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The Truth-Default and Video Clips: Testing the Limits of Credulity

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ABSTRACT

Truth-default theory posits that absent a trigger, people passively accept communication content as truthful and honest. Most often, the idea that some communication might be deceptive does not come to mind. The current research exposed participants to one of six video clips that varied in credibility and credulity. The clips included educational lectures, political speeches, an investigative news report, and an over-the-top satirical investigative news report. Participants completed a thought-listing task about the video they watched. Automated word searches for deception-relevant terms were used to assess the frequency of expressions of skepticism and attributions of deception. Consistent with strong truth-default predictions, except for the satirical video, little evidence of incredulity was observed. The results suggest that the truth-default holds for a variety of online video content, but also that it has its limits. Extreme implausibility most often, but not always, overcomes the truth-default.

Levine (2020) recently introduced the mystery of deception detection accuracy in experiments that are and are not about deception. He noted a wide empirical discrepancy in findings between two experimental literatures. One literature suggests that deception detection accuracy is slightly above chance; the other suggests that accuracy is close to zero. Levine opined that viable theories of deceptive communication must account for and explain why these different sets of experiments lead to very different conclusions about how human receivers process truthful and deceptive messages.

Typical deception detection experiments produce extraordinarily consistent results (Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Levine, 2020; Levine et al., 2020). Deception detection research finds that humans are significantly ($d = .4$, $p < .00001$) better than fifty-fifty at telling truth from lie (Bond & DePaulo, 2006). The across-study average is 54% correct truth-lie discrimination with a standard deviation of 6%. Findings from primary studies are normally distributed around the 54% average (Bond & DePaulo, 2006). Further, discrepancies from a narrow bandwidth around the average appear to be mostly a function of random error. Larger studies reliably produce results close to the average while outlying findings come exclusively from experiments involving fewer observations (Bond & DePaulo, 2006). Remarkably, the consistency of findings extends down to the level of the individual research participant. Given a sufficient number of judgments per message receiver, the distribution of accuracy scores for individual research participants mirrors the distribution of study-

level results (Masip et al., 2020). These conclusions appear astonishingly robust within the confines of the literature on deception detection.

Yet, there is a second even larger experimental literature that produces robust and reproducible findings that appear, on their face, to provide strong empirical disconfirmation of the slightly-better-than-chance deception detection accuracy conclusion. Levine (2020) notes that there is a great deal of social science research that involves deception, but is not about deception. Of particular relevance to the current argument is research that involves "research confederates." Research confederates are members of research teams who, unbeknownst to real research participants, are playing the role of another research participant. They are not who they say they are or whom they appear to be. They are imposters. They engage in identity deception, and they do so with remarkable effectiveness.

If humans really were 54% accurate at detecting deception, and if the 54% finding was indeed robust, then research participants would fall victim to research confederates about 46% of the time. Slightly more often than not, the confederate's false personas would be detected. But, of course, this is not at all what happens. In actual experiments, few if any research participants doubt that research confederates are anything other than another research participant. Deception detection accuracy approaches zero when the deception is perpetrated by a confederate in an experiment involving deception but is not about deception detection.

Asch's (1956) famous conformity experiments provide an instructive example. Research participants were placed in a group where everyone else was a confederate. Everyone made assessments of non-ambiguous stimuli. The confederates repeatedly made objectively false claims. Yet, not only did research participants believe that the confederates were other participants, they did not even infer that their objectively false statements were lies. These findings clash with 54% accuracy. These two robust sets of findings are nine standard deviations apart. What gives?

