

Misperceptions as Political Conflict: Using Schattschneider’s Conflict Theory to Understand Rumor Dynamics

JILL A. EDY
ERIN E. RISLEY-BAIRD
University of Oklahoma, USA

Publicly confronting political misperceptions enacts political conflict, generating communicative forms of public resistance as well as psychological resistance. Applying Schattschneider’s classic model of interest group political conflict to communication by those who publicly resisted messages debunking the misperception that vaccinations can cause autism offers insight into how misperceptions evolve and survive in public discourse. It also extends the model, establishing its relevance for contemporary forms of political conflict. Faced with debunking, believers socialize conflict, inviting audiences to join the struggle on their side, and alter the debate’s terms such that discussion escapes control by authorities. The resulting political debate is a moving target with changing standards of evidence. Consequently, confronting political misperceptions may generate activism that encourages misperceptions to evolve and spread.

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The language used to talk about false beliefs indicates the aspect of the phenomenon to which attention is drawn. The term *misperception* emphasizes the psychological characteristics of belief in the untruth, such as motivated reasoning. Political psychologists and political communication scholars alike ask what sorts of messages might correct false beliefs and how such messages are processed by receivers. Misperception believers are conceptualized much as voters or audiences are—as consumers of messages.

Although the essential difference between a misperception and a rumor is that rumors are sometimes true while misperceptions are always false,¹ the language of *rumors* is largely lost in

Jill A. Edy: jedy@ou.edu
Erin E. Risley-Baird: ebaird@ou.edu
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¹ Rumor is defined as a “proposition or belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being presented” (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. ix), which is also true of misperceptions. However, political misperceptions are typically defined as belief in a

contemporary research on misperceptions. Rumor research has historically emphasized the social and communicative nature of belief. People subscribing to a false belief are not only receivers of messages but producers. In Allport and Postman's (1947) classic formulation of the rumoring process, people both receive and transmit rumors. Such a conceptualization offers important advantages in the contemporary media environment where people are no longer merely members of a mass audience but "prosumers" of personalized media. When people encounter messages debunking a false belief, they may not only process the message; they may generate messages of their own, and an online communication environment can offer them a consequential audience for those messages. As Aupers (2012) points out, "the Internet does provide citizens with a platform to (inter)actively deconstruct official versions of the 'truth', to consume alternative accounts and to produce their own theories" (p. 27). Under such circumstances, false beliefs evolve through social dialogue rather than merely exist as elements within a psychological pattern of belief to be sustained or eliminated.

Many scholars have observed that false beliefs are resilient to the extent they dovetail with the holder's existing beliefs about the social world. As Sunstein (2009) observed, rumors that align with people's fears or their hopes are more likely to be believed. People tend to disbelieve negative rumors about those they like and believe negative rumors about those they do not like, as much research on the partisan character of misperceptions has demonstrated. Typically, misperception scholars have treated both the character of the misperception and the existing belief structure as fixed, suggesting susceptibility to belief in a particular misperception is determined by the characteristics of the misperception and the belief structure of the person. For instance, liberals are susceptible to believing Sarah Palin said she can see Russia from her house; conservatives are more likely to believe Barack Obama was born in Kenya. Considering misperceptions from a rumoring perspective, however, emphasizes the dynamism of communicated untruths (e.g., Allport & Postman, 1947) and thus illuminates the persuasive qualities of rumor communication. How a rumor is pitched could have implications for its acceptance. Unflattering misperceptions about Sarah Palin could appeal to liberals, misogynists, or both, depending upon whether a rumor communicator emphasizes her ideology or her gender in sharing the rumor.

If false beliefs evolve dynamically in social spaces, with believers and debunkers working against one another to persuade audiences of the truth or untruth of a misperception, what is needed is a theory to explain those dynamics. E. E. Schattschneider's (1960/1975) classic theory of interest group conflict offers insightful possibilities. Although Schattschneider's theory is best known in political science circles for demonstrating the outsized power of organized interests in supposedly democratic societies, his insights about political conflict ought not to be neglected. He argues political conflict is like a bar fight: those on the losing side attempt to recruit help from bystanders, a process he referred to as "socialization of conflict" (p. 7) and one making conflict very likely to expand. Might false beliefs evolve similarly as believers and debunkers, both with access to audiences of bystanders via the Internet, work to gain the upper hand and so spread the conflict rather than quash the misperception?

This study considers how Schattschneider's (1960/1975) model illuminates online communication demonstrably false political "fact" (e.g., Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schweider, & Rich, 2000; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), while rumors are sometimes true.

about the persistent misperception that childhood immunizations can cause autism. This belief is both a rumor (an unsubstantiated belief transmitted from person to person) and a misperception (a demonstrably false belief). It has generated vocal resistance to government vaccination requirements and, some say, led to a resurgence of childhood diseases once thought vanquished. Political conflict over the misperception is observed in online, public responses to Internet coverage of official efforts to debunk the misperception. Although political communication scholarship has not typically thought of public health as an area of political conflict, many health issues are in fact subjects of intense political conflict—notably, abortion and the cost of care. Having a vaccination, like terminating a pregnancy, is a legally circumscribed action that can be an object of political struggle over when and under what circumstances it should be done. Moreover, unlike other political conflicts (such as elections or policy debates) where the collective action of majorities is required for social consequences to ensue, a relatively small number of individuals refusing to vaccinate can impact the whole community.

