Evidence-Based Policy and Misinformation: Exploring the Public's Processing of Information

Amy E. Hann
West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

As the online spread of misinformation increases, policymakers are finding it more difficult to ensure that the public is only exposed to the evidence they share and that their evidence is believed. Policymakers find they must now combat misinformation spread by a variety of entities. This dissertation explored thematic concepts regarding information in existing literature information as a thing, information as a public good, information as propaganda, information use by elected officials, and information on social media. This dissertation exposed participants to conservative and liberal misinformation and corrective information to determine how they processed policy information. This study explored if the political nature of a resource, a person's political ideology, and political party can influence participants' trust of resources and the believability of policy information. It repeatedly measured participants' policy support levels to identify if exposure to misinformation and corrective information has a significant impact on their support of a policy. The experiments measured these effects regarding climate change, immigration, and transgendered individuals serving in the military policy. This dissertation revealed misinformation and corrective information does not have a significant influence on person's support of a policy. This study also confirmed that the political leaning of a source, political ideology, and political party values, in some cases, can sway if a person trusts a resource or if they believe policy information. This study determined that people are more likely to believe misinformation in conservative resources and conservatives are more likely to not trust corrective.

Keywords: *Evidence-Based, Policy and Misinformation*

Background to the Study

This dissertation was written during a public health pandemic as the presidential administration attempted to undermine the Executive Branch's infectious disease expert by spreading false rumours (Navarro, 2020). Additionally, there has been no national directive to wear a mask as a preventative measure despite the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommending the wearing of masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 as misinformation about the wearing of masks causing carbon monoxide poisoning and oxygen deprivation spread across social media (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2020; Goodman & Carmichael, 2020). The disconnect between the administration and public health officials during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates how the spread of misinformation and disinformation can derail public policy. It is not just the act of misinformation spreading online that derails public policy, but more pointedly, it is how the public is exposed to policy misinformation and their processing of this false information that can derail a policy. While it is important to understand how misinformation and disinformation are shared with the public online, it is also important to understand how the public processes the information they are exposed to in an online environment.

This dissertation investigated how exposing Americans to policy misinformation can create disconnection between policymakers and the public. Particularly, this dissertation focused on how misinformation affects the public's acceptance of policy misinformation and corrective information when presented by different policy sources. This research examined the effects of subsequent exposure to misinformation and corrected information, the political leanings of an information source, and a person's political ideology on an individual's likelihood to believe evidence supporting a policy. Each survey experiment measured these effects on climate change, immigration, and transgendered individuals serving in the military policy. Though the measurement of these effects on public health policy would have been timely, it was purposefully avoided to prevent exposing participants to misinformation that could actually impact their health in a pandemic. Misinformation and disinformation are not tools used only by foreign entities to disrupt American elections (Allyn, 2020). Policy creators and public administrators are now forced to combat misinformation and disinformation spread by a variety of entities – journalists, elected officials, online social media, foreign entities, and the American public. The American public is particularly guilty of participating in misinformation and disinformation campaigns when they interpret information as having meaning due to subjective connection to the data (Bardach & Patashnik, 2016).

It is a truth universally acknowledged within the public administration field that policymakers in charge of crafting a policy must be in want of supportive evidence (Royse, Thyer & Padgett, 2016). Evidence-based policy is a popular term and a frequent practice in public administration because public administrators utilize evidence to infer precise outcomes for their proposed policies (Furner, 2004). When developing an evidence-based approach, evidence must be believed in order for the public to support proposed solutions (Royse, Thyer & Padgett, 2016). Yet, the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media has made the American public trust particular resources and mistrust others (Keymolen, Prins, and Raab, 2012). There has been little study on understanding how the public's trust of

information sources, belief of information, and exposure to information impacts their processing of information. In addition to understanding how evidence impacts support for policies, it is equally important to understand affected by misinformation. It is hoped that this dissertation will give public administrators more insight into how the public processes supportive evidence and this insight will assist with the development of methods to combat the spread of policy misinformation. This research is part of the progression public administrators must undertake to combat policy misinformation and disinformation being shared with the American public by many entities.