The TDT Answer

Truth-Default Theory (TDT, Levine, 2014, 2020) offers an explanation that reconciles the discrepancy between accuracy in deception detection experiments and accuracy for deception in experiments using confederates. According to the TDT account, the 54% accuracy finding is not as robust as it appears. The findings only appear robust because of the experiments producing 54% share three common design features that together shape the results in predictable and understandable ways. First, deception detection experiments require participants to make a truth-lie assessment as part of the experiment. In the language of TDT, deception detection experiments explicitly trigger conscious assessments of honesty. Truth-lie assessments are overtly prompted by the research method ensuring that the question of deception comes to mind. Second, in deception detection experiments, there is a 50–50 probability that any given message will be honest or a lie. That is, truth and deception are equally probable. Third, participant judgments are made in near real-time based on observable communication behaviors and appearance precluding the ways lies are most typically detected outside the lab (Park et al., 2002). For example, lie detections based on evidence or confessions are precluded. This guarantees a high error rate and pushes accuracy down toward chance (Levine, 2020).

In contrast, in research using research confederates and other deceptive practices, researchers do not ask about deception until the debriefing. Researchers do not actively prompt or trigger a truth-lie assessment. Therefore defaulting to the truth is possible. Second, the deceptive features (i.e., confederates' fictitious identities) are constant within the research designs. This means that there is a 100% deception rate. Third, as with deception detection experiments, participant judgments are made in near real-time based on observable communication behaviors and appearance. Neither method allows for fact-checking and/or prompting honest confessions which are more diagnostic approaches to deception detection than people use outside the lab (Levine, 2020; Park et al., 2002).

In the TDT account, absent a prompt or trigger, people will be in a cognitive truth-default state in which they passively accept incoming messages. When the truth-default is governing message processing, accuracy is purely a function of the veracity of the incoming message. The "veracity effect" (Levine et al., 1999) becomes completely determinative of the outcome. Incoming honest messages are correctly believed. Incoming deceptive messages are incorrectly believed. Because the confederates are always confederates, accuracy is near zero.

The mystery is thus solved. Accuracy is near zero in research employing deception but not studying deception because participants are not prompted to make honesty evaluations and therefore are defaulting to the truth in a 100% deception environment. Accuracy is 54% in deception detection experiments because participants are prompted to make veracity judgments but more diagnostic approaches to lie detection are disallowed precluding accuracy much above the 50–50 guess rate.

The current experiment tests the limits of the truth-default in video content found online. Few studies of the truth-default exist because truth-default theory is relatively new and because almost all deception detection experiments preclude a truth-default state by explicitly prompting assessment of honesty. Once asked if something is honest or deceptive, questions of honesty are called to mind. But, we might wonder, what if people were not directly asked to evaluate honesty? Would thoughts about the possibility of deception even come to mind? TDT says no. Much like research participants interacting with a confederate, the question of deception simply does not come to mind. But how about content that might invite skepticism like political speeches or news reports on a deception-related topic such as public corruption? Might certain online video content trigger suspicion?

Defaulting to the Truth

The core idea of truth-default theory is the truth-default. The truth-default is a passive belief state in which communication is accepted and where questions of veracity and deception simply do not come to mind. According to truth-default theory, people uncritically believe what others say unless they have an explicit reason not to.

Suspicion, skepticism, and attributions of deception require a trigger. There are various types of triggers. External information from third parties can prompt scrutiny. Other categories of triggers include the appearance of motives for deception, known factual inaccuracies, logical contradictions, a dishonest demeanor, and implausible content (see Levine, 2020).

More precisely, TDT specifies a series of two triggers (Levine, 2020). The first trigger is required to kick a person out of their truth-default. For example, in the Asch (1956)

experiments, when the confederates provide incorrect answers, participants become aware of the incongruity between their own and the confederates' assessments. This seems odd to them and they consciously wonder what is going on. Suspicion, or at least curiosity, is prompted. Message processing shifts from the passive acceptance of the truth-default to active questioning of veracity.

A second trigger shifts the cognitive state from suspicion and skepticism to a state of active disbelief and attribution of deceptive content and/or intent. The first trigger is the more sensitive of the two allowing for abandoning the truth-default without the attribution of deception. In the Asch (1956) example, virtually all of the participants were aware of the discrepancies but few participants made the inference that the mismatch stemmed from the confederates knowingly and intentionally making false statements.

