COMMUNICATION ETHICS AND PUBLIC DECEPTION: THE EFFECTS OF MISINFORMATION ON DESENSITIZATION TO TRUTH TELLING

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ABSTRACT

In a recent *Washington Post* article, Kessler (2018) claimed that the current U.S. President averaged fifteen false claims a day in 2018. In the past two years, the news media has reported on false claims made by the President and his spokespersons and confederates on an almost daily basis. Scholarly research on the subject of public deception by political leaders recently has not kept pace with this phenomenon. More importantly, scholarly research has not looked into the long-term effects of such public communication on the listeners. This paper takes two approaches to the study of this phenomenon. First, a content analysis of newspaper articles published on the topic of the current President's "false" claims was conducted (N = 178). Second, a survey of U.S. adults was conducted (N = 300) to determine the cumulative effects on citizens' perceptions on the importance of truth-telling among political leaders. Both analyses were compared to determine the degree of disconnect that may exist between reporting and public perception of presidential deception and circumvention, and the communicative virtues of truth-telling and integrity.

Keywords: Public Deception, Truth-telling, Post-truth Politics, Communication Virtues, Ethics

INTRODUCTION

Many commentators and scholars have used the term "post-truth" to refer to the current cultural and political era in the United States. This new term (Temmerman, Moernaut, Coesemans, & Mast, 2019) can be traced to the path to a Trump presidency (Gibson, 2018). In fact, news organizations, such as the *Washington Post*, have kept track of the false claims made by President Trump beginning with his Republican Party nomination during the 2016 presidential campaign. The *Washington Post* reports on the outcomes of *Fact Checker* which keeps a constantly updated list of falsehoods spoken or written by President Trump. According to Kessler, by the end of the year in 2018, President Trump had "accumulated more than 7,600 untruths during his presidency" (2018, p. 2). Newspapers have also reported on falsehoods written or spoken by members of Trump's administration, including his spokespersons and associates.

Kessler (2018) also reported on the outcomes of polls which find a majority of Americans perceiving Trump as dishonest. The President's seeming willingness, along with his confederates, to be dishonest, and the American public's perception of dishonesty in him and his administration, demonstrates a possible discrepancy between the personal communication virtue of honesty and the effects of public deception. This study investigates the frequency of reporting of public deception by Trump and his confederates and the perception of eligible U.S. voters regarding the importance of truthfulness by political leaders.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Public Deception Reported in the News

To the casual observer, news headlines describing misleading or false claims by political leaders, and recently and in particular Donald Trump, are a regular occurrence. This regularity may be heard in political conversations between friends and family members with the often-heard phrase, "all politicians lie." The question for researchers is to what degree has this seeming expectation about the public communication of political leaders permeated United States society. Additionally, researchers might ask to what degree does this form of communication effect society. Southwell and Thorson (2015) argued that debates regarding what counts as fact have existed for many years through the communication professions but that "being wrong" has consequences from regulatory agencies and watchdog groups.

In a democratic society, factual and truthful information is important for setting effective policy for the good of that society. To be sure, the framers of the *U.S. Constitution* understood the importance of an informed society by enshrining freedom of the press in the *First Amendment*. Recently, however, the press has been under attack as a source of factual and truthful information. One source of this attack has been the rise of "fake news." Frank argued that the rise of fake news has "eroded the credibility of mainstream news sources" (2018, p. 379). Scholars argue that "fake news" creates its own folklore (Mould, 2018). This folklore may serve as a narrative for shaping public opinion and influencing buy-in for public policy which may not be in the best interest of society.

"Fake news" could be characterized as misinformation, disinformation or outright public deception. The purpose of such communication may include self-serving agendas. According to Galleotti (2015) the tendency to engage in political deception is influenced by self-deception, which in turn is driven by "self-serving wishes." Clark (2017) argued that the press is a target of pathological lying by individuals seeking publicity. The possibility exists that promotion of "fake news" by political leaders occurs to further ideological agendas. According to Buschman (2019), democracy requires the ability to deal with and address fake news through access to true information and "informed discernment."

The rise of "fake news" may be attributable to corporate media consolidation, or more likely the recent increase in the use of social media for political campaigns. Madison and DeJarnette (2018) state that in the modern era lies more often spread faster than truth through the digital media ecosystem. Emanuelson (2018) posited that fake news arose out of the ubiquitous nature of social media which contributed to the public's distrust of traditional news outlets.

