

Lying Beyond Scruples

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*The Open Lie and Transparent
Manipulation in the Age of
Mentirocracy*

By

Lia Lola V. Kotnik

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the Age of Mentirocracy

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*In a mentirocracy, no one is spared from effects
of the open lie and the transparent manipulation;
moreover, no one is immune from becoming
an open liar or a transparent manipulator.*

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PREFACE

This work deals with a rather specific phenomenon and particular practice of today's mentirocracies—i.e. particular types of rule, dominance and power imposed and enforced by open liars and transparent manipulators—but at the same time it touches on wider problems that many authors associate with life in a society of constant shock, permanent emergency situations, polycrisis, post-apocalypse, new authoritarianism as the new normality, resistance to knowledge and anti-intellectualisation in the broadest sense of the word, marginalisation of Enlightenment principles and human rights, degradation of the modern social contract, which was based on the subordination of individual interests to the higher goals of a universal and collective good and decent life for all, re-traditionalisation and dedemocratisation and mentirocratic management of publics and audiences through disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, manipulation, and lies.

Similar to some of my previous Slovenian-language research monographs and edited collections in the field of media and communications, such as *The Media and National Minorities* (2013), *Newspapers Without Readers?* (2013), *Homo Academicus and the Media* (2016), and *Media Ethnographies* (2019)—the work before you is also the combined result of my research and teaching in the Department of Media Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska, Koper, Slovenia. In this department, where I have been teaching several courses since 2008, including History of Media, Audience Research, and Anthropology of Media, I set out in my own way to develop an inclusive model of academic teaching where students could participate in specific segments and phases of my individual research projects, which were based mainly on personal enthusiasm and largely non-funded, serving as a kind of research extension of particular subjects and their contents. Since these are bachelor and master rather than doctoral students, they were mainly involved in the less demanding parts of the research, for example in creating and collecting empirical materials (writing short essays, filling in questionnaires, doing various types of interviews), not in analysing and interpreting empirical materials. Nevertheless, by reading my publications, which also included the analysis of empirical materials obtained in the pedagogical process, they were able to experience, in retrospect, what it might look like when empirical raw material, in the

conception and collection of which they participated in their coursework, is finally transformed into a published analytical construction. Not that this type of inclusion of the research element in the pedagogical process always resulted in a publication. After all, it was mainly a pedagogical exercise with the goal of training students to handle theory and empiry in such a way that pedagogy is also implemented in the sense of an “empirical laboratory”. The students thus acquired theoretical and practical skills and were exposed to sophisticated analytical and rough empirical realities, while at the same time they were drawn into the role of creative, initiative-taking, and trusted partners not only in the narrow pedagogical process but also in the field of empirical research under appropriate professional guidance. The result of this kind of successful multiannual integration of pedagogical work and scientific interest through the active involvement of students in research work can also be seen in the second and third part of this book, which has no pretensions to ground breaking research, but is meant as an interim snapshot in my ongoing reflection of mediatic phenomena that surround us every day and intensively occupy our attention with their immediacy.

The book is based on three previously published papers which, while composed separately, were written with the idea that taken together they could make up a coherent whole. Here it is: the Lying Like Trump trilogy, accompanied by an introduction summing up its key points.

The first part, entitled *Lying Like Trump With Trump*, is based on a translation and slight revision of my Slovenian-language scholarly paper “Lying Like Trump: Really Telling the Spontaneous Truth?”, which was published in 2021 in the Slovenian bilingual peer-reviewed journal *Družboslovne razprave / Social Science Forum*. The journal is published by the Slovenian Sociological Association in cooperation with the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. The text was written from the point of view of an observational sociology of Trump’s and Trumpian style of lying, manipulation, post-truthing, dis-truthing and anti-truthing. The article concludes that the Trump and Trumpian origins of all of our excessively open individual lying and obscenely transparent interpersonal manipulation are to be found in the many past systemic and collective licences for today’s lying and manipulation. I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments, the editors of the journal for permission to publish a modified version of the article published there as an integral part of this monograph, and translator Katja Zakrajšek for her precise and flawless translation and proofreader Jean McCollister for her expeditive linguistic check.

The second part, entitled *Lying Like Trump After Trump*, is based on a translation and slight revision of my Slovenian-language scholarly paper

“Lying Like Trump After Trump: Is Tolerating Open Lies Really Easier than Rejecting Them?”, which was published in 2021 in the Slovenian peer-reviewed journal *Anthropos: Časopis za psihologijo in filozofijo ter za sodelovanje humanističnih ved / Journal of Psychology, Philosophy and for the Cooperation of Humanistic Studies*. The journal is published by the Slovenian Philosophical Society and Slovenian Psychologists’ Association. At the intersection of interpersonal experiential sociology and confrontational anthropology, the text tries to bring the earlier macro-sociological reflection to a micro-sociological level in order to better understand what is going on with lying and manipulation *à la Trump* in our interpersonal relationships and why perfectly ordinary outright liars and brutal manipulators have become as intolerable and disruptive in our daily lives as Trump himself has become as a media and political actor for credible media and socially responsible citizens of the world. The text also contains the results of a short online poll conducted between October 15 and November 15, 2020, among students of the Department of Media Studies at the University of Primorska, Slovenia. Thus at the time of the American presidential elections, i.e. in the period between the pre-election and post-election fever, the survey ascertained the understanding and experiencing of the phrase “lying like Trump” or “manipulating like Trump” among a narrow group of the Slovenian student population. I am deeply grateful to the student respondents for their participation in the survey. I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their evaluation of the paper, the editors of the journal for permission to allow a modified translation of the article published there to significantly contribute to the structure of this book edition, and, again, translator Katja Zakrajšek for a fine job with the translation and proofreader Jean McCollister for a few proofs and comments.