Directly testing the truth-default, Clare and Levine (2019) reported two experiments exposing participants to plausible and implausible truths and lies. Both experiments involved an interview with a confederate, one was videotaped, the other involved live face-to-face interaction. Using a thought-listing procedure, it was found that absent instruction to consider honesty-deception, few veracity-relevant thoughts were listed. Within all conditions and across both experiments, absent prompting, veracity-relevant thoughts were listed less than 10% of the time. Although veracity-relevant thoughts were infrequent across conditions, they were relatively more likely when the communication was mediated (on video) than face-to-face and more likely when the content was implausible than plausible. For instance, veracity was explicitly mentioned 8.9% of the time for video-taped implausible lies but never mentioned for face-to-face plausible lies. These findings suggest that the truth-default is generally robust and although plausibility and media make a statistically discernable difference, they are not sufficient to overcome the truth-default for most individuals. The outer limits of the truth-default remain undocumented.

Predictions

TDT predicts that thoughts related to deception do not come to mind unless actively triggered. Participants in the current experiment were assigned to watch one of six videos varying in credibility (actual factual merit) and credulity (surface appearance of credibility). While viewing, participants were asked to list their thoughts as they came to mind. Following from TDT, the general hypotheses are that *mentions of deception-related thoughts will be infrequent* (H1) *and confined to instances where suspicion might be triggered* (H2). Further, *content relevant to credulity rather than actual credibility will trigger deception-related thoughts to the extent that they occur at all* (H3). Our main research question involves the sensitivity of triggers. *How "in-your-face" do the red flags need to be before issues of veracity and deception become commonplace* (RQ1)?

One video, a TED Talk on the topic of nonverbal communication, was predicted to be especially unlikely to prompt deception-linked thoughts. The video was an excerpt from Harvard Professor Amy Cuddy's talk on "power poses." The content was of questionable credibility because the research she discussed had failed to replicate and the lead author no longer stands behind the findings. But, unless a viewer had followed the controversy which is unlikely given the current participants, there was little within the video (other than a priori plausibility of the claims which is debatable) to prompt skepticism.

A second video was an excerpt from The Great Courses by well-known astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. This video was also expected to generate little skepticism except that it contained commentary on aliens which some people might find implausible or at least unexpected.

A third video was a local news investigative report on corruption in the West Virginia Supreme Court. With the advent of fake news and increased attacks on the media, it is possible that news reports may not be seen as fully credible by all viewers. Further, because the content of the story was about corruption, it might trigger thoughts of deception. The targets of the investigation were interviewed and deflected blame onto others and each other. Thus, there were apparent motives for deception and contradictory statements.

The fourth and fifth videos were political speeches or rallies by either former President Obama or current President (at the time of the data collection) Trump. Videos from both major American political parties were included to increase the chances that participants would encounter preferred or opposed political views. Some might expect oratory by other-party politicians to prompt skepticism. Further, fact-checking consistently reveals a plethora of false and misleading statements at Trump rallies (e.g., see Rizzo, 2020). Thus, it is conceivable that merely observing a politician speaking is a sufficient trigger, especially if the politician is from an opposed political party or if the politician has a substantial track record of prolific lying in a particular venue.

The final tape was a lampoon investigative report from *The Onion*. It contained a vast number of over-the-top triggers. Viewers may know of *The Onion*, a satirical publication. A framed front-page headline "Black Guy Asks Nation For Change" with a picture of then-president Obama was visible in the background for the duration. The video clip started with the claim that *The Onion* has been the most trusted name in journalism for 250 years. It is explained that *The Onion* was the first to report on the sinking of the USS Maine which their reporters had rigged to explode. The satirical report claims to release hundreds of pages of classified documents from the Trump administration vigorously authenticated by migrant laborers in their basement. Revelations included Vice President Pence's impure thoughts about the Morton Salt girl. In short, the content was absolutely ludicrous. *The Onion* tape was included to test the extreme limits of the truth-default.