Schattschneider's Theory of Political Conflict

Studies of political misperceptions typically treat the phenomenon as solely psychological, a belief in something demonstrably false. The goal of misperception researchers in both political psychology and communication has been to understand psychological processes, such as motivated reasoning, that give rise to and sustain false beliefs (Lodge & Taber, 2005; Meirick, 2013; Redlawsk, 2002; Redlawsk, Civettini, & Emmerson, 2010). Researchers in these traditions also seek to understand the media exposure that gives rise to misperceptions (Garrett, 2011; Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2003–2004) and the message characteristics necessary to correct misperceptions (Garrett, Nisbet, & Lynch, 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Nyhan, Reifler, Richey, & Freed, 2014; Nyhan, Reifler, & Ubel, 2013). Although processes that support and undermine false beliefs are typically theorized as essentially psychological, in reality debunking messages are released into public contexts and reaction to them is not only psychological but social and communicative. For example, Kata (2012) developed a typology of the kinds of comments vaccine opponents make in online forums. This study builds upon her work by placing her list of “tactics and tropes” (p. 3778) into a theoretical structure provided by Schattschneider's model.

As a number of scholars have pointed out (e.g., Aupers, 2012; Kata, 2012; Quandt, 2012), in postmodern times traditional sources of public authority are commonly questioned, confronted with “the notion that multiple ‘truths’ based on different worldviews are equally valid” (Kata, 2012, p. 3779). Multiple, competing narratives appear in the public discourse facilitated by the Internet, each grounded in its own set of truth claims. Thus, debunking a belief, even if it is a misperception, might be expected to generate conflict since postmodernism does not privilege one set of truth claims above another. Under these conditions, as Nyhan and Reifler (2010) demonstrated, misperceptions evolve and spread in spite of efforts to debunk them. Thus, if we are to understand the resilience of false beliefs, we must understand the communicative and conflict processes sustaining them.

The essence of Schattschneider's (1960/1975) theory is that political conflict expands because the group on the losing side of any fight works to bring in bystanders to help defend its side. Thus, conflict spreads and its outcome is unpredictable because the relative strength of the opposing groups is continuously changing as they recruit support from bystanders and audiences by reframing the terms of

the fight—what he calls redefining its “cleavages.” Applying his theory to ad hoc groups supporting misperceptions, we should not expect those false beliefs to be vanquished by truth but, rather, as postmodernists would predict, to spread and evolve when confronted. Indeed, Schattschneider’s model is uncannily similar to anthropologist Victor Turner’s (1981) concept of “social drama”: When conflict occurs, “there is a tendency for the breach to widen until it coincides with some dominant cleavage in the widest set of relevant social relations to which the parties in the social conflict belong” (p. 146). This means attempts to debunk misperceptions may instead generate conflict that spreads the misperception to new groups.

Applying Schattschneider’s (1960/1975) model to political misperceptions both offers insight into misperception propagation processes and further develops the model. First, Schattschneider’s model has not been employed to analyze communication behavior. Like so many classic political theories of the mid-20th century, his depicts political communication processes without explicitly referring to communication. He argues that powerful groups attempt to privatize conflict—to restrict it to its current boundaries—and that what might be termed appeals to liberty (“individualism, free private enterprise, localism, privacy, and economy in government,” p. 7) are useful to those wishing to restrict the scope of conflict. Conversely, less powerful groups attempt to publicize conflict—to recruit additional support for their position. These groups may make what could be termed appeals to equality (“equality, consistency, equal protection of the laws, justice, liberty, freedom of movement, freedom of speech and association, and civil rights,” p. 7). Narrowly read, this might seem to explicate the workings of political power, but in the broader context of Schattschneider’s political conflict model, it reflects an understanding of persuasive communication’s influence on the structure and dynamics of political conflict.

Schattschneider’s model further invokes communication in its concept of “cleavages.” The scope of political conflict (as well as its meaning) is altered not only by appealing to larger or different audiences but by reframing “lines of cleavage” (Schattschneider 1960/1975, p. 60) within a political universe. Schattschneider observed that political conflict simultaneously unites and divides, consolidating allies who concurrently distinguish themselves from enemies. A group on the losing side of an argument may seek to alter the line of cleavage dividing it from its opponent so that (1) more people become convinced the conflict is relevant to them and are hence motivated to get into the fight, and (2) those people motivated to enter the conflict enter it on the side of the losing group. A group on the winning side may attempt to maintain a line of cleavage in which few people are interested in the fight and those who are favor the winning side. Schattschneider (1960/1975) points out that as new supporters are recruited, the “original contestants will lose control of the matter” (p. 11).

Second, Schattschneider’s (1960/1975) model was explicitly limited to *organized* pressure groups, such as industry lobbies and labor unions. Organized groups implement centrally managed communication strategies to achieve their persuasive goals. This study explores whether Schattschneider’s model retains its usefulness in analyzing political conflict involving communities lacking the institutional structure of formal organizations—in this case, ad hoc groups sharing a false belief. While organized interest groups remain politically influential (Gilens & Page, 2014), public political debate is much less hierarchically organized today than it was in the 1970s. Mass media technologies have ceded ground to Internet technologies that decenter political communication by undermining the gatekeeping and agenda-

setting processes typical of mass media, meaning average citizens can, under the right circumstances, draw the attention of politically significant audiences (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). People with shared interests who contribute to online political debates do not much resemble the organized interest groups with memberships and mailing lists Schattschneider would recognize, nor are they likely consciously pursuing a shared communication strategy. Nevertheless, the principles and patterns of political conflict he theorizes are not tied to communication technologies. They may yet be useful for understanding how independent communicative actions by those in what he referred to as "unorganized groups" sustain political conflict and misperceptions.

