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The Politics of News The News of Politics

Second Edition

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6 Unmasking Deception: The Function and Failures of the Press

Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Bruce W. Hardy

Although scholars see various roles for political information in civic life, most agree that if citizens rely on misleading or false information when they make their political decisions, the results would be harmful to democracy.¹ Assessing citizens' capacity to recognize deceptive claims creates a stringent test of the extent to which the press informs the public. At its base, our question here is: Does the press provide the tools to enable citizens to discern truth from deception in presidential elections?

Our answer is this: although it is difficult to override the influence of often-repeated deceptions, the press has the capacity to do so. In 2004, reading the newspaper or viewing cable news corresponded with a heightened ability to distinguish factual from inaccurate general election presidential campaign claims. Overall, however, the press is neither disposed to delineate deception nor to make comparative judgments about the relative levels of deception in presidential campaigns. We offer reasons for this aversion and then suggest that voters who are deceived about candidate positions may vote differently from how they would if they were fully and, more important, accurately informed.

In short, this chapter considers whether news coverage is successful at overriding the influence of misleading political advertisements to ensure that the public has an accurate sense of the background and proposals of presidential candidates. Instead of concentrating on the accumulation of facts about political workings and current events in the United States, we focus on whether citizens can adequately recognize which 2004 campaign claims were truthful and which misleading.

To answer our question we analyze results from two separate surveys: one of the American public and one of professional journalists. Employing a battery of questions measuring the public's ability to discriminate true from false campaign claims is advantageous because it enables us to examine the relationship between news consumption and holding accurate campaign information. A

survey of journalists permits us to assess the likelihood that they will report that one campaign is more deceptive than another.

The Role of the Information

In modern democracies citizens elect or appoint others to represent them. If constituents are ignorant, political actors may be in a position to betray the interests of those they represent. Avoiding this outcome does not mean that complete information is necessary to produce appropriate votes. Citizens are capable of making rational choices with limited informational resources.² Indeed, average citizens are able to make rational vote decisions based on past experience and heuristics.³ Despite their disagreements about how much the public needs to know, most scholars agree that regardless of the net level of accurate information it holds, if the citizenry makes decisions based on misleading information, such a process would be detrimental to democratic society. Rule-of-thumb reasoning based on misinformation could produce even more negative consequences than those often outlined in the literature indicting low levels of political information held by the general public.⁴

The Press as the Custodian of Facts

If the press is acting as the custodian of facts, we would expect that citizens who consume high levels of news will be more likely to distinguish true from false statements in a presidential campaign. To determine whether that is the case, we turn to data from a postelection survey of 3,400 respondents conducted as part of the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) to answer two questions: Are high news consumers more likely to think that both campaigns are equally deceptive? And is news exposure related to increased command of facts in arenas in which ads are deceiving?

For this chapter, we look at forty-one claims made by the major party campaigns in 2004. All were offered in the course of the campaign. Most were fact checked by FactCheck.org, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, which Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Brooks Jackson direct.⁵ These questions were cumulated to construct an overall index of respondents' knowledge of the claims (see appendix for exact question wording and coding). The higher a respondent scored on this scale, the more claims he or she correctly identified as true or false.⁶ The overall level of knowledge of the truthfulness of the campaign claims is moderate. On average, respondents correctly identified roughly

Table 6.1 Regression model predicting correct identification of the truthfulness of 2004 campaign claims

	<i>Unstandardized B</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Female	-.732	.099	-.137**
Age	.002	.003	.011
Education	.116	.023	.107**
Income	.113	.026	.092**
Republican	-.418	.125	-.073**
Democrat	-.032	.120	-.006
Ideology (conservative coded high)	-.212	.056	-.078**
National broadcast television news	.024	.022	.024
Newspaper	.056	.018	.062**
24-hour cable news channels	.108	.019	.115**
Fox News ^a	-.061	.130	-.010
Local television news	-.040	.020	-.042*
R ² (%)	14.1		

Notes: The “unstandardized B” is the regression coefficient representing the relationship of any independent variable and the dependent variable holding all of the other independent variables constant. The “standard error” is error of the regression coefficient and is used for significance testing. The “beta” is a standardized coefficient representing what the regression coefficient would be if the regression model were fitted to standardized data. The “beta” allows for comparisons among relationships.

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

^a Fox News is included in the model because of the possible differential influence between Fox and other cable news channels. The 24-hour cable news channels measure also includes those who use Fox. Therefore, Fox viewers theoretically are entered into the model twice. Our biggest concern would be collinearity between these two measures, which could inflate standard errors and produce unstable coefficients. Although the two variables are moderately correlated ($r = .36$), collinearity statistics for the model do not suggest there is a problem. Additionally, the variables in question were measured in separate questions on the survey using different scales. The cable news channel variable was measured days per week. The Fox variable was a nominal variable that asked respondents which channel they watched the most. A regression model without Fox did not show any significant differences in the coefficients reported in the model here. Cable news produced a standardized beta of .112 in the model without Fox. As can be seen above, in the model that included Fox the beta for cable news was .115.

half of the claims.⁷ Their scores, as we show in this chapter, are probably a reflection of political orientation. Citizens are more likely to believe their candidate than the opponent and more likely to hear about and believe the inaccuracies a favored candidate puts forward.

The results from a regression model predicting respondents’ correct identification of the truthfulness of campaign claims permit us to examine the effects of news consumption (Table 6.1). We find detectable influence—some positive and some negative. Reading the newspaper and watching 24-hour cable news are both positively and significantly related to the respondent’s ability to distinguish truthful from deceptive claims. This finding is true above and beyond the impact of sociodemographic and political orientation variables such as education or party identification and suggests that some news media are providing the tools that enable citizens to see through the deception in presidential campaigns. National television broadcast news was not related to respondents’ ability to discern truthful claims from deception.

