



Truth: How the Many Sides to Every Story Shape Our Reality

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For fans of *Nudge*, *Sway*, and *The Art of Thinking Clearly*, a fascinating dive into the many ways in which "competing truths" shape our opinions, behaviors, and beliefs.

We like to think that there is a clear distinction between true and false. The reality is far murkier.

Hector Macdonald has spent much of his career exploring the ways that two completely true statements about the same thing can give wildly different impressions to the people listening. For instance, the Internet can be described as a tool to disseminate knowledge or a system that spreads misinformation and hatred. Both statements are true, but they would paint radically different pictures for a cyber-novice.

Now, in *Truth: A User's Guide*, Macdonald explains how these so-called "competing truths" are used both constructively and misleadingly by businesses, media, politicians, advertisers, and even regular people having regular conversations. He shows how understanding competing truths makes us better at navigating the world and more influential within it. Combining great storytelling with practical takeaways and a litany of fascinating, funny, and insightful case studies, *Truth* is a sobering and engaging read about how profoundly our mindsets and actions are influenced by the truths that those around us choose to tell.

Truth: How the Many Sides to Every Story Shape Our Reality Details

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Zak says

The author makes the case that for almost any issue, there is not just the one "TRUTH" but in fact, many competing truths. More so in the current digital age where we are often faced with a deluge of "information" from various sources (most of which are dubious), it is imperative that we be able to separate the wheat from the chaff in order to make informed decisions. Macdonald provides many good examples of how various issues can be argued from numerous angles and depending on the perspective you are coming from, all arguments can seem perfectly logical and convincing at the same time, even though they are diametrically opposed in effect and result. He covers various areas such as politics, economics and finance, corporate marketing, the environment, etc.

The key takeaway is not to listen to just one side of a story, more so if it is just a sound bite or a catchy headline, which people seem to be doing more of nowadays as a result of diminishing attention spans.

JP says

The most important book you may ever read has arrived at a time when it is most sorely needed.

For both sides of a liberal/conservative debate understanding the motivations of others and the way in which we present and interpret truths, this is the most important book of 2018 and possibly the most important book a person could read in this or any year.

A fast, and concise read- with recaps at the end of reasonably broken up chapters, I am in awe of this book now and will be glad to share this book with anyone I know.

No matter your "leanings" politically, understanding what any one person, company or government is trying to spin, this book provides a great resource for looking at any item presented objectively.

You will be better armed against politicians and advertisements after reading this book.

I will share this with every person I know that has even a spark of independent thinking.

Kevin says

There are some interesting aspects to this book. The author attempts to handle the intricacies of truth and the

use of it to mislead. Unfortunately the book begins by relating the obvious. The author then proceeds to present some interesting case studies. I will give him credit for attempting to illustrate multiple facets of the issues he highlights in an evenhanded style. However, I found it distasteful that he betrays his prejudices by ascribing intentions on the proponents of the different facets. If a person uses truth to mislead in the defense of progressive ideologies he identifies this as "well-intentioned". However he deems the same behavior in defense of conservative ideologies "nefarious". This is why I usually avoid reading current books that address political topics; the authors are more interested in their point-of-view than they are with providing fair representations of the issues.

Michael A. says

In *Truth: How the Many Sides to Every Story Shape Our Reality*, Hector MacDonald has provided an incisive view of how language and belief interact to determine everything that people think, feel and do. His story is based on the psychological insight that everything that one understands comprises a *worldview* (or *mindset*), a collection of individual beliefs and meanings which automatically determine one's thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions on an ongoing basis. Everything that we think, feel and do is based on what we've learned to believe.

This starting point leads to the thesis that our mindsets are more or less useful to us (*adaptive*, in psychological terms) in various situations, and that each of us bears the responsibility for ascertaining that our beliefs, which ultimately determine what we do, are relatively beneficial for ourselves and others. According to the author, "We need to be more aware of how the truths we hear shape our mindsets and can entrench partisan divides."

Truth contains a series of clearly written stories and examples, drawn from the author's experience in a wide range of fields, which beautifully illustrate the pitfalls of human communication. It provides practical guidelines about dealing with the complexity and the difficulties inherent in the uses of language. Most of these tips urge readers to think carefully, to identify the various ways in which people manipulate meanings, and to be conscious of the tricks that nefarious communicators use to persuade people to do their bidding.

