

The rhetoric of misinformation in the United States: A narrative review of communication strategies for digital civic resilience

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Abstract

Misinformation threatens democratic discourse and public well-being in the United States. This narrative review examines how misinformation operates as persuasion and explores communication strategies for building digital civic resilience. Through interpretive synthesis of interdisciplinary scholarship from rhetoric, communication studies, psychology, and media studies, this review identifies key rhetorical mechanisms enabling misinformation spread, including emotional appeals, identity-based messaging, and algorithmic amplification. Major intervention strategies discussed include prebunking, media literacy education, and community-centered approaches. Findings suggest that fact-checking alone proves insufficient; effective responses must address underlying social and structural conditions. This review argues for moving beyond individual inoculation toward collective practices of critical engagement that sustain democratic participation in digital environments.

Keywords: Misinformation; Rhetoric; Digital literacy; Civic resilience; Communication strategies; Social media; Democratic discourse

1. Introduction

The ability to differentiate the truth from falsehood constitutes a fundamental condition for democratic governance. Yet this basic condition has eroded with an alarming speed within the contemporary American political discourse. Although the strategic use of disinformation has long accompanied the nation's political development, which can be first attributed to Benjamin Franklin's fabrication of reports alleging King George III's collaboration with Native Americans during the Revolutionary period (Rao, 2024). Thus, the present information crisis represents a qualitative rupture rather than a mere historical continuity. What differentiates contemporary times is not the existence of falsehoods, but the scale, magnitude, and democratic consequence of its circulation. As Benkler et al., (2018) observe, the United States now inhabits a toxic information ecosystem characterized by algorithmically amplified sensationalism, coordinated manipulation campaigns, and the systematic blurring of the boundary between fact and fabrication.

The consequences of this conscious disintegration extend far beyond the realm of information accuracy. They have transformed the nature of political disagreement itself, converting contestation over ideas into processes of mutual delegitimization. Citizens increasingly interpret ideological opponents not as interrogators in democratic deliberation but as existential enemies. Multiple intersecting developments have converged to produce these conditions. For instance, the ease of access to digital platforms has reconfigured information dissemination, generating network effects in which falsehoods evidently travel faster, farther, and more broadly than verified claims (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Studies have also shown that, over half of American adults now encounter misinformation regularly, and approximately three-quarters inadvertently participate in its amplification through online sharing (A. Guess et al., 2019; Pennycook &

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Rand, 2021). The proliferation of generative artificial intelligence has further intensified these concerns, with nearly 80% of Americans expressing apprehension about AI's potential to accelerate misinformation production during the 2024 electoral cycle (Ogunlana & Omachi, 2024).

Concurrently, the economic disintegration of local journalism, which is driven by the redirection of advertising revenues toward digital intermediaries, has dismantled critical institutions that once anchored community-level discourse. This vacuum has been rapidly taken over by unverified sources and orchestrated disinformation networks. Legal frameworks, particularly Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, have compounded the problem by extending broad immunity to technology companies for user-generated content, effectively insulating platform operators from accountability. Meanwhile, fact-checking initiatives remain under-resourced, limited in reach, and constrained by temporal lags that undermine their corrective efficacy (Wack et al., 2024). Thus, these dynamics create asymmetrical conditions favoring the diffusion of falsehood over correction, consequently destabilizing the communicative infrastructure upon which democratic deliberation depends.

Efforts to address misinformation often fail because they rest on an inadequate conceptualization of the problem. Conventional interventions grounded in the information deficit model presuppose that false beliefs persist primarily due to insufficient exposure to accurate information. Yet empirical evidence demonstrates that misinformation endures not through ignorance, but through persuasion. It derives its force from alignment with prior belief systems, affective resonance, and reinforcement of collective identity markers rather than from evidentiary credibility (Kahan, 2017; Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021). When factual corrections threaten individuals' ideological commitments or social affiliations, they frequently trigger motivated reasoning and defensive processing, sometimes producing backfire effects that strengthen the very falsehoods they aim to dislodge. Misinformation is therefore best understood not as a deficit of information but as a rhetorical phenomenon, which is a communicative process that mobilizes ethos, pathos, and narrative coherence to produce credibility and belief (Bean & Taylor, 2023; Zompetti, 2019)

