

*The Ethical Collapse of Political PR: How Trump's 2016 Campaign Exposed a Broken  
System*

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## *Introduction*

The political communication system of the 2016 US presidential election underwent substantial change because digital public relations (PR) methods proved necessary to transform voter perspectives. During his 2016 presidential run, Donald Trump obtained backing from enthusiasts who participated actively by leveraging various data-driven communication methods across social media and targeted advertisements. However, the successful digital tactics used by Trump during his campaign conceal a terrifying problem. Trump's 2016 presidential bid revealed an essential organizational weakness in public relations ethics that stems from its deficient systems in stopping intentional false information delivery and emotion-based manipulation during political campaigns. The ethical failure shown during Trump's campaign represents a broader issue in PR ethics, which affects democratic trust while damaging future public discourse and political communication.

Analyzing political campaigns in Public Relations requires a deep understanding of their precise meaning before proceeding. Public Relations in political campaigns is the professional practice of shaping communication and narratives to influence public perception. While PR is expected to follow ethical standards such as truth, transparency, and public interest, it lacks enforceable accountability — which makes it vulnerable to political misuse and manipulation. When PR practitioners prioritize emotional manipulation and misinformation over public service, they violate the core ethical obligations of the profession.

Public Relations seeks to direct public understanding of candidate messages and narratives to shape communication during political election campaigns. Fawkes (2007) notes that ethical public relations call for goal-oriented persuasion, complete honesty, commitment to the public welfare, and democratic responsibility standards. Relocating emotional manipulation and the spread of misinformation above public service functions as a violation of

fundamental ethical principles found in public relations practice. The moral standards of PR go beyond persuasion since PR needs to maintain democratic ideals by delivering accurate and transparent information that helps citizens make informed choices.

This project's central tenet posits that Trump's 2016 digital PR strategy revealed a deeper institutional failure in public relations: the lack of enforceable ethical accountability. His campaign becomes a case study showing that modern PR ethics are structurally incapable of preventing public deception — a failure with long-term consequences for democratic discourse. According to Nacos et al. (2020), the Trump campaign team exploited voters' information weak points by deploying social media microtargeting and emotional messages along with fear appeals and mass disinformation, which surpassed previous political strategies. The techniques of portraying immigration as a threat to existence, applying offensive labels to adversaries, and spreading fake news about Pizzagate emerged because public relations entities operated without core ethical standards (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). When implementing such deceptive tactics, professionals who broke ethical codes about truth and public welfare remained without severe sanctions.

This capstone focuses its main argument on the systemic defect that public relations as a profession does not possess the necessary structural and enforcement capabilities to defend citizens from intentional political manipulations. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) provides voluntary ethical guidelines to members through transparency standards (PRSA, 2025), but these rules remain unenforceable because they lack binding authority. Political success constantly dominates ethical concerns, which grants PR practitioners total freedom to employ false information while pursuing voters based on vulnerable emotions. This capstone examines the fundamental deficiencies of public relations practice because it seeks to deliver an extensive moral view of modern political messaging strategies. The research establishes that Trump's 2016 presidential campaign demonstrated not to be an

individual ethical problem but a substantial decline in public faith in communication institutions. Political campaigns can exploit ethical violations when no protective measures exist because they persistently use emotional schemes and divisive frames with digital disinformation against voters for their benefit.

The research studies political public relations development through history, which shows how digital platforms increased both strategic effectiveness and moral concerns associated with public relations methods. The paper investigates Trump's 2016 digital PR method by studying his use of social media, targeted data analysis, and emotion-driven communication to transform public conversations. The work extensively explores ethical issues of modern-day strategies through Deontology, Virtue Ethics, and Utilitarianism before discussing voluntary PR ethical codes' organizational flaws. The research includes three comprehensive case studies demonstrating a pervasive ethical problem in the first section. The evaluation involves the "Crooked Hillary" attack advertisements and the Pizzagate conspiracy spreading and immigration-based scare tactics as examples.

The project examines Trump's campaign implications and investigates how PR failure worldwide affected society. The paper demonstrates how uncontrolled PR manipulation destroyed institutional media trust by propagating political divisions while making false information appear valid in politics. The analysis examines future risks by demonstrating that weak PR ethics would result in escalating dangers to democracy during times of AI political communication together with post-truth politics. Finally, it will provide professional recommendations to fix the ethical problems evident through Trump's campaign practices. The suggested recommendations work to reestablish ethical strength in public relations and safeguard the democratic communication system for future periods.

## **Background: PR Strategies in Political Campaigns**

### **Historical Overview of PR Tactics in Political Campaigns**

PR has been a vital political campaign tool for hundreds of years, while communication technologies have changed the media landscape. Until the later part of the 19th century, United States political campaigns spread their messages through newspaper advertising and pamphlets supplemented by public speaking engagements (Khan & Ward, 2016). According to Jamieson (1996), Andrew Jackson used newspapers and organized rallies as part of his 1828 US presidential campaign to establish his populist appeal. Similarly, during the 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt used radio broadcasts named "fireside chats" to speak directly with the public and develop his political messaging goals (Ryfe, 1999). The TV medium soon became available in the mid-20th century, when the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates showed how visual communications transform public thoughts (Druckman, 2003). Despite these advances, early political PR primarily operated within limited technological frameworks. The pace of information transmission remained sluggish with concentrated control centers, and though manipulation tactics did occur, they affected a smaller operational scale (Kamarck, 2019). Due to slow information diffusion, the notable unethical practices in early political PR remained focused in distinct geographic regions and historical moments. These historical examples established foundational elements for political actors to consolidate their narrative authority into a primary governance approach.

Political public relations methods transitioned to digital communication in the mid-1990s with the emergence of the Internet. Kreiss (2009) asserts that Howard Dean utilized the 2004 presidential campaign to innovate online fundraising methods and grassroots blog mobilization, subsequently influencing future digital engagement efforts. By 2008, Barack Obama's presidential campaign adopted social media practices through Facebook, YouTube,

and Twitter, which helped them reach young voters and obtain support while distributing campaign content (Goodman et al., 2011). Thus, technological advancements strongly increased political PR's ability to persuade target audiences. However, the ethical oversight of public relations failed to evolve along with the increasing technological skills available in the field. The PRSA and other professional bodies published ethical guidelines, but their enforcement remained optional, resulting in no systematic defense for public members.

Therefore, by the time digital media became prominent, the public relations profession had displayed its fundamental flaws through advisory rather than enforceable ethical limitations. Campaign organizations treated public sentiment as an open field to reshape but faced no consequences when their tactics involved misleading the public (Necić, 2021). The history of public relations unmistakably led to the cataclysmic changes that digital media would bring.

### ***The Digital Transformation of Political PR***

Political PR has experienced a significant paradigm shift due to the emergence of digital platforms in the twenty-first century. Political candidates now utilize digital channels to facilitate direct engagement with voters, as these systems operate independently of conventional news gatekeepers (Chadwick, 2017). This shift enables politicians to exert complete control over their message content, resulting in the rapid dissemination of their political communications.

Social media offers candidates a crucial platform they utilize extensively in their ongoing political campaigns. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) assert that politicians utilizing Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram may engage with their supporters, counteract adverse media narratives, and actively influence public agendas through real-time communication. The incorporation of data analysis through micro-targeting techniques increasingly defines contemporary campaign strategies. Candidates can create tailored communications aimed at

specific demographic groupings by analyzing performance measures from consumers' online activity (Dennis, 2018). Moreover, Artificial Intelligence and big data power are among the most essential digital PR developments in today's elections through targeted advertising. Modern political campaigns depend on complex algorithms to study voter choices for delivering particular ad content, which shapes public thinking at an individual level (Chu et al., 2023). While these technological advances greatly enhanced campaign effectiveness, they also expanded the opportunities for ethical violations, creating an environment where one could easily sacrifice truth, transparency, and public interest for tactical advantage.

