



Dancing at the Bal Masqué, August Willem van Voorden, c. 1910. [PD] Wikimedia Commons

LIFE IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA



Truth has become a matter of convenience.

RALPH KEYES

We live in an era in which borders between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and nonfiction have blurred. Deceiving others has become both a challenge and a game. There is much incentive and little penalty for improving the storyline of our lives. This practice has become so common that we hardly even consider it “dishonest.”

Ours is the post-truth era. Standards of honesty have not only changed, they have *transformed*. At one time we had truth and lies. Now we have truth, lies, and the form of dissembling I call “post-truth”—statements that aren’t actually true but that the teller considers too benign to call lies.

Bill Clinton personified the post-truth era (a phrase first used in a 1992 *Nation* essay by Steve Tesich). Al Gore was a good backup singer. George W. Bush carried on the tradition. Donald Trump is its exemplar. But we can’t assess dissembling by prominent public figures in a vacuum. They trim the truth in a context of trends that have created an atmosphere of deception-tolerance.

THE TRUTH IMPROVED

In the Clinton-Trump era we’re so accustomed to being deceived that we forget that as recently as the early 1970s we could still get outraged about Richard Nixon’s many deceits. Jimmy Carter got elected in part because he promised *not* to

tell us lies. In the years of Reagan, then Clinton, Bush, and now Trump, outrage about presidential dishonesty has given way to cynicism: *They're all liars.*

It's probably safe to say that honesty is on the ropes in contemporary American society. The gap between truth and lies has narrowed. Choosing which to tell becomes largely a matter of convenience. One survey found that 95% of college students polled said they would make at least one false statement to get a job. Another pollster found that 91% of a sample of 2000 subjects admitted they told lies on a regular basis. This pollster concluded that lying had become a cultural trait in America. "That hasn't really been understood around the world," he said. "Americans lie about everything—and usually for no good reason."

Of course, there have always been those who believed lying is overrated as an ethical lapse. "Without lies" said author Anatole France, "humanity would perish of despair and boredom." Nonetheless, in nearly all cultures for most of time, lies have been considered the antithesis of truth and best not told. Society would collapse if lying became the norm.

This is why, rather than simply accept dishonesty as a way of life, we manipulate notions of truth. We say we're "economical with the truth," we "massage" truthfulness, we "sweeten it," we tell "the truth improved" or engage in "truthful hyperbole," Donald Trump's favorite rationale for being dishonest. No matter how casual dishonesty has become, those who engage in it don't want to consider themselves liars. That sounds so *judgmental*. As a result, we say we "misspoke" or "exercised poor judgment." The term "deceive" gives way to "spin." At worst, saying "I wasn't truthful" sounds better than "I lied." Nor would we want to accuse others of lying. We say they're "in denial."

LITTLE "LIFE LIES"

We're probably no more prone to make things up than our ancestors were, just better able to get away with it. The size, complexity, and mobility of postwar society facilitate artifice. With less face-to-face contact among those who know each other well enough to tell when they're lying, incentives to be honest dwindle.

Nowhere is this more true than in cyberspace. Here, the urge to dissemble is not just tolerated but celebrated. When interacting with those whom

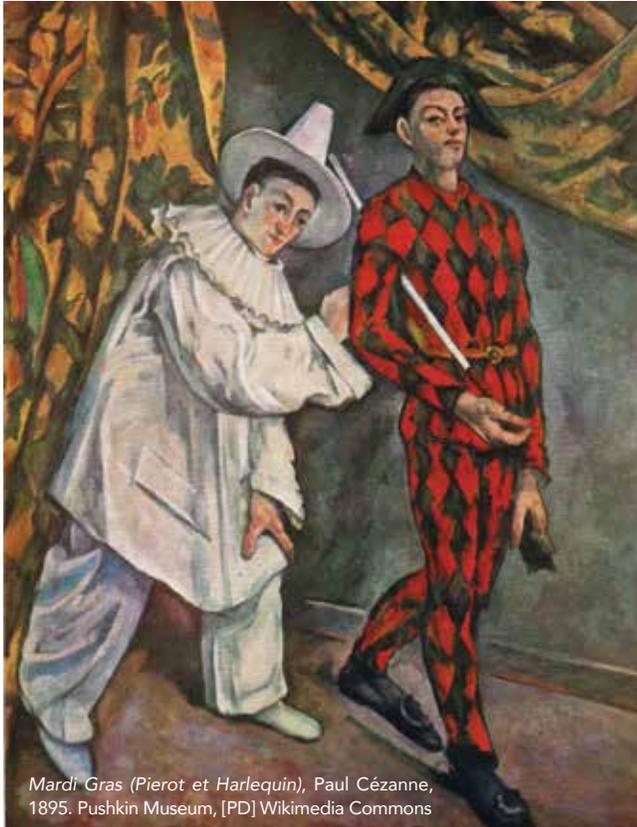
we don't know and can't even see, there is great temptation to convey whatever is convenient—true or false. Deception is even encouraged online, as a safety measure or simply because it's part of the fun. Cybercitizens list the freedom to be someone they're not as a key appeal of this electronic masked ball. The millions who don and doff identities like baseball caps get in the habit of being *poseurs*.

