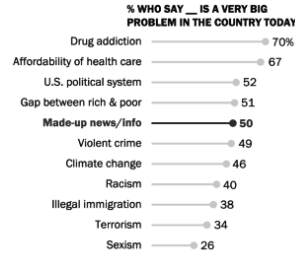


## We're Being Skillfully Manipulated

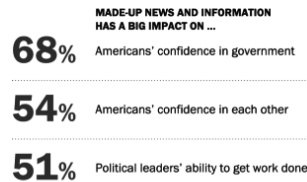
The Washington Post recently adopted the slogan *Democracy Dies in Darkness*. Public awareness and visibility are often the bane of special interests. These interests use propaganda techniques to manage the public's perception of their activities. When democracy works, investigative reporting and honest analysis hold such ambitions in check by shining a bright light on shadowy practices.

Americans are coming to recognize that strategic mendacity (made-up information) is a serious threat. It weakens our confidence in government and interferes with our political leaders getting work done. It's in our civic interest to recognize and reject fake news and propaganda. In addition to sharpening perception, our financial support of high quality journalism is an investment in the country's democratic system.

### Americans see made-up news as a bigger problem than other key issues ...



### ... and most see it as detrimental to the country's democratic system



Source: Survey conducted Feb. 19-March 4, 2019.  
 \*Many Americans Say Made-Up News is a Critical Problem That Needs To Be Fixed\*

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Targeted Mendacity

Propaganda is not mere advocacy. It is intentional deception—the tactical use of lies, false pretense, treachery, and fraud to subvert the correct perception of reality. I use the word *mendacity* for emphasis on the intentional nature of tactical lying. It's more than

evading the truth. It's a tactic for altering what the public believes to be the truth. The digital age gives us access to vastly more information than was possible as recently as 50 years ago. It has also made it possible for large scale profiling of millions of individuals.

We are dependent on large-scale, digital information systems to conduct our daily affairs. Credit cards and bank transactions record where we get our money and where we spend or invest it. Automated toll systems track the movement of our cars by our license plate numbers. Our phone calls are metered and tabulated for billing. These are only the most obvious examples. The term *granularity* is now used to describe the way small details of the big picture are now available to isolate and analyze.

Because this granularity exists, statistical algorithms allow individuals to be accurately typed and grouped for specific purposes. In the trade this profiling is called mining *big data*. A propagandist can craft a message specifically to appeal to narrowly targeted subgroups on our society. Though there are efforts to guard personal privacy from big data miners, they are minimally effective. If we want the benefits of Internet websites and computer applications, we are often obliged to agree to terms that sacrifice some of our data privacy.

Micro-targeting is effective because we protect and feed our fixed beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, and we shun discordant ones. I prefer NPR to Fox. My friend in North Carolina loves Fox and says NPR is left-biased. He gets most of his news from

watching television. I get most of mine from reading digital editions of my local paper, the *NY Times*, *Washington Post*, and others. To say I *read* is not to say I read everything – I scan and read what interests me. Unconsciously, I may skip stories that are confronting or contrary to my beliefs.

The human tendency to seek confirmation is exploited by those who wish to deceive us. They play us, knowing our group affinity and what we are most eager to hear. We are classified and targeted for messages that have the appropriate tone and *hook*.

DECEPTION IS CRAFTED  
TO PLAY TO OUR  
INDIVIDUAL VULNER-  
ABILITIES.

As I write this, the president's reelection campaign is using social media for highly targeted spot ads. There are hundreds of different versions, each targeted at a narrow social identity group. In one ad, the voice-over scripts are all the same, but the actors are very different. They are matched to the targeted group in ethnicity, age, and other demographics. The aim is to capitalize on our affinity for our group and deliver a message without triggering skepticism.

### **Howard is whoever you want him to be**

[A] major set of recent Facebook ads by the Trump campaign features testimonials from several Trump supporters. Notably, none of these testimonials are from white men, where Trump gets the overwhelming majority of his support. They come exclusively from women and minorities.

One ad features "Howard from New Mexico." As soft music plays, Howard says, "Sir, you have really inspired me and brought back my faith in this

great nation. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for all the work you are doing.” A video depicts an older African-American man smiling broadly.