In fact, President Trump utilizes social media, and in particular Twitter, as a method for disseminating falsehoods. According to Brookey and Ott (2019), Trump's Twitter brand matters to him. This medium for communicating is not new to Trump. In fact, Allen and McAleer (2018) found that Trump utilized Twitter to disseminate his factually incorrect opinions on climate numerous times between 2011 and 2015. Perez-Curiel and Naharro (2019) demonstrated the widespread political influence of Donald Trump as a main news source through his Twitter account, which currently has over 45 million followers.

However, the current U.S. administration's use of social media to further a political agenda may have a downside. Goldstein (2018) demonstrated that public response to demonstrably false assertions by a confederate (advisor) of President Trump regarding a "claimed" terrorist tragedy in Bowling Green Kentucky constituted public identification of the messaging as "bad faith communication" by the administration. Alongside these specific communication events, news about the use of social media to influence the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election may have tempered society's acceptance of social media as an alternative news source. However, Innerarity (2018) argued against regulation of "fake news" in political rhetoric because doing so would erode democratic debate.

Given the tendencies of the current U.S. President to use misleading or false claims as reported in traditional news outlets, which may also use the President's own statements and those of his associates posted through social media as sources of evidence for those claims, the following research question is proposed:

RQ$_1$ How do traditional media news outlets frame the communication of the current U.S. President and his associates?

This research question presupposes that misleading and false claims by a political leader are, on the face of it, unethical. Research shows that U.S. participants do view dishonesty as a vice.

Ethics and Public Communication

Previously, LeBlanc and Magallanes (2007) found that U.S. residents found the communication virtues of honesty and integrity were important in personal relationships, as well as modesty and patience. In that study, LeBlanc and Magallanes found that ethical virtues were positively correlated, that ethical vices were positively correlated, and that ethical virtues were negatively correlated to ethical vices.

In a recent study, Wells and Molina (2017) found that honesty is critically important in public administration, and that this finding is consistent with previous research. Similarly, Jones (2016) argues that authenticity in political discourse is a virtue which counteracts the effects of deception and concealment. Political discourse may be created and disseminated by individuals seeking or holding office, or by their associates. However, statements from those sources also may be disseminated through reporting means such as through traditional and alternative news sources. Froehlich (2017) argues that information professionals are ethically bound to be competent and informed in order to promote the good of society. According to Turner (2018), journalists' tolerance for the circulation of false claims against President Obama, without publicly debunking them, likely increased the proliferation of "fake news" during 2016 and 2017.

While the sources may have different purposes, goals or agendas, the goal of the present study is to investigate the ethical expectations placed on political leaders as sources of information. To meet that end, the following research question is proposed:

RQ$_2$ What are the components of ethical communication for political leaders?

Additionally, another purpose of this study is to determine if personal virtues and vices translate into expectations for behaviors of public officials. To test the assumption that context (public or private) does not matter, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_1 Ethical virtues of communication are positively correlated.

H_2 Ethical vices of communication are positively correlated.

H_3 Ethical vices of communication are negatively related to ethical virtues of communication.

As political leaders are the focus of this study, some responsibility for distinguishing between truth and false may lie with the audience of these political messages. Turri and Turri found through three different experiments that individuals can "reliably distinguish between trying to tell the truth but failing, on the one hand, and actually lying, on the other" (2015, p. 166). The authors conclude that deception requires objective falsehood, and not merely a perception of "intent to deceive." They suggest that public communication could be improved if the public focuses on the deception and dishonesty of communicators. According to Endsley (2018), a number of factors contribute to the seeming inability of the public to discern facts from misinformation, including: a) deliberate information attacks, b) social network propagation, c) poor assessment of information reliability, and d) biases that disallow disagreements with preexisting beliefs.

Webley (2018) argued that both administrators and the courts have abused the public information function of providing "concise" preambles to public policies and regulations by creating overly long and technical descriptions of those regulations. By abusing that function, government agencies make it more difficult for the public to understand what the government is doing. However, intent to deceive over a period of time to meet some political goal may have inoculating effects on audiences. Pennycook, Cannon and Rand (2018) demonstrated that prior exposure to potentially plausible but untrue ideas in social media help solidify belief in blatantly false news stories.