The goals of the analysis are twofold:

- To illuminate the dynamic evolution of a false belief as believers communicate with potential political allies in the face of authoritative debunking.
- To evaluate the utility of Schattschneider's theory of political conflict when applied to a context extending the boundary conditions he set for it in three ways: (1) communication behaviors of (2) unorganized interest groups in (3) an online political communication environment.

Method

The majority of modern opposition to recommended and mandated vaccinations can be traced to a 1998 study by Dr. Andrew Wakefield published in *The Lancet*, a British medical journal. Wakefield claimed a link between the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism, generating a flurry of concern in the British press that later reverberated in the U.S. press. Though the study was retracted in 2010 and ultimately denounced as fraud in 2011, belief in the purported link between vaccines and autism persisted. Despite public communication efforts by government and medical authorities, some anxious parents refused to vaccinate their children, and some diseases thought to have been eradicated reemerged. In 2000, measles had been eliminated from the United States, but in 2014, there were 23 measles outbreaks in 27 states (667 cases) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). In 2015, a large, multistate outbreak was linked to Disneyland, eliciting increased public attention and outcry over declining vaccination rates. Conflict between scientists, medical professionals, parents, and citizens who advocate the use of vaccinations and those who believe vaccinations can cause autism emerged not only in the mainstream media in the form of "balanced" reporting (see Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011) but on Internet public discussion boards on popular news and activist websites. In particular, two events elicited heightened conflict: In February 2010, *The Lancet* retracted its publication of Wakefield's study (Harris, 2010), and in January 2011, *The Lancet* went further, calling the study a fraud (Godlee, 2011). These debunking messages sparked interaction as members of the believer community posted messages in response, and the subsequent public discussion included both believers and debunkers before an audience of interested citizens whose opinions and behaviors could be influenced.

Data Collection

The public debate was archived on cached Internet sites. To find them, Google searches were

conducted in September 2011 using the terms "vaccine AND autism 2010" and "vaccine AND autism 2011," yielding public discussions by debunkers and believers provoked when Wakefield's original findings were publicly disavowed. The 2010 search yielded more than four million results, and the 2011 search yielded more than seven million results. To limit the data to a manageable form for qualitative analysis, the top 25 hits for each search were selected, and the ones that archived user comments were examined as sources of data. This resulted in 11 sites for the 2010 search and 17 sites for the 2011 search.

Currently, no technique exists for randomly sampling Internet content, and "filter bubbles," search results tailored to a computer's history, are always possible. Moreover, the search engine does not allow for true historical searches. However, the 28 websites selected for study represent a varied sampling of cyberspace hosts for vaccine debates: 17 mainstream news websites; six advocacy organizations on autism, child health, and science; one independent blog hosted on a personal publishing platform; one entertainment news website; one generic online source for information and advice; one support forum for chronic fatigue syndrome and other health news; and one medical institution website. The Web pages included 18 articles, eight blogs (mostly sponsored by news organizations), one radio program transcript, and one video with a descriptive caption. Their topics varied widely and included content giving credence to the rumor as well as content debunking it.

Content of the 2010 Web pages consisted of eight articles reporting the debunking or retraction of autism links to vaccines, the preservative thimerosal within vaccines, or scheduling of vaccinations. One post was a counterargument to the thimerosal debunking, and another was a report that pediatricians who advise against vaccines have fewer autistic patients. Finally, one article reported celebrity Jenny McCarthy's autism-vaccine advocacy, despite the new realization that her son was misdiagnosed as autistic.

In 2011, website content consisted of six articles or video interviews reporting the Wakefield study as fraudulent. Five articles criticize claims from parents and media that vaccines cause autism despite continual debunking. Finally, six articles report new studies that support the link between vaccines and autism, including a report linking encephalitis to vaccines and another based on vaccine court rulings; two of these articles attempt to discredit the new studies. The data thus offer a rich picture of the discussions occurring online. The appendix lists the names and URLs of all websites used.

Analytical Approach

Only comments explicitly supporting the link between autism and vaccines were selected for analysis. The more than 2,000 comments believers posted exemplify the discursive conflict generated in cyberspace against vaccines and the communities supporting their use, which is the focus here. Comments that did not indicate or were unclear in their bias against debunking were minimal and were excluded from the data pool. The analytical goal is not to speculate on psychological motivations behind comments, but rather to illuminate the communicative and social qualities of the naturally occurring discursive resistance in terms of Schattschneider's (1960/1975) model. Both researchers examined the comments iteratively in light of the following key questions drawn from the model.

Applying his model to organized groups in a highly structured conflict environment, Schattschneider (1960/1975) never seriously considered the first problem facing members of ad hoc groups: How do they get involved in the conflict in the first place? Schattschneider himself argues that political conflicts are “to a very large degree about who can get into the fight and who is excluded” (p. 10) as an outsider. Anonymous citizens cannot draw upon traditional sources of political legitimacy, so this analysis first addresses the question of how they construct themselves as part of the conflict. Comments were characterized as being in this vein when they offered descriptions of the author’s identity in the context of the anti-vaccine debate.

