

# *Lying, Journalism, Democracy\**

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***Ladies and Gentlemen,***

I'd like to convince you in this lecture on lying - truthfully, of course, to your face, without a word of a lie - that we live in times of rising sensitivity among publics to lying and that, in consequence, some old and vitally important perennial questions to do with lies and truth and power and the role of journalism in a democracy are making a comeback. The fascinating, intellectually gripping, paradoxical and politically charged subject of pseudology is making a comeback. Inspired by a recent range of global controversies, for instance to do with weapons of mass destruction, WikiLeaks and climate change, commentaries on the subject of lying are flourishing. It has become conventional to quote the work of Plato on noble lies, or Kant's discussion of whether it is justified to save the life of a friend by telling a lie (he didn't approve of that), or more usually to draw upon the writings of Hannah Arendt stimulated by the publication of the Pentagon Papers. But it was the Russian-born philosopher and historian of science Alexandre Koyré who was the first contemporary writer to pose new questions about the activity of lying: to ponder its changing historical significance and to emphasise the potentially catastrophic consequences of political lying in the age of media-saturated democracy.<sup>†</sup> His treatment was not only careful, sophisticated and unsettling. Its strengths and its weaknesses should ensure that it retains great relevance today – or so I hope to show.

Most people don't know his work, which is a pity, since Koyré's approach was certainly distinctive. It was first sketched in a 1943 essay conceived when working in Cairo, 'Reflexions sur la mensonge' (translated into English and published in New York in the summer of 1945). His starting point was a provocation: since human beings are equipped with the capacity for embodied speech they have a remarkable in-built capacity to 'say what is not so'. Lying is an intentional act of obfuscation, and it takes many varied forms, scattered through a range of settings, extending from the intimacies of everyday life through to powerful institutions of government and business. Sometimes the buncombe humans utter is motivated by playfulness, said just for the fun of it. (The Beatles smoked a joint in the toilets at Buckingham Palace before they received their MBEs in 1965. They didn't: they smoked cigarettes.) At other moments, humans handle

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<sup>†</sup> Alexandre Koyré, 'The Political Function of the Modern Lie', *Contemporary Jewish Record*, volume 8, number 3 (June 1945), pp. 290-300; and 'The Liar', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, volume 6, number 3 (1946), pp. 344-362.

the truth carelessly, without much thought, or because, as the old expression has it, a little inaccuracy saves a world of explanation. Lying without saying a word, the gesture of refusing to open one's mouth, or faking an orgasm, is another possibility. And saying what is not so is sometimes done in self-defence, as when telling untruths can be a weapon of the underdog, a tool for empowering the powerless slave against the omnipotent master. Koyré further observed that societies typically tolerate or recommend lying under certain circumstances, for instance when pork pies and taradiddles told are judged to be 'harmless' or even helpful, as when a child is told by its parent that they're so good at something when clearly they are not; or when good outcomes depend upon not telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth to everyone, or when bitter truths that otherwise would cause pain are masked by courtesy and civility. Koyré surely had Plato in mind when he added that early political philosophy was tied to the same principle: since most people (the *dēmos*) must live in lies because they are incapable of grasping the truth, whose mishandling and bowdlerisation can be dangerous to political order, veracity 'must be spooned out, diluted and specially prepared for them'.

For Koyré war serves as the big and troubling exception to these conventional views that lying is sometimes permissible. During moments of military conflict, as he knew from active service on the Russian front during World War One, lying is typically treated by commanders as a just weapon designed to overwhelm the enemy. Lying to friends is impermissible; lying to foes is mandatory, and desirable. The point was of course made by Machiavelli, von Clausewitz and others. 'But what if war, an abnormal, episodic, transient condition, should come to be permanent and taken for granted?', Koyré asked, as if to taunt previous analysts of war. In such circumstances, when whole political orders feel themselves to be under siege, with an all-powerful enemy wielding a knife at their throat, lying 'would become obligatory and be transformed into a virtue'. Truth telling would no longer be regarded as chivalrous, as pious or plain honest; it would rather be seen as a sign of decadent weakness, a willingness to capitulate to enemies whose defeat requires lying to become more than simply necessary. It must be considered 'a condition of sheer existence', an inviolable rule of human survival.

In an age of asymmetric warfare, chronic military interventions by the United States (more during the past two decades than at any other moment in its history), and flourishing talk of unending combat against 'terrorism', Koyré's reasoning surely still has

