

EXPERT INSIGHT | Higher Education Reform Initiative

DEATH SPIRAL: HOW CREDIBILITY LAUNDERING CORRUPTS INSTITUTIONS

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TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ Individuals who hold sway in the dominant institutions of American society (i.e., “elites”) stigmatize and suppress information they oppose by labeling it “misinformation.”
- ★ Misinformation—be it real or perceived—is not the primary cause of declining public trust in institutions.
- ★ Trust in institutions is declining because elites have coopted institutions to advance radical and unpopular policies.

Introduction

On January 7, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced a dramatic rollback of his company’s content moderation policies—a move that likely represents the most decisive blow to the U.S. domestic censorship regime since Elon Musk’s purchase of Twitter in 2022 ([WSJ Editorial Board, 2025](#)). Almost immediately, Zuckerberg’s announcement provoked a host of condemnations from individuals affiliated with some of the most prominent institutions of American society, including politicians, business and professional leaders, former government officials, academics, and legacy news journalists ([Schakowsky, 2025](#); [Calma, 2025](#); [Zadrozny, 2025](#); [Golden, 2025](#)).

Although tame by comparison, this mini spasm of elite apoplexy recalls the misinformation panic that followed in the wake of President Trump’s 2016 victory. That year, in stark contrast to 2024, America’s political class, business and professional leaders, senior defense and intelligence officials, academy, and (of course) press had been caught completely flatfooted by Trump’s victory. Scapegoating online misinformation enabled elites to blame the election’s outcome on nefarious (including

foreign) forces. This same cope, combined with their overwhelming desire to prevent another electoral defeat, spurred the creation of what had been termed the Censorship Industrial Complex ([Shellenberger, 2023](#)).

The Misinformation Ruse

The term “misinformation” refers to false or inaccurate information ([APA, 2025](#)). Today, the American public is often warned of malign forces “weaponizing” misinformation (e.g., [CISA, 2024](#)); however, in reality, it is the *accusation* of misinformation that has been weaponized. Elites wield the accusation of misinformation as a *shield* (a weapon) to deflect scrutiny from unpopular policies they support, such as soft-on-crime policies, open borders, and sexually explicit materials in K–12 schools ([Wulfsohn, 2024](#); [Uribe, 2022](#); [Norton, 2024](#)). Elites further wield the accusation of misinformation as a *sword* (again, a weapon) to cut down their opponents. Most prominently, a cabal of government agencies, technology companies (including Meta), and dominant media outlets falsely labeled the Hunter Biden laptop story misinformation during the 2020 presidential election and used this labeling to censor competing outlets, public figures, and ordinary citizens ([Post Editorial Board, 2023](#)).

Apologists for these abuses claim that labeling and removing real or apparent misinformation is necessary to arrest declining public trust in major social institutions ([Serrano, 2024](#)). Trust in institutions is indeed abysmal, but misinformation is not the primary culprit ([Pew Research, 2024](#)). Rather, the public no longer trusts dominant institutions because it correctly perceives these entities as having been coopted by elites to provide cover for radical and divisive agendas.

An institution’s legitimacy is closely connected to public perceptions of its political neutrality. This means that if, for example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency acts in an overtly partisan way—say, by denying disaster relief to Trump supporters—its public reputation will suffer ([Le Mahieu, 2024](#)). Blaming misinformation for the resulting backlash is a ruse ([CBS, 2024](#)). Diverting an institution from its legitimate purposes to serve some partisan or ideological end is a kind of corruption. It is principally this process of elite cooption/corruption, and not the existence or availability of misinformation, that has diminished public support for so many of the major institutions of American society.

Credibility Laundering

The role played by major and formerly highly regarded institutions in this dynamic is akin to the role played by a business engaged in a money laundering scheme. The seemingly reputable business derives revenues from the sale of both legitimate and illicit products. By combining the two, it obscures or “cleans” the illicit revenues and corrupts itself in the process.

Consider a few contemporary parallels:

Example 1. WPATH, Professional Medical Associations, and the Department of Health and Human Services.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) publishes standards of care for transgender patients. Given the epidemic of childhood gender confusion and concerns



surrounding the provision of so-called “gender affirming” care to minor children, the need for evidence-based expert assessments from neutral (i.e., non-ideological, non-activist), professional sources is evident ([Respaut & Terhune, 2024](#); [Overton & Campana, 2023](#)). WPATH purports to be precisely such an organization (note the lofty title); however, leaked files reveal it to be anything but ([Hughes, 2024](#)).