Literature Review

The spread of *fake news* on social media in 2016 has made the American public question what is real, politicians to question the reliability of information sources, and academics to question the digital literacy of the common public (Haigh et al., 2019). *Fake news* is a popular term used interchangeably for misinformation and disinformation (Cooke, 2017). The use of these concepts in public discourse is not new as hoaxes, satire, and propaganda have made use of false information to support or injure people, causes, or institutions for centuries (Cooke, 2017). It is the ability to rapidly spread fake news online that makes the current information crisis in public life different than previous lifetimes. The 2016 election and subsequent presidential administration has brought the concepts of using false or inaccurate information to garner support for particular causes, policy, and people into the mainstream. Some academics have referred to it as the *Trump Phenomenon*, the *Trump Effect,* and the *Trump Carnival* (Swire et al, 2017; Brady, Kelly & Stein, 2017; Gaufman, 2018). Yet, it is misleading to attribute the use of false information in public discourse to a single person or political administration. Misinformation and disinformation are considered by some as interchangeable, while others have made important distinctions between the two concepts. Both concepts have the same three same important features– use of deception, the consequences of sharing the deceptive information, and the intent of those disseminating the information. It is the intention of those that disseminates the deceptive information that is the driving difference between misinformation and disinformation. This literature review focuses on how the unintentional spread of misinformation and the intentional spread of disinformation has had similar, but distinctive effects on public discourse (Hinson, 2010). More clarifying definitions of misinformation and disinformation as well as other important terms for this study are defined within the following pages.

Other social science fields, like communication and information science, have explored how information is received and transmits knowledge to the public, that is when information becomes informative, to determine the best methods for sharing information with people to ensure their understanding of the information (Buckland, 1991). Some public administration academics have focused on how social media companies and journalists can combat the spread of false information or how to increase the information literacy of the general public (Batchelor, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Some have focused on exploring how information is a public good and how to create open access to information in the age of the internet (Stienstra, Watzke & Birch, 2007; Zardo & Collie, 2015). Other academics have focused on how the United States can increase the media literacy of its citizens to combat

disinformation and how politicians sharing information on social media can affect public opinion (Barton, 2019; Boudreau, 2014). Several have explored the emotional information behavior of the public and found that people were more likely to seek out information that validates their pre-formed opinions over seeking out correct information (Hart et al., 2009). Another explored how the spread of misinformation and disinformation through artificial intelligence campaigns on social media has impacted the ethics of public policy (Landon-Murray et al., 2019).

Misinformation and disinformation affect all aspects of American public life and the American public life is not solely constructed by policy, but is rather a mixture of communication, information, politics, and many other social constructs. So, it makes sense that the following literature review examined how misinformation and disinformation have affected the American public across many social science fields, including political science, policy studies, library science, information science, communication, psychology, and journalism as well as public administration and public policy. Overall, five themes emerged and are discussed in the following order: information as a thing; information as a public good; information as propaganda; information and elected officials; and the diffusion of information on social media.

Problem Statement
This research explored how exposure to misinformation can affect Americans' acceptance of policy information and their acceptance of corrective information when presented by different policy sources. This research examined the effects of misinformation, the political leanings of an information source, and corrected information on an individual's likelihood to believe evidence supporting a particular policy. Each experiment measured these effects on different policy topics including climate change, immigration, and transgendered individuals serving in the military. In the current political and policy environments, policymakers and policy practitioners have been forced to combat misinformation and disinformation spread by a variety of persons – including journalists, elected officials, online social media, foreign entities, and American citizens themselves. Eugene Bardach and Eric Patashnik's (2016) study found that information only has meaning to the public when they make a subjective connection to the data. They argued this subjective connection to information directly affects how people understand proposed policies to mitigate public problems. Evidence is essential to evidence-based policies because it assists public administrators in inferring accurate outcomes for their proposed solutions to public problems. Evidence should support policy and assist administrators in garnering public support for their proposed solutions, yet the spread of misinformation and disinformation, especially on social media, has made the American public trust particular information resources and mistrust others. There has been little study, as this literature review will show, on understanding how the public processes information, how evidence used to support proposed policies, or how the relationship between the public and policy information is affected by misinformation. It is hoped that the research completed for this dissertation will give public administrators more insight into how the public processes supportive evidence for their policy and develop effective methods to combat the spread of deceptive policy information. The nature of how misinformation and disinformation are used

to discredit public policy can be understood by identifying how people connect with deceptive information, the policy consequences of their exposure and sharing of the information, and the intent of those disseminating the deceptive information. This research's attempt to understand how people connect with deceptive information is the first step in a long process public administrator must undertake to combat policy misinformation and disinformation being shared with the American public.

