

DEMAGOGUES, POPULISM & MISINFORMATION

*A Guide to
Combating
Dark Ideas*

Edited by

CHRIS BROWN & GRAHAM HANDSCOMB

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A GUIDE TO COMBATING DARK IDEAS

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

They don't publish
the good news.

The good news is published
by us.

They don't publish the good news (extract) Thich Nhat Hanh

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find us unafraid.

Invictus (extract) William Ernest Henley

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FOREWORD

Standing Together Against the Egotists

It is an absolute pleasure to write the Foreword to this remarkable book because my life has focussed so much on the areas that it explores. I've written books on the last eight prime ministers – some good, some bad. I have also authored books on trust, artificial intelligence, happiness, character and the purpose of education, and I have run both schools and a university. The chapters within this remarkable book stretch both the mind and the imagination. At times, they seem almost too hopeful and ambitious; at other times, the ideas are so obviously sensible one cannot imagine why they are not widespread in our lives today.

The publication of the book is timed to perfection. Why?

- The rise of Donald Trump, the most lawless President in the US history, who is placing the 250-year-old system in the USA of separation of powers and checks and balances, and the post-1945 global order, under severe test.
- The rise of dictators, including Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela and a host of autocratic figures across every continent in the world. According to the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, only 26 countries out of some 200 can be labelled 'full democracies' the lowest number since the survey began in 2006. Only 6.6% of the world's population, down from 12.5% 10 years ago, can be said to live in countries enjoying full democratic freedoms.
- A prevailing sense of anxiety across the world about the present and future, with worries about climate change, loss of jobs, the impact of AI, food, water and energy security, the damage done by social media, the rise of violence particularly against women and the vulnerable and the devastation caused

by legal and illegal drugs. There are fundamental concerns about the decline of family and religion and their replacement by influencers and figures of shadowy and uncertain morality, the rise of gangs, terrorism, and the resurgence of racism, the loss of communal spaces and civic centres, and places where children could play safely outside.

- The rise of populism, in both left- and right-wing forms, spreading across the world, promoting the idea that the ruling elites are acting in their own self-interest, not that of the population at large. Incumbent governments struggle in difficult economic circumstances to satisfy the aspirations of their people.
- Respect for objective truth has come into question in a way that George Orwell foresaw 75 years ago. Totalitarian countries for centuries have used their power to assert what is true and what is false. The new factor though, and a very dangerous one, is that the most powerful leader of the West, Donald Trump, has no interest in or respect for objective truth. The eclipse of objective truth is magnified by people increasingly finding out about news, not from independent and balanced sources, like the BBC, but from highly partisan broadcast, print and digital sources.
- Ideas have never been more needed. But not every idea is a good idea. Racism, genocide and ethnic cleansing are all ideas, but they are bad and dangerous ideas, which were to the fore to devastating effect in the 20th century. The Republican Administration in the USA since January 2025 has produced a set of novel ideas – clean out Gaza of Palestinians and replace with a ribbon development of gambling and golf resorts, take over Greenland, the Panama Canal and Canada. But these are bad dark ideas. History is full of people wanting to follow and to curry favour with powerful leaders, however, ill-informed and illegal their ideas. The dark web is full of ideas that are very, very dark. The human mind seems to be more drawn to that which is dark than that which is wholesome and good.
- Integrity, trustworthiness and public service are all good ideas that have come under enormous strain this century. A host of scandals in the UK involving politicians and even prime ministers

has steadily eroded public confidence. No single prime minister in the last century has so damaged the integrity of the office of PM as Boris Johnson, with his repeated lying and dissembling.

- A tired and redundant system of education is responsible for many of the problems in Britain. It is fixated on exams, which are seen as an end in themselves rather than a means to an end. It is not producing young people who employers say are ready for work. It finds little place for the arts, sports, adventure and character development, yet it is ethical workers who society and employers most need. Teachers are leaving schools in droves because the regimentation and lack of discipline is uncongenial. The mental health of young people is of epidemic proportions. It fails to prepare young people well enough for further and higher education, and focusses on the very cognitive and linear skills that algorithms will always be able to outperform humans on, rather than the human skills, on which AI will never be able to compete with humans.