Local television news viewing is negatively related to distinguishing misleading from legitimate claims. This finding is consistent with past research showing that local television news consumption was negatively related to political knowledge.⁸ An explanation for this relationship remains elusive. The finding could be, in part, a result of differences in content driven by local news' role as a "good neighbor," not as a watchdog. A 2006 study by Paula Poindexter, Don Heider, and Max McCombs found evidence that the public *expects* the local newspaper to be a good neighbor instead of a watchdog.⁹ Although here we are looking at local television not the local newspaper that Poindexter and her colleagues studied, the same good neighbor role still applies: local television spends significant air time on local crime, local school sports, weather, and human interest and community stories.

What is problematic about this explanation is that it would forecast no relationship between local news consumption and accuracy, not a negative one. A possible explanation for this negative relationship is that the deceptions in the ads that run adjacent to local news are not scrutinized in local news the way they more often are in the national news that follows in most markets. As a result those who see the ads in local news may accept their distortions as fact, but those who rely on the national news and see ads there are more likely to hear an occasional correction. These occasional corrections were not, however, enough to produce a significant relationship in our analyses as national broadcast television news was not related to our dependent variable.

At a first glance, there seems to be some evidence that the press may be acting as the custodian of facts. We did find statistically significant positive relationships between some forms of news use and discerning truthful campaign claims from false ones. This finding does not justify unbridled optimism. Recall that the average number of claims correctly identified is around 50 percent. Additionally, this 50 percent can be explained, in part at least, by the fact that citizens believe their own candidate and not the opponent. People are pretty good at unmasking deception by a candidate they oppose but less adept at seeing through the deception of their favored candidate. For example, Table 6.2 shows the distribution of perceived truthfulness of some campaign claims by those who identify themselves as either Democrat or Republican.¹⁰ As can be seen, individuals' perception of truth is highly dependent on their party identification. Although the influence of news may show up in our statistical model, the press's corrective power is not overwhelming.

What these analyses suggest is that partisans simply embrace claims consistent with their voting preference and in the process stubbornly reject correc-

Table 6.2 Perceived truthfulness of campaign claims, by party identification

Claim: George W. Bush's tax cuts reduced taxes for everyone who pays taxes. (False)		
	<i>Democrat</i> (%)	<i>Republican</i> (%)
Very truthful	11.2	42.5
Somewhat truthful	17.9	27.5
Not too truthful	16.0	10.2
Not at all truthful	52.0	15.0
Don't know (volunteered)	2.8	4.8
Claim: John Kerry's health plan would have provided health insurance to all Americans. (False)		
Very truthful	30.4	9.4
Somewhat truthful	41.5	23.5
Not too truthful	7.9	16.7
Not at all truthful	13.8	44.2
Don't know (volunteered)	6.3	6.2
Claim: Since George W. Bush became president, the economy has lost more jobs than at any time since the Great Depression. (True)		
Very truthful	71.5	18.6
Somewhat truthful	17.2	23.0
Not too truthful	4.7	22.9
Not at all truthful	4.2	30.2
Don't know (volunteered)	2.1	5.0
Claim: John Kerry's health care plan would have taken medical decisions out of the hands of doctors and patients and put them under control of government bureaucrats. (False)		
Very truthful	13.5	40.5
Somewhat truthful	16.7	28.4
Not too truthful	17.0	7.7
Not at all truthful	44.8	12.7
Don't know (volunteered)	7.9	10.7

tive claims and/or that the news media are failing to adequately put the claims of each side in a corrective context. On the bright side, we found some evidence that the press can provide the tools that help citizens make judgments on the truthfulness of campaign claims, as those who read the newspaper and watch 24-hour cable news are more likely to correctly identify the truthfulness of campaigns claims overall.

Also included in our survey was a question that asked respondents how difficult it is to figure out when the Democratic and Republican campaigns were telling the truth and when they were misleading (see appendix for exact question wording). Using the same independent variables as in the regression model above, we see somewhat similar relationships between news consumption and respondents saying that it is not difficult to figure out deception

Table 6.3 Regression model predicting respondents' perceived level of difficulty figuring out when the Democratic and Republican campaigns were telling the truth and when they were misleading

	<i>Unstandardized B</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Female	.086	.030	.57**
Age	.000	.001	-.008
Education	-.005	.007	-.015
Income	-.015	.008	-.043
Republican	-.199	.037	-.123**
Democrat	-.385	.036	-.053*
Ideology (conservative coded high)	-.012	.017	-.016
National broadcast television news	-.007	.006	-.024
Newspaper	-.003	.005	-.013
24-hour cable news channels	-.020	.006	-.073**
Fox News	-.093	.039	-.051*
Local television news	.014	.006	.051*
R ² (%)	4.0		

Note: ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Table 6.4 Perception of the amount of deception used by front-running candidates in the 2004 election

	<i>How often do you think John Kerry told the truth about George W. Bush's record?</i>	<i>How often do you think George W. Bush told the truth about John Kerry's record?</i>
None of the time	15.1%	17.8%
Some of the time	62.5	58.9
All of the time	16.9	17.6
Don't know (volunteered)	5.2	5.4
Refused (volunteered)	0.2	0.2

