

**32<sup>ND</sup> GABRIELA. BERNARDO MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES**

**TRUTHFULNESS AND THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION**

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I thank the organizers of this lecture series. I was a resident assistant in Kalayaan Residence Hall in 1977 and the residence hall director then was the daughter of Gabriel Bernardo, Sister Angelina Bernardo, and I vaguely remember her talking about her father. He was a key figure in the setting-up of the UP Mainly Library when it was transferred to Diliman. I am honored to be able to give the Gabriel Bernardo Lecture this year.

My topic for this morning's lecture is Information Ethics. The coverage of such a topic can be large. While the expectation may have been for a discussion on copyright, plagiarism and censorship, allow me to go the more abstract plane and talk about the Information Revolution in general.

We can start with the fact that so much information is being transmitted and communicated around the world today and at such a fast speed. We can sometimes be overwhelmed by the information that we have access to. This information is not only substantial and the exchange is at almost instantaneous speed, this abundance of information and its speed of dissemination have been demonstrated to dramatically influence social, cultural, economic and political processes and events.

The social and political events in Tunisia, then Egypt, now Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, even China and Afghanistan are displayed before our eyes. We have never imagined such protests movement to be occurring and being fueled by the exchanges on the Internet, Facebook, Twitter and other social network programs. The earthquake and tsunami in Japan last Friday and the subsequent nuclear reactor events at Fugashima Daiichi were brought to our

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<sup>1</sup> Delivered at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Gabriel A. Bernardo Memorial Lecture Series held at the Balay Kalinaw, UP Diliman, Quezon City on March 14, 2011.  
Lee, Z.E. (2011). Truthfulness and the information revolution. *Journal of Philippine Librarianship*, 31 (1), pp. 101-109.

households as they were happening.

We have seen how Wikileaks revealed many hitherto classified material, giving us a view of how government relate with one another using secret documents. Assange claims that the Wikileaks revelations may have partly fueled the Middle Eastern revolts. We saw on TV how the Chilean miners survived for forty-five days and were rescued so that we could share in the glory of their liberation. We can even be engaged in football matches in the English Premier League, half-way across the globe, with fans supporting the Manchester United and the other teams. Before that the 2010 World Cup in South Africa was experienced by many Filipinos even more passionately at times that our own basketball leagues. And who could forget the win of the Philippine Azkals over the reigning champion Vietnam in the Asian Football League.

These events were made as accessible to us as any other global citizen today because of television and more so by the Internet. We were never as plugged in to global events at any point in human history as now. We are provided a panoptical view of everything happening around the world. An 'all-seeing eye' is available to us through our computers and television. We are afforded a 'sense of the world', 'a sense of the world of facts and events.'

It is not automatically the case though that just because we have more information available to us, and for us in the University this also means books, and journals and all the other resources available to us—CDs, data bases, resource networks, etc., that we have necessarily better understanding and greater knowledge. There is even a proposal in the US for a National Digital Library that will bring together all the digital data that is already available. But as many of us know, information per se does not automatically make sense; we still have to be able to process this information, understand its context and significance, and for that information to make sense to us, we have to have inquiry questions that will make that information meaningful. We still have to be able to think about the meaning and significance of the information.

With the pervasiveness of so much unprocessed and undigested information, we can worry how this plethora of information influences our thinking and even global thinking on certain matters. Some of us have proven ourselves to be so gullible with the threat of nuclear contamination from Japan. Mercury

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Drug sold a lot of Betadine because of the scare. People did not question or seek to verify whether the information they got was reliable.

There are definite challenges in how this information revolution will be waged. Let me say at the outset though that this information revolution should be under human control and for human purposes, not alienated from us and out of control of humans. With the advent of computers, laptops, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter and others, the so-called netizens have been born. They are mostly young people, who have grown up as children and teens with the Internet. They are the most computer-savvy compared to their elders who might sometimes be technophobes. And these netizens are the ones who are most at home in this Information Revolution. The Egyptian protest movement, for example, was mainly lead by young professionals in their twenties and thirties who used the vast potential of instant messaging and social networking.

We could say that e-groups on the Internet, like yahoo and google, function like discussion groups in providing opportunities for comments and sharing of insights. From pieces of information some interpretations and meaningful interactions take place, and Skype and Facetime provide face-to-face interaction. We bridge time and distance through these virtual conversations. What has been remarkable as well is that with the Internet discussions have been democratized, at least among those with access to the Internet. There is no central gatekeeper or 'center' of the discussion, so to speak, but rather many conversations are going on at the same time, about almost any topic.

We are witnessing among those who are participating in this technological upheaval a cross-fertilization of ideas across academic disciplines, cultures and identities. A definite shift in power relations in terms of communication and interaction arises, more young people are engaging in constant interaction in virtual reality. We do not know though if these exchanges translate to the generation of information and knowledge that can lead to meaningful social change, much like the question that when we are involved in social networking have we really become more sociable. But the opportunities are there to weave a shared, communicative, and cosmopolitan language that cuts across time and space, background and education, cultures and experiences. This in itself is already revolutionary.

