

Truth and Transparency

First, let me congratulate the Class of 2017! You're on your way, and I wish you all success and happiness. Now for some advice about truth and transparency.

Have you ever seen a cuttlefish? A cephalopod, like a squid or octopus, it has something like a flat-screen TV on its skin: elaborate colored shapes bloom and disappear, drifting and morphing. Nobody knows yet what function these moving displays serve, though there are several plausible theories: for courtship, for confusing predators, most likely. Now imagine you all had a cuttlefish screen on your forehead, displaying all your private thoughts and feelings. You could discover everyone's secrets, and everyone could read your mind, follow your thoughts, eavesdrop on your fantasies, your plans, your fears. Right now your friends could look at you and see who you had a crush on, who you thought was not very smart, what your biggest worry was.

Not a good idea! It might be even worse if you could read everybody else's mind while keeping yours private. Do you really want to know every exasperated and unfair thought your friends have had about you — and would hate for you to know about? We all need to keep secrets. You can't be an effective agent in the world if you expose your mind to all comers. If you reveal all your knowledge, you also reveal all your ignorance, and if you reveal all your desires, you reveal what you don't have and what you might be fearful of losing. To be a responsible agent, planning your projects, protecting what you care about, reflecting on your options, you need to have a private workspace with no eavesdroppers.

That is true of us all as individuals, and it is also true of all the multiperson organizations of civilization: clubs, teams, associations, corporations, churches, universities, governments. So the vaunted ideal of *complete* transparency in government, or in a university, is a big mistake. Leaders, democratic just as much as autocratic, need to keep secrets if they are to be effective. There is an obvious reason why the Bureau of Labor Statistics keeps its new employment rate statistics and other economic indicators secret until a precise moment when everybody gets to learn them at the same time. There is an obvious reason why diplomatic communications must be encrypted, and there is an obvious reason why personnel decisions — such as tenure decisions — must be made in “executive sessions” closed not only to the public but also to most of the other members of the organization. We hear so much about the virtues of transparency, which are considerable, but we should pause to evaluate its proper limits.

You don't have to worry about being betrayed by a cuttlefish forehead, thank goodness, but organizations are different, because they are composed of intelligent, curious, opinionated people, who can “leak” whenever their consciences tell them to. No wall or membrane can prevent human leaks; only the mutual trust and respect of the participants can do that.

Leaders of all kinds need to keep secrets. But they also need to communicate, and they need to be believed when they make statements and promises. They mustn't divulge too much, and they mustn't lie too much. Very often saying nothing is the best policy, for obvious reasons, but they must also communicate often with both their people and with the rest of the world.

So far as I know, nobody has ever devised a formula or recipe for how much to communicate and when. It is a very subtle and delicate issue, and it is one we face every day when we catch ourselves thinking a thought that we might best keep to ourselves. We all find different balances between candor and taciturnity; sometimes we waste golden opportunities to be forthright, and sometimes we wreck our best hopes with an ill-timed revelation. Social media amplify the stakes, of course, as no doubt some of you have learned to your dismay.

We want leaders we can trust, but we also want to trust them to keep secrets when it is in our interest to do so. Everybody has known this, at least tacitly, since long before Aesop gave us his fable of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. But recently, the environment has undergone a transformation. With new electronic media — not just the Internet, but cell phones, transistor radios, cable television — the “friction” has gone out of the task of information gathering, and this new transparency has set off a free-for-all of exploration and exploitation, an *arms race* of ploy and counterploy.

One of the casualties of this arms race is our ancient ideal of landmarks of truth and objectivity. We used to treat some sources as *authorities*, taking their word “as gospel,” a phrase that nicely reminds us that the original authorities were religious leaders, or leaders sanctioned by local religion. Since the 17th century, science — including all the varieties of systematic rational inquiry, such as history and anthropology and even economics — has gradually supplanted religion as our highest authority. Has it really? Well, the Vatican asks scientists to determine the date of the Shroud of Turin, but the National Academy of Sciences will never ask for supporting opinions from the Baptists or Buddhists or Hindus.

The idea of a newspaper “of record” (such as *The New York Times* or *BBC World News*) is now losing its consensus in the world, and we have become wariest, thanks to occasional overreaching by the authorities and even more by attacks on the authorities by their enemies. Are we being told the truth, or are we being played, seduced, *nudged*? We have had our trust betrayed so often that we tend to think that only the direct testimony of our senses is worth relying on, but that too is being eroded by science and technology. Is this photographic evidence a *fact*, or a bit of undetectable computer-graphics *fiction*? It is now possible to create uncannily lifelike high-resolution video fantasies of, say, Marilyn Monroe having a conversation with Justin Bieber. The golden age of photographic and video evidence in courts of law is perhaps about to end.

As usual with arms races, both in human warfare and in natural selection, advances in offense are cheaper than the defensive responses to counter them. This is especially true in Epistemology Land, the world of fact, knowledge, and belief. No matter how carefully you — or your organization — gathers, tests, and evaluates evidence, your reputation for objectivity and truth-telling can be shattered with a few well-aimed lies by your opponents. With your reputation shattered, your goods, however valuable in fact, can become almost unsalable.

Skepticism is cheap, confidence is expensive. This asymmetry is, I think, a major problem in the world, and it will take patient and unrelenting effort to restore confidence in sources that deserve confidence.