If all this sounds a bit gloomy, then reading this book will fill you as it does me with hope for the future.

Let me conclude with 10 ideas first expounded in *Trust. How We Lost It and How to Get It Back*¹ which I wrote with a team of 10 brilliant young women and men on the very cusp of beginning their working lives. In no order:

- Set up nature trails across the country.
- Remove all graffiti from public spaces the moment it appears.
- Start a national campaign to remove all rubbish from the sides of roads, rivers, beaches, public spaces and elsewhere, and repair damage to public buildings and spaces immediately.
- All young people to join scout groups from 7 to 16 and all over 18s spend a year in public national service activities learning practical and coping skills and being engaged in activities that will build a better society.
- All pupils at school to enjoy an arts education, sports, physical and adventure activities out of school.

- All young people to be engaged in volunteering activities.
- Parks and green areas to be created on brownfield sites – a minimum of 25% of each town and city to be green space.
- All derelict canals to be restored, rivers, ponds and lakes to be brought back to be full of natural life.
- Britain to appoint a ‘top 1000 role-models’, figures who have excelled in their chosen fields, to serve for five years, to be national exemplars of ethical behaviour, public service, dedication and hard work.
- Schools to be responsible for discovering not what young people *can't do* – with one-third every year failing at GCSE = but finding out what each and every single young person *can do and loves to do*, showering them with trust, and giving each a pathway to becoming responsible and valued members of society.

Idealistic? Of course. Impractical? No. They have all been proven to work elsewhere. Most important to all is that we must learn that the future is about us, no longer about the egotists, and that we will all flourish by standing together rather than alone as we have done for so much of this vexatious century to date.

Sir Anthony Seldon,
October 2025

NOTE

1. Seldon, A. (2009). *Trust. How we lost it and how to get it back*. Biteback Publishing.

Erratum: It has come to the attention of the publisher that Brown, C. and Handscomb, G. (2025). Demagogues, Populism and Misinformation. Emerald Publishing, contained a formatting error that placed the references to Anthony Seldon's Forword in the Acknowledgements. This error was introduced in the production process and has now been corrected in the online version to ensure that the references are accessible. The publisher sincerely apologizes for this error and for any inconvenience caused.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our deepest thanks to all the contributors to this volume. Your insight, passion and commitment to challenging misinformation and promoting an ideas-informed society have made this book possible.

Our sincere appreciation goes to *Emerald Publishing* for their support in bringing this work to life. We are especially grateful to our editor, *Kirsty Woods*, whose guidance, encouragement and editorial expertise have been invaluable throughout the development of this project.

Thank you all for helping us strike back against the dark side – one idea at a time.

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TACKLING THE FOUNDATIONS OF DARK IDEAS

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INTRODUCTION: STRIKING BACK AGAINST THE DARK SIDE

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PURSuing THE IDEAS-INFORMED SOCIETY

As editors of this volume, we are especially proud of what it represents: a further step towards realising what we term the *ideas-informed society*. This is a concept we return to often in our writing – an ideal, even. It envisions a society in which all members, from school students onwards, actively seek out and engage with enriching, constructive ideas, while also identifying and rejecting harmful or misleading ones.¹ As we write this in mid-2025, clinging to idealism may seem naïve – but can you blame us? The world today is awash with crises: impending environmental catastrophe, a growing migration emergency, worsening obesity and mental health issues, the rise of populist demagogues, attacks on democratic institutions, eroding public trust, and an ever-widening chasm between the privileged and the deprived. Against this backdrop, we argue that fostering an ideas-informed society – rooted in critical engagement with ideas – can serve as a much-needed bulwark. At its core, this means encouraging widespread interaction

with positive ideas while actively challenging dark ones. So, let's begin there.

