

Truthfulness and Use of Accurate and Reliable Facts as a Foundation of Ethical Communication

Submitted by: Paula Tompkins, Amanda McKendree, and Mark Beekman on behalf of the NCA Communication Ethics Division

Proposed Statement

Access to reliable and accurate facts is critical for making decisions about how to communicate and act ethically. Without facts being as reliable and accurate as circumstances allow, communicators are more likely to do harm or create injustice than do good and act fairly. Good intentions are insufficient for counteracting inaccurate, distorted, or misleading facts and information. Because of the critical role that reliable and accurate facts and information play in human decision making, truthful and honest communication is a foundation for competent and ethical communication.

Disagreements over what is true or factual are commonplace today and throughout history. While debates persist about what truth is and standards for its evaluation, these debates generally recognize the importance of truth-telling. Truthful and honest communication plays a critical role in what is best in human endeavors, especially in creating and sustaining healthy relationships and communities where children and adults grow and thrive. Trust in the integrity of messages and processes—their reliability, accuracy, and honesty—provides a critical basis for trust between human beings. Trust is critical for human relationships and communities. Without a commitment to communicate what we understand to be true, why should others trust us?

Today, voices have questioned the relevance and importance of honesty, truthfulness, and truth in communication. Some argue that standards for evaluating what is a “fact” or what is “true,” even the idea of “truth” itself, are changing. Events of 2016 have revealed political and social trends that undermine the integrity and even the relevance of accurate and honest communication. Public communication by an increasing number of communicators exhibits an increasingly cavalier treatment of reliability and accuracy of facts and information. Some question the relevance of facts in public communication and decision making, focusing instead on confirmation bias and motivated reasoning, even regarding facts simply as “white noise” to be disregarded to meet a goal. Intentionally deceptive and dishonest news (“fake news”), and its unsuspecting dissemination as reliable and accurate, has become so commonplace that some have difficulty distinguishing what is “fake” from what is “real.” An understandable response of doubting everything, unfortunately, makes it difficult to recognize truthful and honest communication when it occurs. A suggested substitute for assessing accuracy or honesty of messages is evaluation of a communicator's feelings, replacing critical thinking with assessments of authenticity. Focus on authenticity diminishes the importance of listening to understand ideas, making critical listening unnecessary.

The integrity of communication depends upon a dynamic interplay among communicators who think critically about their views as they consider views of others. This dynamic interplay depends upon a personal commitment to and accountability for honest, truthful, and accurate communication. Without this dynamic interplay, ethical, free, and responsible communication falters, leaving space and opportunity for dominating, coercive, and even violent communication.

Therefore,

We, the undersigned members of the National Communication Association, recognizing the importance of truth and honesty to the integrity of communication messages and processes, ask our Executive Officers, Legislative Assembly, and staff to commit the Association's energy and resources to cultivating appreciation and practices that promote honesty, truthfulness, and use of reliable and accurate information and ideas in the communication of individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions.

We ask the following:

Within the National Communication Association:

- Develop and promote pedagogical materials that highlight the role of factual accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in communication processes (dialogue, discussion, debate, conflict management, advocacy, reporting, etc.) and in the creation of messages.
- Develop and promote use of pedagogical materials that highlight the role and importance of listening to different viewpoints in the discovery, understanding, and evaluation of facts and ideas.
- Develop and promote pedagogical materials that encourage critical thinking about factual accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness.
- Promote pedagogical use of the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication and the NCA Credo for Free and Responsible Communication in a Democratic Society.
- Promote research that highlights the role of factual accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in communication processes and the creation of messages.

Outside the National Communication Association

- Disseminate outside of NCA research and pedagogical materials that highlight the role of factual accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in communication processes and the creation of messages.
- Promote outside the discipline and academy NCA's Credo for Ethical Communication and the Credo for Free and Responsible Communication in a Democratic Society.
- Encourage teaching and research that critically evaluates groups and organizations for their contribution to the accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in communication.
- Develop relationships and offer support to groups and organizations that promote accurate, honest, and truthful in public discussion of issues. Examples of such organizations would include the American Library Association, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).
- Support groups and organizations that monitor and advocate collection of accurate data by governments at local, state, and national levels, such as the American Library Association, the American Academic of Arts and Sciences, and the SPLC's efforts to collect documentation of hate crime activity.
- Promote groups and organizations that fact-check public communication, such as factcheck.org of the Annenberg School of Communication and the private, independent fact-checker snopes.com

Selected readings on truth, truthfulness and trust in communication

Bok, Sissela. *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. NY: Vintage Books, 1989.

Gehrke, Pat J. *The Ethics and Politics of Speech: Communication and Rhetoric in the Twentieth Century*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009.

Hannan, Jason, ed. *Truth in the Public Sphere*. Lanham, NY: Lexington Books, 2016.

Jaska, James A. and Michael S. Pritchard. *Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis*, 2nd ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994. pp. 65-68.

Knapp, Mark L. *Lying and Deception in Human Interaction*. NY: Penguin Academics, 2008.

Tompkins, Paula S. *Practicing Communication Ethics: Development, Discernment and Decision Making*. NY: Routledge, 2010. pp. 69-73.

Wallace, Karl. R. "An Ethical Basis of Communication." *Speech Teacher*. Vol. 4, No. 1 (1955), pp. 1-9.

Rationale and Supporting Material

- Rationale for why it merits Legislative Assembly consideration and how support for a particular position would enhance the ability of communication educators/ scholars to do their work effectively and/or enhance the stature of the discipline in the academy or more broadly.