At the heart of Schattschneider’s (1960/1975) model is the insight that those on the losing side of a conflict (in this case, the misperception believers) engage in conflict socialization by appealing to previously uninvolved groups of bystanders. Thus, the second question is: How do believers’ comments invite audiences and bystanders to join the conflict? Comments that characterize believers as members of larger groups and those that set up oppositions between social groups speak to this issue. Where believers construct themselves as members of larger social groups, such as parents or taxpayers, they invite audiences who fit those categories to support their cause. Where they create common enemies, such as greedy businesses or corrupt officials, a similar invitation to join the “good guys” is presented.

Finally, Schattschneider (1960/1975) argues both sides tend to lose control of the expanding conflict, and research on political misperceptions suggests false beliefs evolve and evade attempts to debunk them (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). We consider how the changing scope of conflict affected control over the fight. In particular, we looked for comments that altered the original debate over whether the MMR vaccine was linked to autism. Comments that raised concerns about other vaccines, other negative outcomes, vaccine protocols, or the validity of the scientific approach all expanded the conflict, making it hard for its original combatants to manage its trajectory. In addition, both asserting authority to join the conflict and altering its cleavages by realigning group boundaries, the types of comments described above, affected control over the fight.

Our approach to the data essentializes rather than quantifies the observed patterns. Quantification of particular comment types would reify the naturally occurring discourse to little theoretical purpose since Schattschneider’s (1960/1975) model makes no prediction about how often particular types of appeals are made, and there is no straightforward link between repetition and influence (Chong & Druckman, 2007). However, multiple exemplars of the types of comments identified in the analysis appeared in the data, and the types of comments we document are quite comparable to those Kata (2012) observed in her study. Multiple, representative illustrations of key aspects of the evolving discourse are offered so the reader may appreciate similarities between them. Every attempt is made to preserve believers’ language choices—their words, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization—with only minor edits offered to improve clarity where needed. Identity is not surmised, for gender or nationality cannot be ascertained with any certainty. However, it is important to note that the believer community contributing user-generated content is quite large. Very rarely is the same online handle quoted twice, and similar types of comments typically appeared on multiple websites.

Who Can Join the Fight

Schattschneider (1960/1975) argues political conflict turns upon who is able to get into the fight. In his era, for example, Southern towns seeking to enforce Jim Crow segregation defined activists who came to help local African Americans register to vote as interlopers. If outsiders were excluded and the conflict stayed small, the Whites already in power could stay in power. The fight over vaccine safety began as a fight among scientific experts and, to a lesser extent, public policy officials. An academic review process governed publication of Wakefield's article, and the merits of his claims were subsequently evaluated using scientific principles of replicability and experimental design. Public health officials reinforced this discursive logic by relying on the best science available to develop vaccination guidelines. The first problem believers faced was how to get into a fight among experts. The user-generated comments contain several cases where believers explicitly assert their qualifications to address the question of whether vaccines cause autism.

Some met the scientific community on its own turf, claiming a similar expertise—a "PhD statistician" or someone who has "taken organic chemistry." One claimed not only scientific expertise but adherence to the epistemological and axiological values of science:

I am a physicist and engineer and I am a big believer in the scientific method. I have no children, friends or relatives with autism in the family so I have no axe to grind. But I have to say that the articles that I have read purporting to show with certainty that there is no link from vaccines to Autism seem unscientific at best.

Other believers altered the terms of the fight more radically by appealing to an altogether different standard of authority in order to enter the conflict. They countered scientific knowledge with eyewitness authority (Edy, 2006; Zelizer, 1998), claiming an authority grounded in personal experience:

My brother is autistic and he did not become that way until he was almost two years old. He was given a series of vaccines around this time and within a few days he was a completely changed person. . . . Whoever says all this is nonsense is lying to you.

These comments shift the grounds of the fight from scientific rationalism to personal life experience and thus demonstrate how the entry of new groups to the fight can change its terms, making it spin out of the control of the original combatants.

Another bid to change the terms of the debate came from believers who asserted a right to question authority. Whereas appealing to eyewitness authority shifts the debate from scientific to personal grounds, asserting a right to question authority moves it from the scientific to the political. Said one, somewhat abusively, "If you censor posts because you are not able to handle strong and creative or fundamental arguments, then please say that as guidelines for your site. 'We brook no strong opposition, being well versed, mentally inflexible and insecure people.'" Another used the language of rights to reject the authority of others: "Wow what right do you have to say it's genetic only?" These kinds of critiques place believers on equal footing with experts and misperception debunkers by denying their expertise.

As Schattschneider (1960/1975) would expect, the battle to define outsiders is a complex affair. Even as believers broke into the scientific argument and sought to change its terms, some also sought to bar others from the conflict. Not only did they introduce personal experience as grounds for entering the conflict, some believers defined such experience as the only grounds for getting into the fight. Said one, "I have a child who [has] also been affected by immunizations. The people who are negative are people who have never experienced this." Another went further, "Again, unless you have seen these things occur within a short span of time after injections, in your own children, you really have no ground to stand upon." Similarly, some who questioned authority argued that anyone who did not should not be admitted to the discussion. Said one, "Do some research other than the garbage that National Pharmaceutical Radio [National Public Radio] provides you with. Otherwise your comments are trash."

