

The Cure for Misinformation

Why falsehood spreads so easily in a society that has already lost its grip on reality

Adam Tugwell | 19 October 2026



Many people feel that the world is going mad. Facts seem negotiable. Institutions contradict themselves. Public debate hardens into rival realities, each with its own evidence, enemies and explanations. We usually describe this as a crisis of misinformation, as though false claims arrived from outside and contaminated an otherwise healthy society.

But misinformation is not the beginning of the crisis. It is what becomes possible when a culture has already weakened its relationship with reality.

For decades, we have organised more of life around a system that rewards what is profitable, convenient and advantageous, even when it conflicts with what is true, sustainable or right. Most of us participate because participation appears to work. It pays the bills, confers status, offers comfort and promises security. The system therefore feels real because its rewards are real - until the moment they are not.

This creates a strange condition: a shared reality built on arrangements that many people privately recognise as unstable, contradictory or morally compromised. We learn to live with the gap. We call it pragmatism. We adapt. We look away. And in doing so, we become used to a world in which appearance and advantage can matter more than truth.

That is the environment in which misinformation flourishes. It does not need to pull people out of reality. It only needs to enter a culture in which reality has already become fluid.

1. Misinformation lands easily when reality is already negotiable

Misinformation is not new. Rumour, propaganda and deliberate deception are as old as human society. What is new is the ease with which falsehood can now settle into everyday life and feel plausible.

The usual explanation is technological: social media spreads claims quickly, algorithms reward outrage and bad actors exploit attention. All of that matters. But it does not explain why so many claims find an audience ready to receive them.

Falsehood needs something to attach itself to. It lands most easily where people no longer trust the public account of how the world works-and where their distrust is not entirely irrational.

When an institution says one thing and does another, when a company speaks of responsibility while externalising harm, or when political language bears little relation to lived experience, people learn a lesson. They learn that official reality is often a performance. They become accustomed to reading between the lines, assuming hidden motives and treating every claim as strategic.

At that point, misinformation is not entering a world of settled truth. It is competing in a marketplace of narratives. Its advantage is not necessarily that it is convincing. It is that the alternatives have already spent their credibility.

2. The system feels real because participation is rewarded

The system we inhabit is not imaginary. Its wages, prices, debts, deadlines and penalties are concrete. Its benefits are concrete too. People participate because participation can provide income, identity, convenience, recognition and a measure of security.

That is precisely why the deeper unreality is difficult to see.

A system can function and still rest on false assumptions. It can generate wealth while exhausting the people and places on which that wealth depends. It can celebrate choice while narrowing the practical choices available. It can speak the language of human value while measuring almost everything in money, output, growth and attention.

Most of us are bought into this system at some level, not because we endorse every part of it, but because refusing it carries a cost. We make compromises, accept contradictions and tell ourselves that this is simply how the world works. As long as the arrangement appears beneficial, its underlying flaws remain tolerable.

Then comes the moment when the benefit disappears: the job is lost, the institution fails, the promised security proves temporary, the environment deteriorates, or the future offered to the next generation no longer looks credible. What seemed solid is suddenly revealed as conditional.

This is the non-reality reality: a social order that is experienced as unavoidable and treated as normal, even while its values and claims increasingly fail the test of lived experience.

3. “You cannot con an honest man”

The old saying is deliberately uncomfortable: **You cannot con an honest man.**

It does not mean that only bad people are deceived. Intelligent, decent and careful people can be misled. The saying points to the opening a con requires: the wish for an outcome that reality does not support - a shortcut, an easy return, a flattering explanation, a justification for what we already want to believe.

The same principle applies at the level of a society. A culture becomes easier to deceive when it has already accepted dishonesty in more respectable forms. If we routinely tolerate misleading language, concealed costs, performative virtue and rewards detached from contribution, we cannot be surprised when cruder falsehoods find a market.

The vulnerability is moral before it is informational. We want the system to be legitimate because our lives are organised through it. We want our compromises to be harmless because acknowledging their cost would demand change. We want our advantages to be deserved and our discomforts to have simple causes. Misinformation succeeds by offering stories that protect those desires.

This is why the proverb belongs in the argument. The con does not create the appetite. It recognises it.

