

On Defining Truth

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Communication of all sorts is passed off as "truth," when in fact it is a collection of varying degrees of truth, half-truth, and untruth. This article seeks to put the semantic spaciousness of the word truth into a more comprehensive context. It does so through construction of a continuum of terms, divided into four practical categories – (a) intent to be open and fully honest, (b) intent to be honest but with selective use of information, (c) use of untruths but with no intent to deceive, and (d) conscious intent to deceive. □ Analysis of the categories relates each to degrees of ethical behavior of the communicator.

The word *truth* is so frequently and sometimes carelessly used in our conversations that the depth of its meaning may have been lost or never even encountered. Children are admonished to "tell the truth." Witnesses swear to tell "the whole truth." We seem to think our credibility is strengthened if we follow a statement with ". . . and that's the truth."

If we seek to define truth in absolute terms, we may be no more successful than countless generations of our predecessors. Plato (1901), in his "Allegory of the Cave," sought an answer to the eternal question, "What is truth?" (p. 233ff.). The Greek philosopher Diogenes (Sayre, 1948) carried a lantern in search of an honest man, assumedly one who would tell the truth. John Stuart Mill (1859) asserted that because no one holds a monopoly on truth, we should not hesitate to hear opposing viewpoints, lest we might unknowingly reject truth (p. 24). Walter Lippmann (1922), emphasized that news and the truth are not the same thing and must be clearly distinguished (p. 226).

Our search, therefore, predictably does not yield an absolute definition of truth, but may help to put the word's meaning into a more comprehensive context. Communicators seek to communicate truths about various subjects. In addition, communicators often deal in varying



degrees of truth, and therefore a better definition of what we mean may be helpful both to communicators and audiences.

First, let us construct a continuum of terms, something of a gray scale from one extreme to another. Let us put absolute truth at one end, and blatant lies at the opposite end. The continuum would give us items and categories that look like this: □

<u>Items in Continuum</u>	<u>Group Characteristics</u>
TRUTH/truth facts and information journalistic “news”	Intent to inform accurately and fully, no apparent bias
public relations copy editorials/columns advertising copy propaganda	intent to persuade by using selective information; truth but not whole truth
parables and allegories fiction honest error	nontruths told without intent to deceive
deceit “white lies” BLATANT LIES	intent to deceive, even if for purposes thought justifiable

We have divided the continuum into four broad categories, each deserving to be treated differently in terms of ethical justification.

The first group of items in the continuum represents conscientious attempts to present information correctly, accurately, and fully—at least as far as is humanly possible.

The next injects persuasion. But, significantly, persuasion does not permit the telling of untruths. Instead, persuasion only introduces the element of selectivity in communication, but retains the implicit assumption that truth is being told.

The third group of items deals with untruths, but with no intent to deceive. Information is shared to illustrate or entertain, or is simply erroneous even if thought to be true.

And the final group of items represents conscious effort to communicate false information. Two out of the three items in this group



may be rationalized as justifiable for a defined purpose but the final one is by definition without any redeeming value.

Inform Fully, Accurately; No Conscious Bias

TRUTH and truth deserve to be distinguished from each other, for without clarification we find ourselves meaning two things by the same word. TRUTH is absolute, it is what is, even though its totality is not fully comprehended. An appreciation of the nebulous existence of TRUTH necessitates a recognition of human limitations, of our own inability to “know it all.” Therefore, truth is what we perceive, view, and describe honestly and to the best of our ability, but with the knowledge that seldom if ever can we know and understand TRUTH.

Plato's “Allegory of the Cave” (1901) distinguished between TRUTH and truth. Briefly, Plato described people imprisoned within a cave, perpetually chained in a position with their backs to the entrance, so they could never see out. All they could see was the interior of the cave. Plato said TRUTH walked by, casting its shadow into the cave beyond the people. When they saw the shadow, they gave it the name, “truth,” because it was TRUTH as they perceived it (p. 233ff.).

We might note several limitations of shadows. They are only outlines and lack detail. They are two dimensional, whereas reality is three dimensional. The shadow's size may be much larger or smaller than reality, due to the angle of the light. On an irregular surface, the shadow may bear little resemblance to the reality.

The clear implication of Plato's allegory is that we are those people. We all live in our own private cave. Our individual cave of personal characteristics may be shaped by uncontrollable factors such as place and year of birth, parentage, sex, and ethnicity. It may continue to be shaped by controllable variables such as education, vocation, residence, and marital partner. All these variables cause us to see the shadow (truth) in our own perspective. But like the people in Plato's cave, we may never see nor fully comprehend TRUTH. Therefore, like the people in the cave, we name our shadows “truths” and often speak of them as if they were TRUTHS.