Key Terms
Disinformation
For their discussion on disinformation within political communications, Freelon and Wells (2020) chose to use the simple definition of disinformation presented within the European Commission report on a multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. Specifically, the author of the report, The European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content, and Technology defined disinformation as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm" (2018, p. 5). This dissertation uses this definition to convey that any information that is false, inaccurate, or incorrect that is intentionally disseminated by those who know the information is not true should be considered disinformation. As Freelon and Wells (2020) noted, this definition unites three important features of disinformation – deception, harmful consequences, and the intent of those circulating the information.

Misinformation
Misinformation and disinformation are discussed interchangeably in many of the resources discussed within this chapter, while others have highlighted the differences between the two concepts. This dissertation defines misinformation as "information that is incomplete, but it can also be categorized as information that is uncertain, vague, or ambiguous" (Cooke, 2017, p.213). Cooke (2017) also notes that misinformation may still be true if the context of the information is taken into consideration. This dissertation makes the distinction between misinformation and disinformation because it is important to highlight that the experiment performed for this study exposed people to misinformation to mislead participants, yet there was no harmful intent or consequences. Similar to the definition of disinformation, it is important tonote that this definition of misinformation highlights the same three important features – deception, the consequences of sharing the information, and the intent of those propagating the information.

Propaganda
Of the several resources referenced within this dissertation, none of them clearly defined the term propaganda. The second definition of the term from the Merriam-Webster dictionary is the most applicable to the various discussions of propaganda highlighted throughout this dissertation. Specifically, the chosen definition states that propaganda is "the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person" (Merriam-Webster, 2020, para. 2). This definition is also most applicable to this discussion because it does not indicate that information presented in propaganda must be false and this makes propaganda distinct from misinformation and disinformation.

Misinformation and disinformation, as discussed later in this chapter, can become propaganda when false information is shared to help or damage a cause, institution, or persons, yet not all propaganda needs to be false.

Information-as-Thing

Buckland (1991) coined the term information-as-thing to express how information is attributed to objects, including data and documents. This concept is meant to describe when those objects become informative because they have given knowledge or communicated information. Specifically, Buckland described information-as-thing as when documents, data, and other objects "have the quality of imparting knowledge or communicating information, or are instructive" (1991, p.351). For this dissertation, information-as-thing is the process of a person subjectively relating to an informative object. The object is not informative until the reader or purveyor relates to information expressed by the object on a personal level.

Public Good

Public good is a material concept that is discussed throughout public administration literature, yet it is important to be specific about what it means when the argument is made that information can be a public good. Public goods are "nonexclusive and nonrivalrous" and "no one can be excluded from their consumption, and one person's consumption does not diminish that of others" (Nye, 2017, p.552). In the discussion later in the chapter on how information can be a public good, it is meant that institutions and producers of information cannot prevent specific people from accessing the information and a single person's use of the information does not reduce the ability of others to use the same information.

Themes in Existing Literature

The literature review found five common topics among existing academic literature regarding information and public administration – information as a thing, information as a public good, information as propaganda, information use by elected officials, and diffusion of information to the public on social media. The following section have five thematic parts that each will discuss the existing literature that explores the specific theme and link how this dissertation will also explore the theme and fulfill gaps in knowledge on the theme. It will then conclude with a summary of how these themes are important to public administrators' use of information and how this dissertation's experiment will contribute to the study of how misinformation sharing can impact engaging the public's support of policy.

Research Method
Research Question

This dissertation explored how misinformation and disinformation have affected the American public's understanding of policy information and their trust in different policy information resources. In the current political and policy environments, policymakers and policy practitioners have been forced to combat misinformation and disinformation spread by a variety of persons – including journalists, online social media, elected officials, foreign entities, and American citizens. This research examined the effects of misinformation, the political leanings of an information source, and the effects of corrected information on an

individual's likelihood to believe evidence supporting a particular policy. Each experiment measured these effects on different policies issues including climate change, immigration, and transgendered individuals serving in the military. This dissertation's findings revealed how the public subjectively processes policy information resources, how misinformation and disinformation has influenced proposed policies, and if the government can successfully counter misinformation and disinformation with evidence-based information.