Potential plausibility of an untrue claim may increase an audience member's likelihood of dismissing concerns about the possible deceptive intent of the message sender. Canter, Ioannou, Youngs, and Chungh (2016) demonstrated that an individual's perceptions of the other's openness, genuineness, nondeceptiveness, trustworthiness and the plausibility of the other's verbal messages predicted judgments of truthfulness in the other. Relatedly, Baker, Porter, ten Brinke, and Mundy (2016) found that an individual's first impressions of the other's trait trustworthiness influence judgments of honesty in subsequent situations, even when they are not warranted.

On the other hand, if an audience member first perceives the message sender of ill-intent, that individual may be primed to observe nonverbal cues of the sender. DeWaele, Claeys, Cauberghe, and Fannes (2018) found that visual cues of deception by spokespersons negatively affect viewers attitudes toward the organization. In such cases, subsequent reception of messages by the same sender might be viewed with suspicion.

Such suspicion by numerous individuals could negatively affect public trust in the political leader generally, or trust in policy proposed by the political leader. According to Galan, the use of misleading public information reduces the citizen's (consumer's) ability to choose a correct action,

"thus violating free competition" (2018, p. 94). Additionally, Moore (2018) argues that public trust is a function communication and not transparency per se, as "transparent" public information can also be made unintelligible. Public information may assist in resolving suspicion, but only if the public trusts the source. If the source, such as an agency or agency head, is associated with the political leader viewed with suspicion, then the public might be suspicious of the source by association. As noted earlier, democracy depends on factual and truthful information to set effective public policy. Edyvane (2015) argues that political "spin" is unethical and anathema to the democratic ideal of truthfulness. However, the author argues that private standards of behavior may be out of place when applied to a public context. Love and Ahiaga-Dagbui (2018) argue that evidence-based research is needed to make informed policy decisions. A suspicious public may be unwilling to accept such evidence following exposure to untruths from the associated administration.

Agencies could counteract deceptive messages from political leaders and may be motivated to do so, in some cases, by watchdog groups, or by internal auditors and inspectors charged with that responsibility. Behnk, Barreda-Tarrazona, and Garcia-Gallego (2018) found that a functioning punishment mechanism increases the likelihood of honesty, and that the relationship between monitoring of behavior and increased honesty is curvilinear. The question that remains is whether a damaged public trust can be overcome or rectified by these internal or external audits when the very basis of what counts as truth has been under attack.

One medium for such attacks on truth has been new digital technologies (social media) such as Facebook and Twitter. According to Amadae (2018), the combined use of strategic communication and new digital technologies create challenges for the norm of truthfulness that underlie public institutions. Nunez (2018) argues that technology has transformed communication by making available information as a "raw material" for political disruptions, including the "fragmentation of public opinion," and the creation of suspicion towards traditional sources of information. Relatedly, Kopp, Korb and Mills (2018) demonstrated experimentally that a very small population of deceivers can influence uncertainty and false perceptions of much larger population. If these small groups of deceivers can propagate false claims and misleading information virally though new digital technologies, then fighting the effects of such intentional deception becomes more difficult.

Regardless, intentional deception, when discovered might reveal the agenda of political leaders. As well, the revelation of such deception by sources including current or former associates of those political leaders through traditional or alternative news media, social media, or other means, might influence public opinion. According to Bail (2015), leaking of classified information reveals contradictions between public pronouncements of policy and the intent of the ruling class. The author also notes that rival political factions intentionally amplify these contradictions through the mass media for gain.

Political Ideology and Communication Ethics

Political deception may be driven by a desire by partisans to advance their party's agenda. This communicative activity requires a willing audience. To be sure, citizens choose which party, or no party as is the case with independents, they belong. Mercier (2017) argued that acceptance of

misinformation is most strongly influenced by preexisting beliefs. Such preexisting beliefs may disallow citizens the ability or desire to hear the other side or to consider perspectives other than their own. Modern communication technologies, such as social media, which is designed to build networks between friends or like-minded individuals may exacerbate these tendencies. For example, Perl, Howlett, and Ramesh (2018) posit that willful ignorance linked to dissemination of ideas through social media contributes to political polarization and amplification of misinformation efforts.

