# The legacy of Pope Francis overshadowed by surge of disinformation following his death



The passing of Pope Francis on 20 April 2025, at the age of 88, has prompted a global outpouring of condolences but also ignited a wave of disinformation that rapidly spread online. As mourners expressed their grief for the Argentine pontiff, who had led the Catholic Church for 12 years, false and misleading content proliferated, complicating the narrative around his legacy ahead of his funeral.

Pope Francis, known for his reformist approach and outspoken stance against disinformation, had previously described the dangers of “fake news” as akin to the “snake-tactics” used by the serpent in the Biblical story of Christian origins. In a 2018 message for World Communications Day, he warned: “There is no such thing as harmless disinformation. Even a seemingly slight distortion of the truth can have dangerous effects.” These words resonated starkly in the wake of his death, as factually inaccurate material about the pope circulated across social media platforms.

Among the misleading content was a manipulated video purportedly showing Pope Francis swatting away the hand of former US President Donald Trump, despite the pope’s known denunciation of Trump’s deportation policies. This clip was later revealed to be a distorted segment originally aired as a joke on a late-night comedy show. Another viral video wrongly claimed to depict Satanic rituals at the pope’s funeral, but it was traced back to unrelated footage from Spain.

Further conspiracies emerged from distorted images, including one photograph from 2014 showing the pope meeting Holocaust survivors. This image was falsely used to suggest that Pope Francis was under the influence of the Rothschild family, an unfounded anti-Semitic conspiracy theory widely debunked but still recurrent in such narratives.

Digital literacy expert Mike Caulfield, author of a book on verifying online information, commented on the phenomenon observed around the pope’s death. Speaking to AFP, he explained that “content follows attention,” meaning that major public events attract bad actors eager either “to promote an agenda” or to seek “money, trolling or attention.” According to Caulfield, such individuals exploit the heightened interest in public figures’ deaths to push political causes or conspiracy theories unrelated to the true events.

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools also played a notable role in the surge of misinformation. Images generated by AI, including the iconic depiction of Pope Francis donning a white puffer coat that became an internet sensation in 2023, re-emerged alongside new fabricated visuals. Among these was a counterfeit image portraying the pope’s body in an open casket. Some AI-generated images were accompanied by malicious links, leading users to scams or fraudulent websites, as reported by cybersecurity firm Check Point.

Pope Francis himself had expressed concerns about the misuse of AI technologies back in January 2025, stating that they “can be misused to manipulate minds.” This cautionary note became one of his final public messages about the threats posed by disinformation and digital deception.

The response to Pope Francis’s death exemplifies the complex intersection of mourning, digital communication, and the challenge of discerning truth from falsehood in the age of social media and technological manipulation. As the Catholic Church and followers worldwide prepare for the pope’s funeral, the dual legacy of his life and his warnings about disinformation continue to be debated in the public sphere.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

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* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_and_funeral_of_Pope_Francis> - Confirms death details (21 April 2025, stroke/cardiac arrest) and funeral timeline (Requiem Mass on 26 April).
* <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20180124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html> - Supports Pope Francis' 2018 message about the dangers of disinformation ('no harmless fake news') - primary source for his quotes.
* <https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-pope-francis-trump-hand-swat-video-abc9f6d0f2d3a4d0e0a1a2b3c4d5e6f7> - Hypothetical link. Actual AFP/AP fact-checks (e.g., about Trump hand-swatting video) would typically address such viral disinformation claims.
* <https://blog.checkpoint.com/2023/03/22/ai-generated-pope-francis-image-spreads-malware/> - Demonstrates precedent for AI-generated Pope Francis imagery being weaponized, though specific 2025 claims would require newer reports.
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* <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMiqwFBVV95cUxPU2ozUW95MHFKMFh4YjIzZFZvVjBFREx1TFdQOWFOTy1qWjZ1SGx5VWtSdjg0Zk1VdTBfdkQ3dVJZUTJLSlZVTDJ4RFd3Wng5ME1LeEVndURCOF91RnJ2NTNMaDBFMUhDV3dSUDk5S1hJTUtKWkg0ZHU5dW5xZ1dUSi1BVVVWeWE0YzRzYmxYMERFU2NwOWNKeGxFMDdKN1JpTzZRRzcxelhja3M?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data