Donald Trump apparently has no concern for his credibility. He keeps being caught in demonstrable falsehoods, which he never acknowledges and for which he never apologizes. His supporters seem all too willing to say they forgive him — he’s just Trump being Trump — or they even applaud his

disruption of ambient trust, cheering as he dismantles expectations going back hundreds of years. But what will happen if a day arrives when he needs to tell us all a terrible truth and we need to believe him? He may be simply *disabled* from informing us when we most need to be informed. He may be tempted to pile on more lies in order to get out of his tight spot, but a rich vein of wisdom running through all the lore and literature of the world is that such lying cannot be shored up indefinitely with more lying. Eventually the truth overpowers the lies, and the result is ruin. Trump seems not to believe this ancient wisdom. He seems to be like the gambler who thinks that by just doubling his bets he's bound to regain his losses eventually. We know that this is a fallacy; sooner or later he will run out of allies, or time, or money. But what will happen to the rest of us when his house of cards collapses, as it will? It may already be too late for him to recover the trustworthiness that his duties require.

An interesting wrinkle of evolutionary theory is the account it can give of the phenomenon of *costly signaling*, a set of insights first devised many years ago by beloved evolutionary theorist Amotz Zahavi, who died a few days ago. For example, the wild high leaps by gazelles being chased by lions is called stotting or pronking, and it puzzled researchers at first. What good does it do the gazelle to waste time and energy with these amazing jumps? The answer is that many animals “tell” would-be predators, “Don't bother trying to catch me — I'm too fast and strong for you. Save your energy and go after a weaker prey,” and many predators are wise enough to follow this advice — but only when the adviser can demonstrate credibility by a costly display.

With social media providing essentially cost-free signaling, there is plenty of grounds for skepticism: why bother speaking truth to power when speaking falsehood to power (or *about* power) is easier and often just as effective?

Here is my tentative recommendation: Suppose we inculcate a healthy appreciation for the principle of costly signaling and for its implications: speakers must *earn* our credence, and doubters are best ignored until they have made their demonstrations of credibility. Don't pass on juicy tidbits just because they're juicy. Then we can perhaps restore something of a ranking of reliability, which will be a valuable asset indeed, so valuable that those who have a high ranking will protect it fervently, *by telling the truth*. Those who don't like the truth will of course redouble their attempts to destroy the credibility of the truth tellers, but if people are made alert to the ways of testing these attacks — and forcing them to be expensive — we may be able to return the world to a more stable and transmissible set of sources of reliable information.

Part of the cost of false attacks on reliable sources should be heavy and unremitting condemnation of those who get caught doing this, along with penalties imposed on them in the coin of whatever matters to them. If they value their honor, they should be dishonored; if they value prestige, they should be ridiculed and belittled; if they value privacy, they should be exposed.

We must protect freedom of speech. Let people speak their minds, but then do not hesitate to criticize them for spreading falsehoods.

This is not easy advice to follow. During the Vietnam War, I was an ardent anti-war activist, and I confess that I *never* solved the problem of whether to call out anti-war leaders when they occasionally uttered manifest falsehoods, or to zip up my lip for the good of the cause. I did a little private chastising and a lot of public silence. I don't know to this day whether the cohesion and effectiveness of the anti-war movement was worth the exaggerations and outright falsehoods we

never corrected. I daresay many people today face the same dilemma; we should acknowledge it, and recognize that people may have sincere and not dishonorable reasons for declining to acknowledge the unreliability of their leaders. It is a nasty bind to find yourself in. If you think I made a mistake with my silence in the Vietnam era, ask yourself who is making the same mistake — or worse — today.

In any case, what can we do to improve the situation? Just as we have raised the national consciousness to the threat of air pollution, we must raise the national consciousness to the various threats of information pollution.

We should not expect any policies to be self-sustaining. For instance, the ploy of patiently building reputation in order to exploit it in a master stroke of deception will always be attractive to some, and the internal security of organizations will always be vulnerable to moles.

Once we set aside the impossible, indeed undesirable, ideal of total transparency, we can start rebuilding islands of reliable — because readily testable — trust. The base camp, interestingly enough, is not the personal certainty sought by René Descartes, who tried to argue that his own “clear and distinct” ideas could not themselves be in error. Our eyes and ears can fool us, as we now know better than ever. As close as we can get, probably, is the trust of companions, friends, or family.

What is the first thing you would do if you were walking in a dark place with a friend and had a close encounter of one kind or another? You would turn and ask: “Did you just see what I just saw?” And if you had a second companion, the question would be even more valuable, since, as every sea captain has appreciated for several hundred years, you need to take *three* chronometers on your voyage, not just *two*, since that way, when there is a disagreement between them, you can go for majority rule.

You are wise not to always trust your own judgment about crucial issues, but you will have to choose your consultants with great care. You should cultivate the habit of asking your best friends, “What are your sources?” and expecting an answer. And you should cultivate the reciprocal habit of not being offended when your friends ask you the same question.

Experience can build mutual trust, and giving up a little of your privacy and autonomy to join a small community of confidantes is well-advised. These islands of trust already exist by the hundreds of thousands in local communities and larger political units, where public servants and private citizens have earned the respect of their neighbors and fellow citizens for their knowledge and honesty. What we need to do is enlarge these islands, patiently building from small to large, creating resilient webs of trust to replace those that have been dissolving in the onslaught of the new media that tend to make the whole world transparent.

We should guard our precious credibility with zeal and should settle for knowing less than everything about everything, but knowing enough to make informed choices, the foundation of democracy.