The 2016 digital campaign focused on these vulnerabilities by Trump's team to their maximum extent. His team conveyed powerful emotional messages about immigration security along with fictive information through claims about mass voter fraud followed by Pizzagate conspiracy theories (Benkler et al., 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The social media algorithms prioritizing user engagement spread false narratives to millions of users, although accuracy was not their primary concern. The Trump campaign recognized the complete potential of unregulated digital PR practices, which the movement did not originate.

The inadequacy displayed by the Trump campaign demonstrated that the PR profession's failure to establish ethical guardrails appropriate for digital realities was the fundamental issue at stake. According to Necić (2021), traditional ethics could not stop the harmful results of digital micro-manipulation tools, which lacked adherence to truth and transparency. The ethical guidelines within PR codes established by the PRSA operated voluntarily, which prevented disciplinary actions against misinformation dissemination, fear-based framing of political opponents, or emotional disinformation used to sway public sentiment.

Thus, it is evident that political public relations gained enormous power after digital transformation. However, its ethical regulatory systems weakened because they failed to keep

pace with this new power. The tools used to manipulate and deceive people became more potent than the systems that safeguarded democratic values and civic understanding (Chu et al., 2023). Trump's political campaign exploited the ethical void to gain electoral victory, leading to lasting harm to civic discourse, democratic stability, and public trust.

### ***Trump's 2016 Digital PR Strategy and Its Significance***

Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign extensively employed digital media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, as his principal political communication tools (Enli, 2017). Throughout his presidential campaign, Trump communicated via social media platforms, completely circumventing traditional media outlets. Trump utilized Twitter as his principal digital public relations instrument, facilitating direct communication with his followers. Enli narrates that Trump dominated news headlines through his incisive and occasionally contentious tweets while defining the parameters for public discourse. He consistently engaged with his supporters on social media, facilitating a genuine connection that resonated with several people. Yet, while Trump's strategy was effective at mobilizing voters and disrupting traditional media channels, it also revealed a much deeper issue: the systemic inability of the public relations profession to prevent, regulate, or meaningfully punish manipulative, deceptive communication practices (Ki & Kim, 2010; Wright, 1979). His success was not simply a triumph of political branding. Instead, it was an indictment of a PR ethics system too weak to defend democratic norms.

Trump included targeted advertising and data analytics as core elements of his digital public relations approach. The Trump presidential campaign collaborated with Cambridge Analytica to provide tailored political content for specific voter demographics (Woolley & Howard, 2019). Through these strategies, the campaign used emotional appeals of fear and anger to build public support against political competitors. The implementation of data-centered

campaigning raised ethical alarms because supporters worried about elections being manipulated through data manipulation while privacy rights were being violated. The critical ethical problem is that professional PR practitioners deliberately use psychological methods against the public rather than presenting facts for political gain (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Yet, no ethical disciplinary action is taken against them.

This issue illustrates this study's fundamental thesis, which explains that Trump exploited the existing lack of enforceable ethical standards in the PR field rather than his willingness to utilize emerging tools in manipulation. The PRSA Code of Ethics contains ethical principles such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility, but such voluntary guidelines lack any enforcement methods to punish unethical conduct (PRSA, 2025). Thus, the Trump campaign operated without formal restrictions, which would have stopped them from manipulating emotions through digital channels incompatible with rational democratic discourse.

Moreover, the widespread spread of fake information across social media networks supported Trump's presidential campaign success. Digital platforms spread false information and misleading news articles, producing political polarization and voter confusion (Woolley & Howard, 2019). Some experts label these political strategies as modern aggressive PR methods, but others maintain that they violate ethical principles because they impair democratic values and trust in facts.

In summary, Trump's 2016 online public relations method should not solely be viewed as an individual ethical violation. The situation represents fundamental weaknesses in ethical practices among public relations professionals that require professional fields to take action, as demonstrated by Fawkes (2007). The moral codes operated voluntarily without monitoring oversight and thus maintained a system where manipulating political communication practices became not just permissible but rewarded. Hence, democratic societies remain

exposed to emotionally manipulative political campaigns unless ethical accountability within public relations receives significant reforms.

### ***Ethical Frameworks and PR Theories***

#### ***Definition of Public Relations***

Public Relations in political campaigns is the professional practice of shaping communication and narratives to influence public perception. Ethical PR requires balancing persuasive goals with truthfulness, transparency, public interest, and democratic responsibility. When PR practitioners prioritize emotional manipulation and misinformation over public service, they violate the core ethical obligations of the profession. The definition maintains that PR entails strategic success alongside a commitment to democratic standards that current professional norms do not satisfy.

PR strategies used in political campaigns battle between shaping public opinion through ethical means while possibly accepting some moral sacrifices. Donald Trump implemented a successful digital strategic public relations approach in his 2016 presidential campaign, which encountered multiple ethical problems involving misinformation dissemination and purposeful, emotional manipulation while exploiting fearful messaging (Nacos et al., 2020). However, the problem is not just Trump's tactics. Public relations as a profession is too ethically weak, and no real enforcement exists to protect the public against manipulation.

#### ***Structural Ethical Failure in Public Relations***

Evaluating the ethical problems discovered during Trump's 2016 presidential run requires a thorough review of professional public relations guidelines. The core issue stems from the PRSA (2025) Code of Ethics, which defines essential values, including honesty, advocacy, loyalty, fairness, and transparency. However, Lieber (2008) posits that although detailed in its ethical declarations, the PRSA Code functions only as a voluntary guideline because it has no

enforcement capability. The PRSA membership termination for code violations exists but does not significantly affect practitioners since they can practice without the association or professional certification.

Public relations lacks any national governing body that provides professional licensing or requires adherence to PRSA regulatory standards, nor does such a licensing system have the authority to enforce ethical behavior within political campaigns. Given the absence of national licensing requirements, professionals can freely pursue unethical practices that violate basic ethics codes without fear of professional consequences (Ferré, 1993). Because of this professional regulatory void, unethical PR practices thrived throughout the 2016 Trump campaign. The propaganda against Clinton and emotional management techniques coupled with democratic institution attacks operated within a professional context that only suggested ethical standards but provided no formal requirements.

Unlike professions, including law, medicine, and journalism, public relations lacks any process for withdrawing credentials while missing both disciplinary hearings and investigatory oversight bodies. No mechanisms for institutional accountability are embedded into public relations design, which essentially manifests as a structural flaw (Ferré, 1993; Ki & Kim, 2010; Wright, 1979). The structure fails to prevent election campaigns from utilizing untruthful and harmful public relations methods that harm democracy even though they maintain their professional status

### ***PR Theories and Their Application to Trump's 2016 Digital Strategy***

#### ***Framing Theory: How Trump's PR strategy framed key issues***

The Framing Theory established by Goffman (1974) dictates that how information gets presented shapes the audience's comprehension and interpretation. Political PR utilizes framing as an influential technique that selects particular issues for emphasis and

simultaneously minimizes alternative matters to control public direction. In his 2016 campaign, Trump utilized compelling emotional narratives to address immigration, national security, and economic deterioration, aligning his themes with supporters' wrath and apprehensions (Homolar & Scholz, 2019). In a 2015 campaign announcement, Trump characterized undocumented immigrants as criminals by asserting that Mexico sent "rapists" and drug dealers to America (The Marshall Project, 2024). In his statement, Trump crafted a rhetorical narrative portraying America as a target, so reinforcing his campaign strategy to erect border barriers and implement stringent immigration enforcement measures.