a sting in its tail. It was intended to discompose his readers. Writing during the most terrible war in human history, with totalitarian power ascendant in both Europe and East Asia, the thesis he spelled out was chilling in its novelty: 'there has never been so much lying as in our time', he wrote. The point can easily be misunderstood, for Koyré did not mean to emphasise quantitative trends. The really novel quality of contemporary lying was its omnipotent and all-embracing or *total* character. The scope of political lying dramatically expands; lying becomes coterminous with life. It becomes not just the canopy but the infrastructure of existence. 'The written and spoken word, the press, the radio, all technical progress is put to the service of the lie. Modern man – *genus totalitarian* – bathes in the lie, breathes the lie, is in thrall to the lie every moment of his existence.' (291). Koyré described modern-day lying as 'mass output for mass consumption'. Despite its utter corruption of democratic values and institutions, the total lie, the kind peddled by totalitarian regimes and (Koyré boldly ventured further) by profit-seeking advertisers who peddle 'patent falsifications', most definitely belongs to the age of the universal franchise. The Age of the People is the Age of Big Lies. In the 'democratic era of mass civilization' the body known as the People had now to be granted recognition as a sociological fact. They could no longer be ignored, or treated as clueless matter, as ignorant swine to be herded with the stick. Their presence on the stage of history was now undeniable. From the point of view of power elites, they had thus to be acted upon, using state-of-the-art instruments of deception, including second-degree lies, which cleverly weave truths into the fabric of total lies. Like hapless animals stranded in fields of power, the People must be sucked upwards into a gigantic tornado of lies which transforms them into an organised force for permanent lying. According to Koyré, leaders like Hitler who trade in systematic lying bring to perfection its frightening arts. Political liars of his kind are new. They are power-loving creatures of the new age of mass broadcasting media and democracy. Pseudo-aristocrats who are contemptuous of flesh-and-blood people, they suppose 'the common run of mortals' is credulous, that most human beings are thoroughly gullible creatures, just as Machiavelli had observed in *The Prince*. 'Men are so simple and yield so readily to the desires of the moment', the Florentine adviser of princes had observed, 'that he who will trick will always find another who will suffer to be tricked'. But twentieth-century totalitarians go further, Koyré argued. In effect they democratise the Machiavellian principle. They suppose that trickery can be a tool of total popular mobilisation. The people are a fickle force, but they

can be reckoned with and guided from above, tingling in awe, tears in their eyes, inspired by newspapers, radio broadcasts, films and television programs. Led by their noses, ears and eyes, the people can be harnessed as an engine of power, as an instrument of triumphant totalitarian rule legitimated by large-scale lying that is popularly believed, and popularly circulated.

### ***Lying and Democracy***

Why bother at a conference on journalism with such thoughts on political lying and democracy, especially given that they belong to circumstances very different to our own – to dark and baneful times when it was quite probable that totalitarianism would triumph globally in a cauldron of barbarism and total war? Except perhaps for the North Korean regime of Kim Jong-il, the Great Leader daily revered by his official DPRK mass media for his remarkable ability to build ‘socialism’ and to ‘stop the rain and make the sun come out’ (a phrase used during his state visit to Russia in August 2001), the totalitarian regimes born of the twentieth century have suffered defeat, whether in Cambodia and China or Albania or Romania. They have been superseded by new despotic regimes, of the Burmese kind led by General Than Shwe; or the one-party Chinese regime, a body politic with one head and many mouths. And democracy has come up trumps in many places on our planet. So, all things considered, doesn’t that mean that Koyré’s analysis has been outflanked by events, perhaps to the point where it has become merely of antiquarian interest?

There are three possible answers to this ‘so what’ question. The most obvious has to do with the fact that Koyré spotted the way big lies indeed have a close (if contradictory and heavily contested) affinity with democracy. Koyré did not fully grasp the logic of the stormy relationship but his intuition that the positive revaluation of the People and the coming of democracy is certainly of striking relevance in our twenty-first century age of monitory democracy and communicative abundance. Once upon a time, for instance in the early modern Europe described in the classic treatise of Johannes Althusius, *Politica Methodice Digesta, Atque Exemplis Sacris et Profanis Illustrata* (*Politics Methodically Digested, Illustrated with [Sacred and Profane](#) Examples* [1603]), organised lying was restricted in geographic scope and social depth. Lies have short legs, ran a sixteenth-century English proverb. When spun by the powerful their webs did not

penetrate easily into a political landscape comprising a mosaic of emerging territorial state monarchies co-existing with many differently sized consociations intersecting from a distance, a world of royal courts, free cities, religious emperors, provincial lords and the Holy Roman Empire, a kaleidoscope of different, sometimes overlapping jurisdictions whose inhabitants were mainly illiterate and normally had little or no contact, except for messages conveyed by means of rumour, or by foot, horse and donkey. Our times are different. Political lying can easily flourish in the age of media saturation, especially under conditions of fear and war, when rising or ascendant groups can satisfy their hunger for power over others by persuading them to feed on vast untruths peddled through communication media that penetrate deeply into people's everyday lives. Mobile telephones, radio, film and television and the Internet lengthen lies' legs, their ability to spread rapidly through vast populations, persuading fearful or confused people that the powerful are correct in their descriptions of reality, even though they deliberately say things that they themselves know are not so. Think of just two epochal moments in our lifetime: the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incidents during the Vietnam War, the first televised war; or the Weapons of Mass Destruction saga in the so-called war against terrorism of our times. War does indeed nurture the doctrine that the powerful must be allowed to operate in secrecy, according to reasons of state, using hidden counsels wrapped in cultic mystery (*arcana imperii*); which is why, in an era of mass communications, war is not just destructive of human life but also poses grave dangers for democratic institutions and their spirit of openness and plurality.

But how does it happen that mass media-saturated societies are unusually prone to the production, reproduction and public circulation of lies?

It has been said by Martin Jay, drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, that since politics is the realm of action, and since by definition it always involves the capacity to be inventive and to bring novelty into the world, it typically draws on our capacity for imagination, which is a mark of our capacity for freedom. On this view, lying, which is nurtured by our capacity for imagination, is ontological. It is a generative, creative act coterminous with engaging others in public as political beings.

