The Demise of Trust:

Trustworthiness, the Internet, and Self-Deception

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A foundational contribution to the birth and development of social psychology in the United States was made by Carl Hovland and his colleagues at Yale's Program in Communication and Persuasion, which set the research agenda for much of what transpired in the field over subsequent decades. A primary focus of Hovland's group discussed in the classic volume, *Communication and Persuasion* (Hovland et al., 1953), emphasized trust in the credibility of information sources as a sine qua non for successful persuasion (Hovland, 1951; Hovland et al., 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). This chapter revisits Hovland's seminal contribution, expanding the consideration of communication source factors and how the internet has changed the landscape, paving the way for the often-blind acceptance of patently absurd beliefs about the fundamental nature of reality promulgated by message sources of no obvious credibility, at least as defined by the classic model. How can messages from untrusted or untrustworthy sources still be persuasive, and what are the consequences of abandoning long-standing principles humanity has relied on to judge trustworthiness, identify credible sources, and guide sound judgments and wise actions?

We argue that acceptance of unsourced influential messages has contributed to the proliferation and impact of conspiracy theories and other false beliefs—beliefs clearly at odds with reality, as demonstrated by scientifically informed research, yet readily accepted as true by significant portions of the population (Forgas, 2025). This assault on the truth is exemplified in a vivid example that occurred in 2017, when President Trump's senior advisor, Kellyanne Conway, backed his press secretary's gross exaggeration of the size of the crowd that witnessed the President's first inauguration. When confronted, Conway defended the

misinformation by introducing the term "alternative facts," to which the interviewer responded pointedly: "Alternative facts aren't facts, they are falsehoods" (Bradner, 2017).

The redefinition of a lie as an alternative fact was abetted by the popular press's general unwillingness to call out falsehoods directly, treating all political statements as deserving equal consideration and dissemination, even when some were patently absurd and wholly unswallowable by anyone with a working brain. This trend was fostered by media moguls and other exceptionally wealthy co-facilitators, who had succumbed to overt political pressure or the implied promise of growing their already unseemly wealth. The duplicitous, self-serving actions of media owners have significantly contributed to the erosion of public trust, exemplified by egregious decisions such as refusing to publish electoral endorsements from editorial teams (e.g., *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*), and the removal of fact-checking mechanisms by major platforms, Meta and X. The democratic threats arising from these actors and their actions are discussed, alongside proposed means of restoring and reestablishing trust.

Expertise and Trustworthiness

According to Hovand et al. (1953), a message's credibility depends on expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise refers to the perception of a source's capacity to produce valid information. Trustworthiness reflects perceptions of the source's motives, specifically whether the source genuinely seeks to inform or merely to persuade for personal gain. A source that stands to benefit from others' acquiescence is generally perceived as less credible than one whose motives are not self-serving, no matter its expertise. Conversely, a highly trustworthy source that lacks expertise also typically is not considered credible. Credibility is strengthened when both trustworthiness and expertise are positively aligned and complementary.

Another critical interest explored by the Yale group was the discrepancy between the audience's preexisting attitudes and the position advocated by a message source. In another of the early classics of the Yale program, Sherif and Hovland's (1961) volume titled, *Social*

judgment: Assimilation and contrast effects in communication and attitude change, combined the classic psychometric "laws" of assimilation and contrast with ego involvement (or self/vested interest) to predict how different audiences might respond differently to the same communication (Crano, 1995, 1997). The concept of self- or vested interest broadened the scope of attitude change models even further and alerted persuasion scholars that one size does not fit all: Identical messages are unlikely to affect different audiences in identical ways. Bringing individual differences into the persuasion equation made research more difficult but provided the impetus for enlarging the scope of some of the field's most powerful predictive models (e.g., Petty & Briñol, 2015; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Research indicates that in most contexts, source credibility plays a moderating role in the relation of the discrepancy between an established attitude and the appeals contained in persuasive communication. For example, Brewer and Crano (1968) demonstrated that sources of high credibility produced attitude changes that increased linearly with discrepancy – the greater the difference between the communication of a high credibility source and one's attitude, the greater the resultant attitude change. The discrepancy-change relation in contexts involving a source of low credibility was negligible. It seemed the source's communication did not register with the receiver. Sources of moderate credibility produced a curvilinear (inverted U-shaped) relation: attitude change increased with discrepancy up to a point, after which it declined. This result refined Sherif and Hovland's (1961) earlier predictions, which did not explicitly consider source credibility in their discussion of the communication discrepancy-attitude change relation.