The framing techniques proliferated via social media, facilitating direct engagement between the campaign and voters and bypassing traditional media intermediaries. Through his Twitter platform, Trump consistently deployed basic statements to reinforce his established frames, which included terms like "Crooked Hillary" and "Fake News" (Enli, 2017). Using such political tactics proved effective, but it relied solely on character assassination while lacking actual policy details, thus violating ethical standards for factual support. Additionally, Trump's campaigning strategies presented immigration challenges in a way that made people believe immigration policies needed immediate action to address security concerns (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Social media strategies by Trump built public awareness that immigration became a danger to national security, which required his restrictionist policies for public protection. However, this intentional framing method used emotionally charged techniques instead of factual policy examination, which resulted in ethical violations during political PR activities.

The political reframing conducted by Trump's PR team demonstrates how framing tools could become dangerous when there are no ethical boundaries. Haque and Ahmad (2017) posit that the ethical practice of PR requires strategic issue presentation to improve citizens' comprehension while stimulating decisions based on knowledge. The Trump campaign

maintained its power by using emotional manipulation to reduce complex matters into two fear-based extremes, which they strategically blocked from professional evaluation. These frames circulated across social media platforms without restrictions because they operated as platforms rather than moderators. Under present conditions, weak ethical boundaries allow PR framing techniques to escalate into massive emotional control methods, which trigger political conflict and jeopardize democratic institutions.

***Agenda-Setting Theory: How the campaign controlled media narratives***

The agenda-setting theory devised by McCombs and Shaw (1972) shows that media organizations actively control public issues that are essential to people. Media entities and political campaigns shape the public agenda by intentionally highlighting specific issues while neglecting others. Digital public relations tactics helped Trump's campaign to dominate media attention and set the political agenda for his entire presidential campaign. Rather than employing conventional approaches like press conferences and interviews, Trump utilized Twitter to disseminate sensational news, influencing the coverage of media outlets. Enli (2017) posits that he established a new standard for immediate political agenda control in public relations through Twitter. For example, Trump's assertion that the 2016 election manipulation incited extensive media discourse over electoral integrity despite the lack of verification for his claim. Through incessant repetition, Trump succeeded in maintaining the prominence of electoral legitimacy debates in public discourse, diverting attention from other political issues (Benkler et al., 2018). Trump used an enemy branding campaign to reduce traditional journalism's credibility, allowing his campaign to produce and distribute messages through unverified channels.

Thus, the ethical problem with agenda-setting in Trump's digital PR strategy originates from using false information and media manipulation tactics. Politicizing the media narrative is a

typical political tactic, yet distributing fabricated or deceptive information erodes democratic dialogue (Happer & Philo, 2013). Public relations ethics face a significant ethical challenge because controlling media mess succeeded, but how the structure of modern public relations, lacking enforceable ethical obligations, enables emotionally manipulative, anti-democratic communication strategies. Aging could lead to accepting deceptive and emotionally manipulated material.

### ***Ethical Frameworks and Their Application to Trump's 2016 Campaign***

#### ***Deontology: Evaluating moral duties in PR***

The philosophical approach of deontological ethics founded by Immanuel Kant focuses on moral duty and ethical principle follow-up regardless of results (Barrow & Khandhar, 2023). The ethical communication principles for public relations should be based on truthfulness while maintaining transparency with democratic values according to deontological approaches. Trump's Public Relations strategy broke down key moral responsibilities since it placed the need to persuade people first ahead of factual truth. Political communicators are bound to provide accurate information to the public according to ethical standards. However, Graham-Harrison and Cadwalladr (2021) reveal that the campaign used deceptive methods, including false voter fraud claims, exaggerated crime data, and discredited economic facts. The political use of racial and social divisions might represent a breach of ethical obligations to maintain an inclusive and respectful public dialogue.

According to critics, democratic societies require political PR to maintain truthful, responsible communication for the public. During his campaign, Trump established a post-truth basis, regularly favoring emotional over factual content, including personally offensive statements instead of concrete truth (Benkler et al., 2018). Such ethical norms in deontology indicate that the approach was unjustifiable due to its damaging impact on public discourse's

integrity through political benefit. Importantly, because deontology exposes a fundamental flaw in PR practice, no enforceable ethical requirements protect practitioners from breaking core duties with no penalties. The voluntary Code of Ethics from PRSA focuses on honesty and transparency, although it lacks any binding character (PRSA, 2025). However, Necić (2021) argues that no professional penalties are enforced in the Code because its members avoid consequences even when violating the principles. A lack of enforceable ethical requirements during political campaigns exposes public communication to dangerous threats because victory-seeking motivates practitioners over moral responsibility. From a deontological view of principles, the Trump campaign revealed a fundamental professional limitation for public relations in supporting its ethical obligations.

### ***Virtue Ethics: Assessing ethical leadership and responsibility***

According to Aristotle's philosophy, individuals must cultivate excellent character traits because virtue ethics emphasizes their moral capabilities instead of action results (Gottlieb, 2009). A PR leader must practice honesty and fairness with a public-minded dedication to serve the public good. Trump subverts the established ethical standards of leadership via his internet PR strategy. Most people endorsed Trump's candid talking style, yet his recurrent dissemination of harmful material prompted inquiries over his presidential conduct. Trump's unfounded assertion that Barack Obama was not born in America (Tatum & Acosta, 2017) exacerbated a deteriorating political climate characterized by profound societal mistrust.

The essence of principled ethical public relations leadership is in upholding integrity while cultivating an informed electorate that gets accurate information. Trump's communication style did not adhere to the essential principles of ethical leadership, as he prioritized sensational rhetoric above substantive conversation. Virtue ethics in public relations practice focuses on trust development, respect for public discourse, and operational transparency

(Gottlieb, 2009). Trump's strategic direction promoted public relations as a method for political domination instead of democratic dialogue. Therefore, he enhanced potential risks from uninhibited digital political communications.

Moreover, a lack of virtuous standards emerged as a professional deficiency within the PR sector because it did not establish mechanisms to promote or implement ethical behavior.

According to Lieber (2008), the absence of licensing power among professional organizations, including PRSA, prevents them from establishing methods supporting virtue-based rewards and vice-based disciplinary actions. Ethical leadership for professionals in public relations exists as a goal but lacks any required obligation to practice it. Thus, according to virtue ethics, a major systemic problem exists because modern PR rewards strategic effectiveness rather than developing ethical character, even when deceptive practices, fear-mongering, and division tactics produce successful results (Haque & Ahmad, 2017).

### *Utilitarianism: Considering the ethical cost of success*

The framework proposed by Mill (2017), utilitarianism, evaluates ethical conduct based on its effects on supporting choices that lead to the maximum welfare of all. A view grounded in utilitarian thinking would determine the political rewards of Trump's PR approach in the context of his ethical misconduct. From this perspective, one could defend Trump's PR strategy because it successfully mobilized voters, engaged audiences, and achieved its political objective (Homolar & Scholz, 2019). However, utilitarianism also demands an evaluation of long-term societal consequences, which, in this case, reveal significant ethical concerns. Through his approach to spreading misinformation, Trump reinforced political polarization in the US, helped establish distrust of media sources, and fueled the rise of misinformation-based political discussions (Benkler et al., 2018). Democratic institutions

suffer lasting damage because these tactics last beyond a single election sequence. The ethical consequences caused by damaging democratic institutions and public trust surpass the political outcomes, so his public relations practices create ethical dilemmas from a utilitarian standpoint.

