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YOU SHALL NOT LIE: FROM COVID-19 FAKE NEWS TO TRUTHFULNESS

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Speaking truth and lies, gossiping and rumours, giving information to guide people, as well as spreading disinformation to misguide people are as old as humanity. In times of crises like war or a pandemic, trustworthy information is even more vital than in normal times as fake news can kill lives. Gossiping and sharing rumours are a form of entertainment in which the person who shares a rumour gets attention on whether he/she is a good storyteller (with a bit of exaggeration) to get even more attention and prestige. However, in a traditional village or in oral tradition, gossiping was shared with a few friends or limited group, while nowadays gossips are shared through social media with millions of people causing numerous effects.

COVID-19: Fake News Can Kill

In the contemporary world, gossip can be spread with a single click of a button to thousands of Twitter or Facebook 'friends' around the world. Furthermore, sharing news is no more the privilege and responsibility of newspapers, radio and television alone. Indeed,

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everybody can now be a little news creator and distributor. Therefore, we can choose to distribute true and verified information, or distribute fake news, knowing or, in many cases, not knowing that it is fake.

During the current COVID-19 pandemic - as I am writing this in August 2020, it is far from being over. Modern communication technologies such as public and private print as well as electronic media (newspapers, radio, TV) and social media play a very important role, both positively and negatively in informing and misinforming the public. For example, whilst the quick release of information from governments about protective measures (e.g. lockdowns) saved millions from being infected, the slow and contradictory information or propaganda of unproven treatment methods exposed lives to infection and even lead to death in some cases.

As an additional example, US President Trump has used Twitter for the last twelve years as his main communication tool, and now has 80 million followers. It is documented that he sent out many lies through his tweets, but on 27 May 2020, for the first time in history, Twitter reported a tweet of President Donald Trump as a lie and added a sentence that the information is wrong. As a result of this, the President became furious and threatened the ban of Twitter. Behind is the debate of the responsibility of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

Ethical Questions of Truth, Lie and Responsibility

The ethical alternative seems simple: you tell the truth or you lie. However, the ethical reality is more complex as the following questions show that in times of crises, it is very difficult to get full information because nobody has a full picture but only pieces:

- Is sharing information, which is not yet verified or is incomplete, part of the process of fact finding, or is it manipulation or even a lie?
- Do social media just offer a technological platform or do they have an editorial responsibility like a publisher or a journalist?
- As for individual users: what is their ethical responsibility to forward a message without fact checking? Are they just a postman transmitting news, or do they have a responsibility for the forwarded content like a journalist has for what they publish?
- Time and speed matters in a crisis like a pandemic. Is delay in information just laziness, a crime or responsible behaviour, if information is checked before sharing? What are ethical criteria for lie and truthfulness and all the grey zones in between?

You Shall not Lie: Simple Ethical Commandment?

Let us focus here on a simple globally accepted ethical commandment: you shall not lie. It exists as an ethical value in all religions and value systems. The Ten Commandments in the Bible are so to say the basic ethical codex for the Jews-Christian, and essentially the Islamic world. The eighth commandment says "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour" (Ex 20:16). In short: You shall not lie. It is repeated in different forms in various biblical texts, e.g. "Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness" (Ex 23:1). The precise context this commandment refers to is the judiciary. Indeed, in its early existence of developing independent judiciary, truth is key for a fair trial. False testimony can kill lives, as a person may be accused with false accusation and sent to prison or receive a death penalty as a result.

In the New Testament of early Christianity, the focus is on the community: "Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to

his neighbour, for we are all members of one body" (Eph 4:25). Lies and gossiping do harm for the community and can destroy it in short time because it undermines trust. Trust is an essential condition to reach community. You shall not lie thus became a general ethical rule, essential for all human relations.

The Bible includes impressive openness regarding many stories about lies and deceptions: from Abraham towards his wife Sarah, up to Peter who denied knowing Jesus three times, as he did not have the courage to tell the truth that he was a disciple. The Bible shows that lying is part of human existence, and thus, the ethical benchmark to overcome it is needed.

In Islam, the Quran has similar benchmarks declaring that lying is against the will of Allah, but also of self-deception. "They think to deceive Allah and those who believe, but they deceive no one but themselves and perceive it not" (Quran 2:9). The truth will finally win over the lies: "Allah will surely make evident those who are truthful, and He will surely make evident the liars" (Quran 29:3). "Truthfulness leads to the paradise" (Quran 5:119). In the Jews-Christian holy texts, the commandment for truthfulness is emphasized because of the daily reality of lies.