The third part, titled *Lying Like Trump Without Trump*, is based on the paper “Lying Like Trump Without Trump: Audience Controversy in Trump-Inspired Slovenia”, published in 2024 in the collection *Popular Culture in Post-Socialism* co-edited by me and Ana Banić Grubišić for the University of Belgrade Press in Belgrade, Serbia. This article, which shows in a specific case how Slovenian public television audiences became playthings in the management’s Trump-like lies, is enriched with sayings taken from a short ethnography dealing with broader media-driven and communication-related problems, such as “fake news”, fake accounts, fake data, fake audiences and fake publics. For this purpose, students from the Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Humanities at the University of Primorska under my mentorship participated in fieldwork and conducted semi-structured interviews with informants from the media and communication sector as part of the *Audience Research* course in the academic years

2020/2021 and 2022/2023. In the academic year 2020–2021, 26 students participated: Ana Arnautovič, Dragica Arsenijević, Michelle Gloria Arzenšek, Hana Brkić, Katja Canalaz, Jakob Črv, Luka Drašler Florjančič, Olja Gavrić, Nika Ivanovič, Alenka Hodžić, Elena Husu, Maja Katič, Nina Kavčič, Tilen Kemperle, Laura Kržič, Ana-Marija Ljuboje, Nicole Meneghetti, Manca Nučič, Nikolina Pavičević, Nina Petejan, Tadeja Peternel, Nuša Slapar, Mia Škodič, Lana Soldat, Tea Vranješ, and Maša Zidar. In the academic year 2022–2023, 18 students participated: Alija Bandi, Mina Čušin, Mina Đorđević, Sara Flegar, Olja Gavrić, Tian Janev, Sonja Knežević, Alan Kostelac, Anže Marolt, Stefan Masliković, Vanja Mihić, Karin Milavec Mlinarič, Lana Milovanović, Valentina Pettiroso, Hana Rataj, Sara Slivečko, Nik Spogliarich, Aleksandra Vidić. Most conducted one interview, some did two. Grateful thanks go to all for their fruitful cooperation. I am also grateful to University of Belgrade Press for allowing the paper to significantly complete the Lying Like Trump trilogy composed here, and proofreader Jean McCollister for her additional linguistic correction.

The book contains an Appendix with my scholarly article “The Rise of Transparent Manipulators and Countless Trumps in the Age of Deep Manipulation: What Have They Done to Manipulation?”, which was published in 2021 in the Italian English-language peer-reviewed journal *Italian Sociological Review*. The journal is published by the University of Verona, Italy. In this article my ideas of *deep manipulation* and *transparent manipulation* are presented for the first time, as is the concept *BBC (bricolage-bousillage-courtage) economism*, generating ripe conditions for transparent manipulation to be produced and performed. The reader is kindly asked not to be disturbed by the fact that parts of the content that were initially elaborated in the article re-published here as an Appendix also appear in the main part of the book. This article namely significantly enhances the Lying Like Trump trilogy, since it discusses some historical, economic and psychoanalytical aspects of the new manipulation as post-communication in the twenty-first century. I would like to thank translator Katja Zakrajšek, who translated the unpublished working version of the Slovenian-language article into English, proofreader Josh Rocchio for his additional linguistic check, as well as two reviewers and the editors of the journal for publishing the article.

This book was created in a plural English-Slovenian and Slovenian-English linguistic, cultural and symbolic exchange. Parts of the text that were originally written in Slovenian (for example, Part 1, Part 2 and Conclusion) needed translation, proofreading and/or language editing. Parts of the text that were originally written in English (Part 3) needed proofreading

and/or language editing. Parts of the text that were originally written partly in Slovenian and partly in English (Introduction), needed translation, proofreading and language editing combined. Two exceptional translators, Katja Zakrajšek and Jean McCollister, were up to all these different tasks, for which I owe them my sincere thanks. It was only with their help that this book became accessible to the English-speaking readership. Of course, the responsibility for what is written is entirely mine.

INTRODUCTION

THE OPEN LIE AND TRANSPARENT MANIPULATION

Trump Studies or What?

In 2014 a student approached me in the corridor of the college where I teach and in the course of our conversation disappointedly said of a professor: “She is the Trump of our college.” Wanting to maintain a professional attitude despite this unexpected confidential remark by the student, I did not grill her further by asking what she meant by this, so the statement just hung suspended in the air like a riddle. Regardless, it was a very unusual statement, which at that time not only surprised me some but also found me quite unprepared to fully grasp it. When my student made this remark, Donald Trump was not yet an important global political figure, but primarily an overbearing star of American entrepreneurial business and reality television who did not hold any particular interest, let alone any appeal, for me. But the student’s characterisation nevertheless prompted further questions in me, for example, why would a student compare a university teacher to Trump, i.e. someone who was not even close to being a university persona or a protagonist of intellectual culture? At the time, Trump was operating in a world that seemed, in fact, a whole universe away from everything that represents a credible university, good science, trustworthy research and serious scholarship, i.e. what we colloquially call academe. It was then that the question first arose for me about who Donald J. Trump is and what it is he actually does, such that his media-branded and self-branded name could be suitably applied as a description for the activities of a university figure at a Slovenian public university.