MacDonald acknowledges the limit of human understanding, which is well understood by the most highly qualified philosophers and scientists: *the absolute and complete truth of any belief or opinion about anything which cannot be directly observed is actually unavailable to human beings*. According to contemporary (postmodern) currents in philosophical and scientific thought, insisting that one knows the absolute truth about any complex issue is contraindicated. Our linguistic explanations and descriptions of things may be *more or less reasonable*; no opinion can be completely verified. As MacDonald warns, "[W]e should be wary of anyone who tries to assert the one 'true' truth and deny all others."

Given this contemporary approach to rationality, it behooves consumers to think critically in order to distinguish the usefulness of the *partial truths* which compete for people's belief. These partial and competing ideas are everywhere, and we should accept none of them without due consideration. *Misleaders* can use partial truths to convince people to think and act in particular ways, so careful thinking is needed to distinguish which truths (stories which seem to be more or less coherent) we should adopt and apply.

MacDonald discusses the notion of *complexity*, making the point that every social issue has many sides, and can be analyzed from various perspectives. Misleaders will pick and choose arguments which serve their purposes while disregarding pertinent evidence, ignoring relevant contexts, picking their favorite statistics,

and making unjustified claims about general principles. Distinguishing these tricks enables one to refute one-sided perspectives, to recognize various alternative interpretations, and to select those ideas and actions which provide optimal benefits for people.

‘Morality’ refers to decisions and judgments about what’s better or worse for people, including decisions about what we should and shouldn’t do. MacDonald writes, “It is up to us...to define and agree our moral truths...The truths we choose to propagate will determine how those around us act...it is imperative we pick our moral truths carefully and communicate them well.”

In keeping with his theme that we can “use competing truths constructively to engage people and inspire action, but we should also watch out for communicators who use competing truths to mislead us,”

MacDonald points out, “[P]oliticians, marketers, journalists, campaigners and even government bureaucrats can mislead us with the truth. It is up to us to catch them at it, call them out and resist dancing to their tune....It has never been more important for each of us to recognize a competing truth when we see it...We just need to choose our truths wisely and tell them well.”

This book clearly indicates the difficulties that we face in figuring out what to do when we’re confronted (and conflicted) by difficult and complex circumstances. What’s left for inquiring readers and educators at all levels to do is to *apply in practice* the distinctions that MacDonald has raised. While these abstract ideas are very interesting, and can be very useful, merely understanding how we are compelled by our mindsets to believe this and not that, and to enact certain habits and not others, seems unlikely to make much difference to a reader’s perspectives or habits. To change our beliefs and our habits *on purpose* we can commit ourselves to cognitive self-development, by engaging in educational discussions with people who understand different ideas and practice different habits than we do.

Deep thinking requires more than a bit of practice, and practical wisdom is a product of a lifelong commitment to considerations of coherency and morality. While most of our ideas and actions are quite automatic, *actively considering which ideas to adopt and apply*, as MacDonald recommends, *isn’t automatic*. This is an educational project, a matter of learning to analyze and explain complex sets of ideas by considering and developing various justifications (as philosophers and scientists have long practiced). These educational objectives are achieved by looking outside of one’s personal perspectives, learning from others with more experience, correcting one’s least coherent beliefs, and figuring out new alternatives.

I hope that *Truth* inspires its readers to realize that nobody should claim to know the absolute truth about the world or the people in it. *Fallibilism* is the idea that it’s much wiser to question one’s own beliefs than to insist that they’re true; all beliefs about the world should be considered as provisional rather than conclusive. That perspective has served for many as a useful starting point for developing practical wisdom, individual excellence and social flourishing.

David Broughall says

The chief imperative of this book is that we must all think critically about the things we see, hear, and read that are being presented to us as truth. Not only must we take care with the truths we consume, but also with the truths we utter. A few times the author is guilty of uttering what he thinks are self-evident truths, when to this reader they are anything but. In particular, his statements about the gender earnings gap. The earnings gap may be true, but only in the broadest sense. His statement about the gap is freighted with an unspoken

assumption that this gap is entirely due to systematic discrimination against women by men, an assumption I do not share.

I know it wasn't the purpose of the book to examine this particular issue in detail, but by making this broad statement absent all context, the author has become what he is constantly warning the reader to avoid: a misinformer, perhaps even a misleader.

Sam says

MacDonald, as a business strategy consultant, knows a thing or two about persuasion. And yet his book begs the question, how are our actions affected by our commitment to 'the truth'? Does our knowing 'the truth', even out of many competing truths, affect our subsequent actions? People know the truth about lots of things: driving while texting is dangerous, for example, but this knowledge seems to have limited practical effect. I believe that MacDonald leaves open the question, whether truth, as opposed to its manipulation, can change deleterious behaviors.

