

With Many Lies Being Told--Including By World Leaders--How Can We Tell?

by

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When I trained as a psychologist over three decades ago, we were told there were certain behavioral signs or 'tells' indicating that a person was lying. Such signs included the speaker having little or no eye contact with whom they were speaking; fidgeting; looking up to the right or left when asked a question; and playing with their hair or facial hair. In thinking of those I know are telling lies, I now realize that focusing on these behavioral signs will not tell me someone is lying. This has been backed up by multiple scientific studies focusing on liars and the art of lying. Through research, we now know that eye movement is associated with cognitive activity; with thinking and recalling information. Other behaviors may be indicators of personality such as being introverted and/or shy. The conclusion of the research is that behavioral signs are among the worst predictors that someone is lying.

One book I ran across was Samantha Ettus' "The Experts' Guide to 100 Things Everyone Should Know How to Do" (2009) where experts give the reader advice such as how to hit a tennis ball or how to interview someone. The section I read was the about the five ways to read someone's body language. The "Five Ways to Read Body Language" are given as:

- "1. Look at the pupils of the person you're speaking to. If they're large, it is a sign of approval. Pupils dilate naturally when we see something we like;
2. Look at the smile – does it look natural or forced? Forced would be smiling through clinched teeth or with tight lips. Remember, it takes longer for a genuine smile to fade than a forced one;
3. Eye contact – most people look away when they're being dishonest;
4. Watch for fidgety legs, excessive hand gesturing or fiddling with something – generally an indication of anxiety; and,
5. Look for stiff movement of the upper body; someone lying often tries to keep his/her body still and control his/her true feelings."

These are non-verbal, behavioral clues. On the surface, these observations are interesting and might be useful in reading behaviors. Stopping to think about clients I've worked with, I realize that each of these behaviours could also indicate something else. Looking at the first point about someone's pupils, a dilation of pupils may mean a head injury or an eye problem. Also, as some people prefer not to stand too close to another person, it may be difficult to discern if someone's pupils are actually dilated or not. Considering the third point, a lack of eye contact won't necessarily indicate someone is lying. Instead, a lack of eye contact in conversation may indicate a shy or insecure person. It could indicate disinterest or boredom. While each point is interesting to think about, it can't be said they are significant or reliable signs of lying.

In Kenra Cherry's article, "How to Tell Someone is Lying" (19 June 2024), she says, "First it depends on how poor a liar it is"! This is because the scientific research on lying and liars has shown that about 50% of all lies are told by only 5% of people. Meaning that there exists a small group of prolific liars! Further, these habitual liars are very good at telling lies and getting away with them. Ironically, it is those individuals who lie less frequently who will be the ones we notice because they are nervous and/or acting out of character. Ms Cherry says the reality of life is that everyone lies at one time or another. At one end of the scale are the 'social lies' where you may hesitate to be honest about someone's clothes or someone's cooking. These lies are generally told to prevent hurting someone's feelings.

At the other end of the lying scale are the more serious, extreme lies such as lying on a resume or lying about an accident. A lie on a resume would be if you say you have a specific degree or went to a specific school when this isn't true. This type of lie means you are misrepresenting yourself, saying you hold certain abilities and knowledge. A lie about an accident indicates one has trouble with being honest and taking responsibility for your actions. While the article points out that there are no definite signs indicating when someone is lying, there are behaviors which are 'red flags' and should be considered in totality.

Ms Cherry points to the following behaviors and advises attention be paid to all of them:

- Being vague about a story or incident; offering few details;
- Failure to provide specific details when their story is challenged;
- Repeating questions before answering them;
- Repeating the same story over and over; speaking in sentence fragments;
- Explaining things in strict chronological order; sounding rehearsed;
- Can't give a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to a question;

--Playing with hair or pressing fingers to lips;
--Increased tension, restlessness and fidgeting.