The thesis is both too abstract and insensitive to the history of lying and its time-space variations; and (an issue to which I'll return) it comes close to praising the virtue of

mendacity. That bothers me, so let us drill more deeply than he did into the symbiotic relationship between democracy, journalism, communications media and lying.

The most obvious connection can be seen in the fact that politicians tell lies. This is not because of their inherent mendacity (though some of them seem hell-bent on proving exactly that) but everything to do with the dynamics of democracy itself. Democracy in representative form is structured by the principle that citizens periodically elect representatives who in effect are put on trial as leaders for a given period of time. Democracy in representative form is thus guided by what elsewhere I have called the disappointment principle. The presumption is against the performance and credibility of those who have been elected, or those vying to succeed them. The whole point of periodic elections is that electors grant the winners a temporary licence to succeed, or to fail. The threat of failure, the strong possibility that the winners will disappoint the represented, is backed by severe sanctions: public disgrace, in the form of public denunciations and subsequent removal from office.

If incumbent representatives are to avoid being flung from office then they have to do everything in their powers to cheer up citizens. Representatives must try to erase or pre-empt their disappointment, to persuade citizens that they are worthy of another term in office or (if and when fixed-term rules kick in) to prepare for life after office by persuading the represented that theirs was a job well done. Especially when things are not going well, and they are under pressure from competitors and citizens, persuasion needs a helping hand from old friends, especially the perfumed figure of mendacity. And so representatives are tempted to cast themselves in the role of the Cretan figure of Epimenides of Knossos in 6<sup>th</sup>-century BCE, that is, they come to behave like a latter-day Cretan who insists, hand on heart, that all other Cretans are utter liars. Saying what is not so is risky business, of course, but for the representative who wants to succeed it becomes an attractive or seductive option, a vital strategy of re-election, the price of staving off defeat, or salvaging reputation from possible public disgrace. Lying becomes a means of self-protection, a sop to vanity and certain cure for possible humiliation (a point well made by Dorothy Rowe: *Why We Lie*). That is the moment that the Richard Nixon 'I am not a crook' political liar is born. It is also the 'Mission Accomplished' moment when George W. Bush announced (May 1<sup>st</sup> 2003) American military victory in Iraq; and it is

the string of deceptions that marked the Tony Blair strategy of clever, hands-on, state-of-the-art media manipulation.

All democratically elected governments are today pro-actively involved in a clever, cunning struggle to kidnap their citizens mentally through the exercise of what Machiavelli called *astuzia*. Their deepening involvement in the business of manipulation of appearances, the tendency that leads us into ‘the age of contrivance’ (a phrase coined by the American historian Daniel Boorstin in *The Image* [1962]) or into what some Americans are calling, following Stephen Colbert of Comedy Central, the age of ‘truthiness’, is made plain by the Blair governments’ media management tactics. They took the art to new heights. They fed ‘leaks’ as exclusives (‘you can have this, but only if you put it on page 1’). When embarrassing stories broke, they put out decoys. They tried to master the art of releasing bad news on busy days (they called it ‘throwing out the bodies’). They denied. They said what was not so. Alastair Campbell, Blair’s chief tactician, regularly practised the art of deception, and did so with great cunning and finesse. His deputy (Lance Price) recalls that Campbell, testing the waters, to prove his skill in the game of mendacity, deliberately told a *News of the World* journalist that Blair had stayed on the eighth floor of a hotel that in fact was only six storeys tall (the journalist never bothered to check); and that Campbell went to a Britney Spears concert and managed to get her autograph, then bet somebody £200 he could get the *Evening Standard* to splash a story that she supported New Labour. He won the bet that very day. The dissembling mentality shaping such stunts is revealed graphically, quite by accident, in Blair’s recently published autobiography *A Journey*. On the last evening of the second millennium, when the government’s extravaganza spectacles (the Millennium Wheel and ‘River of Fire’ fireworks) had not gone to plan, Blair recalls with horror his discovery that the country’s newspaper editors, who had been invited to attend the midnight Millennium Dome celebrations in the presence of the royals and the Prime Minister, had been left queuing for hours at Stratford Station, which had become clogged with New Year’s eve revellers. Blair describes how he grabbed by the lapels the minister in charge, his old friend and flatmate Lord ‘Charlie’ Falconer. ‘Please, please, dear God’, writes Blair, ‘please tell me you didn’t have the media coming here by tube from Stratford just like ordinary members of the public’. Lord Falconer replies: ‘Well, we thought it would be more democratic that way.’ Blair responds: ‘Democratic? What fool thought that? They’re



the media, for Christ's sake. They write about the people, they don't want to be treated like them.' Falconer: 'Well, what did you want us to do, get them all a stretch limo?' Thundered Blair: 'Yes, Charlie, with the boy or girl of their choice and as much champagne as they can drink.'

