



**GRESHAM**  
COLLEGE

Thursday, 5 May 2022, 6:00PM - 7:00PM

Barnard's Inn Hall

# Breaking Democracy: Lies, Deception and Disinformation

Professor Andrew Chadwick

[www.andrewchadwick.com](http://www.andrewchadwick.com)

[www.lboro.ac.uk/research/online-civic-culture-centre](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/online-civic-culture-centre)



Loughborough  
University

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# A special thank-you to collaborators whose thinking influenced this talk

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Professor James Stanyer



Catherine R. Baker



Professor Cristian Vaccari



Andrew R. N. Ross

# **A quick question...**

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**Have you ever been deceived?**

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**When you realised you had been deceived, did you feel a bit embarrassed?**

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**Most people are vulnerable to deception at least  
some of the time**

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**Admitting we've been deceived usually involves loss  
—of social status, social identity, or both**

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Image: Boston Library. Public domain.

*Banker and financial fraudster, Charles Ponzi, c.1920*

# On Cooling the Mark Out<sup>†</sup>

Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure

Erving Goffman\*

**I**N CASES OF CRIMINAL FRAUD, victims find they must suddenly adapt themselves to the loss of sources of security and status which they had taken for granted. A consideration of this adaptation to loss can lead us to an understanding of some relations in our society between involvements and the selves that are involved.

# But what is deception?

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*It's often better to start by saying what it isn't.*



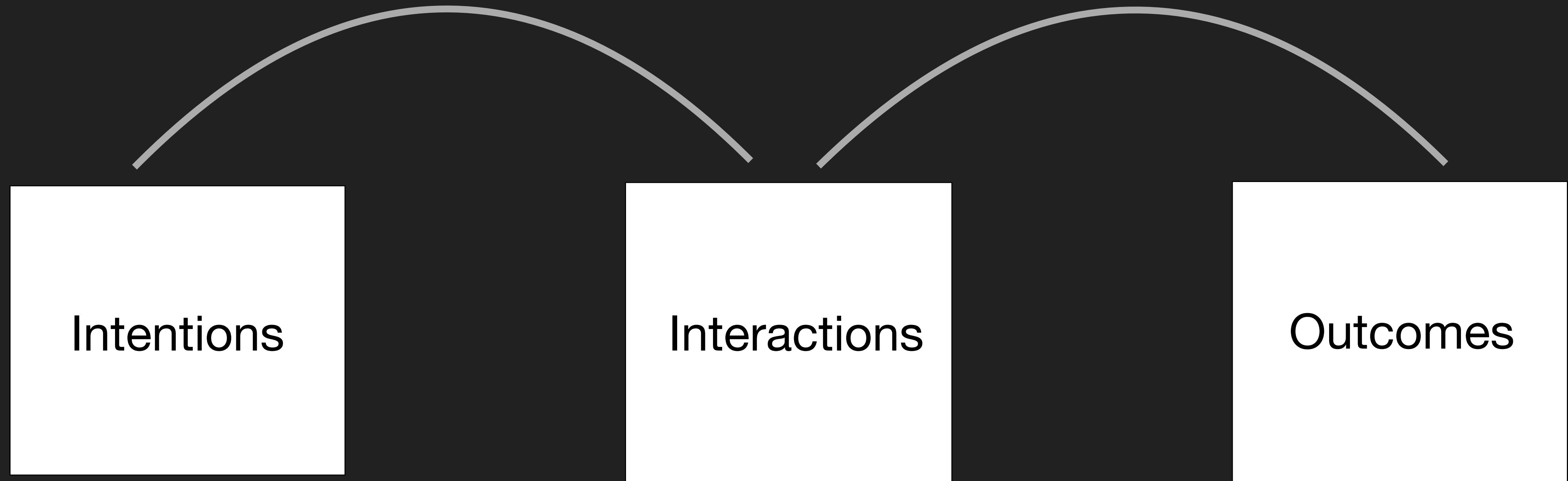
# Deception is not...

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- Lying
- Secrecy
- Individual lack of knowledge
- Disinformation
- Misinformation

# A simple definition

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*Deception: when an identifiable entity's intention to mislead results in attitudinal or behavioural outcomes that correspond with the prior intention.*



# Five varieties of deception

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## **Varieties: 1) Rhetoric**

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- Strategic ambiguity
- Diversions and deflections
- Generating conditional or counterfactual versions of events
- Concealing or withholding information, especially over time
- “Nondecisions”

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# What's happened to the 40 new hospitals pledge?

