

Why not just lie? Tips on “trust” from (gulp) US political campaigns; aka successful ways to communicate persuasively

Harriett Levin Balkind¹

Abstract

Using traditional and social media, politicians (and it would now seem countries) have become quite adept at bringing audiences around to specific ways of thinking based on falsehoods rather than facts. This paper focuses on the techniques politicians use for persuasion, codified after reviewing 200+ television political ads and online media from US Presidential elections dating from their beginning in 1952 up to 2012 while curating the exhibit “I Approve This Message” with the Toledo Museum of Art. The paper states “persuasion” is not necessarily malicious – to persuade is “to induce someone to do something through reasoning or argument” – and demonstrates that the same methodologies politicians use to distort truth can be used in the service of truth as a way to gain support for any initiative. It demonstrates that rather than use a purely rational approach to achieve your goal, which an abundance of research shows does not work, you will be more successful doing what politicians do – not to lie – but to build in emotional elements as a way to influence your audience.

Keywords

Advertising; Political Advertising; US Presidential Elections; Exhibit I Approve this Message; Toledo Museum of Art; Persuasion; Trust; Ecology of Care; HonestAds; HonestAds.org

Trust is a critical component of care. Is truth also an essential element? Recent elections in the United States and the United Kingdom clearly demonstrate that answer to be “no”. Voters trusted that their candidates would work in their best interests – even when they knew those same politicians were spouting fictions

✉ Harriett Levin Balkind: hbalkind@HonestAds.org

¹ Founder, HonestAds.org, New York, United States

over facts.² This was clear in the political campaigning that won Brexit and in the US presidential surprise where Trump lied with his statements more than 70% of the time, while his opponent Hillary Clinton lied 26%³ of the time. In fact, lying in US elections has become so much a part of political campaigning that an industry of nonpartisan fact-checking organisations has evolved. Voters who disagree with their findings believe that the fact-checkers are lying, too.⁴

So, why not lie and win? Lie to your business associates; lie to your friends; lie to your mate; lie to your kids. Get what you want. You'll find that the same political rules don't apply to business and day-to-day life, unless you want to land in jail or in the doghouse. (In the US there are Truth-in-Advertising Laws for consumer products, but it is perfectly legal to lie in national political campaigns. This is "free speech", a Constitutional first amendment right, as interpreted by the US Supreme Court.)

It's taken many decades for that nasty word "lie" to become accepted nomenclature for a US politician's claims. Manipulation. Persuasion. Fib (smaller than a lie). Out of Context. Misrepresentation. Historically, these have been the polite and useful euphemisms.

This paper focuses on the techniques politicians use for manipulation, using the softer rubric "persuasion" which is not necessarily malicious. According to the Oxford Dictionary, to persuade is to "induce someone to do something through reasoning or argument",⁵ thus, these same political methodologies can be used in the service of truth – to gain support for an important initiative.

Emotion rules

Since Americans know that politicians are not being truthful in their campaigns, why would someone actually vote for a candidate who they know isn't telling them the truth? They would never accept that behavior from a business associate or a romantic partner or a child. A review⁶ of research papers, 60+ books by

² [Trump Voters Don't Care If He Exaggerates, Lies](#), *Washington Examiner*, Paul Bedard, June 7, 2017.

³ [Clinton Fibs vs. Trump's Huge Lies](#), *The New York Times*, Nicolas Kristof; [Trump's Lies vs. Your Brain](#), Politico.com, Maria Konnikova, Jan/Feb, 2017.

⁴ [Dishonest Fact-Checkers: How fact-checkers trivialize lies by politicians and undermine truth-seeking](#), Capital Research Center, Barbara Joanna Lucus, March 10, 2017 [NOTE: the preceding is a Republican group considered right-wing]; [Fact-Checking the Fact-Checkers](#), TheCodex.io, Kevin Wright, January 9, 2017.

⁵ Persuade. (n.d.). In *Oxford online dictionary*.