Conflict Spreads

One of the most important elements of Schattschneider's (1960/1975) model of political conflict is that it spreads, and he offered two important predictions about how. First, those on the losing side of the struggle invite bystanders and audiences to their side of the fight. Second, each party to the fight attempts to define the conflict in a way that gives them tactical advantage: more allies, fewer opponents, and a different priority for the conflict. He notes, "The motivations of those who want to bring about . . . shifts of alignment are not difficult to understand because each new cleavage produces a new allocation of power" (pp. 63–64). Conflict, he says, involves not only division but unification as adversaries separate themselves and allies come together. Although misperception believers used new communication technologies to break into expert discussion about whether vaccines cause autism, they were on the losing side. Vaccines remained socially normative and legally required. Thus, if Schattschneider's conceptualization of political conflict is correct, one would expect these believers to engage in public communication that "mobilizes bias" in their favor and redefines lines of social cleavage to their advantage. The analysis reveals that, although the content of the misperception and the belief system of potential allies may be relatively fixed, the salience of potential links between them may be altered via communication, and this tactic appears in a remarkable variety of guises.

Several believer posts set up an us-versus-them dynamic that placed believers squarely within the majority of Americans and tied the struggle to much more salient political conflicts. In redefining group boundaries, the believers expanded the scope of conflict by claiming sizable portions of the public as members of their group. One telling sign that these comments invite a larger audience of bystanders to identify with the believer community in the conflict is believers' use of terms such as *us* and *we*.

Several posters made comments pitting average citizens (*us*) against big business (*them*)—a social rift that would have been especially salient since the debunking occurred shortly after the 2008 credit crisis, a time marked by open conflict between huge financial firms and average people. Some of these comments narrowly targeted the pharmaceutical industry as an adversary of average citizens. Said one:

We cannot believe anyone. WHO has told us the drug companies do not profit from vaccines? The drug companies. WHO has told us vaccines are safe and effective? Same.

WHO finances the studies that lead to the statistics “proving” the safety and efficacy of vaccines? You know who.

Another argued, “Do you know the pharma companies make tens of billions in profits? Yet they can’t afford more research on safety because of guys like me? You are high.” Appealing to a widespread belief that big business is out to screw the little guy, these comments invite people who share the generic belief to apply it in the specific context of the vaccine/autism debate and mobilize in support of the misperception believers.

Other comments defined the conflict as between average citizens and the medical industry more broadly. One argued:

Why do our spokespersons for the overbearing vaccine schedule not openly declare their own conflicts of interests, whether it is salary and other compensation from the makers of vaccines, royalties from developing their own product for the market or dependency upon . . . the makers of vaccines for the budgets of their home organizations, and why should we believe that they are unbiased in their opinions any more than those paid spokespersons for any other industry?

Another broadened the conflict still further, pulling in salient concerns over rising health care costs: “I’m sure that they are bought out by the insurance companies. This is why we can’t get affordable health care. This country is corrupted to the CORE.” These arguments, once again, are a series of appeals to beliefs likely to be shared by others. If you believe that health care is unaffordable or that the health care industry is profit driven, then you might find it plausible that the industry pushes unsafe vaccines on an unsuspecting public and tries to thwart any attempt to bring this to light. Thus, you, too, may come to suspect vaccines are linked to autism.

A second us-versus-them dynamic pitted citizens against government—once again a highly salient dynamic in a political environment where the Tea Party and libertarian rhetoric had significant traction.² Said one believer, “Why would we believe a government committee with the outcome of this decision. After all, they are the ones to pay if it is proven to cause Autism. DUH.” Another comment portrayed the poster as a freedom fighter:

I feel like one of those freedom fighters in some tyrant ran country. I grabbed the whole bundle of [immunization pamphlets] and . . . wrote on the top of each “Is there a vaccine for AUTISM? This is what happens there is top people that control the bottom people. We all just happen to be the bottom people for the NIH [National Institutes of Health], CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], and the HHS [Department of Health and Human Services]. If not for government we would have had the vaccine

² One in five Republican members in the 113th Congress (2013–2015) affiliated with the Tea Party (Silver, 2012). Libertarian Ron Paul won the Conservative Political Action Committee presidential straw poll in both 2010 and 2011.

companies sued into oblivion by now.

Although one might see these appeals as attempts to draw liberals (anti-big business) or conservatives (antigovernment) to the believers' side, virtually none of the comments in the data set make specifically partisan appeals. Of the more than 2,000 user-generated comments analyzed, fewer than 10 refer to ideology or partisanship. Instead, comments suggest collusion by the powerful against the powerless, including average Americans ("taxpayers") and misperception believers:

This brings up one of the biggest challenges in present day Court systems, especially when dealing with the interests of huge companies backed by \$billions to pay big money for legal fees, especially after Kathleen Sebelius, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human services signed documents allowing full immunity from prosecution or law suits to vaccine companies. When will we get true justice in this country?

Another, less articulate, comment nevertheless tried to put it all together:

As soon as the Big Pharm. Companies & all connected Interest groups feel the pinch on there wallets & Big Bank Accounts, they must somehow disprove all the Rumors with Lies on top of Lies. No Govt. No Pharm. Major lab company has been able to prove without a shadow of doubt that these shots are safe for the public TAXPAYERS. It is all about \$.

Some comments suggested wider collusion between powerful interests against powerless citizens by suggesting the media represented business and government interests and thus could not be trusted to tell citizens the truth. Said one, "You are allowing Big Pharma and their friends in the mainstream media to shape your minds." Another included government in the mix:

I find it interesting that USA Today only reports one side. They didn't report on the fact that the CDC hired a company to prove that vaccines weren't causing Autism. The evidence was so overwhelming that the CDC sent several letters to the company to water down the report until it didn't show the causal effect. . . . Incidentally when a Congresssman brought the evidence to Congress the drug lobbies people in the CDC and Congress refused to hear the evidence.