By Nicholas Barrett and Daniele Palumbo  
BBC Reality Check

🕒 1 December 2021

[Reality Check](#)



# “40 new hospitals”

According to the Government, a “new hospital” can be:

- A whole new hospital on a new site or current NHS land
- A major new clinical building on an existing site or a new wing of an existing hospital
- A major refurbishment

The Government says these “must always be referred to as a new hospital” in all press and PR communication.

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Reality Check

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Reality Check





# “40 new hospitals”

- **Complex combinations of true and false information.**  
There *is* a programme of new building underway, but entirely new hospitals are only a small part of it.
- **Strategic ambiguity.**  
The funding is not in place. It's an initial £3.7bn and not enough for 48 building projects, let alone hospitals, of which there will only be two in any case.
- **Diversions and deflections, and generating conditional or counterfactual versions.**  
The use of “new hospital” in specialised ways most people wouldn't recognise in everyday language but which feel “truthy” when repeated.
- **Concealing or withholding information, especially over time.**  
It was only when the BBC asked the Government in 2021 that the potentially misleading information was revealed.



## Varieties: 2) Wilful ignorance

- Avoiding exposure to evidence, to enable one to claim that, at the time, one could not possibly have known the consequences of one's actions.
- Organised in advance.
- Also promoting uncertainty to enhance self-interest in pursuing socially harmful action:
  - Tobacco advertising 1950s–2000s.
  - Climate change denial campaigns since 1980s.
  - War crimes.

Image: Kensuke Okabayashi / Globalwitness  
<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/reports/wilful-ignorance>





“Funk either knew what was being received or was deliberately closing his eyes to what was being done.”

—Nuremberg Tribunal, 1946  
(reported in Gilbert, 1947)

Image: Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-B21019 / CC-BY-SA 3.0



*Walter Funk, Nazi Minister for Economic Affairs and president of the Reichsbank, 1938-1945*

## **Varieties: 3) Manipulating social identities**

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- “Identity-protective cognition” (Kahan)
- To maintain status, social support, and belonging, people resist information that contradicts the beliefs of their social “tribe.”
- But elites can manipulate the contexts that matter for identity and group formation:
  - Increasing false signals about how the social in-group are threatened by out-groups
  - Exaggerating out-group threats

# Russian Internet Research Agency interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election

- 2015–2017: 31 million U.S. Facebook users shared Russian Internet Research Agency's Facebook and Instagram posts (Source: U.S. Senate).
- The Facebook posts were “liked” 39 million times, reacted to with emojis 5.4 million times, and generated 3.5 million comments.
- Instagram posts alone received 185 million likes and 4 million comments.