A Game Change

The traditional dominance of newspapers and network television in providing reliable news in the United States has been challenged, and in many ways supplanted by the Internet. The Pew Research Center (2024) reported that 57% of U.S. adults reported often using online devices for news, and 87% reported doing so at least occasionally. The decline of traditional mass media (newspapers, television, radio, etc.) created a void that the Internet filled quickly,

bringing significant risks. When "truth" was filtered through a few large channels constrained by law and custom to stay reasonably close to reality, the old credibility model functioned reasonably well. However, with the collapse of these monolithic structures, the qualifications of information sources became difficult, sometimes impossible to judge the validity (truth) of their pronouncements. In this context, popularity is often substituted as the primary marker of credibility, measured by online views, reposts, and likes, rather than by established expertise or trustworthiness. Credibility, perforce, came to be based on the degree to which a source appeared similar to the receiver, was consistent in its message, or was approved by many others.

Similarity, Certainty, Frequency

Similarity has been identified as a key antecedent to interpersonal attraction and ultimately, to the acceptance of another's persuasive communication, as it appears to foster attractiveness, trust, and likability, features whose result enhances persuasion (Byrne, 1971; Ma et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2017). This is especially true when the topic under consideration involves issues of high valence or emotion, as agreement fosters the perception of ingroup connection, a powerful factor in promoting persuasion (Brewer, 1991; Crano, 2012; David & Turner, 1996; Prislin, 2022). In the often cue-free environment of the internet, especially when issues of subjective judgment are involved, even minor signals like hashtags or language style can heighten their effect owing to the lack of availability of other, more reliable indicators of communication validity (Haslam et al., 2011; Haslam & Turner, 1992; Walther, 1996; Walther & Tidwell, 1995). Hogg's (2012) uncertainty-identity model reinforces this explanation by showing that identifying with a group reduces uncertainty about one's attitudes and inclinations, thereby facilitating issue involvement in contexts where controversial issues are at play (see also van Prooijen et al., 2015).

The shift from an evidence-based judgment model to one that acknowledges receptivity to emotion or subjectivity as an arbiter of truth led to changes in how information was produced, disseminated, and accepted. The change has played a role in fragmenting conceptualizations of individualist mass society to one where small issue-centered groups of individuals sharing common beliefs and needs became the focus of trust in the validity of (in-group) messages they encounter. This alternate approach to trust and to subsequent evaluation of messages' truth value has resulted in a more open playing field for smaller groups holding unconventional ideas advanced with great certainty (e.g., see Tormala & Petty, 2004). Exposure frequency, too, provides a plausible reason why untruthful stories might trump the truth in internet-based communications. (Koch & Zerback, 2013; Skurka & Keating, 2024; So & Song, 2023). Zajonc's (1968, 2001, 2004) mere exposure proposition, which has been supported repeatedly over the years (Bornstein, 1989; Montoya et al., 2017; Van Dessel et al., 2017), demonstrates that previously nonvalenced attitude objects are more likely to be evaluated positively the more frequently they are encountered. All these established persuasion factors play a role in the new rules of the game when mediated communication and persuasion are at issue, but there's another factor that must be carefully considered as well, and that is the power of the medium of message transmission itself, which appears capable of lending credibility to the messages it conveys.

Algorithmic Reinforcement

Does the internet hold a persuasive advantage over older forms of communication simply because this content delivery system is more convenient, more affordable, and more immediate than traditional media models? Vosoughi and associates (2018) answered these questions affirmatively. They studied the spread of false news on Twitter using a large data archive collected from 2006 to 2017, which contained 'rumor cascades,' which are sequences of related information shared and amplified online and classified as either true or false. They found

that "False news reached more people than the truth. The top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people…Further, falsehoods diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information" (Vosoughi et al., 2018, p. 1146).