POSITIVE IDEAS AND EMPOWERING THE MARGINALISED

We define *positive ideas* as those that help improve lives and strengthen communities. At the personal level, they might include evidence-based knowledge about healthy living – information that leads individuals to reduce alcohol intake or increase physical activity, thus lowering the risk of preventable illnesses.² But positive ideas can also have a long-term, transformative effect. Engagement with enriching ideas builds cultural capital, supporting better educational outcomes, upward social mobility, and personal growth.³

An ideas-informed society, at its best, enables lifelong learning across formal, informal, and community contexts. However, not everyone who could benefit from such engagement does so. Our earlier research highlights the existence of tight-knit communities – often characterised by lower educational attainment and routine or manual employment – where idea engagement is minimal.⁴ Within these groups, discussing current events or exploring new societal developments is uncommon. And yet, these are precisely the communities that could stand to gain the most from becoming more engaged with ideas, particularly given the specific challenges they face.

For example, post-COVID-19 data from the Centre for Social Justice⁵ reveal that 40% of individuals in the UK's most deprived communities now report a mental health condition, compared to just 13% in the general population. Among young people, mental ill-health has risen from one in nine to one in six. Severe school absence has increased by 134%, and nearly 5,000 people died from drug poisoning in 2022 – a 63% increase in methadone-related deaths alone. Meanwhile, people in these areas remain less likely to participate in cultural activities that build capital and support social mobility.⁶ While ideas engagement is no panacea for deep systemic injustice, it can equip individuals with the knowledge and agency needed to better navigate and respond to these challenges.

TYPE ONE AND TYPE TWO DARK IDEAS

By contrast, *dark ideas* fall into two broad categories. *Type one* dark ideas are factually incorrect yet widely believed. These include fake news, science denial, and conspiracy theories – such as the suggestion that Donald Trump staged his own assassination attempt in 2024. Such misinformation has become so widespread that UK MPs have now been issued with guidance to identify it. Alarmingly, type one dark ideas are infiltrating illegal schools across England – unregistered institutions operating outside of regulatory oversight. Investigative journalist Tom Ball has exposed how two such schools, Hope Sussex and Universallzidz, teach a curriculum rooted in conspiratorial thinking.⁷ Students are taught, among other things, that COVID-19 was a ‘PLANdemic’, aircraft vapour trails are designed to cause dementia, and crystals can cure serious illness. Though the number of children attending such schools is relatively small – an estimated 126,100 were home-schooled at some point during 2022–2023⁸ (and, of course, not all of these are experiencing such conspiracy rooted education) – this still represents a disturbingly large population at risk of internalising and acting on such ideas.

Type two dark ideas, meanwhile, are those that lead to harmful outcomes even if they are not factually incorrect per se. Populist ideologies are a prime example. Around a third of voters across Europe now support far-right or far-left parties. Demagogues such as Trump, Farage, Meloni, and Orbán have mastered the art of rhetoric that pits ‘ordinary people’ against supposed ‘elites’, undermining trust in democratic institutions, the judiciary, the media, and experts. Minority rights are rolled back, culture wars rage, and facts are bent or discarded altogether. Truth has become negotiable. In this ‘post-truth’ era, repetition trumps reality. Social media makes falsehoods feel real. Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* imagined a Ministry of Truth that fabricated facts to serve the state. Today, that dystopia feels uncomfortably close to home.⁹ Populism thrives on *post-truth logic*: emotionally charged arguments, belief-driven narratives, and the dissemination of ‘alternative facts’ – a phrase coined to excuse blatant untruths from the first Trump administration. This detachment from objective truth is particularly

dangerous when paired with science denial. Consider former Australian PM Scott Morrison brandishing a lump of coal in Parliament during a heatwave and reassuring the public, ‘It won’t hurt you’.¹⁰ Or Conservative MPs in the UK claiming that lockdowns were more harmful than COVID-19 itself.¹¹

FAKE NEWS AND DARK IDEAS: NOT NEW, BUT MORE DANGEROUS

Although the current crisis of misinformation feels modern, it has deep historical roots. Fake news and propaganda can be traced back to ancient Egypt, with Pharaoh Rameses the Great allegedly inventing military victories to bolster his image. Conspiracy theories have existed since the Roman Empire – some even blamed Emperor Nero for starting the great fire of Rome. Populist leaders have appealed to emotion since ancient Greece, and scepticism towards science has always existed in forms such as Fortean beliefs.¹² What’s different now is scale, speed, and reach. With social media, AI, and digital communication, dark ideas can spread with unprecedented velocity and impact. The consequences are tangible. Tim Farley’s ‘What’s the Harm’ project documents over 368,000 deaths, 306,000 injuries, and nearly \$3 billion in damages resulting from belief in dark ideas. Add to this the erosion of democracy, public trust, and scientific progress, and the stakes become clear. Action is urgently needed.¹³

