

# Representing Misrepresentation

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## Introduction

Living in a capitalist economy, we are taught that profits are the bottom line. This belief also translates to everyday use. Society is constantly looking for answers and information, and when people are seeking information they need to ask others for help, yet how do we know what is right or not. There are millions of resources out there that are there to help us, but there are as many looking to deceive us.

We are also living in an age of information. We have the ability to access so much information in so little time. One is able to go on the internet and acquire massive amounts of data regardless if it is true or not. The business world has used this capability to give them the best opportunity to make money.

But as members of society we have certain duties we must oblige to in order to maintain a moral civilization. One might ask where these duties come from. It comes from having the innate ability to have right reasons to do something. According to Kant one should live in a society where people only act in a way that their actions can become universal.

In other words, only do things that you would want others to do to you. Kant also says that one should respect each person as a free being.<sup>1</sup>

Many people would agree that one duty we have as human beings is to inflict no harm on others. However, many people misrepresent themselves in order for selfish gain. If a company or organization is willing to present themselves in such a way as to mislead the public, they are performing in an unethical way. We must also look at this problem from an unjust point of view. We as a society have become so lethargic that we are willing to take everything we read on the internet as fact without doing any research. Because organizations and companies are aware of this they act unethically and pretend to be something else for gain.

### *Use of the Internet*

As of 2006, 40 million Americans use the internet as their primary source of scientific information. This is second only to television. Forty-nine percent of the Americans using the internet are looking for health information for someone else, and 19% are looking for themselves. Eighty-seven percent of internet users in the United States have used to internet to search for one of seventeen health topics, but three-fourths of those users have never checked where the information is coming from.<sup>2</sup>

### *What is Truth?*

The topic of truth has been discussed from Plato to Kant to the Bible. Not one definition can be agreed upon as people have argued that truth is objective, subjective, relative, or absolute. However, maybe

before we discuss what truth is, we must first discover what lying is. Lying is the *intended* deception of someone through an untrue statement or action. Saint Augustine, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Aquinas all agreed that lying undermined the natural end of speech, which is to convey the speaker's thoughts.<sup>3</sup> According to Frankfurt, when one lies one misrepresents what one is talking about, and one's own mind. Therefore, when one lies one is also creating a false impression to its audience. The liar gives a reasonable basis to the audience that what he is saying is true and in turn is deceiving, or lying to the audience.<sup>4</sup>

In this research truth is considered as an objective absolute thing, using the correspondence theory of truth. The truth can only be one thing relative to reality. Even if someone says something about a subject is true, it is not true if it can be proved otherwise. The truth is concrete and cannot be altered. Keeping this in mind, misrepresenting the truth as more than what it is will prove to be unethical. According to Kant:

*"Truth is said to consist in the agreement of knowledge with the object. According to this mere verbal definition, then, my knowledge, in order to be true, must agree with the object...For as the object is external to me, and the knowledge is in me, I can only judge whether my knowledge of the object agrees with my knowledge of the object."*<sup>5</sup>

By this Kant meant that defined truth is something that shows the true essence of a thing. But if this is true then people do not take it to heart because there are many people misrepresenting information.

## **Examples**

*Microsoft Encarta*

Bill Gates is a powerful man in the information age and in turn he has turned Microsoft into one of the most influential companies in the world. We do not expect Microsoft to mislead the public. An encyclopedia is a source of truth; it is supposed to provide facts that we can rely on. A fact is something that is not interpretable, but rather concrete and nonnegotiable. Then why is Microsoft selling encyclopedias that display different facts to different consumers?

Microsoft's popular Encarta Encyclopedia uses a different type of international marketing. It creates a different encyclopedia depending on what country you live. The facts in each encyclopedia vary to make it easier to market to one region. Bill Gates claims that "the facts depend on where you are coming from"<sup>1</sup>. But that effectively negates the meaning of a fact. A fact is "a piece of information presented as having objective reality."<sup>6</sup> And if something is objective then it cannot be disputed or changed; even if it is in another region.