This individual definition of truth can further be illustrated by the assertion that no two people witness the exact same event in the same way. Because we stand in different places, our perspective is at least slightly different. In fact, because of the relation of near and far objects, our two eyes do not even see the exact same scene.



We may conclude then that TRUTH is what is, and truth is what individuals perceive and speak of as truth. We may further assert that truth is not necessarily incorrect, but it is almost certainly less than complete and therefore something short of TRUTH.

Lippmann (1922) said, "If we assume . . . that news and truth are two words for the same thing, we shall arrive nowhere" (p. 226). But that propels us a few degrees forward in our continuum, so let us take it one degree at a time and proceed from truth to facts.

Facts and information are often spoken of interchangeably with truth. But after our investigation of the word truth, perhaps we now recognize the need for a more precise definition of these two terms.

Let us define *facts* as documentable elements of truth. We can state the amount of rainfall in a given location. We can report the number of members present for a city council meeting. We can describe and picture a 2-car wreck at an intersection. These are facts; elements, but only limited elements, of truths.

Information can then be defined as a collection of related facts, organized in such a way as to convey to audiences a message that is clear and understandable, and to which they may choose to react. We consider information to be truthful, but perhaps we can now recognize that it is more truth than TRUTH.

Journalistic "news" is closely related to information. However, traditions of reporting and newswriting inject some more precise assumptions. Journalists claim to abide by such stated principles as accuracy, fairness, balance, and timeliness. Their stated intent is to communicate information and only information, leaving persuasion to editorial pages and to advertisers.

To paraphrase a forgotten former Supreme Court justice who was talking about judicial objectivity, within the bounds of factual reporting, however, are several levels of permissiveness. *Depth reporting*, *interpretative reporting*, and *news analysis* are terms used to indicate research, greater detail, more background, more relating of facts to other facts, more emphasis on meaning rather than on just the current factual event. These more permissive styles demand that communicators be better educated, have at hand files of background information, and have the integrity to maintain balance in the expanded presentation.

Feature writing injects human interest, and subject treatment that combines entertainment with information. Those who write features employ greater latitude of evaluative description, the painting of word



pictures that an editor would not tolerate in straight news. A degree of featurizing may appear in almost any news story, but journalists doggedly distinguish between hard news and the soft stuff of features.

Intent to Persuade; Selective Use of Truth

Public relations copy consciously introduces bias, but within a very carefully defined limit. Public relations people generate vast quantities of news copy, and submit it gratuitously to the media. Typically, it is very well written and edited, meticulously neat, grammatically precise—in short, excellent journalistic copy but with one major caveat. Its content is very selective, very subjectively chosen. Public relations people know that publication of their news releases depends not only on journalistic quality, but also on credibility of content. So, despite subjective choice of material, they write so as to appear authoritative and unbiased. And they count it a major success every time their copy is selected for publication or airing.

But beyond these high standards of quality and content, public relations communication is different because of one consistent characteristic—the intent to persuade. The persuasive element may be subtle, but it must be present because the distinguishing characteristic of public relations writers is that they owe their allegiance to a corporate or institutional employer, rather than to the public; to selective persuasion rather than to objective information.

There is a tendency among media journalists and public relations journalists (let us call them both journalists) to eye each other with some suspicion and distrust. What is unnecessarily important is that each recognize the loyalties and orientations of the other. The public relations person (loyal to a persuasion ethic) should expect the journalist (loyal to an information ethic) to look also to other sources with other viewpoints. The journalist should expect public relations copy to be accurate, but should expect it to be written from a selective viewpoint.

Public relations journalists, in order to retain credibility, must be careful to write facts and truths best they can. But in our truth continuum, they have the alternative of a great deal of selectivity among those facts and truths. Therefore, we should be able to assume that what they write is correct, but we should know that it is not necessarily objective and unbiased; that it is certainly not the whole story.

Editorials and columns, for the first time in our continuum, inject the permissiveness of frankly stated opinion. Editorials express the opinion



of the paper; columns of a named person. They are treated together here because they share many characteristics. Contrary to the notion held by many young journalists, opinion pieces are far more than “this is what I think.” Typically, only experienced journalists with proven ability are granted access to the editorial page.

Editorial and column writing is strongly rooted in fact. Typically, the opinion piece may begin with a news lead, then offer thoughtful opinion; or it may begin with an opinion, then back it up with factual reasoning. The writer must be very well informed, as well as very articulate and persuasive. Unlike public relations copy, editorials and columns assert their intent to persuade. Thus we move another significant step beyond factual accounts of truths.

Advertising copy is still another example of persuasive information, written with a biased purpose, but still subject to the necessity of accuracy. The advertising copywriter, like all previously mentioned communicators, must also be concerned with credibility.