More research leading to a deeper understanding of the role of the internet followed. For example, in 2021, leaked information from Facebook's (now Meta's) internal research revealed its algorithms were used explicitly to enhance user engagement, even though they knew the algorithms contributed significantly to political polarization and the spread of misinformation, particularly information regarding COVID-19 and vaccines (Robertson, 2021). Their own researchers created and monitored three fake profiles. an Indian user, a liberal American, and a conservative American. They found that each was rapidly met with unsolicited extreme content. The Indian profile was inundated with violent, border-related material; the liberal American received posts mocking conservatives; and the conservative American was hit with a barrage of QAnon-like content. The research shows how quickly the platform directed users into echo chambers of polarized information. Such content is designed to elicit likes, comments, and shares, boosting its visibility through algorithmic amplification, no matter its societal costs. To many subscribers, heightened visibility misleadingly signaled truth. For Facebook, the enhanced user attention directed to extreme responses, often via extremely manipulative misstatements, made financial sense, even at the risk of causing destructive, extremist responses (Vincent, 2022). Misinformation accompanied by high engagement metrics is often perceived as more believable, even when it includes misleading labels (Tandoc et al., 2018).

Some insights from the literature are available to explain why false information sometimes proves more engaging than the truth. In their EQUIP model of persuasive message

development, Crano et al. (2013) identified the principal requirements of persuasive communications, the first of which highlighted the necessity of engagement with the communicator or the communication content. If the audience does not engage, it is unlikely to absorb or accept the advocated appeal. Many major internet news outlets appeared to understand this proposition. As Tufecki (2016) wrote, "The new, internet-driven financing model for news outlets is great for spreading conspiracy theories. Each story lives or dies by how much attention it attracts. This rewards the outrageous, which can get clicks more easily." Conspiracy theories are not only more emotionally arousing and spread more readily than factual accounts, but just as likely to be propagated by humans as by bots, challenging the common assumption that the erosion of truth is primarily driven by automated systems.

How Do You Know What You Know?

The review to this point is not meant to suggest that the information disseminated online has a clear-cut advantage in credibility over more traditional forms. Stavrositu and Sundar (2008) suggested that internet-mediated information did not enjoy a natural advantage across all topics. In a relatively large survey, they found the credibility of internet-sourced information was not viewed as particularly credible; however, credibility was predicted by internet use in information search, and it is in such contexts that critical political, social, and medical information is most actively sought.

The radical transformation in how news is consumed and disseminated carries profound implications for our understanding of reality. It indicates a fundamental shift in the epistemology underlying our judgments of what is true. In earlier times, the isolated "voice crying out in the wilderness" often went unheard, was ridiculed, subjected to physical violence, or at best, benign neglect. The internet transformed this dynamic. It now serves as a modern analogue to the archaic town crier, whose loud announcements would instigate outdoor gatherings of people with overlapping interests, sometimes resulting in more extreme actions than anyone had

anticipated. Research on group polarization and the tendency of groups to engage in more risky

or extreme positions is useful for understanding the power of the internet to move larger groups,

many of whose members initially might not have been invested in the advocated positions but

are brought to that point by the force of the virtual group (Boyd, 2020; Nevryuev & Gagarina,

2020). Relevant to the dynamics of persuasion in internet contexts, Bernstein and Vinokur

(1977) showed that persuasive arguments paired with social comparison processes were

effective in moving previously uncommitted individuals, and novel argumentation was especially

effective in these contexts (Vinokur & Burnstein, 1978). Trust was not a major factor in these

results. The context alone appeared sufficient to generate agreement with decisions that would

not have occurred had the social context been altered.

Due to the open nature of the internet, voices that once were isolated are now amplified

by others with similar nonnormative views. This convergence of perspectives can be profoundly

validating. The result promotes the emergence of groups whose influence expands with each

new member, potentially legitimizing previously marginalized positions, resulting in perceptions

of consensual validity, sometimes giving rise to powerful social movements. The life span of

such movements depends on a range of factors beyond their shared mode of formation (see

Crano & Gaffney, 2021). A comparison between the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Tea

Party illustrates that the longevity of such groups is shaped by influences extending well beyond

their origins. The truth of the position often plays little role in the process. The average Tea

Party member was firmly ensconced in the middle class, but their sense of being put-upon by

changes in contemporary society, which in their distorted view favored others (i.e., minority

groups) over themselves, belied the truth of their strongly held position. Active members of the

Occupy Wall Street multitude were younger than the Tea Partiers, less well off, and more liked

by the general population, but vestiges of the Tea Party live on, while the Wall Street Occupiers

are a distant memory. Demagoguery often flourishes in disordered and disturbed contexts, just as it did when these groups enjoyed the spotlight.