In the American version of Encarta, it says that Thomas Edison and Joseph Swan simultaneously created the light bulb, while in the British version it claims that Joseph Swan created it a year earlier than Edison. In the American and British version, Encarta credits Alexander Graham Bell as the inventor of the telephone, but in the Italian version, it credits Antonio Meucci. The "encyclopedia" also has a different inventor of the mobile printing press<sup>7</sup>. Encarta also skews the lines of reality and politics regarding geography. A disputed border between the nations of Pakistan and India shows an indifferent border line.<sup>7</sup> Microsoft also removed the area of Kurdistan from the southern region of Turkey. The Turkish government demanded Microsoft to remove it from Encarta, and even arrested the local distributors of the product.<sup>8</sup>

If Microsoft is going to delve into the business of Encyclopedias, one would hope that the information they are receiving from such an influential company would be accurate and respectable. But it is clear that they are not in the business of providing correct facts and information, but rather more interested in making their encyclopedias more marketable in other countries. By skewing and omitting so called “facts”, they are ignoring their ethical duty as a respected member of the community, and an alleged giver of facts, by giving society false information. It is also unjust to society provide facts in a way you see fit in order to make people happy. People deserve to have the truth and do not need to be told part of the truth or fabrication of the truth, and it is unfair to rely on a source for information if they are going to blend the data any way they want.

*MartinLutherKing.org*

When searching for Martin Luther King Jr. on the internet, one must be wary of what they find. When I searched “Martin Luther King” on Google, the third match that came up was for martinlutherking.org, and the description read “The truth about Martin Luther King: Includes historical trivia, articles, and pictures. A great source for teachers and students alike.”<sup>9</sup> I clicked on the site believing that it is a great source of information I could find on Martin Luther King. What I found was one of the most shocking pieces of information I have ever seen on the internet.

I clicked on the link that took me to “The truth about King.” This goes on to explain to the reader that King’s real name is not Martin Luther, that he is not a PhD, and that he is not a reverend. It goes on to

tell the reader that King is a communist, a sexual degenerate, and non believer in civil rights.<sup>10</sup>

I was incredibly taken aback by the information presented to me by this website. When I am presented information on the internet that I meet with skepticism I look if the site has any sources. This site had some credible sources such as the New York Times and Pulitzer-prize winning biographer David Garrow, yet as I scrolled to the bottom of the page I saw "hosted by Stormfront"<sup>11</sup>. I clicked on the link and immediately felt like a fool. It turns out this website is sponsored by a white pride organization.

I am sure many people feel foolish when they are duped into believing something is true when it is not. I was hurt and felt betrayed when I found out who ran the website. They purposely portrayed themselves as a non-partisan group that was only seeking the truth. They even described it as a site as a great source for students and teachers. This is an example of a website providing false information in the form of misrepresenting who they are. Most people see the description on the search engine and immediately believe that it is a site dedicated to King. However, Stormfront is using misrepresentation in order to get people to look at their ideas. I believe all people, no matter how controversial they are, have a duty to not mislead people by misrepresenting themselves. This is a blatant attempt to deceive people and is unethical. It is also unfair to people that one would misrepresent themselves as something else when in fact they are something completely different. It would have been ethical if Stormfront did not try to hide who was sponsoring the website. If the description said this website is sponsored by a white pride group and here are the facts about Martin Luther King, they would have done their duty of not misrepresenting themselves.

## *Wikis*

A wiki is an online resource which allows users to add and edit content.<sup>12</sup> The definition alone should draw a red flag from people seeking the truth and facts. There are many misinformed people and this is just giving them another outlet to express their views on any topic.

Two of the most popular wikis are Wikipedia.org and Wikianswers.com. Wikipedia is ranked as the 8<sup>th</sup> most trafficked site in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> This website advertises itself as “the biggest multilingual free-content encyclopedia on the Internet.”<sup>14</sup> Wikipedia says it is an encyclopedia, yet it allows anyone to edit or add content to its pages, and Wiki answers is a website that claims to provide answers, and I’m sure most people are looking for true answers. An encyclopedia is a source of information, and the information in it should be backed by proper information and facts, not authored by uninformed users. Although there are references at the bottom, they are not reliable. When I searched for “wiki” on Wikipedia there were many references on the bottom, yet when I clicked on them they all said there was an error on the page. There is no point putting references on a page if they do not work. This is another type of misrepresenting of information: backing up your research with false references.