Bang Learnedly says

Despite the title Truth is a how-to of how to lie creatively. The author helps corporations with internal advertising (for example aiding in getting employees on board with a controversial company-wide undertaking) and most of the book is written as a guidebook for people with similar career aspirations, with a lot of time also spent doling out advice on how to catch on to and avoid falling for various manipulation techniques.

Many chapters' topics feel more like common sense than insight, to the point that some are borderline condescending. If it's news to you that politicians can employ statistics to obscure the effects of their policies there are far better sources to correct the education system's failure to prepare you for adult life. Most people are going to breeze through the book and find little of value. I finished Truth about a week ago and had trouble recalling much of anything of note before skimming through it to write this review.

Still, there are some interesting anecdotes peppered throughout the book. In a chapter on context Macdonald points out that the response to Hurricane Katrina can be convincingly spun as either a massive failure on the part of the government or a case study for the benefits of privatizing disaster response. A chapter on interpretation discusses how Ghandi based his pacifist philosophy on the same religious text that others used to justify violence. A chapter on definitions explains why the Clinton White House labeled the mass killing of Tutsi in Rwanda as "acts of genocide" instead of plain old "genocide," a memorable lesson to always question why messages are delivered in particular ways.

Are the occasional fun stories worth slogging through the boring bits? Not especially, but they were intriguing enough that I don't regret having read the book. Consider the score rounded up from a 2.5.

Travis McKinstry says

So there were definite parts of this book that I liked. It had some very interesting facts and stories. However,

there is something I dislike about this book, a lot. I'm not exactly sure what that thing is, but it's definitely there.

At times I felt like the author was erroneously off-topic, other times I felt like she was on topic but not making it applicable to real life. I'm not a writer, so describing how I feel about a book is not a strength of mine. However, I am an avid reader and there is something I definitely did not like about this book

E. H. Nathasia says

I am very excited about reading this book since we are in an epidemic of fake news and alternative facts, especially after the unexpected win by the PH government and also, other international issues that garners our interests such as Trump, Israel-Palestine conflict, China diplomacy and so much more.

I always want to know about Truth itself.

Well, truth is not as straightforward as some might think, or want to believe. It's not black and white, as there are different ways to speak about the Truth, and not all of them honest.

On most issues, there are multiple truths we can choose to communicate, and our choice of conveying the truth will influence those around us perceive an issue and react to it. Just see how various types of media write their headlines and see how people react to it in the comment section, and you'll know what I mean (just to name an example).

We can select truths that constructively engage people and inspire action, or we can opt for truths that deliberately mislead. Truth comes in many forms, and experiences communicators can exploit its variability to shape our impression of reality. For example eating meat is nutritious but it's also damaging to the environment.

In this book, the author explores how truth is used and conveyed in politics, business, the media and everyday life, and how readers can spot and call out misleading truths. The author hopes that the book can help readers have a clearer understanding of the many faces of Truths and to better be able navigating the world.

Great storytelling, combine with practical takeaways and insightful case studies that will definitely makes you nod in agreement (or maybe shake your head in disagreement, I don't know!)

Bryan Blanchot says

I've read this book in a day while being sleep deprived for travel reasons so I might not have been in the best conditions to evaluate this book. However, the language used is very clear and the author skilfully explores the different truth bending devices used by master « misleaders » (his word, not mine) but which can also serve a better purpose. Through concrete examples he casts light on the fact that often a situation can have competing truths depending on context/beliefs/data/predictions etc.

Some chapters are a bit long and unrelated to the topic at hand. If you've enjoyed books by Dan Ariely or other behavioural scientists then you will enjoy this one.

Nick Duretta says

Macdonald is a good writer and there is definitely food for thought here, but this had what I felt was a lot of irrelevant padding, and it seemed to be structured for a corporate audience (Macdonald is a corporate consultant). When he stuck to the topic at hand--how can we tell a truth from a lie, something not easy these days--it was good. But then he got too far into the squishy logic of looking at "competing truths" (sort of like "alternative facts") that he lost me.

?Misericordia? ~ The Serendipity Aegis ~ ?????? ✿*♥♥ says

? Complexity, History, Context, Numbers and Story are the (anti)heroes in here.

The Human Rights addressed very shallowly in here: the history of this 'Social Construct' has barely been scratched in here.

