

# Disinformation: The (Low) Watermark of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Mass Media

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## Abstract

Disinformation, also known as lying, has become not only common in postmodern life but even recommended. This paper examines the context of political misinformation presented in the mass media to guide citizens who search for the truth about civic affairs. The paper's author suggests that truth-seekers use Galtung's demanding three-step approach to sifting for truthful kernels among the mass media chaff but expresses concern, after Debord, about a society that needs lies to govern itself. The author proposes a seven-step ladder of mass-media disinformation, ranking types from most harmful (fallacies) to the least harmful (face-saving lies and those in response to invasions of privacy) and invites comments helpful in developing the typology.

**Keywords:** bias, Bush, deception, disinformation, journalism, lies, misinformation

## Introduction

The term *disinformation*, in its many guises, has become a hot button in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, a peek into the history of deception makes clear that lying – whatever euphemism is used -- is no recent phenomenon. In ancient Greece, tricky wordplay – using “hollow words to make an empty case,” Plato complained – netted the speaker the moniker of “sophist,” a cousin of “sophisticated.” Then, as now, word trickery pervaded life, including religion, leading to the term “propaganda” for the messages that believers concocted to spread their faith. Spreading the false word became easier as technology produced what we now call “media” – the movable-type printing press, cameras and motion pictures, radio and television and finally, the Internet.

This paper is concerned with disinformation in the mass media and offers a classification scheme that reflects the author's view of the severity or damage connected to a particular type of disinformation, then finally offering clues for detecting disinformation. The typology and clues are a work in progress and should not yet be viewed as a definitive system. Commonly accepted distinctions between *disinformation*, meaning intentional, knowing deception, and *misinformation*, deception that is unintentional, are used. The purpose is to expand a little-studied area of mass media research, one that has great potential for academics as well as consumers of the mass media

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and for the future of participation in governance (democracy). Since most people get the majority of their civic information from the mass media, research into deception conveyed by the mass media has the potential of playing a positive role in rejuvenating interest in civic life and reinstating the media as sources of valid information. Or, the reverse could occur: Participation in governance by people in the United

States could continue to decline as knowledge levels decline, and the nature of democracy could divert even further from its theoretical ideal state. In addition, pointing an accusatory finger at those who earn their livelihood through disinformation could cause at least some of them to think twice about the damage they do across many layers of society.

Those who defend the use of deception in social intercourse might consider research into mass-mediated disinformation to be a waste of time. This author, however, takes a more Orwellian view that sees language, particularly public language like that presented in the mass media, as the mirror of systemic decay:

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a [cuttlefish](#) spurting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as "keeping out of politics." All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia (Orwell, 1946).

Yet, as the literature review will show, use of deception, particularly in advertising but throughout the mass media when politicians are quoted, accompanied the creation of the European New World society in North America, and at least one eminent historian heralds advertising as the symbol of America's values and aspirations.

The journalistic philosophy guiding this research is the idea that sunshine is the best antiseptic; let the world peer into the dark world of deception and some people will be enlightened. However, a more pessimistic theoretic perspective is offered as an explanation for the proliferation of disinformation in science, information systems and other academic research.

## Literature Review



**Figure 1: Cover of book by Korman and Adinolfi (1997)**

A few decades ago when Sissela Bok wrote *Lying* (1979), she complained that few scholars had paid attention to lying, though “truth” had been the focus of innumerable works back to classical Greece. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though some writers decline to use such a harsh term as “lying,” the concept of intentional deception pervades the mass media. Among the four stories on the front page of the business section of *The Morning News of Northwest Arkansas* of May 3, 2006, three dealt with some form of deception, an umbrella term that includes lying. One headline proclaimed: “Critic Says Wal-Mart Attracts Crime: Security expert calls study ‘somewhat biased’” (p. D. 5). Another poked fun at Anheuser-Busch Beer’s campaign to shift drinkers to beer; rival Miller Brewing flew a banner over A-B headquarters reading “Sire Sire Pants on Fire!” - a play on the name of a 1997 children’s book by Korman and Adinolfi, “*Liar Liar Pants on Fire*,” the cover of which is shown in Figure 1.

The third of the four stories on the page charged “Washington” with saying one thing and doing another on free-market policies. Even more ways to trick the public appear in a section of a book devoted to “a crash course in how to hoodwink with half-truths, fallacious arguments, veiled facts, misleading graphics, and tortured statistics” (Hausman, 1999). Add to Hausman’s list of deceptions public relations and advertising, marketing, promotion and “public diplomacy” – the peculiar name the U.S. government gives to the tales it tells

abroad – all attempts to promote a selective vision without acknowledgement of intentional bias and with contempt for “the whole truth.”

