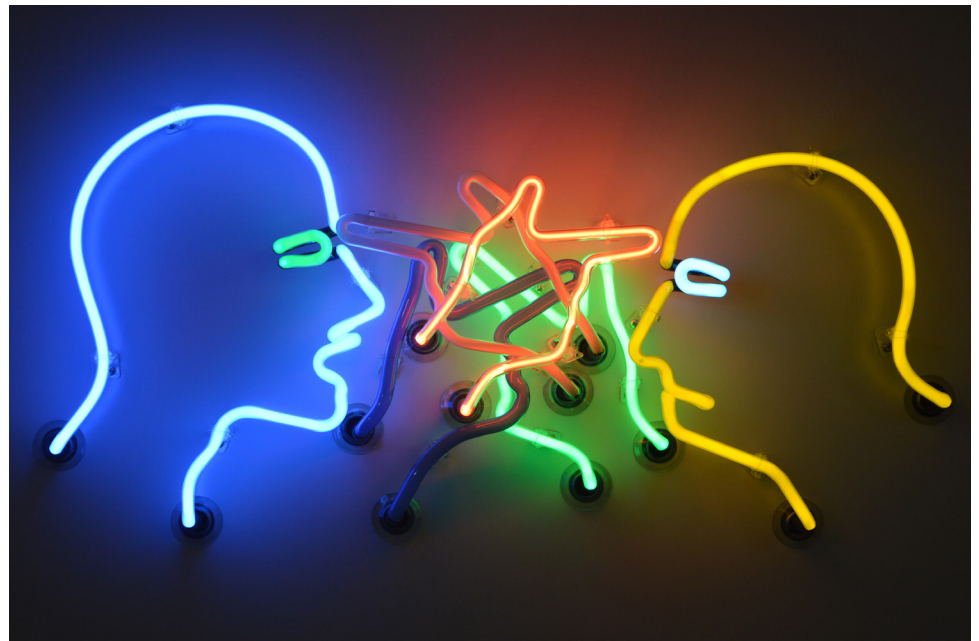# BUSTED TRUST AND TRUTH DECAY:
THE EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUALS WILLFULLY EMBRACING FALSEHOODS

I realized that doing my own research brought me more information than listening to the news ever could. Once I stopped allowing news to make up my mind or my narrative for me, I grew exponentially.

—Jacob Chansley,
self-proclaimed QAnon Shaman

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Can society overcome ongoing tensions around trust and the collateral damage of disinformation?

- What can happen to markets as conflicts increase in frequency and severity?

- What can happen to society and its institutions if citizens no longer trust the rule of law?

- Is government or business the stronger force to confront anti-science perspectives as they spread?

- Does expanding gun ownership among first-time owners increase or decrease societal anxiety?

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN DISTRUST OVERTAKES TRUST?

- How does distrust affect society's coherence?

- Can a society in the middle of we-they conflicts find a resolution that does not involve violence?

- Who or what can produce a story that can overcome distrust and help harmonize conflicting viewpoints on truth?

The Need for a Narrative and the Blossoming of Distrust

"When people are unsure – or made to feel unsure – and not in control of the safety of finances, families, possessions, community of future," explained professor of sociology Christopher Bader of Chapman University (Orange, CA) and a principal researcher on human fears, "their natural inclination is to grasp for certainty" (see **IF 3808**).

In an earlier look at the brain and decision-making, we observed that the brain does not like uncertainty, and it will accept a narrative or "truth" that can explain the world, even if that story is demonstrably false, especially if such a narrative confirms what the brain has already decided is true and, even more so, if it gives the believer a sense of meaning, purpose and membership in a like-minded community, which is an elaborate version of what psychologists call Confirmation Bias (see **IF 3808**).

> Trust, which is critical to a society's cohesiveness, has for nearly two decades been giving way to distrust, with the collateral damage being truth.

This kind of perspective has resulted in science, expertise, leadership and even sounds and sights being challenged, ignored or rejected out of hand. Trust, which is critical to a society's cohesiveness, has for nearly two decades been giving way to distrust, with the collateral damage being truth. And during that time, distrust has moved deeper and deeper into society.