This leads to a huge problem when students are looking for research on a topic. When one searches Google, the first link is often a page on Wikipedia. Most people respect Google as the best search engine and think that whatever page comes up first is the best possible resource. However, when the first page leads you to a wiki, then the reliability is very foggy and questionable. No one knows who is posting the information and what information is true. A wiki just creates more

problems for those seeking facts because of the ambiguity of the information.

There is also a site called Wikileaks.org. On this site are millions of leaked documents from governments all over the world. Wikileaks.org believes that if the people know more about what the government is doing behind closed doors then we will be able to scrutinize them to a greater degree. However, where will this lead us? If millions of people around the world read classified documents about our country then we could be at risk. Again, we have a duty to society to cause no harm because that is the world we wish to live in. If people are able to post any information they want then what will stop them from posting the most confidential information.

Many people claim that wikis are a good source of information because more people can edit and scrutinize them. People say strength lies in numbers and that a million people are smarter than one. But if there are a million people editing something then it is less useful than one informed person giving information.

## **Conclusion**

*What does this mean?*

The availability of information is a big asset and it is treasured by many people. The accessibility of facts, pictures, and videos at the click of a button is a far cry from books and word of mouth. Yet, we still have an obligation to not lie to people; to not harm people with false facts. Even though the exchange of information is now in a digital realm, the duty to do right and to treat others the way we would like to be treated is still

present. People believe that because the information they are giving is not face to face, and they do not need to see the receiver of information, it is not necessarily lying. With information comes responsibility: to provide the right information. And that responsibility transcends throughout all the realms in which information is passed, the digital realm included.

We often wish to live in a society where people do not harm each other. We preach peace, but mainly focus on physical harm and do not think of the mental harm that we inflict on each other such as lying which is destruction of the mind. We always teach our children to not lie yet we do not think of all the forms of lying and continue to pass on information that is false without thinking of the consequences and implications behind it. Information helps society grow and mature and the more information we receive at the easiest accessibility the better. However, with the excess of information comes an excess of false information.

*What is the larger problem?*

Although I have talked about the issue of misrepresenting the truth, the real issue lies beyond that. Misrepresentation of facts is not a new phenomenon nor will it become something of the past. Instead it is the way we receive information that holds to be the real problem. The internet reaches millions of people every day from all walks of life. A hundred people from a hundred different countries all a hundred different ages could all read the same substance, and would undoubtedly respond to it differently. Fifteen years ago the same information was not readily available to that many different people. The accessibility of the internet contributes to the perception that misrepresentation is a new

concern, when in fact it is the convenience itself that leads to people receiving misleading truths. However, it is not only the handiness of accessing information, but also the fact that people are able to provide information over the internet without any need to provide a name or qualifications. Before the internet, one would know who the information is coming from depending on where it was coming from and who was printing it as one would know an independent printing company would have different views than a major company which uses multiple editors. But with the anonymity of the internet it is possible for someone to pose as an erudite writer without any credibility and post tons of false facts that could be mistaken as truth. Even though the ethical problem lies with misrepresenting the truth to people, the overarching problem includes the combination of the ease of accessing information and the ease of posting information anonymously with misleading the public.

*When it comes to information, who has the duty to find out if it is right or not?*

We have seen many examples where the company or organization is misrepresenting themselves and information. But are they really at fault? Do we not have the right to free speech? Are we not free to write what we wish if we are not in violation of slander or libel? It is important to look at both sides of the argument and there is one other party involved when information is passed: the receiver of the information.

As a receiver of information we also have an ethical duty to ourselves to make sure the information we are receiving is accurate and trustworthy. We must not take things at face value all the time or we will

end up living in a very confusing and ignorant world. People are free to post or tell people anything they want, and it is up to everybody involved to determine if that is right to them or not. The giver of information has an ethical duty to not deliberately mislead people, but it is also on the receiver as well. Information is a two way street and each side has an ethical duty to uphold in order to determine what is being misrepresented or not.

*What does the Future hold?*

The internet is fast becoming the most common source of information and it is getting easier for people to post information for the public viewing. However, there are ethical dilemmas attached with this increasing phenomenon in the information age. The fairness of what is being presented will be called into play as people question what information they receive from any source is real or not, and the ethical duty to present and receive accurate information will help define how people look at information in the future.

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