Hausman puts lying in historical perspective, while Bok considers the topic from a moral perspective. Hausman points to how quickly deception found the printing press after movable type was invented in 1450. Columbus published a splashy brochure promising a “glut of gold” from his trip to the New World – if only people would donate funds to get him there. Even publications now revered, from Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* that sparked the U.S. revolution to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which Lincoln said “started this big war,” were “overheated and one-sided” and, in the case of the book, an “inflammatory” work that “took some liberties with factuality” (Hausman, 1999 p. 3). Serban, an anthropologist, holds that the deceit practiced by liars may have helped their kind survive (2001). Boorstin (1984) notes that lures to get Europeans to immigrate to North America were equally fanciful and speculates that self-selection may have led to over-representation among immigrants of those inclined to respond to advertising. Bok suggests that philosophers prefer to play with the concept of truth, which can never be known, rather than struggle with such applied ethical problems as lying. Likewise, codes of ethics for various professions shy away from prohibiting lying, preferring to sanction well-meaning lies without considering whether such a posture is acceptable to the “dupes,” those deceived (Bok, 1979, pp. 12-15). St. Augustine (400) took a clearer stance, condemning all lies but setting up an eight-step (some say nine-step) hierarchy ranging from the worst (lies in religion) to pardonable sins (lies that harm no one but save someone from physical harm). Later Catholic writers presented softer positions, even inventing ways to excuse lies that were not malicious. “Mental reservation,” for example, allowed this argument: “If you say something misleading to another and merely add a qualification to it in your mind so as to make it true, you cannot be responsible for the ‘misinterpretation’ made by the listener” (Bok, 1979, p. 37). Bok took this posture: At least some positions warrant telling a lie, particularly if innocent lives are at stake. She adds: “But in taking such a position, it would be wrong to lose the profound concern which the absolutist theologians and philosophers express – the concern for the harm to trust and to oneself from lying, quite apart from any immediate effects from any one lie” (Bok, 1979, p. 48). Kant, Bok notes, wrote that a man’s lie “annihilates his dignity as a man” (Bok, 1979, p. 48).

Bok saves her strongest condemnation for lies told “in the public good.” Lies may be excused as attempts to avoid harm, for being trivial or for protecting an individual’s secrets, she writes. Yet, “When these three expanding streams flow together and mingle with yet another – a desire to advance the public good – they form the most dangerous body of deceit of all” (Bok, 1979, p. 175). It is with this form of deception – contemporary versions of Plato’s “noble lie” and creative variations – that is of primary interest in this paper. We now turn to several recent attempts to delineate acceptable from unacceptable disinformation -- or lying.

## **Contemporary Political and Media Perspectives on Disinformation**

Examples of disinformation in public life abound, perhaps because military conflict has been pervasive since 1941, when the United States entered World War II. In only slightly more than 10 years out of the last 65 has the United States not been at war in one or more places on the globe (Wikipedia lists incidents and ongoing warfare at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_military\\_actions\\_by\\_or\\_within\\_the\\_United\\_States#20th\\_21st\\_century](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_military_actions_by_or_within_the_United_States#20th_21st_century)). Warfare brings out the deception in mankind, from the Trojan horse to Napoleon’s fantasy bulletins about his successes in battle (Bourrienne, 1893, as cited in Barnes, 1994, p. 112-115) to Lt. Col. Oliver North’s bragging about lying to the U.S. Congress and shredding official documents related to his role in illegal arms trade in Irangate (Barnes, 1994, p. 23). Politics related to war has been so laced with lies that it has a certain acceptance, if not approval.

While some writers fault individual politicians (Hanna Arendt (1972) condemned “the commitment to nontruthfulness” of the Richard Nixon administration, but Adrienne Rich casts a wider net: “We assume that politicians are without honor... The scandals of their politics: not that men in high places lie, only that they do so with such indifference, so endlessly, still expecting to be believed. We are accustomed to the contempt inherent in the political lie” (Rich, 1980). As politicians spin their yarns, journalists follow closely, stenographically recording them and presenting them to the public. As in the days of Sen. Joseph McCarthy when journalists reported the Wisconsin Republican’s charges that Communists infested government, during the runup to the invasion of Iraq, journalists uncritically relayed the Bush administration’s charges that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction” and a large number of other deceptions listed on multiple websites such as *Bushlies.com* and *BushWatch* as well as in political discourse. (See the Appendix for a partial list of websites listing lies and other information on Bush administration lies.) No wonder, then, that the majority of Americans, who get their news primarily from television, believed that Iraq had WMD. Americans who got their news from National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting Service (television) held fewer misconceptions than others and a minority of NPR listeners believed the administration’s claims (Kull, 2003).