Generally, we are bad at detecting lies. In one psychological study, participants were found to only have a 54% accuracy in recognizing the lies they had been told. Other studies have shown that just by using our own intuition of a situation or statement, we are correct about 50% of the time that we are being lied to. Intuition is an unconscious thinking or an awareness we all have. The more we listen to our intuition, the better it becomes.

If a lie is suspected, there are other things one can do such as ask the story-teller to tell the story in reverse order. Studies indicate more liars are found out using this method. The reason being that someone who is lying has memorized certain details but cannot adequately describe what happened. Instead, it has been found that those who have actually been involved will be able to tell the story backwards. One should also be skeptical about the truth when a statement is made involving numbers that appear to be extreme—either too big or too small. If you find yourself questioning something you hear, then it's time to do some research of your own by going to reliable sources*

In "You Can't Spot a Liar Just by Looking But Psychologists are Zeroing in on Other Techniques That Might Actually Work", Jessica Seigel reports "liars or those with something to hide are able to act and look normal". They may be nervous when lying but they've learned to control it by internalizing it. (Knowable Magazine, 6 April 2021). In her article, Ms Seigel reports on ingenuous psychological studies that demonstrate practiced liars can successfully hide their nervousness. This may seem minor but it's an important finding. If a habitual liar can control his or her nervousness, there will not be any outside signs, i.e., behaviors reflecting this nervousness. In the past, because it was believed nervousness would be an outward sign, no matter how small, areas such as law enforcement focused their energy and training on the observable behaviors. Research studies on this topic have been done by Maria Hartwig; Bella DePaulo; DePaulo & Charles Bond; Samatha Mann; and Mann and Aldert Vrij. As Ms Seigel reports, studies focusing on behavioral traits have proved that they are unreliable indicators of lying.

Instead of focusing on how someone is acting, psychologists are now focusing on both verbal cues and on how to magnify the differences between what liars and truth-tellers say. For example, interviewers have found if they withhold evidence longer, suspects will speak more freely and, as a consequence, may contradict their initial statements. In a study where these techniques were taught to police trainees, these trainees correctly identified liars 85% of the time compared to another trainee group not taught the same techniques who spotted only 55% of the liars.

Following the success of looking at verbal cues, police officers in the United Kingdom are now using another technique where both suspects and witnesses are asked to sketch the crime/alibi scene. As this renews one's memory, truth-tellers appear to report more detail. The United Kingdom's police regularly use sketching interviews and work with psychology researchers as part of the UK's switch to non-guilt assumptive questions; replacing the earlier accusation-style interrogations.

According to Ms Seigel's article, these science-based reforms have still not made significant inroads among police and other security officers in the United States. The US Department of Homeland Security's Transportation Security Administration ("TSA") still uses non-verbal behavioral clues to screen airport passengers. In 2013, the US Government's Office of Accountability reviewed scientific evidence for behavioral detection and found it lacking. It recommended that the TSA limit funding and curtail its use. Following that, the TSA eliminated its use of standalone behavior detection officers and reduced its behavior checklist from 94 to 36 indicators. This was an improvement but the TSA retained such behaviors as "heavy sweating". Further, its secretive "Behavioral Screening Checklist" instructs agents to look for averted gazes, prolonged stares and rapid blinking, exaggerated yawning, fidgeting or personal grooming (e.g., fooling with hair, touching facial hair). Unfortunately, all of these behaviors have been thoroughly debunked. Between 2015 and 2018, there were some 2,251 formal complaints made by airport passengers claiming they had been profiled on race, nationality, ethnicity or other reasons. Ms Seigel concluded with a review published in 2019 by Maria Hartwig and 49 other university researchers evaluating the evidence for behavioral analysis screening. This review concluded that law enforcement professionals should abandon this "fundamentally misguided" pseudoscience, which may "harm the life and liberty of individuals".

A quote widely attributed to Buddha

"Believe nothing, no matter where you read it
Or who has said it, not even if I have said it,
Unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense."