It was only later, when Donald Trump actively entered the political arena, that it dawned on me in retrospect what exactly the student must have had in mind when she made this remark, which had surprised me and made me uneasy. It’s clear to me today. She did not have Donald Trump as a person in mind. She had in mind the type of behaviour he represented. She had in mind the type of lying that we define in this book as *open lying*—to

put it more bluntly, as excessively open lying. She had in mind the practice of manipulation that we call *transparent manipulation*—actually obscenely transparent manipulation. If the author of this book had been better acquainted with Trump’s “art of the deal” at the time the student’s statement was made, or had at least watched his reality shows, she would have immediately unravelled the riddle surrounding the meaning of the utterance at the moment it was uttered. However, the label seemed to me to be more of a situational curiosity of a contingent character than some striking characterisation of an epochal nature. Today, it can be much more easily understood in the light of a socially idiosyncratic type of behaviour within the broader post-truth economy of symbolic exchanges, which requires academic thematisation and problematisation, as it is no longer a matter of one individual and his psychology and character, but one of collective enforcement and therefore also of the sociology of human relations.

The student in question should be recognised for her considerable lucidity in the social conditions of the time, and even an ominous clairvoyance that in effect predicted the arrival of a new time, a time that many writers after 2016, when Trump—surprisingly or not—became the president of the United States, began to be referred to as the “Trump age” and the time after the end of his presidential term as the “post-Trump age”. Today, I can assert with confidence that the student’s statement from 2014 represents the birthplace of the emergence of my later academic interest in topics that could roughly be classified as *studies of lying*, *mendacity studies* or *manipulation studies*. The statement cited played, in the words of the psychologist and philosopher Michel Foucault, the role of a kind of *defining moment event* in changing my view of today’s lying and manipulation. In his famous *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault insisted that statements, these elementary units of discursive formations and, more broadly, of knowledge in general, are nothing but events. Accordingly, what is interesting about statements is not so much their internal structure, but their event surface itself. Statements are always unique, no matter how numerous they may be. The fact that a specific statement was made, and not any other, should be taken more seriously, according to Foucault, and the statement should be restored to the status of a singular event. In other words, statements are events that influence the way we think about the world.

To be sure, Donald Trump before 2016 did not hold much interest for serious academics. In the eyes of scholars, academics and intellectuals, he was likely considered an obscure clown on the media scene, a narcissistically boastful businessman, bluffer and wheeler and dealer, an oddball self-promoting upstart. Not even “Trump University”, which Donald Trump founded with two associates in 2004, could remedy the image of the anti-

university Trump. Despite the name, it was of course not an accredited university, but rather a real estate company that shut down in 2011 due to a multitude of problems.

Trump thus failed to become a university or a university actor on the market of intellectual services. However, he still managed to make it to the university world by a different route, which is itself ironic. Once he became president of the United States, it seems that everything about the academic sphere's interest in him changed radically in some way. The academic world simply could no longer ignore Trump once he became the president of a leading culturally Western country, and thus automatically also a globally important and indispensable political actor. Since 2016, hundreds of academic papers and books have taken Trump in all possible manifestations and representations as their subject of study. This, too, is ironic. Although Trump is not exactly considered a symbol and guarantor of intellectual capital, academic engagement with him has become its own academic industry of intellectual capital production. Today there is such an extensive corpus of work in diverse disciplines that some authors are already referring to "Trump Studies" or "Trumpology" (Taussig 2017; Brabazon, Redhead and Chivaura 2019, 1–32).

As early as 2017, anthropologist Michael T. Taussig, writing in the Editor's Forum of the journal *Cultural Anthropology* entitled "The Rise of Trumpism", gave his article the title "Trump Studies", arguing that "Trumpism illuminates the necessary fiction of the social contract, and thus Trump Studies must too ... Can Trump Studies match its object of study?" (2017). This question, of course, implied another question: how can academics, scholars and researchers deal with the Trump phenomenon? The authors of the book *Trump Studies* suggest that Trump Studies be tethered "to angular, disturbing, dangerous, productive, and dynamic knowledge systems" (Brabazon et al. 2019, 6), and also significantly reveal Trump's "academic" ambitions when they cite part of the text from President Trump's speech to the CIA on January 21, 2017, in which he said: "I know a lot about West Point, I'm a person who very strongly believes in academics. Every time I say I had an uncle who was a great professor at MIT for 35 years, who did a fantastic job in so many ways academically—he was an academic genius—and then they say, Is Donald Trump an intellectual? Trust me, I'm like a smart person" (Brabazon et al. 2017, 18). In this statement, Trump first makes an invisible link between security intelligence and academics, and then, by referring to his relative's academic career, he practically places himself among academics and intellectuals, which should not be too surprising when we learn that he also considers himself "a stable genius" (Reuters Staff 2018).

It seems that despite Trump's "academic" ambitions of this kind, in recent years his name has become well established as an academic brand thanks to scholars who have made Trump a research topic and subject of academic attention: from presidency, politics, policy, and political culture (Connolly 2017; Esposito and Finley 2018; Frum 2018; Hart 2020; Kettl 2017; Lamb and Neiheisel 2020; Melone 2020; Oliva and Shanahan 2018; Pfeiffer 2018; Rutledge and Rackaway 2021; Schier and Eberly 2017; Warf 2020a; Wolff 2018), philosophy and ideology (Badiou 2019; Sable and Torres 2018), psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry (Frank 2018; Maccoby and Fuchsman 2020; McAdams 2020; Trump 2020 and 2021); media, journalism and communication (Boczkowski and Papacharissi 2018; Carlson, Robinson and Lewis 2021; Fuchs 2018; Gutsche Jr. 2018, Happer, Hoskins and Merrin 2018; Kamalipour 2021; Kellner 2016 and 2017), language and rhetoric (Eitelmann and Schneider 2020; Hodges 2019; McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020; Rowland 2021; Sclafani 2017), entrepreneurship, business and economics (Coles 2017; Kranish and Fisher 2016; Sargen 2018; Welfens 2019), body politics and gender/sexuality issues (Davis and Crane 2020; Johnson and Finley 2018), sport (Andrews 2019), literature (Resano 2017) to multiple-aspect accounts (Campbell 2018 and 2022).