One of several Bush actions that caused activists to protest occurred after exposure of the administration’s plans for a disinformation campaign, which became public partly through leaks tied to Department of Defense turf battles. (Rodriguez, 2002).

The contemporary disinformation case that could be considered the clearest indicator of systemic problems – the suspicion that elections are not valid, that politicians arbitrarily purge voters and count the ballots that they want to count or rig electronic machines to produce the desired result – undoubtedly point to grave problems (witnesses both the 2000 and 2004 election debacles). Election fraud has a long, inglorious history in the United States, a carefully researched book by London *Independent* correspondent Andrew Gumbel (2005) makes clear.

"People have been manipulating and stealing votes more or less since the dawn of the republic," writes Gumbel (2005) as he recounts electoral shenanigans from the time of the Constitution to the 2004 presidential election. All political parties participated in creating a political system rife with fraud, manipulation, and maintenance of a dysfunctional status quo (Brookes, 2005).

Deceit spills from the political into all spheres of life in the United States. Hinrichson (2004) documented disinformation broadcast by anti-abortion groups, and as early as 1982, concern had appeared over deception in decision theory (Greenberg, 1982).

Many journalists and others have commented on changes in U.S. media in the last several decades, particularly weaker newspapers and either vacuous television news or inflammatory and partisan TV news. Robert McChesney and many other journalists connected with the Committee of Concerned Journalists and the Project for Journalism Excellence write books, speak and generate studies as well as excitement about stemming what they view as the decline of journalistic standards ([www.journalism.org](http://www.journalism.org)). However, this year’s 2006 third annual State of the Media study is pessimistic. Not everyone in either newspapers or television news sees the crisis, those involved in this year’s study wrote in the overview, and they question whether journalism has the leaders and the vision to take charge. A third problem outside journalists’ control is “whether consumers will care about the values that the old press embodies” or the brands that represent those values (“State of the Media 2006,” 2006).

The decline in U.S. journalism has occurred as U.S. politics became more polarized and as media giants grabbed control of ever greater outlets encompassing many media types – entertainment, news (with the same corporations owning radio, newspaper, television, and magazine news outlets), movies and theaters, etc. Infotainment masquerading as news became prevalent, and federal government payments to journalists to promote administration policies were outed by other jour-

nalists. In addition, journalists revealed that television stations and networks had been running government propaganda videos as news without acknowledging that the videos came from federal government agencies. For decades, pseudo news had been taking over news holes; past the front pages of many newspapers, publicity agents are behind most “news.”

Is this the desired direction for 21<sup>st</sup> century media to take? Theoretically, at least, the voices linking a workable democracy and journalism are many, and the idea of a public informed by robust discussion of issues is enshrined in First Amendment court decisions. Yet a recent empirical study questions the notion that knowledge is the basis for political opinions. Kuklinski, Quick, Jerit, Schwieder, and Rich (2000) cite literature that establishes the primacy in theoretical political science and media literature of the link between media, information, and democracy. The study found, however, that “citizens tend to resist facts.” Research reported in 2006 added that people who hold strong partisan political beliefs dismiss factual information counter to what they want to believe (Vedantam, 2006).

Although no one can say whether Americans would, over time, be influenced by factual depth information on their political world, journalism as a profession still projects that value despite a few highly visible media figures who get attention by a different style. Their inflammatory and partisan comments make Fox News, for example, the No. 1 news channel in many markets (Coe, Domke, Graham, John, S. L., & Pickard, 2004), and inflammatory talk radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh have huge, loyal audiences. The hope that an audience for serious journalism still exists provides a rationale for examining the nature of what they are now offered in terms of factually content versus ideology or unsupported opinion. Such a study is outside the scope of this paper, which intends instead to explore the nature of deception presented in the mass media and suggest ways to detect it. The goal herein is not to detect bias in reporters’ approach to news but rather to look at deception in the public positions of President George W. Bush as reported in the mass media.