Efforts by politicians to trick and charm the pants off journalists are neither the monopoly of the British nor conniving, suitably nicknamed Tony B Liar. Stories of political dissembling by governments and candidates are commonplace in all existing democracies. Indian democracy is currently passing through perhaps the biggest lying about corruption scandal in its history. American democracy has had its recent fair share of political lying. In just one week during the 2008 US presidential race, the campaign strategy of John McCain [fabricated crowd estimates for a rally](#) in Virginia and cunningly circulated several handfuls of untruths, including claims that Barack Obama supported 'comprehensive sex education' for children in kindergarten (['dishonest' and 'deceptive' said \*The Washington Post\*](#)); that Mr. Obama used the colloquial expression 'lipstick on a pig' to describe Sarah Palin; that Mr. Obama would raise taxes on middle-class families and force families into a government-run health care plan; that Ms. Palin visited Ireland and Iraq ([her airplane refuelled in the former and never crossed the border into the latter](#)).

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According to most theorists of democracy, journalists and public commentators, such monkey business explains why a free and open communication system is a vital weapon for preventing the spread of lying. From at least the time of Kant and Guizot, speaking truth to power (the pursuit of 'objectivity' is the ritualised expression used by many journalists) is the conventional way of putting the point and in recent decades it has been reinvigorated by the hope that the new communicative abundance based on multi-media digital networks will enable citizens to put a stop to lying by promoting universal 'access', citizen 'participation' and public 'accountability and transparency'.

The troubling paradox is that in contemporary democracies convention and hope are too often scuppered by a decadent trend that favours the rapid circulation of lies. There are more than political lies; there are also media lies that have political consequences. Lies take root and flourish in the soil of communicative abundance. Why

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‡Michael A. Cohen, 'The Politics of Lying', *The New York Times* (September 16, 2008)

does this happen? Common-sense explanations often point the finger at journalists, who are accused of being compulsive liars. That at least was the charge levelled famously by Peregrine Worsthorne, former editor of *The Sunday Telegraph* in Britain. He once asked which part of a newspaper was more truthful: the news stories or the adverts. His answer: the ads. In advertisements for airlines, planes fly and land safely; in news stories, they crash. The ads show households sitting around cozy fires in the depths of winter; in news reports their houses burn down. Planes rarely crash and houses rarely burn down. Ergo, adverts are more accurate than news.

This standard line of attack on news journalism is usually backed up by a litany of complaints voiced by citizens and politicians about ‘media’, and journalists in particular. They are said to hunt in packs, their eyes on bad news, egged on by the newsroom saying that facts must never be allowed to get in the way of stories. Journalism is organised lying. It obliterates the vital distinction between ‘opinion’ and ‘fact’. It sensationalises everything. Journalism loves titillation, draws upon un-attributed sources, fills news holes - in the age of communicative abundance news never sleeps - spins sensations, and concentrates too much on personalities, rather than time-bound contexts. It is said, especially by bookish types, that journalism is formulaic, that it gets bored too quickly and that it likes to bow down to corporate power and government press briefings.

Such generalisations are undoubtedly exaggerated. Journalists are literally under the gun in many global settings; they bravely risk their lives when they report and if they find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time then they pay the ultimate sacrifice. In contemporary democracies, moreover, there are many hardworking, honest and ethically open-minded journalists; and as Michael Schudson has recently pointed out in *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*, bellyaching against journalists is on balance not such a bad thing for monitory democracy, especially if it sharpens the wits of citizens and encourages their healthy sense of scepticism about power, including the power of journalists to represent and narrate the world in which we live. The bellyaching nevertheless has had damaging effects; judging by their low popularity ratings, journalists in many democracies are struggling to hold their own against politicians, real estate agents, car salesmen and bankers.

The problem actually runs much deeper than matters of flawed reputation and the reciprocal tit-for-tat dislike that some journalists have for their audiences. Complaints about reputation are in fact symptomatic of a more worrying dynamic, a problem that Koyré, writing in radically different historical circumstances, never quite managed to grasp. For reasons having to do with market pressures and top-down managerial control, most journalists no longer work ‘off diary’. In democracies otherwise as different as Japan, Canada, the United States, Australia and Britain, they have little or no time in which to go out and find their own stories and carefully check the material that they are handling. Pushed by information flows and pulled by working conditions, they become highly vulnerable to ingesting and reproducing the packages of information that are supplied to them by the public relations industry and governments. Like a human body lacking a properly functioning immune system, the media sprinkles lie dust all over the place. It produces lots of distorted or pseudo-news, or pseudo-coverage about pseudo-events - lots of flat earth news (Nick Davies). Often the stories journalists spin amount to ‘small’ or ‘casual’ lies; in a rush, one eye on advancement, the other on the looming deadline, they handle truth carelessly.

The flat earth news trend within the ranks of professional journalism is often reinforced by the growth of blogging, twitter and other forms of so-called citizen journalism. There are undeniably good things coming out of this rough-and-tumble, kaleidoscopic world of competing and conflicting opinions about matters of public interest; in contexts such as Iran and China, citizen journalism is even posing a genuine threat to secretive, heavy-handed abuses of power. Picking up on this trend, John Hartley and others have praised the recent rapid expansion of a culture of redaction. He speaks of a ‘redactional society’ in which citizens are engaged as producers in sifting through the chaos of their information worlds by ‘learning how to share, deploy, trust, evaluate, contest and act upon collective knowledge’.<sup>§</sup> In much the same vein, Umberto Eco and others have spoken of the contemporary importance of ‘overstanding’, a form of interpretation of the world which does more than ask questions and produce answers posed by the myriad of symbolic artefacts surrounding us. Overstanding, which should not be confused with over-interpretation, is the thoughtful activity of posing questions that these power-ridden symbolic materials otherwise take for granted, frustrate, silence or

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<sup>§</sup> John Hartley, ‘Communicative Democracy in a Redactional Society: The Future of Journalism Studies’, *Journalism* 1, no. 1 (2000), pp. 39-47.

deny outright.\*\* These emphases on the contributions to public life by citizens are important for the way they highlight the possibility of expanding and democratising the role of public commentary in the age of monitory democracy. But their chief limitation, in my view, is the way they ignore the threats to veracity posed by the displacement of what might be called edification.