Addressing misinformation thus requires cultivating what scholars have termed 'the digital civic resilience', which is the constellation of cognitive, communicative, and institutional capacities that enable citizens to navigate complex information ecologies while sustaining meaningful democratic participation (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Mihailidis, 2018a). Empirical studies of media literacy interventions have demonstrated that enhanced evaluative skills can reduce susceptibility to misinformation, though outcomes vary by demographic and ideological context (Ogunlana & Omachi, 2024). This variability underscores the necessity of integrating individual-level interventions with structural reforms in platform governance, journalism sustainability, and deliberative infrastructure. This narrative review therefore synthesizes interdisciplinary research to reconceptualize misinformation as a rhetorical and communicative challenge at the heart of democratic fragility. It pursues two interrelated questions:

What rhetorical mechanisms enable misinformation to circulate and persuade within digital environments?

What communication strategies have been proposed or empirically tested to strengthen digital civic resilience, and with what degree of effectiveness?

2. Methods

This narrative review synthesizes interdisciplinary scholarship on misinformation of rhetoric and civic resilience communication strategies through interpretive analysis. Literature was identified through database searches (Web of Science, JSTOR, Communication & Mass Media Complete, PsycINFO, Google Scholar) combining terms related to misinformation, rhetoric, and civic engagement, supplemented by citation chaining. The review prioritizes peer-reviewed articles addressing U.S. contexts, though foundational theoretical works from earlier periods are included. As a narrative review, this work employs qualitative interpretation rather than systematic protocols, allowing broader synthesis across diverse methodological traditions (Ferrari, 2015). The selection reflects informed judgment about which scholarship illuminates key themes rather than exhaustive coverage. Sources were analyzed through a rhetorical lens, identifying patterns in how scholars conceptualize persuasion, audience, and ethical communication across disciplinary boundaries.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding misinformation requires recognizing it as a rhetorical phenomenon that operates through multiple persuasive mechanisms. Classical rhetoric provides foundational insights for this understanding. Aristotle's concepts of ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic) remain essential for analyzing how false claims gain traction

(Rubinelli, 2018). Misinformation constructs ethos by invoking seemingly credible sources, activates pathos through fear and moral outrage, and simulates logos by using cherry-picked data or logical-sounding fallacies. In digital environments, however, the nature of credibility has shifted. Online ethos is now shaped by website design, social proof through engagement metrics, and algorithmic visibility rather than by traditional indicators of expertise (Fogg et al., 2003, 2007).

Building on this rhetorical foundation, Burke's theory of identification offers a powerful explanation to why people accept demonstrably false beliefs (Davis, 2018). According to Burke, persuasion functions not merely through logical reasoning but through processes of identification, where individuals align themselves with speakers or communities (Davis, 2018). Believing conspiracy theories or false health claims often signals belonging and shared identity rather than factual assessment. In this sense, the central questions for many audiences are not what is true? But who am I? And with whom do I stand? (Davis, 2018; Kahan, 2017). This framework clarifies why factchecking frequently fails, and thus corrections can threaten deeply held identities rather than simply updating mistaken information.

The media ecology theory further extends this analysis by examining how communication technology's structure discourses itself. For instance, McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message" highlights how media forms shape not only what is communicated but also how people think and interact (Karimi, 2025). Social media platforms, in particular, privilege engagement metrics, amplify emotionally charged content through algorithms, compress complex issues into shareable fragments, and collapse distinct audiences into hybrid publics, all of which create fertile conditions for misinformation (Vaidhyathan, 2018). Thus, the problem lies not only with malicious actors exploiting neutral tools but also with the platforms' very architecture, which encode specific communicative values and incentives.

Cultural cognition theory from psychology complements these rhetorical perspectives by emphasizing the motivational dimensions of reasoning. Kahan's, (2017) work demonstrates that individual's process information in ways that protect their cultural identities rather than maximize factual accuracy. This means that, when new evidence conflicts with group commitments, people are motivated to reject or reinterpret it. Paradoxically, higher political knowledge or numeracy can intensify polarization, as more sophisticated individuals become better equipped to defend preexisting worldviews (Kahan et al., 2017). This finding challenges the assumption that education alone can reduce susceptibility to misinformation.