⁶ *Advances in Political Psychology*, Vol. 38, Suppl. 1, 2017, "[The Nature and Origin of Misperceptions: Understanding False and Unsupported Beliefs About Politics](#)" by Flynn and Nyhan (Dartmouth) and Reifler (U of Exeter); "[Taking Corrections Literally But Not Seriously? The Effects of Information on Factual Beliefs and Candidate Favorability](#)" Nyhan, Reifler, Porter (George Washington University, Wood (Ohio State University) among scores of other research reports. Nobel prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, author of "Thinking, Fast and Slow"; neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, author of "Self Comes to Mind" and "Constructing

neuroscientists, political scientists, cognitive psychologists and biologists, and speaking with academics, fact-checkers and politicians, provided six critical learnings:

1. **Facts don't necessarily change minds**, and even the most educated among us may be the least likely to be moved by facts.
2. **We vote based more on emotions than we do on issues.**
3. **We are predisposed to think certain ways.** Some scientists believe we are predisposed to lean right or left based on certain gene-based attributes, such as the desire to take risks versus being more traditional and safety-oriented. We may also be raised or live in an environment that builds on those attributes – home, school, peer group, religious affiliation.
4. **We feel before we think;** emotions frequently override reason. Neuroscientists tell us that it is not possible to have a purely rational thought. Possibly this evolved as a survival technique allowing us to react quickly in moments of danger.
5. **It is more important to be part of a community than to counter it.** The hypothesis is that this, too, represents survival of the fittest as the thinking is that groups who stick together are more likely to survive. And it is more emotionally satisfying to be part of a group, than to be the smart one who is shunned or discarded.
6. **An experience can open a mind and, maybe, even change it.** An experience can provoke thinking. It can induce curiosity; or a recognition of implications; or pure attrition from waiting for something to improve that never does. A tip of our hat to mothers, who in exasperation for centuries have exclaimed: "Wait until you have your own children!" That is a call for experience. When advertising people reference the importance of telling stories to sell a product or service or idea, they are really talking about creating relevant imaginary experiences to elicit emotions.

The question

Could an experience be designed where the visitor is immersed in emotion and, therefore, motivated to reason more critically? Would people move out of their comfort zone to see things in a new way – through feeling? How ironic if you could move people into an emotional experience that would, then, make them think differently.

the Conscious Brain"; political scientists and authors Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber, "The Rationalizing Voter", among scores of other books.

Experience + emotion = seeing things differently

These questions inspired the museum exhibition “I APPROVE THIS MESSAGE: Decoding Political Ads” conceived by HonestAds and launched just before the national political conventions at the Toledo Museum of Art in the political swing state of Ohio – considered a precursor for presidential elections because of its track record of correctly predicting national elections (only wrong twice since 1988). Designed with creative partners, Thinc Design (exhibit), Jet Design (video), Madhouse (identity and marketing) and the Toledo Museum of Art, the plan is for it to travel across the country. The exhibit primarily focuses on using historical political ads from 1952, when they were first broadcast, up to today. Those ads that most compellingly make emotional arguments are shown. An independent researcher in the political arena was brought in to find out if the “I APPROVE THIS MESSAGE” experience made a difference in changing the way people think. While all the data is not in at this writing, two important findings are: 1) The exhibit provoked thinking among 78% of the visitors; and 2) visitors recognized the power and entertainment attributes of the ads without assuming they were accurate or misleading.

A brief walkthrough of the exhibit

Along with images and captions at the end of this paper, this video walkthrough (<https://vimeo.com/204596831>) provides a much better “sense” of the experience.

As visitors walk into the exhibit, an introductory wall lets them know the content is about the voters and their emotions – Hope, Fear, Anger, Pride – rather than about political candidates or issues. The visitor continues towards Hope and Pride Theaters or Fear and Anger Theaters. At each Theater a panel explains the impact of a particular emotion and why it is relevant within the context of an election; for example: “HOPE. If it’s worth fighting for, you have Hope. Hope is a positive emotion and crucial to a campaign. You feel good about events to come even if you have anxiety about an unknowable future...”. The footage in the individual theater cycles you through ads that make you feel fear; ads that make you feel anger; ads that make you feel pride or hope – the idea being that from 1952 to today (60+ years!), politicians say the same things, talk about the same issues, and use the same types of words and images as well as the same music genres to provoke emotions. On theater walls, panels of 17 ads are broken out frame-by-frame with the narration to the left and the persuasive techniques – utilizing specially created graphic icons – to the right that point out the persuasive techniques at work.