According to McNeill (2018), the source of information, particularly if the source is "known," such as a friend, is more influential toward belief that the information is true, than by the information seekers own "research" activity. Put another way, the author argues that the informal, conversational way that social media information is disseminated by known others has more weight on the believability of the information, than information gathered by the individual through his or her own efforts. The seeming outsized influence of "fake news," however, may be overstated. Nelson and Taneja (2018) found that the audience for "fake news" leading up to and following the 2016 presidential election was a relatively small subset of the overall news audience.

However, there may be differences in acceptance of "fake news" and false narratives depending on party affiliation. Clementson (2018) demonstrated that stronger party affiliation predicted a significantly weaker ability to detect deception. Additionally, Anson (2018) demonstrated that individuals with moderately low political expertise consistently rate themselves as much more politically knowledgeable than their political opponents, and are more likely to rely on partisan sources of information in their judgement of those opponents.

According to Jost (2017), conservatives are more tolerant of the policies of the administration only when the administration is headed by a Republican, compared to liberals. This finding suggests that conservatives are more willing to accept the messages if they originate from only their own party. When conservatives' party is the ruling party, this tendency may be exacerbated, which in turn may have contributed to the rise of the post-truth era described by scholars. According to Deligiaouri, "the easy adoption of post-truth narratives in politics creates and 'ill' political culture in which some politicians do not feel obliged to present real facts" (2018, p. 312). This may be especially true when a political leader is advantaged through deception. Bleakley argues that President Trump is primarily responsible for the ascendancy of the post-truth era through "consistent disavowal of reputable media organizations" (2018, p. 432).

Given the ethical, or unethical, nature of political deception that has recently been noted in traditional mainstream media, as it may apply to political parties, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4   Economic ideology influences attitudes regarding communication virtues among political leaders.

H5   Economic ideology influences attitudes regarding communication vices among political leaders.

H6   Social ideology influences attitudes regarding communication virtues among political leaders.

H₇   Social ideology influences attitudes regarding communication vices among political leaders.

To test these hypotheses, and to answer the related research questions, the following methods were employed.

METHODS

Study 1

To answer the first research question as it pertains to the context of this study, a *Nexis Uni* search of all news items published between January 20, 2017 and December 31, 2018, using the search terms "President," "Trump," "false," "lies," and "misleading." These terms were selected as all five appeared in the first sentence of the Kessler (2018) article. All five terms were entered into the Boolean search simultaneously. A general search using just these search terms found over 10,000 articles (*Nexis Uni* did not specify the exact number over 10,000). Given the lack of specificity of the total population of news articles available in the database, a sampling frame was created. The sampling frame restricted results to published articles presented as news from major news organizations headquartered in the United States. Major news outlets were limited to the top six newspaper publications by circulation. According to Watson (2019), the top six newspapers in order of circulation are: *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*. To verify the reliability of Watson's list, other sources were reviewed (see Table 1).

Table 1. Top six newspapers by circulation listed by reference

Order	Reference		
	AgilityPR (2019)	Cision (2019)	WorldAtlas (2017)
1	Wall Street Journal	USA Today	USA Today
2	USA Today	Wall Street Journal	New York Times
3	Los Angeles Times	New York Times	Wall Street Journal
4	New York Times	New York Post	Los Angeles Times
5	Houston Chronicle	Los Angeles Times	New York Post
6	Chicago Tribune	Washington Post	Chicago Tribune
Other	Washington Post (8th)		Washington Post (7th)

The *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and *New York Post* are published in New York. *USA Today* and the *Washington Post* are published in the District of Columbia area which includes Arlington, Virginia (home to *USA Today*). Due to the search parameters provided for in *Nexis Uni*, and the publication location of the top six newspapers, the search was limited geographically to California, New York, the District of Columbia, and to news items in the "Politics" section of a newspaper. In total, 178 distinct news articles meeting the search parameters were collected for the study. Although published separately, several articles were republished in another outlet or later edition. Removing repetitive articles, or articles that did not meet other search criteria such as geographic location, resulted in a final list of 122 articles. Of these articles, 50.00% were from *The New York Times*, 24.59% were from *The Washington Post*, and the remaining 25.41% were various other newspapers (n = 12, see Table 2). Newspaper articles not published in Watson's

(2019) list of the top six were removed from further analysis. Articles from sources with subsample counts below five (the statistical limit of Chi-Square tests) were also removed from further analysis. Consequently, only articles sourced from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* during the period under investigation were used in Study 1 (n = 91). Chi-Square tests revealed a statistically significant difference for publication outlet ($\chi^2(1) = 19.51$, $p < .001$), source ($\chi^2(1) = 10.56$, $p < .001$), and geographic location ($\chi^2(1) = 27.59$, $p < .001$).