Fisher's narrative paradigm adds yet another dimension by suggesting that humans evaluate claims primarily through narrative coherence and fidelity rather than through formal logic (Fisher, 1984, 1985). Misinformation often succeeds because it tells compelling stories featuring clear protagonists, emotional stakes, and satisfying resolutions. Conspiracy theories exemplify this dynamic, offering totalizing explanations for complex events while positioning believers as heroic truth-seekers (Butter, 2020). Consequently, debunking individual claims often fails when corrective efforts do not provide alternative narratives that offer comparable meaning and emotional resonance.

Together, these theoretical perspectives intersect to frame misinformation as operating within a complex rhetorical ecology involving interdependent relationships among speakers, audiences, messages, platforms, social networks, and cultural contexts. Misinformation thrives not through any single mechanism but across multiple rhetorical, psychological, and technological dimensions simultaneously. This ecological understanding implies that effective interventions must likewise be multi-level, addressing individual cognition, platform design, and community-level discourses to counter misinformation in a sustainable and contextually grounded way.

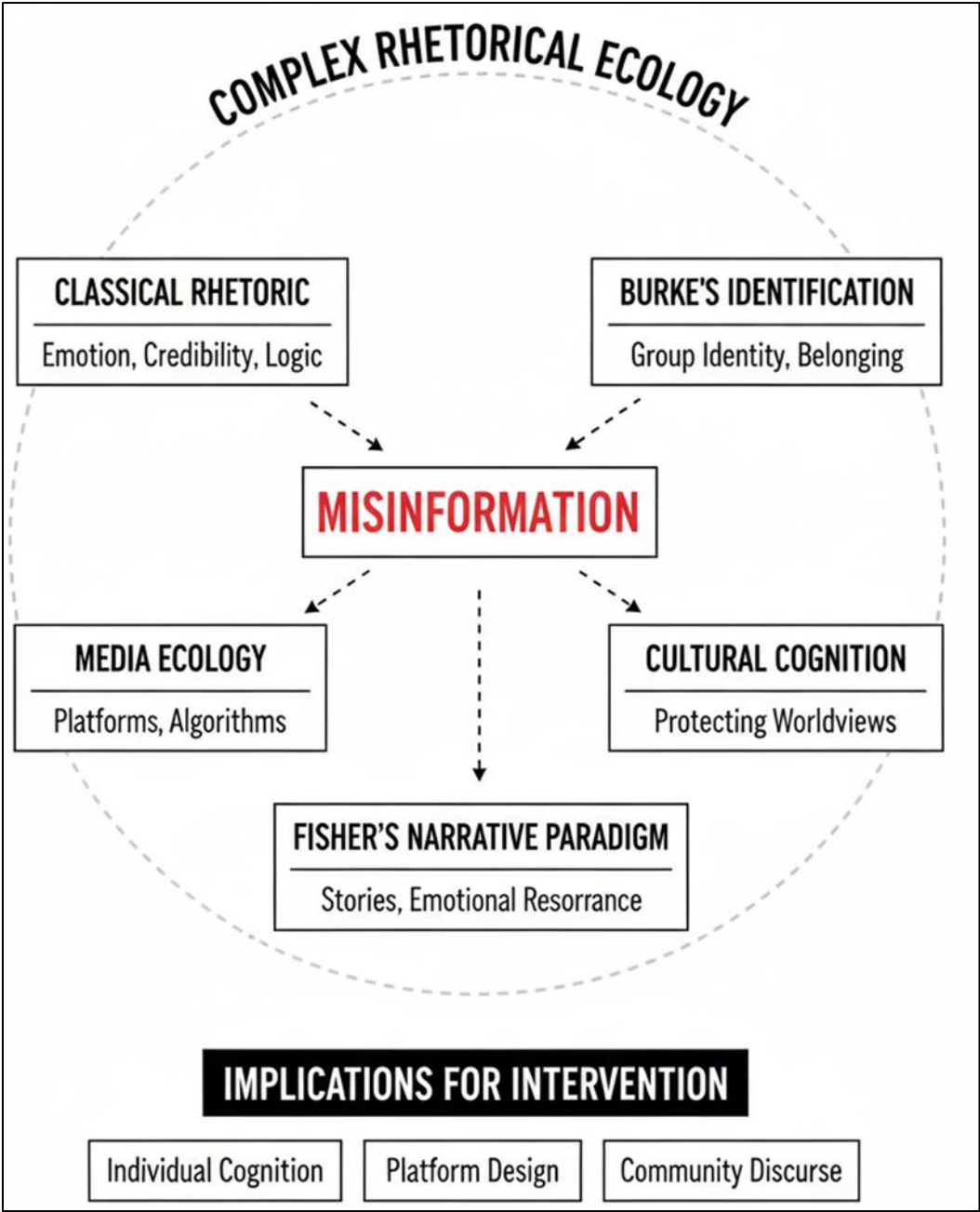


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of the Rhetorical Ecology of Misinformation. Authors Construct