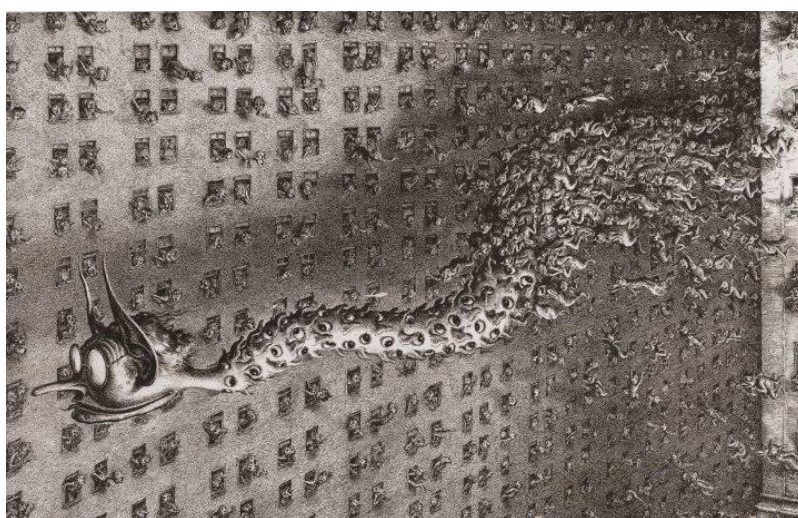
Edification: here I am playing with the family of terms linked to the words editing and education and their Latin root (*aedificare*: to build, from *aedis* ‘dwelling’ and *facere* make) to refer not only to the vital and inescapable importance for democracy of intelligent editorial judgements about how to represent the world; but also to the downside effects that happen when conventional editorial practices are wrong-footed by working conditions, and by ‘amateur’ journalists and their defenders, who are prone to talk loosely of the importance of replacing authoritative truth with collectively produced, horizontal truth. It is all very well to place emphasis on self-chosen citizen representatives actively hashing through competing interpretations, instead of deferring to authoritative sources of information. But the inconvenient point is that sloppy journalism and online mis-reportage, false rumours and nonsense evidently flourish in the age of communicative abundance. Take just one randomly selected example, the recent moment (early November 2010) of panic and confusion surrounding news of the mid-air explosion of a jet engine on a Qantas A380 bound for Sydney from Singapore. The event triggered a chaotic bluster of random tweets and other messages, unchecked and un-sourced, many of them wildly inaccurate. Speed dictated that even sources such as ABC News (@abcnews) compounded the bedlam with posts such as: ‘Kyodo news wire is reporting a passenger plane thought bound for Singapore has crashed in Indonesia’. The ill-chosen words prompted a Qantas spokesperson to confess that reports on the Internet and Twitter were ‘wildly inaccurate’. By then the failed engine itself had chipped in with a tweet via @QF32\_Engine\_2: ‘I’ve been a very, very bad engine.’ The absurdity was well summarised by a tweet from Sydney journalist (@Jen\_Bennett): ‘I have an unconfirmed report that says your unconfirmed report is unconfirmed. More speculation as it breaks.’

Such episodes underscore how crumbs of news of events can and do generate nonsense rumours that go viral, sometimes to the point where they morph from mere

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\*\* See Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*: Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose, edited Stefan Collini (Cambridge 1992); see also Wayne C. Booth, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago 1979).

pitter-patter, water-cooler chatter into re-blogged and re-tweeted inaccuracies and outright falsehoods. Recycled information without edification produces falsification. The cut-and-paste carelessness, lack of questioning and absence of editing is compounded by the impatient fame seeking fuelled by bloggers' and tweeters' desire to prove they are the source of breaking news; that they are capable of attracting substantial numbers of clicks and readers' eyeballs; some of them (see Gawker or Guido Fawkes) are interested in maximising clicks because they believe it will attract advertisers, build brand value and generate income and wealth.



A. Paul Weber, *Das Gerücht* (The Rumour), 1943

As the classic lithograph by A. Paul Weber, 'Das Gerücht (The Rumour)' suggested, the real trouble with unchecked messages is that in the age of communicative abundance lies can quickly grow long legs and long tails. Thanks to 'cybercascades' (Cass Sunstein), which regularly happen under conditions of media saturation, keeping lids on wilful and half-intended distortions often proves difficult. Whether or not there is any substance in the claim made by critics of digital natives that they are losing their sense of time and place, and perforce that they are losing their ability to make intelligent judgements, I cannot discuss here; whether, in other words, communicative abundance destroys the capacity for intelligent, modular and canny citizenship and instead nurtures compressed and degraded characters whose incomprehensible disjointedness comes (say) straight out of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953), I leave as an open question for discussion. My simpler point is only that the age of monitory democracy is bedevilled by the political danger that 'small' lies can grow into whoppers and that sometimes this

really matters, as when reputable newspapers like the Washington Post published no fewer than 18 editorials in favour of the view that WMD existed; or when (according to the Pew Research Center [August 19, 2010]) nearly half of American Republicans today believe that Obama is a Muslim, over a quarter doubt that he is a citizen, and fully half, again falsely, believe that the massive bailout of banks and insurance companies was enacted by Obama, not by President Bush.

