, outrage, repetition, source heuristics, illusory truth	Makes some messages more believable, memorable, and shareable	Reinforces beliefs, identities, narratives, and in-group/out-group boundaries
4. Institutional Trust Effects	Governments, media, universities, courts, science, elections, public-health institutions, civil society	Delegitimization, accusations of corruption, conspiracy narratives, attacks on expertise, false equivalence	Reduces confidence in institutional information sources	Epistemic fragmentation: people no longer agree on which institutions or sources are legitimate

LANGUAGE AS A WEAPON

Language plays a leading role in information warfare. Disinformation campaigns often redefine terms or deploy emotionally charged language to shape perception (Grant, 2020; Jankowicz, 2020). Such redefinition can alter the moral and legal meaning of events and erode shared understanding, making public debate harder to sustain (Haidt, 2022; Mudde, 2004; Sunstein, 2017).

Many techniques exploit the gap between what is said and what is heard (perceived), often illustrated by cartoons in which the same message is understood differently depending on the listener's beliefs and identity. Selective data and carefully framed reporting can be used to advance ideological goals while preserving the appearance of honesty (Haidt, 2022; Sunstein, 2017) (Figure 3).

Political disinformation is deliberately false or misleading information used to influence political beliefs, behavior, institutions, or outcomes. **Information warfare** is the broader strategic use of information-related means (including, but not limited to, disinformation) to influence, disrupt, deceive, or impair an adversary's decision-making while protecting one's own information environment.

Ultimately, political disinformation is less about inventing outright falsehoods than about shaping narratives, myths, and contexts to favor a particular interpretation (Grant, 2020; Jankowicz, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

A key feature of disinformation is the creation and reinforcement of emotionally resonant narratives and myths (Jankowicz, 2020; Mudde, 2004). These narratives serve as mental shortcuts, turning complex events into simple stories that fit existing worldviews (Haidt, 2022; Sunstein, 2017). When combined with groupthink and cognitive biases, they become resistant to counterevidence: information aligned with identity and values is accepted, while conflicting facts are rejected or reinterpreted (Kunda, 1990; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). In information warfare, actors deliberately exploit these

tendencies and social divisions to shape opinion, destabilize rivals, and weaken trust in institutions (Grant, 2020; Jankowicz, 2020).

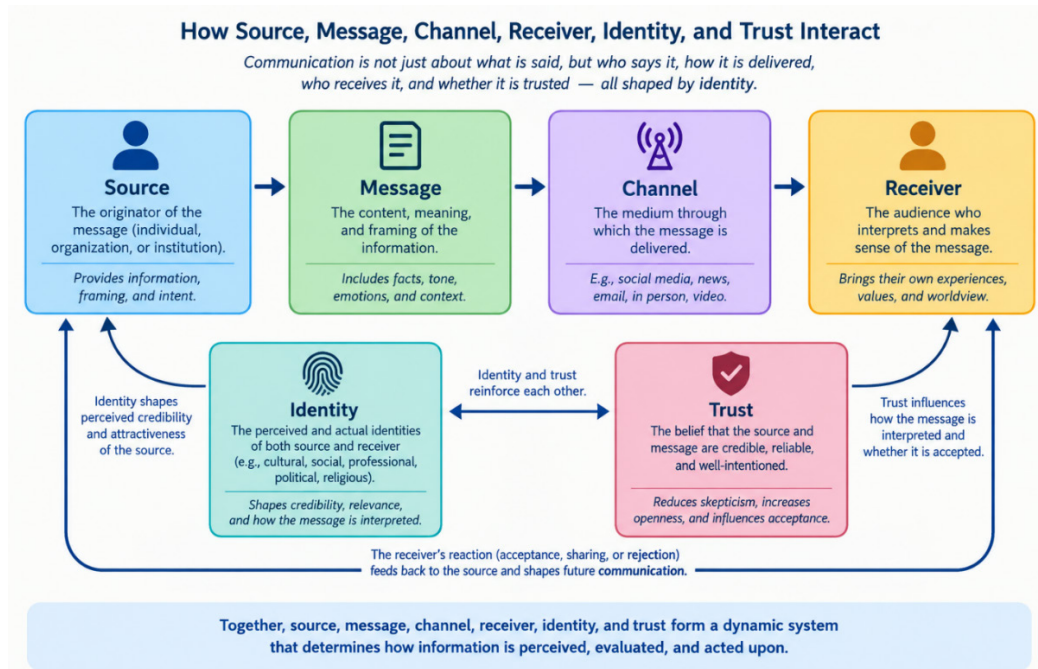


Figure 3. Communication Model:
Identity and Trust Flow, drawn by ChatGPT from a query to create a conceptual diagram showing how source, message, channel, receiver, identity, and trust interact