But advertising copy plays word games with its audience, and the public has come to accept its messages with a slightly suspicious attitude. We expect ad copy will not blatantly lie, but we understand that its careful wording is only technically on the safe side of untruth. For example, many analgesics claim to contain “the specific ingredient recommended by. . . .” What they omit is that the “specific ingredient” may be merely aspirin. Or they may solemnly proclaim this as the product “doctors recommend most.” Note the order of the words; they do not say “most doctors,” even though that may be inferred by the audience. It may be that only a small number of doctors recommend this product most, but advertisers avoid that precise definition.

Still, advertisers do not lie. If the public carelessly accepts carefully constructed messages to mean what they appear to say, instead of what they actually say, advertisers escape with the justification that their copy is not false. In general, society has accepted this form of communication as legitimate, and it appears to be up to the audience to be more discriminating in its interpretation of the message.

Propaganda is a badly mistreated word, thanks to its having been used in recent decades in grossly negative communication. The word is taken from a religious term, the verb “to propagate,” as in the Catholic admonition to “propagate the faith,” or evangelize the world (Jowett & O’Donnell, 1986). In its noun form, propaganda means an intensive, organized effort to persuade. Connotatively, the implication is usually



related to ideological persuasion. More broadly, we could say that editorializing, advertising, and public relations are actually forms of propaganda, although they are not commonly so categorized.

Propaganda took on a decidedly negative connotation after its use by Nazi Germany (Doob, 1935). Adolf Hitler created a Ministry of Propaganda, whose mission was to convince the German people that Aryans were a master race, destined to rule the world; that all others were destined to be subservient; and that select others—Jews—deserved only extermination. The degree of success of this persuasive campaign is stark testimony to the potential of propagandistic communication. Indeed, *brainwashing* is a newer term to enter our vocabulary, meaning that a person's ideological perspective can drastically be altered by radical persuasive techniques.

In propaganda, we have a more extreme form of persuasive communication, thus its location far along the truth continuum. Many (e.g., religious zealots) might argue that the content of propaganda could be true, and that may be so. Nevertheless, a great deal of freedom of selection is employed by the propagandist, and it could hardly be argued that the message is objective.

Use of Untruths; No Intent to Deceive

Parables and *allegories* are examples of communication clearly understood to be fictitious or untrue, but related without intent to deceive. In fact, the intent of parables and allegories is to aid clear understanding through a fictional or hypothetical example, and by this means to communicate a “greater truth.”

We may return to the beginning of our continuum, to TRUTH/truth, and observe that Plato's “Allegory of the Cave” was a blatant untruth. Does this make it unethical? Not at all, for it is understood to be a fictitious example leading to better understanding. The earthly ministry of Jesus Christ was characterized by the telling of many parables. Technically speaking, Christ's parables conveyed untruths, but they were told for the purpose of revealing truths, and they were understood to be only examples.

Parables and allegories are placed near the end of our continuum, however, for two important and consistent reasons—to concede that these message forms are fictitious and to illustrate that not all untruth is deceptive.



New journalism could be categorized also with parables and allegories. This style of writing was popularized in the 1960s by a small group of talented writers who rebelled at the structured writing required of journalists. Although the term is not uniformly defined by all, its general meaning is the use of fictitious characters and the techniques of fiction writing in the communication of journalistic subject matter. Again, the intent was to communicate a greater truth. New journalism bears much resemblance in style to the historical novel, which also takes liberties with quotations and details in the telling of historical events. The justification is that history is made more readable and thus more widely read. Historical figures such as Michelangelo and Andrew and Rachel Jackson are humanized for us by Irving Stone in *The Agony and The Ecstasy* (1985) and *The President's Lady* (1951).

Fiction is a good example of the fact that society does not always desire the truth. If all untruths were magically eliminated from our communication, there could be no novels, no plays, no programs of television entertainment, no fairy tales for children.

Fiction is by definition untruth. But it is openly defined and fully understood to be untruth. Therefore it does not deceive. But controversy may enter the evaluation of fiction when a fictional story about real people or real situations is misinterpreted by a portion of the audience. Occasionally, a work of fiction is attacked by those who perceive that the portrayal is somehow unfair. The controversy is rooted in a misunderstanding of the nature of fiction, as distinguished from factual reporting or editorial commentary.

Fiction is one more example of communication that is frankly untrue but which is understood to be more for entertainment than for information.

Honest error is the conveying of information thought to be true but in reality false. The error may result from factual misunderstanding. It may relate to erroneous translation or semantic variables in the meanings of words. Error may be visual, as in the viewing of a mirage on the horizon or the indefinite distance between persons or objects in a picture. Error may result simply from leaping to a conclusion without adequately analyzing raw data.