Half Truth, White Lie, Deception, Conspiracies: Complex Realities

These commandments look simple and straightforward. Yet, the above mentioned ethical questions and daily realities show that it is often not so easy to draw a clear line between lie and truth. Four examples:

We all know situations where we tell only *half of the reality/truth*. Is this a lie if we tell only half of the truth and are silent about the rest? It can be ethically wrong because it is a form of deception. However, it can also be justified e.g. in order to find the right moment to tell the full

truth. A medical doctor or a pastor may have to choose the right moment and the right way to tell the truth about the deadly cancer. The Swiss author Max Frisch (1911-1991) wrote the famous sentence: "One should hold out the truth to the other like a coat that he can slip into – not wrap around his head like a wet cloth."[86] This is a pastoral approach to communicating the truth.

Even more painful is the question of the *white lie*. Lies kill lives, as we said. However, white lies can also save lives. Many families during the Second World War who hid Jewish people in their houses denied this to Gestapo. They lied in order to save lives. In ethics, white lies are justified by most ethicist, under the condition that it is used for very rare and restricted situations, mainly in order to protect lives.

Deception and Cunning is also a widespread form of lie. The goal of this form of lie is to get a commercial advantage (the product declaration does not correspond to the true quality of the product), an ideological dominance (to stipulate the superiority of the own ideology over the others), and most prominently in intelligence services and in war, strategies. The often quoted famous book "The Art of War" by the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu, [87] written in the 5th century BC, shows strategies to win a war mainly through deceiving the enemy. There are numerous books which apply it to business strategies, especially in dealing with Chinese partners. Ethically speaking, deception is mainly considered as a vice, as it undermines truthfulness and trust. At the same time, it is broadly accepted and justified as a means to defeat an enemy. In politics, it can be an instrument to get a political majority or influence a decision.[88] In secret services, it is a

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[86] Very often quoted, but original source not found.

[87] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, New York: Norton & Company, 2020. See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Art_of_War.

[88] The life-long politician and Minister/Federal Councillor of the Swiss Government (1995-2010) analysed the dilemma of honesty and lies in politics is in a transparent and ethical way: Leuenberger, Moritz, "Honesty – Lies and

major means to collect information. As long as secret services are ethically justified, deception is also justified. This is one among many reasons why I plead for dismantling secret services for ethical reasons, knowing that it is a radical position far from 'Realpolitik'.[89]

Conspiracy theories are also a widespread phenomenon in times of crises such as a pandemic, for various reasons: lack of information and clarity, as well as the complexity of a catastrophe means lack of security.

This is then compensated by:

- Reducing complexity by focusing on a simple answer by giving one reason for the tragedy, e.g. the Jews as in the Plague in middle age or the Chinese as in COVID-19;
- A scapegoat as result of this simplification ;
- An external enemy to unite a nation and distract from internal issues in dealing with the catastrophe.

Ethical Principles for Truthfulness in Times of Social Media and Cyber-Speed

The cyber world kicked the issue of truth and lie to global level, due to the many years unregulated communication. [90] As a key instrument of

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Politics", in Stückelberger, Christoph/ Fust, Walter/ Ike, Obiora (Eds.), *Global Ethics for Leadership*, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2016, 225-222.

[89] Stückelberger, Christoph, "Secret Services: Can they be Ethical?"*,* in Stückelberger, Christoph/Duggal, Pavan (Eds.), *Cyber Ethics 4.0*, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2018, 427-438.

[90] These five points are similar to the publication in Stueckelberger, Christoph, "Ethical Responses to Fake News and Conspiracies During and Post-COVID-19 Pandemic", in Vassiliadis, Petros/Demacopoulos, George (Eds.), *The Church in a Period of Pandemic. Can the Present Pandemic Crisis Become a Meaningful Storm for Renewal in our Churches?* Thessaloniki: CEMES and Fordham Publications, 2020, Chapter 24, 122-126 (124f).

globalization and free market, every person can act as journalist and editor and spread whatever news they want into the world. Of the 2 billion people on this planet, every fourth human on this planet, has a Facebook account. Facebook majority owner Zuckerberg is much more powerful than the Greek Emperor Alexander the Great on the peak of his Empire, at the age of 33. Election campaigns and the COVID-19 pandemic made this influence and responsibility of social media very visible. Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok, WeChat, WhatsApp groups and other social media have a great influence.

Ethical principles to handle news and fake news are:

- The Golden Rule of reciprocity as universally accepted rule in all world religions and philosophies: Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you. Or in the positive version of the New Testament: "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Mt 7:12).
- "Do not lie" as mentioned above. Lies undermine trust, destroy relations, are short term but cannot survive in long term, and contradict the virtue of honesty, and the value of justice and fairness.
- "Do no harm". Fake news and lies can destroy the reputation of persons, groups and institutions and heavily affect communities.
- "Do not kill". Fake news can kill lives. Not only that they push young people, e.g. in case of bullying or false accusation, to suicide. In the pandemic, spreading news about non-proven or clearly false accounts against the corona virus can lead to deadly consequences.