Offline, this reinforces the common practice of buffing up one's identity with apocrypha about our age, our weight, our education, even how tall we are. Ibsen called these "life lies," unprovoked deceptions designed to bolster the self. With life lies we dress up in psychic outfits beyond our means. In time we may forget they aren't true. The 200 game we bowled in high school creeps upward to 250. A retort we wish we'd made now is one we did. A degree we wish we'd earned shows up on our resume.

THE TRUTH EMBELLISHED

Personnel officers take it for granted that up to half the vitas they read are padded, and as many as a quarter include gross misinformation. They've learned to be skeptical about everything, from degrees earned through jobs held to birth dates. Executive recruiter Jude Werra of Milwaukee compiles a semiannual *Liars Index*[®]. In the 300 or so resumes Werra reviews every year for top management positions, the proportion that include serious misrepresentation—usually about education credentials—has steadily risen from about 13% in the mid-1990s to over 20%.

Educational credentials are easy to check, but if a job applicant lies about those, what might he or she be faking that's harder to verify? Wayland Clifton, the one-time police chief of Gainesville, Florida, spent years boasting about playing football for the legendary coach Bear Bryant at the University of Alabama. When Clifton ran for county sheriff, reporters couldn't verify this claim. To help them out, Clifton produced a 1960 clipping from *The Birmingham News*. According to the article, during an October 29 game against Mississippi State, "Buster" Clifton made nine tackles, recovered a fumble, and ran an intercepted pass back 80 yards. The clipping—complete with a picture of Clifton in his Alabama uniform (number 43)—reported that he was named Southeastern Conference defensive player of the week for these heroics. The clipping was a fake. Not that it did him much harm. A year later Wayland Clifton was one of five finalists to become police chief of Dallas.



Mardi Gras (Pierot et Harlequin), Paul Cézanne, 1895. Pushkin Museum, [PD] Wikimedia Commons

Clifton is one of the life-lying elite I call *imposeurs*. Imposeurs go beyond petty resume touch-ups into elaborate ID makeovers. Unlike impostors, they retain their basic identity but alter key elements. These psychic transformations can involve anything from medals won to touchdowns run. The ranks of imposeurs include Oracle CEO Larry Ellison, among the world's richest men, who claims graduate degrees he never earned; Time-Warner's Steve Ross, who convinced *The New York Times* that he'd once played football for the Cleveland Browns; and Chicago Judge Michael O'Brien who had not one but two Congressional Medals of Honor cast on his own behalf.

My tally of hundreds of such imposeurs includes four judges, three police chiefs, any number of college professors, countless politicians, the head of Houston's transportation authority, and one ambassador to Switzerland, the late Larry Lawrence whose corpse was dug up from Arlington National Cemetery when it turned out he'd invented a story about being wounded while serving in the Merchant Marine during World War II. If ever imposeurship was wish fulfillment it is on the field of combat. In recent years several thousand fake veterans have been called to account by real ones.

