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## **The Case of Business Communication: The Pursuit and the Art of Lying**

Let me handle the case of spin doctoring from a business point of view. There is a common suspicion that I'm a spin doctor. And I will not confirm it! Of course I won't skirt around the issue. The German poet Heinrich Heine once stated that when Germans are polite, they start to lie. So I would like to propose that we dispense with a degree of politeness today.

What, by the book, is spin doctoring? Spin doctoring is a privately-financed public service provided by communication professionals to support markets that are in need of story-telling to enhance somebody's business or the economy as a whole. It's not only "re-arranging the truth", as PR is sometimes defined within the PR industry. It's storytelling of the finest fictional finesse. In actual fact, spin doctors are poets.

In the context of developed economies or countries, there is no such thing as a story-free market. If you personally think that you personally are not story-driven, you are either out of touch with the markets or you believe in the story of the "facts-and-figures-myth", which is quite popular with scholars. "Es sind aber nicht alle frei, die ihrer Ketten spotten."

Stories reduce the complexity of number crunching to cultural schemes of experience that enable market participants to act even though they are most probably not in possession of the full facts. After all, even nuts can get rich. And wise guys sleep rough. Spin doctoring offers the safe and comforting mental orientation of sense, reason, good feelings and appropriate opinions, to a far too complex and – when all's said and done – contingent world and its potential victims. It delivers guidance in the jungle of enlightened "facts-and-figures".

Are the stories spin doctors tell true? Are brands true? Do ads rearrange the truth? Is branding a process that reveals the truth? To be honest with you, even if it sounds rather impolite, these are downright stupid questions. Are the fairy tales in "One Thousand and One Nights" true? You will recall the tales are told night after night by a victim facing execution in a last-ditch attempt to save her life. If the tales aren't entertaining, it's "off with her head"!

Are the stories that the Bible tells us and that the Roman Catholic Church nurtures with such care true? Are you willing to discuss the wonder of the "Immaculata" with me? Do politicians never lie? Do only bad politicians lie, and are there any good ones

out there who tell the truth to their electorate? Are you ready to discuss Italian politics with me? In Germany I foresaw the very narrow victory of Angela Merkel, as her story was that of “Aschenputtel” (Cinderella) and the electorate followed the narrative logic of her fairy tales.

Those were three discourses of public speaking: the cultural, the religious and the political, where there is, on the part of the protagonists at least, plainly no discrimination against lying – quite the opposite.

As a spin doctor, I am strongly opposed to discriminating against lying. As Thomas Jefferson made an addition to the American Declaration of Independence, the “pursuit of happiness”, I would like to add the “pursuit of lying” to the UN list of human rights. The question whether our cultural or religious myths are true or not, at least in a Popperian way, is ridiculous. Of course they aren’t: you’re asked to believe them, not to argue about them, right?

Well, we have regulations, for example on the stock markets, at least in the US and Europe, where you are not allowed to blatantly disinform your shareholders in particular or market participants in general. Competition regulations discriminate against “misleading” ads; there is an idea of fairness, in German: “lauterer Wettbewerb”.

That is something like putting legal limits on the game of story-telling to avoid any stupid fraud. You could call it regulated story-telling, while other social systems are less regulated. I see that Mr. Berlusconi is quoted as having said he, “il duce”, is Jesus. Fair enough. But, as Kipling says, that is another story.

Being strongly opposed to discriminating against lies and very much in favour of story-telling, I realize that journalists tend to define themselves as “fact-finders” and “truth-tellers”. That sounds like ethics carved in stone: only facts, only the truth. The sun of enlightenment shines in our eyes. Well, am I impressed? No, I’m not.

All rainmakers pretend to make rain. To pretend something “great” is part of their business. The Pope pretends he never fails. As I’m in favour of story-telling, I like journalists and I respect the Pope as an occasional story-teller. Which doesn’t necessarily mean that I really believe rainmakers make rain. Or that the Pope never fails. Especially as his former profession was head of the witch-hunting committee, as Cardinal Ratzinger was. He is quoted as having said the Inquisition had the big advantage that there was at least some procedure before the witches were burnt. But I digress – back to the issues in hand.

Journalism or PR? Which came first? The chicken or the egg? Who was first – the Medici in Florence (their PR is nowadays known as Renaissance) or the Watergate journalists (who followed the spin of a source called “Deep Throat”, a secret service

official in disguise)? Who was first, Cato or Pulitzer? These are easy questions to answer. In all evolution, you can never explain prospectively, only retrospectively. Man explains the ape and not vice versa. PR explains journalism and not vice versa. I repeat: PR explains journalism; the other way round – excuse me – is the ape trying to explain mankind. For those of you who understand Darwin, this is clear. For those who believe in the creation of mankind, nowadays known as “intelligent design”, I’m afraid I don’t have anything to offer.

