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# TRUTH? WHAT TRUTH? TRUTH AND FAKE THROUGH A CULTURAL LENS

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## Abstract

Faking is a hot item in nowadays newspapers. Especially in the context of modern media and the problem of what is called fake news.

It is clear that political opponents fight each other by claiming that articles published in papers are made up, are fake. The truth, they claim is only found in publications from their side.

In some quality newspapers they do fact checking to see if certain statements are “true”. There is evidence that this factchecking is however not really changing the beliefs of people reading these checks.

The societal key problem is, that the belief in institutions that were trusted in the past as sources of truth are under attack.

Many of the discussions on fake news are taking place in American news media. One can wonder if this struggle for finding truth is special for the American culture. And in how far truth is a cultural “construct”. This article will explore the way truth is defined in different cultural settings.

It will also explore the treat for democracy if institutions that are supposed to be arbiters in heated ideological arguments are made suspicious.

**Keywords:** Culture, Honesty, Truth, Democracy, Rule of law

Marx once said that the secret of success in trade and commerce is honesty and fair play.

And, he added, the ones who can fake that best have got it made!

Of course, it was not Karl who said this, but Groucho, the American comedian.

Faking is a hot item nowadays in the news media. Especially in the context of the problem known as “fake news.”

It is clear that political opponents fight each other by claiming that articles published in papers are made-up or “fake.” The truth, they claim, is only found in publications from their side.

In some quality newspapers journalists do fact-checking to see if certain statements are “true.” There is evidence, however, that this fact-checking is not really changing the beliefs of people who may be reading these checks.

The key societal problem at the current time is that the belief in institutions that were trusted in the past as sources of truth is under attack. The conservative American radio host Rush Limbaugh even called these institutions — government, academia, science, and media — the “*Four Corners of Deceit.*” (1)

## Truth a cultural construct?

Many of the discussions on fake news are taking place in American news media. One can wonder if this struggle for finding truth is special in American culture. And in how far

truth is a cultural “construct.” Below we will explore the way truth is defined in different cultural settings.

Before doing this - a warning: in talking about culture, the danger is to be too absolute. In further reading, take to heart a statement about truth from a famous Dutch writer with the pen name Multatuli:

*“Nothing is completely true. And even that is doubtful!”*

### **Culture clusters and mental images**

The research of Geert Hofstede is still the point of reference in the world of evidence-based approaches in cultural comparisons (2). Building on the Hofstede’s research, six culture “clusters” can be defined. (3) A culture cluster is a group of countries with similar combinations of scores on the first four dimensions of Hofstede. These value combinations lead also to a specific outlook towards the world. This value-driven outlook is called a “Mental Image.” The seven mental images we found lead to seven different views on societal and political priorities. Six of the mental images are shared by more countries. We call these culture clusters. One mental image stands alone: Japan.

Of course, not everybody in a culture accepts the same value preferences. But the dominant culture is setting the standards and criteria for what is called “right” behavior. If others who differ want to “make it” in a certain society, they learn that you had better conform to the standards.

It is surprising to see that the culture clusters have different dominant “sayings” about truth reflecting their “mental Image.”

We found the following examples:

#### **Contest cultures.** (USA, UK, Canada, New Zealand, Australia)

A very influential and revealing definition of truth is stated by the father of “pragmatism,” William James: *“The truth is what works.”* This approach is coming back in the daily use of language in sayings like: *“The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”*

It is inductive thinking, in combination with action orientation.

This way of thinking is leading to the focus in this culture on “best practices.” Practitioners are getting the highest esteem from others. Being called an “academic” in a public discussion is not a compliment. Or, like in the case of Obama: if your policy is being called “professorial,” that is deadly. In the UK it is taking the shape of resistance against “experts.” As one of the leading politicians, Gove- said in a speech: “Who needs experts?” For a good understanding: he did that in the time he was the Education Secretary of the British Government!

See for a further analysis: “Culture and Education” (4)

Compare this with the defining sayings about truth in the other culture clusters:

#### **Solar System:** (France, Belgium, Northern Italy, Argentina)

This special mix of value-dimensions is high on the acceptance of hierarchy, in combination with high individualism and high need for predictability.

This high need for predictability leads to a tendency to look first at all available expert information, before decisions are made on actions. In this sense, deductive thinking is the preferred approach; as a consequence, it is the opposite of the Contest attitude. Here being called an intellectual is the highest compliment. Books about all kind of subjects begin with: the philosophy of... Preferably with quotes from proven philosophers and experts from the past. The more abstract the better. In such a culture the truth is the end result of an intellectual debate. The most representative quote about truth is coming from C.P. Colardeau (1732-1766):

*Du choc des opinions jaillit la vérité!* By the confrontation of opinions truth comes about!

