

## **The Dangers of Misinformation**

**By Brody Daerr**

Alex Jones should be taken to court, as his conspiracy theory misinformation is not only reckless but dangerous too. Through his years of public infamy, he has caused physical, mental, and emotional harm to innocent people. Even supporters of conspiracy theories can be negatively affected, as a research investigation by Liekefett (2022) actually found that:

Findings revealed that conspiracy beliefs did not reduce anxiety, uncertainty aversion, or existential threat, and there was some evidence that it increased these negative feelings and reinforced conspiracy beliefs. Concertedly, emerging research demonstrates that appealing positives of conspiracy endorsement are overshadowed by evidence of the dangerous consequences of these beliefs.

An act like this should not be excused lightly, as real people are being affected in a horrible fashion. Something should be put in place to stop this and limit, not only Alex Jones, but everyone who peddles harmful and wrong “facts”, so that less misinformation and violence is stirred up. This would hopefully strengthen our news sources creating less divides in our society.

Alex Jones is a radio show host who specializes in far-right politics, alt-right ideologies, and conspiracy theories. Starting his radio career back in 1996, Jones’ name has been synonymous with outlandish conspiracy theories ranging from unequivocally stupid to downright harmful. Though claiming 911 was an inside job, stating the tragic Sandy Hook shooting was “faked”, and denouncing covid-19 and its vaccine, it seemed as if Jones would say anything. Because of his radio shows and more infamously his own website, Infowars.com, Jones has managed to amass a following for himself. Another large factor to this following was his mutual

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partnership with, at the time, presidential candidate Donald Trump, who also had a devoted and large support group. From this, Trump gained new voters and Jones gained a bigger audience and a more successful platform to speak his mind.

Through this stretch of time, that being about 20 years, Jones went basically unpunished for the rhetoric he spoke on his public platform. This was until recently, when an event from his past would come back to haunt him. You see, because of his relentless and non-stop targeting of the Sandy Hook parents by claiming all parties involved were “crisis actors” and that the event was fake, he incited some of his followers to harass the parents of the Sandy Hook victims. These parents, who just lost their elementary school age children in a depraved act of violence, were threatened by death, rape, and violence along with having their houses violated and physical confrontations. Alex Jones and his followers caused these innocent parents physical, mental, and emotional harm. In 2022, Jones was taken to court by the families of the Sandy Hook victims and sued for around 1.5 billion dollars, claiming defamation and emotional distress. Jones ended up losing and being forced to pay the roughly 1.5 billion, basically bankrupting him.

Conspiracy theories are very dangerous and one of the biggest problems with figures, like Alex Jones, and their spreading of misinformation is that they are supported by high ranking and influential government officials. As previously mentioned, Jones publicly partnered with Donald Trump during the time of the 2016 election. To put into perspective on how big this was for Jones, Donald Trump did become President, meaning his supporters made up the majority of votes in America. This opened a huge window for Jones to gain a substantial number of new supporters. Due to this new relationship and audience Jones caused a string of chaos through his harmful conspiracies. In 2020, Jones and Trump pushed ideas pertaining to the Covid-19

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pandemic and how untrustworthy and ineffective the vaccine was. This led to a huge distrust in this vaccine. In 2021, the United States Census Bureau (2021) conducted a study about the Covid-19 and what U.S. citizens thought of it. They found that at that time, “15% remained unvaccinated” and that about 42%, “Don't trust the Covid-19 vaccine.” In 2021, Jones led a rally after Trump refused to accept that he had lost the 2020 election. Between both men, they gathered around 10,000 people to protest at the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. This protest eventually broke out into a riot which led to 1.5 million dollars in damages, death threats, and a large amount of brutality. Unfortunately, a violent outcome like this was not a first for Jones.