For these reasons, countering disinformation requires more than fact-checking or debunking. It requires teaching people to listen carefully, distinguish messages from perceptions, and evaluate the narratives, frames, and incentives that shape information (Haidt, 2022; Jankowicz, 2020).

What are the techniques to manipulate how reality is understood?

- **Arguing from Ignorance:** bypassing the burden of proof and pronouncing ideologically charged claims (e.g., “voter fraud,” “settler-colonial state”) as true without evidence.
- **Selective Framing/Omission:** cherry-picking facts and ignoring context, paltering.
- **Idea Laundering:** making an idea appear legitimate by circulating it through credible institutions (especially academia and media); a term derived from “money laundering”.
- **Root Cause Absolutism:** asserting that one historical factor is the sole root of the situation.
- **Terminological Confusion:** altering word meanings to support one’s claims.
- **Fake Images:** AI-generated, staged, from one place and time, and attributed to another.
- **Refusal to Allow Opposing Views to be Heard.**
- **Uncritical Acceptance:** related to groupthink, bandwagon fallacy, particularly where audiences are manipulated into accepting ideologically charged claims without scrutiny.

ASYMMETRY AND THE EROSION AND FRAGMENTATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

So far, this paper has shown how the search for truth has become increasingly clouded. The crisis is highly asymmetrical. Traditional institutions such as governments, major media outlets, and academic bodies resemble Goliath: large, powerful, and authoritative (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Lewandowsky

et al., 2017). Yet they are increasingly vulnerable to smaller, more agile actors – individuals, troll farms, and fringe groups that weaponize confusion about reality (Grant, 2020; Jankowicz, 2020). These actors exploit the open structure of digital media, in which speed, emotional appeal, and simple narratives often outpace accuracy, nuance, and verification (Haidt, 2022; Sunstein, 2017). Shao et al. (2018) showed that Twitter bots are highly effective at disseminating content from low-credibility sources, especially in the first seconds after publication. In this way, they trigger disinformation cascades – information cascades based on misinformation because others say they believe it. As people repeatedly encounter misinformation, they may interpret its apparent popularity as evidence of its credibility. This can lead them to accept and share the claim without independently verifying it, causing the misinformation to spread more widely and gain further perceived legitimacy.

In this environment, a few players can severely damage the credibility of large institutions, even when their claims are false or misleading. Bots do spread falsehoods. See Table 2 for a comparison of traditional, institutional, and disinformation actors.

Table 2. Comparing how institutional actors and disinformation actors operate within – and affect – the broader knowledge system

Dimension	Institutional actors	Disinformation actors	Implications for the knowledge system
Speed	Typically, slower. Universities, scholarly journals, public agencies, professional newsrooms, and courts often use review, approval, editorial, and documentation processes before releasing claims.	Typically, faster. Content can be created, reposted, automated, targeted, and altered within minutes, often without review or evidentiary thresholds.	The system faces a structural timing gap: unreliable narratives can reach audiences before evidence-based institutions can verify, contextualize, or correct them.
Cost	Often high. Credible knowledge production requires trained personnel, research infrastructure, data collection, peer review, editing, legal review, archival systems, and communication staff.	Often low relative to reach. A single operator or small coordinated group can use social platforms, inexpensive advertising, reposting networks, AI-generated media, or automated accounts to reach large audiences.	Low production and distribution costs can give false or misleading content a disproportionate presence relative to the resources required for rigorous knowledge production.
Accountability	Generally higher. Institutions may be subject to professional standards, laws, funder requirements, editorial policies, public-record obligations, corrections procedures, ethics review, and reputational oversight.	Often low or deliberately avoided. Actors may use pseudonyms, offshore infrastructure, disposable accounts, informal networks, or indirect amplification to obscure responsibility.	Accountability creates friction but also supports correction and trust. Evasion of accountability allows deceptive claims to circulate without a clear party responsible for providing evidence, issuing retractions, or making repairs.