THE POWER OF CRITICAL THINKING

In our previous work, we identified critical thinking as key to enabling effective engagement with ideas – and thus central to fostering an ideas-informed society. Specific components include:¹⁴

- **Curiosity:** A motivational force for learning, best nurtured in supportive environments.
- **Intellectual honesty:** Recognising and confronting personal biases and stereotypes.

- **Intellectual humility:** Acknowledging the limits of one's own knowledge.
- **Intellectual empathy:** Respectfully engaging with perspectives different from one's own.
- **Sophisticated epistemic beliefs:** Understanding that scientific knowledge evolves and is subject to revision.
- **Information literacy:** Evaluating and navigating information sources with care.
- **Generic critical thinking skills:** Logical reasoning, argument analysis, and problem-solving.

To this list, we would add *self-checking* – the ability to pause and ask: ‘Is this idea too good to be true?’ The appeal of seductive, simplistic narratives – what we call the *lure of the dark idea* – must be consciously resisted. Many of these traits are intellectual virtues. They can be nurtured. And so, in this book, we bring together a diverse group of contributors from across society – policymakers, educators, artists, business leaders, religious leaders, activists, scientists, and more – to explore two urgent questions:

1. How can we confront and respond to dark ideas more effectively?
2. How can we help people develop the capacity to engage with ideas in ways that improve not just their own lives, but those of their communities?

THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF MISINFORMATION

Bringing the responses of our contributors together, the book opens with a section titled *Tackling the Foundations of Dark Ideas* – an in-depth exploration of the underlying forces that fuel the spread and acceptance of misinformation and populism. The contributions in this section draw on psychology, education, and political science to examine how and why dark ideas take root, and what can be done to counter them. Following our introductory chapter, the next opening chapter, ‘Why Are Some Ideas Easy to Believe on

Little Evidence?’, Anna Stone explores why certain ideas gain traction despite a lack of evidence, focussing on the roles of conspiracy thinking, populist rhetoric, and low levels of social trust. She examines how emotional reasoning, cognitive biases, and the erosion of rational discourse make misinformation resistant to correction, and outlines interventions such as analytical thinking, pre-bunking, and critical engagement as possible countermeasures.

Similarly, in ‘The Lure of the Shadow’, Arif Anis examines the destructive impact of misinformation and conspiracy theories in the UK and the USA, linking false narratives to real-world violence, unrest, and social division. He explores the psychological, technological, and socio-economic factors that enable such ideas to thrive, and calls for collective strategies including media literacy education, platform regulation, and community-based efforts to restore trust in institutions. In ‘Can Pro-Climate Advocates Steal Populism's Clothes?’, Matthew Paterson explores the evolution of climate populism. While older climate denialism relied on misinformation, new climate populism has shifted towards emotionally charged narratives. These reject net zero policies not by denying climate change, but by framing such initiatives as threats to traditional lifestyles or as impositions from out-of-touch elites. Paterson argues that scientists and activists can – and must – adopt the rhetorical tools of populism to effectively reframe climate action in inclusive and empowering ways. This leads into the next theme which focusses on the power of education.

SCHOOLS ON THE FRONT LINE IN A POST-TRUTH ERA

Education is a crucial site in the fight against misinformation, as demonstrated by the chapters in this second section, *Liberation Through Education*. In ‘Science Literacy Beats Misinformation’, Andrew Morris argues that widespread scientific illiteracy leaves individuals vulnerable to poor reasoning and populist manipulation. Drawing on an experimental science course for adults, he makes the case for inquiry-based learning – both in formal education and lifelong learning settings – as a way to cultivate curiosity, critical thinking, and an appreciation for science's relevance to