

Haluk Şahin*

The Concept of Truth As The Main Axis of The Universal Communication Ethics - A Prologomenon

Evrensel İletişim Etiğinin Ana Ekseni Olarak Hakikat Kavramı - Bir Prologomenon

“In the beginning was the word!” So begins a holy book. (King James Bible, 2017). That word was “true”. It was the word of God, and since “He” would not lie, it had to be true.

From the religious point of view, for some, this was the beginning of “truth”. (Paulos, 2021)

Similar things can be said anthropologically and historically. In the beginning, the uttered word was most likely in response to a real need, a genuine request, an immediate warning, as information. For the sake of the survival of the species, it must have been “true”. The date of this beginning, according to different scientists, might have been 70 thousand or 1.5 million years ago. (Paulos, 2021)

The same goes for the much more recent invention of “writing”, which is only 3500 years old by most accounts. (“History of Writing”, 2024) Writing primarily served to record and transport the true “word”. Thanks to it, truth could spread” far and wide. This is partly why the Bible, the holy book of Christians, was called “Good News” by some and why Christian missionaries were happy about the expanding reach of the new communications media. Thus the “true word” would catch up with those who had not been fortunate enough to hear it yet. (Carey, 1989)

In short, the “claim” or “promise” of truth was at the core of communicative acts from the very beginning. Imparting and sharing true information, was the main function of communication.

This article argues that despite big technological, sociological and political changes, this claim or promise must constitute the core of universal communication ethics today. Looking around, we would in fact be justified to declare that telling the truth has never been as important as today – this Age of Post-truth, the era of rampant disinformation.

* İstanbul Bilgi University, haluk.sahin@bilgi.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-4864-445X.

The true-false dialectic

The imperative mood here implies the possibility that some messages may not meet the claim or promise of true-ness. As every concept contains its opposite within itself, so must “true”, whether it manifests itself as a lie, an untruth, falsehood, inaccuracy, misinformation or disinformation.

In other words, just like true speech, we can trace its opposite, the lie, to the beginning. The truth signifies the lie. The real signifies the false. As it signifies it as a possibility, it also signifies it as a fact – in time. From possibilities emerge facts. They develop over time and grow when circumstances allow and spread out, acquire commercial, political and institutional structures.

History tells us that people in early history were aware of the importance of truth in communication and were critical of those who did not conform to it. For example, in the period when cuneiform writing was just beginning to be used, it was expressed in a Sumerian proverb that scribes, who had a very respectable place in society, could fall into bad ways and do things they were not supposed to do:

496

“A disgraced scribe becomes a man of magical spells.” (Brown, 2021)

Apparently the reputation of spell-makers was not very high in those days either!

You could also say liar, disinformationist, sycophant, troll, swindler, “spin doctor”, deceiver instead of “spell-maker”. There is no shortage of words to describe those who engage in the dissemination of untruth and lies and disinformation in our age. They are everywhere.

“Truth” in rhetoric and parrhesia

The Classical Rhetoric, which is known as the mother of communication studies, focuses on oratory or the ability to be effective in persuasive speech. Does this mean that the use of untrue or false arguments and facts for the sake of persuasion was condoned?

According to Aristotle, who is considered to be the founder of the art or science of Rhetoric, the “orator” verifies his words and is responsible for basing them on facts. However, “The First Teacher” looked for “veracity” in the character of the orator rather than in the message itself and relied on the assumption that an orator who abides by ethical rules will not resort to lying. (Aristotle, & Roberts, W. R., 2004)

At that time, there were also those who went beyond good faith and emphasized the obligation of *parrhessia*, that is, telling the whole truth frankly no matter what. It is interesting for us Anatolians that the person who made this sort of honesty a way of life was the folk

philosopher Diogenes of Sinope. The risks and costs of telling the truth openly and especially to the faces of the powerful could be harsh. But they could not silence Diogenes, who made *parrhesia* a way of life and is said to have spoken frankly even to the most powerful man of his time, Alexander the Great! (Rubineau & DeBevoise, 2023).

His exclamation in the 4th century that “the greatest happiness in the world is to express the truth freely” is like a distant greeting to today’s warriors of freedom of expression and universal communication ethics based on truth.

The ideal of *parrhesia*, which faded away during the Dark Ages and especially the Middle Ages, was reignited in modern times under other names and provided the seeds of contemporary freedom of expression arguments from Milton to Mill, Voltaire to Zola. Religious believers like Milton said God gave reason to humans so that they could differentiate between true and false; and secularists of the Enlightenment argued that positive science would be their guide in finding the right answer.