TRUTH IS RELATIVE

Postmodernism is the ship on which this development sails. The core postmodern concept is that there's no such



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If your intentions are good,
accuracy is beside the point.

thing as objective truth; only what we say is true. This shifts the emphasis of intellectual thought from *facts* to *meaning*. Many academics concluded that because the fanciful autobiography of Nobel Prize-winning Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchu helped improve our understanding of oppression, who were we to call it dishonest? After columnist Patricia Smith was fired from *The Boston Globe* for fabricating material, a Boston University professor who used her writing in his class argued that Smith's "fidelity to the truth of the human condition . . . never wavered."

Even though such postmodern thinking raises important questions about the nature of truth, what's relevant to intellectual discourse doesn't always travel well into daily life. Unfortunately, that's exactly where it's gone. As one observer of postmodern relativism recently wrote, "It is a creeping assumption at the start of a new millennium that there are things more important than truth."

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If anything, literal truth is considered a poorer, more meager means of communication than creative falsehood. Embellished information can be true in spirit; truer than truth. Edmund Morris called his fictionalized depiction of Ronald Reagan's life "an advance in biographical honesty." This is intellectually fashionable doublethink. It puts a New Age spin on the old Marxist conviction that facts can be altered for a greater good, and that rigid notions of accuracy are a relic of bourgeois morality.

HONESTY AND COMMUNITY

How did we get to this moral impasse? The obvious cause of honesty's decline is an erosion of ethical standards. From this perspective, America's moral compasses have broken down: *Our sense of right and wrong has taken a vacation. Religious faith has been replaced by nihilism.*

Nonsense.

There is no evidence that early Americans were more moral than their descendants, let alone more religious. This country never enjoyed an ethical golden age. It's doubtful that former-day



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Americans—the ones who broke treaties with Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and engaged in rapacious capitalism—were any more “moral” than current ones.

The rise of deceit has less to do with ethical decline than with the breakdown of community. There was a time when it was harder to deceive others and the consequences greater if one got caught. Those who feel closely tied to each other, and who share common values, are more hesitant to dissemble. Neighbors keep each other honest. In small communities, much gets conveyed between the lines. No lie detector can match people who are well acquainted. Consciously or unconsciously they register the throbbing carotid, the blinking eyes, or drumming fingertips of a dissembler. Friends and neighbors are organic polygraphs.

ALTERNATE REALITIES

There is a widespread, prevalent sense that we’re all being deceived, routinely, and that much of what others tell us can’t be trusted. From potential mates to prospective employees, we no longer feel sure whom exactly we’re dealing with.

Lawyers have always considered truth to be an ambiguous concept. When we hear a term such as “legally accurate,” we’re reminded that there’s not just honesty as the rest of us understand that term but honesty as conceived by the law. In the legal sense, a lie that isn’t told under oath is no lie at all. In an adversarial

system of justice, a lawyer’s first loyalty is to the client, not the truth. Lawyers are second only to postmodern philosophers in accepting that there are many ways to perceive truthfulness. What a lay person might consider a lie, a lawyer might see as simply an “alternative version of reality.” If we wonder why notions of truth and falsehood have become more vague, more relative, and more flexible, our legal system (and the perspective that truth and lies are fungible) is an important influence to consider.

No one doubts that politicians routinely blow smoke in our faces. Research by Colgate psychology professor Caroline Keating has even found a connection between an ability to lead and an ability to lie (among men, anyway). With its penchant for politicians who perform well, TV gives the nod to this type of candidate. Does it matter? One politician’s blarney can be more entertaining than another’s accurate account, and no harm done. But look again. If a dissembling candidate beats one who’s told the truth, was the election fair? And when politicians doctor their background, as so many have, what else might they lie about?

Nowhere is “truth” more ambiguous than in the entertainment industry, where a combustible mixture of ambitious people pursue the art of artifice. Movie studios are settings in which the success of one’s work is ultimately measured by the quality of its deception. A common



The Tragic Actor (Rouvière as Hamlet), Edouard Manet, 1866. National Gallery of Art

joke in Hollywood is: “Hello, he lied.” There, lies are told to gain advantage, because you don’t like somebody, or simply because you think you can get away with it and find lying more interesting than telling the truth. Over time this attitude has filtered into a broader society fascinated by celebrities.