Looking at Sandy Hook court case, Jones and his followers are quick to excuse this action by hiding behind the idea of the First Amendment. When discussing this issue, Marjorie Taylor Greene (qtd in Blanchet 2022) believed, “That’s what freedom of speech is. Freedom to speak words. Political persecution must end.” The First Amendment provides that Congress makes no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise. It protects freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and the right to petition the Government for redress of grievances. This government document is something many Americans use to say anything they want without consequences, including Jones himself. Not only did Jones (qtd in Dinkin) state, “If questioning public events and free speech is banned because it might hurt somebody’s feelings, we are not in America anymore” during his disposition but he also arrived at the courthouse with a piece of duct tape over his mouth that wrote, “Save the 1<sup>st</sup>.” What Jones is saying is not entirely false. *Most* things we say are protected under the idea of free speech, no matter how rude or hurtful. What Jones and fellow defenders are wrong about though is that his statements regarding Sandy Hook were absolutely proven in the court of law to be defamatory, and therefore

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unprotected. Defamation is the action of damaging the good reputation of someone. This can be through either print or verbal speech. Jones' comments directly claimed the parents and their children were "crisis actors" who lied and staged a school shooting to gain sympathy, regulate gun control, and persecute gun owners and survivalist. These known lies directly spewed by Jones purposely damaged these people's public reputation, which directly lines up with Defamation.

Solutions and accountabilities should be put in place and enforced in an effort to counteract this behavior and actions like this. On a basic level, some sort of government or widely accepted fact checking organization or regulation should be put in place to prevent harmful misinformation, as a study done by Madrid (2023) at the University of Southern California found, "just 15% of the most habitual news sharers in the research were responsible for spreading about 30% to 40% of fake news." If implemented correctly, this would hugely decrease the amount of false news in today's online world. While regulations like this are not commonplace on America's on-line internet, other places such as Europe are implementing misinformation regulations. Unfortunately, it does not seem like the U.S. will follow in Europe's footsteps, as Suresh Venkatasubramanian (qtd in Kubzansky 2022), who is a professor of computer science and data science, believes, "The United States likely will not implement its own regulations on misinformation." When speaking of the European Union, he states they have, "more of a willingness to do these things top-down," but similar conversations are "very hard to start in the U.S." because of its commitment to free speech. While this is unfortunate, it does not mean this concept is totally lost. Companies, such as YouTube, have recently started implementing fact checks on videos. With how easy it is to discuss news and opinions online; these actions at least seem like a step in the right direction.

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Another step in the right direction would be making legitimate news sources more widely available. In our world today, it is a common phrase to say that we have all the information we need at our fingertips, but this is not entirely true. Many respectable and important online news sources require either payment, membership, or an account. This doesn't even include either print newspapers or cable news channels which require some sort of payment or subscription. A study conducted by the University of Oxford (2019) found that only 16% of respondents in the United States surveyed they have paid for online news in 2018. Personally, I have found this practice to be very frustrating and difficult. When researching and writing, not only this argumentative essay, but my previous synthesis essay I had run into many valuable news sources that were locked behind some sort of gate. I at least had previous knowledge when researching both papers, but for the less informed average internet user, that blocked off information could be detrimental.

With the boom and accessibility of the internet, people deserve to have a reliable and safe news source, as people like Alex Jones do nothing but divide people. Over the past 20 years, he has caused so much pain to so many innocent victims. We should take the initiative to prevent this dangerous and destructive behavior. On how to avoid cases like this, professor Prooijen (qtd in Weitz and Bergquist) believes that leaders are in the most influential position to overcome this fearmongering, stating:

If one manages to transform widespread pessimism into optimism, irrational conspiracy theories will decrease among the public. As these aversive feelings are closely coupled with feeling out of control, we propose, likewise, that making people feel in control reduces conspiracy theories. Furthermore, to the extent that information often flows through a network (such as gossip network) rather than most the formal network, those

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people who are situated at the “node” (cross-roads) of the network might also be quite influential (Schon, 1973). Stated from a somewhat different perspective, people working at all levels of and providing functions of all kinds in an organization must experience a sense of empowerment in order to become less suspicious. Indeed, one study finds that having participants remember a time in their life when they felt completely in control reduced (belief in) conspiracy theories as compared to a neutral baseline condition. (p.12)

With Alex Jones being officially convicted of defamation and important allies of him, such as Donald Trump, it looks like his power is waning. If this court case does set a president, hopefully we are moving in the right direction to stop and detour others that purposefully spread fake information.

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