Helping readers and viewers detect deceptive information in the mass media is a natural adjunct to identifying the various types of deception. Also, creating a typology for such deception is a daunting challenge, one akin to Nikitkov and Stone’s creation of a typology of deception in eBay commerce (2005). They note that typologies of cheating and deception have been extensively applied to military tactical planning (Hughes 1990, Parker Jr. 1991), to preventing and safeguarding against information systems hacker attacks (Cohen et al., 2005), to model fraud prevention and detection in financial statement analysis (Johnson, Grazioli, Jamal, & Berryman, 2001), and to study the effects of training and warning on sensitivity to deception (Biros, George, & Zmud, 2002).

St. Augustine’s eight- or nine-point ladder (experts vary in how many discrete steps he included) of lies led centuries of religious scholars to concoct one rationale after another to lessen the sinfulness of various steps on the ladder (Augustine, c. 400). Plato some eight centuries earlier urged political leaders to seek truth but also to lie to keep harmony if their superior knowledge indicated that lying would help keep the peace. In between those two polar positions are innumerable others, some of which offer ideas helpful in spotting deception in the media and in developing a detection technique. One of the areas of contemporary life in which deception is practiced and defended is the military, which is also one of the oldest sectors of society to develop deception techniques.

The many faces of military deception are depicted in Dr. Joseph W. Caddell’s “Deception 101: Primer on Deception” (2004). Caddell wrote: “Deception depends on two criteria: First, it is intentional; and, second, it is designed to gain an advantage for the practitioner.”

“Economic disinformation,” he wrote, usually called “advertising,” illustrates the difference in two types of deception, fabrication (creation of false information) and manipulation, the use of

information that is technically true but presented out of context to create a false implication. It may occur through leaving out information or by associating valid information in such a way as to create false correlations. Deception may be passive -- designed to hide *real* intentions and capabilities, hiding something that really exists. Or deception may be active -- the process of providing an adversary with evidence of intentions and capabilities which you do *not*, in fact, possess. Camouflage is the best known deception of this type. Still another dimension is A-type (ambiguity increasing) or the creation of “noise” and confusion, versus M-type (misleading variety) intended to lead the enemy by planting evidence for a specific plan that is not true. Another dichotomy in military deception is *conditioning* and *cover*. *Conditioning* is the repetition of what could be preparations for a hostile action. *Cover* is the use of an apparently non-threatening activity to disguise preparation for or initiation of a hostile act.

Advertising is the focus in another study of disinformation. Carlson, Grove, and Kangun (1993) examined claims made in environmental advertisements. Language techniques used in disinformation were categorized as vague/ambiguous, omission, false/outright lie and a combination of these techniques. The authors said their research confirmed another researcher’s finding that environmental ads tended to contain more disinformation than other types of ads, partly because those in the audience are receptive to claims to improve the environment. Knowing the vulnerabilities of those who care for the environment allowed the advertisers to exploit them by feeding them disinformation.

Hample (n.d.) tested Chisholm's and Feehan's proposed typology of deception: (1) commission versus omission (the liar contributes causally to the receiver's believing the lie, perhaps by telling the falsehood; omission occurs if the liar could have prevented the receiver from believing the falsity); (2) positive (the liar causes the receiver to add a false belief to his or her inventory), or negative, which results in the receiver losing a true belief; and (3) simpliciter (the liar converts the receiver from a state of not being deceived to the state of false belief) vs. *secundum quid* (the receiver already believes falsely and may spontaneously correct him or herself if left alone, but the liar acts to maintain the falsehood). Results supported the existence of a positive (add a false belief) versus negative (take away a true belief) dimension, as well as a commission (tell a direct lie) versus omission (fail to correct a falsity) factor. Data did not support the simpliciter versus *secundum quid* as an important factor.

Researches studying eBay auctions used the Bell and Whaley model of deception as their starting point (Nikitov & Stone, 2005). The model separates deception into dissimulative (hide the real) and simulative (show the false), each with three sub-categories: masking, repackaging and dazzling for the first, mimicking, inventing and decoying for the latter.

Simulative attempts to ‘show the false’ and may be used in conjunction with hiding. Techniques include mimicking (made to appear to be what it is not); inventing (another tactic for showing the false as the case of the wolf in sheep’s clothing); and decoying (luring the target of the deception away will lure predators away from their nests).