As described by a recent amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court, WPATH suppressed the publication of a review it commissioned upon failing to find support for transgender medical procedures for minor children ([U.S. v. Skrmetti, 2024](#)). WPATH officials then opted not to conduct follow-up systematic reviews for fear that such reviews could “reveal[] little or no evidence and put[] us in an untenable position in terms of affecting policy or winning lawsuits,” according to the amicus brief. WPATH nonetheless removed all recommended age limits “for chemical treatments, chest surgeries, and even surgeries to remove children’s genitals” from its SOC-8 guidelines at the request of Rachel Levine, assistant secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services—a political appointee and outspoken advocate for transgender medical procedures for minor children.

In this case, an elite-favored but unpopular policy position—58 percent of Americans oppose transgender medical procedures for minor children—was legitimized (“cleaned”) by a purportedly neutral but, in fact, deeply corrupt organization ([Rasmussen, 2023](#)). Like cancer, WPATH’s corruption has spread throughout the medical establishment: The American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, and many others use its “expert” standards of care ([AMA House of Delegates, 2023](#); [APA, 2015](#); [GLAAD, 2024](#)).

Public trust in the institution of medicine reached a near-record low of 34 percent in June of 2023 ([Saad, 2023](#)). Meanwhile, news media “fact checkers” label statements opposing transgender medical procedures for minor children as “misinformation” ([Washington & Yilma, 2024](#)). They justify this labeling by pointing to support for transgender medical procedures from the same professional organizations that use WPATH’s standards of care ([GLAAD, 2024](#)).

Example 2. The NIH, Public Health, and Medical Science

During the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in medicine collapsed among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. Thirty-four percent of this group described their trust in medical scientists as “Not too much/None” in December of 2021, up from just 12 percent in January of 2019. Among Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents, trust in medical scientists increased slightly during this same period ([Kennedy et al., 2022](#)).

Some polarization and loss of trust may have been unavoidable, given partisan disputes over pandemic policies. However, much of the public’s trust was squandered by prominent public health officials who repeatedly demonstrated a blatant disregard for truth as the nation battled a once-in-a-century pandemic. To recap, public health officials:



- Misled the public on the credibility of the laboratory leak hypothesis and the likely contribution of U.S.-funded gain-of-function research, as revealed by emails from Dr. Anthony Fauci released under a Freedom of Information Act request ([Jordan, 2024](#)).
- Suppressed discussion of alternatives to costly lockdowns. As described by a central target of this campaign, “a dozen federal agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Office of the Surgeon General, and the White House pressured social media companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter to censor and deboost even true speech that contradicted federal pandemic priorities...” ([Prepared Statement by Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, 2023](#)).
- Repeatedly misled the public regarding evidence supporting the efficacy of face masks with zealot-like appeals to The Science® that often belied the tenuousness of the *actual* science ([English, 2021](#)).
- Misled the public by claiming the COVID-19 vaccine prevents virus transmission ([Purnell, 2022](#)).
- Misled the public on myocarditis risks associated with the COVID-19 vaccine ([Corso, 2022](#)).

In each case, those who were dismissed as purveyors of misinformation were later vindicated ([Neves, 2022](#)). These were not unbiased errors made in good faith. Rather, public health officials advanced a contentious and high-stakes policy agenda using the power of government to demonize opposition to it.

Perhaps the most blatant case of institutional corruption during this period was the June 2020 open letter signed by 1,288 public health and other medical officials calling for the lifting of pandemic restrictions exclusively to support the Black Lives Matter protests ([Simon, 2020](#)). For many Americans, the notion that The Science® necessitated shutting down schools and churches to slow the spread of an airborne disease, but not mass public demonstrations and riots, was the final straw. This open display of ideological bias—combined with lies, manipulations, and censorship to push a far-left agenda—decimated public trust in the institution of public health.

Examples 3 & 4: Higher Education and the U.S. Military

Two vital public institutions—higher education and the U.S. military—have recently undergone aggressive far-left indoctrination campaigns.