### *Summary*

The 2016 digital PR approach of Trump fails ethical analysis through the standards of Deontology and both Virtue Ethics and Utilitarianism frameworks. The fundamental lesson goes beyond Trump's unethical campaign strategy because the public relations industry has no enforceable ethical standards that prevent or fix such immoral activities (Ferré, 1993; Ki & Kim, 2010; Wright, 1979). Ethical standards established by the PRSA Code of Ethics and other analogous guidelines offer helpful guidance. Yet, as Necić (2021) narrates, they lack the professional enforcement tools for effective self-regulation, including licensing requirements and independent monitoring bodies, thus lacking binding consequences for rule-breakers. Due to this atmosphere, public relations workers in political campaigns operate in a landscape that awards them financial gains for employing emotional manipulation tactics, disinformation, and divisive language practices (Happer & Philo, 2013). The existing system's lack of structure will make democratic values and public trust steadily more vulnerable. The 2016 Trump campaign poses a fundamental study of contemporary public relations ethical breakdowns above being recognized as an ordinary political contest.

#### Case Study Selection and Ethical Analysis

##### Selection and Justification of Case Studies

The 2016 Trump campaign used problematic digital PR methods to propagate disinformation and emotionally consume fear-based and character-advertising content, causing ethical issues. This section examines the case studies: "Crooked Hillary" Attack Ads (Enli, 2017), Pizzagate

and Voter Fraud Misinformation (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), and Immigration Fear-Based Messaging (Lee, 2016) for ethics, voter perception, and reach. These case studies highlight how poor public relations methods change election results, alter candidate perceptions, and cast doubt on political communicators' reasonableness.

***Case Study 1: "Crooked Hillary" Attack Ads (Emotional Manipulation)***

Donald Trump repeatedly used "Crooked Hillary" during his 2016 presidential campaign as the main element to describe Hillary Clinton. Enli (2017) posits that by using this phrase, Trump established a fundamental digital PR tactic that molded public understanding across video debates, social media, and offensive advertisement content. The campaign constructed Clinton as a dishonest, fraudulent person who lacked integrity and trustworthiness through purposefully selected presentation methods and forceful verbalization techniques repeated throughout the electoral period. According to Malloy and Pearson-Merkowitz (2016), attack ads have become a regular part of electoral politics. However, Trump used public skepticism as he altered information and placed emotional impact above real policy talks in ways that breached ethical standards. Trump's character attacks and emotional framing did not merely reveal political ruthlessness. However, it instead exposed the more profound, systemic weakness of PR ethics as a profession that failed to regulate manipulative messaging.

The digital PR team under Trump employed Framing Theory principles to build a story that made Clinton appear dishonest to voters. The campaign highlighted Clinton's email server and foundation corruption issues, specifically during her term as Secretary of State (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). They emphasized Clinton's controversial incidents to increase public concern while ignoring most of her achievements. Repeated slogans combined with dramatic visual elements and emotional speeches made Clinton an untrustworthy candidate to America's voters (Nacos et al., 2020). The PR team recognized that emotional reactions

prevent people from using reason, so they successfully linked Clinton to corruption despite lacking factual evidence. By bypassing complex discussions and reducing Clinton to a single negative frame, the campaign manipulated voter psychology rather than facilitating informed civic deliberation.

The "Crooked Hillary" attack ads achieved their effect through the Agenda-Setting Theory. The campaign chose digital platforms, especially Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, to make Clinton's alleged dishonesty a constant presence in public discussions. The social media algorithms boosted the delivery of these messages, thus enabling them to reach millions of voters beyond conventional media censorship (Enli, 2017). The campaign employed negative reinforcement through repeated displays of Clinton's reported scandals to maintain their prominence in voters' minds. Trump used this PR strategy to shift public focus away from controversies like the Trump University fraud and his history of business operations.

The "Crooked Hillary" stereotype obtained massive amplification through digital platforms, which emphasized sensational and emotionally provocative information. Facebook algorithms weakened traditional media control mechanisms. Twitter retweets YouTube videos, which favor emotionally charged content, thus making negative Clinton portrayals prevail over what the traditional media could manage (Benkler, Farris, & Roberts, 2018). Hence, Trump's political operation manipulated psychological and structural weaknesses within the digital media system for publicity gains.

### ***Ethical Evaluation: Deontological Perspective***

The ethical grounds of "Crooked Hillary" as a campaign framework generate multiple significant moral issues from a deontological perspective. Kantian moral philosophy expresses through deontological ethics that people must maintain ethical principles and truthfulness independently of outcome standards (Barrow & Khandhar, 2023). Trump used

deceptive information to build his campaign infrastructure despite the need for factual campaigns for strategic purposes. According to Marwick and Lewis (2017), several political ads claimed that Clinton deleted her 33,000 emails to escape prosecution despite the lack of criminal activity. According to PR ethical standards, spreading false information or exaggerations violates the duty to present truthful information. Thus, the digital PR approach used by Trump revealed unethical behavior because it emphasized political victory above responsible conduct. Such deliberate, purposeful deception violates the professional moral obligation to relay truthful information accurately.

These violations became possible because of the essential organizational disadvantages within the PR profession. No monitoring system existed during the Trump campaign to enforce ethical standards issued by the PRSA, which left PR operatives who engaged in deceptive tactics without accountability (PRSA, 2025). The lack of professional duty enforcement proves that deontological ethics in PR exist only as theories instead of operational principles.

### ***Ethical Evaluation: Virtue Ethics Perspective***

Virtue Ethics provides a suitable evaluation for "Crooked Hillary" attack ads because this ethical framework analyzes leadership morals with individual character review. Trump's public fear of manipulation through deception went against the ethical principles of honesty and integrity (Homolar & Scholz, 2019). The election descended into vicious physical assaults and defamation between candidates who avoided discussing essential policy matters. Using this strategic method, people lost their trust in political messaging, so democracy became less engaging for voters, and democratic dialog decreased credibility (Nacos et al., 2020). The attack ads violated ethical leadership principles according to virtue ethics

standards because they focused on creating divisiveness while spreading false information instead of participating in beneficial democratic discourse.

Furthermore, since the PR field does not incorporate virtue through mandatory professional standards or accountability systems, it produces an ethical leadership environment where virtuous practice faces active penalties. Happer and Philo (2013) note that emotional messages that divided audiences received better spread than virtuous standards would have been accepted in digital sharing environments. Thus, the "Crooked Hillary" strategy presents a dual problem for both Trump personally and for the PR profession because it breaches ethical communication practices in the eyes of virtue ethics.

### ***Ethical Evaluation: Utilitarian Perspective***

The analysis through the utilitarian framework demonstrates additional moral challenges in using attack ads. This ethical framework bases its assessments on how actions create maximum benefit for most people. Enli (2017) argues that Trump's digital political tactics successfully brought him to victory through his campaign's damaging impact on Clinton's credibility and increased support for his voter base during the short term. The lasting effects which resulted from this strategy proved to be significantly debilitating. The misdirected campaign techniques boosted public doubt of mainstream news sources, deepening social tensions while legitimizing untrue information to become commonplace in political discourse (Homolar & Scholz, 2019). Attack advertising based on deception established detrimental political discourse standards that the public accepted during the campaign, undermining democracy and media trust. The campaign causes more social harm than political gain, making it unethical under utilitarian morality.

Additionally, future political campaign trends have the potential to deteriorate because emotionally manipulative attack ads and slogans now operate as a standard practice alongside

factual accuracy and civic responsibility. According to Happer and Philo (2013), the long-term societal damage created by allowing manipulative communication to become normalized includes alienating voters and causing suspicion of government institutions and social fragmentation. However, a responsible profession should work to stop this damage from developing (Lieber, 2008). The ethical grounds for supporting emotional manipulation in the "Crooked Hillary" campaign fail even when it succeeds politically. The professional structures of PR show no binding ethical framework, which allows public harm to continue without restraint, thus revealing a significant weakness in the discipline's ability to safeguard public welfare.

