Authenticating the inauthentic

Anne Elizabeth Moore

In recent years, much of our economy – and now, almost the entirety of our global media – has come to rest on a public display of authenticity: ads that bemoan the notion of the sales pitch, heartfelt apologies by perpetrators of large-scale bank frauds or environmental disasters that run on the evening news, and the possibility that our own financial worries may cease when we are made the stars of our own reality television programs. These are all common aspects of modern life. Such transactions – for there is an economic side to each and every one of them – rely on the feeling that we've finally broken through commercialization and emotional manipulation and found truth, but are in fact part of a decades-old project that aims to engage us in individual relationships for the profit of others, eliminating in their implementation a concern for our neighbours or social situation at large.

If this seems like a bastardized notion of authenticity, it is important to note that there are multiple definitions of the term. One, sure, means original, genuine, or true, as in when something can be *authenticated*. It is when something conforms, thoroughly, to original means of production, and uses specific outlined materials. The other is slightly more complex: a reconstruction, a good-enough fake, a production that, because it aims to replicate an original, is deserving of acceptance or belief. In this way, Peruvian restaurants that are not in Peru are authentic; reproductions of Shaker furniture, as well.

That one of our most significant driving cultural forces of the last five years can imply both 'truth' and the intentional falsities that confirm personal belief systems known as 'truthiness' should appal. But it probably won't.[1]

The newest communication systems, that in the US at least are rapidly replacing the old-fashioned telephone and even more old-fashioned meeting – YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, blogs and comment streams – also rely on a desire for authenticity. We join them enthusiastically, bolstered by the notion that we, ourselves, might communicate directly with Kanye West, Susan Orlean, Karl Rove, or Margaret Cho. Social media feels authentic because we make it ourselves. Moreover we do so unhindered by fact-checkers, editors, and publishers, and use it, more often than not, to convey our own

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1 Truthiness refers to a veracity rooted in a personal and emotional sense of rectitude or justice, not necessarily verifiable by third parties.

thoughts and feelings to each other in the course of a day. The ease of use allows us to forget that a business plan stands behind the design of these tools, and that algorithms often trigger the tagging of these minor events: as adult, as inappropriate, as terrorist. The experience of social media is made even more authentic by the presence of real-life stars. They provide opinions about the events of the day, or more likely their feelings, and this becomes a reasonable stand-in for a pool of facts from which we could draw our own conclusions.

In theory, this is a two-way system, as, we like to keep in mind, television was when invented. We can tell Susan or Karl what we're up to, too, because the myth of social media is that it hinges on one-to-one relationships between individuals. Defenders of social media believe this to be democracy, and use it as a talking point when the death of journalism is decried, or further frustrations with an ever-consolidating media system are voiced. Yet somehow, however authentic Kanye or Cho – or whoever updates their Twitter feeds – may seem, the sales pitch slips in anyway. Possibly emergent from our media darlings' too-frequent elbow-rubbings with ad pitchmen, the supposedly authentic reactions of a Karl Rove to his big-brand morning latte do not strike us as objectionable. Neither do we protest reality television, which through an extensive editing process, is underscoring the emotions of the players in a way that would be ludicrous to call real, but that perhaps we still think of as authentic.

It's part and parcel of the new authenticity – the popular version that conforms more to the second definition above than the first, the definition that vacillates, in sense, between 'factually verifiable by outside sources' and 'close enough'. For communications, both public and private, authenticity is being heralded as the mode a la mode. A 2008 *Ad Age* article sums up the argument for the new authenticity, cleverly colluding the governmental and big business drive toward convincing people to buy in:

> Founding fathers start company (er, country) out of the back of a garage. Concept is brilliant in its simplicity – built on just a few key principles. Company grows slowly at first then has key innovation (say, the industrial age) that fuels major growth. Everyone who is part of it, loves it. Everyone who's not, wants to buy its goods. Company staves off a few big competitors (fascism? Soviet Union?) and gets really large and successful. So large and successful that in time, people look back and say "how did we get here?" And "what were those founding principles again?" When 81% of the people say America is headed in the wrong direction, we're a brand that just doesn't know who it is anymore. . . The best brands (and countries) today have street cred – some kind of soul rooted in something real and authentic. But cred doesn't come without a thorough understanding of the nuance of the true believer. Because whatever the field, true believers are the ones that define its authenticity. (Welch, 2008)

As I write in my 2007 book *Unmarketable*, this recent move toward authenticity is best exemplified by the 2004 invention of ad firm Saatchi and Saatchi's Kevin Roberts: Lovemarks. Lovemarks is a theory, a book, and, in a sense, a brand, but what it claims to be is an irresistible combination of mystery, sensuality and intimacy, that hinges on customers' perception of the trustworthiness of and emotional connection to a given good or service. Lovemarks is a theory about why we buy, and a way to get us to buy more. And it's owned by Kevin Roberts. True, countless others at various levels of advertising, marketing, media and government seem to have arrived at the same conclusion at roughly the same time – that no one believes either advertisers or politicians anymore. Yet this hasn't been taken as a signal to fundamentally change

either commercial methods or governmental policies. It's been taken as a signal to change their method of delivery. Roberts' unique attempts to brand this post-branding ethos – with books, lecture tours, online videos, and a social-media infused website – make it an irresistible case study of the elements of the new authenticity.