Table 2. Publication outlet and original source of news articles

| Publication | Total | | Source | Total | |
	N	%		N	%
USA Today	1	0.8	USA Today	1	0.8
Wall Street Journal	0	0	Wall Street Journal	0	0
New York Times	61	50.0	New York Times	61	50.0
New York Post	1	0.8	New York Post	1	0.8
Los Angeles Times	3	2.5	Los Angeles Times	3	2.5
Washington Post	21	17.2	Washington Post	30	24.6
Other newspapers	35	28.7	Other newspapers	26	21.3
Total	122	100.0	Total	122	100.0

Each article was reviewed for claims regarding the behavior of the current U.S. President and his associates as reflecting communication virtues or vices. Specifically, claims regarding the two communication virtues of "truthfulness" and "integrity" and the two communication vices of "circumvention" and "deception" were sought and noted as occurring or not occurring within each article. Each type of claim was coded once if it occurred in the article, regardless of the number of times the claim may have been restated or repeated. These particular virtues and vices were investigated as they comport with the factors discovered in Study 2 (see below). Additionally, a fifth category of "associates" was utilized for articles containing claims regarding the four specific communication behaviors assigned to associates of the President.

Study 2

Respondents. This study (IRB #19-103) was approved by the local IRB on January 17, 2019. *Qualtrics* was contracted for a sample of U.S. adults who were eligible to vote. The non-probability sample comprised 300 individuals from throughout the United States (N = 300). The sample consisted of 68.3% females and 31.7% males. A breakdown of the ethnic characteristics and education level of subjects are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Ethnicity and education level of study participants

| Ethnicity | Total | | Education level | Total | |
	N	%		N	%
Latino/Latina	17	5.7	High school graduate	85	28.3
African-American	37	12.3	Some college	93	31.0
Asian-American	13	4.3	College graduate	88	29.3
Caucasian	214	71.3	Master's/Professional	25	8.3
Other	19	6.3	Doctorate	9	3.0

The average age of participants (N = 300) was 42.57 years (sd = 14.91). The average annual income of participants (n = 283, 17 non-reporting) was $60,281.99. Additionally, participants were asked to self-report their voting tendencies on economic and social policies. Results of this inquiry are provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Voting tendencies of participants by policy type

	Total			Total	
Economic Policy	N	%	Social Policy	N	%
Liberal	67	22.3	Liberal	79	26.3
Progressive	28	9.3	Progressive	27	9.0
Independent	111	37.0	Independent	102	34.0
Libertarian	4	1.3	Libertarian	6	2.0
Conservative	90	30.0	Conservative	86	28.7

Measurement. The Attitudes Toward Public Deception survey was based upon the Communication and Ethics survey utilized by LeBlanc and Magallanes (2007). This earlier survey was developed based constructs of ethical behavior specified by Verschoor (2003), Zauderer (1994), and Klenke (2005). Thirty 7-point Likert-type scale items were utilized to measure attitudes about ethical communication behaviors in public leadership contexts. The survey measured attitudes about public deception by political leaders. Of the 20 items, 10 were positively loaded to measure ethical virtues, and 10 were negatively loaded to measure vices. In general, the survey was reliable. Cronbach's alpha revealed a reliability score of .70 for the positively loaded items (with one item, DV15, removed), and a reliability score of .86 for the negatively loaded items. For the positively loaded items, a high score represents strong agreement with ethical virtues. For the negatively loaded items, a high score represents strong agreement with vices.

To answer the second research question, a Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) analysis using direct oblimin rotation was conducted on positively loaded and negatively loaded items separately, with a .50 loading decision criterion. Results of the PAF analysis of positively loaded items revealed two factors related to ethical virtue: Truthfulness and Integrity. The Truthfulness factor accounted for 37.58% of the variance (initial Eigenvalue = 2.77; Rotated SS = 1.96). Reliability measure for the Truthfulness factor was α = .73. The Integrity factor accounted for 7.94% of the variance (initial Eigenvalue = .94; Rotated SS = 1.77). Reliability measure for the Integrity factor was α = .64 and was not used in further analysis.