### ***The Broader Significance of "Crooked Hillary"***

The "Crooked Hillary" branding offensive had a lasting impact on public opinion during the entire period following the elections. The expression "Crooked Hillary" permanently moved into mainstream American political discussion while solidifying Clinton's negative reputation among most Americans, including voters who did not strongly support Trump (Enli, 2017). Following its first campaign deployment, the branding strategy evolved into a digital meme culture that enabled people to spread the "Crooked Hillary" phrase on social media platforms. Ethical issues arise when political public relations techniques unite with digital meme propaganda because it demonstrates how campaigns can activate false information and emotional biases throughout post-election periods.

The "Crooked Hillary" political attack advertisements showcase meaningful yet morally problematic applications of political PR agenda-setting and framing strategies. Bowen and Lovari (2021) posit that the instrumental tactics led to public perception changes and electoral wins but created specific ethical issues about truthful political representation. The "Crooked Hillary" assault advertisements operated beyond standard political strategy as

manifestations of an extensive breakdown in public relations moral standards. The 2016 presidential campaign under Trump revealed that voluntary PR ethical codes, which lack enforcement tools, enable emotional influence and personal attacks because unethical behavior has no repercussions (Necić, 2021).

This case illustrates how fake news strategies utilized by Trump found their power source within current public relations ethical structures rather than being limited by them. From a deontological perspective, truthful speech remains mandatory, while virtue ethics requires maintaining true integrity, and utilitarianism works to minimize all societal damage (Barrow & Khandhar, 2023; Gottlieb, 2009; Mill, 2017). Current digital PR methods especially promote eye-catching exaggerations while intentionally deceiving users for marketing effectiveness. Without genuine ethical enforcement mechanisms through licensing standards, independent review boards, or mandatory codes, PR will fuel manipulative political manipulation, damaging the foundation of citizenship and trust in democracy (Fawkes, 2007; Lieber, 2008; Necić, 2021). The "Crooked Hillary" campaign serves as a complete study that proves the fundamental ethical breakdown of current public relations practices.

### **Case Study 2: Pizzagate and Misinformation Campaigns (Disinformation)**

Digital media became a primary conduit for the dramatic increase of false information during the 2016 US presidential election. The Pizzagate conspiracy theory emerged as one of the most notorious cases when it falsely connected Hillary Clinton with Democratic officials to run a child sex trafficking business from a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Trump's campaign used its digital PR machine to present fraudulent voting claims, although no supporting data existed. An analysis of this case shows that professionally distributed misinformation demonstrates an ethical breakdown within the public relations profession. Such dangerous truth manipulations went beyond merely being distributed

through the PR industry because this profession lacks adequate control measures to prevent or penalize such damaging untruths.

### *Misinformation as a PR Strategy: Framing and Agenda-Setting*

The Pizzagate and voter fraud misinformation campaigns achieved their effects using Framing Theory principles. Through Pizzagate, propaganda received validation from established conspiracy theories about powerful elites exploiting children and treating Clinton and her circle as political adversaries with criminal moral conduct (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Similarly, Trump's repeated assertions about voter fraud were widely covered in the media despite the absence of credible evidence (The Marshall Project, 2024). The spread of these storytelling tactics was accelerated by confirmation bias because supporters who, starting from Clinton and the election process, already had distrustful sentiments were likely to pass them on.

The Agenda-setting theory shows how Trump utilized his digital PR approach to make misinformation campaigns prevail in public discussions. Through social media algorithms, partisan media support, and bot operations, the campaign functioned to sustain these false narratives (Benkler et al., 2018). Trump's regular tweets about voter fraud distribution across right-wing media and online influencers produced an illusion of credibility regarding the issue for public viewers. The campaign asserted election fraud repeatedly without proof to create convincing public assumptions and media priorities regarding this issue.

These examples show how easily misinformation functions as an effective instrument within political PR practices. The campaign executed disinformation strategically to control emotions among the public, which caused people to ignore fundamental issues and undermined their trust in democratic institutions without being held responsible for factual

inaccuracies (Enli, 2017). Such examples show that PR lacks the necessary framework to handle and control such ethical problems as a profession.

### *The Ethical responsibility of PR practitioners*

According to deontological ethics, PR practitioners must classify these deceptive public information efforts as ethically unacceptable. The theory of deontology suggests that people should remain truthful even when results do not align with this decision. Bowen and Lovari (2021) posit that honest communication is a crucial ethical requirement that PR professionals must maintain. The deliberate use or tolerance of disinformation violates these principles by treating the public as instruments to be manipulated rather than autonomous individuals capable of informed decision-making. Political PR should prioritize factual communication, yet the Trump campaign's tactics demonstrated a strategic disregard for truthfulness in favor of political expediency (Nacos et al., 2020). The consequences of false information spread by the team resulted in a pizzeria gunman attack. Therefore, even though these strategies would create political benefits, they deprived people of truthful details and the freedom to reason independently. Yet again, the failure was not only Trump's. Professionals in PR did not establish consequences or ethical obligations to prevent such behavior. Ethical principles lose all meaning when they lack appropriate enforcement systems.

Virtue Ethics practitioners in public relations must fulfill their essential duty by maintaining integrity and fairness while taking social responsibility seriously. However, using disinformation techniques against democratic values disrupts the basic principles that public relations should uphold. The campaign used false information as a governmental tool to produce emotional reactions that hindered political discussions among the population (The Marshall Project, 2024). Public relations operators working with the Trump campaign participated in creating an atmosphere of distrust together with hostile attitudes and

performing emotional directives. Their failure to confront incorrect information and their use of misinformation strengthened dishonesty in political rhetoric. Failure to exhibit moral character through PR work requires industry recognition that internal accountability deficiencies allow such unethical conduct to succeed (Wright, 1979). Virtue ethics also mandates PR professionals to serve the public interest equally as they do their clients. Public trust directly correlates to two fundamental systems: PR legitimacy and democratic communication function. When conspiracy theories spread and disinformation becomes standard practice, it signifies a breakdown in this mutual trust.

The school of thought supports the ethical downfall of these tactics through utilitarian analysis. The mobilization of Trump's anti-election base, together with electoral success through disseminating false information about voter fraud, was outweighed by the extensive societal damage that resulted from this propagation (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Both Pizzagate incidents led to physical violence that endangered innocent people, whereas voter fraud claims caused lasting damage to American electoral process faith and resulted in enduring political instability. Aggregating misinformative PR practices causes extensive damage to society by endangering life while destabilizing government structures and fundamentally undermining democratic information systems (Nieminen, 2024). The absence of regulatory guidelines that confirm ethical standards and penalize deceptive messaging makes it difficult to stop or minimize this type of malicious activity from happening again.

### ***The role of digital platforms in enabling misinformation***

Digital media acted as a crucial success factor because they created powerful amplification potential during these misinformation campaigns. False narratives flourished through social media platforms since Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube allowed their algorithms to focus on exciting content to maximize user engagement (Graham-Harrison & Cadwalladr, 2021). The

misinformation dissemination helped by Trump's public relations team and their media allies used digital platforms to push misleading information, allowing fact-checking procedures to lag rapidly. The ethical duties of PR professionals extend beyond content development because they must evaluate the distribution methods of their messages (Dennis, 2018). Trump's campaign deliberately deployed algorithmic prejudices to transmit false information while avoiding the thought of its ethical effects on digital strategies.