These critiques may not be based upon the same reasoning as conservative complaints about the "lamestream" media, but they can serve a similar purpose in insulating believers and their potential allies from corrective information by discrediting the source.

Even as comments divided misperception believers and their potential allies from debunkers, they claimed unity with other groups. One suggested a natural alliance with the autism community:

I believe that our vaccine program is the main cause of the huge increase in autism that we have seen over the past 25 years—though not the only cause. I know good parents

who work incredibly hard for their children and who don't agree with me on this. We work together on planning various kinds of events for the autism community. We are not enemies even though we have different opinions.

Others extended the alliance to parents more generally. Said one believer, "Common sense of a parent who watches a child change within days of getting a vaccination, over-rides medical BS." Another built an even broader argument that pitted parents against the scientific, business, and government establishment:

Much of "science" today is conducted under inherent "conflict of interest" which makes observable, logical inference by intelligent people, such as Mothers and Fathers who intimately know their children, and can see a dramatic effect such as rapid deterioration in health as extremely valid information, and much more credible than some research paid for by a pharmaceutical with their horrendous track records.

In suggesting that parents are wiser than doctors or scientists, the comments create an opposition between the everyday wisdom of parents and the dubious knowledge generated by science—a cleavage between parents and officials that invites parents to, if not reject vaccination, at the very least demand more say in their child's health care. This shift in cleavage not only creates important allies and rejects existing power structures; it also makes the conflict more salient and generates an argument more likely to gain traction with a broader public. Some comments used the language of individual rights to make this claim explicitly:

IF YOU THINK VACCINATIONS ARE SO GREAT—GO GET THEM! Why on earth do you feel it necessary to harass those of us who have reviewed the science, found it lacking, and have chosen NOT to vaccinate ourselves or our children? We should have every right to make an informed choice not to vaccinate.

Another made an even more global claim: "I believe people have the right to choose what health care they want and don't want." Policy changes enacting this value could have broad appeal and would serve the immediate ends of misperception believers even if most parents chose vaccination.

Losing Control of the Conflict

Schattschneider (1960/1975) argued that conflict is most easily controlled at its outset. As bystanders enter the fray, bringing their own ideas and agendas with them, the conflict's shape and direction become unpredictable. Triggers mobilizing new entrants are almost certainly different from those that mobilized early participants. The expert debate over vaccines and autism was fought on very narrow grounds. It was a debate in scientific terms over the validity of Wakefield's results linking the MMR vaccine to autism in some children and, subsequently, over whether the mercury-based preservative thimerosal used in some vaccines might be linked to autism (Blakeslee, 2004). As believers got into the fight, they did more than alter the argument's terms from scientific to personal and political. Potential links between vaccines and autism grew exponentially as comments referenced competing reasons for the link believers

were sure existed and demanded proofs outside the scope of science.

Some believer comments articulated pure stubbornness, defending Wakefield's findings on narrow grounds: "Just because his study was flawed doesn't mean there isn't a link"; "You say Wakefield is guilty of multiple ethical violations, but he hasn't been tried in a court of law." However, others redefined the conflict by suggesting a slew of links between vaccines and physical or neurological damage that went far beyond Wakefield's original claims. According to one,

Perhaps, it is not the thimerosal in the vaccine that causes autism. That is not to say the vaccine is not responsible. Changes in the immune system may be triggered by vaccination, predisposing some children, not all, to conditions like asperger's and autism.

Drawing on then-recent vaccine court rulings, another argued, "Perhaps you didn't read the latest studies showing a large percentage of autistic children testing positive for mitochondrial disorders? The only question left is, were the mitochondrial disorders congenital, or were those, too, caused by vaccines?" Some argued the vaccination schedule was at fault: "The very significant numbers of children who exhibit and 'contract' autism can't be ignored and eventually the evidence will be uncovered to prove that combining vaccinations instead of spreading them out stresses the developing brain in small children." Some suggested other vaccines were dangerous:

They keep shooting up innocent babies the day they're born with Hep B vaccine when Hep B is only contracted through IV drug use and sexual promiscuity! . . . The vaccine labels say that the carcinogenic and mutagenic effects haven't been evaluated along with their potential to impair fertility.

Still others suggested vaccines caused various childhood ailments, including, but not limited to, autism: "So people want to split hairs on whether this is truly autism or not? Seriously? Does it make you feel better if this is 'just' brain-damage versus autism caused by the vaccines?"

Several believers made the reasoning error of confusing correlation with causality, either drawing on anecdotal evidence or suggesting vaccines were responsible for spiking autism rates in the population. One argued, "It appears nothing has been 'scientifically' proven, but that does not mean there is not a connection. I have spoken with too many parents who are convinced their children completely changed following a vaccination. They might be right." Another complained,

Rates of Autism have risen sharply since the 80's and they aren't trying to figure out why. All they're doing is trying to show that vaccines aren't the cause. Maybe it's time they start trying to figure out what the cause is.