(Table 6.3). Cable news viewing, including Fox News, was significantly influential in this model. Those who are more likely to say that it was not difficult to figure out when campaigns were telling the truth were not significantly more likely to be able to correctly identify campaign claims ($r = -.027$, $p = n.s.$). This finding is consistent with a body of research that suggests that humans are often unjustifiably confident in the accuracy of their beliefs.¹¹ And it is also consistent with rhetorician Roderick Hart's notion that exposure to deficient forms of news may increase the public's sense that it is knowledgeable without actually increasing knowledge.¹²

We also examined the public's perception of the truthfulness of the two front-running candidates in the 2004 election. Table 6.4 outlines the distribu-

Table 6.5 Regression model predicting perception of candidates telling the truth

	<i>Standardized beta coefficients</i>	
	<i>How often do you think George W. Bush told the truth about John Kerry's record?</i>	<i>How often do you think John Kerry told the truth about George W. Bush's record?</i>
Female	-.003	.005
Age	.031	-.048*
Education	-.015	.041*
Income	.019	-.015
Republican	.153**	-.133**
Democrat	-.140**	.191**
Ideology (conservative coded high)	.146**	-.094**
National broadcast television news	-.028	.071**
Newspaper	-.059**	-.013
24-hour cable news channels	.003	.048*
Fox News	.137**	-.101**
Local television news	-.025	-.004
R ² (%)	15.1	15.1

tions of overall perception of level of deception the major party candidates employed. The perceived disparity between the two candidates is not huge: a large part of the public thinks that the candidates employ similar levels of deception. Without calibrating actual levels of deception, we have no basis for judging whether this belief is warranted.

The table reveals some reassuring news: a sizable majority thinks that the candidates tell the truth about their opponents at least some of the time. If the majority of the public believed that presidential candidates never told the truth, their perception of the link between campaigning and governance, a perception that creates a foundation for democracy, would be broken. More desirable still would be a finding that the public accurately perceives candidate claims and is therefore able to see the actual relationship between those promises and governance. Here we find public knowledge wanting.

Overall news use was not related to the perception that the candidates told the truth at least some of the time. However, different media channels had different effects on the perception of each individual candidate (Table 6.5). Not all that surprising is that reliance on Fox News produced the biggest divergence of all our media variables in the perception of the two candidates' claims. Fox News viewers were more likely to think George W. Bush told the truth about John F. Kerry's record and less likely to think the opposite. Other cable news

viewers and those who watch national television news were more likely to think Kerry was truthful, and newspaper readers were less likely to think Bush was truthful. Nevertheless, the most influential predictors in this model were party identification and political ideology.

To see what press coverage contributes to the citizenry's ability to unmask deception, in the following pages we examine the effects of one campaign advertisement and its news coverage in the 2004 presidential campaign. We detail how the press covered the ad and examine the impact of the ad's claims on public opinion.

Kerry Would Throw Us To the Wolves

One of the misleading claims made during the campaign was based on Kerry's proposal to cut intelligence funding in 1994 and 1995. The Bush campaign painted a picture that implied that Kerry proposed these cuts after September 11, 2001. By indicting Kerry for the cuts, the ad obscured the fact that influential Republicans had supported them as well. The Bush campaign also implied that cuts proposed over five years would have occurred in a single year. (For a detailed analysis of the claims in the ad, visit FactCheck.org.)¹³ Late in the campaign, the Bush camp encapsulated these notions in an advertisement titled "Wolves." This ad was made in spring 2004. When it was found to be highly effective in focus groups, the Bush camp waited until two weeks before election day to release the ad, which featured a pack of wolves in a forest eyeing the camera and preparing to attack:

Announcer: In an increasingly dangerous world. . . . Even after the first terrorist attack on America . . . John Kerry and the liberals in Congress voted to slash America's intelligence operations. By 6 billion dollars. . . . Cuts so deep they would have weakened America's defenses. And weakness attracts those who are waiting to do America harm.

Bush: I'm George W. Bush and I approved this message.¹⁴

"Wolves" was aired from October 22, 2004, until election day in thirty-nine media markets across fourteen states and on cable. According to TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG) data, the 30-second spot aired a total of 9,128 times at an estimated cost of \$8,065,215. Among the states where the airing was concentrated were the battleground states of Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and West Virginia.¹⁵

Table 6.6 Perceived truthfulness of the claim that John Kerry voted to cut intelligence after September 11, 2001

	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Total sample</i>
Very truthful	14.2%	43.6%	27.7%
Somewhat truthful	31.5	25.2	28.2
Not too truthful	15.1	7.1	10.8
Not at all truthful	20.6	8.2	14.6
Don't know (volunteered)	18.5	15.9	18.5
Refused (volunteered)	0.1	0	0.2

Table 6.7 Regression model predicting perceived truthfulness of the campaign claim that John Kerry voted to cut intelligence funding after September 11, 2001

	<i>Unstandardized B</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Female	.100	.073	.036
Age	-.007	.002	-.082**
Education	-.016	.017	-.028
Income	.007	.020	.011
Republican	.386	.091	.130**
Democrat	-.252	.089	-.086**
Ideology (conservative)	.128	.041	.091**
National broadcast television news	-.013	.016	-.025
Newspaper	.010	.013	.020
24-hour cable news channels	.013	.014	.027
Fox News	.164	.096	.050
Local television	.019	.014	.039
Battleground state	.171	.071	.062*
R ² (%)	8.3		

Notes: The "unstandardized B" is the regression coefficient representing the relationship of any independent variable and the dependent variable holding all of the other independent variables constant. The "standard error" is error of the regression coefficient and is used for significance testing. The "Beta" is a standardized coefficient representing what the regression coefficient would be if the regression model were fitted to standardized data. The "Beta" allows for comparisons among relationships.