The dominance of the intellectual process is also reflected by the famous statement of the French philosopher Descartes:

*Cogito ergo sum.* I think, therefore I exist!

**Well-oiled Machine:** (Germany, Austria, Hungary, German-speaking Switzerland, Czech Republic)

Defining characteristics: low on acceptance of hierarchy, high on individualism, drive for competition. And high on an emotional need for predictability

The key element is the internalization of the need for structure. The most important concept is not leadership (which is sometimes expected by outsiders); but *Planmäßigkeit* (need for structure, procedures, consistency, planning). The highest societal esteem is given to proven experts. This is visible in their use of titles: Prof., Dr., Dr., etc.

A winning political slogan for political parties in Germany has been: “*Keine Experimenten bitte*” (no experiments please); and “*Weiter so*” (Let’s continue our course).

Because of the high need for predictability, the cultural drive in thinking is deduction. It is different, though, from what we see in the Solar System. Books in Germany, Austria, etc. are not beginning with “the philosophy of...,” but rather with: “*die Prinzipien von*” (the principles of).

The most representative slogan about truth in this type of culture is coming from the 1918 Nobel Prize winner Max Planck:

“*Die Wahrheit triumphiert nie, ihre Gegner sterben nur aus*”. (*Truth never triumphs. Her adversaries just fade away.*)

This way of thinking is going back to the way of thinking of Plato. The truth is objective and unchangeable. The “Ideas,” as Plato called them, are not directly observable by human beings. But we can observe the “shadows” they cast; and by comparing, analysing, and discussing, we can learn to grasp the ultimate Ideas. In German culture this thinking was promoted by Humboldt and led to a focus on “*Bildung*” formation: gradually learning to grasp reality, coached by experts.

**Network cultures:** (Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland) Equality is the defining value in these cultures. All stakeholders are autonomous and participate in decision-making. Decisions are made based on consensus (the better word is “shared interest”).

Important sayings about truth are reflecting the feeling that all stakeholders are equal.

Two Dutch sayings are examples:

-*Truth lies in the middle (Waarheid ligt in het midden)*

and

-*Nobody has a claim on truth. (Niemand heeft de waarheid in pacht).*

In this thinking there is no objective truth. The only thing to do is to find consensus between subjective stakeholders.

**Pyramid** (Latin American countries, many Asian countries, most African countries, all Arab countries, and also many countries in Eastern and Southern Europe) and **Family** (China, India, Singapore, etc.)

Concerning the attitude towards truth in the Pyramid and the Family, a distinction should be made in terms of religion. In countries with a Monotheistic religion (Islamic, Christian, Jewish) the way of thinking is similar to the solar system: a deductive approach with a high esteem for intellectuals and experts. An academic background is very important

for the credibility of people. In cultures with a Polytheistic religion or a philosophy of life, people don't believe in an absolute truth, truth is relative.

This thinking is expressed by: "*different time, different context, different situation, different truth*".

As a result the emphasis is not on absolute values, but on virtues.

**Japan:** Japan stands alone. Due to a surprising combination of a middle score on acceptance of hierarchy and the direction of loyalty (to in-groups or to the individual). This combination is having a strong influence on leadership, motivation, and decision-making. (3)

For the attitude towards truth they share the slogan of all countries with a polytheistic background: *Different time, different context, different truth*.

### **Truth, postmodernism and human rights**

Under the influence of "postmodernism," the dominant groups in the Western countries defend the idea that there are no valid methodologies to decide whether one value system is better or truer than another. It is all relative and depends on "where you are coming from" in your reasoning: revelations in holy books, the teachings of enlightened people, trying to find explanations in human nature, etc. That, however, can lead to absolute relativism and can bring society to the brink of anarchy.

Looking at the Hofstede research, it is clear that the thing in common in what we call Western countries is that they all score high in individualism. The solution for culture relativity in the mostly secular individualist cultures is to adopt "Human Rights" as the point of reference. Every individual has equal rights and obligations regardless of race, gender, place of birth, sexual preference, etc. A very important consequence is that the notion of human rights is incorporated in the rule of law in western countries.

### **Rule of law**

In practice, two interpretations of "the rule of law" can be identified. They are (a) a broad definition (no democracy and/or human rights implied) and (b) a narrow definition.

In the broad definition of the rule of law, the rules enable the control of behavior of Government and of citizens. The content and form of control are not an issue.