Results of the PAF analysis of negatively loaded items revealed two factors related to ethical vices: Circumvention and Deception. The Circumvention factor accounted for 39.41% of the variance (initial Eigenvalue = 4.45; Rotated SS = 3.65). The Deception factor accounted for 9.31% of the variance (initial Eigenvalue = 1.35; Rotated SS = 2.71). The reliability measure for the Circumvention factor was α = .84. The reliability measure for the Deception factor was α = .79.

RESULTS

Study 1

Of the 91 articles analyzed, deception by the President was mentioned at least once in 44 articles (48.35%). Deception by any of the President's associates was mentioned at least once in 32 articles (35.16%). A Chi-square test failed to find a significant difference in deception reporting between sources ($\chi^2(1) = 0.09$, ns). However, a significant difference was found in deception of associates reporting and sources ($\chi^2(1) = 8.01$, p < .01), with the Washington Post more likely to report on deception of associates than other sources. Additionally, a Cramer's V test failed to find a significant association between articles describing deception by the President and articles describing deception by one or more of his associates, $V = .070$, *ns*.

Less frequently mentioned was the act of circumventing rules by the President in articles published during the period under review. Specifically, circumvention of the rules by the President was mentioned at least once in 13 articles (14.28%). The communication virtues of truthfulness (n = 5, 5.49%) or integrity (n = 1, 1.10%) of the President occurred less frequently in the articles collected. In total, 72 different authors are credited across the 91 articles (*New York Times*, n = 54; *Washington Post*, n = 18).

Study 2

Hypothesis testing was conducted using the ethical virtues and vices revealed through Factor Analysis. In general, hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 were supported. For Hypothesis 1, a strong and statistically significant positive relationship was found between the Truthfulness and Integrity factors, r = .697, N = 300, p < .001. As noted in the Methods Section, the Integrity factor did not meet the reliability criterion and will not be used for further analyses. However, the results of the Pearson Correlation are reported here to justify the use of an oblique rotation method in the Principle Axis Factoring technique. For Hypothesis 2, a strong and statistically significant positive relationship was found between the Circumvention and Deception factors, r = .600, N = 300, p < .001. As with the ethical virtues factors, the correlation between ethical vices factors justified the use of oblique rotation.

For Hypothesis 3, a moderate and statistically significant negative relationship was found between the Truthfulness virtue and Circumvention vice factors, r = -.420, N = 300, p < .001. However, a weak but statistically significant negative relationship was found between the Truthfulness virtue and Deception vice factors, r = -.116, N = 300, p = .045. It should be noted that the Deception factor included three survey items which attached the justification for deception as "for the protection of the country."

To determine if economic political ideology influenced the relationship between these factors, the sample was separated into three groups: Liberal (n = 67), Independent (111), and Conservative (90). Pearson Correlation revealed differences between these groups in the relationship between factors (see Table 5).

Table 5. Correlation between factors by economic political ideology

Ideology	Truth by Circum.	Truth by Deception	Circum. by Deception
Liberal	-.428	ns	.520
Independent	-.330	ns	.734
Conservative	-.509	ns	.450

All results at the p < .001, unless otherwise noted.

To determine if social political ideology influenced the relationship between these factors, the sample was separated into three groups: Liberal (n = 79), Independent (102), and Conservative (86). Pearson Correlation revealed differences between these groups in the relationship between factors (see Table 6).

Table 6. Correlation between factors by social political ideology

Ideology	Truth by Circum.	Truth by Deception	Circum. by Deception
Liberal	-.400	ns	.547
Independent	-.385	ns	.723
Conservative	-.408	ns	.509

All results at the p < .001, unless otherwise noted.

For Hypothesis 4, oneway ANOVA revealed an economic ideology effect on subjects' attitudes regarding the truthfulness of political leaders, $F(2, 265) = 3.912$, p = .021, partial $\eta^2 = .029$. Post-hoc tests with Bonferroni correction revealed significant difference only between the Independent (n = 111) and Conservative (n = 90) groups ($m_{diff} = -.356$, s.e. = .127, p = .017), with conservatives ($m = .186$, $sd = .790$) reporting a more positive attitude toward the importance of truth-telling by political leaders compared to independents ($m = -.170$, $sd = .948$). When age was taken into consideration, the effect was non-significant.