Good sentiment as long as you possess common sense but at the time of Buddha, information was passed on orally. Since being able to read or write was rare, Buddha would not have made these comments .

Fact-checking

Anyone watching political debates or reading political stories will understand the need for fact-checking. It appears that at one time or another, politicians will lie, exaggerate or give 'misinformation', although some definitely give more 'false information' than others. Having a statement immediately fact-checked can add a layer of trustworthiness to the speaker (if it's true), with the listener believing she or he can depend on that person. Sometimes too many false or misleading statements are made in a short amount of time. The listener may not have the time to stop and look up each comment. On social media, even fact-checkers are unable to keep up with the misinformation (see below).

The reliable news services including newspapers generally have fact-checkers. The New York Times and the Washington Post are two national US newspapers that have employed fact-checkers. Unfortunately, at the end of July 2025, the principal fact-checker at The Washington Post (the "Post"), Glenn Kessler, left after being offered a 'voluntary buyout' (i.e., paid to retire/leave) by the Post. Mr. Kessler, starting as a writer for the Post over 27 years ago, spent the last 14.5 years fact-checking statements made by others. The Post is owned by Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon and currently its executive chairperson.

In an NPR interview with Mary Louise Kelly on 31 July 2025, Mr. Kessler discussed his fact-checking work at the Post. He recollected that during President Donald Trump's first term of office (2017-2021), President Trump made around 30,000 false statements or misleading claims. Mr. Kessler noted that Donald Trump had been telling lies to the American public since around June 2015, when Mr. Trump began his first run for the presidency. It became apparent to this fact-checker that neither President Trump nor his followers seemed to care if he was lying. After deciding to accept the Post's buyout offer, Mr. Kessler said that he had wanted to train someone else for his job but the Post offered him less time than was needed to train them.

Ms Kelly asked whether Mr. Bezos had interfered in Mr. Kessler's work on the Post since Mr. Bezos as owner of the newspaper wrote for the editorial page. Mr. Kessler replied that he had complete freedom to do his job. He wanted to be clear there had been no indication "that Mr. Bezos has ever interfered in any of the news side of the newspaper". But Mr. Kessler admitted, "there's been "a hollowing of the news room, especially with experienced editors and reporters leaving". The Post has left open whether it will revive the fact-checking position.

Mr. Kessler believes that "fact-checking remains very valuable and is important to make people better informed." With the Post's motto being: "Democracy Dies in the Darkness", it is hoped the Post will once again have a fact-checker.

Mr. Kessler was also interviewed by Justin Ray of the Columbia Journalism Review on 6 August 2025. In that interview, they discussed Mark Zuckerberg's decision in January 2025 to discontinue using fact-checking for his Meta organization, instead relying on the "community notes" route used by X. Since 2016, Zuckerberg had apparently spent some 100 million dollars to support a hundred fact-checking organizations around the world. Mr. Kessler stated, "To curry favor with President Trump – who doesn't like fact-checks and doesn't like the idea that social media platforms are actually rooting out false information – Zuckerberg made the decision to stop funding fact-checks in the United States (Facebook and on Instagram and its threads) and will probably roll it back across the world."

Pre-conditioning Readers to Misinformation on Social Media by Teaching Manipulative Techniques

An article published in the New York Times on 24 August 2022, "Google Plants Seeds of Doubt about Social Media Lies" by Nico Grant and Tiffany Hsu discussed certain psychological studies done by Jigsaw (a technology incubator within Google), the University of Cambridge and the University of Bristol researchers. One area that has been elusive on social media has been the ability to get those using it to recognize misinformation. Although fact-checking is important and very useful in rebutting incorrect information, it is only able to stop a small percentage of these lies. This is because the "lies crop up fast and spread at the speed of electrons, and there is a lag before fact-checkers can debunk them". Research has also shown that once a lie is heard or read, even if that lie is shown to be untrue by fact-checking, the effect of the lie cannot be fully nullified. Apparently, there is a grain of it that we carry forward. From this article, I went back to the original academic paper that was published on the results.