Dimension	Institutional actors	Disinformation actors	Implications for the knowledge system
Verification burden	Much of the initial burden falls on the institution. Researchers, journalists, agencies, and editors are expected to document methods, cite evidence, disclose limitations, and make claims proportionate to available support.	Much of the burden is shifted onto the audience, platforms, journalists, fact-checkers, and institutions, who must disprove or contextualize the claim after it spreads.	This asymmetry favors deception: making a sensational unsupported assertion is easier than tracing its sources, checking its context, locating contrary evidence, and communicating a correction persuasively.
Anonymity	Usually limited. Institutional communicators generally publish under identifiable organizational names, named authors, editorial mastheads, official accounts, or formal spokespersons.	Often high. Anonymous or pseudonymous accounts can conceal identities, funding sources, political affiliations, geographic origin, and coordination with other accounts.	Anonymity makes it harder to assess a source's incentives, conflicts of interest, expertise, or history of reliability – key signals people use to evaluate knowledge claims.
Emotional appeal	Often constrained by norms of accuracy, neutrality, uncertainty disclosure, and professional tone. Institutional communication may therefore appear cautious, technical, delayed, or less engaging.	Often optimized for outrage, fear, identity affirmation, grievance, ridicule, conspiracy, urgency, or moral certainty – emotions that encourage sharing and group cohesion.	Emotionally compelling content can outcompete qualified and evidence-based explanations in attention-driven environments, especially when audiences face uncertainty, distrust, or information overload.
Reputational risk	High and relatively concentrated. Errors can damage a journal, university, newsroom, agency, expert, or profession; institutions may issue corrections, retractions, disciplinary action, or public explanations.	Often low, diffuse, or temporary. A misleading account can delete a post, rebrand, move platforms, blame a source, or continue operating through related accounts.	Reputational consequences can encourage institutional caution and correction, whereas low-cost identity replacement can permit repeated misinformation with limited long-term penalty.
Correction practices	Formal mechanisms are more common: errata, retractions, updated guidance, editorial corrections, public statements, appeals, and documented revisions. These mechanisms can be slow but leave a record.	Corrections may be absent, inconspicuous, mocked, reframed as proof of suppression, or replaced with new claims. Original content may remain more visible than later corrections.	Knowledge systems depend on corrigibility – the capacity to identify and repair error. Disinformation weakens that norm by treating correction as a vulnerability rather than a standard of reliability.

Dimension	Institutional actors	Disinformation actors	Implications for the knowledge system
Evidence standards	Claims are ordinarily expected to be tied to identifiable evidence, methods, sources, records, expert judgment, or transparent reasoning appropriate to the field.	Claims may rely on fabricated evidence, selective anecdotes, decontextualized facts, manipulated images, false authority, unsupported insinuation, or unfalsifiable conspiracy narratives.	When evidence standards become blurred, audiences may treat rigorous inquiry and unsupported assertion as merely competing “opinions,” undermining shared criteria for adjudicating truth claims.
Primary incentive	Ideally, public service, knowledge advancement, professional responsibility, legal compliance, policy implementation, or long-term institutional legitimacy – though institutions can also have political, financial, or organizational incentives.	Often, attention, influence, ideological mobilization, political advantage, harassment, fraud, advertising revenue, geopolitical disruption, or erosion of trust in rivals and institutions.	The central conflict is not simply between “slow” and “fast” information; it is between systems designed, however imperfectly, to improve reliability and systems that may profit from confusion, distrust, or polarization.
Effect of failure	Institutional errors can be serious because institutions are influential; however, identifiable procedures may enable investigation, correction, accountability, and learning.	Disinformation failures can persist through repetition, fragmentation, and migration across platforms, even after a claim has been debunked.	A resilient knowledge system needs both institutional self-correction and public capacity to recognize manipulation, assess sources, and distinguish uncertainty from deception.

DISCUSSION: TRUTH DECAY, TRUST DECAY, AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Lady Justice’s blindfold symbolizes the ideal that justice – and, by extension, knowledge – should be impartial and unaffected by status, power, or identity. It reflects the principle that claims should be judged on their merits, not on who makes them (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Knowledge relies on standards of evidence, institutional legitimacy, and trust in informing systems.