Of course it could be asked, what 'social change' are we talking about? There is change going on at the community and social levels, whether we acknowledge it or not, and whether the effects and consequences are very discernible or not. For example, our overseas Filipino workers communicating to their children their experiences in working and living abroad already enlarges the horizon for both. There is change going on in people's mind through the interactions that are being carried out. We need to be able to imagine and understand what the other is saying for there to be communication and the conversation to proceed. These interactions can generate a more cosmopolitan and global way of thinking and understanding.

With so much information available, and constant (cultural and political) action generated by information, we are not certain, or are certainly not definite and clear about whether we are being deceived or manipulated. We are mainly trusting and even perhaps naive that the information generated, and the exchanges we participate in, are accurate and trustworthy, and our interlocutors sincere and credible. We need to believe perhaps that these exchanges are trustworthy and the information provided true.

But first we might need to look deeper into some moral dilemmas we may be confronted with. The question we are being challenged by is, do we have a sense of the value of truth? Would we know how we can assess whether what we are being told is true? The question is a vast and complex matter, but it needs to be confronted.

Perhaps it might help to put this in further context. We can be misled, the news can be manipulated. For example, some have lambasted Fox News in the US for knowingly fomenting distorted news. Fox News gives news a spin so that the audience is conditioned to distrust or mistrust the American federal government. Their main agenda, which also happens to be the Republican agenda, is to argue for further de-regulation and lower taxes for the very wealthy, further eroding the capacity of the US federal government to deliver basic services like education and health. Fox News has an ideological agenda and uses its media outlets for its agenda. The supposedly-grassroots movements Tea Partiers are being manipulated to believe that less government is truly in their interest. This is deceptive because in fact the most-heavily subsidized state are in

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Republican control, contrary to what the Republicans publicly avow. In other words, Fox News is deceptive.

Another form of manipulation is: we could be fed only certain kinds of information which while seemingly substantial could be skewed towards only certain kinds of conclusions or options that while we think we are the ones making the inferences and conclusions, we did so on the basis of information that may not have been the more comprehensive. The antidote might be precisely be to ask critical or inquiry questions.

How do we detect whether we are being manipulated or deceived? There is need for investment, investigative investment. To have reliable information, acquiring a true belief about a given question has a cost in terms of time, energy, opportunity cost, perhaps even danger run. We need to be able to pursue the truth about a given state of affairs by asking critical inquiry questions. Some persons need to conduct research and sift through the mass of data to verify whether this particular bit of information is reliable or not. Questions will need to be answered so that we can have sufficient warrant for the information besides further understanding.

Why do we need the truth? The question is posed in an era when posturing, “putting a spin”, “packaging”, slanting the truth, have become some of the common ways of dealing with information. It is not so much the information that is important but how that information is manipulated, packaged, presented—so that a particular interpretation or message is delivered. And yet we need the truth because we do not want to delude ourselves. We want to be able to rely on our judgments, and reliable judgments must be based on reliable assertions. We would not have survived for so long if all the information we needed to make valid judgments were all false or unreliable. While we do make mistakes in assessments or weak judgments because we did not have adequate and reliable information, at a certain point we develop ways of ascertaining whether we indeed are not dealing with what is true. In that sense we have to have objective facts, we have the truth as far as we know.

We cooperate more with those we trust. Trust is something we hold sacred. To those with whom we have a primary loyalty, we see to it that we do

not lose their trust. Trust is the reward for being reliable in telling the truth as far as we know. What we are looking for is truthfulness. As far as the information that is provided is given with an intent to be truthful, that information is trustworthy. We are not asking that it be truth itself already, but there is truthfulness in the report. A basic intention exists to present what is truthful, as far as we know. We are assured by statements like “as far as I know” or “to my knowledge” because there is the desire not to assert that I am definitely certain that this is true, but that, within my knowledge, within valid limits, this is what I know to be true.

In the face of the challenges provided us by this flood of information, what are the ethical issues we are being confronted with? To my mind these are: (a) trust and trustworthiness, (b) truth and truthfulness, (c) lying and deceit, (d) sincerity and accuracy, (e) the generation of new knowledge, not just information because information has to be processed and discussed for it to acquire and attain full meaning and significance.

We are concerned not just with information but (a) new understandings, new knowledge and new ways of perceiving the world, and more importantly (b) more genuine human relationships through (c) truthful exchanges, especially generated by rational discussion. The possibility exists for a generally more enlightened and rational manner of dealing with and solving human problems and concerns because we have knowledge at hand.

Truthfulness is an impulse, a way of responding to the need to get it right, to be true to a sense of describing something correctly within the criteria of the meanings of words and adequate descriptions. If this sense is not strong, one gives in to a looseness or lack of precision in one’s ways of perceiving, of thinking and of using language, or even laziness of expression.