Except that the man pictured is not Howard. How do I know? For a split second at the beginning of the video, in tiny print, the ad includes the following disclaimer: “Actual Testimonial. Actor Portrayal.”

Giving the Trump campaign the benefit of the doubt, perhaps Howard really is an older African-American man and the campaign just hired the actor for purposes of the ad? That is unusual but not unethical.

But in many other versions of the ad, Howard is portrayed as a young African-American man engrossed in his cell phone. Howard is still from New Mexico and still has the exact same quote about Trump.<sup>363</sup>

**NO PRACTICAL WAY  
TO SET THE RECORD  
STRAIGHT.**

Such targeted messages often contain lies because there is no practical way for others to set the record straight. The opposition may be left unaware of a disinformation attack, and even if they know, how can they address a rebuttal? To broadcast a rebuttal to the world is expensive, and also serves to extend the reach of the lie.

I [Shreve] recently filed to register my copyright for my new anthology of short fiction, *Escape*. I was feeling rushed because I needed to leave for a dinner date in half an hour. The registration process is simple—not much more difficult than ordering clothes online. You fill out a form, pay a fee, and upload the work to be registered. I logged into what appeared to

be the official site, filled out the form, provided my credit card info, did the upload and went to dinner.

When I returned later that evening, I checked my email for the acknowledgement. There was none. It turned out that I was not logged in on the official Library of Congress copyright site but a private commercial one easily mistaken for it. Opportunists designed their site to look official and, under the guise of offering a service, they collect fees and do the filing as an intermediary. It's deceptive, but they disclose enough in the fine print to avoid crossing the line into fraud. I should have been more careful.

Magicians manipulate our perception by distraction and slight-of-hand. In The Information Age, technology allows the magical manipulation of images. When my wife ran for Congress, her opposition doctored a photo to eliminate a third person standing between her and a reviled public figure, with the intent to make it seem they were buddies.

In the next two decades it became possible to similarly doctor every frame of a movie clip. Pranksters now generate pornographic clips substituting the faces of celebrities for those of the porn stars just as Hollywood manipulates images of daring stunt performers to look exactly like the film's stars. The mendacity industry can fabricate fraudulent video sound bites that are not detectable as pranks or obvious stunts. We can no longer believe our eyes and ears unless we know and trust the source.

So it is that mendacity has become a high-tech business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Personally, you probably have an ethical commitment to knowing reality

in your world, and speaking truth—otherwise, why would you read this book? Alas, not everyone shares this passion.

## **Certainty**

**M**any, possibly half of Americans, seem more committed to certainty than truth. F. Scott Fitzgerald noted, *The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.* Except in Garrison Keillor’s fictional Lake Wobegone, where everyone is above average, only half of us possess such “first-rate” intelligence.

Being of like mind fosters cohesiveness and coordinated action. Fundamentalist beliefs, literal interpretations of historical stories as revealed truth, and the human tendency to invent mythical explanations for everything are all rooted in our discomfort with open questions and ambiguity. This agreement may be part of the glue that bonds us in our social groups. Yet it also certainty discourages independent thinking. In the extreme it can harden into a cult of orthodoxy around a belief.

Terms like “bubble” and “silo” are used to describe groups that defend certainty by excluding discordant (heretical) ideas. In 2012 the Texas GOP included the following in their platform:

Knowledge-Based Education – We oppose the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (values clarification), critical thinking skills and similar programs that are simply a relabeling of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) (mastery

learning) which focus on behavior modification and have the purpose of challenging the student's fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority.

The ensuing media furor put the party in the awkward position of having no easy way to reverse the position since it was adopted by their convention and wasn't easily expunged once the convention concluded. "Fixed beliefs" mean beliefs that are to be unchallenged, in other words dogmatic certainties. People who practice critical thinking are open to challenging established beliefs (ideology).

## **Mendacity Playbook**

**T**he way we speak of winners and losers, you would think that business and politics were a game, a sporting event. This is never more clear than in the political debates of recent years. They are promoted like prize fights, with blow-by-blow live commentary and then followed by endless analysis and polls to see who won.