More detailed definitions for misinformation and disinformation were embedded in the previous chapter, however, it is important to again highlight what exactly is meant by disinformation and misinformation in this experiment. This dissertation defines disinformation as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm" (Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology, 2018, p.5). This dissertation used this definition to convey that any information that is false, inaccurate, or incorrect that is intentionally circulated by those who know the information is not true should be considered disinformation. Misinformation is defined as "information that is incomplete, but it can also be categorized as information that is uncertain, vague, or ambiguous" (Cooke, 2017, p.213). These definitions highlight three important features of disinformation and misinformation – the information is deceptive, the distribution of the information is likely to have harmful consequences, and the intent of those disseminating the information determines if is it misinformation or disinformation.

Bardach and Patashnik (2016) argued that information only has meaning to the public when they make a subjective connection to the material. This experiment hypothesized that this subjective connection to information directly affects how people understand proposed policies. Information is often used as evidence to support evidence-based policies because it supports the expected outcomes for proposed solutions to public problems. Evidence should also support policy and support administrators in garnering public backing for their proposed solutions, yet the spread of misinformation and disinformation online has made the public trust particular resources and mistrust others. Thorson's (2016) study used a deceptive element to measure if misinformation still had an impact on political attitudes after misinformation had been discredited by corrective information. This experiment similarly used a deceptive element to determine if misinformation and corrective information affected an individual's support of a specific policy. This study focused on understanding how the public processes evidence used to support proposed policies and how the subjective relationship between the public and policy information is affected by misinformation.

This chapter will first discuss the specific research questions that this experiment is seeking to answer. Then, the hypotheses will be clearly identified. Next, the concepts that this experiment measured will be explained. Measurements that were designed to measure the defined concepts will be identified and then the detailed design for the three experiments will be highlighted. The sampling strategy and the degree to which the measurements accurately represent reality, the validity, will be reviewed. Then, the expected consistency and reliability of each survey will be assessed. And finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion on the

chosen methods of analysis to determine the findings and their appropriateness will be discussed in this chapter.

Experimental Design

The specific research questions this experiment asked were:

i. Does exposure to misinformation and corrected information affect the likelihood an individual will support a policy?

ii. Does the political leaning of a policy information source containing misinformation affect the likelihood an individual will trust the information source?

iii. Does the political leaning of a policy information source containing corrected information affect the likelihood an individual will trust the information source?

iv. Does the political leaning of a policy information source containing misinformation affect the likelihood an individual will believe the presented information?

v. Does the political leaning of a policy information source containing corrective information affect the likelihood an individual will believe the presented information?

In brief, three experiments were deployed, and each experiment focused on participants' attitudinal position on a different policy. The first experiment focused on participants' attitudinal position on immigration, the second experiment focused on participants' attitudinal position on climate change policy, and the third experiment focused on participants' attitudinal position on policies regarding transgender individuals serving in the military. In each experiment, a pre-test of each participant's attitudinal position on the chosen policy topic was measured. Participants were then randomly presented with either a pro-policy or anti-policy explainer that deliberately contains incorrect policy information. Then the participant's trust of the presented information and their attitudinal position on the policy topic were again measured. Each participant was then randomly exposed to various conditions, including exposure to corrected information from a source that aligned with their values or exposure to corrected information from an opposing policy position resource. Then, participants' belief of the corrected information source was measured. A post-test attitudinal position on the policy topic was then conducted to determine the impact of the discredited misinformation and corrected policy information on participants' attitudinal positions.

These three experiments sought to prove the following major hypotheses:

i. Individuals' exposure to misinformation and corrected policy information is likely to affect their support of policy.

ii. Individuals are more likely to trust information sources containing misinformation that are congruent with their political ideology.

iii. Individuals are more likely to trust information sources containing corrected information congruent with their political ideology.

iv. Individuals are more likely to believe misinformation presented in a policy information source congruent with their political ideology.

v. Individuals are more likely to believe corrected information presented in a policy information source that is congruent with their political ideology.