A study of deception in intelligence systems uses the Bell and Whaley model and theory of deception. The authors (Santos & Johnson, 2005) categorize deception into two categories, dissimulative and simulative, each with three sub-categories. Dissimulative (‘hide the real’) techniques are masking (make a feature of the environment invisible either by blending with the background or avoiding detection), repackaging (hide the real by making something appear to be what it is not or making it appear dangerous, harmless or irrelevant) and dazzling.

Yet other categories appear in the work of a distinguished moral philosopher emeritus at Princeton, Harry G. Frankfurt. He studies bullshit. “Bullshit is a greater enemy of truth than lies are” (Holt, 2005). Unlike the bullshitter, Frankfurt contends, the liar at least cares about the truth, an account a little too flattering to the liar? In theory, of course, there could be liars who are moti-

vated by sheer love of deception. This type was identified by St. Augustine in his treatise “On Lying” (Augustine, c. 400 A.D.). Someone who tells a lie as a means to some other goal tells it “unwillingly,” Augustine says. The pure liar, by contrast, “takes delight in lying, rejoicing in the falsehood itself.” But such liars are exceedingly rare, Frankfurt contends. Not even Iago had that purity of heart. Ordinary tellers of lies simply aren't principled adversaries of the truth, Frankfurt continues. Suppose an unscrupulous used-car salesman is showing you a car. He tells you that it was owned by a little old lady who drove it only on Sundays. The engine's in great shape, he says, and it runs beautifully. Now, if he knows all this to be false, he's a liar. But is his goal to get you to believe the opposite of the truth? No, it's to get you to buy the car. If the things he was saying happened to be true, he'd still say them. He'd say them even if he had no idea whom the car's previous owner was or what condition the engine was in. Frankfurt would say that this use of deception is bullshit and is a game that the two parties play knowingly, but he adds one other evaluation of such bullshit -- most bullshit is ugly.

## Detecting Deception

Frankfurt's characterization of BS as “ugly” is one clue to spotting it. When deception takes the form of political propaganda, management-speak, or P.R., he said it is “riddled with euphemism, cliché, fake folksiness, and high-sounding abstractions.” Oscar Wilde, in his dialogue “The Decay of Lying,” suggests that the proper aim of art is “the telling of beautiful untrue things” (Wilde, 1889).

When the bullshitting is done from an ulterior motive, like the selling of a product or the manipulation of an electorate, the outcome is likely to be a ghastly abuse of language, Frankfurt writes. When it is done for its own sake, however, something delightful just might result, Frankfurt claims, adding that the paradigm in his mind was Falstaff, whose refusal to be enslaved by the authority of truth is central to his comic genius. Falstaff's merry mixture of philosophy and bullshit is what makes him such a clubbable man, far better company than the dour Wittgenstein. We should by all means be severe in dealing with bullshitters of the political, the commercial, and the academic varieties, Frankfurt warns, adding: “But let's not banish plump Jack.”

In forensics and law, other techniques for spotting deception appear. In most cases, the devil is in the details. Zwier and Bocchino (2000) offer these suggestions: Ask the same question various ways, seeking precise detail. The respondent who is making up the story as s/he goes along may well forget what s/he had said in addressing a similar question, and soon the liar is trapped in a net of inconsistency. In the process, the liar's delivery often changes, either speeding up or slowing down. Body language mirrors the inner confusion, with the respondent looking for something to lean on, indicating a feeling of instability. In desperation, the liar starts piling on irrelevant detail, trying to sound convincing. Other clues, such as sweaty palms and shifting eyes, may not be visible to the media audience.

Detecting disinformation, imminent scholar Johan Galtung (1998) contends, is a 1-2-3 proposition, though he said he “had no illusion” he could “draw a clear cut, fine line.” First: Is the information a fact? The information must correspond to reality, a Buddhist *dukkha-sukha* reality. Second: What information is left out? A news report may claim jobs were created, he said, but if one job is eliminated and two workers are hired at 2/3 the salary the old job paid, that is not reported. Third: So what? What are the consequences of believing the information?

