**A Point of View: Why people sometimes prefer lies to the truth**

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Has our world become a place where a plausible or entertaining lie is more welcome than the truth, asks writer AL Kennedy.

More than a decade ago, I met a liar and I rewarded him for lying to me. At the time it seemed like the right thing to do.

Imagine it's a January night with snow underfoot and I'm with a group of Scottish writers, loose in Manhattan after an upstate festival we're all slightly glad is over. We were heading for dinner, but at the moment we're standing in the dark, cold air while a total stranger lies to us. We know he's lying because the story he's telling makes no sense and we're quite good at stories. And we're kind of giving the stranger notes to improve his scam while he's requesting cash. The man isn't dressed for the weather and is shivering. The shivering isn't a lie. And we do all give him money. We say we aren't fooled, but are rewarding his excellent performance and we want him to head indoors now and be warm. He gave a good show and we're paying for it.

Figure 1: Famous Liar: Pinocchio- fictional wooden boy (pictured) whose nose grew longer every time he told a lie.

At the time this all felt like an unfamiliar situation - being openly deceived and rewarding the deceiver anyway, choosing to treat deception as entertainment, rather than feeling robbed, or seeking redress. Today it seems the scenario is commonplace. Falsehoods proliferate - multiple TV formats rely on cheap and nasty deceptions, but they're just fun. It's less fun when MPs juggle statistics until they blur, companies tailor phrasing to dodge lawsuits and many of us now assume something isn't true, precisely because we read it in the papers. And batsmen won't walk - because cricket just isn't cricket any more. Reliable truths seem threatened, if not unobtainable. And the public response required is apparently that of an appreciative audience. It's all just showbiz now.

And yet we generally dislike being deceived. In fact, we try to avoid it. We study books on body language so we can decode each other in love or business. Our crime dramas emphasize the importance of scrutinizing eye movements and gestures. While government surveillance and commercial data mining appropriate private truths, we can buy software to monitor our loved ones. In what feels like an age of lies, we struggle to establish the truths of others. Once suspicion enters in, the lover's question, "What are you thinking?" can begin to expect the answer, "That I'll smother you in your sleep."

Because it's hard to know if someone's lying. Lie detector tests generally aren't admissible in court, because they don't reliably know either. Juries tend to believe eye witnesses who believe themselves, although they're notoriously likely to be mistaken. Professional investigators tend to be only averagely good at spotting lies, but - disastrously - tend to believe they're much better than average. Examining video recordings of faces for micro-expressions can be informative to trained observers. But professionally and privately, observer bias can lead us to seek only evidence that reinforces our preconceptions. And how do we get the truth from those who are delusional, or who feel comfortable lying, or who've trained themselves to lie effectively? They could be deeply dangerous individuals but impervious to interrogation.

And when the stakes are high, when we've been harmed, or believe we will be, then the pressure to prove and punish guilt, to really deal with those who have terrible capacities, increases. But how do we unlock generally mysterious, possibly resilient, perhaps monstrous human beings? How do we get the truth from expert liars?

Back in the realm of showbiz - we're increasingly told by TV and movies that the answer to our problems lies in torture. Heroes and heroines used to remain unbroken by evil torturers. From Mr. Blonde to Jack Bauer, Ethan Hunt to Dexter and across a slew of cop shows we're offered fictions in which heroes and heroines are torturers, who threaten torture, who ramp up their interrogation violence in glitzy, even funny ways - although the camera shies away from showing anything too dreadful. It's sexier to flirt with the idea of torture than show the hours of degradation, the scars of abuse, still punishing decades later.

And politics being, as they say, showbiz for ugly people - the lure of torture as a no-nonsense, macho necessity can seem irresistible. What once was held to be a practice of dark regimes is now presented as a not-too-embarrassing home truth, softened by a Hollywood makeover. It has been redefined as "torture lite", or something a refugee victim did to themselves, the bad habit a useful ally may yet grow out of, the useful habit we exploit in bad allies, something threaded darkly through UK court proceedings.

But those who find the practice of torture acceptable have not only abandoned their humanity, they have also forgotten their history and fallen for a lie in search of truth. Arguably the first manual for witch-hunters, the Malleus Malificarum - first published in 1487 - included a warning that torture victims might say anything to stop the pain. In Cautio Criminalis, printed in 1631, former witch confessor Friedrich Spee also warns against the tainting effects of pain and the tendency of one untrue confession to unleash a cascade of exponentially unreliable information. He notes that if both confession and silence are taken as signals of guilt then everyone is guilty. Truth evaporates.

Child looks at photos of Khmer Rouge torture victims Pol Pot's victims are remembered at the Tuol Sleng Museum in Cambodia

Combine observer bias with unfettered cruelty and paranoia and you get the Holy Inquisition's centuries of pain. Or you get Pinochet's Chile, Pol Pot's Cambodia. You walk inside Abu Ghraib, the Columbia Haus, the Lubyanka, buildings where innocence becomes impossible and the only truth that emerges concerns torture itself - that torture isn't about information. What it gathers is often useless, or worse. Torture is a promise of terror - enough terror to subdue a mind or a population. Except, of course, the promise is a lie. Torture blinds security forces with repetitions of the nightmares they brought with them and it begs for justice, creates opposition.

Among other forms of resistance, torture produces whistle-blowers, people who can walk into buildings infected with inhumanity and remain human. They make the truth of torture known, sometimes at great personal risk. It seems, in fact, an epidemic of various concealments and deceptions is giving rise to a wider and wider whistle-blowing response. While the powerful seem increasingly able to simply redefine what truth is - what is, is - the whistle-blowers are treated with increasing severity. In government, in business, in healthcare, education and the security services, the useful truths whistle-blowers bring are ignored, or punished with dismissal, smears, gagging orders, even imprisonment. While journalism can sometimes seem irrevocably corrupted by rented opinions and gossip, serious investigative journalists - professional truth tellers - are in every sense an endangered species, specifically targeted in war zones, curbed and intimidated by both oppressive regimes and democracies.

So we exist, it would appear, in a world where truth is punished and liars may lie at will - about levels of surveillance, expense claims, about statistics and financial transactions, about abuses, failures in care, about the crushing to death of human beings at Hillsborough - and only slowly, slowly will truths emerge and then be denied, before the even slower push for acknowledgement, then justice, then perhaps reconciliation, progress.

Hillsborough victims memorial at Anfield stadium, Liverpool The truth about the Hillsborough stadium disaster is still emerging

Our situation seems bleak. But, equally, we may be at a tipping point when the showbiz dazzle of the narrative is no longer enough to make us pay up, express our gratitude for the skill of the fraud. More and more individuals now have more ways than ever before to declare necessary truths. We may be on the brink of an age when both lies and fears diminish and we can face each other honestly to find the joys in privacy and revelation. Maybe to ask and answer, "What are you thinking?" can be again an act of love.

On lying

"History is a set of lies agreed upon" (Napoleon Bonaparte)

"A lie that is half-truth is the darkest of all lies" (Alfred, Lord Tennyson)

"A lie told often enough becomes truth" (Lenin)

"In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act" (George Orwell