Method

The participants were (initially N = 199, N = 163 final sample) undergraduate students from a large Southwestern university in the United States who independently started an online survey with an embedded video clip. The sample was 71.4% female and ranged in age from 18 to 59 years (median and mode = 21). Ethnically, the sample was predominantly (73.4%) non-Hispanic whites (17.6% Hispanic). Politically, the sample self-identified as 52.8% conservative, 19.6% moderate, 10.1% liberal, and 9.5% libertarian. The listed categories accounted for more than 90% of the sample.

Technology failure in the form of the tape not playing resulted in the loss of 4 participants. An additional 32 participants (16%) failed to provide thought-listing data, resulting in a final sample of 163. In total, twenty-five to twenty-nine participants viewed and commented on each video depending on the technology failures and no-responses for a particular video.

Demographic questions were asked first. Then instructions were presented. Participants were instructed as follows:

> For your next question, you will be watching a short 10-minute video. While watching the video, we would like you to type down what you are thinking. It can be anything that comes to mind. Please list as many thoughts as you can in enough detail that the researchers can get a basic idea of what you were thinking. There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to know what you are thinking when watching the video.

Following the instructions, participants were randomly assigned to view one of the six videos listed in Appendix A. All were edited to be approximately ten minutes in duration, starting at the beginning and running to a coherent stop point. The video with a start button appeared on screen with a text box below. The typed responses were automatically saved to a data file.

The main outcome variable was deception-relevant thoughts. The data were searched with software (MS Word search function) for words related to suspicion or deception such as: lie, lying, liar, deceit, deception, fake, suspicious, false, and untrue. Further, two authors independently read each response looking for words and expressions signaling questioning of veracity, suspicion, or attributions of deception. Automated searches were supplemented with a qualitative examination by the lead author. Formal qualitative coding was avoided because of ambiguity in the data. Such ambiguities are noted in the results.

Results

The Cuddy TED Talk yielded 29 sets of comments. No deception or suspicion-related words occurred. Qualitative inspection of the data suggested that most participants found the talk educational and agreed on the importance of nonverbal communication. No participant explicitly expressed doubt regarding the main claim of the talk. One participant expressed disagreement with the specific claim that people compliment others' body language: "we do the opposite? I do not always find that true. Sometimes I feel like I need to 'one up' them and do a more powerful pose." However, later within the same comment the participant explicitly states, "Yes, power poses work!" A second participant questioned, "what does posture have to do with how my life unfolds[?]." Taken in isolation, this comment seemed to question the point of the video. However, later the same participant wrote "What she is saying makes a lot of sense." Overall, 0.0% ascribed deception to the content, one participant (3.5%) questioned one specific sub-claim, and a second participant (3.5%) may have expressed momentary suspicion.

Twenty-six participants commented on the universe lecture. No deception or suspicion-related words were identified with the automated search. One participant wrote, "Neil Degrasse [sic] Tyson doesn't know what he is talking about." It was unclear if this was meant seriously or not. A second asked "Where is he getting this information? So aliens . . . . physics . . . . engineers, whats [sic] he on about? So this pioneer anomaly relates to airships?" possibly suggesting skepticism. Other participants commented that the information was opinion rather than fact. One participant wrote, "Many terms I am not aware of. Not able to follow his ideas and thoughts very well. Very much of what he says seem to be opinion driven." Another participant wrote "what.strange arm movements … not actual knowledge." Several participants commented on the mentioning of aliens (e.g., "I was not

expecting to hear about aliens after all the talk about physics" and "I don't understand how aliens are relevant. I do think aliens are real"). Most participants expressed either favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward the topic (e.g., "very interesting," "I like space," "very boring," "I don't like science or physics"). Overall, while 0.0% ascribed deception to the content, 15.4% (4 of 26) could be considered as possibly expressing skepticism depending on how they were interpreted.