Q

In 1986, the Guardian newspaper ran a TV and cinema advert that has stuck in my mind like few others. In newsreel black and white, it showed a skinhead running away from an approaching car. The soundtrack was completely silent except for an authoritative voiceover: 'An event seen from one point of view gives one impression.' The same man is then shown from a different angle: he runs straight at a businessman, seemingly set on attacking him or stealing his briefcase. 'Seen from another point of view it gives quite a different impression.' Another cut, and we see the scene from above. A suspended load of construction material is juddering over the businessman's head, out of control. The skinhead hauls the businessman aside, saving his life as the load crashes to the ground. 'But it's only when you get the whole picture you can fully understand what's going on,' concludes the voiceover. (c)

Q

When Amazon began 'sanctioning' Hachette authors, delaying shipping of their books and guiding shoppers away from their pages, more than 900 authors signed a protest letter. (?)

Q

Next time you hear someone start a sentence with, 'Women prefer...' or 'Bankers are...' or 'Muslims want...' or 'The gay community feels...', just think about the many diverse, complex and contradictory people being wrapped up in the impending declaration. Maybe it will be a truth of sorts, but we can be sure plenty of competing truths could be drawn from the same constituency. (C)

Q

Historical omission is widely practised in school textbooks, where the civil servants and politicians who decide national curricula choose to ignore the more embarrassing or shameful aspects of their country's history. (c)

Q

Our history moulds our identity. It shapes the way we think. (c)

Q

The term 'Dunkirk spirit' has entered the English language to denote great courage, unity and determination in the face of adversity. (c)

Q

If Americans look back with shame on Saigon, and the British look back with pride on Dunkirk, the Chinese

look back with deliberate and purposeful anger on their Century of Humiliation. ...

The long sequence of humiliations is blamed on the failure of imperial China to keep up with the technological development of the West. That failure, by implication, must never happen again. In this way are the Chinese motivated to build, to progress, to invent, to triumph. (c)

Q

Imagine you have been stripped down to your underwear and dropped in a lake. You have no idea where in the world you are, and when you exhaustedly crawl ashore there is no sign of human habitation or agriculture. You seem to be in the middle of nowhere.

Terrifying?

Not if you're the astronaut hero of the movie *Gravity*, and against all the odds you've just made it back to Earth after being stranded in space, facing the imminent prospect of death by collision, incineration or asphyxiation. It is a testament to the narrative skill of the filmmakers that when Sandra Bullock pulls herself on to that alien shore and lies there clutching at wet sand, we rejoice in the conviction that all her troubles are over. She's breathing fresh air! She's on solid ground!

Yet exactly the same scene could have been the chilling start to a survival adventure. A lone woman with no food, map, shoes, matches, phone or knowledge of the wilderness has to find her way back to civilization. A daunting prospect. But because we know how much worse her situation was just a short while earlier, and we anticipate a NASA rescue mission, we see this scene as a happy ending.

Context makes all the difference to our impression of reality. (c)

Q

Context changes meaning.

Such context is part of the complexity of the world we are trying to understand. It is easy to say we should know the context of any actions and events we evaluate but harder to say which context is relevant or appropriate. Hearing a story in one context will give a very different impression to hearing the same story told within a different context. Deciding which contexts to highlight and which to downplay is a critical part of shaping reality. (c)

Q

A black and white cat named Humphrey used to live at 10 Downing Street in London. Humphrey shared the address at various times with three prime ministers, including Conservative Margaret Thatcher and Labour's Tony Blair. In a telling experiment, British voters were shown a picture of Humphrey and asked to say whether they liked or disliked him. When described as 'Thatcher's cat', Humphrey received a net approval rating of 44 per cent from Conservative voters and only 21 per cent from Labour voters; as 'Blair's cat', Humphrey scored 27 per cent with Conservative voters and 37 per cent with Labour voters. Same cat, different context. (c)

Q

De Hory did not copy existing works of art. His method was to create something new that famous artists might have drawn or painted. He was always careful to use aged canvas, frames and paper, sometimes buying an old painting to reuse the canvas, or tearing blank pages out of antique books for sketches. His ability to imitate the style of Modernist masters was so good that few experts were able to tell the difference. A living artist, Kees van Dongen, was convinced that he himself had painted a work created by de Hory. One New York art gallery owner declared, 'When it came to doing Matisse, de Hory was better than Matisse.' Indeed, it is widely claimed that many of de Hory's works are still on show in galleries around the world, misattributed to more famous artists.(c)

Q

Reframing—changing the context—is a vital skill in conflict resolution, innovation and change management.