In the center is a mood room that cycles you through the same four emotions using video and a custom soundtrack that demonstrates how, with the appropriate stimuli, you literally cannot stop “feeling” the emotion that is triggered. Interactive experiences with blackboards provide “prompts” for a visitor to write about what they are thinking or feeling.

In the back gallery is a 50-foot timeline,⁷ beginning with the 1920s when radio emerged as the first mass medium. The timeline illustrates how things don’t exist in a vacuum but evolve over time, impacted by: News Events, Advertising and Politics, Laws and Political Spending, and Technology. For example, political ads were first broadcast during 1952 because it was only then that enough Americans had televisions in their living room to make advertising viable. Presidents have always been opportunistic about using the latest technology to make their case: Roosevelt was the first President to use radio; Kennedy, television; Obama, the internet; Trump, Twitter. An interesting aside: During the televised Nixon/Kennedy debates, those who watched on TV thought Kennedy won; those who listened on radio, thought Nixon did.

The Change Theater focuses on cultural shifts and how over time we speak differently to different groups: women’s issues, civil rights, immigration. In the Interactive area, visitors can create their own ads, applying what they’ve learned so that it becomes ingrained in their consciousness.

The persuasive techniques

After watching hundreds of political broadcast and YouTube ads, the most emotional and compelling were selected to compare similarities and differences – the objective being to determine the persuasive techniques that were most frequently used. These resulted in six categories outlined alphabetically below.

1. Association

Association links the candidate to something or someone the viewer emotionally connects with from a past personal experience.

The association may be negative, like putting the opposing candidate in the same image as someone else who has negative connotations; for example, a well-known swindler or some other “scandalous” figure. Or an association may be positive, i.e. images of all the young people who have benefited from a political party’s policies or, common to all parties, Americans gathered together to celebrate the fourth of July.

⁷ 50 feet is just over 15 metres.

Authors and cognitive linguists George Lakoff⁸ (Democrat) and Frank Luntz⁹ (Republican) have written about the impact of words in terms of “framing”. You may feel sympathetic towards an “undocumented worker” but frightened of an “illegal alien” – even though they are the same thing. Republicans hate “Obama Care”, but may feel good about the “Affordable Care Act”, not realizing they refer to the same legislation. You feel differently depending upon the description attributed to that person or thing or the communities who support it, but frequently without understanding the facts behind it.

In politics one key question people ask themselves is: “Does this person care about people like me?” Association helps imply that the candidate does, indeed, care.

2. Confusion | Clarity

Confusion ignores the real concern and replaces, juxtaposes or makes inferences in order to distract from the original concrete issue.

Candidates may confuse you about their own stands or confuse you about those of their opponents. Rather than confuse, clarity builds confidence and assures people. Phrases steeped in indecipherable acronyms or “inside” nomenclature can intimidate. Put yourself in the shoes of the people with whom you are talking. What do they care about? Listen carefully. This isn’t about you. If you want to gain support, it has to be about them, as Nelson Mandela wisely related: “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk with him in his language, that goes to his heart”.

3. Contrast

Contrast uses opposing elements to clarify and drive a point home based on actual or perceived differences.

The contrast can be real or it can be deceptive, for example, taking words or photos out of context or simply comparing non-existent facts. Contrast used honestly is highly effective which is why, for example, when Al Gore talks about the impact of climate change, he doesn’t just refer to how many tons of ice are melting. He shows an image of the before and after. This is because dramatic contrast tells stories; sets a desired mood; quickly cuts through the clutter of unrelated irrelevancies.

⁸ [Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate](#), George Lakoff, September, “The All New”, 2014.

⁹ [Words that Work: It’s Not What People Say, But What People Hear](#), Frank Luntz, *First Edition*, January 2007.

4. Omission | Inclusion

Omission ignores the key parts of a story that weaken the case and may add unrelated information to strengthen it.

Conversely, particularly in today's climate, transparency and responsibility are highly valued. If a mistake is made, own up to it. If something goes wrong, acknowledge it. Avoidance and a lack of information diminishes trust, believability and, ultimately, the confidence of key constituencies.

5. Repetition

Repetition is showing and saying the same thing over and over again so that it becomes "sticky", gaining traction and becoming believable.