Twenty-seven sets of comments were available from participants who viewed the West Virginia investigative news report. The words lying, liar, and suspicion occurred once each in three different responses (11.1%). All three instances expressed thoughts about the people under investigation rather than the credibility of the reporting. Participants' comments included: "I would say that about half of these people are *lying*," "This is just a blame game. This judge is a *liar*, right? I don't like him," and "*Suspicion* of the government/how tax money is being spent." One additional participant explicitly stated, "They don't seem credible … It pisses me off and it irritates me to know that I am paying into a system that allows other people to spend MY money, MY hard earned money, on bullshit like couches and social security for many people who may not earn it." Another participant wrote about the public officials "everyone needs to own up and just tell the truth." Virtually all of the participants explicitly expressed indignation at the waste of tax payer money suggesting that the news story was believed. For example, the participant thinking the judge was a liar went on to write, "YO HOLD UP, 28,000 USD ON RUGS? HOW CAN YOU JUSTIFY THAT? ARTHRITIS IN YOUR FEET? Girl you are crazy, you can geld [sic] good quality rugs for WAY less than that, that is just unnecessary and excessive. The least expensive renovation was still over 100,000 USD? I'm glad I'm not from West Virginia, I would be pisssssed." Two participants did express initial skepticism about the report. One asked, "Is this fake news? Is this guy even a judge?" and a second wrote, "Eyewitness = more likely to be true???, What makes these people qualified to report? Where did this information come from?" Yet, it is clear from the comments of these two participants that as the report progressed, both participants believed the allegations of corruption and expressed indignation at the judges and officials involved. Thus, 2 of 27 (7.4%) initially expressed skepticism of the reporting, but the skepticism faded by the end of the segment. Two participants (7.4%) made explicit allegations of lying and an additional three participants (11.1%) expressed suspicion of the officials who were the target of the investigation. In all, 25.9% of the responses indicated some deception or suspicion related comment.

Of the 27 participants viewing the Obama speech, 12 (44.4%) self-identified as politically conservative and 3 (11.1%) self-identified as politically liberal. Three of the 27 (11.1%) provided commentary that could be considered skeptical. The clearest statement of skepticism was "I also don't belief in a lot of the things he says." The same participant added "I don't believe in his values, so I found it hard to watch him for 10 minutes" and "he makes fair political points though." Thus, the comments seem to reflect an honest difference of opinion rather than attributions of deception. A second participant wrote "I thought obama was from Hawaii," in reference to Illinois being his home state. A third participant wrote "wait this is from cnn- careful might be "fake." It was unclear if this was serious or not. Thus, at most 11.1% expressed skepticism, but depending on how the comments are interpreted, it might be less than that. No comments explicitly alleged lying or deception.

Twenty-five participants listed their thoughts in response to the Trump rally. Three of these participants self-identified as liberal. The word search identified 10 mentions of "fake

news." Eight of those ten merely commented that Trump called the media filming the rally fake news. One participant, however, commented, "Its not all fake news." Another wrote "calling them fake news is silly and immature." Other indications of skepticism include one participant who wrote "Trump talking nonsense like usual. He just is talking to make himself relevant and doesn't care about his people," and a second, noting signs waved by some in the audience "Is Trump really for women?" A third participant noted that Trump's diction "is used to woo instead of be transparent." In all, at most 5 of 25 (20%) expressed comments that could be construed as skepticism. No explicit assertions of lying or deception were observed, but one participant expressed the view that Trump exaggerated a claim.