There is one other form of lying for which ‘churnalism’, in both its professional and citizen forms, is responsible. I call it no earth news. Australian journalism, with its obsession to bend everything back to an imaginary ‘Australia’, is riddled with such news. It could be called the narration of public silence, or perhaps malevolent silence, since it takes the form of important events and processes which journalists around the world deliberately fail to take an interest in, or to tell. They choose a sub-form of lying, wilful ignorance. They choose not to take an interest in saying what is so - they lie from a distance, so to speak - and they do so in no small measure because such subjects as the global surge in poverty, efforts to build cross-border institutions, the arms trade and leveraging in the banking and credit sectors are highly complicated and perforce require intensive concentration, language skills and in-depth research to cover thoroughly, or to cover well. They simply don’t bother. They conspire in taciturnity tinged with ignorance - deliberately crafted hush about the wider world upon whose push-pull dynamics the lives of millions of citizens dangle.

### ***Truth***

That is enough for the moment about democracy and lying. I want now to turn to the vexed question of the meaning of lying, and its binary opposite, veracity. Truth and lying are relational terms. Yet what is the difference between them? Is the distinction still plausible? If so, how are we to speak of truth in an age when naïve conceptions of veracity and ‘objectivity’ have been picked and pulled apart by such disparate developments as the disconnection of religious authority and science, the linguistic turn in philosophy and the multiplication of representatives under conditions of monitory democracy? To put things in a slightly more precise, if abstract way: if truth (as I shall suggest) has a history and if today it is the name we give to statements governed by rules which define what we mean when we speak of truth, even when we wilfully go against it,

that is, tell lies, surely that implies that truth and its binary opposite lying have no ultimate foundations unburdened by the contingencies of time and space? And if that is so then doesn't that imply that the act of telling lies, wilfully saying what is not so, can go on the rampage, unconstrained by its other half, the objectivity of truth?

It is not easy to answer these vexing questions. Parents who demand of their children to tell the plain truth, or those who swear in a court of law to 'tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth' do so for reasons they think to be compelling. They suppose that truth is the opposite of lying, that whenever a lie is told the liar by definition knows that s/he is going against the truth. Although the distinction has a heavily contested history (traced in such works as Perez Zagorin's *Ways of Lying* [1990]) it seems clear-cut to many people, and certainly many professional journalists, whereas considered reflection suggests it is actually dogged by paradoxes. For instance, lying and truth telling arguably belong to the same linguistic universe, if only because both are nurtured by leaps of imagination concerning what 'reality' is; both suppose the ability to imagine in mental pictures the world around us, 'as it really is'. That's why fools can neither lie nor spot the truth. This was of course a vital point inscribed within Oscar Wilde's scurrilous defence of art (in *The Decay of Lying: An Observation* [1889]) as the struggle to lie, as the active pursuit of 'beautiful untrue things'. Koyré himself knew that acts of imagination have similarly always played a vital role in the history of science. He did not regard the pursuit of truth in scientific matters as the quest progressively to strip away simulations, veils, or appearances from things as they really are.

Truth is not the quest to find the happy correspondence between the statements we make and objects of fact. Truth in fact has many faces, a definite elusiveness, which is why - another paradox - the act of telling lies is much easier than revealing the truth. 'Tis as easy as lying', Shakespeare says in *Hamlet* (Act 3). The remark is worth bearing in mind, to underscore the way liars have in their heads definite pictures of what they are denying. By definition, a lie is a wilful act of fabrication, of saying what is not so. What is so is taken for granted - unlike truth, which even in the hands of the most hard-nosed believers in unvarnished Truth (think of Thomas Gradgrind, in Dickens' *Hard Times*, a 'man of realities...of facts and calculations') is always said to involve a complicated and time-consuming effort to release reality from the distorting effects of fabrications.

What is genuinely interesting about the subject of political lying is that ‘truth’, the opposite of the falsity of the lie, is an enigma. Here I find myself at odds with Hannah Arendt’s later defence of ‘meticulous loyalty to factual, given reality’. Koyré is interesting on this point. He acknowledged that for many observers truth and human reality are twins - that truth is the aspiration to tear down curtains and demolish falsehoods through the re-description of living realities, with some measure of accuracy – but he firmly rejected the view, fashionable among contemporary scientists, that truth is gleaned empirically, through hypothesis formation and testing by means of practical experimentation. In perhaps his most famous work, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (1957), Koyré pointed out that the rise of early modern science crucially entailed a fundamental conceptual revolution, a fundamental Gestalt switch among scientists during the period stretching from Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno through to Isaac Newton. The point for Koyré is that the scientific quest for truth, the aspiration to know the secrets of the universe, is always and inescapably embedded in specific historical circumstances, that is, in the time-space world of language, institutions and characters in which perforce human beings dwell on earth.