4. Rhetorical Mechanisms of Misinformation Propagation

Misinformation achieves persuasive force and viral spread through identifiable rhetorical mechanisms operating across cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. This section synthesizes research on how false claims leverage these mechanisms to circumvent critical evaluation and achieve widespread acceptance despite factual inaccuracy.

4.1. Emotional Exploitation and Affective Polarization

Emotional arousal constitutes a primary mechanism through which misinformation achieves both persuasive impact and viral spread. For instance, Brady et al., (2017) conducted computational analysis of over 500,000 Twitter posts, demonstrating that each moral-emotional word in a message increased its retweet rate by 20% within same-ideology networks. This finding illuminates why misinformation producers strategically craft narratives evoking anger, fear, or moral outrage. Contents such as these generate clear higher engagement than emotionally neutral information. Thus, mechanisms operate through a dual pathway: first, emotional arousal disrupts deliberative processing, and second,

sharing emotionally charged content serves social-expressive functions beyond information transmission. Pennycook & Rand, (2021) also synthesized emerging research on the inattention-based account of misinformation sharing, arguing that people often share false claims not because they believe them but because social media contexts prioritize rapid reaction over accuracy evaluation. Their work revealed that simple accuracy prompts, such as asking individuals to consider accuracy before sharing, significantly reduce misinformation dissemination, suggesting that emotional engagement often operates outside conscious accuracy motivations. This affirms Iyengar et al., (2019) work on affective polarization, where they argued that political identities become emotionally charged beyond policy disagreement. Thus, when misinformation activates these affective associations, which portray political opponents as not merely wrong but morally corrupt or existentially threatening, it gains some persuasive force independent of factual merit while simultaneously motivating sharing behaviors that amplify its reach.

4.2. Identity-Based Messaging and Motivated Reasoning

Misinformation frequently employs identity-based rhetorical strategies that transform factual claims into loyalty tests rather than propositions subject to evidential evaluation. Kahan et al's., (2012) study on climate change perceptions revealed that increased science literacy and numeracy predicted greater polarization rather than convergence on scientific consensus, with more knowledgeable individuals proving more adept at selectively processing information to support predetermined group commitments. Their finding that knowledge exacerbates rather than mitigates motivated reasoning; challenges deficit models assuming information provision resolves false beliefs. For instance, Van Bavel & Pereira, (2018) argued this phenomenon through identity-based motivated reasoning, where beliefs served as political team jerseys, indicating group membership. Their research revealed that partisan identity increasingly predicts factual beliefs on political topics, with individuals exhibiting what they term "identity-protective cognition" that prioritizes group loyalty over reality. Misinformation exploiting this mechanism embeds factual claims within broader narratives about in-group virtue and out-group malevolence. For instance, Nyhan & Reifler, (2010) earlier work presented the backfire effects, in which corrections paradoxically strengthened misperceptions, though subsequent research by Wood & Porter, (2019) found these effects less robust than initially perceived. This implies that corrections from trusted in-group sources prove more effective than out-group corrections, and corrections emphasizing shared values mitigate identity threat.