The academic literature cited is, of course, part of a much wider global book production, which includes a whole range of diverse academic, pseudo-academic, anti-academic and non-academic efforts to express a certain point of view regarding Trump, against Trump or even for Trump as the symbol of a very particular "art of the deal", which has recently become so much a part of society. Trump would likely be proud to have managed to become such a prominent subject of scholarly scrutiny, even if their reasons, ambitions and arguments may be diametrically opposed to the reasons, ambitions and arguments that would have made Trump himself feel worthy of such lavish academic attention and scholarly erudition. Donald Trump clearly did not invent lying and manipulation and perhaps today's open liars and transparent manipulators do not even need him (anymore) for their excessively open lies and obscenely transparent manipulations, because it seems that with his recent rise in politics and the media they have experienced complete social legitimacy and success. The idea that Trump is just a trope or a figure that clearly outlines the facet of a certain post-reality type of lying and manipulation, which I describe as open lying and transparent manipulation, was solidified in me before Trump even became one of the US presidents. It solidified before I even knew that he was interested in the "business of politics"; in fact even before we all saw on television screens how Trump, as a businessman selling his own truth, truly

presidentially lies and manipulates. The idea actually solidified in me dating from that passing encounter with a lucid student in 2014.

How Trump Lies

The small research project I dubbed Lying Like Trump and which ran from 2019 to 2023, was designed in academic circumstances specific to Slovenia, which left no doubt that what some current Western researchers of Donald J. Trump's presidency call "Trump's lies", "Trump-like lies" or "Trumpian lies" do not stop at national, political and ideological borders, but have spread globally to virtually all social sectors and all corners of our lives. Although it has long been known that politicians lie (see Alterman 2004), Donald Trump's entry into the political arena has seen lying become not just an augmented political strategy unparalleled in the recent history of political falsehoods and manipulations, but one that has spread rapidly throughout the media and, with the help of information and communication technologies, across public spaces to reach every domain of society. This example reveals the social dimension of new initiatives in what Hannah Arendt (1968, 232 and 251; 1972, 6) decades ago called *organized lying*—that is, *open lying*—and is an upgraded version of deep systemic manipulation—that is, *transparent manipulation*.

As many authors (Alterman 2020; Carlson et al. 2021; Danesi 2020; Frank 2018; Hahl et al. 2018; Hayden 2018; Jiménez Murguía 2019; Jenkins and Gomez 2022; Kakutani 2018; Kellner 2018; Kessler et al. 2020; Lemire 2022; McGranahan 2017; Pfiffner 2020; Skjeseth 2017; Warf 2020b) dealing with Trump's lies have already shown, Trump's type of lying demands a serious approach not because it has recently become publicly and politically notorious but because it is now socially paradigmatic and therefore a threat to our future coexistence. Some write that the Trumpian type of lying should not be regarded as insignificant, even if many of Trump's lies seem completely trivial and obscure, because this type of excessively open lying and obscenely transparent manipulation virulently contradicts commonly accepted facts and denies reality as such, and therefore corrodes democracy and destroys trust in law, science and truth. Even if such alarming views on Trumpian lying merely reflect the quickness of Trump's countless lies and ease of his lying, some scholars "nonetheless find significant and potentially long-term consequences of the lie" (Arceneaux and Truex 2022).

How does Trump actually lie? The simplest answer is that he lies shamelessly, recklessly, dishonourably and carelessly. If we say that Trump is a liar or that he is known to be a liar, we are not lying. But this does not

add anything new to what many others have already said on the subject. Some even very directly, such as Eric Alterman, historian, media critic and professor of journalism, who opens his book *Lying in State* (2020) with the following self-evident statement: “I hardly need to make the argument that Donald Trump is a liar”. He continues: “At the same time, the depth and breadth of Trump’s dishonesty is something new”. To explain what is actually new about Trump’s type of lying compared to previous historically known types of lying, Alterman refers to the description offered by Chris Hayes, political commentator and television news anchor, which seems to capture well how Trump brought something new to lying when he says:

The president is a liar. He lies about matters of the utmost consequence (nuclear diplomacy) and about the most trivial (his golf game). He lies about things you can see with your own eyes. He lies about things he said just moment ago. He lies the way a woodpecker attacks a tree: compulsively, insistently, instinctively. (Alterman 2020, 1; according to Hayes 2018)

A similar characterisation of Trump’s lying is offered by Douglas Kellner, philosopher and rigorous critic of media culture and spectacle, who calls Donald Trump the greatest liar in the history of the modern US presidency:

He tells repeated Big Lies despite empirical evidence and well-documented media reports contracting his lies. When confronted with contrary evidence, Trump and his handlers dismiss any critical claims about Trump as “fake news” and “alternative facts”. (Kellner 2018, 89)

Although such characterisations appear to be extremely accurate when it comes to Trump’s practice of lying and manipulation, at the same time one gets the strange feeling that Trump is already ahead of them with the next lie. It’s as though Trump always gets away with his own lies, by telling the second, third, fourth, fifth, and countless other lies the very next moment. It’s as though Trump’s hyperproduction of lies manages to invalidate his own previous lies on the fly, making it seem like we’re always a step behind when trying to evaluate each lie. Moreover, in the detection and criticism of Trump’s lies, something is always missing, something that we ourselves do not want to accept, namely facts that can be both shocking (from an ethical point of view) and impressive (from a business point of view) and that communicate the message that it is possible to thrive in society through obvious lies and manipulations without concern for credibility and integrity. In recent years, Trump has presented himself not only as a notorious presidential producer and spreader of lies and manipulations, but also as someone who has created a profitable business and successful brand out of lying and manipulation. We are also convinced that Trump is not the

inventor of excessively open lying and obscenely transparent manipulation. But he is certainly someone who has succeeded in spite of it, and even precisely because of it, which is a thought that triggers even greater cultural discomfort.