Concepts

The public can both be misinformed and disinformed at the same time and encounter both types of information online within the same resource. Misinformation is information presented as factual, and often believed to be true by those diffusing the information, that is determined to be untrue. Disinformation is information presented as factual that is known to be false by those diffusing the information (Thorson, 2016). In practice, it is difficult to clearly separate a population into distinct groups of *misinformed* and *disinformed*. As such, this mixed methods study reviewed what can be known about how purposeful exposure to misinformation and disinformation is subjectively understood on the individual level by examining the overall concept of how people process policy information. To examine this overall notion, a few different concepts were explored within the experiment including the trust of an information source, the belief of policy information, and the impact of misinformation and corrected information on opinion of policy.

Processing of Misinformation and Disinformation. For this experimental research design, it is important to recall the most significant similarity between misinformation and disinformation – it is information that is incorrect. The spread of disinformation often is purposeful, and misinformation may be spread in error. As Thorson (2016) noted, false information, whether spread on purpose or mistakenly, can lead to false beliefs and create vexing issues for policymakers. For this experiment, the information presented in the first policy information source can be treated as both misinformation and disinformation, because the source was manipulated on purpose to contain false information, but it was not shared with the intent to permanently deceive participants. This study did not attempt to make a distinction between the misinformed and the disinformed, but rather create an information source that could be considered disinformation on first glance at an individual level, and becomes misinformation when the participant is told the first resource contained false information in the second policy resource. This experiment hoped to understand how incorrect and corrected information are processed on an individual level by asking for several different responses. First, the experiment pre-tested each participant's opinion on a policy, and then post-tested their same opinion after they were exposed to misinformation and again post-tested after they were exposed to corrective information to determine if their processing of deceptive information affected their attitudinal position on the policy. This concept was also measured by asking each participant if they trusted the policy resource itself and if they believed the policy information presented within the resource after reading first the misinformation policy explainer and then the corrective policy explainer. Calculating each participant's trust in different policy resources that may be congruent or incompatible with their values is another means to measure their processing of misinformation and disinformation. Finally, this experiment asked their level of belief in both the policy resource that contained misinformation and the policy resource that expressed corrective information to measure how people process misinformation and disinformation.

Research Question and Summary

This dissertation examined if the public's support of policy, belief in policy information, and trust in information resources were impacted by the political leaning of the source, their own

political ideology, and the political party to which they belonged. This experiment was designed to explore the Buckland (1991) idea that people understand informative items through a subjective relationship defined by their personal values, including their political ideals. Information is also recognized as a propaganda tool of the government and this experiment specifically used policy information sources that acted as if they were propaganda that either supported or disavowed the presented policy to measure how much people trust or believe propaganda materials. This experiment also related to the academic theory that information is used by elected officials to sway the public on policy, including false or misinformation, by including elected officials' statements regarding the policy, including false or manipulated statements, in the information sources to which participants were exposed. Also, this experiment limited participation to those who participated in social media to utilize a pool of the public would be routinely exposed to policy information on social media as they were more likely to perceive online information as accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

This experiment was designed to measure and answer the following research questions:
i. Does exposure to misinformation and corrected information affect the likelihood an individual will support a policy?
ii. Does the political leaning of a policy information source containing misinformation affect the likelihood an individual will trust the information source?
iii. Does the political leaning of a policy information source containing corrected information affect the likelihood an individual will trust the information source?
iv. Does the political leaning of a policy information source containing misinformation affect the likelihood an individual will believe the presented information?

Limitations
Different Instrumentation
This experiment was purposefully designed to use different instruments to measure policy support, trust of the information sources, and belief of the policy information. The purpose was to make a distinction between the aspects of support, trust, and belief, all of which are characteristics of the subjective relationship people can form with information. It was thought that if the same instrument was used, participants may confuse the questions easily and think they were being asked the same question repeatedly. The use of different instruments also made it obvious to participants that they were being asked about their support of the same policy at different intervals as well as being asked about their trust of the source, rather than policy, and if they believed the presented information, rather than if they believed in the policy.