The psychological studies done by these researchers at Jigsaw, the University of Cambridge and the University of Bristol focused on whether "pre-bunking" (i.e., pre-conditioning) of individuals to the type of propaganda tropes and manipulation techniques would actually help them to identify misinformation

when they read it on social media. The aim was to tackle misinformation susceptibility and improve people's resilience against manipulative attempts. The resulting academic paper on pre-bunking misinformation was published in *Science Advances* on 24 August 2022 as "Psychological Inoculation Improves Resilience Against Misinformation on Social Media". The team of researchers was Jon Roozenbeek, Sander van der Linden, Beth Goldberg, Steve Rathue and Stephan Lewandowsky.

Through five short, animated videos (specifics below), participants were taught about tactics such as scapegoating, deliberate incoherence and the use of conflicting explanations to assert something is true. Another manipulative technique used, one which is often found in general advertising, is to portray an emotive subject such as a child or animal in various scenarios to get people to pay more attention and to think with their heart. The use of fear-mongering and appeals to outrage are keys to spreading moral and political ideas on social media. For this research, there were a total of seven high-powered studies done, including a large study using YouTube. Almost 30,000 total participants took part in these "pre-bunking" studies.

The five animated videos covered: 1. Use of emotive language to evoke outrage, anger or other strong emotions; 2. Use of incoherent or mutually exclusive arguments; 3. Presenting false dichotomies or dilemmas; 4. Scapegoating certain individuals or groups; and 5. Engaging in ad hominem attacks (i.e., referencing the conduct of an argument or can mean an argument that criticizes or impugns a person). The participants were also taught that when something they heard or read didn't make sense to them, there were only two reasons as to why this was. The first was (and, is) that the person speaking did not completely understand the subject they were talking about or, second, they were (are) intentionally not making sense.

The researchers used a three-part introduction to the manipulative techniques used on social media. First, those in the studies were given a forewarning of an impending misinformation attack. Next, a preemptive refutation was given of the manipulative technique used. This was an explanation of why a certain strategy was used such as portraying a small child and puppy to elicit an emotional response and/or connection with the audience. Last, a "microdose" of misinformation was given in the form of innocuous and humorous examples. These examples were nonpolitical and fictitious.

The findings of the pre-bunking studies conclusively demonstrated that by watching these technique-based, short inoculation videos "improved one's ability to identify manipulation techniques commonly used in misinformation, both in lab studies and in a real life environment. In statistical terms, 19 of the 23 hypothesized effects from studies 1 to 6 were significant in their findings. One limitation discovered by the researchers was that the videos had no influence on those individuals already possessing hardened political views, such as, white supremacists. Another possible limitation of the studies was that all the participants were American. These and several other limitations are given in the academic paper as they may change the outcome in other cultures or situations. You can view the videos used in the studies by inputting the following into your search-engine: <https://inoculation.science/inoculation-videos/> Having viewed them, I think (almost) everyone could learn something from them.

Based on these findings, the researchers opined that inoculation videos could be run as public-service ads ahead of potentially harmful content and could be scaled across millions of users thus reducing susceptibility to radicalizing content.

In another study done earlier (2020), a group of researchers at the University of Cambridge and at Sweden's Uppsala University found that people who played the online game "Bad News" learned to recognize common misinformation strategies across cultures. From all these studies, it appears the best defense to misinformation is to inform and teach the public about the different manipulative techniques that are routinely used for misinformation, especially on social media.

--ONE SHOULD NEVER BELIEVE ANYTHING THAT A HABITUAL LIAR SAYS--

Concluding and Recommendations

From the numerous studies on liars and lying, it has been conclusively demonstrated that behavioral traits such as fidgeting, a lack of eye contact or even sweating, cannot be relied upon to indicate lying. At the most, these behavior cues may give some information on personality or emotions such as someone folding their arms during a discussion indicating defensiveness or, perhaps, holding one's anger. But, don't read too much into this either! Remember that there is only a small number of proficient liars. From studies, it has been estimated that 50% of the lies are told by only 5% of all people. As studies have also shown, the practiced liar is able to lie without any outward sign of nervousness.