In the 20th century, on the eve of the onslaught of digital communications technology, Michel Foucault reinvigorated *parrhesia* as a philosophical concept that could be used in the political, social and personal quest of frankness at all levels (Foucault, 1999). At the same period, especially those who considered the media “the fourth branch” of the democratic system of government considered “telling the truth at all costs” essential for both social development and happiness. In the second half of the century this approach was vigorously defended by those who saw investigative journalism as essential for democracy (Şahin, 2012).

“Homo super communicatus”

With the advent of digital media into everyday life at the beginning of this century, it was anticipated that the realm of true information would further expand. The idea that every citizen could become a truth disseminator, akin to an investigative journalist, was quite popular. It was hoped that the constantly connected Homo Super Communicatus, who could access all information at all times from everywhere, would become fool-proof against lies and fabrications! (Şahin, 2023).

However, this optimism was short-lived. As the new communication space fell into the hands of greedy entrepreneurs who were more interested in making money than informing the public, the trend was reversed. Even if truths could be spoken without harassment thanks to democratic traditions, they began to be drowned out in the noise. In an environment of total networking and total communication, truth was hard to find, like a needle in a haystack (Han, 2017).

The same dialectic had produced the predicted outcome. Truth was being challenged in its own territory. After a while, as untruth became more lucrative and organized, there was perhaps as much anti-communication as communication. The new communication

technologies were in the service of lies and disinformation as much as truth and information. In many critical instances and periods, they were dominant.

The unfortunate reality is that Homo Super Communicatus, gluttonous like a shark but equipped with a whale's narrow throat, was overpowered by an increasingly relentless and indiscriminate information deluge, unable to deal with huge masses of incoming information, relying on emotions instead of reason and trusting fallacies and conspiracy theories instead of science.

Regardless of the content, "noise" had become the primary message.

Obviously, this marked the end of the progressive optimism of the Enlightenment. Poet John Milton, who advocated the free expression of truths, confident of God given reason, had challenged his contemporaries in 1644:

"Let [Ttruth] and falsehood grapple. Who ever knew Ttruth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?" (Britannica, 2004)

We have! We see it every day. "Truth" is frequently defeated, and worse; we can't tell who is who on the pitch. They are dressed similarly, and someone pours plenty of oil on them. It's unclear whose hand is in whose wrestling tights.

This stage is now called the "Post-truth era"! A bewildering period where the weight and validity of the truth no longer matter.

We could even say that this is worse than being in the Age of Lies. Truth, defeated by lies, does not expire. It can straighten up in the future with the help of reason or science. What about now, when even these presuppositions have been demolished?

The neutralization of truth by noise is a serious source of worry for those who believe in democracy. An informed public is still indispensable for it to work. People must acquire knowledge before they can form opinions. Where will it come from? Who will keep them informed, provide them with true information? "A free and independent news media", according to the theory. What if no such media exists? What if media itself has turned into the primary source of noise; that it is more like a fog, rather than light?

Can democracy survive?

Telling it like it is

Acknowledging that the primary task of the media is to convey truth (information, knowledge, news), gives rise to the following question: What is "truth"?

This undoubtedly is one of the most debated questions in philosophy. The "Correspondence Theory", in its various versions has been proposed to provide a satisfactory answer. The adequacy, correspondence, congruence, similarity, and representational capacity

between what actually happened and what is narrated are seen as the differentiator of truth claims (Rasmussen, 2018).

We are talking about “fidelity” between what actually happened and what is relayed in the report. The claim is that whatever happened must be told exactly as it occurred – as sloganized in the classical maxim “telling it like it is.”

The notion of “truth” is different from the concept of fidelity mentioned in some communication models, including Shannon and Weaver (Shannon & Weaver, 1998). In “fidelity” as used in the model, the content is irrelevant; we are talking about the overlap between the message sent by the sender and the message received by the recipient. In “truth,” we talk about the overlap between what is “real” and what is conveyed. A message can be very faithful to its source, without necessarily reflecting the truth.

Ironically, when approaching the message in terms of the concept of Correspondence, we inherently accept that the perceived, decoded “truth” cannot be identical to the one encoded by the sender. Even when it is totally faithful, it can only be understood as much as the receiver is capable of understanding.

The statement by the Sufi poet Rumi, “Do not bother; they can only understand you as much as they are able,” indicates that even then, this greatest weakness of communication was known. (Rumi, 2008)

He might have added a counterpart: “Strive a lot, make an extra effort to understand, because those who speak can only explain their intentions as much as they are able.”

Most human communication takes place between those whose capacity to express their true intentions is limited with those whose ability to understand them is insufficient.

As George Bernard Shaw once said, “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place” (Whyte, 1950).

Herein lies the communication conundrum.