4.3. Algorithmic Amplification and Platform Architectures

Platform algorithms constitute crucial structural mechanisms, amplifying misinformation beyond individual-level psychological vulnerabilities. Vosoughi et al., (2018) analyzed 126,000 news cascades on Twitter and found that false news diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, with falsehoods 70% more likely to be retweeted than accurate news. Critically, this advantage persisted even after controlling both activities, which indicated that human behavioral patterns rather than automated amplifications primarily drove viral misinformation to spread. Thus, false information tends to be more novel than truth, and humans preferentially share novel information. However, platform design choices significantly shape these dynamics. Recommendation algorithms optimized for engagement metrics have been shown to create algorithmic radicalization, wherein users receive progressively more extreme content recommendations (Tufekci, 2018a, 2018b). Her investigative works documented YouTube's algorithms steering users from moderate political content towards conspiracy theories and extremist material through successive recommendations designed to maximize watch time. Ribeiro et al., (2020) affirmed this in their work by demonstrating systematic pathways from mainstream to extreme content on YouTube's recommendation network. They argued that algorithmic dynamics interact with attention economics, wherein platforms profit from user engagement regardless of content quality, creating misaligned incentives in which inflammatory misinformation generates higher engagement than nuanced accuracy. Additionally, Zuboff (2019) analysis of surveillance capitalism contextualized this within broader business models, premised on behavioral prediction and modification rather than neutral information provision. Woolley & Howard, (2017) research on computational propaganda also documented how bot networks and troll farms manipulate trending algorithms, hashtag campaigns, and recommendation systems to artificially inflate misinformation visibility while creating false impressions of grassroots support.

4.4. Source Credibility Heuristics and Epistemic Trust

Misinformation systematically exploits evolved heuristics for credibility assessment that proves unreliable in digital environments. Metzger & Flanagin, (2013) dual-processing model of credibility assessment distinguishes between systematic evaluation, deliberate investigation of source credentials and evidence quality and heuristic evaluation, which are rapid judgments based on surface cues. Their research revealed that cognitive misers under time pressure default to heuristic processing, relying on cues like professional design, institutional branding, and social endorsements. They further argued that misinformation producers engaged in what they termed 'Credibility Theater', which is the act

of creating professional-appearing websites with official-sounding organizational names that mimic legitimate journalism. Also, Lazer et al., (2018) analyzed the fake news ecosystem during the 2016 U.S. election and found that, fabricated political websites successfully disguised themselves as local news sources, with users unable to tell the difference between legitimate outlets based on superficial inspection. Further research has also shown that the spread of pink slime journalism, which is the subtle act of algorithmically generating local news sites to advance partisan agendas, further exploits these dynamics (Maheshwari, 2019). Additionally, Pennycook et al., (2020) revealed that prior exposure to false news headlines increases subsequent perceived accuracy, a phenomenon termed the 'illusory truth effect.' This phenomenon happens even when individuals do not consciously remember prior exposure and initially tagged content as false, suggesting that mere familiarity operates as a credibility heuristic. This implies that, when users observe content with thousands of shares or prominent source of attribution, engagement metrics themselves signal credibility regardless of the underlying source of quality.

4.5. Narrative Coherence and Conspiratorial Sense-Making

Complex social phenomena resist simple causal explanations, yet human cognition gravitates toward narrative coherence and intentional agency. Misinformation exploits this through simplified narratives providing emotionally satisfying explanations for threatening or ambiguous situations. For instance, Douglas et al., (2017) review of conspiracy theory psychology identified three core psychological need conspiracies to fulfill. First, epistemic needs for understanding and certainty, second, existential needs for control and security, and social needs for positive self-image and group belonging. They further argued that conspiracy theories, which is one of the most virulent forms of misinformation, offer a comprehensive explanatory framework that attributes bewildering events to intentional malicious action by identifiable agents. To support this, Butter, (2020) argued that such narratives prove psychologically appealing because they restore order and control. Therefore, if powerful conspirators cause negative outcomes, then exposing and resisting those offers coherent action pathways. For Van Prooijen et al., (2018), feelings of powerlessness, lack of control, and existential threat predict increased conspiracy belief, indicating that conspiratorial misinformation meets psychological needs factual complexity cannot satisfy. Moreover, Uscinski et al., (2022) further revealed that conspiracy theories flourish during periods of social crisis and uncertainty, with the COVID-19 pandemic predictably spawning numerous conspiracy narratives. Thus, the narrative mechanism also operates through selective evidence presentation. This affirms what Lewandowsky et al., (2012) meant when they explained that conspiracy theories achieve internal coherence through a self-sealing logic that interprets contradictory evidence as further proof of conspiracy, which is a rhetorical move rendering them effectively unfalsifiable. These rhetorical mechanisms, emotional exploitation, identity-based messaging, algorithmic amplification, credibility manipulation, and narrative simplification operate collectively rather than independently. This means that, emotionally arousing contents, which exploits identity concerns achieves algorithmic amplification, which then provides a social proof that enhances perceived credibility, are all embedded within a simplified narrative offering satisfying explanations. This interconnected operation suggests that interventions targeting isolated mechanisms while ignoring others prove insufficient for comprehensive mitigation. Understanding how these mechanisms function collectively across individual psychology, social dynamics, and technological infrastructures provides essential foundation for evaluating communication strategies designed to build resilience against misinformation's corrosive democratic effects in the United States.