As the national professional organization for the study and teaching of communication, NCA is the most logical organization for this petition that focuses on the creation and interpretation of communication messages. News accounts as well as research show several trends that indicate cultural and social agreements and understanding of the role of truth, truthfulness, and the reliability and accuracy of facts are not just changing, but weakening to the point that there has been public questioning of the relevance of accurate and reliable facts for both communication and decision making. Of even greater professional concern are indications that communicators are becoming less confident in their ability to distinguish between what is true or fake, accurate or inaccurate. Some research indicates that adolescents are unable to distinguish between real and fake news acquired through internet searches, increasingly a primary source of facts and ideas. A foundational professional commitment of NCA and its members is teaching and researching how communicators construct and interpret messages in interpersonal, small group, organizational, intercultural and public contexts. A key element of this is teaching and researching the role and importance of truthfulness and the accuracy and reliability of facts and information in the communication process. Truthfulness, aspiration to and practice of communicating the truth as one understands it, is foundational to the ethical practice of communication, as stated in the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication.

- Background information regarding the academic/ professional policy issue being addressed

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- Specific action being requested by external parties and identification of those parties

We, the undersigned members of the National Communication Association, at the initiative of the Communication Ethics Division of NCA, recognizing the importance of truth and honesty to the integrity of communication messages and processes, ask our Executive Officers, Legislative Assembly, and staff to commit the Association's energy and resources to cultivating appreciation and practices that promote honesty, truthfulness, and use of reliable and accurate information and ideas in the communication of individuals, groups, organizations, and

institutions. See petition at change.org <https://www.change.org/p/natl-communication-association-importance-of-honesty-and-accurate-reliable-facts-in-communication>

- Specific actions the Association will be expected to take if the resolution passes
 - Develop and promote instructional materials and scholarship on the role of truthfulness and factual accuracy in communication processes (dialogue, discussion, debate, conflict management, advocacy, reporting, etc.) in the discovery, understanding, and evaluation of facts and ideas, e.g. special calls for *Communication Teacher* and *Communication Education*; at NCA conventions encouraging and supporting programs, panels or pre-conferences on truthfulness and accuracy and reliability of messages; articles in *Spectra*; articles on the NCA website.
 - Develop and promote instructional materials and scholarship on creating, listening to, and evaluating truthfulness and accuracy and reliability of messages, especially messages presenting viewpoints different from the communicator's, e.g. special calls for *Communication Teacher* and *Communication Education*; encouraging and supporting programs, panels or pre-conferences on truthfulness and accuracy and reliability of messages, articles in *Spectra*, promoting on the NCA website.
 - Further promote the Credo for Ethical Communication and the Credo for Free and Responsible Communication, e.g. place more prominently an internal website link to these policy statements. They are difficult to locate, unless you already know they exist. Outside groups who have little or no prior contact with us would likely have no idea we have such statements.
 - Develop relationships with other professional organizations to focus on research and instructional materials on truthfulness and accuracy and reliability of information for creation and evaluation of messages, especially the American Library Association and American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
 - Support organizations that do fact checking with articles in *Spectra* and NCA Website— e.g., Annenberg Public Policy Center's Factcheck.org and Snopes.com-- including how these sites can be used in teaching creation and interpreting messages. Invite representatives from these organizations for a session at a NCA convention.
 - Support organizations that monitor and advocate collection of accurate data by governments at local, state, and national levels, such as the SPLC's efforts to collect documentation of hate crime activity with articles in *Spectra* and the NCA Website. Invite representatives from these organizations for a session at an NCA convention.

- An explicit statement of the resolution

See above

- An assessment of the resources required (both financial and human) to implement the resolution (to be determined in consultation with the Executive Director) and justification for priority of this expenditure.

Priority of Expenditure

The 2016 election and increase in political partisanship, not just in Congress and state legislatures, but also among friends and within families, point to the importance of truthfulness and accurate and reliable facts in the communication process, from message creation to

interpretation, especially when communicators disagree. Not only are facts contested, but so are the nature and relevance of facts themselves. Contesting the nature of facts and truth has a long history. What differs in this public discussion is the questioning of the relevance or importance of facts themselves. Historically, a commitment to truthfulness in communication (principle of veracity) has provided a foundation for trust in relationships, groups, and communities, especially when communicators disagreed about the facts or truth themselves. Such trust provides a basis for cooperation and collaboration among people who disagree, because it is evidence of good will. When communicators jettison the principle of veracity, they simultaneously jettison commitment to cooperation and collaboration. Force, coercion, domination, even violence become “reasonable” options for getting things done.

Estimates of Expenditure

We envision actions taken based on this resolution as occurring over a 1-5 year span. From one standpoint, this resolution elaborates a more specific vision of truth and truthfulness from the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication and responsible communication from the NCA Credo for Free and Responsible Communication. Actions to implement this vision are both short and long-term. Some of these proposals, e.g. establishing a relationship with the American Library Association, could continue into the foreseeable future. Some could be implemented in the short term, e.g. creating a more prominent internal website link for the Credo for Ethical Communication and Credo for Free and Responsible Communication. We envision a combination of work by National Office Staff, NCA Officers, Journal Editors, and membership to implement this resolution, as well as other actions that could potentially grow out of this activity. Since we are not privy to financial expenditures of NCA, we do not offer reliable cost estimates of expenditures of time, personnel, and materials.