

# [***Misinformation has created an alternative world for some Americans***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BX1-W0F1-DY7V-G03Y-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; There's a tendency in this heated political climate to simply reject people who are saying false things and to write off conspiracy theorists writ large.

But as the US approaches the third straight [*election*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2024) in which misinformation - and the fight against it - is expected to play a role, it's important to understand what's driving people who don't believe in US elections.

CNN's Donie O'Sullivan and his team have an hourlong documentary, "MisinfoNation: The Trump Faithful," airing on "The Whole Story with Anderson Cooper" on Sunday at 8 p.m. ET.

I talked to O'Sullivan about the documentary, in which he has some frank and disarming talks with people about what has shaken their belief in the US. But he paints an alarming picture about the rise of fringe movements in the country.

Our conversation, conducted by phone and edited for length, is below:

The fringes have infected the mainstream

**WOLF:** What were you trying to accomplish with this project?

**O'SULLIVAN:** So much of mainstream American ***politics*** now is being infected and affected by what is happening on what was once considered the real fringes - fringe platforms, fringe personalities.

And I think really what we want to do in this show is illustrate how these personalities may be pushing falsehoods, but they're no longer fringe. This is all happening right now.And it is having a big effect on our democracy.

'A lot of these people are pretty normal'

**WOLF:** Your demeanor when you conduct these interviews with people saying incorrect things is friendly. It's respectful. I was disarmed by that because, while you do point out inaccurate things people say during these interviews, you also ended up talking to people instead of disagreeing with them. How do you go about conducting these interviews?

**O'SULLIVAN:** I do not view my job as going out there to change people's minds. There are plenty of other people who can do that or who can try to do that. I want to hear what these people believe and why they believe it.

Obviously, when we present it to our audience, we will make sure people have the facts. But I think it's very important to go into every single one of these interviews open-minded and with an understanding that we're all human.

A lot of the country believes this stuff. The latest polling - I think it's [*about a third of Americans*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/03/politics/cnn-poll-republicans-think-2020-election-illegitimate/index.html) who believe that Joe Biden didn't legitimately win the last election. I think about [*a quarter of Americans*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/01/04/fbi-conspiracy-jan-6-attack-misinformation/) believed that January 6 was staged by the FBI or they had a hand in it. It's tens of millions of people.

A lot of these people are pretty normal. They've got jobs, they've got families, they are involved in their community. But for one reason or another, they just go off on this election stuff or they go off on QAnon or whatever it is.

So I think it's really important that we treat everybody with respect, maybe even if they don't necessarily want to show it to us.

Some of the people we've met along the way, we've shown bits of their interviews on air. Rachel Powell is serving time in federal prison for what she did on January 6. She is also a mom and a grandmother. When we published some of that interview, I had loads of people in comments online saying, "Why are you humanizing this woman?" To which my response was: "She's a human being."

How do we get people to agree to the same facts?

**WOLF:** It's not your job to change people's minds, but I wonder, after reporting this documentary, what you think can be done to get people to agree to the same set of facts?

**O'SULLIVAN:** I do not have solutions. I think listening and talking to people is a huge part of this. We talked to Joe Black, a guy in Colorado.

(Note: They meet at a Donald Trump rally, and O'Sullivan calls Black and ultimately travels to Black's home, where they look at what Black sees on social media versus what O'Sullivan sees.)

He didn't even know that CNN would ever do a fact check of Joe Biden.

(Note: [*CNN does many*](https://www.cnn.com/factsfirst/politics/category/joe_biden).)

It's opening people's eyes in that way a bit. But I think more importantly, it's being willing to have the conversation in the first place. Being actually willing to sit down and talk with folks in the first place.

And I think a lot of readers probably have people in their families or friends who have dived into this world of election lies or conspiracy theories. From the experts that I've spoken to about this, whether it's cults or conspiracy theories, empathy is a big part of it. You're not going to convince anyone of facts by starting off telling them they're an idiot.