Koyré’s sensitivity to the contingencies of knowledge, his scepticism about naïve accounts of truth, his sympathy for the view that in matters of truth (as Bill Clinton put it) everything ‘depends on what the meaning of “is” is’, arguably all of this retains its bite, if only because we live in times in which, for a strange variety of causes and causers, simple-minded or un-ironic belief in Truth is on the rise. The post-modernist sensibility seems correspondingly to be weakening. Fed by Truth Commissions, websites such as [www.factcheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org) and Truth-o-Meters provided by organisations like Politifact, there is a new enfranchisement of Certainties and Facts – an embrace of the view that Truth is a plebiscite of Facts and Certainties, whose clear and vocal verdicts must be respected.

I find myself out of step with the trend; it induces strong intellectual and political discomfort. I reject simple-minded truth claims because for him truth seeking involves doubt, scepticism, stubborn incredulity, a willingness to stand back temporarily from the world for the purpose of questioning and rejecting nonsensical claims made on its behalf. Truth seeking requires independent reflection on the world. It is aware of its elusiveness. Truth seeking welcomes semi-colons, the awareness of nuances, plural propositions and complex realities. Truth seeking takes courage - what the Greeks called *parrhesia* – and it



requires breaking the rules that govern definitions of what we mean by truth. It refuses convictions because it views them as potentially more dangerous obstacles to truth than lies. It is no less unkind towards bullshit (Harry Frankfurt), forms of speech in which concern for veracity is extinguished. The quest for truth demands awareness of inconsistencies and contradictions; it requires a sensibility to difficulties and complexities, the capacity for thought and judgement. It therefore has no truck with what Hannah Arendt later called the 'despotic character of truth' when it seeks entry into the world of politics.

Such qualities of truth seeking are demanding, which is one reason why they are invariably despised by political liars. Good liars must be clever and practised in their art, but one thing they cannot tolerate is open disputes about what counts as the truth of a situation. That's yet another paradox: liars are believers in naïve beliefs about truth. Tell a lie and find the truth is an old English proverb, but the formulation, if I am right, is much too simple. Koyré's analysis of political lying under totalitarian conditions provides well illustrates this point. He was struck not just by the absence of truth seeking within totalitarian circles, but its perversion. Totalitarians embrace what he called a bowdlerised activist understanding of 'truth' as the manifestation of the supposed essential spirit of a race or nation or class or some other imaginary category. In totalitarian circles respect for the complex realities of the world is abandoned. Conventional religious objections to lying are also overthrown; the precept that lying, saying what is not, deliberately obfuscating reality, is a grievous sin of pride against the spirit, is rejected as just so much worthless old rubbish from timid and unenlightened times. The principle that 'there exists a single objective truth valid for everybody' is considered claptrap, for political reasons. In totalitarian circles it is replaced by the primacy of the lie - the big lie peddled over and over again by a movement whose leader is worshipped for his ability to manipulate and practise lies with such skill, especially when trapped in tight corners. The frightening thing about totalitarians and organised liars in general is their treatment of untruths as a weapon, as a means of deceiving others systematically, for the sake of building and securing total power. The numbers of victims and the scale of destruction are unimportant. What counts is victory - over all opposition, across the whole earth.

### ***The Political Dangers of Lying***

Here I come to the third and final point: the political dangers of telling lies. It is tempting, of course, to make the observation that twentieth-century totalitarian regimes suffered political and military defeat, and then to infer from this observation that the warnings by mid-twentieth century intellectuals against the political dangers of total lies are now passé, that they belong to a generation that is now passing away.

I don't accept this line of reasoning. The regimes of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Ceasescu and Hoxha were indeed defeated; and life seems to have become harder for all dictators and would-be despots. The politically dangerous phenomena of lying and large-scale lying nevertheless remain alive and well in the twenty-first century.

Why is this? In one word: hubris. In practice, power, wherever it is exercised from above in publicly unaccountable ways, can often have crippling effects. Things go wrong and the mishaps hurt people's lives, especially in circumstances in which the powerful fall narcissistically in love with their own judgements. When that happens, the radius of their circle of advisors shrinks. They denigrate, push aside or disappear their critics; they fall prey to the bad human habit of believing what is convenient and telling themselves what they want to hear. So they tell lies and generally become dismissive of all opinions and evidence that run counter to their own views. They hallucinate while talking hot air; what they are doing and why they are doing this or that comes clothed in mendacious phantasms, to the point where problems, policy failures and enforced retreats either go unrecognised or are interpreted, falsely, as triumphs.

Four decades ago, the American psychologist Irving Janis (1918-1990) labelled such hubristic behaviour as 'groupthink', the tendency of decision makers operating in group settings to lie to others and to ignore counter-evidence in the interests of towing the line, getting things done and protecting their flanks. He showed (in *Victims of Groupthink* [1972]; see also Paul 't Hart's *Groupthink in Government* [1994] and *Beyond Groupthink* [1997]) how groupthink played a fundamental shaping role in the fiasco of the American invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. More recent examples of political decisions or non-decisions protected by groupthink and lies spring to mind, among them the invasion and occupation

of Iraq and Afghanistan, the well-documented mishandling of the 2003 SARS epidemic by the Hong Kong Chief Executive, the pseudo-regulation of BP that led to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and the negligence of many democratic governments in allowing banking and credit institutions to regulate their own affairs, unhindered by objections and fears that the large-scale ‘leveraging’ of risk in money markets would result eventually in giant market bubbles, whose bursting would bring the world nearly to the point of a global great depression.