However, this purposeful delimitation of using different instruments also was an unintentional limitation. The use of the 0-100 scale to collect repeated measurements of policy support turned out to be rather sensitive and gave participants too much choice in their response. This is indicated in that the median policy support response remained in the upper 90s, indicating that there was very little lack of support amongst participants than there might have been if a more limited scale with fewer options was chosen, such as a Likert scale. Additionally, the use of identical and limited instrumentation on the questions about policy support, trust of the source, and belief of the information may have been helpful to find similar patterns about factors that influence these characteristics of processing policy information.

Online Survey

As mentioned earlier, this experiment was conducted when there was an ongoing public health event affecting the nation and conducting a field experiment with physical surveys and follow-up interviews was not possible as most states imposed stay-at-home orders during this period. The recruitment of online participants that were paid to take the experimental surveys was more practical given that most people were now encouraged to remain at home and the survey was focusing on online exposure to misinformation. The limitation of using an online survey was that the exposure to misinformation and corrective information was immediate and in a rapid sequence. This is not often how people are exposed to policy misinformation in reality. Often, it involves people reading information from different sources online, without realizing that it contains misinformation, and a period of time passes before another resource reveals that their original exposure to policy information had misinformed them. This inability to allow time between exposures to misinformation and corrective information limited the experiment's ability to determine what factors most influence their support of the policy, their trust of particular sources, or their disbelief of specific information.

Political Distribution of Participants

Hundreds of published papers have utilized the AMT service to recruit participants for their experiments and it is a common practice within social science research (Chandler & Shapiro, 2016). Characteristics of the sample populations recruited on AMT can be easily monitored and tracked if the researcher requests the service to recruit specific demographics for participation in their efforts and there is a diverse range of populations from which to recruit. (Cheung, Burns, Sinclair, & Sliter, 2017). However, this dissertation did not request any specific demographic of the available population to be recruited and rather allowed users to randomly self-select their participation in the surveys at the time of their release. There were limitations on who could participate such as those who had taken one of the other surveys was not able to take any of the other surveys used in this experiment and users who could self-select had to be U.S. residents with a social media account. However, this random self-selection from the MTurks user population resulted in three sample populations that heavily skewed towards liberals and Democrats. This meant that the randomized exposure to the four conditions of each survey meant there was a greater chance that a liberal user would be exposed to the two liberal information sources than a conservative user being exposure to the two conservative information sources. This skewed population meant that the hypothesis people would trust sources and believe information congruent with their political ideology and political party was not evenly tested amongst liberals and conservatives.

Future Research
Misinformation Asymmetry

Information asymmetry has been discussed as when one group has more access to information than others and the disparities in power that can be a result in this difference of access (Hagen et al., 2013). The spread of misinformation online does not appear to be slowing and the study of how this can be disrupted continues; however, future research could focus on misinformation asymmetry to determine if there are particular groups in the public who have more access to misinformation than others. Research on how this increased exposure to

misinformation of others affects these groups' political power, decision making, and methods for sharing information could reveal who within the population is the most vulnerable at being impacted by misinformation.

Misinformation Impact During Public Health Emergencies

The spread of misinformation about COVID-19 and how it hindered public health policies and efforts to combat the virus are not yet fully apparent as the pandemic has not yet concluded. The study of the impact of misinformation hindering pandemic policies has already begun (Motta et al., 2020; Tasnim et al., 2020). Yet, this does not mean that future research can't focus on the differences between those populations that had a more successful response at suppressing the COVID-19 virus and those that were unsuccessful to see how much misinformation prevented health agencies from implementing public health policies. Studies on how misinformation have affected public health policy during a pandemic will need to utilize larger sample sizes to accurately capture how different demographics were affected. Future studies may also focus on what types of resources were particularly responsible for the spread of COVID-19 misinformation to formulate if there is a method for public health experts to use these same resources to share accurate pandemic information with their public.

