

# Lies We Live By

By Carl Hausman

## Proposal

I'm going to lie to you. And you won't be able to catch me because everything I say will be true. But it's still going to be a lie.

Watch me as I use facts and figures to sell you on a very expensive investment -- an education at a private university.

*"University X is highly selective, accepting only 33 percent of applicants. The average SAT score is 1095. As a result of the high caliber of our student body, we were named one of the outstanding colleges in the East by a well-known national magazine!"*

Judging from this information, University X looks like a fine place to drop about \$15,000 a year on tuition. It is, after all, exclusive. It admits only one in three applicants. (Obviously, not everybody can be a University X student!) The SAT score is well above the national average -- showing, it seems, that this is a competitive college where the standards are high. Correct?

Not really. I've just lied to you, not by what I've said, but by what I've left out. Here's the rest of the story:

- At University X, we don't like it known that we accept most of the people who apply, so we massage the numbers. For starters, we recently began handing out pre-addressed postcards at high schools; students were instructed to fill in their names and mail the postcard for more information. We count that postcard as an "application." Because few of these students go to the next step -- filling out a real application -- we cut our "acceptance" rate significantly.
- We also started encouraging applications from students who had virtually no chance of acceptance.
- To cement our reputation as a "selective" college we counted people who were rejected by one program in the university but accepted by another program as rejects. We then further whittled that figure by putting about 500 students on a 'waiting list.' We accepted most of them later, but still counted them as rejected applicants.
- What about that high "average" SAT? Well, our actual SAT is about 200 points lower. But in order to boost the average we simply did not count people who don't do well on the test, such as international students and students in remedial programs. We also exclude the football team (sturdy folks but not a genius among them) by admitting them when they show up for training in August instead of the September class. Our "average" SAT score is, of course, computed only on the September class.

As a result of our numbers massage, University X may find itself moving up five or ten slots in the "Best College" rankings of respected publications such as U.S. News and World Report -- which, like other college guide publications, does not comprehensively fact-check the data.

The example is hypothetical but the widespread number-fudging is real. When The Wall Street Journal compared the figures given in guidebooks with statistics provided to credit rating agencies such as Moody's, the Journal found that in virtually every case the guidebook figures were much more favorable to the college, having been massaged with the techniques above and some others even more imaginative. (We name names and blow the whistle in Chapter 7.) It's a violation of federal securities law to lie to Moody's, but it's legal to lie to the guidebooks -- so in almost every case the "real," uncooked figures were given to Moody's.

Telling lies is not unique to education, although it is a particularly expensive type of misrepresentation -- as well as a galling example of lies told by people who would surely regard themselves as living on a higher moral plane than used car salesmen or fast-talking telemarketers. But very few used cars or aluminum siding jobs cost what a college education does.

\* \* \*

The example above, shows one way to lie with the truth. There are many others. But the phony figures provided by leading

colleges and universities are excellent examples of the modern lie in this media-driven age: a half-truth, a mix of fact and factoid that often makes its point as much by what's left but as by what's put in.

Lies We Live By will show how such lies are crafted, how they sometimes are repeated uncritically and take on a life of their own, and how the lie has become something of an American art form. In the first book-part, we'll provide a crash course in how to lie with words, numbers, images. In Part II, we scrutinize various industries that have shown themselves to be less than pristine in their handling of the truth. Part III is a call to action - a prescription for accurate analysis, for, detecting the lies we live by, and becoming a resistance fighter for the whole truth.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Carl Hausman is a journalist and educator who has written two books about media ethics, edited a magazine about ethics in international affairs, and has testified about communications ethics before Congress. Hausman is an associate professor of Writing at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey, and an adjunct professor of journalism at New York University, where he developed and teaches a workshop in explanatory journalism.

He holds a Ph.D. in journalism and media from the Union Graduate School and completed a post-doctoral fellowship at New

York University, where he was awarded the Mellon Fellowship in the Humanities.

The author of a total of 19 books (most of them dealing with media) and about 500 published articles, Hausman specializes in making complex subjects simple and interesting. His writing has been called "excellent" by The New York Times and "lively and accessible" by Booklist.

Hausman is a former television talk show host who is comfortable with the book-promotion process and has appeared as a guest on many radio and television talk shows (including the Morton Downey Junior Show).