Practical measures against fake news are needed at all three levels of ethics: individual, interpersonal and institutional. [91]

On *individual level*, the right to information includes also the responsibility to be informed, which means to collect information from different sources.

On *interpersonal level*, it includes caution in sharing information. If the information is shared, then it is important to first think twice if it can be true and if not sure, do not share or add a remark for caution. But fake news, even fake videos with image manipulation (e.g. of personalities) are aided by Artificial Intelligence tools to achieve a high level of professionalism, which makes it difficult for lay persons to distinguish lie and truth.

On *institutional level*, media education and training in critical analysis and thinking have a special responsibility in higher education. [92] Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon (the GAFA companies, whereas in China it's BAT: Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent) are big data collectors, and with their global social platforms they have a duty to filter fake news, and the regulators have to oblige them to do it. It is of course a sensitive effort as it can violate the freedom of expression and freedom of press. Classical media outlets have clear rules and regulations which should also be adopted by these new platforms. Facebook has already employed ten thousands of staff, whose daily task is to clean the platform and get rid of fake news. The COVID-19 pandemic has lead to a clear increase of information through the public. In times of threat like a virus, reliable information is crucial. More and more volunteer-led initiatives, often

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[91] See also, Christoph Stückelberger, *Globalance. Ethics Handbook for a Balanced World Post-Covid*, Geneva: Globethics.net, August 2020, 513-522 on media.

[92] I thank Dr. Simon Stückelberger, lecturer in political science, for his inputs on this part.

compromising of younger academics, journalists, and non-profit NGOs offer fact checking services and news literacy trainings.[93]

Infodemic Escalates towards War, Truthfulness De-escalates towards Peace

Fake news, lies and conspiracies escalate conflicts and are part of war language. Serious factual information, truthfulness and empathy de-escalate conflicts and are part of peace language. War and peace do not happen from one day to the other, but are a process as the graph shows.
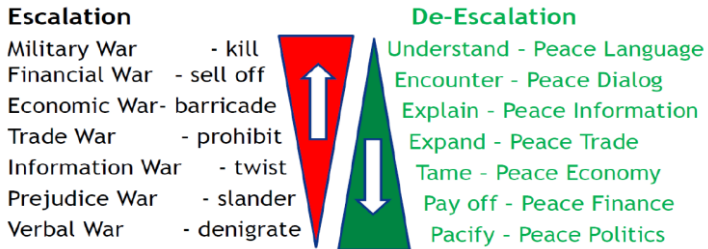
Figure 1: Spiral of conflicts by author

The vicious spiral of conflict escalates towards war (red in the graph), and the virtuous spiral points towards the de-escalation towards peace (green in the graph). Both spirals start with how we communicate and how we deal with information. They either fuel the conflict or calm it down. These steps can be observed in many conflicts, currently observed in the conflict between the two superpowers; USA and China, who are both tackling the pandemic.

Escalation starts with soft verbal war, with denigration of the enemy and is linked to prejudice war, where collective guilt of people, race, nations etc. is produced and lead to an information war. This then builds the climate for justification and acceptance of trade war, e.g. by prohibiting import or export of products, be it consumer goods,

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[93] https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/

technologies or medical equipment as urgently needed during a pandemic. This prohibition can easily lead to sanctions and barricades as economic walls. The financial war e.g. around dominance and access to currencies like USD and RMB can lead to a strangulation of an economy of a country, which then provokes military response to escape or avoid.

De-escalation also starts with soft measures of contributing to mutual understanding, listening and facts-based information (peace language). Direct encounters between humans are an important element and can even happen online, to communicate and build peace dialogues. Peace information leads to a deeper understanding, which does not mean to accept the actions and attitudes of the other sides, but at least look for a fair judgment and treatment, based on the Golden Rule. Trade relations contribute to peace, under the condition that the trade conditions are fair and lead to mutual benefits. If trade is unfair, it can increase a conflict. A more general peace economy which does not only include trade, but the whole production chain from resources to production, consumption and recycling can substantially tame conflicts, be it social, economic, political, religious or cultural. Peace finance in terms of the macro-economic measures is equally important. How to deal with the trillions of new debts accumulated due to COVID-19 without laying the ground for future political and even military conflicts related to indebtedness is a crucial challenge. Peace politics means to include de-escalation of conflicts instead of escalation in all decisions=. The pandemic shows the need for balancing fair information, fair sharing of the economic burdens of the pandemic and fair, assertive political leadership. Leaders, including religious leaders, have great responsibility to ensure fair and transparent information as much as possible. This builds the integrity and trustworthiness of leaders.

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