◆ Americans' trust in all media sank to 36 percent, the second-lowest level ever in Gallup Polls, the lowest level having been hit in 2016.
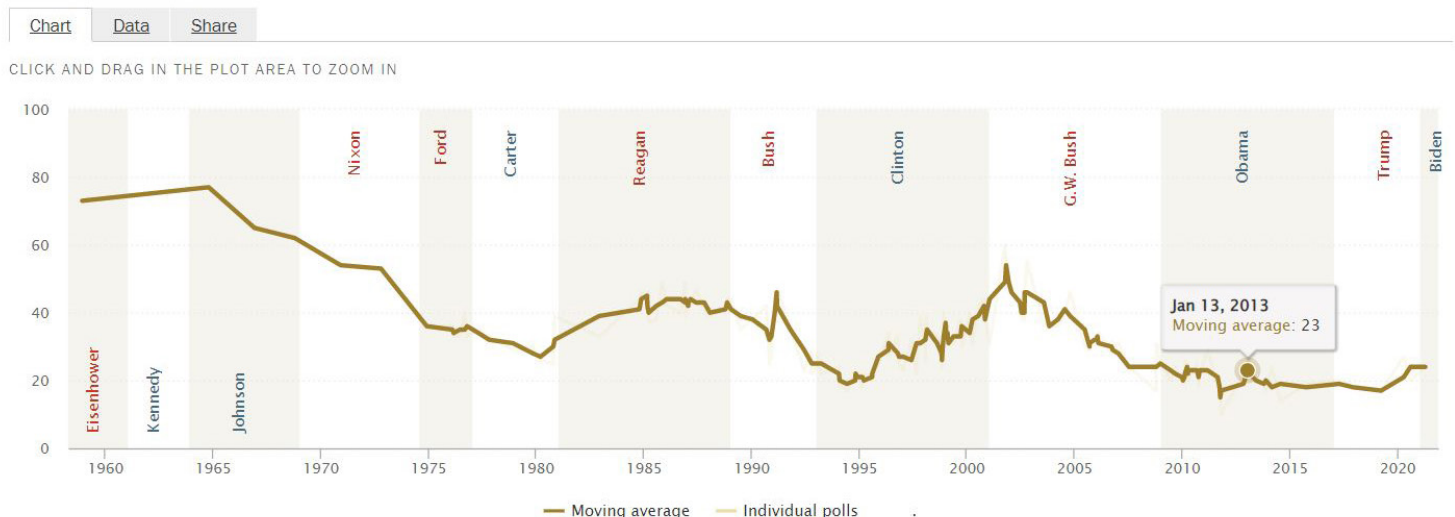
◆ Seventy-two percent of Internet users do not trust Facebook, saying that they trust it "not much" or "not at all." Six in 10 Americans say they distrust TikTok and Instagram, and seven in 10 think their conversations on phones or other devices are being monitored.

◆ Only 44 percent of Americans trust what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has communicated about the virus.

◆ Trust in technology reached an all-time low in 2021, and the phenomenon was global, with countries as diverse as China and Australia as well as the U.S. reaching that nadir.

(*Gallup*, 10/7/21: *Washington Post*, 12/1/21 and 12/22/21; *Newsweek*, 1/23/22; *CNET*, 3/31/21)

Public trust in government near historic lows

| Chart | Data | Share |

CLICK AND DRAG IN THE PLOT AREA TO ZOOM IN

Jan 13, 2013
Moving average: 23

Legend: — Moving average   — Individual polls

CLICK LEGEND ITEMS TO REMOVE THEM FROM CHART

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The consequences of distrust – in government, for example – can be severe. In a recent study of 177 countries' pandemic preparedness, the U.S. ranked among the top and Vietnam ranked among the bottom. Yet Vietnam, with fewer doctors and hospital beds and less research per capita than most countries, dealt with the virus most effectively among all countries; the U.S. was toward the bottom. The reason, according to researchers: the Vietnamese trust their government. (*Washington Post*, 1/31/22)

◆ Over the past year, trust in democracies fell seven percentage points in Germany, six percentage points in Australia, five points in South Korea and the United States, with the average percentage of support for democracies dropping to a range from 42 to 57 percent. Meanwhile, among citizens in China, trust in the Beijing government increased 11 percentage points, reaching 83 percent. Clear goals and predictability garner support, even without the benefits of democracy. (*New York Times*, 12/7/21 and 12/20/21; *Reuters*, 1/18/22)

> Thirty-seven percent of survey respondents said that COVID-19 vaccines can cause infertility.

