

# Cry "Fake News" and Gain Support

DIRCK DE KLEER | BOCCONI UNIVERSITY

Americans consider made-up news a bigger problem than climate change and racism. Widespread awareness of made-up news has also opened the door to “fake news” cries by politicians who allege that real news stories are misinformation. In a new APSR article, Kaylyn Jackson Schiff, Daniel S. Schiff, and Natália S. Bueno show that these strategic claims of misinformation can pay off.

When wrapped up in a scandal politicians can respond in different ways. They can apologize, simply deny the scandal, or stay silent hoping it will all blow over. However, the authors argue that there may be a more effective strategy politicians can use: suggest that the real story is misinformation. The authors elaborate that politicians claiming misinformation might use two strategies: first, they could sow uncertainty among the public about what is true and what is not. Alternatively, politicians can exploit political divisions to draw supporters to their defense.

The authors conducted five online experiments with over 15,000 Americans to test whether claims of misinformation increase support for politicians. They also examined whether these claims affect the public’s belief in the actual news stories and their general trust in media. In the experiments, participants first saw a real video or read a real story about one of four Democratic or Republican politicians involved in a scandal. To ensure that the experiment would not negatively impact participants’ voting behavior or affect current politicians’ careers, the authors chose stories about no longer politically active politicians.

After seeing the video or reading the story, participants then read the politician’s response to the scandal. These were not actual responses by the politician, but responses constructed by the authors. Some participants read no response from the politician (control group). Others read a rebuttal where the politician claimed that the scandal was misinformation and where they intentionally sowed uncertainty (treatment 1). A third group of participants read a rebuttal where the politician claimed that the scandal was misinformation and where they tried to draw supporters to their defense by criticizing their political opponents and the media (treatment 2).

The results show that lying pays off; there are strong and consistent returns to alleging misinformation in response to real text-based scandals across several studies and replications. Regardless of



**Dirck de Kleer** is a PhD student in Social and Political Science at Bocconi University (Italy), where he studies political behavior and public opinion. He holds an MA from Duke University, where he was a Fulbright Graduate Student (2018-2020).

the strategy (sowing uncertainty or drawing supporters to the defense), politician claims of misinformation lead to an increase in support for the politician when compared to no response at all. Moreover, these gains do not only come from co-partisans, but from independents and out-partisans as well. In contrast, claims of misinformation in response to video scandals, alleging that these are deepfakes, are ineffective in most cases. This could be reassuring from one perspective but concerning from another; the authors argue that because the audio-visual evidence is so compelling, it is hard to rebut.

What is less clear is how claims of misinformation affect the public’s belief in the actual story of the scandal. The link between changes in belief and changes in support is complex and needs more investigation, argue the authors. Moreover, contrary to the authors’ expectations, allegations of misinformation did not undermine trust in media, potentially because trust is already so low.

What about other politician strategies? The authors also measured claims of misinformation against other alternative politician responses to scandal. In one experiment, they compared claims of misinformation to more simple denials or an apology by the politician. These results suggest that claims of misinformation are more effective than apologizing, and at least as effective as traditional denials (if not more). In another experiment, the authors found that fact-checking can eliminate the gains from this “liar’s dividend.”

This study helps us better understand how misinformation can be leveraged by politicians as a rhetorical strategy for electoral gain. While much has been written about the direct effects of actual misinformation, we know far less about its indirect effects and how claims of misinformation in response to real stories are politically consequential. This study shows that lying bolsters more support than apologizing or silence, which may be bad news for promoting trust and political accountability. ■

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