The purpose of higher education is truth-seeking and the dissemination of knowledge. Institutionalizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies undermines this goal by:

- Prohibiting certain speech, thereby chilling dialogue and deliberation—both of which are essential to learning ([Stanford University, 2022](#)).
- Imposing ideological litmus tests on hiring, thereby eschewing intellectual diversity in favor of a viewpoint monoculture ([De Piero, 2023](#)).
- Disparaging reason and evidence to advance radical ideologies ([Knight, 2024](#)).
- Promoting race stereotypes (including antisemitism) reinforces primitive tribalism in places that should be open to a diversity of viewpoints and opinions ([Pidluzny, 2024](#)).



- Undermining rigor and academic ethics (e.g., by normalizing plagiarism) undermines norms of truth-seeking ([Calarco, 2022](#); [Swain, 2022](#)).

The destruction wrought by DEI in higher education is now so obvious that even the *New York Times* feels compelled to acknowledge it. Describing the University of Michigan’s mammoth DEI regime, the *Times* reports:

Michigan’s own data suggests that in striving to become more diverse and equitable, the school has also become less inclusive: In a survey released in late 2022, students and faculty members reported a less positive campus climate than at the program’s start and less of a sense of belonging. Students were less likely to interact with people of a different race or religion or with different politics — the exact kind of engagement D.E.I. programs, in theory, are meant to foster ([Confessore, 2024](#)).

The purpose of the military is to defend the nation from foreign threats. Woke indoctrination and DEI policies are almost indescribably absurd in this context. This was described in a recent report from the Center for American Institutions at Arizona State University:

Today our cadets and midshipmen in our military service academies are instructed through Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) training that belies—indeed, subverts—the concept E Pluribus Unum. In extensive and multiple DEI training programs that are implemented through every rank, our service men and women are instructed to believe that this nation was built on systematic racism embedded in the founding of our country and that that system underlies daily life in the country today. Racism is so endemic, these DEI programs declare, that people are not even aware of their racism. DEI training insists that “White supremacy” permeates every facet of American life, institutions, and individual thought and insists servicemembers utilize the divisive vocabulary of oppressed vs. oppressor ([National Commission on Civic Education in the Military, 2024](#)).

In effect, the military now instructs servicemembers to regard one another as members of opposing hostile tribes while also telling them to trust and defend each other and an irredeemably unjust country with their lives. Purposefully undermining the bonds of loyalty that connect servicemembers to one another and to their country is counterproductive to the military’s mission, to put it mildly.

Once again, the coopting of major institutions by radical, unpopular elite agendas coincides with declining public trust. According to Gallup, trust in higher education dropped 20 percent in just eight years and trust in the military has reached a 26-year low ([Brenan, 2023](#); [Younis, 2023](#)). This implosion in public trust is further reflected in sharp declines in college enrollment and military recruitment ([Tough, 2023](#); [Burrow, 2024](#)).

Faced with this backlash, DEI proponents have opted *not* to abandon their radical campaigns or to return to the legitimate and vital missions of their organizations. Instead, they deny the problem and attack their critics ([Brazile, 2023](#); [Brooks, 2023](#)). Misinformation once again emerges as a



primary cause for the public’s stubborn failure to appreciate the wisdom of their betters. The charge of peddling misinformation is leveled explicitly at campus DEI critics—for example, in a recent book titled *The Big Lie about Race in America’s Schools* ([Johnson & Harper, 2024](#)). It is also implicitly leveled at veterans and other Department of Defense opponents of DEI by claims that such “unfounded” criticism undermines public faith in the military ([Myers, 2022](#); [Beynon, 2022](#)). If tapeworms could talk, they would undoubtedly say similar things.

These are just four examples of institutional corruption among many. An expanded list could include the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the broader intelligence community, Customs and Border Protection, and politicized courts, among others ([ABC News, 2023](#); [Devine, 2022](#); [Bensman, 2024](#); [Pandolfo, 2024](#)). Prominent government agencies appear to have manipulated official crime and job growth estimates ([Knox, 2024](#); [Davidson, 2024](#)). One could spend a lifetime cataloging the corruption of America’s news media and barely scratch its surface.

To summarize, there is no misinformation crisis. The retrenchment of online censorship poses no risk to the health of American democracy—just the opposite, in fact. The long-running, disingenuous, and largely performative misinformation panic serves entrenched elite interests by concealing the corrupt use of major institutions to advance unpopular agendas. This parasitic process is killing its hosts—*that* is a crisis, but our elites don’t actually care about institutions. They care about retaining power and using it at the expense of the people they purport to serve. Americans should disregard the misinformation concerns of their would-be censors and applaud all efforts to restore free speech in the digital public square.



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