



The Half-Told Lie

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The half-told lie is perhaps the most common kind of message on social networking sites.

My half-told lie is the claim that Melissa chose me as her research advisor. But with only a modest effort, you could paw through the thousands of emails on my server and find the one in which I recruited her to pursue a project on civilizing the Internet. Yet as it is only half a lie, the half-truth is the fact that she appeared on my doorstep unannounced two years ago and asked how she might study the way that technology changes society. Still, I believe it's best to accept the blame, as I know that technology has a way of revealing those stories that we might wish to keep to ourselves.

The project began, as all my projects do, with lengthy discussions of subjects that seem entirely irrelevant. In this case, we started with the Industrial Age rather than the Internet era, a suggestion that Melissa accepted with the pursed lips of a disbeliever. Undeterred, I urged her to consider the civilizing goals of the YMCA and sent her to the library.

The YMCA was created in 1844 as an institution to civilize the young men who came to the city to work in factories. It taught these men, most of whom were from farms or small towns, how to work with others,

deal with urban institutions, and comport themselves in a sophisticated society. It offered classes and models of what an urban man should be. It developed sports such as volleyball and basketball to teach teamwork and, if the record is to be believed, keep the young men's thoughts focused on moral virtue. From this model, Melissa's research direction was obvious, I suggested. What is the YMCA of the Internet?

Melissa and I spent many a profitable hour arguing about the various organizations that are attempting to civilize the Internet until deadlines forced us to create a concrete research agenda and start gathering data. Very quickly, our study devolved into a classic big data problem. Today, no undergraduate project can be accomplished without 4 million data points, help from a professional programmer, and the services of a crowdsourcing firm in California. We had to wrestle with all of the "Vs" we now associate with big data—volume, variety, velocity, value, and the one that's rarely treated in the technical literature, vexation. Of the five, volume isn't that hard to handle, variety was constrained with filters, value is in the eye of the beholder, and vexation is always with us.

But velocity was a constant

problem because the events driving our study changed faster than we could react to them. As so many researchers had before us, we eventually had to fit our research question to the data we possessed rather than make one more effort to get the data we desired. In the end, we were no closer to civilizing the Internet, though we could at least see the problem. Now, as in the YMCA's early days, the goal is to get a population of inexperienced users to cooperate and behave civilly.

The half-told lie is perhaps the most common kind of message on social networking sites, a grain of truth rewritten to promote the sender's status. "I am sending you this information or this image or this link, but I want you to pay attention to me." Such messages are nurtured by a marketplace environment that pits one message against another to gain reader attention. However, such environments rarely support a community spirit without a civilizing institution in its midst. ■

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