People are surprised that God is not in the Constitution

**WOLF**: A theme throughout the show is a belief among Christian nationalists that the US is a Christian nation and that Christianity is laced throughout the Constitution and the founding documents. There are some interesting moments in the show where it dawns on people that actually the word "God" does not appear in the Constitution. Was that something you expected? Or is it something you stumbled upon?

**O'SULLIVAN:** There are so many strands to what is happening in the country right now, especially when it comes to trust and distrust in democracy, and Christian nationalism is one of them. We wanted to show in this documentary how two of these strands are kind of intertwining.

When it comes to Christian nationalism specifically, the reasons that we went down that route are 1) it's something I hear all the time at these events and 2) there is increasing awareness about it.

Tim Alberta had a very good book last year about it.

(Note: Watch CNN's Christiane Amanpour [*interview Alberta*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2023/12/05/amanpour-alberta-trump-evangelicals.cnn).)

More so than anything else, it was just from speaking to evangelical and other Christian pastors who are really worried right now about what they're seeing, how their faith is being weaponized in a way to attack democracy.

A lot of it is not new in terms of this kind of rapid weaponization of conservative Christianity, if you want to call it that, but I think there's an urgency now that we hadn't seen before.

[*Pastors*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2024/04/11/trump-christian-nationalism-pastors-wisconsin-contd-af-orig.cnn) have seen members of their congregation, members of their flock who leave because their sermons weren't political enough or weren't directly supporting Trump as the candidate.

When it comes to God in the Constitution, pastor Caleb Campbell puts it pretty well in the documentary when he says that he sits down with fellow evangelicals - he's a theological evangelical and a lot of people assume that the Christian God is all over the Constitution and the founding documents, which is not the case at all.

There's nothing wrong with being a Christian. There's nothing wrong with being a patriot. But what is really happening with Christian nationalism is that they are pushing a very specific type of Christianity at the expense of other people's freedoms.

Fringe platforms foster fringe movements

**WOLF:** You've covered these fringe movements, but you've also covered some of the social media stuff and I wonder what you think people should know about the rise of these kinds of fringe social media platforms - Telegram is the one featured in the documentary - that are gaining traction.

**O'SULLIVAN:** A lot of people got kicked off the major social media platforms after January 6. Trump got kicked off, but I think what a lot of people don't realize is that a lot of his supporters got banned too because they were sharing election conspiracy theories or things like that.

We meet one of those people in the documentary, Joe Black, who said he got kicked off Facebook after he shared a meme about January 6.

(Note: Black says he felt isolated by not being able to do simple things like buy items on Facebook.)

It has driven people into these darker corners of the internet that can be a lot more extreme and a lot more radicalizing. It's a dilemma, right? Because major social media platforms like Facebook have these rules. But what happens when you kick a lot of those people off is sometimes they go to platforms that are more extreme.

Obviously, Twitter, X, has changed a lot. (Note: Twitter has changed a lot since many of its moderation protections were ended after it was bought by Elon Musk.) But I think just overall, in 2016, all the guards were down when it came to social media. There were Russian trolls and everything else.

And then in 2020 there was a big crackdown from the social media platforms, which got a huge amount of blowback from conservatives. And now I feel like we're in a whole new landscape - it has totally changed again.

Hoping for a Trump pardon

**WOLF:** There's a woman you interview, Rachel Powell, a mother who's on her way to prison when you talk to her. Is she in prison now? Are you still in contact?

**O'SULLIVAN:** She is in prison. I actually received a letter from her this week from prison in West Virginia. She sent the letter, I think, more than a month ago. But it only arrived to me this week.

She's hanging on to that hope that if Trump gets reelected, she'll be pardoned. Obviously, there's a lot riding on this election for her. It's interesting, because obviously Trump has, particularly over the last few months, has really started spotlighting the people who had been prosecuted for January 6 and has very much been kind of [*portraying them as martyrs*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/16/politics/biden-trump-january-6/index.html).

She's in prison. She's got a cellmate. But it doesn't seem like the belief in Trump or anything like that has waned in any way.

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