Across the first five videos, two participants (1.5%) made unambiguous attributions of lying. Both of these instances were in references to targets of the investigative report, and not to the investigative reporting. Beyond these, there was one explicit attribution of exaggeration (0.7%), seven unambiguous expressions of suspicion (5.2%), and an additional eleven comments (8.2%) that might be construed as suspicion depending on how they were interpreted. Thus, somewhere between 7.5% and 15.7% of the participants provided comments that, depending on how they were interpreted, showed at least fleeting suspicion if not outright attribution of deception.

The comments (N = 29) on the final video (satirical news report by *The Onion*) were considerably different from the responses to the other five videos. At least 8 (27.5%) participants correctly and confidently labeled the content as satire, parody, or humor. Most of those commented on prior familiarity with *The Onion*. At least four (13.8%) participants appeared to accept the content at face value. For example, one participant wrote "The Onion definitely sounds like a newspaper I would love to read. It seems very successful and only growing in popularity." A second participant commented: "speaks with enthusiasm, uses gestures, eye contact, annunciates, has clear points, supporting evidence, has visualizations." A third wrote: "You shouldn't look into what he is hiding anymore, that's been going on for 4 years, and nothing has been found and his presidency is almost over." The fourth wrote: "History Channel, Statistics, Informative."

Most participants expressed confusion or disorientation. At some point, they suspected that it was fake or a joke, but their comments often oscillated between belief and doubt. Three examples are presented here to convey the nature of the comments.

Participant 88:

I've never heard of the onion. Its weird that migrant labor workers are going through the documents. Okay this isn't real. Fear of lighthouses and morton salt girl?? If this was real it would probably be dangerous to make all this information public. I am interested in seeing pages of the presidents doodles. If I was the president that's how I would want my daily brief. That customizable executive order seems pretty accurate. Yawning and not making eye contact is pretty rude, I'll give him that. Interesting craigslist ad. The void seems like a good time. Who knew the government was so supernatural. Does steve bannon really eat out of a trough?

Participant 80:

This sounds fake and the name sounds. I am really confused and do not think that this is real. Why is it talking about an onion? What is the news? The Press of some source? The onion is a newspaper company, this makes more sense now. These actions seem unlawful. The background framed picture seems racist. So maybe this newspaper is a joke? This video seems like it is suppose to be funny, but I do not understand. It seems to be official in some ways but also has some humor in it. It talks about leaking things, but they are not all serious. It talks about

keeping thier sources. It is making fun of President Trump as being a child in the daily brief. It makes fun of how he is racist and how he has a template of what he uses and makes it easy for him to do his job. Ive seen many videos like this and I think this one isnt very good, it is rude but creative. I dont like how harsh it is towards trump. We all know he acts childish when he doesnt get what he wants. It is trying to make the Trump Administration seem stupid and out of control. It is all very above and beyond and not really realistic so thats why I would describe it as a stupid video. I did not like the ending, I was really confused and it did not have a proper ending, it was really abrupt. This was a video that to me, seemed to attempt to make fun of trump and his administration in all ways. It attempted to make fun of the behind the scenes aspects. It was not vulgar, but very silly and exaggerated. Overall I did not like this video at all, it was boring and confusing because I thought she was trying to be seerious.

Participant 61:

I want to do more research on the onion, and I want to see these exclusive leaks. I am a little confused, there's someone releasing information about the white house? The President's daily brief looks like a child's coloring page, I'm confused if this is actually real. This has to be a joke, right? I feel like they're making fun of Trump because they are making it seem like everything he comes up with, has been handed to him in the easiest way. A lot of the information given in this video seems like it could potentially be real by the use of words the woman uses, but now I feel like it's just parody news. This reminds me of Saturday Night Live in a way.

In summing up the results in relation to the predictions, the first hypothesis anticipated that mentions of deception-related thoughts will be infrequent. This was the case. With the exception of *The Onion* video, fewer than 20% of the participants viewing the other five videos expressed any skepticism or suspicion. Explicit mentions of lying were even less frequent and occurred only in response to the officials denying corruption in the face of evidence to the contrary.

