

Psychological Factors



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Goals of Deception: First Approach

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What are the goals of doxing or fake news?

Don Fallis's "The Varieties of Disinformation" (2014) cites Chisholm and Feehan's "The Intent to Deceive" (1977, pp. 143–159) to articulate four of these.

The first two, which are achieved by positive deception (causing a false belief) are:

- (1) creating a new false belief (e.g., that the violent attack of insurrections at the Capitol on January 6 was a tourist visit of patriotic Americans to the Capitol exercising their First Amendment Rights.) and
- (2) maintaining an existing false belief (e.g., if Hillary Clinton would have become president, she would shut down the National Rifle Association).

Goals of Deception: First Approach

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The other two, which use negative deception, are:

- (1) causing the loss of a true belief (Hillary was an acceptable presidential candidate before her image was affected by the stream of fake news stories about her) and
- (2) preventing the acquisition of a true belief (that masking, social distancing or vaccination are the most effective ways in dealing with COVID-19) (Fallis, 2014, p. 140).

Goals of Deception: Second Approach

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Fallis (2014, p. 142) also provides another useful classification of the goals of deception:

(1) mislead about the accuracy of the content:

Most of Trump's lies were of the first category, like his claims that the United States is the most heavily taxed country in the world, that nobody but reporters cared about his own tax returns or that he signed more legislation in his early months in office than any previous president. All of these are purported to be true and all of them can easily be shown to be false.

(2) mislead about the source believing the content:

In this case, a good example might be when Donald Trump claimed that he fired Mr. Comey in part because agents had lost confidence in him (whereas internal survey data contradicted that claim) (Apuzzo, 2017).

Goals of Deception: Second Approach

(3) mislead about the identity of the source:

- An example of misleading about the identity of the source would be the Russian trolls pretending to be reliable sources of information or that their comments were from ordinary average Americans only to trick those that fell for them.
- For example, they created a fictional American by the name of Melvin Redick of Harrisburg, Pa., an easy-going American with appealing properties, e.g., wearing a backward baseball cap and with a young daughter, which they posted on Facebook. This fictional character had a link on his Facebook page to a brand-new website in which, he claimed in a message written on June 8, 2016, "These guys show hidden truth about Hillary Clinton, George Soros and other leaders of the US." "Visit #DCLeaks website," Redick concluded, "it's really interesting!"
- It had just enough seeming innocence to attract the visitor to an anti-Hillary Clinton site. Russian fingerprints were on a multitude of fake Twitter and Facebook accounts. As noted earlier, many were automated Twitter bots that would display identical content seconds apart "in the exact alphabetical order of their made-up names" as the cybersecurity company FireEye observed (Shanesept, 2017). On Election Day, for instance, the same company confirmed that "one group of Twitter bots sent out the hashtag #WarAgainstDemocrats more than 1,700 times" (*Ibid*).

Goals of Deception: Second Approach

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- (4) mislead about an implication of the content being accurate.
- Fallis's final category is "Misleading about an implication of the accuracy of the content" or what he calls "false implicature."
 - If Trump's claim that millions of undocumented people voted illegally during the election were true, then the implication is that he would actually have won the popular vote (despite the fact that the reasoning is confused: he had assumed that all of the undocumented people voted for Hillary Clinton, although one might argue that many may have voted for him and therefore his claims would be at best ambiguous).
 - In order for deception to work, the receiver of the message must be willing to be self-deceived or at least to be gullible.
 - The forms of deception facilitate self-deception – the types of self-deception dovetail the forms of deception.