Thus, in summary, the dissemination of fake information, such as Pizzagate and voter fraud theories by the Trump campaign, demonstrated the professional breakdown of public relations ethics as a system. These campaigns achieved their goals because public relations ethics exist as goals rather than legal requirements (Fawkes, 2007). A violation of truthfulness emerges from deontology, whereas virtue ethics exposes an ethical failure of moral character combined with societal damage, as utilitarianism shows. All these cases share a fundamental breakdown because PR has failed to establish response mechanisms or regulatory structures or take any reform action. PR practitioners have an obligation that surpasses client loyalty because their duty to the public aligns with their responsibility (Haque & Ahmad, 2017). Ethical PR needs authorization as a requirement rather than voluntary follow-up in a contemporary world where communication constructs actual events. If the profession fails to establish enforceable standards, licensing requirements, and independent review processes, then misinformation will continue to function as a regular model that generates profit at the expense of public safety.

### ***Case Study 3: Fear-Based Messaging on Immigration (Fear Appeals)***

Donald Trump established fear-based messaging to guide his presidential campaign of 2016 as he tried to influence how voters saw immigration. During his campaign, Trump continually established immigrants from Mexico alongside Muslim immigrants as dangerous agents

against American safety and state economics and cultural heritage (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Through his slogans and ads, including social media content, Trump continuously emphasized crime statistics and terrorism together with displacement-related issues to create fear among voters. This form of communication aligns with fear appeal strategies in PR, which use emotionally charged narratives to drive political action (Khan & Ward, 2016). These techniques successfully made Trump's supporters more devoted. However, they marked an ethical failure that affected Trump's campaign and the public relations field despite its inability to stop emotional manipulation strategies.

Fear operates as an effective instrument for achieving persuasion goals. Studies in political psychology have established since 2006 that fearful communication stimuli dominate reason-based assessment to elicit rapid emotional reactions (Brader, 2006). Messages based on fear appeal utilize stirring words along with personal stories and unimaginable eventualities to trigger public anxiety and defensive behaviors. The public relations team under Trump exercised thorough knowledge of human emotional responses when they presented information regarding immigrants to the public.

Trump repeated through numerous speeches that immigrants were conducting an "invasion" at the southern border while claiming Mexicans entered with drugs and criminal activities and falsely linked undocumented migrants to American deaths (Lee, 2016). The ads produced by his campaign featured short videos that pretended to show immigrants killing Americans, even though their statistics were fake. His campaign selected these videos specifically to hook viewers with emotional responses rather than rational data. Through their messaging strategy, Trump's campaign presented immigrant threats as dangers that targeted both individual security and America's country identity while specifically intending to create panic and nationalist rage and hatred (Lee, 2016).

### ***Fear appeals and their effectiveness in political PR***

Fear-based communication techniques shape voting choices by bypassing logical decision processes in favor of emotional triggers. Throughout his campaign, Trump presented immigrants as offenders who transport drugs and take employment from Americans without supporting data (The Marshall Project, 2024). The application of broad assumptions orchestrated public hysteria that led people to consider immigration as a crisis endangering America's very existence.

The political strategy developed by Trump's PR team relied on Framing Theory because they chose to stress immigration's negative aspects and avoid discussing immigrants' positive impacts. This deliberate construction of fear mobilized support by appealing to nationalist sentiments and anxiety about economic instability (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021). The digital PR strategy used by Trump maintained immigration as a leading campaign matter through agenda-setting practices. The media witnessed an increased focus on immigration as Trump disseminated numerous tweets about building walls, banning Muslims, and deporting people, which resulted in keeping immigration as the central theme throughout the election discourse (Enli, 2017). However, the use of fear in this context was not incidental. It was strategic, systematic, and professionally produced by PR teams, yet entirely unregulated by ethical boundaries. This extensive distribution without the accountability of emotionally manipulative content demonstrates the core finding of this study that public relations as a profession cannot enforce ethics when manipulation and misinformation strategies are applied.

### ***Ethical concerns about using fear to manipulate voters***

A deontological review indicates that Trump's immigration messaging proved unethical because he chose false manipulation of emotions instead of facts to support his policies.

Under deontological ethics, as explained by Barrow and Khandhar (2023), one should uphold honesty when respecting others, but Trump chose to attack whole groups for political purposes. Research studies proved that factual information disproved numerous incorrect claims about Mexican immigrants being criminal offenders (Pew Research Center, 2017). Disseminating false political information constituted a moral breach because it broke truth-telling standards in political public relations.

Moreover, the professionals designing and spreading public relations messages operated without ethical requirements during this process. The PRSA Code of Ethics promotes truth and public interest without mandatory enforcement (PRSA, 2025). The advertising PR professionals for this campaign avoided any investigation or punishment from any licensing body regarding their deceptive, fear-based messages. When no enforceable ethical duty exists, the deontological system becomes reduced to an ineffective set of aspirations.

Virtue Ethics evaluates this approach by demonstrating that ethical leadership requires three essential components: fairness, integrity, and responsibility. According to Bowen and Lovari (2021), fear-based communication engenders division, animosity, and prejudice, undermining the principles of justice and social cohesion. The immigration policies Trump promoted during his campaign led to increased discrimination against immigrants because he instilled hatred toward foreign individuals, and this resulted in various hate incidents and social xenophobia. The professionals working in PR roles swapped critical principles such as fairness and empathy to pursue political advantages (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021). The campaign directors chose victory over factual accuracy, protected separation instead of national unity, and allowed fear to replace comprehension. Their work created a political climate filled with misinformation and hostile attitudes because they did not promote educated voters.

The deeper failure, however, lies within the profession. Haque and Ahmad (2017) posit that public relations rewards effectiveness first and foremost rather than ethical practices.

Emotional resonance, not ethical reflection, drives success in political PR. When institutions fail to support virtue, the campaign strategies shift from ethical practices to successful strategies regardless of morality (Nieminen, 2024). The fear-filled messaging occupies a structural vacancy in the profession, allowing it to secure success over ethical standards.

Moreover, as Mill (2017) outlined in utilitarian theory, Trump's political approach proved successful, but its social repercussions were negative in the long run. Voting behavior became split by fear-based language, which produced heightened racial animosity and diminished confidence in immigrants during that period. The damage that fears appeals generated for social cohesion exceeded political electoral gains and thus made such tactics unethical at this critical moment. Such a move damaged democratic standards by changing reasonable public discussions into panicked emotional reactions. The decision-making quality of informed citizens weakens when fear distorts their capacity to reason, forces them into limited views, and makes them vulnerable to authoritarian messaging (Nussbaum, 2018). Social costs emerged as a direct outcome of an advertising approach that relied on fear and an ethical system that failed to minimize harm.

### ***Results and Societal Impact***

#### ***Impact of Trump's PR Strategy on Public Trust in Media***

Donald Trump's 2016 digital PR approach produced numerous impacts that surpassed his presidential victory, including media distrust among public audiences, intensified societal polarization, and problematic guidelines that would affect future political correspondence norms. Misinformation spread throughout the media along with fear messages altered voter perception (Chadwick, 2017). At the same time, it caused democratic institutions to lose

strength because public trust in journalism quality and electoral systems diminished. The main impact of Trump's PR-based misinformation approach led to the gradual deterioration of public confidence in established media outlets. Trump fiercely denounced respected news organizations throughout his entire campaign by calling them "fake news" and "the enemy of the people" (Homolar & Scholz, 2019). Republican supporters received increased encouragement on alternative media platforms to dismiss news reports that portrayed Trump's agenda in a negative light by claiming the reports were biased or false. Trump steadily undermined the credibility of traditional journalists to the public, which made them lose their position as authentic informational sources. These developments were not solely the result of one candidate's strategy but also revealed how structurally weak public relations ethics had become (Necić, 2021). Without enforceable professional standards or institutional accountability, PR practitioners could engage in media delegitimization and emotional manipulation without facing professional consequences.