As these potential links between vaccines and autism proliferated, believer comments also imposed a standard of proof upon the expert community that science is not capable of: they demanded proof vaccines did *not* cause autism: "Show me the ACTUAL SCIENTIFIC STUDIES done on children to

prove that these vaccines are safe. Oh wait you can't because they have NEVER been done!" Ignoring the experimental and ethical difficulties of such a study, another demanded:

There's just one link only where I am waiting to hear, ever, from anyone at all, and that is that there is no link between autism and kids who have never been vaccinated compared to kids who have been vaccinated. . . . I believe autism does not exist outside the vaccinated . . . groups.

Others demanded proof not only that vaccines were safe but that the vaccine schedule was safe:

In fact, the CDC has never done any studies on the cumulative effects of vaccines on a young child's immature immune system, or if they have they have not made the results public. . . . Promoting an untested vaccine schedule is the equivalent of playing Russian Roulette with our kids.

Indeed, some comments expressed distrust of science and the knowledge it produces:

I would really love to believe that vaccines work and are safe. . . . But as for now, all I hear is that everything is based on studies, done by people in laboratories in schools and workplaces. I just can't buy it. Human error is too great and the potential for corruption is too great. Humans will assign reason and causation to anything without looking at the bigger picture. . . . Try as you might, no study is going to shape this opinion because everything that is published is owned, and therefore I just can't trust any of it.

By the time the scientific community had, to its own satisfaction, thoroughly discredited Wakefield's research linking the MMR vaccine and autism, the political conflict over the vaccine/autism link had spun beyond its control. Misperception believers responded to the debunking on their own terms, not the scientists'. Discrediting the study's original scientific claims did not, and perhaps could not, respond to believers' evolving concerns. Indeed, the expanding political conflict over vaccines had evolved beyond what the scientific community would ever be able to resolve using the modes of reasoning available to it. It was no longer possible to define the fight as a scientific argument played out among experts. It was now a political fight, and one that was rapidly expanding as parents refused to vaccinate their children.

Conclusion

Although their infrastructure bears almost no resemblance to that of the organized interest groups Schattschneider (1960/1975) initially analyzed, the discourse of those who believe vaccines can cause autism fits well with his model. When the expert community debunked the misperception, comments from the ad hoc group of believers, rather than accepting the scientific findings, invited bystanders to join their fight. Although they were almost certainly not enacting any sort of coordinated strategy, online commenters reacted similarly to an interest group losing a political conflict, and their comments, whether intentionally or not, generated opportunities for the conflict to expand. Comments reached out to an audience of bystanders by highlighting salient public concerns that encouraged belief in

the misperception. Moreover, this analysis illustrates that people may not be prone to belief or disbelief in a rumor simply because of their existing worldview. The relationship between belief systems and misperceptions may be affected by the way a misperception is communicated.

Schattschneider argues political parties are uniquely well suited to represent the kinds of general social interests many of these posts raise, yet, intriguingly, the believer community failed to generate partisan appeals. One potential explanation comes from Schattschneider's more general principles of group conflict. In a polarized political environment where support by one party constitutes sufficient reason for opposing partisans to reject a policy regardless of its merit, a specifically partisan appeal generates avowed adversaries as well as invites key allies. Appeals to widely shared, apparently nonpartisan social values and beliefs may seem a strategically superior way to create a social cleavage likely to generate enough support for the misperception to reshape public policy. Although a great deal of the research on political misperceptions has focused on partisan ideology as the source of motivated reasoning that sustains misperceptions (e.g., Meirick, 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Redlawsk et al., 2010), this analysis demonstrates that not all political misperceptions are linked to partisanship. Schattschneider's model has the advantage of explaining a wide variety of forms of interest group conflict, including, but not limited to, conflict in which partisanship defines group boundaries. Also, the model allows for the possibility that the spread of belief in the misperception is affected by the way it is framed or communicated. Libertarians and parents may be persuaded of the same misperception for different reasons.

Schattschneider's (1960/1975) theory also predicts the originators of a conflict commonly lose control of it as new groups enter the fray and the political cleavages shaping the fight shift. This is what gives conflict its unpredictability. The conflict over whether vaccines are linked to autism began as a scientific debate among medical professionals, but as misperception believers got involved, those professionals lost control of the fight. In seeking access to the conflict, the believer community redefined its logic. No longer could the debate be limited to the scientific merit of Wakefield's study. Instead, personal experience competed with scientifically generated knowledge as the ultimate truth standard. Charges of spreading false or wrong information were met with charges of denying personal freedom to question authority and speak out. The scientific community had lost control over the standards by which information was judged. Moreover, believers continued to generate questions about vaccine safety, going far beyond the initial scientific claims that had raised concerns, and their standards of proof were not drawn from scientific discourses. Comments rejected the probabilistic language of science and demanded absolute assurance that all vaccines were always safe for everyone; thus, legitimate science could no longer assuage concerns. Because this study focuses on misperception believers' comments and not on those of their opponents, what is less clear is whether the believers were also losing control of the debate. More work should be done as the debate evolves to discover how more recently mobilized participants may distort the original goals of the believer community.

Although the basic mechanisms of Schattschneider's (1960/1975) theory of political conflict hold up quite well in explaining the online communication of unorganized groups, some aspects of the theory may be somewhat dated. He argued that appeals to liberty tend to privatize conflict, yet the essence of the believer community's appeal is that parents should have the right to do what they want when it comes

to their children's health. Business, government, and the medical profession are accused of interfering with this liberty. This suggests American values may be more pliable than Schattschneider imagined and can be used, under the right circumstances, to either privatize or socialize political conflict.