The second hypothesis further specified that mentions of deception-related thoughts would be confined to instances where suspicion might be triggered. This appeared to be so for the majority of cases.

The third hypothesis predicted that content relevant to credulity rather than actual credibility will trigger deception-related thoughts to the extent that they occur at all. This seemed to be the case as well. In particular, the unanimous acceptance of the content of the Cuddy TED Talk is consistent with hypothesis three.

Finally, our main research question regarded the sensitivity of triggers. We asked, how "in-your-face" do the red flags need to be before issues of veracity and deception become commonplace? The data suggest that the truth-default is robust, and triggers must be quite obvious before skepticism is triggered in a majority of participants. Some participants even seem to miss multiple strong indications of untrue media content.

Discussion

The current research examined the extent to which participants viewing various online media content varying both in veracity and in suspicion-provoking content defaulted to the truth. Consistent with truth-default theory (TDT, Levine, 2014, 2020), little evidence of suspicion was expected except in cases where indications of false or misleading content were hard to miss. Overall, the data aligned with the predictions.

Although TDT specifies that widespread defaulting to the truth is expected, people sometimes become suspicious. Even if suspicion is triggered, however, messages may not be identified as deceptive. Specifically, TDT specifies two types of triggers that vary in sensitivity. A first trigger

prompts suspicion. The veracity of communication is questioned. Suspicion, however, is not sufficient for attributions of deception. A second threshold must be passed to move from active questioning of veracity to the belief that a message is deceptive. Thus, defaulting to the truth is cognitive business as usual. If something in the environment triggers skepticism, the possibility that message content might be false or misleading enters consciousness. If reasons are sufficiently powerful, a second trigger leads to the belief that the message was deceptive. Otherwise, content is accepted and believed.

It follows from the series of trigger thresholds that most thoughts in response to messages will have nothing to do with deception and the idea that content might be false or misleading simply does not come to mind. Less frequently and only when prompted, is veracity consciously questioned. People become uncertain about the veracity of communication content. Even less frequent still are attributions of deception because people need additional reasons to move from suspicion to the belief that the message is false, misleading, or deceptive. This was the pattern observed in the current data.

Perhaps the two most informative conditions in the current experiment were the most and the least often believed. Amy Cuddy's TED Talk on power poses generated little suspicion even though the research discussed is at best controversial. To the extent that the main claims made in that video were false or misleading, comments suggest that 100% of the participants were duped. Even though the main claim might be viewed as implausible, there were few if any triggers other than implausibility. To be suspicious, a person would probably have to know about the replication crisis in psychology and make the link between that and the claims made in the video. The engaging nature of the presentation and topic makes the triggering of suspicion unlikely. People may further assume that TED Talks are vetted for accuracy. The net result is a strong truth-default. Any misleading claims were passively accepted and functionally deceptive.

By far, the least believable content was *The Onion*'s satirical investigation of Trump. Yet, it was only the participants who previously knew about *The Onion* who quickly identified it as a parody and over-the-top false. There was plenty of absurd content to trigger skepticism. Consequently, a majority of participants expressed skepticism. Yet, they seemed reluctant to label it fake news. Comments often oscillated between belief and doubt. The first trigger was pulled, but even the extreme farcicality of the content seemed insufficient to confidently pass the second threshold. Astonishingly, a few participants appeared to accept its content at face value apparently missing the numerous red flags.

Many readers may find the conditions involving political content especially interesting. One might think that all political content might be subject to skepticism. After all, don't all politicians lie? Might the simple act of knowing that a politician is a politician be sufficient to trigger suspicion? Polling over the past decade has shown that between 44% and 57% of Americans express distrust in politicians when asked (Gallup Poll Results, 2018). Or, perhaps, people particularly distrust politicians from the opposing political party. The current results provide little evidence of either. If we had explicitly asked participants about trust, prompting them to think about it, the answers might have been different. But absent such an explicit prompt, no participant, regardless of own political affiliation labeled any of the statements an outright lie, although one participant thought that Trump was exaggerating in one instance. Occurrences of explicitly expressed suspicion were surprisingly infrequent occurring in less than 16% of the commentaries.