## Russia's Influence Campaign Targeting the 2016 US Presidential Election



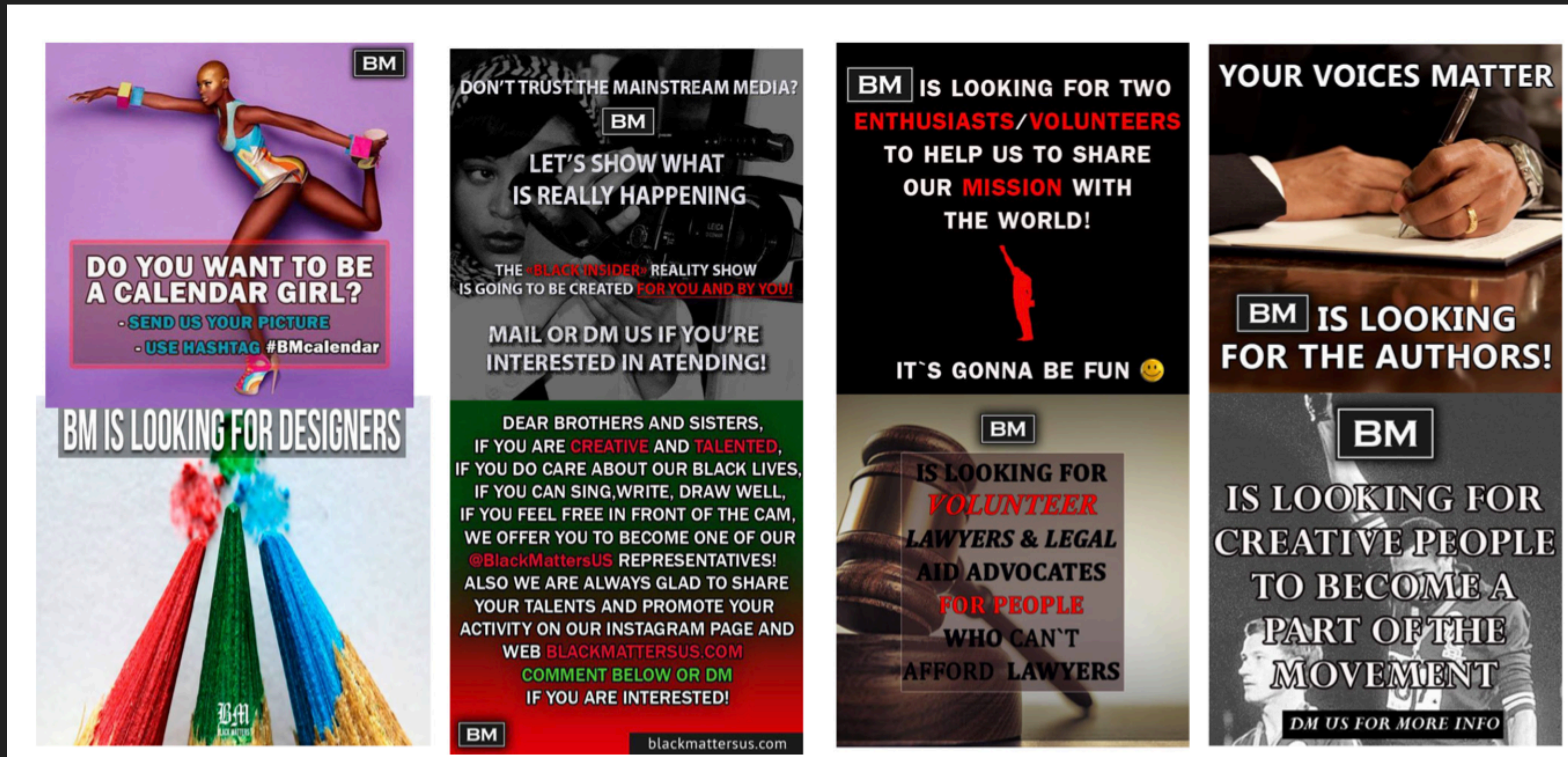


# Russian Internet Research Agency interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election





# Russian Internet Research Agency interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election





## Varieties: 4) Repetition, fluency, and the illusory truth effect

- Fluency: how we feel when we think about information.
- Familiar information is easier to process and more likely to stimulate positive emotions.
- Repeated exposure increases fluency. Fluency increases credulity.
- Can increase acceptance of online misinformation, e.g.:
  - Astroturfing
  - Sockpuppets
  - Coordinated trolling