Trump has given excessively open lies and obscenely transparent manipulations not only the face and image of a man who lies and manipulates in a specifically disruptive way, but also unprecedented public encouragement for others to try and perhaps even succeed in Trump's "art of lying". It is thus not unusual for people who in today's post-Trump era excessively openly lie and obscenely transparently manipulate, i.e. who "lie like Trump", to be identified primarily as Trump-like, Trump-imitating or Trump-inspired liars. This kind of impersonation can be all the more significant since it can also reveal a sort of paradox, such as, for example, that Trump-like liars are not necessarily and exclusively fierce followers of Donald Trump or Trumpists and supporters of Trumpism. On the contrary, some among them even come across as vocal critics of Trump, while others condemn any lying as an unethical practice on principle. So there are people who lie like Trump, but have or want nothing to do with either Trump as a person or Trump as a political symbol. What does this tell us about the type of lying that we attribute so strongly to Donald Trump that it has become virtually synonymous with his personalised brand of lying? It tells us that the social success of Trump-like liars should be reframed so as to depersonalise and de-essentialise the ontological or instrumental view of Trump's lying as an emerging type of highly personalised lying.

The *open lie* and *transparent manipulation* also fall within the framework of this understanding of the phenomenon of lying *à la Trump*. These are concepts we use to try to outline more sharply in this book not only what has happened recently with respect to lying and manipulation as two inventive practices, which otherwise have probably accompanied people for centuries and millennia in different forms, to different degrees and under different names, but also what has happened to their social status and social practice in the post-Trump age. For now, these two provisional definitions will do:

The open lie is a type of post-truth lying that is considered to be notoriously excessive precisely because it lies outright face-to-face about realities that are easily verifiable, facts that are at hand or generally accepted and truths that are common and often quite self-evident. Prominent examples of the open lie include bald-faced lies, barefaced lies, obvious lies, egregious lies, common-sense lies, common-knowledge lies and all other lies that lie about things that we know well or we can practically see with our own eyes.

Transparent manipulation is a type of post-communicational manipulation that is considered outrageously obscene precisely because it manipulates brutally in such a way that the act of manipulation itself simultaneously reveals and demystifies the very process, procedure, mechanism or machinery of doing or performing the manipulation. However, the essential relational characteristic of this manipulation is not its transparency or visibility, but its oppressiveness, as it undermines our ability to see manipulation as manipulation, i.e. as non-communication and anti-communication.

From these two definitions, it can be seen that in the coinages noted above, adjectival characterisations are connoted in a way that is quite contrary to what the conjunctural semantics of the terms ‘open’ and ‘transparent’ have overwhelmingly predominantly signalled in the last few decades. People, things, practices and situations that are considered “open” generally have a positive connotation, as suggested by established catchphrases (e.g. ‘open society’, ‘open government’, ‘open science’, ‘open research’, ‘open knowledge’, ‘open education’, ‘open university’, ‘open access’, ‘open content’, ‘open source’, ‘open data’, ‘open standard’, ‘open business’, ‘open politics’, etc.). Openness, as an academic concept, political principle and social practice, is a quality or characteristic that generally refers to lack of restriction and lack of concealment, but above all to accessibility, collaboration, participation, inclusivity, honesty, sincerity, frankness, directness, forthrightness, straightforwardness, truthfulness, outspokenness, etc. If these meanings of openness, which are connoted as socially preferable, cohesive and cohabiting, are compared with openness in our definition of the open lie, then we can see that the latter actually appears as its own kind of “backlash”, since an open lie with its supposed directness, frontality and spontaneity actually operates in a manner that is socially disturbing, disruptive and excessive. What is supposed to be worthy of being open in an open lie is in fact a complete abuse of the openness of society.

It is similar with the prevailing connotation of the adjective ‘transparent’, which some well-known phrases (e.g. ‘transparent culture’, ‘transparent background’, ‘transparent behaviour’, ‘transparent person’, ‘transparent finance’, ‘transparent image’, ‘transparent communication’, ‘transparent media’, ‘transparent information’, etc.) give an important qualitative sub-meaning. People, things, practices and situations that are considered “transparent” are connoted in the sense that they are to be believed. Transparency, as an academic concept, political principle and social practice, is a quality or characteristic that generally refers to clearness, clarity, visibility, accountability, integrity, fairness, impartiality, etc. But the

transparent manipulation of people and things does not make them transparent in the positive connotations just mentioned, but is rather evidence that nowadays manipulations, mystifications and related practices of calculating behaviour have lost the status of something that is practised in a hidden, concealed, unrevealed, invisible, undetectable, blurred, murky or camouflaged way. Transparent manipulation turns the hitherto prevailing social and ethical quality of transparency into its obscene opposite every time it oppressively imposes itself as a legitimate form of “transparent” communication, a “transparent” relationship, a “transparent” practice. Just a decade or so ago, the coinages ‘open lie’ and ‘transparent manipulation’ could be perceived as poetic oxymorons at best, with no corresponding reality. But in the era of Trump, they no longer function as a union of two mutually exclusive concepts.