Public opinion transitioned from following truthful news reports to embracing campaign-aligned narratives because of the Agenda-Setting Theory. The digital PR assets of Trump devoted their media presence to spreading controversial content alongside verbal assaults against opponents while promoting conspiracy theories (The Marshall Project, 2024).

Substantive debate lost ground to sensational news until the media industry split into separate sections presenting news based on ideological preferences. The Pew Research Center (2017) revealed how trust in American news organizations dropped sharply after 2016, especially among Republican readers, because of the permanent impact of Trump's publicity techniques on news agency credibility.

According to deontology, the purposeful distortion of information and journalist slander violates two fundamental ethical values: truth-telling and democratic institution respect.

Public Relations in democracies exists to assist citizens in making well-informed decisions,

but it should never attempt to dissuade people from using valid sources of information (Bowen & Lovari, 2021). The amalgamation of misleading communication and assaults on mainstream media under Trump's public relations strategy significantly undermined the trust in political information. Thus, it created problematic longstanding effects for upcoming elections. More critically, it revealed how public relations practitioners operating in an environment of voluntary, unenforceable ethical codes were professionally unrestrained in promoting narratives that damaged core democratic norms (Ki & Kim, 2010; Wright, 1979).

### ***Polarization And the Role of Fear-Based Messaging***

Trump's public relations approach caused a dramatic increase in polarization that split political and social aspects of American life. According to Bowen and Lovari (2021), fear-based rhetoric heightens in-group and out-group divisions, intensifying political animosity and reducing bipartisan cooperation. Using fear appeals and spreading misinformation through emotional language split voters between hostile political camps, increasing partisan tensions. Through his assertive anti-immigration statements and his resentment toward racial groups and political opponents, Trump established deep partisan divisions, which prevented successful bargaining between opposing sides. Through Framing Theory, it is evident how Trump framed immigrants and minorities alongside the media as threats, which boosted voter identification with their groups and strengthened the gaps between them (Chu et al., 2023). Fear narratives portraying immigrants as lawbreakers and terrorists politicized the atmosphere, making it more extreme because people started placing greater importance on emotional identification with specific beliefs than recognizing factual evidence. Marino et al. (2024) argue that this increase in polarization exposes how the uncontrolled use of PR techniques enables strategic emotional manipulation, which deteriorates the base requirements for a democratic agreement to coexist. PR ethics failed to regulate Trump's

political messaging because there were no established constraints to protect against unethical practices.

Within utilitarian logic, the increased societal polarization and declining institutional trust proved more significant than political benefits. By successfully activating his voter base, Trump created national splits that deepened social divisions while worsening discrimination faced by marginalized communities. The study conducted by Nacos et al. (2020) demonstrates that both venomous crimes along with politically motivated violence grew more prevalent after Trump began using inflammatory language. Trump's campaigning methods delivered positive results for his election bid while inflicting substantial damages to democratic principles and communal peace. These consequences reflect the broader societal risks that emerge when the PR profession lacks accountability, allowing unethical fear-based tactics to thrive unchecked for political advantage.

### ***The Role of PR Practitioners in Maintaining Ethical Standards***

The ethical mission of political PR practitioners elevates matters beyond election victories because it demands truthful information dissemination, democratic cooperation, and public safety protection. Trump demonstrated a dangerous inadequacy in upholding these responsibilities during his 2016 presidential campaign by spreading false information along with deceitful and fear-based strategies to achieve political victories. This failure highlights the ethical obligations of PR professionals, particularly in ensuring that political messaging aligns with democratic principles rather than manipulative tactics (Bowen, 2018). Political communication strategies require greater accountability, while PR professionals must fulfill their ethical duties according to this situation. According to Virtue Ethics, ethical PR practitioners must demonstrate integrity and honesty to establish public trust (Gottlieb, 2009).

The deliberate distribution of falsehoods and fear-based promotion by the Trump campaign opposed basic principles that would maintain democratic well-being.

Sympathetically, the worst realization stems from the fact that PR practitioners breached ethical standards without facing any professional obstacles. Under the voluntary framework for PR ethics codes, practitioners have been permitted to break ethical standards while receiving professional advantages, as predicted by Stevens (1999). PR professionals must understand that their practices extend across society to affect election results, public communication, media truthfulness, and public sector trust.

As stated in the PRSA (2025) Code of Ethics, truthfulness, fairness, and social responsibility are the core values of public relations practice. In the public relations approach, Trump disregarded fundamental values using deceptive strategies and false statements. Thus, future PR practitioners must actively support transparent communication with accountability and ethical standards to stop future misuse of political messaging. This will require individual commitment and structural reform of the PR profession, including enforceable ethical frameworks that go beyond suggestions and hold practitioners accountable for public harm.

### ***Discussion: Ethics vs. Political Success***

The 2016 Trump campaign placed the dilemma before political communication practitioners: can political success justify unethical public relations practices? According to many political strategists, Trump's unexpected win provided evidence that emotions and false information, together with fear-mongering, function well as propelling forces of public influence (Crawford, 2017; Stewart & Svetieva, 2021). However, the ethical standpoint does not approve these results because of the unethical methods. Nonetheless, a crucial weakness in public relations professionalism becomes obvious when no meaningful ethical systems safeguard public interests (Fawkes, 2007). Through its successful execution, the Trump

campaign demonstrated that digital technology had surpassed the ethical boundaries set by professionals.

### *Can Political Success Justify Unethical PR Practices?*

The 2016 US presidential election revealed a dangerous quandary about political communication. Donald Trump's presidential campaign displayed that strategically using misleading information, scare tactics, and character assaults may effectively mobilize voters and shape public opinion dynamics (Stewart & Svetieva, 2021). Machiavellian political theory justifies this tactic by arguing that leadership success makes actions with questionable morality acceptable (Bíba & Franěk, 2023). According to this perspective, unethical public relations practices will justify themselves through victory since modern political competition supports their acceptance.

However, this ethical consideration exhibits severe weakness as a moral position. According to deontological ethics, respecting people and staying truthful remains absolute despite all circumstances (Barrow & Khandhar, 2023). Falsifying narratives and using fear appeals contravene ethical obligations to maintain honest communication with the public. As discussed by Gottlieb (2009), Virtue Ethics argues that leaders and PR practitioners should uphold honesty, integrity, and fairness rather than using divisiveness to acquire personal or political advantages. Hence, unethical PR measures lead to temporary political gains yet destroy fundamental democratic principles and institutional trust, which makes them unacceptably immoral for ethical review.

Moreover, accepting unethical behavior for political triumph motivates future campaigns to employ comparable or even harsher tactics. Accepting unethical promotional strategies leads to the creation of replicable templates that move beyond abnormal practices (Crawford, 2017). In this way, the Trump campaign did not simply succeed despite its ethical violations.

It succeeded because PR as a profession lacked the institutional infrastructure to hold it accountable. The main issue is why the profession allowed and perhaps facilitated unethical candidate practices rather than the candidate's crossing of professional ethical boundaries.

### ***Long-Term Impact of Unethical Digital Campaigns on Democracy***

The digital public relations practices used by Trump in 2016 left lasting effects on political conversation and news reliability, impacting America's future years. Rossini et al. (2020) discovered that democratic institutions face widespread verification issues because of misinformation dependence, fear-based messaging, and media attacks. The primary negative outcome of unethical digital PR operations is the complete deterioration of trust in mainstream election systems, media, and governing institutions. People developed deep doubts about factual news and voting results because Trump continuously made false statements about election abuse and media bias (Pew Research Center, 2017). Unverified claims from Trump about election fraud led to serious consequences years later when both the 2020 presidential vote and the Capitol Hill assault occurred after his statements hurled violent opponents toward election result reversal (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021). Thus, services that damage ethics within public relations practice create political instability and damage basic democratic principles.