Clearly, social media is key, and becoming increasingly significant as print media declines in the US. (As I trace in *Unmarketable*, the drive toward regaining trust and increasing profit that underscores the plea for authenticity isn't limited to online social media, but any media that exists primarily as a means of communication among small social networks, such as zines, comics, graffiti, and pirate radio. The volume of these have decreased so dramatically in recent years, however, it's become very difficult to generalize about them.) This is because media that does not emanate from a solitary source passes horizontally from peer to peer and is not already pre-tainted with the foul whiff of advertising. The move toward authenticity, however publicly undertaken, is still a genuine one. That is, Lovemarks strives to connect itself emotionally to the concept of authenticity, but it also urges a more genuine one-on-one connection between brand managers, corporate decision-makers, and would-be consumers. It *is* authentic.

What is tricky, however, is that the desire to both seem to and to actually become more authentic isn't rooted in concern for bettering product, improving customer relations, or lessening environmental impact. Increased accountability, heightened transparency, and greater fiscal responsibility are similarly out. What's in is profit.

For this, of course, is about money. As Roberts told Douglas Rushkoff on *Frontline* in 2004, companies that adopt his Lovemarks approach 'are going to be the brands where the premium profits lie' (Roberts, 2004). In fact, he does not promise that Lovemarks will connect a brand to a desirable human quality. No, their purpose is to inspire a subhuman response, or what Roberts calls 'loyalty beyond reason' (this is the tagline of the term Lovemarks). Brands create identities we meld with our own, and thus a spending based on justification, a weighing of options, a conscious decision to adopt a certain brand identity. This, to Roberts, is a waste of time. Lovemarks, on the other hand, intend to instil a reason-free impulse toward a certain consumable good or service. Without hesitation, thought, or justification, Lovemarks intend to exploit your trust, for profit.

So Lovemarks create a sense of authenticity only within the pre-established field of consumerism. Vacillations of meaning within the term authenticity – from 'real' to 'real-seeming' – allow this moniker to stand, unmolested. Still, authenticity, put on display for purposes of proving authenticity, in order to establish a relationship of trust on which to build a more stable and long-lasting relationship of commerce, can only ever be an authentic expression of unauthenticable authenticity. The new authenticity, therefore, is an entirely stable structure, as long as we don't investigate its foundation.

Yet, however satiated we feel by the assurance that BP feels bad or that Margaret Cho really loves the band Girl in a Coma or that the Chrysler corporation understands our pain during this economic crisis and is lowering car prices because of it – or that Obama hears our concerns about the war in Afghanistan because he posted something about it

on the White House Facebook page – the fact is that no more third-party information is available now to the general public than it was a few years ago. In fact, there is significantly less. We do not, in fact, have any more information with which to gauge authenticity except that which has emanated from the same sources who strive to be perceived as authentic.

Our methods of receiving information, of course, have changed in recent years, but the actual sources of third-party information has, essentially, not. The *New York Times*, BBC, CNN, and MSN all made the top five in Technorati's March 2009 Attention Index, which lists the sites bloggers link to most frequently. The top 15 includes *Time*, *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, and the *Wall Street Journal* (– Oh, but the top linked-to site? Youtube.com. 'Cause, *dude, did you see the Daily Show last night? I totally transcribed it word for word on my blog* just doesn't cut it anymore.) (see Rao, 2009). At the same time as these same newsrooms are cutting staff, desks, and bureaus like it's going out of style. Who rushes to fill the void of such third-party information as one of the parties falls silent? One of the remaining parties, of course.

Which means something. We may *feel* better informed, more individually cared for, and more authenticated as members of our society, but the quality of available information about the products we purchase and the services we make use of: these are not necessarily improving. And rapidly dwindling governmental approval ratings in Germany and the US, citizen uprisings in Greece and South Africa, and rising unemployment and numbers of student protests across the globe means we don't feel our lives are, either. That is to say, we might be striving as a culture for greater authenticity, but our ability to authenticate anything at all has been cut quite short.

Unfortunately, we've seen in recent years that public devotion to well-branded worldviews supplants a desire for journalism, for facts, taking up space that could otherwise be spent exploring other curious avenues or, say, talking to our neighbours about their concerns. Although this has sounded alarms for many inside and outside media activism spheres, few arguments have been constructed that cannot be deflated with the question 'What exactly is your problem with Margaret Cho?' And the bottom line is, most of us don't have one.