We could say that an open lie is open to excess, and transparent manipulation is transparent in obscenity. Far from being “good” openness and transparency, these fundamentally negate the role that they are supposed to serve in society. It seems that this kind of “openness” and this type of “transparency” are especially capable of being produced by solipsists, i.e. people who are convinced that the truth is simply composed of their thoughts and that their thoughts make up all reality. Such people count on the performative power of the open lie and transparent manipulation, as if it is possible to create truth with an open lie, indeed a more powerful truth, and to create communication, indeed more effective communication, with a transparent manipulation. This is also a magic trick of open liars and transparent manipulators, who act in such a way that if they openly lie about something, the very openness of their lies imparts a socially valid reality to them. Donald Trump seems to have developed such a solipsistic disposition to lie and manipulate, frequently openly lying and transparently manipulating, convinced that if he told lies openly and manipulated completely transparently, those lies and manipulations, due to their “openness” and “transparency”, would acquire a social validity and reality that counted. If we tell something in the manner of an open lie, there is no need to hide such a lie from anyone or to claim that we did not lie, because we lied openly, even as openly as if we were telling the truth. It is the same with transparent manipulation. If we manipulate transparently in interpersonal relationships, we do not need to additionally camouflage and mystify such manipulation, because we created it completely transparently, even as transparently as if we were producing legitimate communication. Accordingly, we could insist that an open lie acts as an amplified “truth” of the open liar, and transparent manipulation as a legitimised “communication” of the transparent manipulator. We see that both concepts are driven by a

coherent solipsistic logic, even though in my efforts to understand them in a coherent way, they were not developed at the same time.

While the idea of the open lie was developed within the framework of the non-funded Lying Like Trump project, the final result of which is this book, the idea of transparent manipulation is linked to a related, also non-funded, research project entitled *The Rise of Manipulation: How to Communicate in a Post-Communication Age?*. This separate or parallel genesis of the development of the two concepts can also be perceived in this work, which perhaps pays a little more attention to the practices of lying than to the practices of manipulation. To redress this imbalance, the Appendix brings my original paper on manipulation, here with the slightly modified title “Transparent Manipulators as Post-Communicators”, which deals with the rise of transparent manipulation as a form of post-communication in the age of deep manipulation.

Traditionally, manipulation has been considered as an act that necessarily takes place somewhere in the background, in secret, in the “backstage”, in the dark, so to speak, in the “unconscious” part of our social actions. Such an understanding of manipulation thus suggests, psychoanalytically, that manipulation is fundamentally constituted by a logic of the unconscious, which must be suppressed, concealed, and camouflaged, something that resists being easily uncovered. However, in the post-communication era manipulation has taken a step further. Encouraged by big data technologies, pseudo-communication strategies, digital factories of “fake news” and lies, pseudo-journalism, industries of viral mystification, fabricating and disinforming media, and by related complex systems of deceiving, disguising, blurring, simulating, falsifying, distorting, diverting, mispackaging, deforming, misrepresenting and misusing reality that have colonised all spheres of social life, from politics, business, media, the mass communications industry and the public sphere to interpersonal communication, manipulation has recently taken on a new form: that of deep manipulation. This term focuses on the increasing, intense and omnipresent naturalisation of manipulation, which has brutally invaded the territories of communication between people at both individual and collective levels, moulding it into its tool. In such a world of perverted communication, the goal of using communication is not “plain communication” but the constant production of manipulation by performing it as our “new communication”. But this is not the end of the story of deep manipulation operating both in depth and at the capillary level, both individually and globally. Against this complex background, another, transparent version of manipulation has evolved, whose key ideological effect is undermining the ability to see manipulation as manipulation, that is, as an excess of communication.

Transparent manipulation is dangerously imposed as our new “natural communicational condition”, or even, invigorated by its unscrupulous visibility, as our “new communicational conscious”. In other words, it is an accelerated mystifying system that has not only enabled Trump to become Trump, but is able to produce, multiply, and legitimate countless other Trumps in our lives. This insight serves as the starting point for the “Transparent Manipulators as Post-Communicators” paper in the Appendix to outline a brief historicity of manipulation, develop a critique of the economism of manipulation, and reveal the psychoanalytical mechanism behind such visible manipulation. The paper not only shows why it is easy to become trapped in the post-communication quagmire, but also why deep manipulation, even in its most transparent version, is a threat to the democratic potential of communities and societies.

The Lying Like Trump Project

The initial motivation for setting up this project had nothing to do with being so fascinated or intrigued by Trump’s lies that they would capture my research interest. In fact, I came to the topic gradually and in a largely imperceptible way, mainly out of a deep personal frustration that recently developed when I was dealing with people whose practices of outright lying and brutal manipulation began to strike me as completely Trumpian. In this case, it was not people conveyed to me through the media but actually people from my everyday life, and especially from my immediate work environment. The thought that the university could be occupied by increasing numbers of Trump-like liars and manipulators was disappointing and disenchanting at the same time. With this project, we hope, this idea has also become more reflexive and self-reflexive when it comes to understanding and evaluating the practices of lying and manipulation. The project, in the form of a trilogy of sorts, makes a transformative journey from a kind of observational sociology of Trumpism through experiential sociology and confrontational anthropology of open liars and transparent manipulators to a media ethnography of Trump-imitating and Trump-inspired lying in a specific Slovenian case.

In the first part, entitled *Lying Like Trump With Trump*, which was written in the months just before the US presidential election of November 2020, we identified five factors that explain the problems created by these two new forms of lying and manipulation, which may be distinct in their social constitution and function yet are highly complementary in their social use and action. First, the position of being constantly deceived by (excessively open) lies and (obscenely transparent) manipulations is no longer a delusive

“alternative”, but is imposed upon us as the “new normal” or new normative “natural state” of our social existence. Second, toxic and pathological political lying and manipulation has been exported beyond the political field and is now also contaminating the entire public sphere. Third, such communication has moved from the domain of mass communications or media-driven communication to interpersonal or face-to-face communication as well. Fourth, open lying and transparent manipulation cause relational and symbolic violence. And fifth, these practices are, in all respects, wrongful, harmful, disruptive and destructive.