"First you have to earn their trust."

Bullshit, a Side Effect of Busted Trust

In the first decade of this century, late-night comedian Stephen Colbert touted a new term: "truthiness," the idea that public discourse was starting to blur the distinction between disinformation and information. In 2017, the Oxford English Dictionary named "post-truth" the word of the year, a signal that society was giving up on agreeing on what is accurate and what is not. At the time, the term "fake news" rang from high office. Greta Thunberg, the Swedish activist, in chastising the "promises" world leaders were making about their emission-reduction goals, applied a slang word to the entire category of misinformation: "Let's call out their bullshit." Meanwhile, technologists were announcing Deep Fakes, nearly perfect simulations of actual voices, images or sounds known in physical reality.

We wrote about this steady shift to misinformation, grifting and deception, starting as far back as in 2004, when we outlined the way in which the "Gaming of Nearly Everything" was altering markets, media and interpersonal communications. While we continued to monitor that perspective, we turned to the spread of "Frauds, Fakes and Alternative Facts" in 2017 and added another look with "Deception, Manipulation and the Allure of Artificial Anything" in 2018. Bernie Madoff and Theranos have kept that line of deception alive in the public eye (see **IF 2510**; **inThought 3/6/17** and **12/7/18**).

The parade of deceptive language has continued to lead people astray.

◆ Twenty percent of Americans say they believe at least one piece of information categorized by scientists as vaccine misinformation; 51 percent said they were not sure whether or not they believed in an idea characterized by society as disinformation. As examples of such disinformation and its following, consider these: 37 percent of survey respondents said that COVID-19 vaccines can cause infertility; 32 percent believed that vaccines contain lung tissues of aborted fetuses; and 22 percent said vaccines contain microchips that can be used to track people. (*PR Week*, 9/21; *Guardian*, 1/5/22)

Because trust is so critical to institutions and society (*e.g.*, in the realms of voting, medical diagnosis and treatment, investment reports, economic data, consumer prices) and because Busted Trust is so difficult to repair, how such system challenges come to be is important to society; we will discuss how such challenges and perspectives emerge in the **final part** of this *inThought*.

But first, we want to pause for a moment and examine some implications of spreading distrust.

> After Paris announced closures of bars and restaurants across France, the Association of French Mayors accused the government of adding a "crisis of trust to a crisis of health."

What Are the Effects?

While many implications of spreading distrust and misinformation have been illustrated by several of the bullet items cited earlier, other less obvious implications continue to surface.

I. Alternatives move to the mainstream. Distrust began to gather significant momentum after the financial crisis of 2008-09. Joseph Lubin, chief executive of ConsenSys and an advocate of cryptocurrencies, explained: "It was folly to trust all those structures that we implicitly felt had our best interest at heart. I felt we were living in a global society and economy that was figuratively, literally and morally bankrupt." The distrust of traditional institutions is spreading even among government leaders, such as Hillary Schieve, mayor of Reno (NV), who is a supporter of cryptos and who commented: "It would be great to cut out the middleman. I'm not a big fan of banks." (*Financial Times*, 9/8/21).

Applications: Cryptocurrencies challenge the stability of fiat money; militias and armed communities circumvent police; influencers supplant celebrities; authoritarian standards overtake democratic ideals; side hustles and meme-stock investing supersede traditional careers and make careers out of jobs envisioned as short-term only; skills certificates gain popularity over mainstream education; and central banks struggle to assert control.

