

Lies Unlimited

Honesty is the best policy—or is it?

By Melissa Field Sherman '86

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The truth is we're conflicted about lies. After all, who hasn't told a little, white lie? Complimented a colleague after a poor presentation? Assured someone a horrid haircut flattered her face? Backed out of a social engagement with complaints of a fictitious illness? And how many of us indulge in a little "creativity" when preparing expense reports, income tax returns, or résumés?

We are, it seems, keen on the comfort of partial truths. It's part of the game, we reason. Who would want to know everything? And what does it matter, we ask, if no one gets hurt? Yet we become indignant when we perceive that we've been dealt something less than the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The delicate social contract is broken when a lie becomes big enough or hurtful enough—or when any number of people have known the truth and kept it from us!

Tricky stuff. The morality of lying is, at best, a difficult subject, but we seem to know instinctively that situations exist in which a lie seems to be a "right" and "good" thing. Charles V. Ford, author of *Lies! Lies! The Psychology of Deceit*, calls this an altruistic lie, a sort of Band-Aid for the soul—as when a mother assures her children the meal they've prepared is delicious and the tacky, ill-fitting shirt they've presented is just right. Ford identifies five other common types of lies, the definitions of which depend on their intent:

- **white lies:** those familiar social lubricants that ease our way —“Oh, dear! I've got to run! Gabby has a play-date.”
- **humorous lies:** hyperboles or entertaining anecdotes —“Then he fell right into the mud. No, really. It was all over him!”
- **defensive lies:** fingers in the dam to avoid punishment—“It wasn't me. She broke it.”
- **aggressive lies:** purposefully destructive deceits—“Well, everyone knows how she got the job.”
- **pathological lies:** compulsive tale-telling for no other reason than to tell lies—“Yeah, that's the ticket.”

Looking over the list, one realizes that, with the likely exception of compulsive, pathological lying, we engage in the art of social duplicity pretty regularly. So “deception is not something only bad

people do,” notes David Nyberg, author of *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life*. “We are all ordinary deceivers.” Of course, categorizing the content of our conversations this way prevents us from dwelling too long on how many varied types of untruths we exchange, but our cavalier acceptance of social lying may well have visited a more insidious type of deception on us.

For example, what if we discuss lies not as steps in the intimate dance of our interpersonal communication but rather as strategies in the intricate game of

Of course, not everyone lies. But it's my belief that today's climate of spin, fine print, and verbal chicanery is profoundly corrosive to the quality of our lives and to what passes for national discourse.

Carl Hausman, *associate professor of communications and author of Lies We Live By*

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mass communication? Certainly, some of us have learned to manipulate the truth better than others and have parlayed that dubious skill into a marketable asset. Sales associates, flight attendants, lawyers, politicians, advertising copywriters—cadres of workers are skilled in the art of reworking the truth. Such professionals, writes Nyberg, “are remarkably adept at managing their expressions.” In other words, they know how to lie to us.

And legions of other professionals are trained in the business of repackaging our information. Marketing specialists, public relations practitioners, journalists, campaign advisers, television producers—all vie for a precious byte of our attention.

- You’ve got mail.
- Tonight on this evening’s news...
- Buy this.
- Don’t believe them.
- Vote for...

We’re pummeled with more words, numbers and images than we could ever hope to properly catalogue and use. Carl Hausman, associate professor of communications at Rowan University and author of *Lies We Live By*, agrees: “One byproduct of the information explosion is that we’re overfed with information but starved for time to figure it out.” He adds that we’re “so accustomed to being lied to that we reflexively roll over and expose our bellies when confronted with misleading information.”

In short, our comfort with social lying and the frantic rate of information-processing required by our “connected” society have made us easy targets for the half-truths professionals in commerce and government concoct, mostly in the name of selling us something or someone.

And it didn’t happen overnight.

Hausman contends that we’ve been “suckers for half-truths” ever since Christopher Columbus made his pitch to Spain’s rulers, and, desperate to

A fundamental truth about advertising is that advertising agency people are not the ultimate decision-makers. As the advertising agency system functions today, they are the puppets, the manipulated. Nor is the advertiser as he sits astride the bleeding, panting agencyman the one who wields the whip in full command. The final control, the decisive power, is in your hands and under your command — if you will use it.

Samm Sinclair Baker, *The Permissible Lie: The Inside Truth About Advertising*

recoup some of their war losses, they agreed to finance his adventure to the New World. Taking advantage of the “new, new thing” of his time—the printing press—Columbus widely distributed brochures describing the gold and riches he could bring home, exciting readers’ interest in advance of his sales presentation to the king and queen. The rest is the stuff of history lessons.

Little has changed in 500 years. Like Ferdinand and Isabella, we see gold and riches where they may or may not exist: in political statements denying any “improper relationship” with a 22-year-old intern, in advertisements declaring that we can get our new luxury car for zero down and \$199 per month, and in letters certifying that we have won a sweepstakes.

That’s where Hausman comes in. A journalist and educator specializing in communications ethics, Hausman has worked in both print and broadcast media. His experience lends an insider’s immediacy to *Lies We Live By*, an exposé of the tools of deception used in advertising, politics, and the media to befuddle consumers and constituents. “We’ve trained liars to exploit us by rewarding them with our money, or our votes, or both,” writes Hausman. “The industries of influence—honest, dishonest, and in the gray area—are huge, and when we make decisions we’re up against a well-financed army of persuaders.” He adds,

“Persuasion has grown into a serious and sophisticated business and has interwoven itself into the fabric of society—so much so that we’re sometimes not sure what’s ‘real’ and what’s ‘made up.’”