## Mass-Mediated Disinformation (Deception and Lies)

The chart shown in Table 1 is a first attempt to identify various forms of disinformation ranked from the worst to the least damaging. Rather than use St. Augustine's judgment of sinfulness, this chart aims to estimate the amount of harm to all living things and the Universe resulting from

each category of lies. A lie causing death to one person, for example, does great harm but one causing the deaths of thousands is more harmful. Using the chart would facilitate analysis of disinformation distributed by the mass media in quoting members of the Bush administration along with the Galtung test, forensics techniques and viewing the statements through the other schema discussed above. If journalists fail to probe politicians' messages, that chore remains with the audience. Communication involves probing, Galtung said, citing Danilo Dolci. Post-modern people think like TV screens, fleetingly, blinking, disconnected, non-linear. Without linkages backward, the theory part of his triad, and forward (the 'So What?') -- diachronic thinking that post-moderns seem incapable of -- disinformation prevails.

Galtung's prediction is dire:

We are in for heavy loads of disinformation...As news is little more than condiments for the major disinformation of advertising, the answer may be 'Who cares if the near future of information is more disinformation and the near future of communication is more indoctrination.' Until one day there is a new awakening. Because we hit our heads and bodies against real reality, and it hurts. The game is over.

The terms used in Table 1 are defined as follows:

**Fallacy:** Erroneous reasoning that has the appearance of soundness. Types include *post hoc ergo propter hoc* – after this, therefore because of this; *ad hominem* – against the man, attacking the individual rather than establishing pertinent facts; and *circulus in probando* (also called *petito principii*) – arguing in a circle, attempting to demonstrate a conclusion by means of premises that presuppose that conclusion; begging the question ("Fallacious arguments," 1988).

Plato's "**noble lie**," the lie "in the public good" that Bok (1979) considers to be the most reprehensible of all, is a lie that is not obviously told to fool "the enemy," bring harm to a particular person or group or otherwise render concrete damage to specified beings or things. Yet for those interested in being a well-informed participant in governance, to be treated by the nobles as one not meriting the truth could be the most damaging of all lies. This type of deception should be identifiable for its lack of concretes and dependence on a combination of the other types, particularly fallacies and symbolism.

**Fabrication**, using Caddell's definition (2004), is creation of false information. His work mandates that "deception" must be intentional and aim to gain advantage; in this work, "do harm" is substituted for "gain advantage." One type of fabrication that Caddell mentions is associating valid information to create false correlations. Both fabrication and manipulation (distorting the meaning of information by presenting it out of context) may include "noise" to confuse the issue. Work by Nikitov and Stone (2005) coded deception as "dissimulative" (hide the real – involving masking, repackaging and dazzling) or "simulative" (show the false – subdivided into mimicking, inventing and decoying), an adaptation of the Bell and Whaley typology (1982). In concealment, a deceptive image of reality is communicated by preventing access to full information.

**Simulation** induces a distorted image of reality.

**Omission**, though seeming simple on the surface, is among the most difficult forms of mass-mediated deception because only a person who consults many types of news coverage might be aware that something is missing from some stories. When an administration hides information and plants false stories, the news audience must be ever vigilant and skeptical.

**Symbolism** as a deceptive tactic is use of abstract, high-sounding terms such as freedom, democracy, and peace without concrete indication of achieving such a state. Negatives, such as terrorism and named boogey-men such as Osama bin Laden, also serve as symbols that may be flaunted to arouse public opinion and avoid dealing with real problems.

The remaining deceptive category in Table 1 is a form of lie that many authors forgive: Personal **face saving** or a lie offered in the face of impertinent intrusion into one’s privacy. While private individuals may merit such forbearance, this author argues that public officials do not. For example, President Bush no doubt would have liked to have avoided inquiry into his National Guard performance, which by all available accounts was less than fully honorable. Since his service record provided information that the public needed about his character, requests for official records was not impertinent. However, some inquiries into public officials’ private lives might merit the privacy that this category affords.

The chart calls for ranking of each instance of deception along two dimensions according to whether the deception was intentional or unintentional. The latter category is included because unintentional deception might cause harm. For example, a medical official’s dispensation of the wrong medication to a patient could be unintentional, yet cause serious harm. Therefore, the unintentional category has two levels of harm, minimal or neutral/positive. The latter is included to cover what might be called white lies or the exaggerations essential to comedians and other storytellers, whose use of deception could be the source of mirth.

<b>Table 1: Typology Of Mass-Mediated Disinformation</b>				
LEVELS OF DECEPTION, MOST HARMFUL TO LEAST HARMFUL	Motivation and Result of Deception			
	INTENTIONAL		UNINTENTIONAL	
	Harms Many	Harms Some	Harm Minimally	Neutral or Positive
Fallacies <i>post hoc ergo propter hoc</i> <i>ad hominem</i> <i>circulus in probando</i> <i>(petition principii)</i>				
Noble Lie (Plato)				
Fabrication				
Manipulation#				
Omission*				
Symbolism**				
Personal Face-Saving or avoidance of impertinent intrusion				

#Most advertising, particularly that designed to exploit the interests of the audience, such as environmentalism.