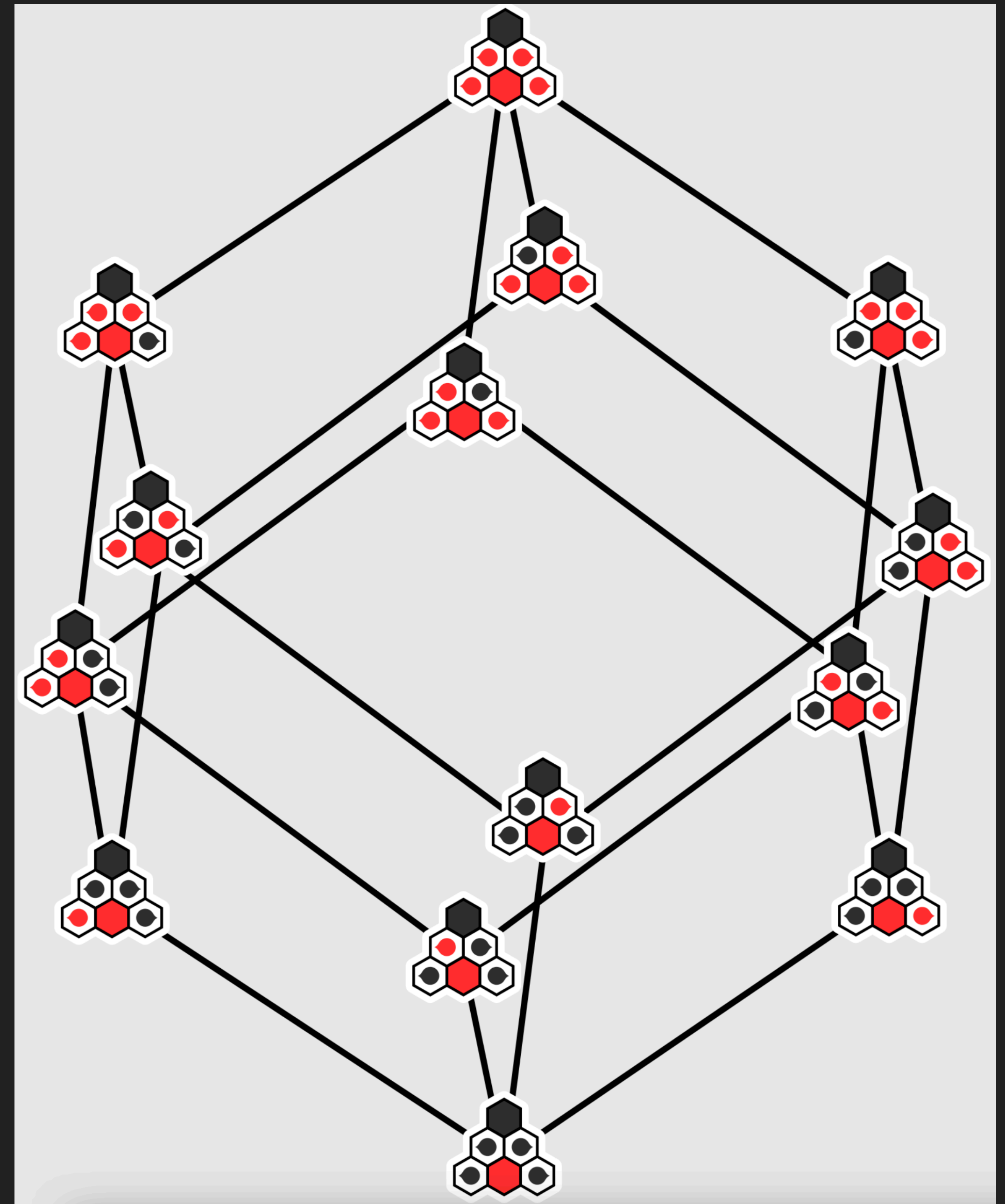


Image: Tilman Piesk, Public domain.



# Varieties: 5) Manipulating source credibility

- As media technologies have changed, how people judge credibility has changed.
- Online “credibility cues”:
  - Recency
  - Popularity
  - Comments
- Vulnerabilities in news organizations:
  - Amplifying conspiracy theories
  - Embedding fake social media accounts in news articles
  - Combines source credibility and false information



Image: mikemacmarketing, CC BY 2.0



# **Why does deception undermine democracy?**

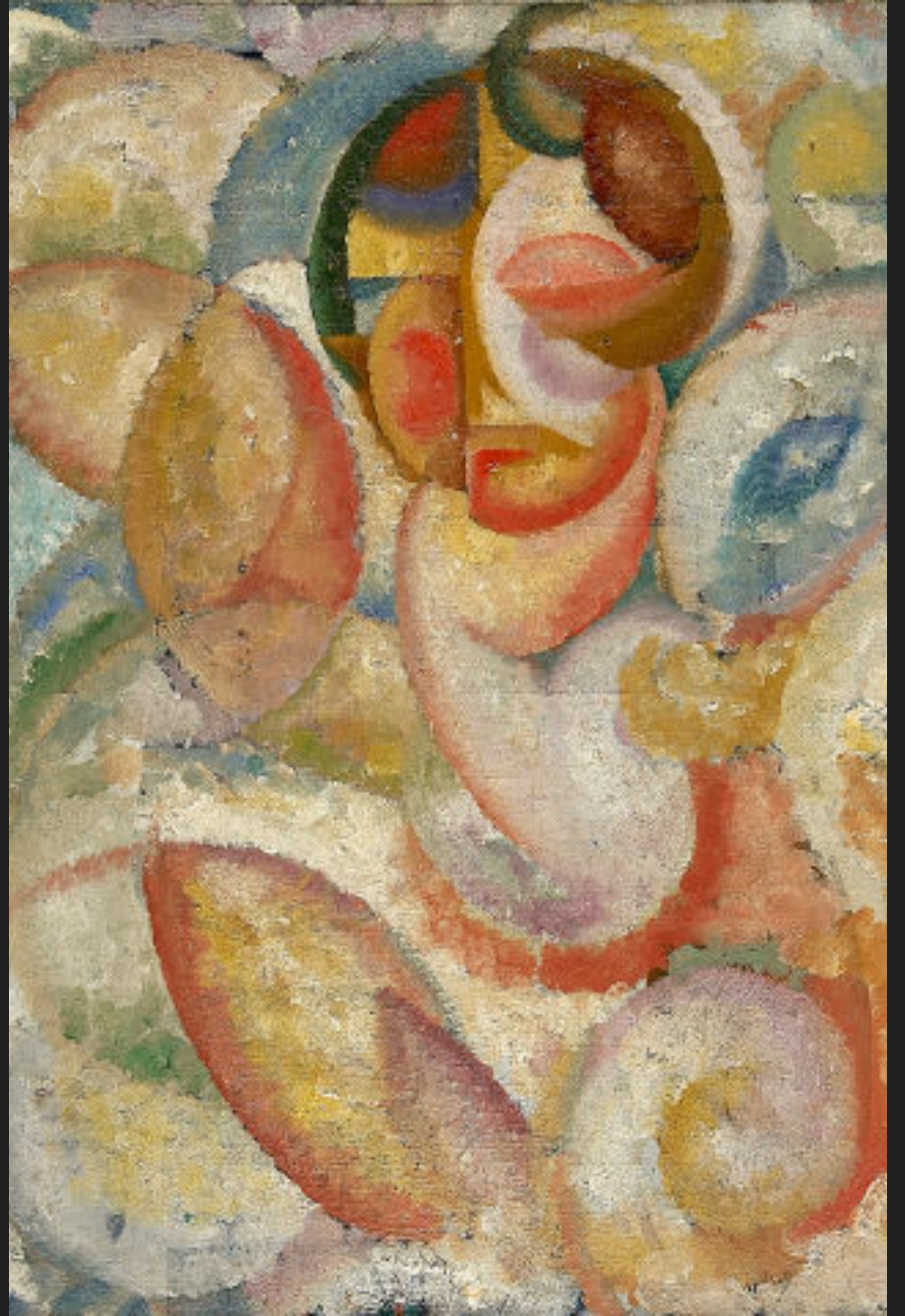
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## Direct impacts

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- Undermines the interests of the deceived
- Undermines capacity to participate effectively in civic life
- Distorts policy preferences
- Increases social and political divisions
- Becomes a norm—just “what it takes” to win

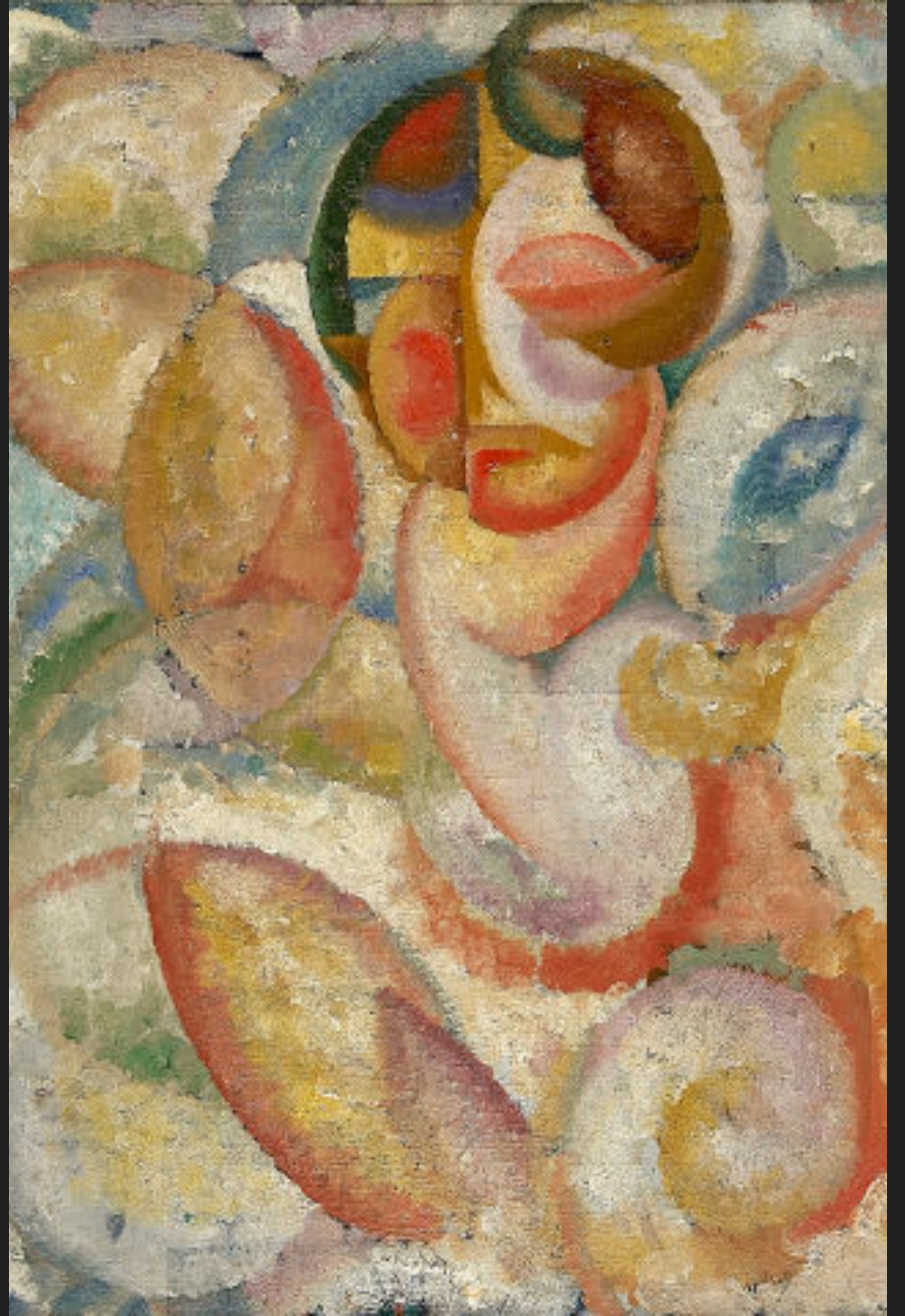




# Indirect impacts

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- Erodes norms of evidence, verification, and reason-giving
- Increases perceptions of wrongdoing, which in turn reduces social trust
- Distinguishing truth from falsehood becomes harder
- Healthy skepticism turns to cynicism and apathy
- Frees illiberal elites to mislead—because they can claim nothing can be trusted, or to curtail freedom to restore “order”







“If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer.... A people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its own mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please.”

—Hannah Arendt, 1974

# **Principles for the fightback against deception**

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# Principles for the fightback against deception

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- Promote broad understanding of how the nature of deception has changed due to changes in our media systems.
- Focus on empowering *people*, in their everyday social capacities, to understand and challenge attempts to deceive. Don't just focus on quick technological fixes to "poor" quality information.
- Recognize how today's media and digital platform business models are often ill-suited to challenging deception.
- Independently fund investigative journalism and fact checking.
- Fund independent scholarly research. Avoid research funded on terms directly dictated by digital platforms, media organizations, or governments.



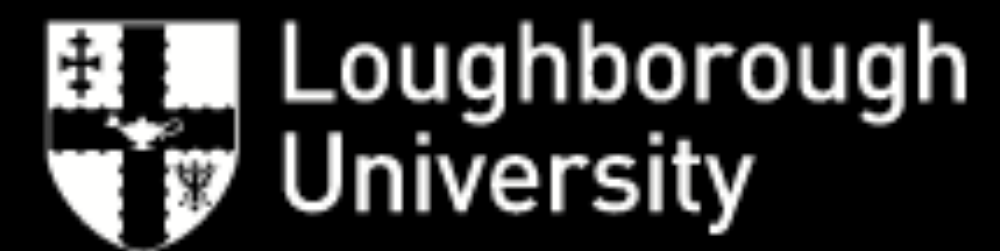
## Principles for the fightback against deception

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- Establish in law a transparent, shared public national data repository of social media take-downs and other identified attempts to deceive.
- Recognize the importance of politics. Provide opportunities to challenge the idea that deception is a political norm or “just what it takes” to win.
- Establish deception-sensitive nuanced legal frameworks for retrospective public inquiries of all kinds.
- To avoid moral panics and unintended indirect effects, focus efforts on mitigating deception, not just the existence of poor-quality information.

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