

Mitigating Harms From Crisis Events: Political Crisis



POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM
RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB
SCHOOL of PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Manipulation and Harmful Narratives Surrounding the Release of the Epstein Files

Crisis Background

On November 19, 2025, President Donald Trump signed H.R.4405, the Epstein Files Transparency Act (EFTA), into law, requiring the Department of Justice (DOJ) to publicly release records related to its investigation into the sex trafficking charges against Jeffrey Epstein and his associates. Initial “Epstein files” releases – including the November 12, 2025, release of 23,000 documents by the House Oversight Committee; as well as the DOJ’s December 19, 2025, release of 100,000 documents and January 30, 2026, release of 3.5 million documents – produced countless records generating intense public debate and outrage, underscoring the gravity of related crimes and the longstanding failure to hold perpetrators and enablers accountable.

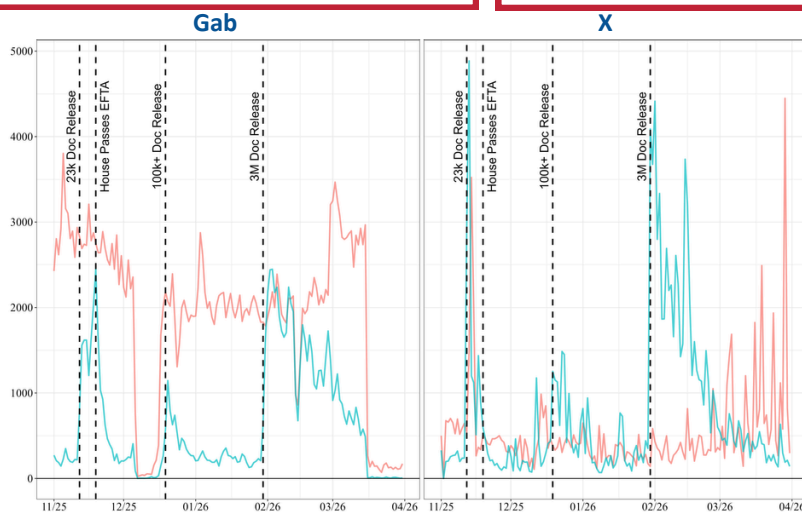
While online discourse has echoed legitimate concerns, it has also fueled harmful **compounding conspiracy theories** that exploit **moral outrage** and rely on **black and white thinking** that all frequently draw on antisemitic tropes. Over time, these narratives assign collective blame for the crimes connected to Epstein and his associates to Jewish people – the mainstreaming of which fuels antisemitism and places Jewish communities and allies at greater risk.

Themes: Harmful Narratives

While the Epstein files documented profound failures in accountability and justice – particularly for wealthy and powerful individuals – online discourse surrounding the files has fueled compounding conspiracy theories in which evidence validating one concern, that rich and powerful men abused women and girls, is used to lend credibility to a conspiracy: Epstein’s crimes and influential connections are evidence for direct work on behalf of intelligence agencies and foreign governments like Israel. One poster claimed, “the CIA, MI6, and Mossad all sat [Trump] down and told him how the world actually works” because “Trump is *not* one of the world elites.” These narratives draw on and reinforce longstanding antisemitic tropes, including the neo-Nazi-coined globalist “ZOG” (Zionist Occupied Government) conspiracies.

Moral outrage also frequently surfaced in furtherance of compounding conspiracies, observed most prominently in the Pizzagate conspiracy, a claim which alleges, without evidence, that the Comet Ping Pong restaurant in Washington, D.C. has a basement – which does not exist – that houses a child sex trafficking ring led by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. One poster wrote, “@HillaryClinton is NO Christian. An evil Satanist” – showcasing the intense emotional response to the claim of child exploitation as lending urgency and apparent credibility to a baseless claim.

Another manipulation technique observed in relation to Epstein file online discourse was **black and white thinking**, which reduces complex issues to extreme, simplistic binaries. Users commonly suggested that everyone perceived as guilty of sex trafficking and extortion connected to the Epstein files is Jewish. One poster wrote, “Everyone involved in the Epstein files is either Israeli or spiritually Israeli” – reducing the issue to an antisemitic absolute, with “spiritually Israeli” functioning as a dog whistle for broader Judaism. Another commonly observed narrative was praise for President Trump as “good” for being seen as releasing the Epstein files, while simultaneously directing blame at President Biden as “bad” for not releasing the files during his term, ultimately disregarding broader context and nuance like differences in circumstances and policy positions.



Antisemitic Rhetoric on Gab and X vs. Epstein File Events

Reactions to Epstein files events varied on the fringe platform Gab and more mainstream X. While posts mentioning Epstein increased precipitously on both platforms following document releases, discourse on Gab about Epstein disproportionately increased after the signing of the EFTA into law. Posts containing antisemitic content increased significantly on X after the House Oversight Committee document release, however no such spike was observed on Gab. Interestingly, while X users discussed the House Oversight Committee document release more than the signing of the EFTA into law, the opposite was observed on Gab.

● = Antisemitic Terms ● = Epstein Mentions

Preventing Manipulation

PERIL’s evidence-based research shows that teaching about manipulative tactics is more effective than counterarguing with facts. A common starting point is 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.

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

Black and white thinking can be addressed with messages that challenge harmful narratives by identifying gray areas, introducing appropriate nuance, and using moderate language in place of absolutes like “always/never.” This does not mean minimizing documented evidence about the role of wealth, power, or institutional failures in enabling related crimes; but rather distinguishing the crimes of individuals from baseless, hateful, and manipulative narratives that blame entire identity groups.

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.