The current findings have additional implications specifically for youth. Bowyer et al. (2017) noted that young people are highly exposed to political content via online videos.

They maintained that YouTube was the main platform for this type of content. The authors observed that "because politically oriented content circulated through these channels often bypass the traditional gatekeepers of political news and circulates largely due to its entertainment value, individuals are increasingly likely to be inadvertently exposed to political news" (p. 534). They observed that even when young people are exposed to political content, they often are not able to comprehend the messages effectively. Our current findings further suggest that dubious political content may be accepted uncritically.

This research and Clare and Levine (2019) provide a method for researchers interested in investigating the truth-default. The problem TDT presents for researchers is how to study suspicion, distrust, and judgments of deception without asking about them directly thereby triggering thoughts that might not have otherwise occurred. The thought-listing approach, while imperfect, provides a useful research strategy for future research.

As with all studies, there are limitations with the current research. The sample was demographically limited and the majority of the sample was Caucasian female college students from the Southwestern United States. This was a convenience sample and certainly not representative of any clearly defined population. This limitation may have been compounded by the university setting which may have enhanced the credibility of materials, reduced skepticism that might be present in a non-educational setting, and (perhaps ironically) reduced critical thinking.

Second, the selected videos were not representative of the population of online video content. Thus, the current research design does not permit generalizations beyond the current participants and current stimulus materials. Further, the videos varied in ways too numerous to mention, and thus direct comparisons from video to video would be hopelessly confounded. Nevertheless, as a test of theory-based predictions, the current data are informative. That is, the value of the current findings is in testing the limits of a generalization rather than making generalizations or testing the difference between experimental conditions. This being said, as always, replication is required before confidence in the results is justified.

The third category of limitations involves the coding of the data. Although automated word searches ensure accuracy and make inter-coder reliability unnecessary, the searches were only as good as the search terms employed. While the search terms were supplemented with the human examination of the data, it is possible that relevant search terms might have been omitted. If this was the case, however, the impact on the findings is likely minimal because the current procedures were more likely to miss an idiosyncratic case than a widely used term or phrase. More problematic was the unresolvable ambiguity in the data. In many instances, multiple interpretations of what was meant were possible. Rather than having multiple coders try to make firm and reliable determinations of ambiguous statements, the current approach was to note that various interpretations were possible and acknowledge how the ambiguity altered the findings.

In summary, this article further examined the truth-default theory with a variety of online content. The results were broadly consistent with the theoretical predictions. The findings offer further evidence that people often default to the truth when encountering communication content, that suspicion requires a trigger, and that triggers are less sensitive than people might expect. Even when suspicion is triggered, few participants made explicit attributions of deception. Further, even extreme implausibility failed to universally trigger recognition of obviously fictitious content. The truth-default appears remarkably robust, but it does have limits.

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Disclosure Statement

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Appendix A. Video list

(1) The Inexplicable Universe with Neil deGrasse Tyson, Inexplicable Space, The Great Courses
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI-KEvdbmI4
(2) Your body language shapes who you are – Amy Cuddy
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWZluriQUzE
(3) Watch Live: Trump hosts "MAGA" rally in Ohio
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zVfLHOSUKQ
(4) Former President Obama unleashes on Trump, GOP – Full speech from Illinois
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHAkDTlv8fA&t=631s
(5) "The Onion" Has Obtained Hundreds Of Classified Documents From The Trump White House (Onion video)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvaVKq7jMAs
(6) AP – Best Investigative Reporting – Supreme Court Spending Uncovered (WCHS-TV reporter Kennie Bass)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiz7Rl05IVQ&t=292s