Policy disasters of this kind are no laughing matter. They might be dubbed the Iceland Syndrome. The 2,300-page Truth Report released last April by a Special Investigation Commission shows how that tiny country was led into misery and global disgrace by an unchecked, shadowy and dissembling government and a banking sector that grew within seven years to become ten times the size of the whole economy. Key decisions were confined to a few government ministers; lines of communication throughout the political economy were deliberately kept unclear; no reports on the banks were written; and everything was off the record.

Such organised mendacity had and continues to have long-distance effects; it impacted not just Iceland but many other countries, just as the Irish crisis is now doing. In the twenty-first century world of long-distance interdependence, that is typical. Organised mendacity affects and often damages the lives of millions of people; for a variety of reasons to do with technological scale, mobility of capital and communicative abundance, the global footprint of lying is widening. Worldwide policy failures of the kind I’ve mentioned drive home the painful truth of the old proverb that fools never differ - that unchallenged lying power is dangerous, ultimately because it operates within a universe of great complexity, great unknowns and great unintended consequences. Hubris nurtured by groupthink and lies is the cancer of publicly unaccountable power. The only known human cure for its deadly effects is the free circulation of differing viewpoints about what is true and false, courageous conjectures, corrective judgments, the institutional humbling of power by means of checks and balances on liars.

Here we return to the questions about democracy, and Koyré’s sympathies for democracy. Along with other public intellectuals of his generation - Albert Camus, Simone Weil, George Orwell, Reinhold Niebuhr, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Maritain -

Koyré understood with great clarity that early 20<sup>th</sup>-century struggles for the universal franchise turned out in practice to be a mixed political blessing. The principle that the People were entitled to govern themselves through their representatives practically degenerated into populist dictatorships and totalitarian politics fed by public gullibility. Against the anti-democratic turn taken by many intellectuals during this period (detailed in *The Life and Death of Democracy*) Koyré bravely held fast to his democratic principles, buoyed by the hope that against all odds democracies could survive the onslaught of political lying by cultivating their capacity for public diffidence towards those who exercise power. Koyré's analysis of the problem of lying in politics was no jeremiad against democracy. For a start, it rejected, correctly in my view, the cliché that every society is dominated by a 'regime of truth', the line of formulaic thinking later often repeated by supporters of Michel Foucault, for whom the valorisation of contingent belief as truth uttered by some who are charged with saying what is true is an effect of power/knowledge games.<sup>††</sup>

Koyré was among the first in the field of the history and philosophy of science to point to the perennial importance of power/knowledge games under modern conditions; but in descriptive terms he was convinced that democracy is a mode of handling power that ensures that battles 'for truth' and 'around truth' are ongoing and unceasing. That was why Koyré did not indulge political wistfulness, evident in the recent claim of Martin Jay that mendacity could well be a virtue, that (as Jay puts it) 'democratic fabulation...must allow a thousand mendacious flowers to bloom'. Living in dangerous times, Koyré would have found such talk puerile. He might also have found it complacent, perhaps an unwitting apology for lies that are told, latter-day equivalents of the line written by John Gay in *The Beggar's Opera*: 'Sure men were born to lie, and women to believe them!' The point here is that the Jay thesis ignores the inconvenient insight that small lies have a nasty habit of metamorphosing into big lies, and that that is why the robust public scrutiny of power, for instance by means of such monitory mechanisms as judicial review, muckraking journalism, truth commissions and social audits, is the wisest and most effective early warning system, the most powerful means of coping with uncertainty and anticipating, recognising and avoiding mistakes, and of acting to prevent Big Mistakes, or Big Evils.

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<sup>††</sup> Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (eds.), Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy (Sydney 1979), p. 46.

In this lecture I have emphasised some bad moon trends in contemporary democracies: the constant temptation to lie faced by politicians; the organised mendacity of governments; media lies, in the form of flat earth news, propelled by cybercascades, and no earth news; the decline of edification; and the deepening confusion and self-righteous backlashes triggered by the breakdown of naïve conceptions of lying and truth. For reasons of time, I have sidestepped some important issues, such as the changing history and spatial variability of different conceptions of truth and lying. I hope nevertheless that you'll agree that the subject of lying is quite a research agenda, and that it poses serious challenges to the precious way of life we call democracy. I certainly did not mean to make a case for post-democratic ways of handling power. To the contrary, far from being a jeremiad against democracy I trumpeted a call for democrats everywhere to wake up, to become more politically savvy, to urge you, as journalists and scholars of journalism, to think more deeply about lying, and to get tough on liars - to demonstrate in practice that despite their shrewd and foxy knavery it is liars who belong to the category of the gullible because they make a double mistake: not only do they suppose that truth is an unproblematic given, so ignoring its many faces. Liars presume, again mistakenly, that others are incapable of seeing through lies because they cannot think for themselves, as you, ladies and gentlemen, are surely now about to demonstrate during the discussion, with flair.

Thank you.