Self-deception: types

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- Self-deception may be a way to embrace forms of ignorance or false information, including lies, paltering, fake news, visual disinformation, malinformation or doxing. Self-deception makes it possible to maintain our beliefs in the face of contravening evidence.
- Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) describe five varieties of self-deception:
 - (a) biased information search (i.e., only consulting sources that validate our biases or a priori beliefs – if you are a member of the alt-right, your *only* source of information is Fox News or like-minded media or associates);
 - (b) biased interpretation (i.e., ignoring parts of a story that do not fit our views. E.g., Colin Powell's death showed the vaccinations do not work, ignoring the fact that his immune system was compromised by a form of cancer);
 - (c) misremembering (e.g., as some Trump supporters who voted for and approved of Barack Obama have come to rationalize Trump's characterization of him as incompetent);
 - (d) rationalization (i.e., making our arguments fit our biases, such as accepting the mistaken belief that immigrants are largely criminals and aim to take our jobs); and
 - (e) convincing oneself that a lie is true (e.g., that Barack Obama had spied on the Trump campaign in 2016; that vaccination is a plot for government control of all those vaccinated).

Social Self-deception

- Self-deception is a socializing and socialized strategy. We convince ourselves of our false beliefs in the process of persuading others, and if and when they are convinced it confirms and sustains our false beliefs.
- Roy Dings (2017, pp. 17–18) points out that this social self-deception may be “situating” or “persuasive.”
- The first, “situating,” includes the positive, in which we seek likeminded people with whom to associate (e.g., a political rally), and the second is the negative, in which we avoid people who disagree with our views (e.g., ignore news sources that don’t agree with one’s political viewpoint).
- The second, “persuasive,” includes the positive, trying to convince people to adopt our views (e.g., go to a town hall to try to convince others of the validity of your political position), and negative, withholding information that would deter a person from such adoptions (e.g., use only web sources that support your political views). (Dings, 2017, pp. 17–18).

Collective Self-Deception: Group Self Deception

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- Ding sees as a research offshoot for his work the notion of “collective self-deception,” that is discussed by DeWeese-Boyd (2012).
- He defines collective self-deception “as the holding of a false belief in the face of evidence to the contrary by a group of people as a result of shared desires, emotions, or intentions (depending upon the account of self-deception) favoring that belief.” (DeWeese-Boyd, 2012). In short, it is group self-deception. In this case, we have a group of individuals who each share levels of resentment about the status quo and who share “the same belief for similar reasons and by similar means.” One can imagine a group of Trump supporters who share a belief in the success of his presidency by watching the same media outlets (e.g., Fox News).
- Group self-deception is a dialogical process where the group absorbs and perpetuates false beliefs, individually, socially and collectively.
- We will now look at psychological factors. It will set the context of information seekers and why they might endorse and/or refuse particular information.

Other Psychological Factors

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- We need to pursue psychological factors not to explain normal information seeking behavior primarily, but rather why a certain subset of political actors refuse to change their behavior based on verifiable facts, evidence or logic.
- As indicated earlier I am trying to describe two types of “information” seekers in the current political environment
 1. Seekers: Those that are open to education and learning, those willing to undergo critical thinking and to be open to information, media, and digital literacies
 2. Partisan/ Seekers/Avoiders: Those who live in a closed propaganda loop, whose behavior makes them closed off to any possible intervention into their political position. In this case, we can learn how and why people close themselves off from any information that contravenes their position. A good illustration is Trump supporters, who no matter what he says or does, they defend him and believe that he did a wonderful job as president.

For example, as of October, 2020, Four in ten (40%) Americans hold favorable views of Donald Trump, compared to nearly six in ten (57%) who view him unfavorably. (<https://www.prii.org/research/trump-biden-favorability-2020-election/>). Despite his lies, incompetence, failed leadership in many areas, etc., this favorability rating has not budged over the past three+ years. How and why? Psychological studies provide clues. Because of time constraints I can only provide a partial analysis.