5. Communication Strategies for Digital Civic Resilience

5.1. Prebunking and Inoculation Approaches

Prebunking, which is defined as warning people about manipulation techniques before encountering misinformation (Traberg et al., 2023) has emerged as a promising communication strategy for digital civic resilience compared to reactive debunking. Drawing on inoculation theory from social psychology, these approaches expose people to weakened forms of misinformation arguments alongside refutations, building cognitive antibodies (Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021). Thus, prebunking can reduce the susceptibility to various manipulation tactics including emotional exploitation, false dichotomies, and scapegoating.

To effectively use prebunking, Van Der Linden et al. (2017) developed online games that teach people to recognize misinformation techniques through active participation in creating misleading content. For instance, their game titled 'Bad News' greatly enhanced participants' ability to identify manipulation tactics across political domains. Similarly, Roozenbeek & Van Der Linden (2019) found that inoculation against specific techniques like emotional language and incoherence reduced perceived reliability of misinformation posts. What makes these interventions prove more effective than general warnings is because they target psychological mechanisms rather than specific claims.

Notwithstanding, prebunking as a strategy to counter misinformation faces several challenges. While the above studies look promising, translating these approaches to real-world contexts where people encounter thousands of claims daily remains difficult. Additionally, inoculation may work better for certain misinformation types than others, particularly when false claims align strongly with partisan identities (Guess et al., 2020).

5.2. Media Literacy Education

Media literacy interventions aim to develop critical evaluation skills for assessing source credibility, recognizing bias, and understanding how media messages are constructed (Woodley, 2023). Traditional approaches teach students to check authors' credentials, examine evidence quality, and compare multiple sources. More recent frameworks emphasize lateral reading, which is the practice professional fact-checkers use of leaving a site to investigate its credibility elsewhere rather than evaluating it solely through internal cues (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019).

A study by Breakstone et al., (2021) found that brief interventions teaching lateral reading significantly improved college students' ability to evaluate online sources compared to control groups. They further argued that students trained in this approach proved more likely to identify unreliable sources and less likely to be deceived by professional-appearing but untrustworthy websites. This means that expertise lies not in having memorized credibility checklists but in knowing how to investigate unfamiliar sources rapidly.

Further, critics note that media literacy education often assumes individual rational actors operating in information neutral environments (Pangrazio, 2016). Such an assumption as this often overlooks how platforms algorithmically curate content, how social networks shape information exposure, and how identity and emotion influence processing. However, some critical media literacy approaches have addressed these limitations by examining how power structures, technological affordances, and social contexts shape the information ecosystem (Kellner & Share, 2019). Additionally, the relationship between media literacy and misinformation susceptibility proves complex. Some research suggests politically knowledgeable individuals show greater susceptibility to partisan misinformation, as they possess more cognitive resources for motivated reasoning (Garrett et al., 2019). This implies that literacy interventions must address not just skills but also the motivations that shape information processing.

5.3. Accuracy Prompts and Cognitive Nudges

Recent research explores simple interventions that shift attention toward accuracy when people encounter information online. Pennycook & Rand, (2021) found that asking people to rate the accuracy of a single headline before showing them other content significantly reduced their likelihood of rating false headlines as accurate and increased discernment between true and false information. Thus, the accuracy prompt appears to work by activating accuracy motivations that social media contexts often suppress in favor of social and identity concerns.

The strategy involves shifting from intuitive to more analytical processing. For instance, Pennycook et al., (2021) argued that on social media, people often operate in a sharing mindset focused on social approval and identity expression rather than accuracy evaluation. This means that simple reminders about accuracy can reorient attention, though effects may be temporary and context dependent. This raises the question of whether such nudges adequately address deeper structural issues or merely provide superficial fixes to platform design problems.