SUSPICIOUS MINDS

In the absence of actual knowledge about each other, we depend on outer symbols to assess those we meet: designer labels, shoe style, firm handshakes, steady eye contact. These symbols are easy to manipulate. A former KGB agent said one of the first things they learned in spy school was how to look firmly in the eyes of those they were deceiving. When Bill Clinton told clergyman Robert Schuller that he hadn’t had sex with Monica Lewinsky, Rev. Schuller later recalled that “he did it with such passion, and with his eyes locked on me.”

The assumption that those with whom we’re dealing are as likely to be lying as telling the truth drastically alters

the flavor of social discourse. In the suspicious society, background-checking is a growth industry and “Google” has become a verb. Suitors and others assiduously Google each other to find out what court cases they’ve been involved in, who else they might have been married to, if they’re at all who they said they were. Society pays a price for this level of suspicion.

The damage that deceit does to social interactions isn’t necessarily direct. According to one study, recipients of lies like the other person less, even when they don’t realize that person is being dishonest. Another study found that subjects considered interactions in which lies were deliberately told “less pleasant and less intimate” than ones in which lies weren’t told. Employees who work for organizations they perceive as honest have higher morale than those who suspect their employer is being deceptive.

Integrity, in other words, has market value.

IN TRUTH WE TRUST

There is a pragmatic case for telling the truth, one based more on social imperatives than morality, one less concerned about questions such as “What is truth?” or “Is lying always bad?” than “How can we live together with some semblance of trust?”

Virtue may be its own reward, but there are other, more practical reasons to avoid lying. The confidence engendered in a society whose members are generally honest with each other is the basis not only of political stability but economic prosperity. Francis Fukuyama has devoted an entire book to the theme that only societies with a high level of trust can enjoy the benefits of social capital, civility, and a free market economy. The more massive society gets, the more true this is.

As direct contact with others declines and technology serves as a go-between, we need *more* emphasis on honesty, not less. Large, complex societies like ours are actually more dependent on truth-telling than small, simple ones. The most important issue is not honesty per se but honesty’s most important product: *trust*.

In our contemporary climate of post-truthfulness, alas, our attitude toward honesty has grown casual. The burden of proof is as much on telling the truth as telling a lie. We need to shift it back, make truth-telling the default if

not the certainty. Some won’t swallow so much as a Tylenol without first asking, “Is this really necessary?” The same criterion should be applied to deception.

Philosopher Sissela Bok thinks any lie should be given “negative weight” when evaluating whether to let it leave one’s mouth. Unlike truth-telling, which almost never needs justification, lies should only be told when there’s a compelling reason to do so. “Mild as this initial stipulation sounds,” Bok writes in her classic book *Lying* (Vintage Books, 1989, 1999), “it would, if taken seriously, eliminate a great many lies told out of carelessness or habit or unexamined good intentions.”

Establishing a moral standard does not assume that all will always live up to this standard, or that whoever doesn’t should be punished. Rather, in the case of honesty, it means reaffirming that lying is wrong, and we know it’s wrong, even though it can sometimes be a lesser evil. This is a judgmental position, to be sure. But perhaps we *need* more judgment on this issue.

One reason we’ve lost our way in the ethical woods is that we’ve adopted the stance in which no one is held accountable for dishonesty. Casual duplicity picks away at our social fabric. Society would crumble if we assumed others were as likely to lie as tell the truth. We are perilously close to that point.

RALPH KEYES has authored sixteen books, including *The Post-Truth Era*, cited by *Oxford Dictionaries* as a key source of their 2016 Word of the Year: “post-truth.” He is completing a forthcoming book for Oxford University Press on *The Hidden History of Coined Words*.

EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- “The Truth about Lying,” a collection of six TED Talk videos on why we lie (to others and ourselves), why we believe lies, and how to spot a liar. ted.com
- “How Politicians Have Adapted for a Post-Truth Reality,” Zahira Jaser, *Newsweek*, Nov. 28, 2016. Jaser notes that modern leaders “adapt their style to different contexts” and followers are influenced by “subjective emotions and beliefs, rather than by objective facts.” newsweek.com
- “Martín Espada Reads ‘Blessed Be The Truth-Tellers,’” *Moyers & Company*, Feb. 26, 2013. A poem on childhood and discovering the truth about truth. billmoyers.com



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All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.—Steve Tesich, “A Government of Lies,” *The Nation*, Jan. 1992.