PR approaches that use unethical tactics, especially fear appeals and disinformation functions, intensify political and social disputes. According to Kamarck (2019), the 2016 election marked the peak of political mistrust and hostile relations, which connected them to deliberately misleading campaign messages and divisive messaging. Thus, the digital methods of communication adopted by Trump transformed political adversaries into life-threatening dangers, which made compromise and bipartisan administration almost

impossible. Manipulative PR techniques above constructive dialogue create environments that replace logical debate with emotional tribalism, thus damaging democracy.

The normalization of disinformation creation has emerged as a dangerous consequence when utilized by politicians as a political tool. Through the social media channels of his campaign, Trump showed how unverified false information travels quickly to manipulate public views despite extensive fact-checking debunking (Chu et al., 2023). An era of post-truth politics emerged through copycat political strategies used by additional leaders worldwide, which regularly overshadow factual evidence with ideological storytelling. Such conditions lead to a deterioration of information ecology, making voting citizens struggle between identifying actual truth from deceptive messages while affecting the basis of informed citizens in democratic processes (Blanchar & Norris, 2024).

The long-term risk is clear: future manipulation of democracy through PR becomes significantly threatening when ethical restrictions are not set. Repeated breaches of public trust led to the demise of the trust itself. Engaging in civic activities becomes impossible when fear and misleading information are constantly present (Blanchar & Norris, 2024).

Furthermore, no reform measures would stop upcoming campaigns from replicating the same tactics that attacked democratic dialogue that year.

### ***Is There a Need for Stricter Ethical Guidelines in Political PR***

The unethical nature of manipulative PR approaches in political campaigns generates intense debate about adopting strict ethical policies for political public relations. Chadwick (2017) argues that the current ethical supervision relies mainly on autonomous regulation because political candidates and media outlets need to monitor their activities. However, the trouble with public opinion manipulation and misinformation dissemination became evident during the 2016 Trump campaign, unveiling the weaknesses in current ethical oversight.

Modern political campaign disinformation exceeds the scope that the Public Relations Society of America's ethical guidelines can properly manage according to an increasingly prevalent consensus. The PRSA (2025) ethical guidelines encourage PR transparency, honesty, and accountability. However, these codes are voluntary. Even though practitioners work without mandatory registration, they operate without oversight boards, which means there are no official investigative processes to discipline unprofessional behavior.

The voluntary enforcement system is why unethical behavior persists in political campaigns. Public relations workers receive better compensation for evoking emotions instead of maintaining ethical standards, which promotes deceptive methods above factual information (Ferré, 1993). The structural defect allows practitioners to carry out unacceptable methods, such as pushing fabricated stories and fanning racial hatred while escaping any disciplinary action. Hence, it is evident that Trump found a significant boost in these vulnerabilities, and the application of social media platforms enabled the unlimited propagation of deceptive information. Facebook and Twitter reacted by creating fact-checking systems, excluding political disinformation advertisements (Morgan, 2018). These mitigation strategies show incomplete success because they act mainly by reaction instead of proactive regulation. Government authorities must study legal frameworks that balance free speech protection and accountability standards to prevent platform-enabled election tampering.

### ***Future risks if PR ethics are not strengthened***

If these changes are not implemented, the future of political PR will likely involve more advanced disinformation campaigns, deeper societal division, and increasing political extremism. According to Pinto (2024), modern exploitation methods, including AI content algorithm manipulation and targeted emotional strategies, will strengthen their ability to generate unethical outcomes. The development of political communication toward

manipulating the emotional states of citizens will continue unless ethical standards are restored in the field of public relations.

Trump's 2016 campaign was not an exception; it was a prototype. The system revealed possible actions and the extent of deception that could go unnoticed in a PR framework without professional ethics and silence (Stewart & Svetieva, 2021). The lesson learned will enable future political campaigns to become increasingly deceptive while posing more dangerous threats to national security. Fawkes (2007) recommends that ethical standards must not remain voluntary because effectiveness wins over truth in systems today. Unethical public relations practices receiving political success will lead to sustained deterioration of institutions necessary for democracy, including trust among the public alongside informed debates and shared factual information.

### *Conclusion*

Donald Trump's 2016 digital PR strategy revealed a fundamental flaw in public relations as a profession: the absence of enforceable ethical standards capable of preventing manipulation, misinformation, and emotional exploitation. This failure is not unique to one candidate but reflects a broader systemic weakness — public relations remains governed by voluntary codes with no binding accountability. The analytical case studies in this project illustrate actual structural failure outcomes. Unsubstantiated "Crooked Hillary" television ads highlighted how character-based emotional manipulation spreads freely in political discourse without professional discipline or any consequences of truthfulness. A combination of effective PR tactics spread the Pizzagate conspiracy and fake voter fraud claims without any ethical rules controlling the accused responsible parties. Strategic fear tactics about immigration proved that emotional appeals supported by deceptive information lead to voter polarization combined with political mobilization without regard for honesty or maintaining

fair and public servant practices. These cases confirm that ethical principles in public relations become abstract goals when institutions do not enforce them. Without adopting binding standards, licensing requirements, and oversight structures, the practice of public relations will remain an influential instrument, although it may not serve the public interest.

### ***Recommendations for Promoting Ethical Practices in Digital PR***

***This capstone project recommends the following:***

#### **Mandatory Licensing and Accreditation for Political PR Practitioners**

Without proper certification, any person can practice political PR. Professional responsibility and ethical competence require that political PR professionals obtain licensing before working in their field. Like medical or legal licensing schemes, this accountability system would use enforceable conduct rules that trigger sanctions up to suspension or termination of practice.

#### **Establishment of Independent Ethical Review Boards**

A non-partisan external board focusing on PR ethics should function independently to evaluate complaints about unethical political messaging practices. This entity would analyze incidents of disinformation together with emotional exploitation and media manipulation practices before delivering public conclusions that expose campaign misconduct and practitioner misdoings.

#### **Regulation of Digital Political Advertising**

The government must create stricter rules for political digital promotion that specifically address targeting methods, funding declaration requirements, and content confirmation standards. Every political advertisement must be investigated for accuracy, and users should see identifying information, such as sponsorship details and audience demographics.

### **Accountability Mechanisms for Misinformation**

Public relations professionals who deliberately spread disinformation will receive formal sanctions such as removing political campaign privileges and public criticism with potential financial penalties. Organizations must apply these penalties as part of professional authorization and certification to demonstrate the actual real-world effects of unethical conduct.

### **Mandatory Ethics Education in PR Training**

Every political communication and public relations education program at universities and training institutions must include comprehensive ethics training modules. Comprehensive education should contain practical examples of online misinformation, anxiety-based communications, and democratic accountability because they connect theory to concrete effects in the real world.

### **Regulatory Changes for Preventing Unethical Campaigns in the Future**

Future unethical digital marketing requires governmental regulation updates as preventative measures against its occurrence. First, independent bodies and governmental entities need to implement stronger transparency rules that allow political advertising platforms to reveal their sources of support and methods of audience targeting the public. Secondly, social media organizations should implement a time-sensitive fact-checking system with financial penalties for deceptive content submissions. Thirdly, the regulators should establish a ban on using personal psychological or behavioral information for political ad targeting after psychographic data abuse in 2016 because of fear of identity and emotional manipulation. Additionally, a political communications oversight body should exist to research ethical violations, hand out penalties and suspension orders, and create public reports about campaign messages in the same way the media monitoring organization functions. Finally,

governments need to establish precise legal actions against political campaigns distributing false information about voting procedures and allegations of criminal conduct against opponents or attacks against institutional authority. Free speech becomes irrelevant in such instances because it threatens electoral integrity.

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