Understanding political misperceptions as cases of political conflict in which communication processes matter helps explain why misperceptions are so difficult to eradicate. Prior misperception research demonstrates debunking messages can produce substantial psychological resistance, but this analysis reveals the remarkable social dynamism of the rumoring process when confronted with authoritative debunking in the postmodern era. Communicative resistance to debunking messages is not a matter of stubbornly reiterating a misperception. It involves creative, persuasive discourse that modifies the misperception and shifts the relevant audience of potential believers. Viewed in this light, the search for a single message or type of message that would effectively debunk a misperception seems fruitless. Effective debunking, like rumoring itself, is likely a process that adapts to the changing social conditions in which discourse about the belief occurs. The problem is not simply the motivated reasoning of misperception believers. The discourse itself represents a moving target with no fixed standards of evidence or truth that might support factual debunking. When debunking messages are introduced into the discourse, the social dynamic of the conflict evolves to raise new questions and evoke different standards of evaluation (what Schattschneider would call altering the lines of cleavage) and to invite new participants (what he would call socializing).

Schattschneider's model effectively describes the communication of ad hoc groups in modern communication environments, inviting potential supporters and redefining public debate. His model does not predict the policy outcomes of these conflicts (indeed, he rejects the possibility of such prediction). Instead, the model predicts their continued expansion. Thus, we might expect further declines in vaccination rates and more outbreaks of childhood disease regardless of accruing scientific evidence that vaccines are safe and effective. Similar patterns might be expected to emerge in political conflicts over false beliefs about both political issues of the moment (such as whether Barack Obama was born in the United States) and lasting political challenges (such as global warming).

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Appendix**Table A1. 2010 Google Search.**

Source	URL
Hollywood Life by Bonnie Fuller	http://www.hollywoodlife.com/2010/02/26/jenny-mccarthy-says-her-son-evan-never-had-autism/
Reuters	http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/03/12/autism-vaccine-idUSN1218720720100312
Age of Autism: Daily Web Newspaper of the Autism Epidemic	http://www.ageofautism.com/2010/01/vaccines-dont-cause-autism-pediatricians-do.html
Huffpost Parents	http://www.parentdish.com/2010/05/25/researchers-blast-another-link-between-autism-and-vaccine
National Public Radio	http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2010/02/lancet_wakefield_autism_mmr_au.html
Science-Based Medicine: Exploring Issues and Controversies in Science and Medicine	http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/index.php/vaccination-are-we-number-1/
NJ.com, New Jersey news affiliates	http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2010/02/study_linking_autism_vaccines.html
Age of Autism: Daily Web Newspaper of the Autism Epidemic	http://www.ageofautism.com/2010/03/autism-vaccines-thimerosal-further-study-needed.html
Newsweek	http://2010.newsweek.com/top-10/most-overblown-fears/vaccines-cause-autism.html
CNN News	http://www.cnn.com/2010/HEALTH/09/07/p.autism.vaccine.debate/index.html
ABC News Blog	http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2010/03/thimerosal-in-vaccine-out-as-autism-cause/

Table A2. 2011 Google Search.

Source	URL
CBS News	http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-31727_162-20049118-10391695.html
Popular Science Magazine	http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2011-01/british-doctor-faked-data-linking-vaccines-autism-and-hoped-profit-it
Child Health Safety, Personal Blog	http://childhealthsafety.wordpress.com/2011/01/10/vaccines-cause-autism-war-is-over/
CNN News	http://www.cnn.com/2011/HEALTH/01/06/autism.vaccines/index.html
National Public Radio Blog	http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2011/01/06/132703314/study-linking-childhood-vaccine-and-autism-was-fraudulent
Forbes Magazine	http://www.forbes.com/sites/matthewherper/2011/02/11/huffington-post-still-believes-vaccines-cause-autism/
Washington Post Blog	http://voices.washingtonpost.com/checkup/2011/01/autismvaccine_link_another_nai.html
ABC News Blog	http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/01/evidence-mounts-against-link-between-vaccine-and-autism-wakefield-said-there-was-no-fraud-falsificat-1/
The Daily Beast	http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/01/03/money-the-link-between-autism-and-vaccines.html
The Public Library of Science Blog	http://blogs.plos.org/thepanicvirus/2011/05/09/the-latest-claims-of-proof-that-vaccines-cause-autism-will-the-media-take-the-bait/
Neuroskeptic, Personal Blog	http://neuroskeptic.blogspot.com/2011/05/vaccines-cause-autism-until-you-look-at.html
Phoenix Rising: ME/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Forum	http://forums.phoenixrising.me/showthread.php?11452-Vaccines-and-autism-report-to-be-released-on-Tuesday-May-10-2011
The Diane Rehm Show	http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2011-02-02/vaccines-and-autism-story-medicine-science-and-fear
About.com	http://autism.about.com/b/2011/05/10/findings-on-autism-and-the-vaccine-court-to-be-announced-today.htm
Seattle Mama Doc, a Blog by Dr. Wendy Sue Swanson at Seattle Children's Hospital	http://seattlemamadoc.seattlechildrens.org/guest-blog-dr-ari-brown-on-dr-oz/
USA Today	http://www.usatoday.com/yourlife/health/medical/autism/2011-01-06-autism06_ST_N.htm
FairWarning: News of Safety, Health, and Corporate Conduct	http://www.fairwarning.org/2011/05/analysis-finds-evidence-of-autism-in-many-vaccine-injury-cases/