Journalism is a specific form of PR that allows editors and their industry, that allows the proprietors of media, to sell room for advertising. In historical terms: there was PR ages before some storytellers imagined themselves to be truth-finders and fact-tellers. Read the apology of Socrates or Cato’s campaign against Carthage, which he wanted destroyed, and you get an idea.

Business communications are a medium for transforming values. Public Relations are services that support businesses. All public speaking services are a means to a specific end. Just as journalism is the PR of the newspaper editing business, journalism is part of PR, not even a very sensational or difficult part at that. It’s easier to investigate a fraud than it is to commit one. Journalism is far easier than business. A quote from Bert Brecht: “What is a robbery of a bank compared to owning a bank”.

Let’s approach our issues more seriously: we tend to compare social situations which we see as similar. By this, we transfer our experiences of one situation, or should I say from one social sub-system, to another: we transfer our understanding. When we exercise this process of “Sinnstiftung”, transforming sense and understanding, we assume that the analogy is given in reality, but we never argue as to whether this is really the case.

The manners we learnt as children from our parents, our parent-child relationships, are transposed onto situations in our adult lives. And we are told that well-behaved children are successful grown ups. Which is, of course, as the Americans say, “bullshit”. To give you a simple example.

In quite a few cases the relationship between the well-understood situation and the situation to be understood is just metaphorical. The red rose we find in a love poem is a symbol, a metaphor for the girl you adore, but there is nothing else to it than the very, very weak logic of a metaphor. By this, we might have the feeling that the red rose is a way of describing the lovely girl, but, as we all know, it explains absolutely nothing. Otherwise gardeners would be ideal lovers.

Dialogue between honest people who exchange their views peacefully and in mutual respect in order to find a common understanding, aka the truth, is not the prototype of communications, at least not the prototype of public speaking. Being erroneously

taken as a paradigmatic idea is deeply misleading. As such, the moralised and categorised distinction between journalism and PR is a misguided approach that becomes even more misleading.

Dialogue is just a metaphor. Investigation as revealing the truth is just a metaphor. Journalism as a source of democracy is just a metaphor. Applying images of a dialogue to communications within an economy, especially as regards the relations between businesses, can serve the purpose of transferring nice experiences to nasty businesses, but it's not at all intellectually appropriate.

Investigative journalism is a PR form in highly competitive markets to scandalize stories into sensations to increase competitiveness, period, paragraph.

Let us revisit our cultural history. Let's revisit ways of public speaking. The fairy tales in "One Thousand and One Nights", to bring us back to our first example, represent the situation where the story-teller will be executed unless her stories are so exciting that the death sentence is postponed for another day. Entertain them or they will hang you: that is the "hidden hand" (Adam Smith) that rules the media markets.

The politician wants to be elected. The priest wants meek believers and supporters of his church. And business is about earning money, preferably earning a lot of money, preferably a hell of a lot of money.

As a matter of fact, the truth has very seldom been a relevant category of public speaking. As a speaker you had to be smart, charismatic, entertaining, whatever, but never ever was there any misunderstanding about the fact that a merchant in the market wants to sell his products. By almost any means. To quote Bert Brecht again: "They are not living according to moral standards, but off moral standards".

The discrimination and delegitimation of lying is historically quite new and culturally very specific. It is in the "genius loci" of exactly this part of the world – it's a product of Swiss Calvinism. I love being here and have the utmost respect for Swiss democracy; but one can still feel the influence of Vadian, the witch-hunter's philosopher. The discrimination and delegitimation of public lying is not the rule but the exception. It's a neurotic obsession of Calvinistic witch-hunters.

That is why the development of capitalism needed a "Doppelmoral" – double standards – right from the beginning. Max Weber was right: only the bad conscience of the Protestant bourgeoisie could be a real driver for the social game of hiders and seekers. This game enforces competition. In the game, investigative journalists as well as spin doctors play the role of Punch and Judy, Kasper und das Krokodil, to put it into German. Both are part of a role concept in competition-driven societies. They

are puppets on strings in a play they don't need to understand entirely. The market itself pulls their strings.

I close with my plea: stop discriminating against lying – it makes life so much nicer. And never tell your girlfriend what her new hairdo or her new dress really looks like. You know the spin: tell me lies, tell me sweet little lies. Too much truth kills.