The appeal of false rumors and fake news has serious implications for undermining truth in environments where nearly anything can be freely accessed. Algorithmic gatekeeping, characterized by decentralized control over which information reaches the public, provides an almost irresistible context for the spread of the most egregious and eye-catching presentations imaginable. Remember the notion that Covid-19 caused infertility or death, was part of a plot hatched by the government (US or China, take your pick), could be cured by Hydroxychloroquine, and other equally discredited conspiracy theories that spread so readily among the Q-Anon crowd and later to innocent bystanders whose natural curiosity drew them in, and who became extremized by the nature of the algorithm? In the case of Covid, extremely misleading, incorrect rumors cost the lives of many innocent but misled men, women, and their children.

The responses of the country's leaders at the time made matters worse by showing some degree of COVID denial, for reasons that remain not entirely transparent. Where journalists once served as the central gatekeepers of news, the rapid spread of clearly false but astounding and clickable content never got past the proverbial editorial blue pencil. Now, algorithms shape information flows. They are ruled not by truth, validated information, the public interest, or even on controversies where both sides of the issue may enjoy some semblance of the truth, but rather by engagement metrics (e.g., likes, shares, watch time) which have no necessary relation to the truth, but are perceived as trustworthy because of the manipulation of platform owners whose fortunes depend of their platforms' popularity. More often than not, editorial judgment does not affect the disseminated material because the editors have left the building. The shift from prioritizing flash over truth has complicated the news-making process and undermined journalists' ability to foster diverse and balanced public discourse. Leaving

politics aside, in some ways, this is attributable to journalists themselves, whose handling of the (false) equivalence between true and false information should have involved a more rigorous exercise of judgment to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Consequences of Digital Credibility Challenges

Why does misinformation thrive in digital spaces? While research on persuasion models and group dynamics attempts to answer this question, there are simpler processes that go into it. One such explanation is Fiske and Taylor's (1991) position that human beings are cognitive misers. People often tend to rely on shortcuts, heuristics, online short videos, memes, and viral posts instead of taking the time to think critically. Many people click and share without close reading, driven by shrinking attention spans or, more charitably, time constraints. Why? Because a positive click or emoji, even from a perfect stranger, is enormously reinforcing. Photos with fake captions are conveniently shared, and satirical or propagandistic articles devoid of truth are retweeted as if they were real, without pausing to verify the facts. At the very core of this problem are ordinary people falling for extraordinary nonsense. Outlandish claims, from lizard-people conspiracies to miracle weight-loss cures flourish because effortful critical thinking does not hold a torch to clickbait. As a consequence, standards for judging online truth have shifted dramatically. Credibility is evaluated by surface-level signals like smiling emojis, shares, and follower counts. The bigger the numbers, the greater the elastic credibility, which can expand and contract like an accordion. Online platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Meta have built ecosystems that thrive on clickbait, viral content, and personalized engagement, energized by our obvious tendency, like laboratory rats, to fall for simple reinforcement. Truth often is not reinforcing, but online likes, properly engineered, can move mountains. Such systems, when interacting with the average cognitive miser, find fertile ground for creation and spread of viral misinformation. Ideas that would once be dismissed, from flat-earth theories to outrageous political conspiracies, now take on a life of their own in this fertile digital soil and

reshape thoughts and behavior. In this alternate universe, conspiracy theories and fringe

narratives thrive, truth is not significant, and trust is bent into alarming forms.

Psychosocial Contributing Factors in the Disregard of Trust

As the standards for evaluating truth have shifted, we have stumbled into a world where

virality masquerades as validity, with profound consequences. To understand how we arrived at

this point, it is crucial to examine other underlying factors that have allowed misinformation to

thrive. Cognitive miserliness, distraction, and boredom offer reasons explaining why people

disregard the truth and fall for misinformation, but they do not tell the whole story. A range of

other psychological and social forces shape how we interact with online content.

People often encounter belief-incongruent information that creates psychological

discomfort. Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) drives people to reduce this discomfort by

discounting or distorting the information presented, selectively seeking confirmation, or, as a last

resort, agreeing with the disconfirming evidence. Discounting or distorting is easy, but not in the

face of apparently overwhelming evidence. Rationalization or biased interpretations sometimes

work to defuse dissonance, but rarely, and often are weakly defended against new

communicative onslaughts. Selective exposure has not proven a reliable behavior over years of

research on the phenomenon, and when it does occur, its effects are weak (e.g., see Dubois &

Blank, 2018; Garrett, 2009; Stroud, 2008). Often, belief-incongruent information also can drive

people to accept false information that aligns with their existing worldview, sometimes with

significant costs to self and society (Ecker et al., 2024; Lewandowsky et al., 2023). False beliefs

can become entrenched and resistant to corrective information.