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Because ads air mostly in battleground states and national news coverage of them blankets the country, campaigns are "natural experiments" for researchers interested in campaign effects. This structure affords us the opportunity to see whether the press is doing its job as the custodian of facts. The postelection survey of 3,600 respondents of the NAES asked respondents to rate the truthfulness of the campaign claim "John Kerry voted for cuts in intelligence after September 11."¹⁶ In our sample, only 25.4 percent of respondents rated this claim as not truthful (see Table 6.6).

A regression analysis predicting levels of perceived truthfulness of the claim shows us that those who live in the battleground states are more likely to believe it (see Table 6.7) when controlling for sociodemographic variables and political

preferences. In other words, the advertisement or concurrent campaign claims in other campaign venues may have had an impact: people who lived in the states where the advertisement was aired were more likely to believe that Kerry voted to cut intelligence funding after September 11. It is no surprise that Republicans are likely to believe that the statement is true and Democrats that it is false. Because Republicans and Democrats rely on different news channels, it is possible that instead of correcting the claim, pro-Republican news channels underscored it. We do not, however, see this in the regression model.

Because we would expect the press to correct the mistaken impression regardless of the venue in which it was originally found, the possible conflation of ads with other campaign discourse is not problematic for our analysis.

Throughout this chapter we have argued that if the news media were acting as a custodian of facts, we would see a direct influence on the perception of truthfulness of misleading campaign claims. As seen in Table 6.7, none of the types of news use included in the model was significantly related to accurate assessment of the truthfulness of this specific claim. If the press was fulfilling its role, news consumers would be able to discern a false from a true claim. These news consumers should know that Kerry did not vote to cut intelligence funding after September 11. If this claim is the test, the press is not fulfilling its role as custodian of facts.

One reason that the claim was more likely to be believed in battleground states is that very little news coverage focused on the accuracy of the assertion. Where corrections occurred, ad exposure, or exposure from campaign sources in the battleground, overrode any effect the assessment in news may have had.

To determine how often news provides the public with corrective information, we used the terms *wolves* and *Bush* and searched the dates between October 21 and election day in the Lexis-Nexis database. This process located eighteen articles in major U.S. newspapers that discussed the advertisement. Although many outlets, including the Associated Press, carried information about the release of the ad, and many television news programs replayed the ad, through Lexis-Nexis we were able to find only six out of the fifty-three search results for television transcripts that commented on its content.

Most of that commentary was of little use to an audience interested in the factual accuracy of the claim about Kerry's record. The day this ad was released, Terry Moran on ABC's *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings* discussed it with advertising analyst Bob Garfield. Garfield commented that the ad "looks like a Halloween slasher flick. It's really spooky. It's really well done. I'm really afraid, and that's exactly what they're after."¹⁷ In this segment, Moran mentioned,

albeit briefly, that the ad contained some misleading claims: "As for the Bush ad's claims, while it is true Kerry proposed intelligence cuts in the 1990s, senior congressional Republicans did too. But Kerry's proposed cuts were larger and across the board." In this statement, Moran barely touched on the ways this ad could potentially mislead voters.

Much of the news coverage on this particular advertisement did not focus on the misleading claims. Of the eighteen newspaper articles only three mentioned that the ad was misleading. Even there, however, the identification of the misleading information was attributed to Kerry spokesman Phil Singer. For example, the *Houston Chronicle* noted, "Many congressional Republicans, including Porter Goss, whom Bush made CIA director this year, advocated deeper intelligence cuts than Kerry in the early 1990s as the Cold War was ending, Kerry spokesman Phil Singer pointed out" (emphasis added).¹⁸ "Pointed out" hints that the reporter believes the partisan spokesman without making the journalist responsible for the conclusion. Using the partisan source makes it easier for Bush partisans to discount the correction as spin.

The October 22 Associated Press wire story focused mostly on the scare tactic used in the advertisement. The article quotes Kerry's running mate, John Edwards, saying that "Bush had 'stooped so low' that he was 'continuing to try to scare America in his speeches and ads in a despicable and contemptible way.'" ¹⁹ The press concentrated on the similarities between the "Wolves" ad and Ronald Reagan's "Soviet Bear" ad that was used during the 1984 campaign to counter Democrat Walter Mondale's attacks on Reagan's military spending.

Feeding much of the press's coverage of this advertisement was a response ad, released to the news media but not aired by the Kerry camp, that featured an eagle (to symbolize Kerry) and an ostrich (to symbolize Bush). This ad suggested that Kerry soars high and "knows when to change course" while Bush just sticks his head in the sand and stands in one place. The press picked up on the uses of wildlife in these ads. Headlines such as "Political Imagery Gets Wild in TV Ads," "A Zoo Out There: Wolves, Ostriches and Eagles Populate Presidential Ads," and "Candidates Use Animals in Campaign Ads," which opened with the sentence, "It's Animal Planet in the presidential advertising wars," populated discussion of the ads.²⁰

Some news content did deal with the misleading claims in the Bush ad. Four days after Factcheck.org released its report on the "Wolves" ad, NBC's *Today Show with Matt Lauer and Katie Couric* featured a panel of undecided voters and their reactions to misleading claims found in "Wolves." Factcheck.org director Brooks Jackson also joined the show to explain why this ad is misleading.