In today’s misinformation environment, however, that blindfold is often cast aside. Trust is granted or withheld based on tribal affiliation, identity, and narrative alignment rather than evidence or fair procedure (Haidt, 2022; Lukianoff & Eduardo, 2025). When the symbols and practices of impartiality appear compromised, the legitimacy of the broader system begins to erode (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Winchester, 2023).

As Lukianoff and Eduardo (2025) argue, “the misinformation crisis is not [only] about truth, it is about trust” (para. 1). When trust erodes, facts alone are not enough, because evidence depends on institutions and practices that people regard as legitimate (Grant, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

Kavanagh and Rich’s (2018) work on truth decay describes growing disagreement over facts, the blurring of fact and opinion, the rising influence of opinion over fact, and declining trust in once-respected sources of information. As a result, even accurate information may fail to persuade.

Distorted or fabricated stories can still thrive when they align with identity, grievances, or prior beliefs (Haidt, 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). These dynamics produce what we define as “trust decay,” a broad loss of confidence in institutions, experts, journalism, and public discourse, as noted by Haidt (2022), Kavanagh and Rich (2018), and Winchester (2023).

CRITICAL THINKING VS CRITICAL THEORY

These dynamics become clearer when critical thinking is contrasted with critical theory (Horkheimer, 1982; McLaren, 2015). Although both use the word “critical,” they refer to quite different ideas.

Critical thinking involves systematically analyzing arguments, weighing evidence, and drawing rational conclusions. It is a methodological tool for understanding reality and guarding against cognitive bias (Kunda, 1990; Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

Critical theory, by contrast, emerged from the Frankfurt School tradition and predates many post-modern and post-structuralist currents of thought. Rather than simply describing how the world works, it critiques social inequalities and calls for active social change. At its strongest, it offers a framework for examining power structures, ideologies, and the social construction of knowledge (Horkheimer, 1982; McLaren, 2015).

Critical theory can expose injustice and bias. However, when applied uncritically, it can lead to radical skepticism, treating every claim as an expression of power rather than an effort to describe reality (Fuller, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). In that case, the boundary between truth and ideology blurs, and the normative foundation of knowledge weakens (Fuller, 2018; Winchester, 2023). This can produce binary, us-against-them thinking, in which people are cast either as oppressors or as oppressed. By contrast, critical thinking focuses on whether reasons and evidence justify beliefs. Critical theory focuses on social injustice and emancipation. Critical thinking opens inquiry to new ideas; critical theory, when used dogmatically, can close inquiry to opposing views.

IMPLICATIONS

While I would like to enhance the conclusion by outlining concrete steps institutions and individuals can take to foster trust and critical thinking, such as specific educational programs or policy reforms, doing so would be a fool’s errand. Instead, the paper provides policymakers with general issues to address and leaves it to each policymaker to handle them based on their individual situation. That is, it does not attempt to provide specific recommendations for practitioners and policymakers to address trust decay and improve public discourse.

POLICYMAKERS NEED TO WORK ON REBUILDING TRUST AND REVIVING CRITICAL THINKING

Although the current trajectory is troubling, it can still be repaired and even reversed. Doing so will require coordinated action to strengthen individual skills, reform institutional practices, and improve platform and infrastructure design. Because these changes depend on public policy, policymakers must play a central role.

Policymakers need to rely on critical thinking that is evidence-based, using primary sources

A healthy society depends on trust, and not on blind faith. It depends on trust earned through transparency, accountability, and demonstrated competence (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). To achieve this, institutions need to demonstrate how they evaluate evidence, correct errors, and manage conflicts of interest (Haidt, 2022; Winchester, 2023). Without that visibility, appeals to expertise can sound less like invitations to informed judgment and more like demands for obedience (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). That is, policymakers need to rely on primary sources.

What is more, individuals need to seek the truth using critical thinking. At the civic level, societies need to recover critical thinking as a way of seeking truth (Kunda, 1990; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). It starts with teaching citizens and children how to weigh evidence, recognize manipulation, and distinguish arguments from rhetoric (Haidt, 2022; McLaren, 2015).

