

# How Journalists Got the Idea

**T**HE FIRST LIE EVER TOLD, ALTHOUGH THE STORY cannot be confirmed and therefore might be a lie itself, was uttered for the ears of God. Canadian journalist Bruce Deachman writes that sometime around four thousand years ago, a voice roared through the Garden of Eden, causing tree branches to shake, trunks to quiver, and roots to vibrate. “Who ate my apple?” the voice asked. The question, Deachman reports, “was met by innocent looks all ’round and, eventually, a timid chorus of ‘Not me.’”

Then, only a few days later, came the second lie. Deachman tells us that Eve slipped a fig leaf over her midsection, sashayed up to Adam, and asked him whether it made her look fat. “No, dear,” Adam replied, “not at all.” Eve looked at him dubiously.

Whenever it really happened, it was understandable, even inevitable, that human beings would discover the lie to be an invaluable tactic for interpersonal relationships, a natural reaction when we found ourselves in unfavorable circumstances. Adam and Eve were afraid of God's punishment; why not deny the crime? Adam was afraid of hurting Eve's feelings by telling her she needed a plus-size fig leaf; why not deny the perception? In both cases, self-interest seemed better served by fiction than by fact.

In Aldous Huxley's 1923 novel *Antic Hay*, a young man named Theodore breaks a lunch date with a young woman named Emily. The two have recently made love for the first time, but on this day he prefers not to take the train back to London where she awaits him for a repeat performance. Instead, he wants to meet with another woman, one whose fleshly pleasures he has enjoyed in the past and longs to savor again, the notorious Vivian Viveash. To do so, Theodore must deceive Emily. He sends her a telegram: "Slight accident on way to station not serious at all but a little indisposed come same train tomorrow."

It is not the only lie that Theodore tells Emily, but it is the one that sets off social historian Evelin Sullivan in a volume of her own called *The Concise Book of Lying*. She understands that the reasons for all of Theodore's lies are obvious to readers of Huxley's novel, but she imagines a person opening *Antic Hay* precisely at the point of the falsehood described above and, having no idea of its context, trying to discern its motive. Such a person, Sullivan believes, would find the possibilities limitless, and she illustrates the point with examples that are sometimes intriguing, sometimes ludicrous. Theodore could have lied to Emily, Sullivan tells:

- To get out of a tedious social obligation.
- To blacken the reputation of a business rival.
- To get out of helping a friend move.
- To keep from hurting his parents' feelings.
- To avoid an embarrassing admission of ignorance or lack of money.

- To keep from his wife the truth about a child he fathered before he was married.
- To have an excuse for missing a meeting considered important by his boss.
- To get a woman to sleep with him by claiming to be a marine biologist.
- To keep secret a crime he committed ten years earlier and deeply regrets.
- To protect himself from harm by the thugs of a police state.
- To remain a closet homosexual.
- To keep from his wife the truth about his having an affair.
- To keep his landlord from knowing he has a cat.
- To get a job at a law firm by claiming he graduated from an Ivy League school.
- To conceal from Emily preparations for her surprise birthday party.
- To cover for a teammate who missed practice and has promised to reform.
- To keep his I-told-you-so father from learning that he has been fired.
- To get even with someone who he knows has done him harm.
- To hide his drinking.
- To get a job by claiming he is a veteran.
- To sell as genuine a fabricated account of his childhood, alleging abuse and neglect.
- To save his young sister from the gallows by confessing to a crime he didn't commit.
- To get someone to have unprotected sex with him although he knows he has AIDS [which, given the fact that *Antic Hay* was written in 1923, would make Theodore prescient as well as devious].
- To bring people around to his point of view on something by inventing supporting anecdotes.
- To keep one of his children from learning a distressing truth.
- To sell his romance fiction by using a female pseudonym.
- To pay less income tax.

Sullivan's list is worth considering not because of what it might tell us about Theodore's relationship with Emily, but because it illustrates the vast variety of motives that human beings possess for avoiding the truth. She is, however, just beginning. Several pages later, Sullivan gives even more examples, quoting categories of lies from a long since out-of-print book by Amelia Opie called *Illustrations of Lying, in All Its Branches*. Opie refers to:

Lies of Vanity.

Lies of Flattery.

Lies of Convenience

Lies of Interest.

Lies of Fear.

Lies of first-rate Malignity.

Lies of second-rate Malignity.

Lies, falsely called Lies of Benevolence.