When not coyly writing his bio in the third person, Hausman frequently lectures on mass media issues and is a subscriber to George Bernard Shaw's maxim: "If you want to tell the public the truths you'd better make them laugh or they'll kill you."

#### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

Lies We Live By deals with a serious subject, but relating to the point mentioned above, its approach will be lively. The last thing the world needs, in my view, is another overheated, self-important jeremiad. But at the same time, Lies We Live By will be journalistic and to-the-point. We'll name names and shine a flashlight in the eyes of some people and industries that truly deserve the glare.

What follows is a proposed table of contents and a brief chapter-by-chapter outline of the book.

# **Lies We Live By**

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# **Lies We Live By**

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## **OUTLINE**

### **Part I: The Truth About Lies**

#### **1. Lies: The Truth, the Half-Truth, and Nothing Like the Truth**

This introductory chapter provides a brief overview of the industry of lying in America, comparing the "big" lie, which is a blatant falsehood, and the "little lie," which involves a half-truth leading to a conclusion in which there's usually no truth.

Chapter 1 includes a brief anecdotal history of lying, featuring politicians, tobacco companies, and other stalwarts, and demonstrates how the lie has today often become a standard technique of doing business.

#### **2. How to Lie With Words**

Many arguments sound reasonable until we dissect them. For example, a political ad I heard recently touted a new proposal to change the legal system in a way that would (surprise!) benefit trial lawyers. The ad concluded with the announcer intoning, "Recent polls show 84 percent of Americans want a better legal system."

Aside from the spurious linkage between the poll data and the proposal, listeners were given no clue as to how the evidence was concocted. What was the question asked in the poll? Is it any surprise that when asked, "Do you want the legal system to be better or worse?" most people said "better"? (And where did the 14 percent come from who want the system to be worse? Were they the criminals?)

In Chapter 2 we'll categorize various kinds of word-lies, from leaps of logic to weasel words (hollow words and phrases that have no meaning), and provide some intriguing examples and anecdotes.

### **3. How to Lie With Numbers**

An ad for a chiropractor caught my attention recently. It noted that people injured on the job who seek care from a chiropractor recover 30 percent more quickly than those who are injured and seek care from an M.D. And the chiropractor's patients spend 40 percent less money for treatment.

Persuasive!

But this is an example of a statistical fallacy called ignoring the exposure base, meaning that the sample from which the original data was drawn is skewed. In this case, it's the assumption that people injured on the job who visit a chiropractor or an M.D. have equivalent injuries. But are they comparable? Would, for example, the fellow who had his legs torn off in a threshing machine drag himself on bloody stumps for a

chiropractic adjustment? Probably not. . .he'd more than likely go to an M.D. in the emergency room for a long and expensive recovery.

Chapter 3 details the many ways a liar can slant statistics, providing examples and anecdotes.

#### **4. How to Lie with Images**

Which stock would you buy ... the one from Company A or Company B?

The earnings record for Company B seems much more impressive. But if you look closely at the graph, you'll see that the earnings are the same. I've tinkered with the values of the graph and truncated the bottom.

In a shorthand world with time-starved readers, the visual is often the quickest way to communicate and the most effective way to deceive. Chapter 4 shows all the tricks and techniques, and catches some of the perpetrators in the act.

## **Part 2: Would They Lie?**

### **Tricks and Techniques of 11 Industries**

#### **5. Politics**

Chapter 5 begins the book-part that dissects the techniques of telling lies. In politics, we deal with not only with explicit lies, but lies that have become embedded in our framework of ideas.

This chapter shows how political candidates use research to uncover the emotional hot buttons that will respond to lies and propaganda. We'll dissect some intentionally misleading ads, such as the Willie Horton ad, which used a juxtaposition of visuals and audio to create a completely false impression. Chapter 5 shows how politicians often frame their statements in ways that dissemble or create false impressions. (One of my favorite examples is a politician who wanted to be seen as tough on crime and ran a spot claiming, "I believe in mandatory life in prison for murderers, and my opponent doesn't." True! His opponent was running on a capital-punishment platform.)

#### **6. Airlines**

This industry is driven by competition, not only in pricing but in who can out-lie whom in their advertising. Among other issues, we'll examine a recent government investigation showing that many of the "bargain" fares carried so many restrictions that it was virtually impossible to get them. (One ad touted a fare that expired the day before the ad ran.) We'll name names,

show examples, and try some experiments to see if we can get those "bargain" fares.