Policymakers need educators to provide media literacy education

Media literacy programs can help people recognize disinformation campaigns. As noted above, such campaigns include placard strategies, narrative frames, and linguistic manipulations (Jankowicz, 2020). But media literacy programs work best when they rest on a positive account of truth and knowledge, not merely on debunking techniques (Fuller, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

Prebunking can help inoculate people against disinformation, especially when it teaches them to recognize recurring manipulation tactics before they encounter a specific false claim. The evidence is encouraging, but it is not a permanent or complete “immunity”: effects vary by audience, message, setting, and outcome measured (Traberg et al., 2023).

Policymakers need to understand that critical theory is often antagonistic to critical thinking

Therefore, a more critical understanding of critical theory is necessary (Horkheimer, 1982; McLaren, 2015). Recognizing that power shapes knowledge does not require reducing every claim to a power struggle or treating every institution as a tool of domination (Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984). A mature epistemic culture acknowledges structural injustice and systemic bias while still upholding shared standards of evidence and reason (Fuller, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). The challenge is to integrate the insights of critical theory into a broader practice of inquiry. In summary, what is needed is critical thinking to discover and communicate what we judge to be true (Haidt, 2022; Winchester, 2023).

Policymakers need to understand and act against asymmetric threats

Responding to asymmetric threats in modern information warfare requires careful examination of the structure of digital communication (Grant, 2020; Jankowicz, 2020; Sunstein, 2017). Platforms that reward speed, outrage, and simplicity over accuracy and careful discussion give disinformation a built-in advantage (Haidt, 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). We need alternatives.

Repairing how knowledge is obtained and transmitted will take work. van der Linden et al. (2017) suggest inoculating the public against misinformation. Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) further explore the idea of inoculation against misinformation.

Policymaking needs to occur at several levels: institutional reform, better platform design, and wider cultural change (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Winchester, 2023). Without that kind of effort, trust will continue to be eroded. Meaningful public discourse will remain difficult to sustain (Haidt, 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2017). Nevertheless, there is no choice. Herzog (2025) writes, “Truth has no future, but truth has no past either. But we will not, must not, cannot, give up the search for it.”

FUTURE RESEARCH

Polleri (2022) suggested future research, noting that misinformation often reveals underlying narratives, experiences, and socio-political tensions. A study of anthropological misinformation, such as magic and witchcraft, could provide useful insights.

Lastly, Eckstein delivered the Senior English Address at Harvard Commencement (Harvard University, 2026), which offers a hopeful closing perspective: understanding, rather than agreement, may be one antidote to polarization.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the decay of trust as a defining feature of contemporary social division. It has been argued that polarization extends beyond disagreement about particular facts or policies; it also reflects a deeper breakdown in the shared standards through which individuals and groups evaluate evidence, expertise, and truth claims. When people no longer accept common methods for determining what is credible, public debate becomes increasingly fragmented and susceptible to manipulation.

The analysis traced this crisis through three interconnected developments: postmodern challenges to objective truth, the strategic weaponization of communication through disinformation and narrative manipulation, and declining confidence in institutions that have traditionally helped stabilize public knowledge. Together, these developments have created conditions in which emotionally charged framing, motivated reasoning, group identity, and digital amplification reinforce separate and often incompatible realities. Rather than serving as a common basis for deliberation, information can become a marker of political, cultural, or social allegiance.

The consequences extend well beyond individual misunderstanding. The erosion of trust weakens democratic discourse, complicates educational efforts, undermines journalism, and diminishes the capacity for constructive civic engagement. In such an environment, correcting false claims remains necessary but is not sufficient. Fact-checking alone cannot resolve a crisis rooted in distrust of the people, institutions, and standards responsible for evaluating facts.

Rebuilding trust, therefore, requires a broader and sustained response. It depends on strengthening critical-thinking skills, expanding media literacy, improving institutional transparency and accountability, and renewing commitment to shared standards of evidence. Although disagreement will remain an unavoidable feature of democratic life, a functioning public sphere requires at least some common basis for judging claims and engaging opposing views. Restoring that basis is essential not only for reducing polarization but also for preserving meaningful public debate and the civic relationships on which a democratic society depends.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To overcome my tendency to write “telegraphically,” that is, use fewer words and assume all readers already know the background, I employed AI to enhance the wording of this paper. I used search engines to locate and cite additional resources in APA 7 format beyond those I initially found. AI helped me understand academic verbiage I found in my readings that was new to me. I described to ChatGPT what I wanted it to illustrate.

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