\*Includes withholding of information and secrecy.

\*\*Patriotism and partisanship are frequently used symbolic vehicles

## Discussion and Conclusion

Given the long history of deception in public life and its myriad defenders, one could be excused for abandoning the search for truth. Yet enough screams for legitimacy remain in the public realm to justify turning over all aspects of the argument for solid ground. The availability of the Internet for dialogue and formation of communities opens unprecedented opportunities. Such voices as those on davesweb, for example, are appealing for action. “It Can’t Happen Here” (2006) cautions Americans about plans by the Department of Defense to construct concentration camps around the nation and provides links to government documents as evidence. The author asks, “What the hell is the matter with you people?...What the hell does it take to get a reaction out of you?” He lists “things that you didn’t react to”: stolen elections, deaths of more than 2,000 service personnel and thousands of civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq, officially sanctioned torture in violation of international treaties, corporate scandals tied to administration officials, illegal domestic surveillance, military tribunals, and “diligent efforts by an army of 9/11 skeptics to convince you that the official ‘terrorist act’ is a fairy tale” and another dozen such deceptions. The author complains that

“without a compliant media machine to obscure the truth and shape public opinion, (government) plans for a fascist agenda would remain a dream...Without a propaganda machine masquerading as a free press, such an audacious and patently fraudulent story as 9/11 could not have been sold to the American people...and wars couldn’t have been marketed” (“It Can’t Happen Here,” 2006).

A noted 1960s postmodernist, Guy Debord, wrote that the mass media “perfectly expresses the entire society of which they are a part.” Direct experience and determination of events by individuals are replaced by “a passive contemplation of images” chosen by someone else. Humans are reduced from “beings” to “having” and finally to “appearing” in an impoverished, fragmented life in which no unitary aspects remain in society. “Celebrities” including politicians represent a number of human qualities and *joie de vivre* – “precisely what is missing from the lives of all other individuals trapped as they are in vapid roles.” Debord writes that individuals could rediscover unity only within the spectacle where “images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream” (Jappe, 2004).

The spectacle is not a pure and simple adjunct to the world, Debord writes, “as propaganda broadcast via the communications media might be said to be. Rather, it is the entirety of social activity that is appropriated by the spectacle for its own ends.” Reality becomes distorted images as the spectacle falsifies reality to the point that “in a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.” Debord acknowledges that “every power needs lies in order to govern.” The problem, he says, “lies in the society that needs such images.”

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## Appendix: Sources of Information on Bush Administration Deceptions

### I. BushWatch list of President George W. Bush's biggest lies ([www.Bushwatch.net](http://www.Bushwatch.net)):

1. In the 200x State of the Union address, Bush said Social Security would be exhausted and bankrupt by the year 2042.  
Truth: Even if the usual periodic adjustment raising the income level paying into Social Security were not made, in 2042 the fund would still pay  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the promised funds.
2. 29 lies related to Saddam Hussein's "Weapons of Mass Destruction"  
Truth: After devastating the Iraqi landscape and killing thousands of Iraqi civilians and U.S. military personnel and spending billions of dollars, no WMD have been found.
3. On Cuba, Bush told law enforcement officers in Miami that Fidel Castro, head of the Cuban government, said: "Cuba has the cleanest and most educated prostitutes in the world."  
Truth: A Dartmouth University undergraduate, Charles Trumbull, made up the direct quotation in an essay in 2001. What did Castro say? He said that in Cuba, no women are forced to sell sex, but some do. "We can say that they are highly educated hookers and quite healthy, because we are the country with the lowest number of AIDS cases."
4. Condi Rice when National Security Adviser, on 60 Minutes:

### II. Bennett, Frank, and Paulsen, Heidi. "All the President's Lies." *American Prospect*. May 1, 2003.

1. No Child Left Behind education program: Bush pushed to get the program legislated, then removed substantial funding. Congress in 2003 budgeted \$29.2 billion for the program; Bush requested \$22.1 billion. Bush's 2004 budget was \$6 bn. short of the congressional authorization. The state of New Hampshire figured the Bush program cost the state \$575 per student; Bush provided \$77.
2. Medicaid and Medicare: In a March 4, 2003, speech, Bush said his block grant program would provide preventive care and prescriptions. Instead, it cut benefits, restricted choice of doctors and provided benefits 40 percent below those in the federal program that Bush touted as the model.
3. Environment: In an April 22, 2002, Earth Day speech, Bush claimed his proposed Clear Skies program would cut smog and mercury emissions. Instead, it delayed emission cuts for 10 years, restricted state controls on pollution and allowed industry to avoid upgrading pollution-reduction equipment. He cut the Environmental Protection Agency two-year budget by \$500 million dollars, forcing layoff of 100 employees.