4. A fluid society produces fluid truths

Once a society grows accustomed to contradiction, truth begins to feel less like a common standard and more like a position to be managed.

Institutions publish values that their incentives undermine. Politics presents choices without addressing the structures that constrain them. Advertising turns desire into need. Public relations converts failure into messaging. Digital platforms personalise what each person sees until a shared picture of events becomes harder to sustain.

None of this means that every institution lies or that all public knowledge is false. It means that people experience enough distance between language and reality to become suspicious of language itself.

In that atmosphere, an unsupported claim can feel no less credible than an official statement. A conspiracy can seem more coherent than a complicated truth. A confident voice can outperform a careful one because certainty feels like solidity.

Misinformation therefore does not win by proving itself. It wins by arriving in a world where proof has lost status, trust has been depleted and every account is assumed to serve somebody.

5. Why the usual remedies are not enough

Fact-checking, media literacy, responsible platform design and proportionate regulation all have a role. False claims can cause real harm, and practical safeguards matter.

But these measures operate downstream. They treat misinformation as a defect in the flow of information rather than a symptom of a deeper failure in the culture receiving it.

A fact-check can correct a claim. It cannot restore trust to an institution that has behaved without integrity. Media literacy can teach people to examine a source. It cannot make public life coherent when incentives repeatedly reward pretence. Regulation can slow the circulation of a lie. It cannot give people a reality worth trusting.

Worse, control imposed by institutions that have not earned confidence can confirm the very suspicion it is meant to reduce. People do not hear, “We are protecting a shared reality.” They hear, “The same system that misled us now wants greater authority over what may be said.”

The point is not that every remedy is censorship, or that nothing should be done. It is that no informational solution can repair a moral and structural problem on its own.

6. The cure is reality, rebuilt through integrity

If misinformation feeds on the distance between appearance and reality, the durable response is to close that distance.

That begins with values - not as slogans, branding or private sentiment, but as standards that carry a cost. Honesty matters when telling the truth is inconvenient. Responsibility matters when the consequences can no longer be passed to somebody else. Service matters when there is no immediate return. Stewardship matters when restraint limits profit. Community matters when belonging demands more than agreement.

Institutions regain trust by becoming trustworthy. Businesses regain legitimacy by valuing people and places as more than inputs. Leaders regain authority by accepting limits, admitting error and aligning their words with their conduct. Individuals regain their bearings by refusing the small daily bargains through which unreality becomes normal.

This is not a call for a perfect past. Earlier societies were often unjust, exclusionary and dishonest in their own ways. Nor is it a demand for one uniform morality imposed from above. It is a simpler proposition: a society cannot maintain a shared reality if it repeatedly rewards behaviour that denies what is true and evades what is right.

Reality is not restored by insisting more loudly on the official version of events. It is restored when the world people are asked to believe resembles the world they actually experience.

Conclusion: Misinformation is not the madness. It is the symptom.

The spread of misinformation is often described as an assault on reality. But it may be more accurate to see it as evidence that reality had already been weakened.

We built a culture in which participation often requires compromise, in which advantage can outrank truth, and in which institutions ask for trust while behaving in ways that

corrode it. Because the system still delivers benefits, most of us continue to cooperate with it. We treat it as reality. Yet the arrangement remains convincing only while its promises appear to hold.

When they fail, people do not simply lose faith in one policy, company or leader. They begin to doubt the whole account. Into that doubt come explanations that are simpler, darker and more emotionally satisfying. Misinformation lands ridiculously easily because it does not have to overturn a stable reality. It enters a reality already made fluid by compromised values and failing legitimacy.

The answer is not to abandon fact-checking, education or sensible safeguards. It is to recognise their limits. A society cannot fact-check its way to integrity. It cannot regulate its way to trust. It cannot censor its way to reality.

The deeper cure is to make our shared world believable again: to say what we mean, to do what we say, to accept the real costs of our choices and to organise life around values that remain valid when they are inconvenient.

When reality is lived rather than merely asserted, misinformation loses the conditions it needs. The bearings return - not because everyone agrees, but because truth is no longer treated as whatever best serves the system in the moment.

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