II. Current governments face constant citizen pushback. Last year, 73 countries, accounting for 75 percent of the world's population, experienced a lower score than the prior year on a metric that measures their freedom, meaning that their governments constricted citizens' liberties. Included in the list of countries with constrained freedoms were China, India and the U.S. According to one of the researchers who creates the freedom scores for the nonprofit Freedom House, "This year's findings make it abundantly clear that we have not yet stemmed the authoritarian tide." Government mandates for vaccines or masks have triggered reactions ranging from political discontent in the U.S. to mass demonstrations in Europe. After Paris announced closures of bars and restaurants across France, the Association of French Mayors accused the government of adding a "crisis of trust to a crisis of health." (*Freedom House*, 3/3/21; *Financial Times*, 12/26/21)

Applications: Government/government agencies (*e.g.*, CDC, FDA, EPA) have trouble enforcing rules; the appeal of strongmen and autocracy increases; social democracies have trouble sustaining power; governments increase efforts to control and regulate their constituents; vigilantism gains support; and taxation is increasingly difficult to enforce.

III. Surveillance expands. Monitoring by companies and those seeking to influence individuals has become so widespread and effective that the U.S. government recently recommended that all citizens reboot their mobile devices **several times each day** to eliminate malware that might be in their device's memory rather than in its storage. Meanwhile, distrust encouraged a woman moving from St. Louis to Boston to put an Apple AirTag in one of her boxes. When her shipped goods failed to arrive at the scheduled time, she called the movers, who said they were in the region, while her monitoring device said they were nowhere near. Her distrust was well founded; the movers arrived two days later. (*New York Times*, 1/8/21)

> Gun sales have experienced the first- and second-largest annual purchases in history in the past two years.

Applications: Monitoring devices in offices and tracking devices among individuals become normalized; companies increase monitoring enforcement; companies that offer tracking and monitoring hardware and software will grow; companies that offer privacy devices and services also will grow.

Gary Varvel Editorial Cartoon used with permission of Gary Varvel and Creators Syndicate. All rights reserved.

IV. Misinformation and disinformation become uncontainable. As an extension of what we have called Permeable Borders, the online ability to transmit to the world whatever unverified, false or questionable perspective one would like to promulgate creates a constant challenge to scientific facts or widely held truths. And such challenges will become more commonplace because AI-enabled systems can now produce disinformation at scale, thereby obfuscating and even overwhelming actual truths. (*Spectrum*, 1/22)

Applications: Trusted communities gain more appeal, benefitting certain platforms (*e.g.*, Reddit and Discord); data analytics companies offering accurate numbers increase in value; new categories of metrics gain influence.

V. Anxiety and violence increase. As of the last quarter of 2021, anxiety disorders, already at elevated levels prior to the pandemic, increased by more than 25 percent during the prior year. Last year, anti-Semitic violence in New York City increased by 100 percent and in Chicago by nearly 60 percent. One in four Jewish Americans said they had been the target of anti-Semitic behavior in the prior year. Meanwhile, last year, San Francisco experienced a sixfold increase in Asian hate crimes, a 50 percent increase in hate crimes against LGBTQ citizens and a 27 percent increase in anti-Black attacks. Also, in the third quarter of last year, 2,000 kidnappings took place, an increase of nearly 29 percent over the same period in 2020. Gun sales have experienced the first- and second-largest annual purchases in history in the past two years, and the TSA discovered the largest-ever number of guns, half of them loaded, in carry-on baggage. (*NPR*, 10/26/21; *U.S. News & World Report*, 1/26/22; *News24*, 11/19/21; *Scientific American*, 10/8/21; *Harper's*, 2/22; *Security Systems News*, 1/31/22)

Applications: Personal security and privacy systems will increase in appeal. Interface, a home-security-system company, grew its sales last year over the prior year by 37 percent, the result of "a rapidly changing threat landscape," explained an industry publication. The need for mental health services in schools will surpass capabilities; gun ownership continues to expand and gun control becomes a prime political issue.

"WOULD YOU PREFER A PLANE WITH AN ARMED OR UNARMED PILOT?"