By drawing on particular scholars, we tackle different aspects of the problem, from historical, systemic, collective and institutional to intersubjective and interpersonal perspectives. These scholars are, primarily: Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of classification and his problematisation of truth in the social world (2018, 6–10, 127–133); Michel Foucault and his correlation between power and truth and his idea of the courageous speaking of truth (2001); Hannah Arendt and her idea of organised lying (1968, 227–264; 1972, 1–47); and Fabrice D’Almeida and his historical conceptualisation of manipulation (2018 [2003]). We then, in a largely macro-sociological manner, reflect on what had happened recently to the social status of truth and to lying and manipulation in this post-truth world. With the help of ideas arising from the aforementioned authors we try to answer analytically the question of what it means to “lie like Trump” and “manipulate like Trump”.

In the first chapter of the *Lying Like Trump With Trump* part, entitled “Lying Goes Truth-Setting”, we establish the social status of truth in the Trump and post-Trump era as “truth in crisis”, following the suggestion of the contributors to the *On the Question of Truth in the Era of Trump* volume (Agostinone-Wilson 2020). In short, it is not just that the lie has become what makes the truth, but it is that open liars and transparent manipulators have imposed on us the feeling that it is easier to tell an open lie than to tell the open truth. And by analogy, transparent manipulation (as a form of anti-communication) has become more rewarding for people than transparent communication in the post-communication era. We further define the truth–lie relationship characterising the post-truth era and the specific practices of (Trumpian) open lying and transparent manipulation as *asocial* and *antisocial* socialising and yet a highly mobilising type of lying and manipulation. Within the framework of an observational sociology, we see the open lie and transparent manipulation as two eminently anti-/non-/post-truthful, anti-/non-/post-factual, anti-/non-/post-ethical, anti-/non-/post-intellectual, anti-/non-/post-reflexive, anti-/non-/post-communicational, and anti-/non-/post-relational products of the anti-/non-/post-factual or anti-/non-/post-truth society of the twenty-first century. In short, only in

circumstances that are anti-/non-/post-intellectual as well as anti-/non-/post-ethical can a lie be performed in an excessively open fashion and rise above the truth in a way that is obscenely transparent. In other words, an infrastructure must be built and nourished in society in order for excessively open liars and obscenely transparent manipulators to grow and flourish. The central building blocks of this public and social infrastructure are the media. The media are also the structures and agents that, as Mickey Huff and Nolan Higdon (2019) suggest, have contributed the most to the creation of a public and social infrastructure inclined to lying, manipulation, gaslighting, deception, diversion, distraction, distortion, fabrication and falsification. In the era of the reign of all kinds of fakeness, a lie sets the truth. Is it really more comfortable to tell a lie than the truth these days?

In the second chapter, entitled “Lying Goes Classifying” and written in a Bourdieusian manner, we pondered truth and lies in the context of social classifications and found that it matters who classifies the social world because not all acts of classification are equally inclined to validate factual and truth-based reality. Although post-truthers fall into various contradictions when speaking their truths, which are actually alternative truths, their recent essential acquisition is the ability to pronounce their truths, partial truths and untruths quite authoritatively, i.e. shamelessly, ruthlessly, recklessly and dishonourably, and above all without harsh social sanctions or serious consequences for their social prosperity: “In the Trumpian vision of the world, truth is not necessary, it is actually irrelevant, as an insolent, reckless or crudely spoken lie is enough to effectively show how serious the supporters of this vision are about the lie” (Kotnik 2021b, 217–218). Truth classified and perhaps still classifies. Does lying really classify more effectively today? And if so, why?

In the third chapter, entitled “Lying Goes Authoritative”, we argue that, in the post-truth world, the role of Foucauldian “fearless speech” has been overtaken by lies. Michel Foucault is important here because he innovatively historicised truth in two ways: first, by introducing truth into discourse as a “regime of truth”; and second, by linking the social status of truth to the practice of truth-telling (parrhesia). Some argue that Foucault’s genealogical analysis of truth-telling needs to be further enriched by an anthropological understanding of the practices of truthing and lying. In reality, the practices of telling the truth and telling the lie are always quite closely linked. Perhaps this is why Foucault insisted so firmly that truth needs fearless speech. Decades ago, Hannah Arendt’s works warned about the fragile, vulnerable and uncertain position of factual truth in the modern world. But, in her time, notorious lying, unscrupulous forgery, systematic deception, wild speculation, and continuous manipulation were very much

considered politically toxic and pathological practices. Today, this is no longer the case, as they are found in plain sight across all sectors of society. Has the lie recently really taken over that speech, which was previously reserved for the truth?

In the fourth chapter, entitled “Lying Goes Easier Than Ever in History”, we reveal the broader structural roots of recent and current open lying and transparent manipulation. This is done not by outlining a history of lying or a history of manipulation, but by indicating certain historical transformations of lying and manipulation. These transformations signal historical regimes of lying and manipulation. We show how the lie underwent a certain historical development in which the *traditional lie* (for the purposes of hiding reality, i.e. lying within the authority of truth) became the *organised lie* (for the purposes of destroying reality under the pretext of representing reality; e.g. Goebbels’s “big lie”, Arendt’s “modern political lie”) and the *open lie* (for the purposes of demystifying the destruction of reality, i.e. authoritative lying). In other words, in the past, lies were produced in a regime ruled by truth. Now that has changed. Truth is no longer the undisputed arbiter of reality. The lie has become a completely legitimate competitor with the truth for the purposes of defining and validating reality. Manipulation has also undergone a certain historical evolution from *pre-manipulation* (i.e. the indistinct mixing of different ancient calculating practices of cunning known before the eighteenth century), through *classical manipulation* (i.e. the politically instrumentalised, then industrialised and mediatised, then corporatised manipulation from the mid-eighteenth to the end of the twentieth century) to *deep manipulation* (i.e. the datafied, digitally and virally economised and technologically automated omnipresent manipulation of the twenty-first century). In this latest iteration, all our lives are increasingly and unavoidably tied to manipulation and its growing media-nourished, mass communication-driven, technological, political and social infrastructure. However, this deep manipulation has appeared in an upgraded, more brutal form in the second decade of the twenty-first century as post-truth, post-factual and post-intellectual *transparent manipulation*, the mechanism of which we also explain in the second part at a more intersubjective level.