It's partly because media networks and their commentators compete for the viewing audience and so they manufacture drama, borrowing freely from the tactics of the entertainment and sports worlds.

However, it goes much farther than entertainment. In the 1970's when computers were readily available to business and academic users, analysts began to apply game theory to model how markets work. Using them, analysts could play "what if" games. These mathematical models reduced the variables that influence business outcomes to rules and formulas that could be used to predict outcomes. The

aim was to figure out how to win competitively—and how to cheat.

It was during this period that Edward O. Thorpe wrote the book *Beat the Dealer*. Thorpe modeled all the possible plays of all the possible hands of the casino game blackjack. This allowed him to devise a system of counting cards to discern when the dealer was at a statistical disadvantage. The player could then bet heavily while having the advantage and modestly when the remaining cards in the deck favored the dealer. (Today's casinos have strategies to make such card counting difficult or impossible.)

Talking about the tactics and strategies surrounding public affairs as if the participants were engaged in a game is, therefore, more than a metaphor. There are social conventions and patterns that can be identified and influenced. Technology has made game theory an academic discipline, and the language and insights associated with it are rapidly being adopted in public discourse. Ethics has not kept pace.

## **Disrupting the Game**

**I**n learning about critical thinking we need to consider not only the tools we employ to get a better fix on reality; we also need to understand those that can be used to game the process of finding truth. You will probably recognize these tricks. You saw them in school-yard arguments, and you see how public figures use them to disrupt interviews to forestall or derail an attempt to reveal the authentic perception of reality—the truth of the matter.



Mendacity plays are the rhetorical equivalent of blocking in sports. When discourse is disrupted, analyze the blocking plays. Here are some examples of common blocking tactics:

### 1. Bluster

“If you don’t have an argument, pound the table,” the saying goes. When confronted with something that is indefensible, something that can’t be denied or disproved, the tactic is to feign emotion and create drama. “I will not sit here and let you make such an accusation. I’m outraged!” The opposing side is forced to deal with the uproar. Thus, bluster derails the direct confrontation with inconvenient facts and truths.

### 2. Denial

Confronted with an obvious fact, the tactic is to resolutely deny it. “Mr. Smith, you accepted my estimate and agreed to pay \$100 to have the stump removed.” The response, “It didn’t happen. I never agreed to that price. They tell me you were only here ten minutes. I’ll pay \$50, not a penny more.”

### 3. Alternative (fake) facts

Productive discussions start with agreement on the pertinent facts. By introducing falsehoods that must be disproved, this play prevents resolution. It may also give cover for an action that would be obviously improper in the face of the real facts. The alibi is an age-old example.

#### 4. Fostering Doubt

In the legal system, conviction of a serious crime requires proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Defense lawyers routinely propose alternate theories that raise doubt about the import of the evidence and testimony in a case. In public affairs partisans employ “think tanks” to fabricate persuasive arguments that obscure or introduce doubts about actions adverse to their client’s interests.

Action to protect the public from the addictive and lethal effects of tobacco use was delayed for many years by these tactics. Action on climate change is likewise delayed. There is big money to be made in fostering doubt.

#### 5. Gaslighting

This means arguing that we can’t trust our own perception—that we can’t trust our own eyes and ears. It’s taken from the plot of the play *Gaslight* where a woman is cunningly influenced to question what’s real.

#### 6. AstroTurf®

When a lot of people unite on an issue, it takes on added political importance. In our democracy, we give greater importance to the positions advocated by grass roots organizations and movements because they reflect ideas that have motivated a large following. Fabricating or faking popular support is called astroturfing, a word-play on the trade name for artificial (fake) grass used on athletic fields.

## 7. Bullying

Superior power raises the stakes in confrontation. Power can be used directly or indirectly to avoid recognizing the truth of a matter. It's hard to confront a lie if doing so will get you fired or harmed. The harm may not be physical. A charismatic leader with a loyal following can mock and intimidate the lone independent thinker.

A variation on this play is to use charisma to incapacitate or discredit the opposition. In a now famous debate line, President Reagan said in a dismissive tone, "There you go again" speaking to President Jimmy Carter in the condescending tone one might associate with an older, wiser person speaking to a child.

