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TECHNOLOGY


I'M RUNNING OUT OF WAYS TO EXPLAIN HOW BAD THIS IS

What's happening in America today is something darker than a misinformation crisis.

By Charlie Warzel

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The truth is, it's getting harder to describe the extent to which a meaningful percentage of Americans have dissociated from reality. As Hurricane Milton churned across the Gulf of Mexico last night, I saw an onslaught of outright conspiracy theorizing and utter nonsense racking up millions of views across the internet. The posts would be laughable if they weren't taken by many people as gospel. Among them: Infowars' Alex Jones, who claimed that Hurricanes Milton and Helene were "weather weapons" unleashed on the East Coast by the U.S. government, and "truth seeker" accounts on X that posted photos of condensation trails in the sky to baselessly allege that the government was "spraying Florida ahead of Hurricane Milton" in order to ensure maximum rainfall, "just like they did over Asheville!"

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As Milton made landfall, causing a series of tornados, a verified account on X reposted a TikTok video of a massive funnel cloud with the caption “WHAT IS HAPPENING TO FLORIDA?!” The clip, which was eventually removed but had been viewed 662,000 times as of yesterday evening, turned out to be from a video of a CGI tornado that was originally published months ago. Scrolling through these platforms, watching them fill with false information, harebrained theories, and doctored images—all while panicked residents boarded up their houses, struggled to evacuate, and prayed that their worldly possessions wouldn’t be obliterated overnight—offered a portrait of American discourse almost too bleak to reckon with head-on.

Even in a decade marred by online grifters, shameless politicians, and an alternative right-wing-media complex pushing anti-science fringe theories, the events of the past few weeks stand out for their depravity and nihilism. As two catastrophic storms upended American cities, a patchwork network of influencers and fake-news peddlers have done their best to sow distrust, stoke resentment, and interfere with relief efforts. But this is more than just a misinformation crisis. To watch as real information is overwhelmed by crank theories and public servants battle death threats is to confront two alarming facts: first, that a durable ecosystem exists to ensconce citizens in an alternate reality, and second, that the people consuming and amplifying those lies are not helpless dupes but willing participants.

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Some of the lies and obfuscation are politically motivated, such as the claim that FEMA is offering only \$750 in total to hurricane victims who have lost their home. (In reality, FEMA offers \$750 as immediate “Serious Needs

Assistance” to help people get basic supplies such as food and water.) Donald Trump, J. D. Vance, and Fox News have all repeated that lie. Trump also posted (and later deleted) on Truth Social that FEMA money was given to undocumented migrants, which is untrue. Elon Musk, who owns X, claimed—without evidence—that FEMA was “actively blocking shipments and seizing goods and services locally and locking them away to state they are their own. It’s very real and scary how much they have taken control to stop people helping.” That post has been viewed more than 40 million times. Other



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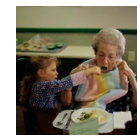
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not comply with FEMA, she posted on X. This is a matter of survival.

The result of this fearmongering is what you might expect. Angry, embittered citizens have been harassing government officials in North Carolina, as well as FEMA employees. According to an analysis by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, an extremism-research group, “Falsehoods around hurricane response have spawned credible threats and incitement to violence directed at the federal government,” including “calls to send militias to face down FEMA.” The study also found that 30 percent of the X posts analyzed by ISD “contained overt antisemitic hate, including abuse directed at public officials such as the Mayor of Asheville, North Carolina; the FEMA Director of Public Affairs; and the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security.” The posts received a collective 17.1 million views as of October 7.

Online, first responders are pleading with residents, asking for their help to combat the flood of lies and conspiracy theories. FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell said that the volume of misinformation could hamper relief efforts. “If it creates so much fear that my staff doesn’t want to go out in the

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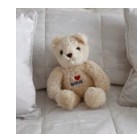
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field, then we're not going to be in a position where we can help people," she said in a news conference on Tuesday. In Pensacola, North Carolina, Assistant Fire Chief Bradley Boone vented his frustrations on Facebook: "I'm trying to rescue my community," he said in a livestream. "I ain't got time. I ain't got time to chase down every Facebook rumor ... We've been through enough."