(c)

Q

Before we get to the numbers themselves, we need to check what they actually represent. Is a business

boasting of its employment record talking about full-time employees, contractors, unpaid interns or 'full-time equivalents' (FTEs)? Is the demagogue quoting numbers of migrants, illegal migrants, economic migrants or refugees? Are all those people 'on welfare' unemployed or just eligible for child or low-income support? Do 7 out of 10 people really prefer Product Y, or is it 70 per cent of the people polled in a single town recently flooded with advertisements for Product Y? Are those government statistics referring to corn grown or corn sold, households or individuals, taxpayers or residents? Huge variation can be found in these distinctions, and therein lie opportunities for competing truths. (c)

Q

Canada and Australia have the highest rates of kidnapping in the world. Really, it's true. Not because they are more dangerous than Mexico and Colombia but because their governments include parental disputes over child custody in kidnapping statistics. Similarly, Sweden is said to have the second highest incidence of rape in the world, with more than 60 cases reported per 100,000 inhabitants each year (the rate for India is 2 per 100,000). Yet this reflects not only Sweden's better reporting of sexual crime but also a broader definition of rape. (?)

Q

There is a lovely graph on the Web that plots the decline in the number of pirates since 1820 against the rise in global average temperature. The correlation is uncanny: as the pirate population has decreased, the world has got warmer. Clearly, the fall in crime on the high seas has allowed more intercontinental trade, which has caused global warming!

That conclusion, of course, is ridiculous. As any fool can see, it's the other way round: rising temperatures cause the alcohol in ships' rum to evaporate, weakening the morale of pirates and driving them into more honest trades.

This spoof analysis warns us against assuming that an observed correlation between two number sets implies some kind of causal relationship. It has been noted that the more ice creams are sold in beach resorts the more people seem to drown. That does not mean that ice cream is causing fatal cramp; people tend to eat ice cream when it warms up, and people also tend to go swimming when the weather improves. There is no causation between ice cream consumption and increased cases of drowning; both are caused by a third factor.

(c)

Q

Many a Victorian gentleman celebrated the chivalry of war, dreaming of mythical medieval knights doing battle according to a strict code of honour, even as the horrors of the Crimean War unfolded. Piero Manzoni managed to make his own excrement highly desirable in certain circles by labelling ninety cans of it 'Artist's Shit' and declaring them works of art. Today, some have suggested that knowledge may become a bad thing if, for example, it gives us too much insight into our future diseases and death, or it reveals to us how much better off other people are elsewhere; both forms of knowledge are liable to make us unhappy. Some scientists suggest that excessive domestic cleanliness may be responsible for a rise in autoimmune and allergic diseases like asthma. If agriculture, hygiene and knowledge can be seen as undesirable, while war, faeces and failure can be seen as desirable, there does not seem to be any limit to the subjectivity of desire.

(C)

Q

The word propaganda comes from the Office for the Propagation of the Faith (Congregatio de propaganda fide), set up by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 to oversee missionary work and combat the spread of Protestantism. Propaganda, for centuries, implied nothing more insidious than broadcasting the truth, at least as the Church saw it. Its Catholic origins put the word in bad odour in some Protestant countries, but it was only with the work of Joseph Goebbels, minister of propaganda in Nazi Germany, that propaganda became a noxious concept. The first definition in my dictionary reads, 'information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view'. No one today would want the job of minister of propaganda. (?)

Q

People who identify as non-binary often prefer the pronoun they over he or she. 'Singular they' was the American Dialect Society's word of the year in 2015. Some reject 'labels' or adopt such bespoke identifications that categorization becomes near impossible. This trend suggests the definitions traditionally used around gender and sexuality are frequently seen as unhelpful or even oppressive. (c)

Betsy Myers says

I won this book via Goodreads First Reads. I am an ECE administrator and I look forward to adding this book to the lending library for parents and staff at my school.

Kent Winward says

Is this a true review? 4 stars? Well yes and no. And Hector would agree with me. It is also a 1, 2, 3 and 5 star book -- sort of a pentagon of reviews are available, depending on the reader.

Subjective truth is a form of truth and perhaps the most dangerous when the believer acts on their truth. I'm not saying you should act on my review and I don't want to give the impression that this book is some sort of post-modern, relativistic, multi-cultural, everything is true so nothing is true, because it is not.

As I wrote that last sentence I realized the truth of this book: it is a lexicon of truth -- truth in its many faceted definitions which need to be taken into account whenever we talk about the "truth" of something, even this review.

Masa Nishimura says

My impression of this book is Hector is an amazing writer. The book is filled with anecdotes, which made it exciting to read until the end. Even though he claims in the beginning that it's not a book about the philosophy, he definitely revisits some of its classic themes into a modern context. I enjoyed that applicability. I also liked his summary at the end of each chapter. Storytelling approach in a book is often confusing of what the takeaway of your reading was. He brushed that concern off.