Repetition increases impact and aids memorability. Whether fact or fiction, audiences remember the content but not where it originated, so, even when it may be retracted, it is remembered as truth.¹⁰ Marketers have always known: Frequency. Frequency. Frequency. Marketers believe in repetition because it works. This does not mean that everything has to look exactly the same, but it has to "feel" as if it is coming from the same place. Strong brands typically have that attribute – you know the messenger before ever seeing their name. Consistency in word, deed and promise counts.

6. Transformation

Change something to make it seem like something else or, actually, do make it something else.

Transformation uses all the creative tools in the visual and audio arsenal to alter a person, situation, comment or image so that it is changed to seem like something it actually is not. This is used sometimes by candidates, subtly and not-so, and to the outrageous ultimate in political parody ads and in late night comedy shows.

Transformation can also be used to find solutions to problems large and small. Think out-of-the-box. For example, in New York City, without a lavish budget for architecture, our since-acquired agency Frankfurt Balkind took a large school that housed 5,000 students and turned it into five smaller ones using graphics and paint. For a major museum in California, we used the parking lot walls to highlight permanent exhibitions while simultaneously helping visitors to way-find. Post 9/11, when time was of the essence for a major corporation who managed mailrooms, we created posters relating to safety that could be output on

¹⁰ [Repeated exposure to disinformation leads people to believe it even when they know the truth](#), *Business Insider*, Lisa Fazio, December 6, 2016.

letter-size paper and easily distributed internally for their employees and externally for their customers. Communication isn't always just through talking or imagery or argument. You can use your environment in many ways to transform the way people think and feel.

7. Creative execution

Creative execution uses the appropriate tools available – words, imagery, movement, audio – to be a compelling (and even entertaining) presence while making a strong experiential case.

The worth of creative execution is not quantified by its costs, but by its ability to help meet the goals that have been set and the promises made. When it comes to budgets in today's digitally-driven environment, it is possible to do a lot with a little. However, a worthy idea can be lost if it is executed poorly and a poor idea can make a difference if it is well executed. When a statement of concern, effort and care is undoubtedly being made – be sure it is the one you mean to communicate.

In summary

The next time you need to bring people over to your way of thinking, here are two equations:

The first

Logic is, of course, necessary to understanding, but people will not be enthusiastic unless they can relate. Creating experiential communications with emotional impact bridges that gap.

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{Experience} \\ + \\ \text{Emotion} \\ = \\ \text{Seeing things differently} \end{array}$$

The second

Don't fall in love with your words or your communication. Over time, there is inevitably a need to re-ideate, refresh, rethink and re-message.

Maintain
the best of what you've got

Subtract
the least of it

Add
what you're missing

Remember ... emotions rule. Emotions are critical to trust. And trust is the embodiment of Care.



The following figures (Figures 1–4) present images from the “I APPROVE THIS MESSAGE: Decoding Political Ads” exhibit.

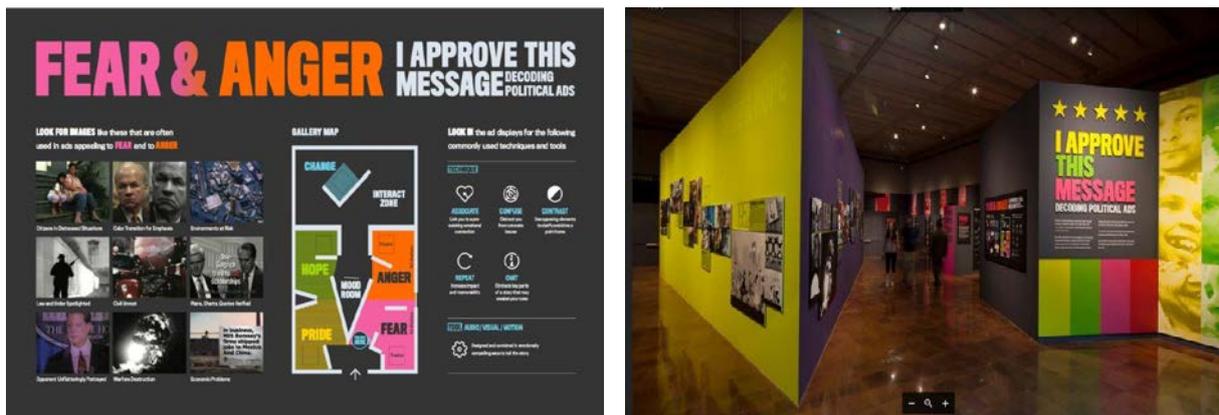


Figure 1. Group 1 (left to right).