The recent shift in media strategies to rely on the public display of authenticity is most visibly at work in the invention of 'embedded journalism' in the beginning of the most recent US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This mode of conveying information – opinion-inclusive and directly from an affected source – is a model of authenticity: Genuine, intimately shared (with you, the viewers, and thousands if not hundreds of thousands of other viewers), and wholly unverified by outside sources.

In essence, it is privatized. That no outside information usually impedes on the embedded journalists' report – no third-party fact-checking of the kind formerly prized in journalism. When the term 'privatization' is used today, it is believed universally to refer to business dealings. Of course, really, it does: Privatization is the process of transferring ownership of a resource from the public sector – the government – to the private – a business. A 1959 report released by the Pentagon, however, entitled

'Psychological Operations: Cambodia', contains an entirely different definition of the term 'privatization'. One that melds most cunningly with the new authenticity.

When released, the Pentagon report intended to describe various social groups in the impoverished nation, teasing out which may be resistant and which submissive to a potential US presence (Shawcross, 1979: 55). Largely dismissive of the socially organized farming society – as, I suppose, we expect the Pentagon to be – fear of ghosts, corruption, and a mistrust of technology were all listed as counts against the likelihood that an American presence would be clamoured for by the Cambodian people. (Probably wise on their part, too: only ten years later, a massive, secret US bombing campaign would kill shocking numbers of them.)

Still, the Pentagon argued, there were options. If it could not win the Cambodian people over, it could aid the process of privatization, defined here as promoting 'the preoccupation of the individual with his personal rather than his social situation' (Shawcross, 1979: 55). We are more likely to read this now as a side-effect of commercialization: that a gradual crumbling away of social concerns occurred as technology, products, and an American (read: globalized) concern for individuation began to preoccupy the minds of people in the process of becoming superconsumers. But, sure, there are parts of the world where that must have been – was, *is* – premeditated and rooted in governmental policy. Where commercialization is, in fact, a side-effect of privatization in the Pentagon's sense of the word. Divide and conquer.

It is incontestable that Cambodia was traditionally organized around villages, small social groups that acted as support networks during times of famine or political unrest. Following the decade marked by American bombings and four years of Khmer Rouge rule – after which almost three million people were dead, and those who remained alive had been wrested from families, forced to remarry, or were simply too sick to be concerned about anything but their own survival – resistance to American imperialism was no longer a major concern. The country now uses the American dollar, and opened, in 2008, its first Kentucky Fried Chicken. Few political organizations or groups have the strength to respond to rampant corruption, land-use violations, domestic violence, or other concerns that haunt the bulk of the citizenry daily. In other words, the Pentagon's intention to promote privatization in Cambodia seems to have worked quite well. Nor does the drive toward authenticity contradict in any way the individualism on which global capitalism stands.

But what is at stake in the drive toward authenticity isn't quite so clear from the outset as all that. Writing about photography, Susan Sontag theorizes the existence of an idealized world, our world but better – the image-world. It is the world where we belong only once imaged, and it is imminently desirable to be there. It is predominantly imaginary, in that we conceive of it as a social body, and we can verify its importance only when others acknowledge it. Yet only individually can we ever access it: when photographed, recognized, by technology, as unique.

She writes:

> It is common now for people to insist about their experience of a violent event in which they were
> caught up – a plane crash, a shoot-out, a terrorist bombing – that it 'seemed like a movie.' That is

said, other descriptions seeming insufficient, in order to explain how real it was. [People] seek to have their photographs taken – feel that they are images, and are made real by photographs. (Sontag, 1973: 161)

The obvious question that arises is, 'What *does* it take to make you feel real?' The question is ridiculous at its face, the only logical response to whatever answer you might give being, 'if *anything*, then what is your problem?'

Yet, identifying reality as something outside of lived experience is a common problem, especially now that we live not so much in an image world as in a thoroughly branded one – whether with Obama's Hope or Pepsi's. The image-world, an all-visual imaginary, is still a tad less hyper-real than the playground of brands we buy into in order to go about our daily lives. For in its ideal state, branding isn't the physical marking on the cow so much as it is the awareness that the cow belongs somewhere in particular. Branding is primarily an emotional project, but an emotional project rooted in the logic of possession.

When I pose the question to my students, 'What does it take to make you feel real?' they respond, at first, properly: they know that as critical thinkers, an elite corps of creative minds, they are obligated to provide answers like 'organic food', 'crying', 'sex', or 'talking to my mom'. Yet I often then reframe the question, because 'feeling real' has certain connotations, a hippie vibe, that imply a bodily sensation that does not entirely get at what Sontag means. So I present it to them in less didactic terms. 'When do you feel validated as a participant in our society?' They do not realize it at first, but their answers come as a string of technological innovations, mass communications devices, trademarked names. 'When I make the news', one said. 'When people "like" my Facebook status', another suggested.

