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Responding to Innuendo: A Case From the Ivory Coast

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Abstract. This article describes some of the psychological issues involved in successfully responding to political innuendo.

One crucial aspect of the recent referendum on a new constitution in the Ivory Coast concerned the candidacy requirements for presidential aspirants. These requirements specify that all aspirants must have been born in the Ivory Coast, as must be the case for both parents as well. Moreover, aspirants must never have held the citizenship of another country.

Most analysts of political events in the Ivory Coast view the constitutional requirements as a vehicle to prevent Alassane Ouattara, a former Ivorian prime minister and former deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund, from seeking office. This view is supported by rumors and innuendoes reinforced by both the former and current presidents of the Ivory Coast that Mr. Ouattara's father was born in Burkina Faso (the former Upper Volta) and that Mr. Ouattara once held Burkinabe citizenship. The problem for Mr. Ouattara in the run-up to the referendum was how to best respond to the rumors and innuendoes.

A precis of research on innuendoes suggests that a headline bearing an incriminating question--e.g., is Ouattara a real Ivorian?--is more potentially damaging than one bearing an incriminating denial--e.g., it is not true that Ouattara is an Ivorian. In addition, the publicly acknowledged source of innuendoes seems to have a variable effect with reports of "no effect," "contributing to receptiveness," and "reducing receptiveness" all being cited.

A precis of research on rumors suggests that they are generated and transmitted most effectively dependent on the personal anxiety, general uncertainty, credulity, and outcome-relevant involvement of the intended audience. As the persuasive strength of the rumors increases, the victim must change strategy from ignoring them to confirming the victim's position on "the truth" and refuting effectively. It also is generally recognized, however, that more interdisciplinary effort and more attention to demographic, social, and psychological aspects of the rumor transmitter needs to occur in ongoing research.

From Mr. Ouattara's vantage point, a salient question has been whether or not to directly refute rumors and innuendoes. He has responded by splitting the difference. Specifically, he has always denied the political claims of his opponents, yet he has gone along with supporting the referendum on the constitution. This last maneuver can even be perceived as a positive innuendo generating a question: why would he support the referendum unless he, indeed, has nothing to worry about as to his father and his citizenship? This maneuver seems even more appropriate in the context of the constitution draft having had extremely significant support during the run-up to the referendum and the elections and their aftermath.

Nowhere in this analysis is there anything about the "real truth." However, before postmodernists rejoice at another example of truth's demise, one must note rumors and innuendoes are being

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employed to fight for the right to dictate the truth. In essence, the truth is still worth fighting for and this is something that is neither a rumor nor innuendo. (See DiFonzo, N., Bordia, P., & Rosnow, R.L. (1994). Reigning in rumors. *Organizational Dynamics*, 23, 47-62; Onishi, N. (July 24, 2000). Ivory Coast votes on charter bringing back civilian rule. *The New York Times*, p. A3; Pendleton, S.C. (1998). Rumor research revisited and expanded. *Language and Communication*, 18, 69-86; Rosnow, R.L. (1991). Inside rumor: A personal journey. *American Psychologist*, 46, 484-496; Wegner, D.M., Wenzlaff, R., Kerker, R.M., & Beattie, A.E. (1981). Incrimination through innuendo: Can media questions become public answers? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 40, 822-832.) (Keywords: Innuendo, Ivory Coast, Ouattara, Rumor.)