Some of the panelists thought the ad was powerful. Panelist Anthony explained: “Just the way they portrayed the—deep music, trying to give a serious note to it. It kind of catches your attention. You’re think [*sic*] where are the wolves coming in? And it’s kind of putting you in a position where you don’t want to be preyed on.” Other panelists were not as moved. Panelist Steve commented, “All it does is ratchet up the fear in everybody, and sir, reminds them of all of the things that they need to worry about.”²¹

Jackson points out that the ad refers to the first World Trade Center attack in 1993, that the cut was not \$6 billion, and that it was less than 4 percent of intelligence spending at the time. Panelist Michael responds, “It’s a slick marketing package. It happens real quick where they talk about—the \$6 billion, but right away you think 9-11.”²²

The second half of this *Today* segment focused on the misleading claims found in the Kerry ad, “Middle Class Squeeze.” Nowhere in the segment do the hosts, Lauer and Couric, put weight on either deception. They do not provide any relative statement, explicit or implicit, that one ad was more misleading than the other, thereby creating the sense that the two campaigns were involved in comparable levels of deception.

In this case the news media did on occasion provide the tools necessary for citizens to identify misleading claims. The debunking that occurred did not have much of an effect. We suspect that Bush’s “Wolves” ad overrode any positive influence that the press may have because it enjoyed a wide airing in the battleground states.

This analysis of “Wolves” gives us insight into the media’s lack of disposition to counter the misleading claims promoted in a heavily aired television advertisement in the battleground states.

Assessing Comparative Amounts of Deception

Misleading statements made during a presidential campaign are not all of equal weight and importance. Some claims made during the 2004 campaign, such as Kerry did not deserve his military decorations, or that Bush lied to the American public about the necessity to go to war with Iraq, are undoubtedly more consequential than other claims made during the campaign, including the debate about the number of times Kerry voted to raise taxes.

Knowing that a campaign claim is deceptive can buffer the voter from drawing false inferences from it. Moreover, when one campaign is more deceptive overall or more deceptive on topics of concern to the voter, the relative level of

deception may become a factor in a voting decision by inviting the voter to penalize the offending campaign. Doing so requires knowing which campaign to blame. For reasons we outline below, the press is reluctant to conclude that one side in a campaign is more deceptive than the other.

The differences between two articles published in spring 2004 are illustrative. Each focused on the presidential campaigns' use of deception. One appeared in the *New York Times*, the other in the *Washington Post*. The *Times* article by Jim Rutenberg was titled "Campaign Ads Are under Fire for Inaccuracy," and the *Post* article by Dana Milbank and Jim VandeHei was called "From Bush, Unprecedented Negativity: Scholars Say Campaign Is Making History with Often-Misleading Attacks."²³

Writing in his blog, *Press Think*, on June 4, media critic and New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen outlined the "world of difference" between them.²⁴ The Rutenberg article details the use of deception in advertisements by both campaigns in a fairly equal light. Rosen comments, "This makes Rutenberg a chronicler of the will to deceive in politics, presented as part of the reality of politics."²⁵ Milbank and VandeHei chronicle the deception used, much like Rutenberg, but go one step further and write, "But Bush has outdone Kerry in the number of untruths, in part because Bush has leveled so many specific charges (and Kerry has such a lengthy voting record), but also because Kerry has learned from the troubles caused by Al Gore's misstatements in 2000."²⁶ One article was the rule in campaign reporting, the other the exception.

For a 2005 survey we phrased a question about a hypothetical campaign in which journalists knew that one side was more deceptive than the other. That poll of journalists conducted for the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands suggests that Rosen is correct: even when journalists conclude that one side is more deceptive they are reluctant to report it.²⁷ We asked, "In a political campaign, if one side is using deceptive tactics more often than the opponents, do most journalists usually report the greater use of deception by one side, just report that both sides are using deception, or avoid the matter completely?" A majority of those surveyed said they believe journalists usually report that both sides are using deception and that this creates the impression to the public that each side of the campaign is engaging in similar amounts of deception (see Table 6.8). The avoidance of comparative judgment, which is part of the he said/she said approach to campaigns in general, creates a sense of moral equivalence between the two campaigns.

We believe that five problems explain why so few news articles evaluate the relative truthfulness of each side in a major campaign. It is difficult for

Table 6.8 Survey of journalists on use of deceptive tactics in political campaigns

In a political campaign, if one side is using deceptive tactics more often than the opponents, do most journalists usually report the greater use of deception by one side, report that both sides are using deception, or avoid the matter completely?

	Journalists N = 673
Report the greater use of deception by one side	25%
Just report that both sides are using deception	58
Avoid the matter completely	11
Don't know	4
Refused	2

Under these circumstances, do you think that by failing to point out that one side is more deceptive, journalists are suggesting that both sides are engaged in a similar amount of deception or not?*

	Journalists N = 465
Suggesting similar amount	79%
Not suggesting similar amount	17
Don't know	2
Refused	2

*Based on those who believe that most journalists usually either report that both sides are using deception or avoid the matter completely.

reporters to determine: (1) What is deception? (2) What forms of advertising should be counted? (3) Whose ads should be counted? (4) How does one calculate amounts of deception—number of claims or claims weighted by advertisement buy? and (5) Are all deceptions are created equal?

First, defining deception is complicated in an arena in which most problematic statements in political advertisements are literally accurate, but invite false inference. In addition, as communication scholars are fond of noting, meaning exists at the intersection of text, context, and the predispositions of the receiving audience. Reporters are reluctant to assume that all viewers of a television advertisement have been misled. And it is indeed true, as the survey findings we reported suggest, that for whatever reason, many citizens are not misled by distorted claims.

Reporters are not comfortable with the words *deceptive* and *false*. In the language conventionalized in print and broadcast ad watches, the ads being treated in the two articles are usually cast as “misleading.” Seldom will an ad watch use the term *false* to describe a campaign ad. Our search for the word *false* and the root *decept* in the ad watches in the “Ad Watch Database: Election

2004” by Media Literacy Clearinghouse for the month of October shows that only FactCheck.org used the word “falsely” in reference to a campaign claim.²⁸ How does a reporter tabulate “deception” when most fact-checking employs language that does not use the word?