In the fifth and final chapter of the first part, entitled “Lying Goes Open, Manipulation Goes Transparent”, we argue that people as social agents never just lie individually, spontaneously, tactically or strategically, but rather we also lie collectively, institutionally and systemically. Accordingly, an open lie, as a socially acceptable form of lying, can only take place within a framework of collectively supported and systemically organised lies. The same applies to transparent manipulation, which can only be practised

successfully and effectively within a framework of institutional and deep manipulation. To conclude, the relationship between lies and the truth, manipulation (as a form of anti-communication) and communication, has become problematic in the post-communicational age because lies have colonised the roles and language of truth, while manipulation has directly neutralised, cannibalised, or even nullified principles of communication.

After the first part, which is mainly rooted in macro-sociology, the second part of the trilogy, entitled *Lying Like Trump After Trump*, turns to the micro-sociology of excessively open liars and obscenely transparent manipulators *à la Trump*. After looking at the recent rise of open lying and transparent manipulation through the lens of observational sociology, here the problem is brought to the intersubjective level and the realm of interpersonal relationships. The perspective of observational sociology is enhanced by the perspective of experiential sociology. The analysis, made after the defeat of Donald J. Trump in the American presidential elections in November 2020, is based on a short online survey among students of the Department of Media Studies at the University of Primorska. Within this framework, in the period between pre-election and post-election fever, we investigated the perception and reception of the phrases “lying like Trump” or “manipulating like Trump”. Through the survey, we wanted to find out not just how open lies and transparent manipulations are perceived mentally or cognitively, but also how they are accepted experientially and emotionally, among a specific and narrow student population in Slovenia.

In the sixth chapter, entitled “Trump Is Gone, Trumpism Remains”, the phenomenon of Trumpism is reconsidered briefly from a critical point of view, which indicated that the problem of Trumpism was not solved by Trump’s departure from the presidency, because Trump- and Trumpism-inspired open liars and transparent manipulators, as sociological types or types of social agents, have been very successfully cloned, reproduced and multiplied (Kotnik 2021a). The title of the chapter is actually a well-known catchphrase that emerged in the media after Trump’s defeat. The phrase signals that Trump’s departure from the Oval Office is not a cause for rejoicing, since he leaves behind a worrying legacy in the form of the destructive and anti-democratic Trumpist doctrine. With Trump gone, the question automatically arose: Is this really just the end of the beginning instead of the other way around?

In the seventh chapter, entitled “Lying with a Presidential Licence to Lie”, we deal with the micro-sociology (containing the sociological, anthropological, psychological and psychoanalytical nuances) of excessively open liars and obscenely transparent manipulators. In a world inspired or even ruled by anti-/non-/post-intellectualism, anti-/non-/post-ethics, anti-

/non-/post-communication and anti-/non-/post-truth, “Trump is no longer one concrete person but rather embodies a type of *unscrupulous messianism* neither embarrassed by nor denying the fact that it generates a quagmire” (Kotnik 2021a, 422) of excessively open lies and obscenely transparent manipulations as anti-/non-/post-intellectual, anti-/non-/post-ethical, anti-/non-/post-communicational and anti-/non-/post-factual refuse. The point of this chapter is to argue that open liars and transparent manipulators, in the wake of ex-President Trump, have been given a presidential licence to lie in an excessively open and manipulate in an obscenely transparent way. As they go engagingly relational or even hyper-relational, they become not only visible but even unavoidable actors in our interpersonal relationships. In particular, certain types are singled out, such as the self-revealing liar, the ruthless manipulator, the authoritarian manipulator, and the hypocritical manipulator. Should such social types really continue to hold a presidential licence to lie and manipulate? Without any social sanction?

The eighth chapter, entitled “Experiencing Trump-Like Lies”, offers the results of the aforementioned survey. Its purpose was to find out whether the analytical insights from our theorisation could be somehow related to the empirical evidence. The results of the survey proved to be useful, at least to a partial and limited extent, as they provided an insight into the connection between theoretical and empirical realities precisely at the point where we tried to understand the phenomenon not only on a cognitive or mental level but also on an experiential and emotional one. The students overwhelmingly described Trump’s and Trumpian lies as shameful, shameless/rude, manipulative/manipulating, callous/reckless, pathological, absurd, lame/miserable, egregious, amusing/ridiculous, etc., which was an unexpected relief for the author of the study. However, it is one thing to perceive, detect, identify and think about a problem, and another to know how to react to it concretely in interpersonal relationships. It turned out that students were poorly equipped in social terms for the relational practice of active resistance in the sense of direct criticism, condemnation or blocking (i.e. the reaction in the moment when a liar lies openly or a manipulator manipulates transparently in face-to-face communication, such as the immediate confrontation of an open liar or the outright condemnation of a transparent manipulator). In other words, knowing the problem is one thing, but confronting it is quite another. So, how to deal with something that appears to be or is experienced as a serious ethical, social and relational complication? Or even as a threat to the minimum of coexistence in society?

In the ninth chapter, entitled “Resistant Confrontation”, it is argued that excessively open lying takes place in the style of a reality show, and obscenely transparent manipulation in the form of post-communication.