A Sample of Psychological Factors

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- Willful or deliberate ignorance: the conscious choice not to know.
- Information avoidance is a rejection of any information or sources that does not fit one's beliefs – can be conscious or unconscious.
- Gullibility is “a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action” (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019, p. 2).
- Gullibility can occur in one of two situations: “Either an individual's beliefs are manifestly inconsistent with facts and reality, or an individual's beliefs are at variance with social norms about reality” (p. 2).
- The psychological foundation of gullibility “appears to be the universal human capacity for trust – to accept second-hand information we receive from others as a proxy for reality” (p. 5).
- This is really key. We are born naturally to trust people about things we do not know (second-hand knowledge), and this propensity is exploited by various authorities, frequently alt-right or conservative religious authorities to take an ill-advised course of action, such as accepting and propagating propaganda about COVID-19.
- For more detail on psychological issues and other psychological factors, see my recent publications on “The role of pseudo-cognitive authorities and self-deception in the dissemination of fake news, (Froehlich, 2019) ” and “A disinformation-misinformation ecology: the case of Trump” (Froehlich, 2020) at my website: <http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/>
- Cognitive biases also play a significant role.

Cognitive Bias

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- Cherry (2020) defines cognitive bias as “a systematic error in thinking that occurs when people are processing and interpreting information in the world around them.”
- The vast research on cognitive bias has identified several aspects that foster disinformation campaigns, some of which are particularly salient in the political domain.
- When people exhibit cognitive bias, they take particular, flawed mental shortcuts on regular basis.
- In the face of too much information, people typically allow their cognitive biases to dictate their thinking, opinions, and actions when they must make quick assessments.
- Other factors that invoke cognitive biases include a person’s emotions or motivations, the limits on the mind’s ability to process information, and social pressures (Cherry, 2020).
- All of these causes seem to be relevant to such groups as Trump allies and supporters, who make errors in judgment about actual facts, who often are engaged in anger and resentment about current events, who are seduced by the social pressures coming from their ingroup (social self-deception and collective self-deception), and who have less flexibility in processing information than non-Trump supporters.

Cognitive Bias

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- There are hundreds of cognitive biases that have particular relevance for disinformation adherents. See in particular, “A disinformation-misinformation ecology: the case of Trump” (Froehlich, 2020) for an analysis of 13 that play into disinformation campaigns.
- We will look at several important ones that rank high in disinformation campaigns. The explanation of these factors with examples from the Trump administration should not obscure the fact that all persons, of any political stripe, are vulnerable to them. However, people who are on the right and are more uneducated are more prone to act of them and not recognize their influence in their thoughts and actions.
- Confirmation bias involves interpreting information that supports our existing beliefs, even when presented with conflicting evidence. Trump supporters hold all sorts of improbable beliefs because they concord with their pre-existing beliefs: e.g., that Trump was a great president, was successful in curbing the coronavirus and its infection and death rate, cared about poor people, drained the Washington swamp, was a great businessman, that his tax cuts helped all Americans, and that he had a great plan for healthcare, all of which were patently false. Unfortunately, real evidence is dismissed by hyped emotions.

Cognitive Bias

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- The *Dunning-Kruger effect* is the tendency to overestimate one's abilities. Persons with low critical thinking skills overestimate their capabilities in assessing current events. They are unaware of the limits of their critical skills so it makes it more difficult to assess current events fully or to see that other people can have legitimate alternate views about the same event. They lack the ability to think critically about their critical thinking abilities.
- The *affect heuristic* reflects the tendency to rely on emotions in our initial decisions regarding some action, event, or information. Rather than reflecting on the long-term consequences of a decision, one relies on their emotional state.
- As he faced re-election, Trump claims that he promoted law and order even as racial strife and police brutality erupted and he spoke approvingly of murderous white supremacists. He inflamed emotions, such as anger, resentment, and racial hatred, to justify a simplistic approach to complex problems. Sole concerns about looting and property damage overlooked issues of police brutality of Black Americans and systemic racism. Any demands for questioning police authority is a wholesale threat to law and order.
- Business ethics expert, Chris MacDonald, attributes Trump's 2016 election victory primarily to affect bias. The net result of this built-in human mental trait is that rather than letting our beliefs about the world tell us how to feel, we tend to let our emotions tell us what to believe. Afraid of crime? Then one will tend to see the world as violent (even if violent crime is at its lowest point in a generation or more). Worried about one's job? Then one will believe that unemployment is up (even if it's at a 10-year low). Trump capitalized on this by telling Americans things they *felt* were true. And feeling is much more compelling than listening to eggheads spout statistics on television. (MacDonald, 2016).