## **7. Education**

The same ivory-tower dwellers who castigate the corporate world for its coarseness and slavish obedience to the bottom line tell some of the more egregious lies known in American marketing. The message of admission statistics detailed in the opening of this proposal would likely land someone in jail if it were done for a stock offering.

But that is little consolation to parents and students who fork over astronomical amounts of money and base decisions with life-long impact on falsified figures and empty, illogical words. We'll expose the whole mechanism of deceit in Chapter 7.

## **8. Financial Institutions**

Have you ever read the fine print •on your credit card statements? They are Often masterpieces of misstatement. The rate "promised" will often not be the rate your get. Your pre-"approval" may turn out to be a pre-"approval" for mailing the application to you -- and you'll be rejected for the promised rate (for which you thought you were pre-approved) and lumped into a category where the rates and fees are higher.

## **9. The Mass Media**

A reporter with an ax to grind can manipulate many elements of the story. A common technique is "speaking through sources," where you call people you know are going to give you the quotes

and slant you want. Even the choice of the photo an editor chooses to accompany the story can be misleading; catch the subject at the right moment and you can make him appear dejected, angry, or deceptive.

We'll show how this is done through examples, words, and pictures.

An intriguing avenue to be explored is web journalism. Here's an unregulated Wild West of misinformation, and we'll show how the new technology has compounded an old problem.

## **10. Lawyers**

Remember the tippy Suzuki Samurai? Its dangers were highlighted in a videotape provided by a "safety institute." That tape, showing the little truck obediently flipping when it took a sharp turn, eventually wound up on the CBS Evening News.

And, trial lawyers showed, the CBS Evening News tape at the trial in which Suzuki was sued.

Can you guess who made the tape in the first place? Yes, the "safety institute" was really a group of trial lawyers.

Chapter 10 highlights similar shenanigans, including the legal profession's imaginative use of the English language.

## **11. Tobacco Companies**

Tobacco companies have a long history of twisting words and burying data. We'll demonstrate the techniques and document the deeds.

## **12. The Auto Industry**

This chapter focuses primarily on advertising, but techniques of salespeople deserve some attention here, too.

Note that the growth of the leasing industry has spawned many new methods of misrepresentation. We'll look at a typical ad for a leased vehicle and flag the misrepresentations. (My favorite: "Actual price set be dealer." Meaning, literally, that the price on the ad has no meaning.

## **13. Retail**

Did you ever wonder how "fresh squeezed" orange juice can come in a can? It's because "fresh squeezed" is ungrammatical and therefore has no actual, enforceable meaning -- and can therefore slip into the retailer's weasely lexicon of hollow catch phrases.

Chapter 13 exposes the techniques of deception retail and grocery stores -- from bait-and-switch advertising to misleading placement of signs.

## **14. Public Relations**

Chapter 14 focuses on how the public relations industry creates false impressions. One of my favorite examples was orchestrated by Hill and Knowlton, the country's largest P.R. firm, when it represented the saccharine industry. Congress was debating whether the substance should be removed from sale because it was a possible carcinogen. Hill and Knowlton arranged for a crowd of diabetic children to crowd the Capitol steps and shriek at congressmen: "We can't eat sugar -- please don't take

our soft drinks and candy away !” (I’m not making this up, and I can prove it.)

We’ll detail many instances such as this, including planted book reviews and videotape placed as news.

### **15. Advertising**

Advertising is placed at the end of this book part because the field exemplifies our approach toward persuasion, and can therefore be used to illustrate some concluding points. We’ll look at the fundamental illogic behind advertising, the way advertisers prod us to make inaccurate conclusions based on misleading information, and how little half-truths are used to propel a big lie.

## **Part 3: Fighting Back**

### **16. How to Keep Distortion in Proportion**

Chapter 16 provides a guide to how the reader can synthesize the information in the book and stand guard against those who would lie to him or her.

The chapter also provides guidance on ways to fight back against people and organizations who mislead you -- Whom to contact, how to complain, what to ask for.

## 17. Resources: Books, People, and Organizations

The book closes with an extensively annotated bibliography of works that deal with critical thinking and understanding information. Examples include. Language in Thought and Action by S.I.Hayakawa and How to Watch TV News by Neil Postman.

