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## Making Sense of Lies, Deceptive Propaganda, and Fake News

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# Making Sense of Lies, Deceptive Propaganda, and Fake News

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Although the concept of truth seems to be taking a beating these days, media ethics continues to provide us with guidance to help distinguish news and information from rumor, innuendo, propaganda, and fake news.

Fake news is made-up news, manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are designed to deceive us. Once uploaded, fake news is easily spread through social media to large numbers of people who are willing to believe and share the fictional material. While false information has always existed and fake news has been a part of online news since it began, in 2016 fake news reached a tipping point when many of the manufactured reports went viral on Facebook and Twitter and were reinforced by Google searches. For example, during the presidential election campaign, several fake news reports outperformed news articles from respected media outlets.

Credible news venues have become extremely concerned about the rise of fake news and a variety of media outlets have published information to help prevent the spread of fake news. Yet I find that the work of

philosopher and ethicist Sissela Bok provides us with important guidance to help us determine the difference between truthful reportage and fake news.

First published in 1978, Bok's *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* remains a seminal book for ethics researchers in a variety of disciplines. In *Lying*, Bok addresses notions of truth and falsity, tackles difficult questions about "harmless" and "noble" lies and discusses times when lying might be justified. *Lying* also explores problems with social science research, political deception, and paternalistic lies. Although it is not a traditional media ethics textbook, throughout the years I have found that students enjoy its accessible language, thoughtful commentary, and numerous real-world examples. And as fake news has gained momentum, many of my ethics students find Bok's discussions of truthfulness and deception particularly useful.

Bok explains that the moral question of whether a person or a news report is lying is not settled by merely establishing the truth or falsity of what is said or reported. To fully answer this question, we must know whether the individual or the report intends to deceive us. In our complex world, many things can misinform us, but only some of them are intended to deceive us. If I give you inaccurate information but have no intention to mislead you, that is not deception. Deception is a person, news report, or video that intentionally deflects, withholds, or distorts information. For Bok, it is this issue—the intentional manipulation of information—that is fundamental to the concept of truth telling.

When we attempt to deceive others intentionally, we communicate messages to mislead them that are meant to get them to believe something that we personally do not believe. We can do this through our words, our gestures, our actions, our inactions, or even through our silences. When deceptive messages are stated they become lies—in other words, for Bok a lie is an intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement.

So why are lies so bad? Lies affect the distribution of power in society. Lies add to the power of the liar and reduce the power of those who have been deceived by altering their choices. Lies may misinform us by eliminating some of our objectives or making certain objectives seem unattainable or no longer desirable. Lies may also eliminate necessary alternatives or lead us to believe that there are more alternatives than there really are. Bok suggests that lies may lead to our loss of confidence in the best alternative and that, by manipulating our options, liars gain power over those who have been deceived.

Most people use deception to get out of trouble, or to avoid hurting the feelings of others. Yet some people lie to manipulate people. After individuals learn that they have been lied to about an important matter, they often become resentful, disappointed, and suspicious of others. They feel wronged and manipulated and find it difficult to make future choices in good faith. As Bok explains, when we are lied to, we have no way to judge which lies are the trivial ones; we have no confidence that the liars will restrict themselves to trivial lies, so that ultimately when we are deceived it leads us to be wary of all deception.

Overall, I would recommend that when encountering questionable news and information we should check the author, news outlet, publication date, links, and sources before believing or sharing news reports. In addition, if we consider the intention of news reports and what the individual or group might gain from deceiving viewers, listeners, or readers about an issue or concern, we will come closer to distinguishing authentic news and information from lies, deceptive propaganda, and fake news.

## References

1. Bok, S. (1978/1999). *Lying: moral choice in public and private life*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.