We come at the matter from another angle again. 'How many of you have cell phones?' I ask. 'How many, televisions? How many, MySpace pages? Twitter accounts? And which of these are you willing to give up, if you have them?' 'None', is the answer. The explanation being: Because then we wouldn't be participants in our culture. Because then we wouldn't *feel real*.

So the sense of authenticity as genuine, as true, is carved out from both sides: When employed by media, PR, and advertising, it is set upon a shaky foundation that aims to support, eventually and only, commerce. Authenticity becomes perceptible to us, as individuals, only when verified through certain popular but mediated technologies that have come, more and more, to define communication. Not the communications *industry* anymore, mind you – communication *itself*.

'Our era does not prefer images to real things out of perversity but partly in response to the ways in which the notion of what is real has been progressively complicated and weakened', Sontag explains (1973: 160). This is doubly clear now, and could be stated thus: Our era does not prefer authenticity over reality out of perversity, but partly in response to the ways in which we are given to understand that the latter is just as good as the former.

'A capitalist society requires a culture based on images', Sontag (1973: 178) underscores, by way of explaining the social drive to live in the image-world. It is similarly more evident now than ever, when questioning the social drive to live in a world in which all territories are prepossessed and all actions profit others – our branded world.

But Sontag's statement opens up a disturbing path of inquiry: what sort of society requires a culture based on believing available reproductions to be just as well for trying?

In an appendix to the published version of his play *Galileo*, Bertolt Brecht writes a treatise outlining five primary difficulties of honesty. (It is an updated version, for when it first appeared in print, he could find only three.) Still, 'Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties' provides an excellent dissection of pretenders to the throne of truth.

The difficulties, as Brecht sees them, are in short these: courage, keenness, skill, judgment, and cunning. Of these, only keenness concerns us. For it, Brecht claims, is necessary for discerning the truth in the first place, as distinguishable from a mere fact. The significant obstacle here is in 'determining what truth is worth the telling' (Brecht, 1966: 135). For example, he describes, 'it is not untrue that chairs have seats and that rain falls downward', but these are not 'the truths that are worth writing about' (1966: 136).

A current commercial describes an exciting revelation in mattress technology, which uses 'authentic Swedish material'. Rick Bayless, born in Oklahoma City in the United States, first became known for his 1987 cookbook, *Authentic Mexican* (Bayless, 1987). Authentic Foods is a company that manufactures wheat and gluten-free food products. And authenticity.net is a marketing website with extensive theories, complicated processes, and heavy fees through which genuine relationships with your customers can, eventually, be achieved.

These are all accurate (enough) uses of the word 'authentic'. But using a keenness inspired by Brecht's demand for it, it's clear that they still do not matter. However factual it may be that bits of your mattress, at some point, came from Sweden, or that no aspects of your Authentic Food is unprocessed (read: 'natural'), what Brecht calls for is actionable information. 'The kind of presentation of truth', he writes, 'which will enable men to act on the basis of that presentation. People who merely record little facts are not able to arrange the things of this world so that they can be easily controlled' (Brecht, 1966: 137).

Yet a definition of truth as rooted in action does not always align with a full accounting of facts. For example, Brecht advises, if a country such as Germany has gone awry – a subject very much of concern to Brecht in 1935 – it is possible to say so plainly by supplanting the word 'Germany' with the word 'Austria'. 'Many things that cannot be said in Germany about Germany can be said about Austria' (Brecht, 1966: 143), he advises.

So in a treatise devoted exclusively to the sole significance of eradicating 'truthiness' so that truth itself may flourish, in fact there are limits to what truths might be useful,

concessions to the self-same powers that seek to limit truth. But Brecht's warning contains a far more salient point: that the sense of justice we experience from 'truthiness' we do not always glean from truth. Sometimes, what is true does not seem factual. Most of the time, what is true is not in any way authentic.

The truth is that authenticity allows for the vacillation between truthiness and mere fact that politicians and marketers have always been comfortable with. It privatizes our worldview, and, in allowing our individualized emotional response to command perceptions of honesty and genuineness, authenticity devalues the third-party fact-checker, the outside source, the village. It corresponds perfectly to the wan demands of a brand-obsessed culture, celebrity-driven media, and digital communications systems, creating a feedback loop where we no longer question why all interactions financially benefit others. Such questions do not feel real. In fact, we begin to wonder whether we should even ask them.

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the author   Anne Elizabeth Moore is the author of *Unmarketable: Brandalism, copyfighting, mocketing, and the erosion of integrity* (The New Press). She teaches Visual & Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and received a Fulbright to explore global media and youth culture in Cambodia. A book on this work is forthcoming from Cantankerous Titles. www.anneelizabethmoore.com.
E-mail: aem@anneelizabethmoore.com