Even platform-level implementations have shown mixed results. In a study by Roozenbeek et al., (2021), it was revealed that Twitter prompts asking users to read articles before retweeting increased article opens but did not necessarily improve sharing discrimination. This suggests that awareness alone may not overcome powerful social motivations that shape sharing behavior.

5.4. Algorithmic Transparency and Platform Governance

Scholars increasingly recognize that individual-level interventions cannot fully address misinformation when platform algorithms amplify false content. Due to this, calls for greater algorithmic transparency and reformed content moderation have intensified, though implementation faces technical and political challenges (Gillespie, 2018). Nevertheless, some research explores how platform design features could promote more deliberative engagement. For instance, Lazer et al. (2018) argued that attention to information ecosystem structures, which includes hyperlink networks, platform affordances, and media ownership patterns, proves more productive than focusing solely on individual psychology. Also, Benkler's, (2018) analysis of the 2016 election coverage found that propaganda and misinformation succeeded not through social media alone but through coordination across websites, email lists, and traditional media in ways that exploited platform vulnerabilities.

However, platform interventions alone may face some barriers. Content moderation at full-scale for instance may require difficult judgments about speech boundaries. This implies that algorithmic changes affecting misinformation may also have unintended consequences for legitimate content. Thus, different platforms may serve different functions within the information ecosystem, hence a one-size-fits-all solution may be complicated.

5.5. Community-Centered Approaches

Building civic resilience through community engagement rather than individual inoculation has gained interest among scholars recently. Mihailidis, (2018) argues for civic media literacies that move beyond critical consumption toward participatory practices of meaning-making and collective action. This approach recognizes that people encounter information not as isolated individuals but within communities that shape interpretation and response.

Community-centered strategies focus on strengthening local information ecosystems, supporting community journalism, and creating spaces for deliberative dialogue across differences. For instance, Stains (2016) describes initiatives bringing together diverse community members to discuss contentious topics using structured facilitation that promotes understanding rather than debate. These approaches address misinformation's social dimensions by building trust, creating shared norms, and developing collective capacity for navigating disagreement.

Libraries and community organizations have further pioneered programs teaching critical information skills while fostering civic engagement. These efforts recognize that resilience emerges not from individual immunity but from social networks that support reliable information sharing and collective problem-solving (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). However, such approaches require sustained investment and may not manifest easily across diverse communities with varying resources and needs.

6. Discussion

This review synthesizes diverse scholarship examining misinformation's rhetorical dimensions and communication strategies for building democratic resilience in the United States. Three critical insights emerge with significant implications for addressing what Rao, (2024) characterizes as American democracy teetering on the brink of destruction due to epistemic collapse. First, misinformation operates through interconnected rhetorical mechanisms that align emotional exploitation, identity protection, algorithmic amplification, credibility manipulation, and narrative satisfaction, revealing why isolated interventions targeting single mechanisms prove insufficient. Second, structural features of the American information ecosystem, particularly Section 230 immunity, platform profit incentives, and local journalism collapse, creates asymmetries systematically favoring misinformation propagation over correction. Third, effective interventions require coordinated action across individual, technological, and institutional levels, yet significant barriers impede implementation at each level.

The rhetorical mechanisms identified. Which is emotional exploitation (Brady et al., 2017), identity-based messaging (Kahan et al., 2012), algorithmic amplification (Vosoughi et al., 2018), credibility heuristics (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013), and conspiratorial narratives (Douglas et al., 2017) all demonstrate that misinformation succeeds through collective operation rather than any single persuasive element. This explains the limited effectiveness of fact-checking interventions that address only informational accuracy while ignoring emotional, social, and technological dimensions (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Pennycook et al., (2021) found that people share misinformation not because they believe it but due to inattention operating in social media contexts optimized for rapid engagement rather than accuracy evaluation exemplifies this complexity. The United States context intensifies these dynamics through what Benkler et al., (2018) term network propaganda, which is the coordinated exploitation of platform vulnerabilities, partisan media ecosystems, and psychological susceptibilities that proved decisive in events from the 2016 election through January 6, 2021. Thus, understanding misinformation as operating within rhetorical ecologies rather than isolated false claims fundamentally shifts intervention approaches from corrective to preventive, from individual to systemic.

