

Mitigating Harms From Crisis Events: Natural Disasters



POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM
RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB
SCHOOL of PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Manipulation and Harmful Narratives Surrounding Severe Weather and Climate Change

Crisis Background

As severe weather events become more frequent and destructive, they are increasingly accompanied by a now familiar wave of conspiracy theories spanning weather-control and climate denial narratives that erode trust in institutions and can fuel hostility toward individuals and communities.

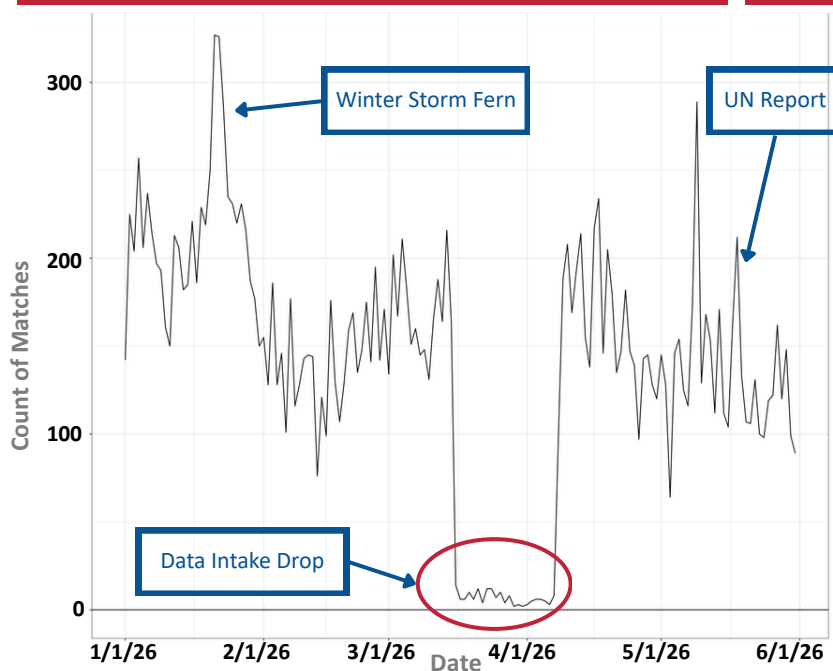
Common claims include allegations that "globalists" or the "New World Order" are manipulating the weather, manifesting as antisemitic attacks on Jewish officials during Hurricane Helene recovery efforts; assertions that current warming reflects only "natural [climate] cycles" rather than human activity, arguments that NASA has explicitly rebutted; and accusations that climate science is a coordinated scheme to profit from fear and regulation by stealing from ordinary people. These narratives can have a devastating impact, affecting disaster victims navigating recovery amid disinformation and souring the broader public's trust in climate science and emergency response.

Themes: Harmful Narratives

Public discourse surrounding extreme weather has served to promote climate denialism and perpetuate anti-globalist rhetoric. These posts often engaged in the spread of **conspiracy theories**, utilizing antisemitic dog whistles to claim that groups, often the Jewish community, engineer severe weather events. This is often done in conjunction with pseudoscientific claims in an attempt to dismiss rigorous climate change science.

Posters also used **faulty assertions** to allege manipulation of weather patterns, including by various groups (e.g., government, globalists), through various technologies such as steering hurricanes (e.g., HAARP, chemtrails).

Some posters invoke **moral outrage** to weaponize public frustration against financial institutions and policymakers. They do this by framing severe weather crises as an economic conspiracy that "liberal" institutions use to fabricate climate propaganda in order to enact green taxes and "steal" from citizens.



Natural Disaster and Climate Conspiracy Rhetoric on Gab

Since January 1, 2026, posts on Gab that included natural disaster or climate related conspiracies spiked in two specific periods. In mid-January, conspiracies attributing the severe weather of Winter Storm Fern to government and research facilities were prominent. The second period of increased disaster conspiracies occurred in mid-May, coinciding with the publication of a United Nations Climate Committee report and associated political backlash.

Preventing Manipulation

PERIL's evidence-based research shows that teaching about manipulative tactics is more effective than counterarguing with facts. A starting point is always to point out manipulation as a tactic of bad actors who are trying to persuade you. In addition, these three tactics can be addressed directly through evidence-informed responses:

Conspiracy theories can be reduced by fostering critical thinking, engaging in empathetic communication, and providing education on digital literacy.

Faulty assertions can be countered by identifying the fallacies/faulty logic at play, providing counter evidence, focusing on arguments instead of actors, and educating about how to engage in more sound logic and arguments.

Moral outrage can be mitigated by exposing the "outrage economy" of exploiting extreme emotions, discouraging "good vs. evil" rhetoric, and promoting media literacy.

PERIL analyzes harmful, salient, and fast-moving narratives to inform violence prevention. In this series, we highlight prevalent manipulation strategies that appear in the aftermath of common crises.

Scan QR for more resources developed from PERIL's research.