"Don't trouble your pretty little head ..." is classic, and became a rallying point of the feminist movement.

Using one's power to subtly demean and discredit one's opponent is a form of bullying. It shifts attention from objective consideration of the facts and focuses it on the person.

## 8. Diversion

There must be a million ways to divert attention. Every mother knows that it's much easier to distract a toddler from something than it is to deal directly with what's at issue. The diversion play introduces a "bright shiny object" that's actually irrelevant to the matter at hand but takes the discourse in a new direction. Doug Muder calls this "Bull-shift."

### 9. Displacement

This is “the devil made me do it” ploy. It seeks to displace accountability for an action. “I was only following orders.” “It was the whiskey talking.” “Boys will be boys.” “She was dressed like she wanted it.” “Everyone was doing it.” ... and so on.

### 10. What-about-you?

Shifting attention by asserting hypocrisy seeks to shift from defense to offense in the game. Consider a group of celebrities advocating for environmental causes:

Headlines quickly focused in on their method of transport—a private jet—and a wave of criticism followed, condemning the apparent hypocrisy of flying private while professing to support environmental causes.<sup>364</sup>

While there may be genuine hypocrisy, it can be a seductive trap when the opposition actually holds the high ground and feels self-righteous. If the celebrities defend their use of the jet, their credibility becomes the issue instead of the environment. The what-about-you trap works if it triggers a passionate defense of the so-called hypocritical actions that interrupts pursuit of authentic perception and right action.

### 11. Preemptive Accusations

As a related ploy to what-about-you, accusing your opponent of what you have done or are about to do is a tactic to escape accountability. It’s akin to,

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<sup>364</sup> Merriam Webster online dictionary example of hypocrisy. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hypocrisy>)

“Johnny snitched a cookie [so I’m entitled to do the same].”

### 12. *Impugning Motive (or the process)*

“It’s a witch-hunt.” “You only say that because you are jealous.” This play seeks to discredit allegations on the basis that they are made with an ulterior motive. Witch-hunts do happen. But as a mendacity play, questioning the accuser’s motive suggests that the facts should be ignored. It means, “Give me the benefit of the doubt. Nobody’s perfect. Ignore the incriminating facts.”

### 13. *Baffle-gab and word-salad*

Consider this hypothetical scenario:

The presenter speaks fast, using a lot of jargon and unfamiliar technical terms. He’s pretentious. Sometimes he doesn’t finish a thought, as if it were too obvious to speak of, leaving you to infer what’s intended. Some sentences are grammatically complete but convey nothing. Yet something about his confidence and demeanor creates in you the feeling that only an extremely ignorant or suspicious person would raise a question. He’s slightly intimidating.

Actually, he’s a con artist. The barrage of words is intended to deflect and obfuscate, not illumine or inform. At the same time the scene of the conversation is likely to be stage-managed to create social pressure: an expensive restaurant, a catered reception, a “free” lavish seminar. As a guest, to confront the failure to communicate clearly would seem ungracious or boorish.

It's a lie dressed up in a pinstripe suit. In this setting, you are the "mark" and the aim is to manipulate you by social pressure and deception. This tactic used in high pressure sales, political interviews, negotiations, and other settings where the con artist wants to control the narrative and keep his mark from thinking critically or making him or her accountable for what was actually said.

Many of these mendacity plays depend upon an expectation of good will and a shared commitment to fairness in working toward a solution—otherwise we wouldn't be participating in the dialog or negotiation. It's naïve to presume good will in the 21st century. There are far too many who believe that the end justifies *any* means when it comes to defending their fixed beliefs.

We certainly can't count on fair play and ethics to prevail. We need only consider terrorism, dysfunctional politics, and the daily reports of behavior at all levels of society that can only be termed sociopathic. Liberty and justice require hard work, clear thinking, and constant vigilance.

Unfortunately, political dirty trickster Lee Atwater was quite right: so far as our decisions and actions are concerned *perception is reality*.

# CONCLUSION

*There are two ways to be fooled.*

*One is to believe what isn't true.*

*The other is to refuse to believe what is true.*

Søren Kierkegaard