III. Sen. Edward Kennedy on Bush lies ("The President Should Be Held Accountable," *t r u t h o u t* | Statement, Nov. 10, 2005. Summarized by this author.):

It was little more than a devious attempt to obscure the facts and take the focus off the real reason we went to war in Iraq. 150,000 American troops are bogged down in a quagmire in Iraq because the Bush Administration misrepresented and distorted the intelligence to justify a war that America never should have fought.

As we know all too well, Iraq was not an imminent threat. It had no nuclear weapons. It had no persuasive links to al Qaeda, no connection to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, and no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction.

But the President wrongly and repeatedly insisted that it was too dangerous to ignore the weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Saddam Hussein, and his ties to al Qaeda.

At a roundtable discussion with European journalists last month, Secretary Rumsfeld deviously insisted: "I never said imminent threat."

In fact, Secretary Rumsfeld told the House Armed Services Committee on September 18, 2002, "... Some have argued that the nuclear threat from Iraq is not imminent - that Saddam is at least 5-7 years away from having nuclear weapons. I would not be so certain." In May 2003, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer was asked whether we went to war "because we said WMD were a direct and imminent threat to the United States." Fleischer responded, "Absolutely."

What else could National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice have been suggesting, other than an imminent threat - an extremely imminent threat - when she said on September 8, 2002, "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

President Bush himself may not have used the word "imminent", but he carefully chose strong and loaded words about the nature of the threat - words that the intelligence community never used - to persuade and prepare the nation to go to war against Iraq.

Nuclear weapons. Mushroom cloud. Unique and urgent threat. Real and dangerous threat. Grave threat. These words were the Administration's rallying cry for war. But they were not the words of the intelligence community, which never suggested that the threat from Saddam was imminent, or immediate, or urgent.

It was Vice President Cheney who first laid out the trumped up argument for war with Iraq to an unsuspecting public. In a speech on August 26, 2002, to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, he asserted: "... We now know that Saddam has resumed his efforts to acquire nuclear weap-

ons...Many of us are convinced that Saddam will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon." As we now know, the intelligence community was far from certain. Yet the Vice President had been convinced.

But President Bush was not deterred. He was relentless in playing to America's fears after the devastating tragedy of 9/11. He drew a clear link - and drew it repeatedly - between al Qaeda and Saddam.

On September 25, 2002, at the White House, President Bush flatly declared: "You can't distinguish between al Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror."

**IV. Another website [www.BushLies.net](http://www.BushLies.net) lists "Top 10 Bush lies."**

**V. An article in *The Los Angeles Times* Nov. 20, 2005, p. M3, "Take bad intel, twist it, and run with it," by David Wise, intelligence writer and author of "Spy: The Inside Story of How the FBI's Robert Hanssen Betrayed America," details numerous deceptions by the Bush administration.**

## Biography

Dr. **Louise F. Montgomery** began examining George W. Bush's statements and the mass media's presentation of them soon after the 9/11 attacks on Washington and New York, searching for explanations of public attitudes toward the administration and its attack on Iraq. This work is an examination of the context for misinformation (called "lies" in this paper). Montgomery has been an associate professor of journalism at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, since January 1990, serving as department chair for about three years. She has taught at the schools of journalism at the University of Missouri and the University of Alabama. Her doctorate in Communication/Journalism is from the University of Texas, as is her Master's in Latin American Studies. Her baccalaureate degree is from Arkansas State University, Jonesboro. Montgomery has also taught at the Institute of the Press, University of Tunis, Tunisia, and as a Fulbright professor at Catholic University, Santiago de Chile. She has been a VIP spokesman for the U.S. State Department in Pakistan, India and Guatemala and in Peru and Chile for the Fulbright Commission. She came to the InSITE Manchester conference from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, where she served as a Fulbright Senior Specialist for three weeks with the University of Naryn American Studies Program.