Cognitive Biases

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- *Disconfirmation bias* occurs when “we expend disproportionate energy trying to debunk or refute views and arguments that we find uncongenial.” (Mooney, 2011). Trump and the alt-right: all news that does not support his/their agenda is “fake news.”
- The *availability heuristic* is a mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples that come to the mind of a person when assessing a particular topic, idea, or decision. It relies on placing greater value on information that comes to mind quickly, based on the assumption that it must be important and more trustworthy than countervailing information. A person’s judgments weigh their assessments based on more recent information, meaning new opinions rely on the latest news (Availability Heuristic).
A senior writer at *Wired*, Emily Dreyfuss (2017), claims that Trump was a master facilitator of the availability heuristic. He starts with the straw man fallacy, a logical fallacy in which one exaggerates the position of one’s opponent and then attacks it. A classic example is Ronald Reagan’s use of the notion of a “welfare queen,” a Black woman who exploits the welfare system. Linda Taylor who, in fact, did exploit the welfare system, became the straw man for Reagan, and her story exploited the availability heuristic because it was memorable. However, her case was extremely uncommon, and abuse of the welfare system was and remains rare. Trump’s story of Mexican rapists reflects the same strategy with the same impact on his supporters, who come to believe that immigrants have a high level of criminality in spite of strong evidence to the contrary. Salient images stick in the minds of his supporters and readily come to mind.

Cognitive Biases

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- *Attentional bias* refers to how the direction of attention affects a person's perception. Engaging this bias, one pays attention to some things while simultaneously ignoring others. For example, a Trump supporter might focus on Trump's deployment of federal troops to quell "riots," giving no attention to the fact that so-called riots were mostly peaceful protests against police brutality, and thus believe his claim to be the law-and-order president. Trump often invoked this bias through ad hominem attacks: "sleepy Joe," "crooked Hillary," or characterizations of attacks on him, "witch hunt" or "hoax," so that his listeners revert to the stories he invents to apply such memes.
- The *illusory truth effect* is a bias that occurs when repetition creates bias. This bias mimics the positive feeling we get when we hear information that we know is true in the service of information that may be false but that we have heard before. The Republican party has long been a master of repetition in the sense that it creates discipline such that all Republican officials repeat variants of the same message, such as that trickle-down economics lessens poverty. When Trump reported that he had managed an excellent response to the coronavirus, Republicans as well as Fox News, white evangelicals, and like-minded leaders were prepared to repeat the message that hundreds of thousands of deaths represent a good outcome because it could have been worse.

Cognitive Biases

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- *Negativity bias* occurs when persons have a greater recall of unpleasant memories than pleasant ones. Even when adverse events and positive events are of the same scale, we feel the negative ones more strongly. Trump and GOP members used this during his first presidential campaign by focusing on Hillary Clinton's involvement with Benghazi. In his reelection attempt, he hoped fearing crime and the destruction of property would outweigh the memory of watching George Floyd die at the hands of police.
- The *bandwagon effect* is the bias in which we support opinions as and when they become popular. We tend to adopt certain behaviors or beliefs because many other people do the same. Trump's constant use of rallies throughout his presidency exploits this effect that repeated such things as. everyone hated the libs; critiques of capitalism is socialism. Social media can have the same effect, as seen in the popularization of QAnon theories.
- *Stereotyping* is the bias when we expect a member of a group to have certain beliefs or characteristics because of their group membership. Trump relied on racist stereotypes by calling Black Americans dirty and lacking in intelligence and by suggesting women of color in Congress go back to their countries.