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It is difficult to capture the nihilism of the current moment. The pandemic saw Americans, distrustful of authority, trying to discredit effective vaccines, spreading conspiracy theories, and attacking public-health officials. But what feels novel in the aftermath of this month's hurricanes is how the people doing the lying aren't even trying to hide the provenance of their bullshit. Similarly, those sharing the lies are happy to admit that they do not care whether what they're pushing is real or not. Such was the case last week, when Republican politicians shared an AI-generated viral image of a little girl holding a puppy while supposedly fleeing Helene. Though the image was clearly fake and quickly debunked, some politicians remained defiant. "Y'all, I don't know where this photo came from and honestly, it doesn't matter," Amy Kremer, who represents Georgia on the Republican National Committee, wrote after sharing the fake image. "I'm leaving it because it is emblematic of the trauma and pain people are living through right now."

Kremer wasn't alone. The journalist Parker Molloy compiled screenshots of people "acknowledging that this image is AI but still insisting that it's real on

some deeper level”—proof, Molloy noted, that we’re “living in the post-reality.” The technology writer Jason Koebler argued that we’ve entered the “‘Fuck It’ Era” of AI slop and political messaging, with AI-generated images being used to convey whatever partisan message suits the moment, regardless of truth.

This has all been building for more than a decade. On *The Colbert Report*, back in 2005, Stephen Colbert coined the word *truthiness*, which he defined as “the belief in what you feel to be true rather than what the facts will support.” This reality-fracturing is the result of an information ecosystem that is dominated by platforms that offer financial and attentional incentives to lie and enrage, and to turn every tragedy and large event into a shameless content-creation opportunity. This collides with a swath of people who would rather live in an alternate reality built on distrust and grievance than change their fundamental beliefs about the world. But the misinformation crisis is not always what we think it is.

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So much of the conversation around misinformation suggests that its primary job is to persuade. But as Michael Caulfield, an information researcher at the University of Washington, has argued, “The primary use of ‘misinformation’ is not to change the beliefs of other people at all. Instead, the vast majority of misinformation is offered as a service for people to *maintain* their beliefs in face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.” This distinction is important, in part because it assigns agency to those who consume and share obviously fake information. What is clear from comments such as Kremer’s is that she is not a dupe; although she may come off as deeply incurious and shameless, she

is publicly admitting to being an active participant in the far right's world-building project, where feel is always greater than real.

What we're witnessing online during and in the aftermath of these hurricanes is a group of people desperate to protect the dark, fictitious world they've built. Rather than deal with the realities of a warming planet hurling once-in-a-generation storms at them every few weeks, they'd rather malign and threaten meteorologists, who, in their minds, are "nothing but a trained subversive liar programmed to spew stupid shit to support the global warming bullshit," as one X user put it. It is a strategy designed to silence voices of reason, because those voices threaten to expose the cracks in their current worldview. But their efforts are doomed, futile. As one dispirited meteorologist wrote on X this week, "Murdering meteorologists won't stop hurricanes." She followed with: "I can't believe I just had to type that."

What is clear is that a new framework is needed to describe this fracturing. Misinformation is too technical, too freighted, and, after almost a decade of Trump, too political. Nor does it explain what is really happening, which is nothing less than a cultural assault on any person or institution that operates in reality. If you are a weatherperson, you're a target. The same goes for journalists, election workers, scientists, doctors, and first responders. These jobs are different, but the thing they share is that they all must attend to and describe the world as it is. This makes them dangerous to people who cannot abide by the agonizing constraints of reality, as well as those who have financial and political interests in keeping up the charade.

In one sense, these attacks—and their increased desperation—make sense.

The world feels dark; for many people, it's tempting to meet that with a retreat into the delusion that they've got everything figured out, that the powers that be have conspired against them directly. But in turning away, they exacerbate a crisis that has characterized the Trump era, one that will reverberate to Election Day and beyond. Americans are divided not just by political beliefs but by whether they believe in a shared reality—or desire one at all.

This article previously stated that Bradley Boone is the assistant fire chief in Pensacola, Florida. In fact, he is based in Pensacola, North Carolina.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlie Warzel is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of its newsletter Galaxy Brain, about technology, media, and big ideas. He can be reached via email.

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