For Hypothesis 5, oneway ANOVA failed to demonstrate an economic ideology effect on subjects' attitudes regarding the circumvention of rules by political leaders, $F(2, 265) = 1.913$, ns. Tests also failed to show an economic ideology effect on subjects' attitudes regarding deception by political leaders, $F(2, 265) = 1.084$, ns. Age treated as a covariate did not alter the outcome.

For Hypothesis 6, oneway ANOVA revealed an social ideology effect on subjects' attitudes regarding the truthfulness of political leaders, $F(2, 264) = 6.679$, p < .01, partial $\eta^2 = .049$. Post-hoc tests with Bonferroni correction revealed significant difference only between the Independent (n = 102) and Conservative (n = 86) groups ($m_{diff} = -.458$, s.e. = .125, p < .01), with conservatives ($m = .260$, $sd = .662$) reporting a more positive attitude toward the importance of truth-telling by political leaders compared to independents ($m = -.198$, $sd = .950$). When age was taken into consideration, the effect was less strong but still significant ($F(2, 263) = 3.514$, p = .031, partial $\eta^2 = .026$).

For Hypothesis 7, oneway ANOVA failed to demonstrate an social ideology effect on subjects' attitudes regarding the circumvention of rules by political leaders, $F(2, 264) = 1.596$, ns. Tests also failed to show an economic ideology effect on subjects' attitudes regarding deception by political leaders, $F(2, 264) = .476$, ns. Age treated as a covariate did not alter the outcome.

Age did have predictive power on attitudes regarding truthfulness (R^2 = .09, $F(1, 298)$ = 29.60, p < .001, 95% CI [.012, .025]), and circumvention (R^2 = .12, $F(1, 298)$ = 39.51, p < .001, 95% CI [-.028, -.015]), but not on attitudes toward the use of deception by political leaders. A Spearman's rho demonstrated relationships between age of subjects and degree of economic conservativeness (rs = .19, N = 300, p < .01), and between age of subjects and degree of social conservativeness (rs = .15, N = 300, p = .011).

DISCUSSION

The evidence presented therein indicates that considerable political, public deception is occurring and that the public is being informed about this deception through traditional news media sources on a regular basis. Although the first study focused primarily on two news sources, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, it should be noted that: a) these were not the only sources reviewed, and b) these first two sources were often the location of first publication which were subsequently republished in other sources, including local papers and through other broadcasts such as network and cable news, and Internet search engines (e.g., *Yahoo News*). According to Glader (2017), the *New York Times* remains the agenda setter for news in America, due to its leadership in political news and by adhering to "ethical standards of reporting." Glader also claims that the *Washington Post* maintains an intellectually robust tradition as the paper that "brought down President Richard Nixon with its reporting on the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s" (2017, p. 1). It is important to note that four of the top six newspapers by circulation (*USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*) failed to publish significant enough number of articles using the search terms for this study. Both the *New York Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* are published by News Corp.

The evidence also indicates that individuals perceive personal communication ethics as applicable to public figures. The components of ethical communication for political leaders, such as truthfulness and lack of deception, were very similar to those individuals viewed as important in their personal relationships. Additionally, communication virtues for both public and private contexts were highly correlated, as were communication vices. In both contexts, public and private, communication virtues and vices were negatively correlated.

Finally, both economic and social political ideology played a role in the relationship between communication virtues and vices. In particular, truthfulness (virtue) was negatively correlated with circumvention of rules (vice), whereas circumvention of rules was positively correlated with deception (vice) regardless of self-identified social or economic political ideology. However, independents, overall, viewed those relationships as more important than either conservatives or liberals. This finding suggests two possible explanations. First, as Clementson (2018) found, party affiliation (Republican or Democrat) may be more strongly associated with willingness to accept the messages or actions of their political leaders. This study found that independents were potentially less likely to accept those messages. If there is any truth to the adage that "all politicians lie," this might demonstrate increases in the proportion of self-identified independents as shown the larger than expected ratio of independents in this study sample.

This study suggests that one way that citizens may be dealing with the rise of "fake news" and the post-truth era is to eschew identification with either of the two traditional political parties.

