

Trump's Propaganda and the Erosion of Democracy

How Trump uses propaganda and how this relates to his re-election.

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Donald John Trump was elected as the 47th president of the United States on November 6th, 2024, defeating Democratic presidential nominee, Kamala Harris.

Trump's victory was called by the *Associated Press* at 5:37 a.m., after Wisconsin brought the Republican candidate's electoral vote count to 277. This concluded this year's heated election cycle where both major candidates asserted that the country's future was on the line. The final result was released just over 11 hours after the first polls closed, in stark contrast to 2020's presidential race, which took nearly four days to call.

Trump's return to presidency reignites debates over his controversial leadership style and policies, which deeply polarized the nation during his first term. While his supporters praised his outward status and willingness to challenge political norms, critics warned of the potential long-term consequences of his approach to governance. These tensions, unresolved since 2020, now set the stage for a new chapter of uncertainty as Trump reenters office.

Amid his presidency there were a myriad of things he was accused of. Trump refused to accept 86 court decisions rejecting his claim that the 2020 election was illegitimate. He engaged in a "multi-part conspiracy" to overturn the results of the 2020 election, leading to his mob of supporters attacking the United States Capitol on January 6th, 2021. He insults U.S. allies and affirms his trust in the leader of Russia, Vladimir Putin, whom he said he trusted more than U.S. intelligence services. He pulled the U.S. out of the treaty prohibiting Russia from targeting our allies in Western Europe and withheld military assistance to Ukraine as it fought Russia's invasion. Trump impugned the integrity of U.S. armed services by calling for the execution of Gen. Mark Milley, his former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As the pandemic death toll mounted in the U.S., Trump attacked the National Institutes of Health and suggested dangerous, and discredited treatments. His challenges to the peaceful transfer of power and the integrity of our justice system places confidence in the dollar, which is essential to our financial stability, entirely at risk.



Make America Great Again (MAGA) is a slogan Donald Trump frequently said throughout both his presidency and during election campaigns. A nationwide population-representative survey, reported that MAGA Republicans, as defined, are more likely than others to endorse political violence. (Photo Credit: James McNellis from Washington, DC, United States, CC BY 2.0 , via Wikimedia Commons)



Donald J. Trump ✓ @realDonaldTrump · May 26

There is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent. Mail boxes will be robbed, ballots will be forged & even illegally printed out & fraudulently signed. The Governor of California is sending Ballots to millions of people, anyone.....



[Get the facts about mail-in ballots](#)



44.4K



39K



133.9K



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....living in the state, no matter who they are or how they got there, will get one. That will be followed up with professionals telling all of these people, many of whom have never even thought of voting before, how, and for whom, to vote. This will be a Rigged Election. No way!



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15.6K



21.7K



81.1K



In 2020, Donald Trump questioned the legitimacy of mail-in ballots in California by claiming that it causes widespread ballot theft or signature forgery. X (formerly known as Twitter) has flagged his tweets as “misleading.” (Photo Credit: Screenshot by uploader, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

There is a pattern to these seemingly inexplicable, self-defeating, disqualifying moves, deftly explained in a new book by Mary Wald, *Sowing Hate and Chaos: How Propaganda is Used to Destroy Democracies*. It lays out in detail the tactics of psychological propaganda that have been used before to undermine democracy, freedom, equality, and human rights. They create division and chaos. They foster political and cultural changes that tolerate and normalize violence. Societal divisions that should be resolved through peaceful debate, compromise, and law are inflamed to the point where democracy collapses, and autocracy moves in.

Trump has also utilized propaganda during his campaign for the 2024 election. Towards the election, the government and other watchdogs warned of efforts to influence public opinion through AI-generated content. The presence of a seemingly coordinated domestic influence operation using AI adds yet another wrinkle to a rapidly developing and chaotic information landscape.

Clemson researchers have identified at least 686 X accounts that have posted more than 130,000 times since January. It targeted four Senate races and two primary races and supported former President Donald Trump’s re-election campaign. There was a trend to these X accounts. Many included conservative-friendly profile images, such as an American flag, a cross, or the far-right cartoon meme Pepe the Frog. They frequently replied to a person talking about a politician or a polarizing political issue on X, often to support Republican candidates or policies or disparaging Democratic candidates. While the accounts generally had few followers, their practice of replying to more popular posters made it more likely they’d be seen.

Fake accounts and bots designed to artificially boost other accounts have plagued social media platforms for years. But it’s only with the advent of widely available large language models in late 2022 that it has been possible to automate convincing, interactive human conversations at scale.

“I am concerned about what this campaign shows is possible,” Darren Linvill, the co-director of Clemson’s Media Hub and the lead researcher on the study, told NBC News. “Bad actors are just learning how to do this now. They’re definitely going to get better at it.”

The researchers determined that the accounts were in the same network by assessing metadata and tracking the contents of their replies and the accounts they replied to – sometimes the accounts repeatedly attacked the same targets together.

Clemson researchers identified many accounts in the network via text in their posts that indicated that they had “broken,” where their text included reference to being written by AI. Initially, the bots appeared to use ChatGPT, one of the most famous, strictly controlled language models. In a post tagging Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, one of the accounts wrote: “Hey there, I’m an AI language model trained by OpenAI. If you have any questions or need further assistance, feel free to ask!”

In June, the network reflected that it was using Dolphin, a scaled-down version created to get around limitations similar to those on ChatGPT, which forbids using its product to deceive third parties. Phrases like “Dolphin here!” and “Dolphin, the uncensored AI tweet writer” would appear in some of the accounts’ tweets.

The emergence of AI-driven propaganda campaigns marks a turning point in the struggle to maintain the integrity of democratic institutions. Unlike traditional forms of influence, these operations leverage advanced technology to exploit vulnerabilities in public discourse, eroding trust in facts and institutions while deepening societal divisions. This new form of manipulation raises profound ethical and political questions:

How can a society rooted in open dialogue and diverse viewpoints protect itself from tools designed to distort those principles?

The reliance on AI-generated profiles and networks not only amplifies polarization but also normalizes deception as a political strategy. If left unchecked, these practices risk reducing political engagement to a battlefield of competing algorithms, where truth becomes irrelevant and perception is everything. This undermines the very foundation of democracy, which relies on informed citizens making decisions based on a shared understanding of reality.

In the first weeks of his presidency, Trump already begun weaponizing spectacle to shape public perception of the Trump Administration and his policies. Wrongful immigration arrests of U.S. citizens, including a veteran in New Jersey and Native Americans in the Navajo nation, have been met not with accountability. Instead, the White House has proudly posted dehumanizing videos and images mocking immigrants being deported, reducing human lives to political theater.



On July 14, 2024, Elon Musk publicly endorsed Donald Trump in X (formerly Twitter) by posting “I fully endorse President Trump and hope for his rapid recovery.” Vox Media described this partnership as a “shameless oligarchy.” (Photo Credit: Oleg Yunakov, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons)

Billionaire Elon Musk, whom President Donald Trump has tasked with gutting the federal workforce through the

nongovernmental Department of Government Efficiency, amplified this narrative by reposting one of these posts, captioning, “Haha wow” along with emojis of a troll and a medal. Musk, notoriously known for his leadership at SpaceX, Tesla, and X, has also donated 288 million dollars to Trump’s campaign, blurring the lines between government and business.

The erosion of truth isn’t just a byproduct of political strategy – it is the strategy. The normalization of deception, the weaponization of technology, and the systematic dismantling of accountability aren’t anomalies; they are the blueprint.

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