Lies of real Benevolence.

Lies of mere Wantonness, proceeding from a depraved love of lying, or contempt for the truth.

There are others probably; but I believe that this list contains those that are of the most importance; unless, indeed, we may add to it practical lies; that is, lies acted, not spoken.

Sullivan is still not through. Opie was not detailed enough for her. There are other reasons for truth-bending, Sullivan states:

The fear of losing something—money, a job, a marriage, power, respect, reputation, love, life, freedom, comfort, enjoyment, cooperation, etc., etc.—a better job, admission to a desired school, the chance to hang out with kids our parents tell us to avoid, sexual favors, money, revenge, love, cooperation, respect and admiration, control and power, comfort and convenience, and so forth—is another. Of course, depending on the liar's mental state, the desire for something may appear as the fear of not getting it; the intense desire to marry the adored creature can become the desperate fear of being thwarted, just as the wish for convenience can be the fear of inconvenience—millions have lied to avoid an argument.

The preceding appears on page 57 of *The Concise Book of Lying*. The volume's last numbered page is 334. By that time, "conciseness" has become yet another of the book's countless misstatements.

The first newsmen to lie were probably the first newsmen—the minstrels who sang the news, accompanying themselves with a homemade stringed instrument of some sort, in the villages of medieval Europe. They got their information from the nearby courts, speaking to people who had themselves spoken to the king or duke or baron or lord. Then, as they returned to their villages, they composed their "newscasts" in their heads, almost like stand-up comedians arranging their material to get the biggest laughs.

But surely, one suspects, the minstrels were not concerned with veracity so much as performance. Surely they molded the truth of events to suit the demands of rhyme and the flow of melody. And the more quickly they got back to their villages, the more likely they would be able to stake out positions at heavily trafficked intersections.

And just as surely, the men and women who made up their audience, living lives of isolation as they did, not yet believing that events outside their ken could have any significant effect on their own lives, were only marginally interested in veracity. To them it was the music that mattered, not the lyrics. The news was a show, as it would become once again in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, although this time with much more sophisticated orchestrations.

For hundreds of years, people lied to one another verbally. It was too much trouble to transcribe a mistruth on the rough surface of a hemp-fibered sheet, too time-consuming to scratch out a curse on a clay tablet. Then, in the late 1430s, in the village of Mainz, Germany, on the west bank of the Rhine, a man named Johannes Gutenberg seemed to have had a change of heart. His first goal in life was to be a manufacturer of mirrors. He was fascinated by the way they captured images, the brilliance with which they

reflected the sunlight, throwing it off in a hundred different directions. He thought there was a certain magic to the process, and he wanted to associate himself with it.

But for reasons we do not know, he decided against a career in mirrors. Instead, he would invent the movable-type printing press. Actually, the press was a series of three separate inventions: a new means of shaping letters on small pieces of metal that could be easily rearranged into different words; a new kind of ink made of linseed oil that would enable the ink to stick to metal type, previous kinds of ink being insufficiently viscous; and a press that would push the paper onto the inked letters. The latter was probably the most difficult of Gutenberg's tasks, one he could not solve until a carpenter friend suggested building a contraption that resembled a cheese or wine press. In fact, the original Gutenberg printing press might even have contained parts of its cheese- or wine-making predecessors.

"Word of Gutenberg's achievement spread quickly," writes historian Bruce Koscielniak, "and people with interest in printing more books flocked to Mainz to see how this new art of the printing press was accomplished. Hundreds of print shops quickly opened, and soon thousands of different books were in print." But the reading revolution did not begin quite that easily. Gutenberg's first books were produced in a hard-to-read Gothic style of print, meant to resemble handwriting. The closer resemblance was to hieroglyphics: elegant to look at but difficult to comprehend.

"Within a short time," though, Koscielniak continues, "easier-to-read styles replaced the heavy Gothic type. Nicholas Jenson, in Venice, Italy, in the 1470s, designed a Roman alphabet that is still used today. Aldus Manutius, also of Venice, created the well-known slanted *italic* type style." As a result, it took only a few decades for books to become not only plentiful but legible.

Suddenly there was a permanence to the language that had never before existed. Yesterday's lie was today's lie as well, and in some cases tomorrow's. It was the same with the truth. In some cases, especially as the centuries went by and printing presses began to print newspapers, the trick was to tell the two apart, and it was not nearly as easy as it sounds.