Listings of people and associations involved in integrity of information will be included -- examples are the various non-profits involved in analyzing and exposing misleading political ads.

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The author is ideally located at the precise midpoint between Washington and New York. Many of the interviews for the book will take place in those locales.

In addition to in-person interview research for the book, the author will also mine:

- newspaper libraries
- videotape collections at New York University and Georgetown University
- collections of papers and tapes at other professional and academic institutions .

## **Prospectus**

### **Lies We Live By**

This prospectus describes the theme, approach, and appeal of Lies We Live By, a book that exposes and decodes deception in everyday life. Following this prospectus, a table of contents and a chapter-by-chapter summary detail the subject matter of the work.

Lies We Live By documents how deception has woven itself into our everyday lives -- from the ads in the paper to the promises of politicians and even the claims colleges make when they tout "average" SAT scores.

Lies We Live By spotlights the modern technique of telling a "little, lie," a half-truth, a deception based on fine print, hollow word meanings, a statistic with a meaningful component withheld, or a misleading juxtaposition of words and images.

### **Why This Book?**

Modern society is inundated with information, and trying to access the flow of knowledge is like taking a drink from a fire hose. Propagandists know that a confused and overwhelmed public is a vulnerable public, and they exploit this information overload with the little lie, the spurious half-truth that looks appealing and seems genuine to a time-starved consumer or voter.

Lying is a big business, a high stakes business. Investing in stocks, electing a president, choosing a college, leasing a car, booking an airline ticket, all involve a substantial investment of time, trust, and money.

And if you have ever done any of the above, you've been lied to.

Lies We Live By will show how you've been deceived, how you can detect the liar's techniques in the future, and how you can become a resistance fighter for the truth.

### **What's the Approach?**

The over-arching theme of Lies We Live By is that deception has become business as usual in the information age. Telling lies taints virtually every transaction into which we enter. And unfortunately, information-glutted Americans have lost what the author so elegantly calls our "crap detector" -- the mental device that should start ringing when the truth and the whole truth part company.

Lies We Live By disassembles the business of lying bolt-by-bolt, and shows how the business-as-usual approach has tainted commerce, politics, and education. The book demonstrates how

cynical propagandists deliberately mislead the public, hiding behind asterisks, fine print, and tortured statistics.

While the book is spiced with hundreds of amusing anecdotes, it is more than a collection of amusing stories. It cohesively and coherently deals with what I believe is a cancer of modern life, a corrosive practice that eats away a society's connective tissue of trust, truth, and logic.

Every chapter hammers home that point. Every chapter shows how systematic distortion has become business as usual. And the closing chapters of the book tell you how you can fight back.

### **Why Will Readers Buy This Book?**

Five reasons ...

It is highly promotable. As you can see from the following outline, there are many compelling examples that can compactly be presented on talk shows. Excerpts could be broken out into articles for such publications as Reader's Digest. The author is an experienced public speaker and talk show veteran, and delights in administering the public bastinado to corporations and politicians who deserve it. The author is also youthful, handsome, and modest.

It is a good read. In fact, it's funny. Sad, but funny.

The book is at the crest of the first wave of anti-lie, anti-spin public sentiment. Witness the phenomenal success of Howard Kurtz's The Spin Cycle.

It is important. The erosion of confidence in the public ethic of honesty undermines the structure of society. If banks lie to us\* in credit card applications, how can we trust them' with our savings? How can we live in a world where every transaction and every statement must be checked for fine print or weasel words?

It is current. There is no shortage of examples, and those examples can be updated for new editions.

Lies We Live By taps into a larger theme of the outrages and frustrations of everyday life -- seemingly small things that when added up represent a corrosion of our quality of life. (And topics for a series of future books.) My personal mission is to do what I can to get people thinking about these issues, reacting to them, and fighting back.

-- Carl Hausman

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\*For example, my bank sent me a credit card application that said, in bold letters on the outside of the envelope. "pre-approved."

The rate was very attractive. But the fine print noted that the "pre-approval" was pre-approval for mailing the application. (For mailing?) As attorneys general in several states have pointed out, many people who return such applications, assuming they are pre-approved, are eventually told that they don't qualify for the advertised rate but, of course, do qualify for the higher rate.