Group dynamics add another layer to this problem. Social belongingness needs partly

determine how people evaluate information they encounter. People are more likely to accept or

spread false claims that reinforce group norms (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; van Prooijen et al., 2015).

Information that reinforces group identity, or maintains and defends in-group values and norms,

albeit false, provides psychological validation. Under these conditions, credibility is no longer the

highest priority; group loyalty is. Such misinformation is often accepted and readily disseminated across social networks.

Sometimes, the only thing that drives people to pause and think critically is having skin in the game. The motivational force of vested interest (Crano, 1983, 1997; Donaldson et al., 2021; Donaldson et al., 2016) can influence how critically people interact with information. When there is a clear personal stake, people will be more inclined to process information carefully. In contrast, when vested interest is absent or low, the motivation to invest cognitive effort is also low. As a result, people will default to shallow, heuristic processing, rendering them vulnerable to accepting and propagating misinformation (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009).

Periods of crisis or uncertainty also can also amplify psychological vulnerability and consequently the neglect of the trustworthiness of information sources and the subsequent devaluation of trust. Faced with anxiety and a need for explanatory closure, individuals may turn to simplistic or emotionally charged narratives that could be false or misleading (Douglas, 2019; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). However, the simplest explanation is not always the best; Occam was not always right (Thorburn, 1915). The escape to simple analysis is particularly pronounced during health crises, political unrest, or economic instability, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. People will seek immediate, often reassuring explanations to reduce their sense of chaos; in these contexts, misinformation spreads like wildfire.

The platforms further add fuel to the fire. Algorithms enable selective exposure of highly tailored, ideologically congruent content that reinforces pre-existing beliefs and increases polarization by leveraging group dynamics, leading to ideological echo chambers that can exacerbate the spread of misinformation (Flaxman et al., 2016). This creates a self-reinforcing, hard-to-break feedback loop: as users engage with this content, the algorithm learns to serve them more of the same or even more extreme content (Tufekci, 2016). Over time, this process amplifies biases and strengthens attitudes, making them increasingly resistant to corrective information.

Long-term Implications of the Decline of Trust for Democracy and Public Discourse

As public trust erodes, individuals increasingly turn to alternative sources of information, which often are found in fragmented online environments where misinformation spreads unchecked. The decline of institutional credibility creates fertile ground for conspiracy theories offering simple explanations for complex societal problems and reinforce in-group identities (van Prooijen et al., 2015). This dynamic is particularly concerning for democracy, as it undermines the public's ability to engage in informed debate and make evidence-based decisions (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Moreover, when people's political and ideological identities become tightly linked to their interpretation of truth, they are more likely to reject expert consensus and resist corrective information, even when their beliefs are demonstrably false (Lewandowsky et al., 2017, 2023). The outcome is predictable: Conspiracy theories will flourish, polarized identities will harden, and trust in expert consensus will erode amid competing realities. The result is a crisis of trust.

These implications extend to all institutions. Perceived media bias reduces credibility in the media because it is seen as promoting political (or other) agendas, thus diminishing perception of trustworthiness, the basis of trust. This process leads ironically to a rejection of fact-checking and correction. For some, this leaves the social media echo chamber as the only viable source of information. Perceived institutional failure further contributes to the decline of truth, where a fragmented online space is considered more credible than government and science (Lewandowsky et al., 2023). Should our kids receive the measles vaccine? The obvious answer is no longer generally accepted by the public because there is no generally accepted medical expert. This chaotic environment, where objective truth no longer appears to exist, leads to the weaponization of "alternate facts." Influencers and political leaders often weaponize allegations of fake news to discredit legitimate journalism and undermine its pursuit of truth (Hameleers, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Trust in media, science, and institutions is eroded even more. This tactic is especially relevant for populist leaders, who rely on emotional,

people-centered language when addressing the masses. In the process, facts are often

bypassed, and expert knowledge is disregarded. This strategy further reinforces public distrust

in media, science, and institutions, accelerating polarization. Right-wing populism shows a

strong anti-media focus, whereas left-wing populism tends to target economic elites. Social

media amplifies these dynamics, facilitating the spread of disinformation and weakening the role

of institutional gatekeepers in both political camps.