Second, where should one look for deception? In speeches? Debates? Ads? When ads are the reporter’s focus, tabulating deception requires a decision that limits the range of the claim. Should only televised content be counted? The importance of this question is increased by the fact that radio ads tend to be more deceptive than those on television. And direct mail ads and phone contact by campaigns are more deceptive than either radio or television ads.²⁹

Third, whose advertisements should be counted? Should the Bush and Kerry campaigns be tagged with responsibility for the ads by their respective parties and Section 527 groups? The importance of this question is magnified by the fact that attacks have tended to migrate to noncandidate advertisements.

Fourth, how does one determine how much deception is contained in either an advertisement or a campaign globally? If one relies on a simple count of the number of misleading statements, the campaign that creates many ads with small amounts of air time behind each is disadvantaged. But weighting ads for exposure is time consuming and somewhat unreliable until “time buy” information for the entire nation becomes available. At the moment, the monitoring services ignore some markets.

Finally, once one has defined, located, and counted the deceptions, one needs to ask if all assertions are created equal. Is saying that someone did something he did not do more serious than exaggerating the effects of an actual action? Is saying that a person lied to take the country into war more or less serious or comparable to alleging that a candidate committed treason by giving aid and comfort to the enemy? Weighting deception is even more dangerous for the journalist than drawing conclusions about the amount of deception the campaigns use. If one could quantify the number of claims by employing some systematic methodology, the journalist could use the scientific method as a shield to fend off attacks of bias. Weighting misleading claims inherently involves personal judgment, however. What might seem serious to one citizen might seem comparatively innocuous to the next. At the same time, attaching weights to misleading campaign claims would put the reporter in the line of partisan fire that they try to avoid.

Apart from these difficulties, most reporters are not disposed to engage in the process of calculating deception at all. The “belief of reporters that their job

is 'covering' news, not 'making the news'” leads them to avoid both fact checking and weighing in on the question: Is one side more deceptive than the other or engaged in more consequential or serious distortions?³⁰ When reporters duck these responsibilities, campaigns can deceive and mislead without the penalty such reporting could impose.³¹

When reporters do draw a comparative conclusion about the relative deception in a campaign, they often attribute it to supposedly neutral experts. This move sidesteps the problems we identified in defining and calculating amounts of deception. For example, Milbank and VandeHei did not conduct a systematic content analysis of all ads aired by each campaign. Instead the warrant for their conclusion is found in the subtitle of the article: “Scholars Say Campaign Is Making History with Often-Misleading Attacks.” Citing experts frees journalists from drawing and voicing conclusions that might appear to advantage one side in the political contest. As journalism scholar Gaye Tuchman has argued, citing outside sources and using direct quotes allows journalists to distance themselves from the topic or event they cover and creates a “web of mutually self-validating facts.”³²

Drawing conclusions from individuals who are interviewed is problematic when the subject of the news report is the relative accuracy of campaigns. Asking partisans on each side to critique or calculate levels of deception in the ads of the other does not give readers access to dispassionate voices drawing conclusions. In campaigns each side routinely alleges that the other is engaging in far higher levels of distortion. And academically based research teams such as FactCheck.org are more likely to critique ads one at a time than to draw global conclusions for exactly the same reasons that constrain reporters. Scholars are no more eager than reporters to be tagged as partisans, a label that will be flung at them should they say that one side is engaging in more, or more consequential, deception. The result is evident in the exculpatory tone in the weak judgment offered by “scholars,” Jamieson among them, in the *Post* article.

What is the impact of this journalistic (and scholarly) disposition and of the difficulties in assessing relative deception? Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman argue that when journalists fail to act as the custodian of facts, they tacitly reward campaign deception.³³ To that claim we here add the notion that when they expose deception but falsely imply that equivalent levels characterize the campaigns of the major contenders, they deny voters the capacity to punish those engaging in a higher level of problematic discourse and invite the cynical assumption that lying is endemic to politics.

Misleading Claims Lead to Misguided Voting

All of this matters because misconceptions based on deception can produce misguided voting. If campaigns did not believe they would benefit from it, they would not deceive. Meaningful participation in the most basic form of democratic life—including casting a vote—requires a degree of consistency between citizens' own issue stances and their votes. Believing falsehoods creates a false sense of such consistency, leading to misguided votes. Recent studies confirm the existence of the problem. During the 2000 and 2004 campaigns voters made mistakes in matching candidates' policy stances with their own policy stances.³⁴ These mistakes benefited incumbent George W. Bush with perceived agreement exceeding actual agreement and had the opposite effect for Democratic challenger John Kerry, with actual agreement exceeding perceived agreement.³⁵ The inconsistencies between candidates' positions and voters perceptions of them detailed in these studies are, in part, at least the outcome of the press's failure to deal well with deception in campaigns.

As we have outlined in this chapter, the press has the ability to provide the tools citizens need to discriminate truthful campaign claims from false claims. Our analysis suggests, however, that the press has a way to go to play the role it could in protecting citizens from campaign deception. Press critics and political theorists argue that more substantive news would produce a better informed and perhaps more engaged electorate.³⁶ Many scholars call for the media to devote less time to discussions of strategy and more to substance. To that call we add a plea for a notion of substance that unmasks deception.