Racial Asymmetry and Misinformation

Freelon et al.'s (2020) review of existing social science research on disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda found that racial asymmetry is a phenomenon that deserves further study. Freelon's (2020) study found that racial impersonation was a method often utilized by Russian disinformation campaigns to rapidly spread false information online. Given that 2020 was a year that also multiple active campaigns calling for social justice and realignment of public policies to address racial disparity in the United States, it would be a benefit to public administrators if social research continued to focus on racial asymmetry and misinformation. If those advocating for the realignment of policy to address racial disparity were able to understand how racial tensions and sensitivity was being used to derail their activism, it may help them combat misinformation about their policies and campaigns spread by nefarious parties seeking to inflame tensions in American society. Future research also might want to consider what other explanatory variables that might explain information asymmetry and how misinformation exacerbates this gap of those who have access to correct information and those who are more frequently exposed to misinformation.

Conclusion

The year 2020 has been ripe with examples of how misinformation affects public health policy during the COVID-19 pandemic and these examples stress the importance of understanding how the public processes policy information, including misinformation and corrective information. Public administrators have long advocated that evidence-based policy is one of the best approaches for developing policy. Yet, now the very information that administrators rely on as evidence to support their policy can be challenged by propaganda shared by elected officials and the public are challenged to determine what is real. Information is a thing. It conveys knowledge when people make a subjective connection to the information and these connections can be influenced by their personal values. Public administrators would do well to

understand how the public processes information, how they decide if they trust particular resources over others, and how they decide which information to believe.

This dissertation revealed that even if the public makes a subjective connection with policy information that may or may not be congruent with their political ideology, it does not influence them to level of support of a policy. Yet policy support is not the only measure for understanding how people process information. It is important to also understand how they decide to trust particular resources or determine if they believe the information they encounter. This study verified that the political nature of information sources, a person's political ideology, and political party values influence if a person trusts a resource and if they believe policy information. This study determined that people are more likely to believe misinformation in conservative resources and conservatives are more likely to not trust corrective information, no matter the political nature of the source. This may mean that people who utilize conservative sources are more susceptible to believing misinformation and not trusting sources that seek correct and counter misinformation with correction. Public administration literature has long argued that it is important to more widely inform the un-informed public to garner support; however, the spread of online misinformation has resulted in a public that is no longer unaware of policy, but a public that is confidently misinformed, believes false information, and does not trust efforts to counter misinformation. Developing an understanding of how the public trusts information sources and chooses to believe or disbelieve information is important, even if it is not proven to directly affects public support, as having the public's trust and faith in government policy information is essential to developing successful policies to resolve public problems.

References

Allcott, H. & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *31*, 211 - 36.

Allyn, B. (2020). Study Exposes Russia Disinformation campaign that operated in the shadows for 6 years, [Online Article] *NPR*, Retrieved July 15, 2020, from https://www.npr.org/2020/06/16/878169027/study-exposes-russia-disinformation-campaign-that-operated-in-the-shadows-for-6-

Bardach, E., & Patashnik, E. M. (2016). *A practical guide for policy analysis: The eightfold path to more effective problem solving*. /z-wcorg/.

Barton, C. C. (2019). Critical Literacy in the Post-Truth Media Landscape. *Policy Futures in Education*, *17*(8), 1024–1036.

Batchelor, O. (2017). Getting out the truth: the role of libraries in the fight against fake news. *Reference Services Review*, *45*, 143 - 148.

Boudreau, C. & MacKenzie, S. A. (2013). Informing the electorate? How party cues and policy information affect public opinion about Initiatives, *American Journal of Political Science. American Journal of Political Science*, *58*(1), 48 - 62.

Brady, J. T, & Kelly, M. E, & Stein, S. L (2017). The Trump effect: With No peer review, how do we Know what to really believe on social media? *Clinics in Colon and Rectal Surgery*, *30*(04), 270 - 276.

Buckland, M. K. (1991). Information as Thing, *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, *42*(5), 351 - 360.

Chandler, J., & Shapiro, D. (2016). Conducting clinical research using crowdsourced convenience samples, *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, *12*(1), 53–81. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-021815-093623

Cheung, J. H., Burns, D. K., Sinclair, R. R., & Sliter, M. (2017). Amazon Mechanical Turk in Organizational Psychology: An Evaluation and Practical Recommendations, *Journal of Business and Psychology*, *32*(4), 347–361. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-016-9458-5

Cooke, N. A. (2017). Posttruth, truthiness, and alternative facts: Information behavior and critical information consumption for a new age, *The Library Quarterly*, *87*(3), 211–221.

Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology. (2018). *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent High-level Group on fake news and online disinformation*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation

Freelon, D., Bossetta, M., Wells, C., Lukito, J., Xia, Y., & Adams, K. (2020). Black Trolls Matter: Racial and ideological asymmetries in social media disinformation, *Social Science Computer Review*, 0894439320914853.

Freelon, D., & Wells, C. (2020). Disinformation as political communication, *Political Communication*, *37*(2), 145–156.

Furner, J. (2004). Conceptual analysis: A method for understanding information as evidence, and evidence as information, *Archival Science*, *4*(3-4), 233–265.

Gaufman, E. (2018). The Trump carnival: Popular appeal in the age of misinformation, *International Relations*, *32*(4), 410-429.

Goodman, J. & Carmichael, J. (2020). Coronavirus: 'Deadly masks' claims debunked. [Online Article] *BBC News*, Retrieved July 25, 2020, from https://www.bbc.com/news/53108405

Hagen, R., Statler, M., & Penuel, K. B. (2013). *Encyclopedia of crisis management*, SAGE Publications, Inc; eBook Academic Collection (EBSCOhost). https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=tr ue&AuthType=shib&db=e000x na&AN=5 92559&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s3916018

Haigh, M., Haigh, T., & Matychak, T. (2019). Information literacy vs. fake News: The case of Ukraine, *Open Information Science*, *3*(1), 154–165.

Hart, W., Albarracín, D., Eagly, A. H., Brechan, I., Lindberg, M. J., & Merrill, L. (2009). Feeling validated versus being correct: A meta-analysis of selective exposure to information, *Psychological Bulletin*, *135*(4), 555.

Hinson, CL (2010). Negative information action: Danger for democracy, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *53*(6), 826-847.

Keymolen, E., Prins, C., & Raab, C. (2012). Trust and ICT: New challenges for public administration. In Snellen, I and Thaens, Marcel, and van de Donk, W. (Ed.), *Public Administration in the Information Age: Revisited*. (pp. 21-35). IOS Press.

Landon-Murray, M., Mujkic, E., & Nussbaum, B. (2019). Disinformation in contemporary US foreign policy: Impacts and ethics in an era of fake news, social media, and artificial intelligence, *Public Integrity*, *21*(5), 512–522.

Merriam-Webster. (2020). Propaganda. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*, Retrieved May 8, 2020, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda

Motta, M., Stecula, D., & Farhart, C. (2020). How right-leaning media coverage of COVID-19 facilitated the spread of misinformation in the early stages of the pandemic in the US, *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, 1–8.

Navarro, P. (2020). Anthony Fauci has been wrong about everything I have interacted with him on: Peter Navarro. [Online Article] *USA Today*, Retrieved 15 July 2020, from https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/todaysdebate/2020/07/14/anthony-fauci-wrong-with-me-peter-navarro-editorials-debates/5439374002/

Nye, J. S. (2017). Information technology and democratic governance. In J. M. Shafritz & A. C. Hyde (Eds.), *Classics of Public Administration* (Eighth, pp. 545–554). Cengage Learning.

Royse, D, Thyer, B., & Padgett, D. (2016). *Program Evaluation: An Introduction to an Evidence-Based Approach (sixth edition ed.).* Cengage Learning.

Stienstra, D., Watzke, J., & Birch, G. (2007). A three-way dance: The global public good and accessibility in information technologies, *Information Society*, *23*(3), 149 - 158.

Swire, B., Berinsky, A. J., Lewandowsky, S., & Ecker, U. K. H. (2017). Processing political misinformation: comprehending the Trump phenomenon, *Royal Society Open Science*, *43*(1)

Tasnim, S., Hossain, M. M., & Mazumder, H. (2020). *Impact of rumors or misinformation on coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in social media*.

Thorson, E. (2016). Belief echoes: The persistent effects of corrected misinformation, *Political Communication, 33*(3), 460–480. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1102187

Zardo, P. & Collie, A. (2015). Type, frequency and purpose of information used to inform public health policy and program decision-making, *BMC Public Health*, *15*(1), 381-392.