As a result, we have created (or stumbled into) a fractured epistemic environment. When the

shared reality required for informed debate and evidence-based decisions begins to unravel, the

result has dire implications for democracy. Deep disagreements about what counts as legitimate

evidence or expertise contribute to a divided information landscape, and the cycle replicates

itself until the communication gulf between contending camps becomes insurmountable. This

completes the cycle, as initial distrust and political attacks ultimately destroy the conditions

required for functional public discourse (Southwell & Thorson, 2015).

Restoring Trust

We now have, potentially, an understanding of the problem we face, how it developed, and the

factors that have led us to the current fractured state of society. How and where do we go from

here to mend this fragmented reality and rebuild the common ground, a requisite for public

discourse? A good starting point may be found in the seminal work of Sherif and Hovland

(1965). Their framework, social judgment theory, posits that attitudes should not be viewed as

discrete points on an evaluative continuum but rather as representing the range of positions an

individual is willing to consider, that is, their latitude of acceptance. The converse, the latitude of

rejection, was defined as the positions the person would reject out of hand. Developing

communications that were at the far end of the individual's latitude of acceptance would result in

an attitudinal readjustment in the sought-for direction, because it would be assimilated, that is,

viewed as not threatening, because it fell within the range of positions the individual was willing

to accept. In this way, the individual's attitudes could be moved gradually, and as an added

benefit, the latitude of acceptance widened. The model did not account for a transformation like that of Saul of Tarsus when he became Paul the Evangelist.

In today's deeply polarized society, identifying others' latitudes of acceptance has become increasingly difficult. With little shared reality between opposing groups, attempts at persuasion or dialogue often are dismissed outright because as beliefs become more extreme, their latitude of acceptance shrinks, and their latitude of rejection grows—but there remains reason for hope. Drawing on insights from the past reminds us that persuasion hinges on who says what, to whom, and how the message is conveyed (Lasswell, 1948, 1951). In his work, Hovland placed considerable emphasis on the source of the communication, the "who" of Lasswell's formula (Hovland, 1951; Hovland et al., 1953). As perceptions of authority have become fragmented, the 'how' of the formula, the medium of communication, has grown more significant than ever. However, this shift does not diminish the importance of the other elements in the persuasion equation. Even in digital spaces, this framework underscores the importance of source credibility, message clarity, audience characteristics, and context. Although sensationalist presentations dominate online platforms, there remains room for carefully crafted, properly sourced messages to reach motivated audiences. To rebuild trust, it is arguable that communicators must return to the fundamentals: clear, evidence-based communication delivered by credible (i.e., expert and trustworthy) sources, tailored to the needs, values, and susceptibilities of their audiences (Donaldson et al., 2021; Noar, 2006; Noar & Harrington, 2016).

A challenge in today's digital environment is the persistent lack of effective fact-checking by platforms and audiences. Overcoming this issue requires a two-stage communication strategy, in which communicators present their positions persuasively and also strong, evidence-based counterarguments to opposing views. Regardless of the forces working against the spread of credible information on the internet, responsible media and governmental institutions should ensure that messages threatening the health and safety of the citizenry are

combated. Obvious untruths should be called out and rejected. Responsibility for truthful public

communication should become expected, and failure to meet this expectation should be

contested with truth and a comparison with alternative facts.

There is precedent for truth-based restrictions of this sort. The lies of Big Tobacco were

partially stamped out by the Master Settlement of 1998, which imposed restraints on the sale

and advertising of tobacco products. It has had a powerful effect on the use of nicotine products,

especially among young people. The tobacco companies have now repurposed their old sales

themes to sell new and potentially harmful lung-endangering substances to the citizenry, but it is

hoped the laws catch up with tobacco's deceitful sales practices, which are aimed largely at

adolescent and young adult audiences. In a similar manner, the large alcohol companies are

restrained in their advertising, although this is not legally mandated. This same approach may

be considered as a possible fix for the diffusion of dangerous untruths disseminated on our

large platforms. First Amendment protections must be honored, but content that is untruthful

and dangerous to the health and welfare of the citizenry should be called out, even if it is the

state agencies themselves that are responsible for disseminating false information. Responses

and rebuttals to alternate facts should be immediate and grounded in evidence and science, but

merely countering allegations with counter-allegations is rarely effective. Rebuttals should be

scrupulously truthful and communicated clearly and accessibly, enabling the public to

distinguish fact from misinformation, and in the process, the invalidity of opposing arguments

should be laid out.