Appendix

Exact Question Wording for Index of Campaign Claims

These questions were recoded into a dichotomous scale with those reporting 1 or 2 for true claims coded as 1 and 3 or 4 for true claims coded as 0 and vice versa for false claims. "Don't knows" were always recorded as zero. This may seem problematic because the "don't know" could refer to not knowing the truthfulness of the claim or a fact that the respondent never heard such a claim. The regression analyses reported in the chapter were also conducted with the "don't knows" coded as "missing values"; however, this did not affect the estimates of model.

1. John Kerry's health care plan would have taken medical decisions out of the hands of doctors and patients and put them under control of government bureaucrats. How truthful do you think that statement is? (FALSE)

- 1 very truthful
- 2 somewhat truthful
- 3 not too truthful
- 4 Or not truthful at all
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

2. George W. Bush's Social Security plan would cut benefits 30 to 45 percent. (FALSE)

3. John Kerry's tax plan would increase taxes on 900,000 small business owners. (FALSE)

4. By limiting how much people could collect for pain and suffering in medical malpractice suits, Bush's health plan would significantly reduce the cost of medical care. (FALSE)

5. Saddam Hussein played a role in September 11. (FALSE)

6. Since George W. Bush became president, the economy has lost more jobs than at any time since the Great Depression. (TRUE)

7. George W. Bush's tax cuts reduced taxes for everyone who pays taxes. (FALSE)

8. George W. Bush increased federal funding for education. (TRUE)

9. Dick Cheney has profited from the contracts Halliburton has in Iraq. (FALSE)

10. George W. Bush's plan to cut Social Security would cut benefits for those currently receiving them. (FALSE)

11. The assault weapons ban outlawed automatic and semi-automatic weapons. (FALSE)

12. The new jobs created since George Bush became president pay, on average, \$9,000 a year less than the jobs they replaced. (FALSE)

13. George W. Bush proposed creating a new Homeland Security Department right after September 11. (FALSE)

14. John Kerry's health plan would have provided health insurance for all Americans. (FALSE)

15. The AARP supported the Bush prescription drug plan. (TRUE)

16. The U.S. has found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. (FALSE)

17. The unemployment rate is now about where it was in 1996 when Bill Clinton ran for a second term. (TRUE)

18. John Kerry said that every American soldier who served in Vietnam was a war criminal. (FALSE)

19. George W. Bush cut the number of students who receive Pell grants for college education. (FALSE)

20. The Bush administration permitted members of the bin Laden family to fly out of the United States while U.S. airspace was still closed after September 11. (FALSE)

21. Senator Kerry voted to ban pump action shotguns and deer hunting ammunition. (FALSE)

22. When George W. Bush took office as president there was a budget surplus, and now there is a deficit. (TRUE)

23. The Bush administration discovered that flu vaccines were contaminated and decided to stop their distribution. (FALSE)

24. George W. Bush was honorably discharged from the National Guard. (TRUE)

25. John Kerry said he would only use military force after the United States was attacked. (FALSE)

26. John Kerry wanted to repeal the use of wiretaps in the Patriot Act. (FALSE)

27. John Kerry wanted to pay for the \$87 billion for Iraq by eliminating part of the Bush tax cut for those paying the highest income tax-rate. (TRUE)

28. The Bush administration sent some soldiers to Iraq without the latest body armor. (TRUE)

29. Tax breaks for corporations that outsource American jobs began under George W. Bush. (FALSE)

30. As a senator, John Kerry repeatedly supported an increase in the gasoline tax. (FALSE)

31. John Kerry voted for cuts in intelligence after September 11. (FALSE)

32. John Kerry voted against major weapons systems after September 11. (FALSE)

33. President Bush increased the tax burden on the middle class. (FALSE)

34. John Kerry promised to cut middle class taxes. (TRUE)

35. Ninety-five percent of the cargo containers coming into United States ports are not screened in any way. (FALSE)

36. Under the Bush administration, the United States has gained more jobs than it lost. (FALSE)

37. World opinion favored U.S. intervention in Iraq. (FALSE)

38. George W. Bush strongly supported having an independent commission to investigate the attacks of September 11. (FALSE)

39. When in Congress current Central Intelligence Agency head Porter Goss supported cuts in spending on intelligence. (TRUE)

40. In the videotape aired the weekend before the election, Osama bin Laden didn't endorse either Bush or Kerry. (TRUE)

41. George W. Bush has promised to nominate Supreme Court justices who will overturn *Roe v. Wade*. (FALSE)

Exact Question Wording for Table 6.3

Thinking about the 2004 presidential campaign, in general, how difficult did you think it was to figure out when the Democratic and Republican campaigns were telling the truth and when they were misleading? Was it:

- 1 Very difficult
- 2 Somewhat difficult
- 3 or, not at all difficult
- 8 Don't know (coded as missing value)
- 9 Refused (coded as missing value)

Exact Question Wording for Table 6.4

How often do you think John Kerry told the truth about George W. Bush's record? (None of the time, some of the time, or all of the time) (All of the time, some of the time, or none of the time)

- 1 None of the time
- 2 Some of the time
- 3 or, All of the time
- 8 Don't know (coded as missing)
- 9 Refused (coded as missing)

How often do you think George W. Bush told the truth about John Kerry's record? (None of the time, some of the time, or all of the time) (All of the time, some of the time, or none of the time)

- 1 None of the time
- 2 Some of the time
- 3 or, All of the time
- 8 Don't know (coded as missing)
- 9 Refused (coded as missing)

Notes

1. See James H. Kuklinski, Paul J. Quirk, Jennifer Jerit, David Schwieder, and Robert R. Rich, "Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship," *Journal of Politics* 62 (2000): 790–816.

2. Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need To Know?* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Samuel L. Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

3. Lupia and McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma*.

4. Kuklinski et al., "Misinformation."
5. FactCheck.org "is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 'consumer advocate' for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics. We monitor the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases. Our goal is to apply the best practices of both journalism and scholarship, and to increase public knowledge and understanding." From www.FactCheck.org.
6. Due to a split ballot design, each individual respondent was asked roughly half of the questions. Those who received form A were asked about twenty-one of the claims, and those who received form B were asked about twenty of the claims.
7. For those respondents who received survey form A, the descriptive statistics for this variable are as follows: Minimum = 0; Maximum = 18; Mean = 8.86; Standard deviation = 2.912. For form B: Minimum = 0; Maximum = 16; Mean = 8.38; Standard deviation = 2.573.
8. For example, see Markus Prior, "Any Good News in Soft News? The Impact of Soft News Preference on Political Knowledge," *Political Communication* 20 (2003): 149–171.
9. Paula M. Poindexter, Don Heider, and Maxwell McCombs, "Watchdog or Good Neighbor? The Public's Expectation of Local News," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 11 (2006): 77–88.
10. The relationship found in Table 6.2 holds for almost all campaign claims. Space limitations prevent us from detailing all fifty-two claims by party identification.
11. See Baruch Fischhoff, Paul Slovic, and Sara Lichtenstein, "Knowing with Certainty: The Appropriateness of Extreme Confidence," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performances* 3 (1977): 552–564; Kuklinski et al., "Misinformation."
12. Roderick P. Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998).
13. "Would Kerry Throw Us to the Wolves? A Misleading Bush Ad Criticizes Kerry for Proposal to Cut Intelligence Spending—A Decade Ago, By 4% When Some Republicans also Proposed Cuts," [Factcheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org/article291.html), October 23, 2004. Available at www.factcheck.org/article291.html.
14. Associated Press, "Bush Ad Uses Wolves to Suggest Kerry Weak on Terror; Democrats Counter with Eagle-Ostrich Spot," October 22, 2004.
15. According to the U.S. State Department, the 2004 battleground states were Florida, Iowa, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and West Virginia. See U.S. State Department: <http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/Archive/2004/Jul/12-250886.html> for information on why each state is considered a battleground state. Other news organizations, however, list as many as seventeen states in the battleground. See [Time.com](http://www.time.com/time/election2004/battleground): www.time.com/time/election2004/battleground.
16. The exact question wording is "John Kerry voted for cuts in intelligence after September 11. How truthful do you think that statement is?" 1 = very truthful, 2 = somewhat truthful, 3 = not too truthful, 4 = not truthful at all, 8 = don't know, 9 = refuse.
17. "Eleven Days to Go, 'Wolves' Ad released by RNC," *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, October 22, 2004, 06:30 PM ET.
18. Bennett Roth, "Bush, Kerry Spar over Approaches to Terror; The President's Ad Features Wolves, a Move His Rival Calls a Scare Tactic," *Houston Chronicle*, October 23, 2004, A1.
19. Associated Press, "Bush Ad Uses Wolves."
20. *St. Petersburg Times*, "Political Imagery Gets Wild in TV Ads," October 23, 2004, A9; Associated Press, "A Zoo Out There: Wolves, Ostriches and Eagles Populate Presidential

Ads," October 22, 2004; Associated Press, "Candidates Use Animals in Campaign Ads," October 22, 2004.

21. *Today Show*, "A Panel of Undecided Voters Weigh in on Political Ads and Their Effectiveness; Brooks Jackson of FactCheck.org Gives the Facts on the Issues Mentioned in the Ads," October 27, 2004, 07:00 AM ET.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Jim Rutenberg, "Campaign Ads Are under Fire for Inaccuracy," *New York Times*, May 25, 2004, A1; Dana Milbank and Jim VandeHei, "From Bush, Unprecedented Negativity: Scholars Say Campaign Is Making History with Often-Misleading Attacks," *Washington Post*, May 31, 2004, A1.

24. Jay Rosen, "He Said, She Said, We Said," *Press Think*, June 4, 2004. Available online: http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2004/06/04/ruten_milbank.html.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Milbank and VandeHei, "From Bush, Unprecedented Negativity."

27. The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnyslans and the Annenberg Public Policy Center commissioned Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI) to conduct a study of the media as a central democratic institution. This study involved 673 journalists—371 interviewed by telephone and 302 who completed an online version of the survey. The telephone interviews were conducted by Princeton Data Source, LLC, from March 14, 2005, to May 2. The online survey was administered by PSRAI from March 7, 2005, to April 26. The response rate was 49 percent. This study was designed to be representative of the national and local print and broadcast media. The sampling frame for the national print organizations included newspapers, national news magazines, and wire services. The sampling frame for national broadcast organizations included television, cable, and radio networks.

28. See <http://medialit.med.sc.edu/adwatchdatabase.htm>.

29. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

30. *Ibid.*, 29.

31. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories That Shape the Political World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

32. Gaye Tuchman, *Making the News: A Study of the Construction of Reality* (New York: Praeger, 1978), 78.

33. Jamieson and Waldman, *The Press Effect*, chap. 7.

34. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Issue Knowledge and Perception of Agreement in the 2004 Presidential General Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36 (June 2006): 243–259; Paul Waldman and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Rhetorical Convergence and Issue Knowledge in the 2000 Presidential Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33 (2003): 145–163.

35. Kenski and Jamieson, "Issue Knowledge and Perception of Agreement"; Waldman and Jamieson, "Rhetorical Convergence and Issue Knowledge."

36. Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Norman H. Nie, Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).