

# Lies in the marketplace: Understanding how disinformation spreads

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“– Wherever there is food, there is freedom! This cage room is my dream. It is here my happiest moment has arrived.”

–In “Dream”; *Wild Wise Weird* [1]

[SCICOMM]

Lying is a complex social phenomenon, often shaping beliefs and influencing society beyond individual dishonesty. Recent research provides insights into how false information spreads, why it can become widely accepted, and the potential consequences for society.

According to Lewandowsky et al. [2], intentional lying—often termed disinformation—is distinct from simple misinformation because those who spread it are typically aware that the information is false. A well-known historical example is the tobacco industry’s extended campaign denying the health risks associated with smoking. Disinformation can impact public health, political processes, and societal trust in significant ways.

A notable case illustrating the potential consequences of disinformation is the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Misleading claims about voter fraud, promoted by various influencers, undermined trust in the electoral process and contributed to events such as the January 6, 2021, incident at the U.S. Capitol (Starbird, DiResta, & DeButts, 2023 [3]). This

disinformation was not solely disseminated by elites; ordinary individuals also played a role in sharing misleading information online, often unintentionally. This process, described as “participatory disinformation,” highlights the role of everyday people in spreading false narratives [3].



Why do people sometimes accept clearly false information? Williams [4] proposes the concept of “belief-based utility,” suggesting individuals might favor certain beliefs not necessarily for their accuracy but because they provide psychological comfort or social advantages. When these preferences become widespread, they create “rationalization markets”—environments where plausible justifications for popular beliefs are continually produced and rewarded, even if they lack factual grounding.

These dynamics help explain persistent skepticism, such as the notable proportion of Republicans who continued to question the legitimacy of President Biden's election victory despite extensive evidence confirming its validity (Lewandowsky et al., 2024 [2]). The "marketplace of rationalizations" concept suggests that ongoing justifications, even if unfounded, contribute significantly to sustaining such beliefs (Williams, 2022 [4]).

Addressing the challenge of disinformation requires understanding the deeper motivations and social contexts that allow false information to flourish rather than focusing exclusively on fact-checking or correction strategies (Starbird et al., 2023 [5]).

## References

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