Psychological Factors: Pettigrew

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Thomas Pettigrew (2017) in, "Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters," identifies factors reflecting five major social psychological phenomena that account for the bulk of Trump supporters' devotion: (1) tolerance for authoritarianism, (2) a preference for associating with socially dominant groups (social dominance orientation, SDO), (3) prejudice, (4) low intergroup contact (i.e., little familiarity with groups other than themselves), and (5) relative deprivation (i.e., feeling that others are much better off than they are). While acknowledging political factors may be at work as well as other psychological factors, he argues that these five dimensions are particularly relevant.

(1) Tolerance for authoritarianism. Pettigrew finds that many Trump supporters are attracted to authoritarian figures. Authoritarians see the world as dangerous, and fear guides their response to it.

- Trump's rhetoric stoked fear, which lead his supporters to consider him to be an authority on matters of American security, leading them to support him in his efforts to secure the borders against outgroups, including through family separation policy and a border wall between the United States and Mexico. His deployment of federal troops on peaceful protesters and tear gassing of protesters in Washington, DC, or Portland, OR, reflected his authoritarianism.

Psychological Factors: Pettigrew

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(2) Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) is "an individual's preference for the societal hierarchy of groups and domination over lower-status groups" (p. 108). People who want to maintain the current social hierarchy have an SDO.

- They believe members of other groups are inferior to members of their own. People with strong SDO are "typically dominant, driven, tough-minded, disagreeable, and relatively uncaring seekers of power" (p. 108).
- Trump's assertions that he alone can solve the nation's problems and that those who oppose him are "losers" (including media critical of him as well as Democratic officials) reflects a belief that they are inferior to members of his group, which include Fox News and like-minded media and loyal Republicans.

(3) Trump supporters are prejudiced, which is manifest in their support for anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy.

- In the 2016 election, Trump launched rhetorical attacks on immigrants, Mexicans, and Muslims.
- His actions in office had reinforced that stance: bans on immigrants to the country from certain Muslim countries, harsh restrictions for asylum seekers, and the separation of children from their parents at the border as a measure to discourage immigration.

Psychological Factors: Pettigrew

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(4) Trump supporters have low intergroup contact (i.e., little familiarity with groups other than themselves).

- They have less experience with minorities such as Muslims, Mexicans, or even Black Americans, than other Americans.
- Low intergroup contact makes it easier to dismiss members of other groups as foreign, un-American, and/or inferior. Ignorance of others allows one to self-enforce negative stereotypes, as in Trump's references to immigrants as "animals" (Davis & Chokshi, 2018).

(5) The last factor, relative deprivation, may be the most powerful and troubling problem to enable Trump's rise and continuing influence.

- While Trump's supporters are not disproportionately economically disadvantaged—they are generally employed full time (at least before the pandemic) and unlikely to live in districts that depend on manufacturing— *but* they *perceive* themselves as deprived.
- Trump supporters feel that other members of society are better off than they are and that their expectation of where they would be in life has been severely limited. They are heavily motivated by a sense of loss of status by a belief that American global dominance is in decline and that white people were losing status and dominance domestically (Mutz, 2018).

Psychological Factors

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- Hours of Fox News, like-minded media and right-wing social media sites denigrating "welfare queens," welfare programs, the more frequent appearance of minorities, mixed and gay marriages, on media, and the media's and advertising's version of what an ordinary American home is supposed to be like strengthen the sense of deprivation. Trump offered supporters an opportunity to reverse the trend. They feel that they were victims of the forces of politics, corporations, education, and demographic shifts, and Trump and his allies focused on those themes so as to make them feel empowered.
- Emotion, not critical thought, drives the behavior of Trump supporters, Trump-aligned politicians and alt-right media.
- They use psychological vulnerabilities to turn alt-right causes and adherence to them into a "closed propaganda feedback loop," in which their grievances are inflamed to keep them within that loop.
- In latter lectures we will discuss how they turn moral outrage into addiction, blind faith and the fierce rejection of any position other than theirs, that they have as a result of their authorities (media, political, religious, etc.).