Keeping it simple, Hausman outlines 15 techniques commonly used to trick, confuse, and mislead—five each for words, numbers, and images, respectively. For example, department stores frequently employ “tortured definitions”—a form of lying with words—to lure us to sales. They advertise

“20-50% OFF ALL* JEWELRY” or “20% off STOREWIDE.” The fine print, of course, tells the real story: ALL* excludes watches and fashion jewelry, and STOREWIDE excludes several departments.

Lying with numbers can be even more bamboozling than lying with text because “we are respectful—practically worshipful—of numbers,” says Hausman. “Is it any wonder that in the age of the information avalanche we cling to the spurious precision of numbers?” One example of duping with numbers, is the “veiled variable,” a technique used by hotels, which offer room rates as low as \$40 per night—but not in any of the locations to which you’re traveling; mastered by credit card companies, which offer wonderfully low introductory rates only to increase the interest rate exponentially if one or two late payments are posted to the account; and brought to new levels of creativity by automobile retailers, which quote marvelous lease options and hide the down payment and fees in the incomprehensible flurry of words at the end of the advertisement.

Deceiving with graphics, Hausman writes, “is the most diabolical method of ... persuasion because we see the result with our own eyes and are, therefore, reluctant to believe that we could be hoodwinked.” For example, a print advertisement for an automobile dealer appears



Illustrated by Samuel Guerrero '01

to promise that we can buy a car for \$199 a month and \$0 down. But careful analysis of the “graphic garble” reveals that \$0 down is available—resulting in monthly payments significantly higher than \$199—and that the particular car you want requires a trade-in or money down. Finally, the agate type at the bottom of the ad packs the nastiest punch: If you do choose to pay \$199 a month, your final monthly bill will be for a balloon payment of more than \$11,000!

While the marketplace is rife with examples of duplicity to get us in the door of the department store, the auto dealership or the bank, the techniques of deception are not limited to commerce. For example, to manipulate potential voters, politicians and their spin doctors use the graphic technique “ambiguous event,” perhaps better known as a photo opportunity. In his afterword to Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, columnist George F. Will writes, “A photo opportunity is an obviously staged...event in which a public official or candidate for office does something photogenic...for the purpose of

striking a pose useful in symbolizing an attitude or intimating a promise.” You know what he means: a candidate appears on our nightly news reading aloud to earnest and well-scrubbed children in a local elementary school. Another story follows later in the broadcast or maybe the next day in which a candidate is shown helping a crew break ground at the site of a new cultural center. “A photo opportunity,” continues Will, “properly understood, is someone important doing something solely for the purpose of being seen doing it. The hope is that those who see the resulting pictures will not see the elements of calculation (not to say cunning) that are behind the artifice.”

Not that politicians and campaign advisers are limited to deception by images only. Hausman predicted that the tortured definition might be one technique employed by the Gore camp in its presidential bid. “Gore likes to say he has always supported a ‘woman’s right to choose,’” says Hausman. “But he voted against federal financing for abortions in the late 1970s and early ’80s. That’s what happens when we shorthand everything,” he continues. “‘Woman’s right to choose,’

**[A]nd the rest of them who, being human, were all accustom-
ed to lying with a greater or lesser degree of skill, wondered, not why he did it, but why he did it so badly.**

Alice Thomas Ellis in *The Inn at the Edge of the World*

Mr. Gore seems to be pretty elastic. That’s a tortured definition.”

He notes that Bush can put “some definitions on the rack, too,” pointing out that the Texas governor “has a habit of touting his state governance in sweeping terms. For example,” says Hausman, “in his primary advertising he took credit for a ‘patients’ bill of rights.’ He actually let stand, without signing, the right for patients to sue HMOs.”

“We like shorthand,” Hausman told Mike Cuthbert on “Prime Time Radio” earlier this year. “Substance is scary; it’s boring and hard.” Inevitably, though, voters confuse the slogans and symbols—the political shorthand for what a candidate may believe—for the skills necessary to lead, and they end up being manipulated out of their votes.

Not that Hausman envisions a world of plainspeak. “I think everybody’s entitled to a little puffery,” he says of advertising. “In fact, the Federal Trade Commission even gives ‘puffery’ protection. So I can live with someone calling his car ‘the most elegant vehicle on the road.’ But lying,” he continues, “is another matter...When a car rental company quotes you a rate over the phone and then springs all sorts of hidden charges on you at the airport—when you, quite literally, are in no position to walk away—that’s grounds for public hanging.”

Well, we can’t hang the hapless clerk working the counter of the airport’s auto rental center (no matter how appealing that may sound after a long flight followed by the news that your \$25-a-day rental car is now going to set you back a cool \$55 daily). But, by anticipating the tortured definitions, veiled variables, and garbled graphics that may be leveled at us, we can—if not stop spin—at least refuse to reward those who set the wheels of deceit in motion. You see, while we may accept the relative benefits of at least five degrees of social lying, we don’t see much merit in the pervasive use of deception in commerce and government—not when it robs of us of money, time and votes. ■