Techniques such as sketching an accident scene or allowing an interviewee more time to talk and maybe contradict their initial statements have had good results. These techniques should be taught to police officers, security people and anyone in a field where information is taken down from 'witnesses'.

Pre-bunking the manipulative techniques used on social media would benefit everyone except those with hardened views. The short, animated videos developed by Jigsaw, University of Cambridge and the University of Bristol were very effective in teaching others what these techniques were and how they were used. As these videos are still on-line, check them out.

I wonder if we have become lazy or if we are too trusting –thinking that certain people such as politicians—are telling us the truth whenever they say something? Or, worse, what if we no longer think the truth is important? Do we care if someone lies? How do we trust someone who lies? Truth is the basis of democracy. We, the people need to know what is actually happening with government. If our government lies, we are cut loose, unmoored.

One thing that made a lasting impression on me happened during University. One of my professors told us in class that we should not believe what he told us. His message was, "Don't give your power and objectivity away to those you consider smarter or more knowing." Instead, we were told to always go to the source of information. You may be familiar with a game of "Chinese whispers" which involves the first person passing on a thought or sentence to the person sitting next to them. What was said is passed on around the circle until it comes back to the person who initially spoke. Very rarely does the message pass around without changes. Remember that trust is the glue of society. We need to be able to trust our friends, our neighbors and our politicians.

My recommendations are:

1. Go to the original source of information – If another article or person is quoted, look up the original article or the person who was quoted to see what was actually said;
2. Go to reliable sources such as experts in that specific area be it economics, history, politics or international law to give a few examples;
3. If numbers seem too large to be believed, they probably are untrue;*
4. Use reputable news sources, both newspapers (those with fact-checkers) and reputable national news services. Murdoch's Fox News is not a reliable source for the truth. A newspaper should be objective and not use emotive words in telling the news. Many newspapers that used to be objective now use emotive words to lead the reader to a conclusion. As Sargent Friday used to say on the TV program, 'Dragnet', I want "the facts, Ma'am, only the facts." We all interpret what we see and why someone has done something but the facts are what we heard and actually saw. What came first and then what followed?
5. Once you noticed someone lies, realize that a habitual liar will always lie and nothing they say can be trusted. You cannot rely on what is said. Although there may be some truth in a statement, where is it? Remember, a "half-truth" is no truth at all; and
6. Last, be critical rather than accepting of what you hear, read, learn. Being lazy and accepting at face-value information isn't helpful to anyone.

Several Reliable Fact-checking Sites:

1. Politifact: A Pulitzer Prize-winning site run by editors and reporters from the Tampa Bay News (Florida) checking the accuracy of claims made by elected officials and others speaking up in US politics;
2. FactCheck.org: non-partisan & non-profit consumer advocate; and
3. OpenSecrets.org: tracks money in US politics.

Also, former fact-checker Glenn Kessler can be found at: glennkessler.substack.com

* President D. Trump has repeatedly stated, "The United States has given Ukraine \$350 billion in aid which is some \$200 billion more than the European Union has contributed." The US contribution to Ukraine seemed extreme so I went to the FactCheck.org site to see if this was true.

FactCheck states: As of 31 December 2024, the direct bilateral aid was as follows: "Europe had allocated 132.3 billion Euros to Ukraine while the United States had allocated 114.2 billion Euros to Ukraine (1 US\$ = .95 Euros). Specifically, European aid allocated to Ukraine was 70 billion Euros in financial and humanitarian aid and 62 billion Euros in military aid. The United States' aid allocated to Ukraine was 50 billion Euros in financial and humanitarian aid and 64 billion Euros in military aid." In comparing the figures, one can see that the president's statement was false on many points.