Popular Culture and the Quest for “The Truth Machine”

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The Cultural Allure of Lie Detection

- The desirability of both lying & “lie detection” found in ancient myth and folklore
- Magical devices - spells and potions - expose lies and truth
- used for good or ill
- But .. human beings are naturally opaque to the scrutiny of their fellows
Lying is (Philosophically) Complex

- Occasional/ routine
- Major/minor
- Variously motivated (personal gain, noble cause, survival strategy)
- Variable consequences
- Damages/sustains trust
- More stressful than truth telling - stress has physiological consequences
There is a popular hunger to know ....

- What goes on in the mind of a killer ... or an innocent man?
- Some crime victim’s relatives feel a need to know, for closure
- Is the law equal to the challenge of finding the truth?
The Polygraph

- Slow gestation in psychology - measures an inner emotional/mental state by physiological means
- William Marston (Harvard, 1915 on) - correlates rise in blood pressure with deception
- Leonarde Keeler & John Larson (1920s on - multiple physiological measures correlate with deception
- Auguste Vollmer (California) - scientific policing
- Post-WW2 military funding of serious research
- Professionalisation - constant modification of core technology - champions exaggerate reliability
- Use extended in 1950s from lie detection of criminal suspects to loyalty monitoring of employees, esp government scientists and security personnel - this continues
An American Obsession?

- “No country other than the United states has made use of the technique to any great degree” (p xiv)
- Banned from court
- Discredited by science
- ….yet widely used, on 2m Americans in 1980s
- “America’s mechanical conscience”
Explaining the Obsession

Lie detection expressed and reinforced some enduring popular American beliefs:

- Puritan revulsion towards the sin of dishonesty
- Infallibility of science over nature
- Techno-utopianism - “the artificial paradise”
- Institutionalisation/ professionalisation
- Showmanship/ charisma of its champions
- Employee loyalty testing during Cold War
- (Uncritical) popular culture extols its utility
Lie Detection and Popular Culture

Credibility of lie detection endorsed in:
- advertising
- comics
- Hollywood movies
- TV drama series eg “The Mentalist” & ‘Lie to Me”
- Reality TV/ Game Shows
Popular Culture is not Naïve …

A magic spell robs a man of his capacity to lie for 24 hours

- Good for honest relationship with his son
- Bad for his career as a divorce lawyer
- Sincere honesty is best
Institutional Pluralism

✓ “what distinguishes a culture is how it copes with deceit: the sorts of lies it denounces, the sorts of institutions it fashions to expose them. Only in America has the campaign to expose lies taken a technoscientific turn” (Adler)
✓ Senior US legal institutions never accepted the techno-science of the polygraph
(Most) models of man in (most) western law postulate an inaccessible inner life - capacity for secrecy and privacy essential to human selfhood.

But …exposure of lying and deceit is integral/ vital to criminal justice and legal practice

Lying (by defendants & “witnesses”) is addressed via oaths, cross examination and jury-integrity - by highlighting inconsistency and contradictions, & eliciting confessions

Polygraph data is not reliable evidence of inherently “inaccessible” states of mind - premised on a transparent, reductive view of man at odds with western legal ontology
But What If We Could?

- If neuroscience could deliver technically foolproof and 100% reliable lie detection technology ....
- Would it be used.....?
- How ... in what circumstances?
- By whom ....?
- And with what social consequences?
Marston and Wonder Woman

✓ 1941 - William Marston idealised matriarchy - invents comic strip character Wonder Woman - an Amazon princess/superhero living incognito in modern USA - who has the “lasso of truth”
Science Fiction, Futurology & Lie Detection

- 1909 - Balmer and McHarg - series of crime/sf novels - one predicts a “lie detector”
- 1950s - imagined telepathic detectives
- Phillip Dick (1968) - the Voight-Kampf machine - and in Bladerunner (1982)
- No major non-fiction futurology.....?
- Technology aids police work - no grandiose/transformative social consequences - until ....
James Halperin (1996)  
“The Truth Machine”

- Self-published - then Random House
- Hard, Wellsian shape-of-things-to-come-sf
- Realist utopianism - what if and why not?
- Capitalised on interest in O J Simpson murder trial (1994) - did he kill his wife? - did the law fail?
The Story

Halperin’s projected timescale:

- 2002 - Al Gore becomes president
- Increasing Muslim terrorism - nuking of secular Bagdad in 2003
- 2004 - rising violent crime in US prompts Swift and Sure Act - more use of death penalty - its champion becomes president
- 2011 - all financial transactions go digital/ more nuclear terror strikes
- 2012 - first US Black president
- 2022 - ACIP approved for use in US court - first used to exonerate a man on death row. (Old OJ Simpson dies in helicopter crash)
- 2026 - ACIP eliminates tax fraud, increasing revenue: US government lowers taxes.
- ACIP used at US border control, and in employment interviews
- 2029 - ACIP exported abroad, eg to China - incriminates terrorist
- 2029 - ACIPs go on sale to private individuals - divorce rates rises - falls back to pre-ACIP levels - 12,014 ACIP related suicides
- 2035 - increased international trust via ACIP transforms diplomacy and enables World Government
- Numbers executed in US falls below 1000 - lowest since 2004. Major serial killer caught out by employment ACIP
- 2037 - first US woman president
- 2041 - near elimination of crime and fraud - increased welfare/medical expenditure, inc cryogenics
- 2049 - Armstrong patents expire - other MRI-based lie detection companies emerge
James Halperin’s
“The Truth Machine”

✓ Halperin explains at the end of the novel:
✓ “Nobody knows how difficult its invention would be, or how quickly it would find its place in society, but we do know that a Truth Machine is scientifically possible. Therefore it will someday exist - if the human race survives long enough. Unfortunately, that’s a big if ….” (Halperin 1996:309)
✓ The paradox of the plot - the inventor of the Truth Machine (a virtuous and idealistic man) harbours a dark secret (murdering a treacherous colleague) for 25 years, which, had it been exposed earlier would have jeopardised the development of this socially beneficial technology .. the novel implicitly (perhaps unintentionally?) subverts its own techno-utopianism.
Social Critique of Halperin

✔ Exaggerates lying as the root of ALL evil, honesty as the source of all virtue - therefore effective lie detection will be socially and politically transformative

✔ Sees no value in deceit, hypocrisy and euphemism

✔ elides meaning and virtue of truth-telling in criminal justice, international relations and the domestic sphere

✔ Texas-centric: US politics are benign and rational

✔ Underestimates importance of false views, sincerely held: “In a world as continually wracked by the convictions of believers, does Halperin really think that the elimination of conscious deceit would fix as much as he says it does? (Alan P Scott)
Technical Critique of Halperin

- Ostensibly simplistic understanding of fMRI - simple, unambiguously readable neurological correlates of conscious deceit, applicable to everyone
- Neglects other new lie detection technologies … and the role of the military in developing them
- Ostensibly underestimates pace of innovation and adoption
- Underestimates growth of wider “surveillance society” - people will have fewer secrets/less privacy because all data will more easily be accessed (David Brin)
- Sees no totalitarian potential in lie detection
Criminal Justice Critique

- Postulates widespread and routine use, as opposed to selective (and costly) use in serious cases
- Assumes widespread deterrent effect
- Neglects likely complexity of use - by both defence and prosecution - to create doubts
- Predicts - but underestimates - demand from the wrongly accused/convicted - who have incentives to cooperate
- Ignores the institutional power of law (and its ontology) - overrates the power of rational scientific argument
- Ignores innovation in other other countries, eg India
However .......

- Criticising sf writers for mistaken or skewed predictions is pointless
- Utopias can mobilise people to act precisely because the inspiration is simple & clear
- Halperin constructs a superficially “plausible narrative” for the 21st century
- …adds to the culture of expectation that foolproof lie detection could and should be developed … stimulates debate
- Sf - “the dreams our stuff is made of”
A Post-Polygraph age?

✓ “There is something about us Americans that makes us believe in the myth of the lie detector. It’s as much of a myth as the tooth fairy”. David Lykken

✓ Neuroscience - new means of pursuing and realising an old obsession - superceding the polygraph?

✓ The US military think so - search for reliable interrogation techniques (Jonathan Moreno)

✓ Deep & enduring cultural factors still in play - popular culture has already exploited fMRI - the future of neuro-lie detection will be shaped by social/cultural factors, not just by rational, evidence-based science
“Ignoring outward physical changes, the Evergreen Foundation scientists looked directly inside the brain using magnetic resonance imaging. The Truth Room was simply a large MRI chamber in which a person could talk, eat and move about. The man or woman being questioned didn’t have to know what was going on, which allowed for a wider range of reactions” (p134).
Lie Detection in Britain

✓ Negligible police and security service interest in lie detection technology - more emphasis on psychological strategies.

✓ Use of polygraphs with sex offenders under probation supervision & voice –based lie detection in social security

✓ Will neuroscience technology change this? With new “real” science, will lie detection cease to be a US-only obsession … and go global?

✓ (London) Science Museum survey (May 2010): 1 in 5 people think lie detection is acceptable at home and in workplace & think belive that reliable technology is imminent
Some Final Thoughts on Lies

✓ In vino veritas. Plato?

✓ “In human relationships, kindness and lies are worth a thousand truths”. Graham Greene

✓ “In war, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies”. Winston Churchill

✓ “That lying is a necessity of life is itself a part of the terrifying and problematic character of existence”. Frederick Nietzsche
Bibliography