VI. Biases become built-in. Researchers have shown that human biases exist not only in our heads but get embedded in software because humans write the codes and compile the databases. As a result, software of all kinds, and especially databases that supply that software with specifics, are loaded with subtle examples of societal bias. In the metaverse or any kind of digital realm, with its complete software simulation of actual life, biases will likely be embedded in the structure of that alternative world. Philosopher David Chalmers has noted: "Virtual reality isn't the same as ordinary physical reality. [But] it's a genuine reality all the same." Trust and truth will be encoded in the virtual worlds currently being fabricated; **whose** truth and **whose** trust will be critical. (*New York Times*, 1/30/22; *Time*, 1/31/22)

> Trust and truth will be encoded in the virtual worlds currently being fabricated; *whose* truth and *whose* trust will be critical.

    Applications: The distinction between physical and virtual realms becomes less obvious, even as the metaverse is slower to develop than advocates believe; governments push for the regulation of AI in decision-making and social monitoring.

Decisions Made Are Difficult to Change

    Distrust requires a decision. Yet such a decision leaves the decision-maker adrift, distrust being alienating as well as discomforting. Quite often, having lost trust in a belief system, a product, a message, an institution or a leader, decision makers place trust somewhere else, especially if that new place confers comfort and a sense of certainty. Most often, they place that trust in a heuristic or a rule of thumb gained from past experience. Such a strategy is quick and comforting, and it relieves the brain of anxious thoughts. (*Guardian Weekly*, 1/14/22)

    Once a decision has been made to place trust in a new place, the brain considers the issue settled, and a different sense of purpose or meaning develops. Studies of cults reveal that people's personal identity becomes entwined with the new trusted group; their belief systems align with their leaders; and their whole beings are focused on that cult's operations and goals. Breaking that hold on their minds becomes quite difficult.

    Such redirected trust and its hold on a new advocate is not limited to cults. The reason breaking the hold of the new trust on individuals once they have accepted a belief is so difficult was established in the early 1950s in research by the famed Stanford psychologist Leon Festinger. His studies led him to a clear conclusion: "A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts and figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point" (see **IF 3808**).

    One solution for the problem of cultish or erroneous decision-making has been education. A RAND Report entitled *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (2018) raised the issues of a rising "skepticism about experts" and a tendency to disregard or flatly deny "facts and analysis." RAND said the only way to halt the advance of truth decay was through media literacy classes, and that point has gained momentum. The state of São Paulo, in Brazil, has a media literacy class requirement for all middle school students, and Finland has introduced a media literacy program in all public schools. A U.S. nonprofit, Media Literacy Now, insists that media literacy should be taught in every school in the country, and more and more districts are proposing such a curricular addition. (*Americas Quarterly*, Quarter 4/21; *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11/26/21)

    Yet not all believe in that simple answer. Elise Wang, a professor of linguistics at California State at Fullerton, studies conspiracy narratives. Her research has revealed an inherent problem with the belief that education will help society overtake the spread of conspiracy theories.

"Unfortunately," she explained, "the core tenets of media literacy – don't believe everything you read, do the research yourself, think for yourself – are also the watchwords of conspiracy theorists." (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11/26/21)

What leads individuals who are skeptical of things they read, who do their own research and their own thinking, down a path to questionable conclusions, especially conclusions that are demonstrably inaccurate? **It starts with what social scientists call a Context Collapse.**

> What leads individuals who are skeptical of things they read, who do their own research and their own thinking, down a path to questionable conclusions, especially conclusions that are demonstrably inaccurate?

"We want you to stop reporting on a need-to-know basis, Childers, and start reporting on a want-to-hear basis."

Context Collapse and Finding a New Narrative

Broad contexts provide a structure of knowledge into which an individual can place new content. These contexts typically take the form of stories, short or long narratives that provide a framework of understanding into which new kinds of information can be placed. All religions use stories to influence nonbelievers into joining their group and to retain the loyalty of those who are already members: Noah and the ark; Jonah and the whale; the birth of Jesus in a stable. Marketers piece stories together by introducing characters, such as Flo for Progressive insurance, or Jake for State Farm. Politics has done the same thing, with stories of Honest Abe, George Washington and the cherry tree, Johnny Appleseed, "conquering" the "Wild West" and defending democracy around the world. All of these stories seek to attract new followers and to secure the loyalty of already existing believers.