So, how do we develop these communications? One useful possibility is found in the

EQUIP model (Engage, Question, Undermine, Inform, Persuade), an inclusive framework to

guide building persuasive communications, based on a synthesis of decades of prior research

results in communication and persuasion (e.g., see Crano et al., 2013). Poorly designed

persuasive messages are easy to create and just as likely to fail. The long history of

unsuccessful and costly persuasion campaigns underscores this statement (Crano & Alvaro,

2013, 2019; Crano et al., 2015). The EQUIP provides a recipe that offers a reasonable chance

for persuasive success. It requires the communicator to engage the audience and to maintain

engagement throughout their presentation, which should begin by posing a question regarding

the issue at hand (e.g., Do you think the COVID-19 vaccine/vaping marijuana/unprotected sex

with a long-term partner) is safe? The question is meant to initiate the persuasion process, but

not ignite counterargumentation. The appropriate response to a misinformed answer is to

challenge the expressed belief by providing corrective information, thereby undermining the

attitude. For example, "I've just read about two major research efforts conducted by leading

research universities, and both reached the same conclusion. Your understanding of the issue

does not comport with their evidence-based conclusions. Here's what they showed..."). It is not

enough to poke holes in another's beliefs. In the undermining process, more supportive

information is provided, and the opposing belief is challenged, initiating a state of incongruity or

dissonance. The usual response of the audience to this undesirable state is to try to achieve

cognitive harmony either by reverting to the original position or by seeking new information on

the issue. Mounting the first of these defenses is difficult if the persuasive communication is

strong enough to negate its validity. In the inform stage of the EQUIP, new information is

presented, and if its source is credible, it provides a path to eventual persuasion. Without this

bolstering of the new belief with information, the individual or group is more likely to revert to the

safety of their initial position (Wood et al., 1995). Persuasion occurs throughout the process.

The literature is replete with research on hundreds of tactics that foster persuasion. Among

these are ensuring the credibility of the information source (Hovland et al., 1953), impeding the

cognitive processes involved in counterargumentation (Gilbert, 1991), and disarming resistance

by indicating the message is aimed at another individual or group (Crano et al., 2007, 2013,

2019). Using these evidence-based features of the persuasive context to enhance the other

features of the EQUIP, which have rendered the audience open to persuasion, can start the

attitude change process. It can be a starting point for developing communications that have

powerful persuasive effects. Such communications can help undo the untruths of those who live

in the world of alternative facts and bring society back to some form of cognitive equilibrium.

Parting Comments

The change in society's views of truth, and its antecedents, has occurred with stunning

rapidity. What was once called a lie is now accepted as an alternative fact. What was once

considered despicable or illegal is now accepted without a second thought. All of this can be

traced to an assault on the truth that seems a hallmark of despotic regimes in other places.

Acceptance of this state may indicate indifference to the truth and to the type of society that is

nourished and dependent on it. In many ways, the cavalier view of the truth is an unfortunate

loss of trust, which has been a feature of American life at least since the time of the war in

Vietnam, when the lies of the government, which cost the lives of many thousands of innocent

people, were laid bare. The Watergate affair kept the cynicism train well on track, and it has not

been reversed (Olson, 2003). With the rise of the imperial presidency, recourse to those in

power took a strong turn for the worse, and that, too, has contributed to the state of the Truth in

the US and perhaps the world (Cooper, 1999; Schlesinger Jr, 1973). Correctives are needed to

reestablish a renewed appreciation of the truth, and this will come about when trust in the

central communication media – television, newspapers, and the internet – are reestablished.

This can only be done by a movement that brings people into shared, interdependent contact,

working on a common issue, and winning some early battles. Reinforcement, however slight, is

important. This sort of change in the behavior of adults who put aside vested interest and begin

to think in broader terms about the necessity of supporting democratic institutions against the

forces that are aligned against it. In large part, this will depend on both the motivation of the

general population to reject alternative facts and the quality of their message to energize others

like themselves (Buttigieg, 2020). A central factor in all of this is a clear understanding of the

importance of the role of communication and persuasion in the process. It will be necessary to

reestablish the sort of place where intelligent debate is encouraged and succeeds. It will take an

enormous effort, and there will be losses as well as wins in the process. But really, do we have

a choice?

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