Structural conditions unique to the American information landscape create what Rao, (2024) again described as environments where misinformation flourishes largely unchecked. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act provides platform immunity from liability for user-generated content while permitting arbitrary content moderation, effectively insulating technology companies from accountability despite evidence that algorithmic design choices systematically amplify misinformation for profit (Gillespie, 2018). For instance, facebook's controversial XCheck program, which exempted millions of high-profile users from standard content moderation, exemplifies how platforms prioritize engagement over accuracy even when aware of harms (Théro & Vincent, 2022). Simultaneously, local journalism, which historically provided trusted community information and accountability reporting, has collapsed economically, creating what the Local News Initiative identifies as expanding news deserts where 204 U.S. counties lack

any local newspaper, digital site, or radio newsroom (Abernathy, 2023). This leaves information voids rapidly filled by what Rao (2024) again describes as trolls, bots, and purveyors of falsehoods, while advertising revenue that once sustained local journalism flows to Google and Facebook. Thus, the intersection of platform immunity, profit-driven algorithmic amplification, and local journalism collapse creates structural asymmetries where producing and spreading misinformation proves easier and more profitable than producing accurate journalism or implementing effective corrections.

Communication strategies examined demonstrate varying effectiveness and implementation challenges. Prebunking interventions based on inoculation theory show promise in controlled studies (Roozenbeek & Van Der Linden, 2019; Van Der Linden et al., 2017), with participants exposed to manipulation technique warnings demonstrating improved discernment across political orientations. However, scalability remains problematic, as Rao, (2024) notes that in YouTube implementations, only one-fifth of users watched prebunking messages to completion, with unknown proportions actively processing content. However, media literacy interventions emphasizing lateral reading techniques has been shown to significantly improve source evaluation capabilities (Breakstone et al., 2021; Wineburg & McGrew, 2019), yet Garrett et al., (2019) argued that politically knowledgeable individuals sometimes show greater susceptibility to partisan misinformation. This suggests that skills alone prove insufficient without addressing motivational factors. Accuracy prompts also represent promising low-cost interventions according to Pennycook et al., (2021), though effects may prove temporary and context dependent. More fundamentally, individual-level interventions risk placing responsibility on citizens to navigate environments deliberately designed to exploit psychological vulnerabilities when structural reforms addressing platform governance prove more appropriate but politically difficult.

Moreover, the review shows that the authenticity initiative offers promising deepfake identification through cryptographic authentication yet requires social media platform adoption that remains absent despite stated interest (Schneider, 2024). These barriers reflect a fundamental refusal to be accountable by technology companies despite possessing technical capacity for more effective content moderation.

6.1. Implications for policy and research

Several implications emerge for research, policy, and practice. Research priorities should include longitudinal studies examining intervention persistence, investigations of how strategies work across diverse populations with varying resources and political orientations, and analyses of how individual-level and structural interventions interact. The relationship between media literacy and motivated reasoning deserves particular attention given contradictory findings about whether knowledge mitigates or enables partisan misinformation of belief. Policy interventions must address structural asymmetries rather than solely targeting individual resilience. Reforming or contextualizing Section 230 immunity, requiring algorithmic transparency, and supporting local journalism sustainability will all address root causes rather than symptoms. For practitioners, findings suggest interventions should be tailored to specific contexts and audiences, address motivations and emotions alongside skills, and recognize limitations of what any intervention can achieve given misinformation's roots in human psychology, social organization, and technological infrastructure.

7. Limitations of findings

The U.S. focus means findings may not generalize internationally, though comparative research could illuminate how different legal frameworks, media systems, and political cultures shape misinformation dynamics. The narrative approach enables broad synthesis but lacks systematic review rigor with quantifiable effect sizes.

8. Conclusion

Misinformation in the United States is more than a problem of inaccurate information; it reflects a deeper crisis in democratic communication, trust, and civic participation. This review has shown that misinformation thrives rhetorically through emotional appeals, identity-based persuasion, algorithmic amplification, credibility heuristics, and compelling narrative structures that collectively influence how citizens interpret political and social realities. The review also highlights that communication strategies for digital civic resilience show promise but remain uneven in effectiveness. Prebunking interventions, media literacy education, accuracy nudges, and community-centred approaches can improve critical evaluation skills and reduce susceptibility to manipulation under certain conditions. Therefore, strengthening democratic resilience in the United States demands a multidimensional response that integrates rhetorical awareness, educational reform, ethical platform governance, and renewed investment in public-interest journalism and community discourses.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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