Why must we be truthful? We need to be truthful to ourselves so that we do not make incorrect or false judgments. To lie to oneself is to deceive oneself, to delude oneself; and the deluded person makes wrong assessments and judgments. One must be truthful to others so that one becomes trustworthy and reliable. If one is known to be deceitful and a liar, others will not have confidence in what he says and therefore that person becomes untrustworthy. In contrast, reliability and robustness of information leads to better decisions.

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More importantly, truthfulness generates trust in the whole society and builds more reliable relationships.

The motivation to truthfulness relies on our wanting to be true to ourselves, not wanting to deceive ourselves. We have to have a sense of the value of truth. Trust is our currency. To the extent that others are assured that what we will say is true, as far as we know, to that extent they have trust in what we will present and assert.

Through the access that we are allowed through the information we have, and the various communication technologies available to us today, we are being provided (again) a panopticon (an all-seeing eye) with which to view the world. For this panopticon to be a real picture and not a delusive or deceptive one, the information we have to have must be accurate, not deceptive and manipulated, and more importantly, not an 'ideological' picture, that conforms to some preconceptions and vested interests. We need to be provided a sense of reality, the information composing a picture that is realistic and true, and only consequently perhaps a congenial picture that we create of ourselves as well as humanity.

To be able to do this, we must be people who use methods of inquiry that are truth-acquiring. We have daily experiences in conversations and discussions among ourselves where we raise questions to each other about the validity and bases for our arguments and points of view. These are "generic" experiences that become bases for discussions and conversations on the Internet and virtual reality. We also have basic experiences regarding veridical situations, truthful encounters. The moves that we follow in conversations on the Internet, for example, follow the dialogues and exchanges of ideas that we have in ordinary conversations. Our methods of inquiry in virtual reality follow what we do in ordinary life.

We should be people who actually want to find out the truth. Inquiry will encounter obstacles because, as Bernard Williams (2002) says, the world is resistant to be discovered, interpreted and unravelled. There are two kinds of resistances he mentions: the resistance to being changed, and the resistance to being discovered.

How does the virtue of truth affect social institutions? The old virtues that we thought were diminished or devalued by our political culture must be brought back. We raise ourselves up when we return to truth-telling; to have the courage to stand by what is true, and to feel fear when we are lying or deceitful. Philippine political institutions have wavered and have been weakened because the virtues that are the foundations of these institutions have been betrayed. Witness what Heidi Mendoza did in the face of the Garcia plunder case and the attempt to push through the plea bargain agreement, she belied the claim that the case was weak because in fact her solid research showed that the evidence was very strong.

People do not just want to receive information, they also want to be able to find out the truth. What are the qualities of people who can be expected to use methods of inquiry that are truth-acquiring? They will ask for proof, evidence, argumentation, justification or valid reasons. They will want to scrutinize whether the reasons warrant the conclusions or assertions. They will want facts and proofs, not just opinions or blind assertions, or worse, gossip. They should actually want to find out what the facts are. They want to know what is true.

In this regard, the Right of Information Act is important. Williams recalls Machiavelli's reminder, "the anti-tyranny argument:...governments are disposed to commit illegitimate actions which they wish to conceal, as they also want to conceal incompetent actions. It is in citizens' interest that these be checked" (Williams, 2002, p. 207). The main weapon against tyrants is the truth, or reliable information, because tyrants are predisposed to conceal or to deceive. Truthfulness is also crucial in the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule.

Citizens have a right to be informed about the bases for the policies of government, based on the idea that public reason is enhanced when the reasons that are provided as bases for government policies are reasons that most every rational citizen can give assent to. We build public reason to which government can refer to when those in government want to know what justifications can be given for certain policies. Public reason will have been



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built through the continuing discourse, exchange of justifications, learning through historical experiences.

When information is free, available and truthful, we are better able to make appropriate judgments, including whether existing governments fulfill their mandate to govern for the benefit of the people. There is a moral wellspring from which people draw their assessments. These assessments can be made finer and more robust when freedom of expression allows citizens to share their judgments, the reasons for these judgments, and consequently their thinking on the social issues at hand. Collective thinking, as the articulation of public reason, translates into mass political actions, should the need arise. This collective thinking further galvanizes people's sentiments and becomes the further bases for their bonds of fellow-citizenship.

There has to be a shared enterprise to discover and find the truth. And when these are institutionalized in public reason, the truth becomes the foundation of social institutions.

What are the consequences and implications of these ideas on our academic practice? We must insist on standards for valid and reliable information, free and available information. This information is a prerequisite to critical inquiry. We must encourage critical and productive social exchanges to arrive at further understanding and robust knowledge. And the atmosphere of truthfulness, having a sense of the value of truth, must be strengthened.

### **References:**

Williams, Bernard. (2002). *Truth and Truthfulness*. NJ: Princeton University Press.