Tara Isabella Burton, in her *Strange Rites: New Religions in a Godless World* (2020), spends little time on what religions **are** and looks, instead, at what religions **do**. In essence, they provide meaning, purpose, a sense of community and ritual. As society becomes more secular, quasi-religious groups have surfaced. Cults and cultlike organizations provide stories that fill would-be adherents with a sense of purpose and community. Amanda Montell, in *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* (2021), examines various cults and certain kinds of businesses, such as multilevel marketers, and discovers that their use of language "corresponds to spirituality, community, meaning and identity." That is, they provide a comfortable identity, among like-minded individuals; they add a "larger-than-me" purpose to interactions; they offer meaning to daily life; and most critical of all, they have moved from distrust to an alternative viewpoint that resurrects trust. (*USA Today*, 12/15/21)

How does that happen? "We seek patterns," offers Elise Wang, the Cal State at Fullerton professor, "and the more out of control we feel in our personal lives and our work and our world, the more we seek patterns. Stories are how we unite; they're what gets us up in the morning. People don't believe conspiracy theories because they're irrational or uneducated or they just don't have the right information. **Far above truth, people seek meaning.**" Meaning, not accuracy or anything that might be called the truth, is the attraction. (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11/26/21)

The weakening hold of traditional stories leads back to Context Collapse. Society is awash in information. Whether it is termed data, content or some other popular

term, information pours into people's lives with seemingly ever greater frequency and a greater sense of urgency (*e.g.*, "Breaking News"). Each bit of information is discrete. Yet recipients of this flood of information typically lack a larger context into which the latest bit of data can fit. That is, more precisely, what is called Context Collapse: a barrage of specifics without a frame of reference.

In a world enduring Context Collapse, political rhetoric, marketing stories, conspiracy theories, and even athletic teams provide context on which to base one's actions, giving believers a sense that they understand what is "really happening" and making them unique and "better" than others because of that understanding (or because their team wins). In essence, **believing in a story and seeing a specific pattern being brought forward by that story, whether true or false, eases the brain's anxiety over uncertainty, gives the believer a new meaning and purpose and makes the world easier to understand.**

Several years ago, as the damage from distrust was starting to mount, columnist David Brooks thought about why distrust was spreading and why so many people were splintering off into smaller groups with their own way of viewing the world. To Brooks, the cause was the loss of a central story. "One of the things we lost in this country is our story." He continued, "It is the narrative that unites us around a common multigenerational project…that gives us an overarching sense of meaning and purpose to our history. (*New York Times*, 3/21/17)

The absence of a central narrative or storyline that can bind society together has created what we have called the Disorienting Environment, and its uncertainty and confusion trouble the human brain, which wants answers to all problems, often quickly adopted, in order to enable it to return to its main purpose, keeping the person alive. As a result, the brain will accept a readily available answer and will accept facts in the context of a story that supports what the brain already has decided is true. It is just easier that way. "Why change my mind when here is new evidence that supports what I already believe?" The brain wants answers, and once it has a story that supplies them, it does not want to change again. The brain accepts misinformation and disinformation because they make the confusing world less confusing. In essence, Busted Trust in society's central narrative leads to Truth Decay in the form of misinformation and disinformation.

In this way, believed falsehoods gain equivalency to verified truths, both being equally effective in bringing order to the disorder that the brain perceives to be all around. A new and accepted context comes from the storyline that delivers the greatest relief to the brain.

Alan Sekula, the late photographer, likened a courtroom to a battle between two fictions, each one fighting to be named the "truth." Such a contentious competition is currently playing out in society, with at least two "fictions" competing for a final designation of the "truth": science versus beliefs; democracy versus autocracy; passion versus reason; honesty versus deception; and so on. Which "fiction" will garner trust among the most members of society?

With Busted Trust in mainstream institutional and scientific perspectives and with more, and more-efficient, methods for distributing alternative explanations of events, ideas and facts in the Disorienting Environment, all of which further Truth Decay, narratives that can most effectively and simply account for new conditions and changing realities will win out. Let the battle for trust rage!

Some of our previous looks at this topic: