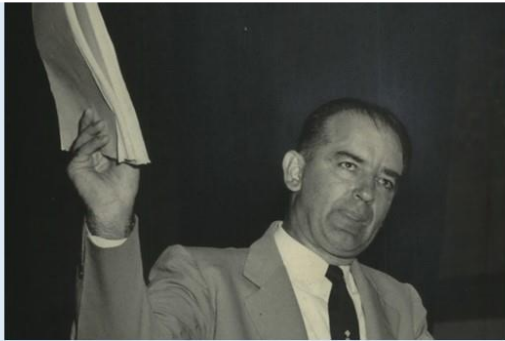


The Use of Information and Misinformation to Stir Up Fear in America: A Comparative Analysis of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, McCarthyism, and the Modern MAGA Movement

MAKE IT THE MOMENT



Have you no sense of decency?



When did that become okay?

Ms. Ai, October 12, 2024

Introduction

Throughout American history, waves of populism have frequently been fueled by an exploitation of fear, resentment, and disillusionment among the traditional working class. Often, these movements have found common ground in promoting a fear of the "other," targeting perceived enemies both within and outside the nation. Three distinct eras in U.S. history—the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the Midwest in the 1920s, the McCarthy-era Red Scare in the 1950s, and the modern-day MAGA movement—exemplify how information and misinformation have been weaponized to shape public opinion and influence political power. The manipulation of fear through misleading or false narratives has remained a key tactic, leading to harmful societal impacts that resonate even today.

The Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s: Fear of the "Other" in the Heartland

In *Fever in the Heartland*, Timothy Egan chronicles the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the American Midwest during the 1920s, offering a sobering glimpse into how fear and misinformation can galvanize a

movement. This second iteration of the KKK was not just confined to the South, nor was it focused solely on racial issues. Rather, the Klan extended its animosity to Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and anyone perceived as a threat to the white, Protestant way of life. The movement found fertile ground in rural and working-class areas of the Midwest, where economic instability and rapid societal change left many feeling disempowered and uncertain about their future.

The Klan capitalized on these anxieties by distributing sensationalist misinformation about the supposed dangers posed by non-Protestants and immigrants. They claimed that Catholics were plotting to undermine American democracy, that Jews controlled finance, and that immigrants were taking jobs from "true Americans." The Klan used modern tools like mass media and rallies to spread their message, leveraging print and radio to create a sense of urgency and existential threat. In doing so, they stoked fears among working-class whites who felt economically marginalized and culturally displaced.

While the Klan was effective in manipulating public opinion, the consequences were devastating. Innocent people were subjected to violence, intimidation, and social ostracism based on lies and prejudices. The Klan's message of hate was ultimately built on a foundation of misinformation, yet it tapped into real concerns among the populace, leading to its rapid expansion during this period. The fear of the "other" and the creation of an enemy figure were crucial in rallying the traditional working class to the Klan's cause, demonstrating the power of fear-driven misinformation.

McCarthyism and the Red Scare: The Weaponization of Fear in the 1950s

A few decades later, a similar phenomenon unfolded with the rise of McCarthyism during the Cold War. Senator Joseph McCarthy and his allies capitalized on widespread fear of communism to launch a campaign of accusation, persecution, and blacklisting. The Red Scare, much like the KKK's rise in the 1920s, preyed on the anxieties of the working class, who were grappling with post-World War II economic challenges and a rapidly changing world order.

McCarthy used the threat of communism as a tool to target political opponents, intellectuals, and even ordinary citizens. His accusations were often based on flimsy or non-existent evidence, and the media played a key role in amplifying his claims. The fear of communism was magnified by the sensationalist press, which presented McCarthy's accusations as credible and heightened the sense of danger. This misuse of information—blurring fact and fiction—allowed McCarthyism to thrive.

Like the Klan's manipulation of fears in the 1920s, McCarthyism relied heavily on the demonization of the "other." In this case, it was not Catholics or immigrants but alleged communists and fellow travelers. The threat of infiltration by foreign ideologies created an atmosphere in which dissent was criminalized, and suspicion became a national norm. Working-class Americans were particularly vulnerable to these tactics, as many had served in World War II and were deeply invested in preserving the democratic ideals they had fought for. The idea that communists were working to destroy these ideals from within America's borders stirred an emotional and often irrational response.

Ultimately, McCarthyism left a legacy of mistrust and repression. The spread of misinformation and the willingness of the media and political institutions to enable McCarthy's crusade showed how fear could be manipulated to silence opposition and control public discourse. While McCarthyism eventually collapsed under the weight of its own lies, the damage it caused to individuals' lives and to the political fabric of the country was profound.

The MAGA Movement: Misinformation in the Age of Social Media

The modern-day "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) movement, associated with Donald Trump, echoes many of the same dynamics seen in both the KKK of the 1920s and McCarthyism in the 1950s. Like those earlier movements, MAGA has been adept at channeling the frustrations and fears of the traditional working class, often through the use of misinformation and the creation of an "other" to blame for societal problems.

MAGA's primary targets have included immigrants, particularly from Latin America, as well as Muslims, the LGBTQ+ community, and various perceived "elites" such as scientists, journalists, and academics. Misinformation has been a central tool in this movement's rise. For instance, the myth of widespread voter fraud has been a key narrative, despite repeated debunking by experts and officials. Similarly, misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic—such as claims that it was a "hoax" or that vaccines were dangerous—gained significant traction within MAGA circles, leading to public health challenges.

The advent of social media has provided a new and powerful platform for the dissemination of misinformation, allowing falsehoods to spread more rapidly and widely than in previous eras. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have enabled the rapid circulation of conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, which gained considerable popularity among some MAGA adherents. These platforms, unlike the traditional media of the 1920s or 1950s, allow for more decentralized and participatory forms of misinformation, making it harder to counter false narratives with fact-checking or expert opinions.

As with the Klan and McCarthyism, the MAGA movement thrives on the idea of an enemy within. Whether it is the "deep state," immigrants, or liberal elites, the movement continually frames America as being under siege from forces that are undermining its greatness. By tapping into economic insecurities, cultural anxieties, and distrust of institutions, MAGA has managed to foster a significant and devoted following, despite the frequent exposure of its misinformation.

Conclusion

The exploitation of fear and misinformation has been a recurring theme in American populist movements, from the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, to McCarthyism in the 1950s, to the modern-day MAGA movement. In each case, working-class anxieties were manipulated by creating a scapegoat—a feared "other" who was blamed for societal problems. Whether through anti-immigrant rhetoric, red-baiting, or conspiracy theories, these movements have used misinformation to rally support and maintain power. The consequences have been both immediate and long-lasting, leaving scars on the political and social fabric of the nation. In today's era of mass communication and social media, the need to recognize and counter misinformation is more critical than ever.

Note: OpenAI generated this essay from the prompt: Write a 1000 word essay comparing the use of information and misinformation to stir up a fever among the traditional working class population and a fear of the other as exemplified in the book *Fever in the Heartland* about the KKK in the Midwest in the 1920s, the McCarthy era in the 1950s and its red-baiting and persecution, and today with the MAGA movement and the repetition of misinformation and disregard for science and facts.

Slide: the slide references Bob Welsh's famous statement to Joe McCarthy, "Have you no sense of decency?" that helped to break the McCarthyism fever of that time. The picture also references Barack Obama's statement in a speech about Donald Trump's false and divisive statements that could do the same for what could be considered the MAGA-fever of today. Here is a link to the speech excerpt as well as some of the text from the transcript:

Video clip link: ['When did that become OK?': Obama bashes Trump in emotional speech \(yahoo.com\)](https://www.yahoo.com/news/when-did-that-become-ok-obama-bashes-trump-emotional-speech-123456789.html)

Excerpt: *The idea of intentionally trying to deceive people in their most desperate and vulnerable moments – my question is, when did that become OK? ... If you had a family member who acted like [Trump], you might still love them, but you'd tell 'em, 'You got a problem,' and you wouldn't put him in charge of anything. And yet, when Donald Trump lies or cheats, or shows utter disregard for our Constitution, when he calls POWs 'losers' or fellow citizens 'vermin,' people make excuses for it... I get it why people are looking to shake things up. I mean, I am the 'hopey-changey' guy. I understand people feeling frustrated and feeling we can do better. What I cannot understand is why anybody would think that Donald Trump will shake things up in a way that is good for you. – Excerpts from former President Barack Obama's October 9th, 2024 Pittsburgh speech*