Orientation panels set-up the logistics and theme quickly, and images demonstrate the nonpartisan nature of the exhibit while introducing visitors to the “persuasive techniques” icons. Shown here is Fear & Anger; the adjacent entry sign showcases Pride & Hope.

The exhibit is about all of us; thus, an introduction wall shows faces of our fellow citizens as we enter the space and are immersed in an experience that showcases the four key emotions that impact our vote: Anger, Fear, Hope, Pride.



Figure 2. Group 2 (left to right).

The Mood Room entrance introduces viewers to the idea that they can’t control their own emotions.

Visitors are free to roam; make choices; interact as little or as much as they want. The “V” wall divides the positive emotions, Pride & Hope, from the negative emotions, Fear & Anger, and provides historical background on classics of political advertising.



Figure 3. Group 3 (left to right).

In the Mood Room, hot button video imagery on screens 9 feet tall¹⁹ and an original soundtrack cycles the viewer through their emotions. Even an expected image continues to elicit pride.

The emotion-themed theaters – Fear, Anger, Hope, Pride – show 6 to 8 minutes of ad loops curated for emotional impact and dating from the first 1952 political ad broadcast to today. Viewers feel each specific emotion for themselves. Seventeen-foot panels²⁰ break down ads with frame-by-frame imagery. Icons call out persuasive techniques. A panel provides historical context.

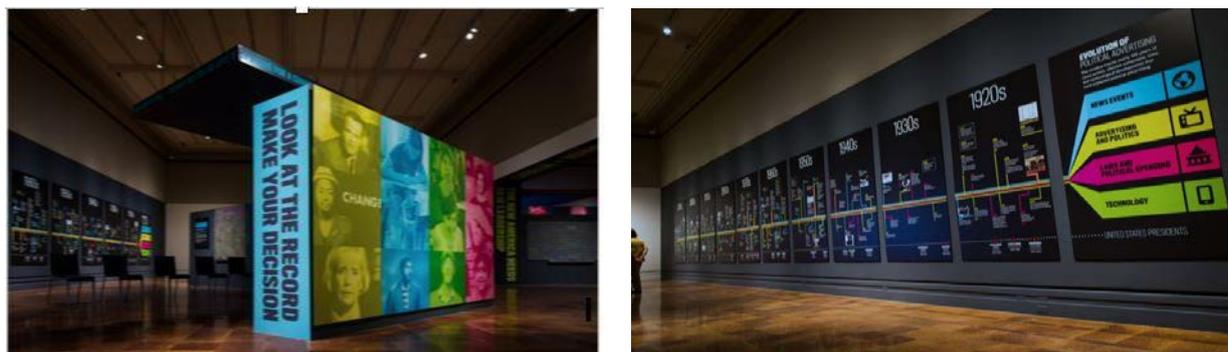


Figure 4. Group 4 (left to right).

The Change Theater shows historical ads on a video loop that demonstrate how we speak differently about cultural issues over time.

A timeline shows evolutionary forces since the beginning of mass media (radio, 1920s) up to 2016.

¹⁹ 9 feet is almost 3 metres.

²⁰ 17 feet is just over 5 metres.

About the author

Harriett has spent a career carving out critical meaning, decoding and creating messaging in ways audiences can relate to and understand. Starting her branding career in San Francisco at strategic consultants Landor Associates, she became a partner and principal of one of the first integrated communications agencies, award-winning Frankfurt Balkind, headquartered in New York with offices in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Following Frankfurt Balkind's acquisition, Harriett pursued a personal passion and founded nonprofit [HonestAds.org](https://www.honestads.org), focused on bringing people into-the-know about political advertising and messaging by working together with organizations who care about political literacy. She and HonestAds have been featured in political, advertising, art and news media as well as in the New York Museum of Modern Art's experimental online "Design and Violence" exhibit and book of the same name.