We may concede that in honest error there is no intent to deceive. However, the result is potentially as damaging as intentional deceit or blatant lies. The result is the communication of untruths, with possibly severe results.



For the careful communicator, it is not enough to excuse error on the flimsy justification of right intentions and absence of malice. To communicate as accurately and honestly as possible, the communicator must guard against error by verifying information. To do less is to deceive by carelessness or default.

Intent to Deceive; Rationalized Justification

Deceit is a broad category of misinformation that may be communicated without culpably "telling a lie." However, deceit broaches ethical justification in that it is intentionally deceptive communication. Nevertheless, a communicator may loudly proclaim that a message contained no specific untruths, no outright lies.

Deceit by omission is widely practiced in both business and social messages. We may want to conceal information we know is of interest to our audience, so we carefully leave it out. Meanwhile, we may elaborate on other information, to convey the impression we are providing a complete account. We know our audience is being deprived of useful information, and we know we are deceiving. But we hope our audience will not suspect, and we salve our conscience with the justification that technically we did not lie.

Deceit by generalization is a second method by which we may intentionally mislead. Generalized information is intended to create an impression that may be largely or totally false. Generalizations are often marked by such phrases as "Everyone knows that . . ." or "Of course it's obvious that . . ." Generalizations may also be identified by imprecise terms such as *many* or *most*, when it is clear in careful reading that no definition of how many is available. Generalizations often use stereotypes, such as implied characteristics of "Yankees" or "Southerners."

Generalizations are commonly heard from adolescents seeking parental permission. They may claim "everybody's going," or "all the kids are doing it." The clear persuasive intent of generalizations is to convey the possibly false impression of conformity or unanimity. The appeal is to a "band-wagon" mentality (Doob, 1935).

Deceit by *over-specificity* (or, as the propaganda analysts sometimes call it, card-stacking) creates an impression of being open and honest, but in the process giving such precise, though narrow, information that key elements are omitted. To the question, "Are there any cases of AIDS on our campus?" an administrator might reply, "There has not been one



single case of confirmed AIDS among our student body.” The administrator carefully specified “confirmed” and “student body,” thus excluding unconfirmed cases and nonstudents on campus, such as faculty and staff.

A perceptive person should be suspicious of over-specificity any time a reply or a statement is couched in restrictive language, any time the message carefully defines a geographic, demographic, or time sequence limitation. This is the audience's cue to ask a more precise question, and expect a more encompassing reply.

White lies are clearly untruths, but they are commonly justified as being kind or for a good purpose. A doctor's white lie may conceal from a terminally ill patient the severity of a disease. A family member's white lie may keep from a loved one the secret of a surprise birthday party. A friend's white lie may offer a compliment about new clothes in place of a more honest negative evaluation.

Whether white lies can be ethically justified is subjective. Deontologists may argue that lies are lies, and white is not an adjective that excuses the reality of the lie. Teleologists, on the other hand, may argue that there is a time and a place for the white lie, when a desired result allegedly justifies an otherwise unjustifiable method for attaining the result. If white lies are ever to be justified, we must accept the rationale that the end can justify the means. □

BLATANT LIES is the ultimate position in our continuum. By blatant lies, we mean that some untruths are communicated with no redeeming purpose, with only an unjustifiable intent to deceive. Blatant lies may contain no elements of justification, as in the three categories of deceit and as in white lies. Blatant lies may have no underlying purpose of conveying greater understanding, as in the case of parables, allegories, and new journalism. Blatant lies do not reveal themselves as fiction, but try to pass off their content as valid truth. □ Blatant lies, if ever to be ethically excused (Bok, 1978, pp. 111-112), might only be justified by the teleological argument that the lie serves to avoid a tragic outcome.

In summary of the continuum, we should note that not all agree on the exact order of individual items. What is more important is the order of the four categories: (a) intent to be open and fully honest, (b) intent to be honest but with selective use of information, (c) honest use of untruths but with no intent to deceive, and (d) conscious intent to deceive.



What is intended by this discourse is that we better understand truth and its uses, and that we recognize much of our communication as half-truth or untruth.

And we should now recognize that degrees of truthfulness are not themselves exclusive arbiters of ethics in communication. Ethical people write and broadcast news. Ethical people write editorials. Ethical people write public relations and advertising copy. Ethical people write fiction or teach through use of fictitious examples. Some would even argue that ethical people deceive or tell white lies for a defensible purpose.

The more important variable is definition, and audience understanding of that definition. So long as we more accurately recognize truth and its many fractional forms of presentation, we will more clearly articulate and evaluate messages couched in the continuum's many types of communication. We will also more clearly be able to judge the ethics of the communicator within each of the degrees of truthfulness.

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