All over the world there are countries that can be identified that can claim they have the rule of law in this sense.

Only few countries include the Human Rights in their system of the rule of law. The defining attributes of these two definitions are:

#### **Broad (or formal) definition**

- The rules should be clear
- No retroactive action
- Not too many changes
- Consistency
- Independent changes
- Fair trials

#### **Narrow definition**

- These are the countries where the rule of law *also* encompasses:
  - a chosen parliament
  - a democratic system
  - human rights are recognized and respected

As we explained above, the narrow definition is found especially in individualistic countries. In short, in what we call "Western countries."

### Positive versus negative human rights

Human rights can, however, take two shapes according to Isaiah Berlin's "Two approaches to freedom." (5)

Berlin explains that the classical concept of human rights protects us against a totalitarian state. It guarantees issues like freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and access to the judicial system. Next to these guaranteed freedoms there is, however, also a positive freedom. Here the state is doing much more. It is acting as protector, coach, and social guide. Here the state is taking care of influencing behavior, like what people *ought* to do if they were acting in a rational way.

Here again cultural preferences are coming into the picture. In healthcare, for instance, the majority ideas influence the ideas about fairness of the system, the use of taxes, and solidarity with the "have nots."

In some cultures, like in the US, this is where resistance begins. The whole idea that "the State knows better" is for a lot of people repulsive. For them human rights are minimum norms; and for them the biggest problem is that the positive rights tend to be endless. All thinkable special interest groups will be having their claims. Women, people of color, people with a physical challenge, the LGBT communities. All have claims with a reference to human rights and are demanding special treatments based on perceived deprivation in the past.

The cultural background is that sympathy with the underdog is not a universal trait. This is especially found in so-called feminine cultures. Moreover, what is happening in a majority "masculine culture" is that the minorities also have a tendency to create a special identity by their claims and sometimes forget that they are around the same table as the others. Cultural masculinity means a tendency to polarize. And *voilà*: before you know it, you are involved in the so-called identity wars like in the USA.

### Identity wars and truth

Freud already labeled the danger in the identity wars. He called that the "*Narcissism of the small difference*:" the tendency to blow up minor differences to be able to make your subgroup distinctive from other similar groups. As a result, they have eyes only for their own interests while competing for media attention and resources.

The danger of these identity wars is that sometimes people lose the perspective of what is good for the overall community.

But still, in principle, the different identity groups accept the democratic "rules of the game." They trust that the legal frameworks in their countries are the watchdogs in seeing to the just, fair, and honest application of the "narrow system" for all societal stakeholders. They also trust that the judicial apparatus is functioning and that the way universities are analyzing and reporting about societal developments is, in principle, impartial.

There are, however, groups that don't believe in this impartiality.

In first place, there are some conservative religious groups who strongly believe that morality and truth is defined by the revelations of the holy books in their religion. In their view this truth is one and indivisible and should be applicable to all. These are the people who don't share the post-modern thinking concerning value-relativity. They are suspicious of all people and institutions that have the pretension of scrutinizing the revealed truth of the holy books, through intellectual debate, in order to look for modern interpretations of what the holy book formulated centuries ago. As a result, they are suspicious of the mainstream media and of universities where free debate is propagated.

The second group consists of people who are suffering from the consequences of globalization.

They live the consequences of the economic shift in the last decades of the past century. What happened is that big international companies changed their focus concerning

overall profit-making. Instead of thinking in terms of effectiveness per nation state, their thinking became global. They looked at the way they could save costs; for instance, by moving manufacturing to low-wage countries. They also rationalized staff functions by outsourcing and actively relocating activities to countries giving them tax reductions.

The result was that a lot of people lost their jobs and found it very hard to find new ones. Add this to the tendency towards robotization and manufacturing with 3D printing.

This group could be called the losers of globalization. They see that their families are suffering and that they live in areas where a lot of people are in the same circumstances. They have to cope with the consequences of poverty, including bad educational facilities for their children and the danger of drug addiction.

No wonder that this second group also turns against “the elite” promoting universal values, human rights, and global outlooks.

Together with the conservatives they react aggressively to the ideas and opinions of the post-modern elite.

They even are convinced that the rule of law and the institutions that safeguard the pursuit of “truth” are not neutral, but are instruments in the hands of the secular, post-modern group. As a result, they mistrust universities, mainstream media, and even courts. They have no eye for fact-checking, research data, or open debate. It’s all propaganda.

The discussion in the media world is about the dangers of this a-symmetrical approach. One side with open debate and fact-checking. The other side aggressively fighting against all news that comes from the other side and trying to discredit their information.