As communication professionals we are expected and obliged to strive to do our job well in both senses, i.e., to express ourselves well and to try hard to understand what is being said. The cognitive skills, professional mastery, and intention of the communication expert is constantly being put to test. This is where we distinguish the “good communicator” from the “bad communicator”.

Crisis of truth

So why is it so important to try to speak the truth?

First and foremost, let’s say it is important in the Aristotelian sense of “good life” and happiness. Lying has been considered a shameful act both in terms of morality and religion through the ages. Honesty has been praised as a “virtue”, important for the development and peaceful existence of the human species. Yet, looking back, it is clear that that most religions have fallen far behind the concept of *parrhesia* which considered the clear, frank

expression of truths as a high human quality, regardless of the subject. Monotheistic religions, while strongly criticizing lying, slander, and false testimony in daily life, have imposed harsh penalties, including impaling, tongue cutting and death for speaking certain truths. Even today, there are places where people are killed for this “crime”.

In recent times, as the ideology of independent media has grown, the concept of *parrhesia* has attracted the attention of important thinkers like Foucault as I said earlier. According to them, it is an element in a person’s growth which is essential for the development of individuality; it is needed for the sense of being oneself, as a test of courage (Foucault, 1999).

Likewise, loyalty to the spirit of telling the truth and *parrhessia* in all areas of communication practice can be seen as a part of each and every communicator’s progress towards becoming a virtuous professional. Any code of ethics that does not declare allegiance to *parrhesia* and condone its violation can be said to contribute to the corruption of not only the profession but also the democratic way of life.

Certainly, the dose and style of delivery of the message may differ from branch to branch --news, advertising, public relations, political communication etc.-- but the underlying message remains the same: Don’t lie, tell the truth!

500

The great crisis of democracy is not only political, cultural, social; it is also cognitive. It has to do with the cognitive capabilities and weaknesses of homo sapiens, and its current version, the Homo Super Communicatus. Artificial intelligence can help in certain instances, but it can make it even worse in others. It can be an agent of true information as well as disinformation.

The end of history?

So what should be done to find a solution that befits the true dimensions of this great crisis?

First of all, it is necessary for every professional in the field of communications to look at their own ethical codes in light of the current crisis and ask the critical question: What else can we do to combat the pandemic of lies?

But this is not enough: In our age, communication structures are not just a part of an illusory super-structure cut off from base of actual production; they are indeed the main means of all production processes, material or intellectual. The indispensability of true information for democracy and happiness must be emphasized everywhere, at all layers of life, especially in the education system.

The crisis of truth can also be seen as a sign that the basic assumptions of the Enlightenment are no longer taken as valid. The Enlightenment revolutions which changed the course of history, were based on the assumption that humans are intelligent beings, and if they can learn the facts freely, they will eventually choose democracy as the best system of government.

It cannot be expected that truth will eventually win or democracy will triumph in a communication order where truth is drowned out, and anti-communication, that is, the forces of disinformation, become dominant or superior.

That, in a sense, would be the end of history!

References

- Aristotle & Roberts, W. R. (2004). *Rhetoric*. Courier Corporation.
- Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2020, March 27). *Areopagitica*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Areopagitica>
- Brown, S. (2021). *Where Did Writing Come From?* <https://www.getty.edu/news/where-did-writing-come-from/>
- Han, B.-C. (2017). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Verso Books.
- History of writing. (2024). In Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=History_of_writing&oldid=1220490449
- James W., C. (1989). *Communication as Culture*, Revised Edition: Essays on Media and Society. Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Communication-as-Culture-Revised-Edition-Essays-on-Media-and-Society/Carey/p/book/9780415989763>
- King James Bible. (2017). *King James Bible Online*. <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>
- Paulos, G. (2021). *On the Origins of Human Speech and Language*. Independently published.
- Rasmussen, J. (2018). *Truth, correspondence theory of*. In Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780415249126-N064-2>
- Roubineau, J.-M., DeBevoise, M., Mitsis, P., Roubineau, J.-M., DeBevoise, M., & Mitsis, P. (Eds.). (2023). *The Dangerous Life and Ideas of Diogenes the Cynic*. Oxford University Press.
- Şahin, H. (2012). *Kim Korkar Soruşturmacı Gazeteciden?* Say Kitap. <https://www.saykitap.com/urun/kim-korkar-sorusturmaci-gazeteciden/>
- Şahin, H. (2023). Why do we miss newspapers in the age of homo super communicatus?. *Reflektif Journal of Social Sciences* 4(1), 123-126.
- Shannon, C. E., & Weaver, W. (1998). *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. University of Illinois Press.
- Whyte, W. H. (1950). *Is anybody listening?*. *Fortune*, p. 77.