Although this study did not examine that potential phenomenon directly, the study does seem to corroborate the findings of Jost (2017) that conservatives are more tolerant of the policies of the administration, given that President Trump is identified with the conservative political ideology within the Republican Party. If true, this support for the current president's policies is troubling if those policies are based on information that is demonstrably false. The question for scholars and citizens alike is whether acceptance of a post-truth era could have long-term negative effects on the country, and the freedom of its citizens.

Both studies involved limitations that should be noted here. For the first study, the *Nexis Uni* search was limited to the three largest markets for traditional political news in the United States. To be sure, other geographical regions both within and outside the United States could have provided alternative perspectives on public deception and the implications for communication ethics. The policies of the United States, both domestic and foreign, have an impact on other countries. Thus the communicative actions of political leaders in the United States would be of interest to these audiences as well. The choice was made to limit to these markets due to the sheer number of articles found in the initial search, as well as the likelihood that a significant portion of these articles would have been reprints or republications from primary sources. It should also be noted that the initial search in *Nexis Uni* produced 10,000+ articles, although an exact number was not provided by the database, which made a random sample from the total population of articles too difficult to determine.

For the second study, the sample included only eligible U. S. voters as selected by *Qualtrics*. The researcher had no control over the selection process and had to rely on the proprietary methods employed by *Qualtrics*. The survey was based on an earlier survey geared towards measuring attitudes regarding communication ethics in personal relationships (LeBlanc & Magallanes, 2007). That survey was used as the basis for creating the survey for the current study, as it was assumed similar communication ethics might exist in both public and private spheres. Principal Axis Factoring revealed similar underlying factors across both contexts demonstrating validity in the structure of both communication virtues and vices, although there were a few minor differences. Future study might compare the data across both contexts directly to determine the strength of those relationships.

Other directions for future study might include investigating whether public perception of public deception holds true after the release of the Robert Mueller report, or after the completion of Donald Trump's term in office. Other scholars may also want to investigate to what degree U.S. citizens place faith in either traditional news sources or social media after the completion of U.S. investigations into election meddling by foreign actors through the Internet. Additionally, future study might look at the long-term effects of sustained public deception on the electorate in terms of voter political engagement. To be sure, public deception has consequences which may be detrimental to freedom.

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APPENDIX

Attitudes Toward Public Deception

The purpose of this survey is to measure public perception attitudes regarding public deception. Please answer all of the following questions in reference to your attitudes about public deception using the following scale:

1 – Strong Disagree   2 – Disagree   3 – Somewhat Disagree   4 – Neutral
5 – Somewhat Agree 6 – Agree   7 – Strongly Agree

1. Truthfulness is very important in public life.
2. It is okay for leaders to lie in order to protect their organization.
3. Truthfulness is very important in one's personal life.
4. Taking blame for a failed action is essential in a leader.
5. In order to advance a political agenda, sometimes leaders have to ignore the rules.
6. Loyalty from citizens is necessary to achieve the nation's goals.
7. It is permissible for a political leader to withhold information to protect the country.
8. Success is measured by superiority.
9. A political leader who admits he/she was wrong is weak.
10. Tolerance from citizens is needed in order to meet the nation's goals.
11. Strong confidence is a good quality of a leader.
12. It is permissible for a political leader to be intentionally vague to protect the country.
13. Political leaders should only deceive in matters of national security.
14. Personal integrity is necessary for political leadership.
15. Strength of belief is more important than being factually correct.
16. It is permissible for a political leader to lie to protect the country.
17. Ethical communication is not necessary to move the country forward.
18. A political leader should not be held accountable for his or her decisions.
19. It is acceptable to lie to protect oneself in a personal relationship.
20. Political leaders who admit their mistakes should be admired.

Demographics

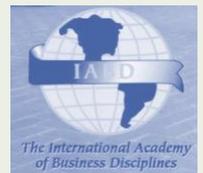Please answer the following questions about your identity.
A. What is your age? _____
B. What is your gender? Male   Female   Transgendered
C. What is your ethnicity? _____
D. What is your highest level of education attained?
        High school diploma Some college/Associate's degree   Bachelor's degree
        Master's or professional degree   Doctoral or terminal degree
E. What is your gross annual income in U.S. dollars? _____
F. What is your voting preference on economic policy issues?
        Liberal Progressive   Independent   Libertarian   Conservative
G. What is your voting preference on social policy issues?
        Liberal Progressive   Independent   Libertarian   Conservative

QRBD

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