Going back to the main issue of truth: the danger is that by fighting in this way, influencers spread mistrust in the minds of people where democracy is only guaranteed by relying on the institutions that are meant to be used by both sides as arbitrators.

## **Conclusions**

Truth is under siege. We would do better to cure the ailments before things escalate and destroy democracy!

Calling everything that is disliked “Fake news” is dangerous for democracy, for it is spreading mistrust about necessary “arbiters” like the Constitution, the courts, universities, and the news media.

The societal repercussions are tremendous. This problem even affects trust in expert opinions about health care. See the discussion about the need to vaccinate children against diseases. There is a trend to see evidence-based advice by doctors as just an opinion next to other opinions.

In democracies people should not be too naïve about the way truth can be distorted. It is not a coincidence that the official paper in the communist times in the Soviet Union was called “Pravda” (truth).

The tendency to close up and not look for open discussion is actually not one-sided, not only coming from “conservatives.” There is also a tendency in some parts of the academic world to reject open discussion. More and more activist students try to block discussions and avoid inviting representatives from “the Right” to speak at universities. An example is what happened with George Papadopoulos, the journalist from Breitbart, the very right-wing news site in the US. This is doubly dangerous. We should be willing and able to listen to ideas and sharpen our minds by open confrontation. In this sense we should also be careful with the “safe places” for minorities. We should not “pamper” students, but make them alert and skilled in discussing/defending truth from ideological attacks.

Notes:

- (1) New York Times. May 19 2017. Donald Trump and the rise of tribal epistemology . By David Roberts
- (2) The research of Geert Hofstede is still the point of reference in the world of evidence-based approaches in cultural comparisons.

## Citation Index Social Science 2015

| Book                                                        | Author                            | Date*     | Discipline        | Citations |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|
| The Structure of Scientific Revolutions                     | Thomas Kuhn                       | 1962      | Philosophy        | 81,311    |
| Diffusion of Innovations                                    | Everett Rogers                    | 1962      | Sociology         | 72,780    |
| Pedagogy of the Oppressed                                   | Paulo Freire                      | 1968/1970 | Education         | 72,359    |
| Competitive Strategy                                        | Michael E Porter                  | 1980      | Economics         | 65,406    |
| Imagined Communities                                        | Benedict Anderson                 | 1983      | Political Science | 64,167    |
| Mind in Society                                             | LS Vygotsky                       | 1978      | Psychology        | 63,809    |
| Discipline and Punish                                       | Michel Foucault                   | 1976/1977 | Philosophy        | 60,700    |
| A Theory of Justice                                         | John Rawls                        | 1971      | Political Science | 58,594    |
| Social Foundations of Thought and Action                    | Albert Bandura                    | 1986      | Psychology        | 55,324    |
| The Interpretation of Cultures                              | Clifford Geertz                   | 1973      | Anthropology      | 48,984    |
| The History of Sexuality (3 Volumes)                        | Michel Foucault                   | 1978-1986 | Philosophy        | 47,955    |
| Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation      | Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger      | 1991      | Education         | 47,627    |
| The Fifth Discipline                                        | Peter M Senge                     | 1992      | Management        | 43,876    |
| Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance | Douglass North                    | 1990      | Economics         | 43,411    |
| Culture's Consequences                                      | Geert Hofstede                    | 1980      | Management        | 42,144    |
| The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life               | Erving Goffman                    | 1959      | Sociology         | 40,573    |
| Das Kapital                                                 | Karl Marx                         | 1867-1894 | Economics         | 40,237    |
| Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste    | Pierre Bourdieu                   | 1984      | Sociology         | 39,729    |
| The Social Construction of Reality                          | Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann  | 1966      | Sociology         | 38,845    |
| Metaphors We Live By                                        | George Lakoff and Mark Johnson    | 1980      | Linguistics       | 38,723    |
| Stress, Appraisal and Coping                                | Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman | 1984      | Psychology        | 38,665    |
| Communities of Practice                                     | Etienne Wenger                    | 1999      | Psychology        | 37,775    |
| The Economic Institutions of Capitalism                     | Oliver Williamson                 | 1985      | Economics         | 37,651    |
| Motivation and Personality                                  | Abraham Maslow                    | 1954      | Psychology        | 37,614    |
| Attachment                                                  | John Bowlby                       | 1969      | Psychology        | 37,318    |

- (3) Cross-cultural competency is one of the most important work skills for working in a global environment. More clearly it is about **the ability to operate in different cultural settings.**

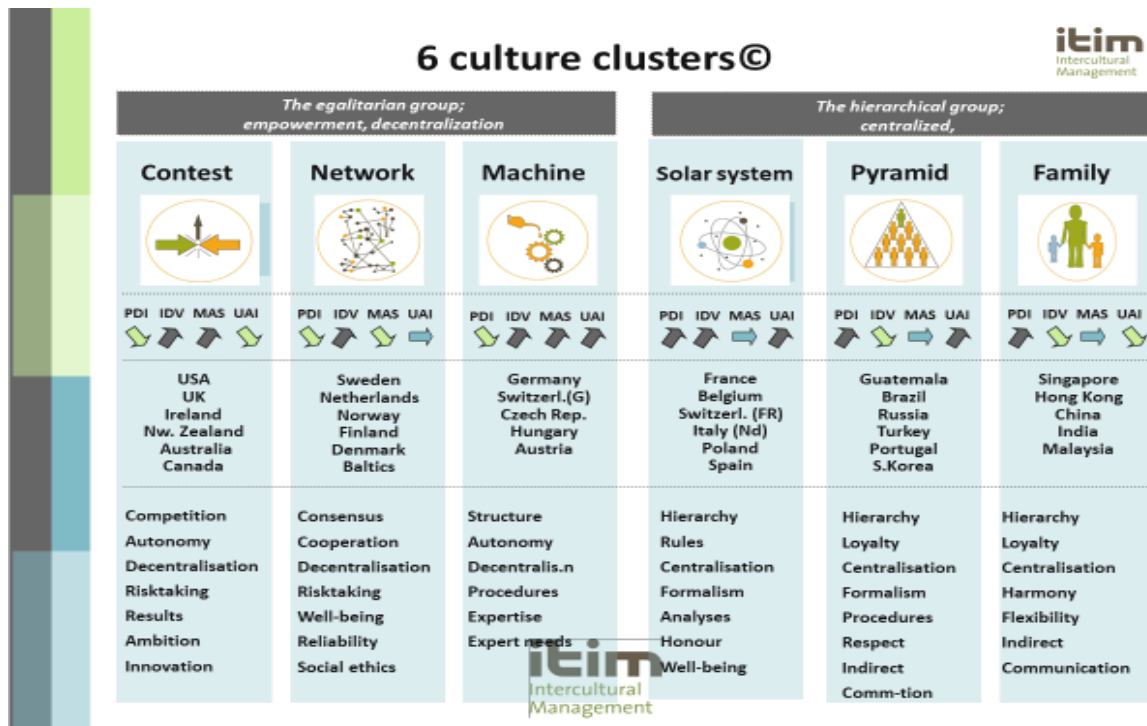
Does this mean that we have to understand the values, rituals, symbols, and heroes of all the 190 plus countries in the world?

The answer is that the more you know- the more effective you are. But we can help in reducing the complexity, because based on 50 years of continuous empirical research we can identify six culture clusters. These culture clusters encompass six different coherent “rules of the game” in how people operate in organizations. Because these “rules” correspond with the pictures people have in their mind about what an organization looks like, we also call the six clusters “mental images.”

See below a short summary of the clusters.

For a complete description see:

**Huib Wursten (2017)** [https://www.academia.edu/34319656/Mental\\_images\\_of\\_culture\\_a\\_perspective\\_to\\_understand\\_misunderstandings\\_in\\_politics\\_business\\_religion\\_and](https://www.academia.edu/34319656/Mental_images_of_culture_a_perspective_to_understand_misunderstandings_in_politics_business_religion_and)



(4) **Huib Wursten, Carel Jacobs (2013)** **The impact of culture on education**  
[https://www.academia.edu/22731263/The\\_impact\\_of\\_culture\\_on\\_education](https://www.academia.edu/22731263/The_impact_of_culture_on_education) Can we introduce best practices in education across countries

(5) "Two Concepts of Liberty" was the inaugural lecture delivered by the liberal philosopher **Isaiah Berlin** before the University of Oxford on October 31, 1958. It was subsequently published as a 57-page pamphlet by Oxford at the Clarendon Press. It also appears in the collection of Berlin's papers entitled *Four Essays on Liberty*.

(6) The views expressed in this article are of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Hofstede insights. Copyrights: © HofstedeInsights 2018/ Huib Wursten  
 Huib Wursten is the intellectual father of the 7 mental images, The system builds on a quadrant in chapter 7 of the 1980 book of Geert Hofstede *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. 475 pages. Beverly Hills CA: Sage Publications, 1980, hardcover, ISBN 0-8039-1444-X.