

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
Lynn Thoman
(<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

Ep. 119: Why the Lies We Tell in Public Are So Destructive with Duke's Timur Kuran

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives in their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. We all sometimes hide what we really think, like when we tell someone they look good or we like their new apartment. But hiding our true thoughts can lead to terrible consequences, especially in politics. I'm excited to be with Duke professor Timur Kuran, who's written a book, a wonderful book, *Private Truths, Public Lies* about hiding what we really think, and it's sometimes devastating consequences. I'm excited to find out how this explains many of the issues in the world today and how it can conceal vulnerabilities in societies and allow for quick and radical change that no one foresaw, such as the election of Donald Trump in the US and revolutions in other countries. Welcome Timur, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

Timur Kuran: Thank you, Lynn for inviting me.

LT: It is my pleasure. What is public lying, what you call preference falsification?

TK: Let me start by illustrating preference falsification through an episode that caused the Me Too movement to spread virally in 2017. Me Too got a huge jolt after press stories made dozens of women allege publicly that Hollywood titan, Harvey Weinstein had sexually harassed or assaulted them. Suddenly, Weinstein's world collapsed. The assaults went back decades, but his descent was meteoric. For years, Weinstein was rumored to be preying on young women, but reporters who investigated, found almost no one willing to speak on the record.

TK: Why? He dealt ruthlessly with anyone who crossed him. He was feared as someone who could break a career. Meanwhile, his professional reputation grew, his movies won hundreds of Oscar nominations. For Weinstein's behavior to draw public criticism, it wasn't enough that there were many victims or that his behavior was widely known. Potential complainers needed to know that others, including witnesses, would back them up. They also needed to believe that Weinstein supporters or the press wouldn't denounce them as publicity seekers or smear their reputations. It had to be likely enough that early whistle blowers would receive sympathy and that they would be believed. When the press broke the story, more victims who had been afraid to speak lost their reticence. Witnesses started revealing what they saw. Within days, silence was no longer an option, and defending him was out of the question. Weinstein's friends and supporters found it necessary to express shock and outrage. Actors and actresses whose careers he had launched rushed the condemning.

TK: What kept Weinstein so powerful for years on end was widespread preference falsification. As he won Oscars, people who despised his predation joined standing ovations. They helped to build

his reputation when in their hearts they wanted to destroy it. So preference falsification is the act of misrepresenting one's wants because of perceived social pressures. It aims specifically to manipulate the perceptions of others about one's motivations or dispositions. Preference falsification is not, by the way, synonymous with self-censorship. Self-censorship is a passive act. You simply go quiet. Preference falsification is performative. It entails actions meant to project a contrived preference. Weinstein's victims didn't all leave Hollywood. Many swallowed their anger and participated in making him Hollywood's most powerful man.

LT: How widespread is preference falsification, public deception?

TK: Well, it's absent in contexts lacking controversy. If you ask whether I prefer an apple or a pear, I have no reason to fear that my answer will make you or any other listener judge me more favorably or less favorably. So I'll review my preference truthfully, but in many contexts, the preferences we express do bring rewards and punishments. So we commonly falsify our preferences. We choose public preferences at odd with our private preferences. Intellectual preference falsification is common on sensitive subjects. Scholars refrain from expressing skepticism of a theory for fear of being ridiculed, losing friends or angering someone with the power to harm their careers. On campuses, students and faculty commonly falsify their preferences on the ongoing culture wars, for example, for fear of ostracism or worse. Political preference falsification is a survival tool in dictatorships.

TK: Public support for the dictator is largely, if not mostly faint. The dictatorship needs preference falsification to survive. In China, opposing Xi publicly can land you in jail. If you complain about him to your friends, someone may report you to the [Communist] Party as an opponent to gain browning points themselves. In the US, election polls have become less reliable, partly because many voters of all persuasions are losing trust in institutions. Cultural preference falsification is common everywhere. In Iran, men and women aren't supposed to socialize together, except with their relatives. Women are required to cover their hair. For decades under the theocracy, Iranians have had to pretend that they agree with the restrictions and to abide by them. Religious preference falsification occurs when people feign religiosity to avoid sanctions. Sexual preference falsification in the form of hiding in a closet is common, wherever homosexuality is a crime or socially disapproved. And the list goes on.

LT: How can we tell when public lying or preference falsification is common in a particular context, for example, in politics?

TK: After a trap has somehow been exposed and destroyed, it becomes highly visible. People tell you what they knew and felt for years, but couldn't say or express. In fact, now the problem is to separate genuine accounts of past preference falsification from contrived ones in the Weinstein case, after the press made the cases public, fear changed sides. Hollywood personalities were no longer afraid of him or his supporters. Now, they were afraid of being viewed as enablers. They had every incentive to say they were shocked or to say they sensed the predation, but were afraid to file a public complaint. So exposure of a trap sometimes comes from observers who keep pursuing a case until a critical mass comes forward. In the Weinstein case, the work was done by reporters with inside information about Hollywood and a keen sense that Weinstein's retaliations were harsh because he had much to hide.

TK: Now, while you're in the trap yourself, identification is difficult. Anyone who provides

evidence of preference falsification will be cut down by people who benefit from the status quo or while harmed want to earn rewards for upholding it. Dysfunction persists indefinitely, partly because it's risky to identify the dysfunction. In politics, such a situation offers huge opportunities for anyone who can expose the commonness of preference falsification, and champion the cause of those who feel victimized by institutions that require them to falsify their preferences. Trump's rise to success illustrates this, he sensed it correctly. It turned out that a large body of American voters is alienated from the US political establishment, Democratic and Republican. His strategy was to show that he's different and that he wouldn't betray the alienated once in office. He achieved credibility by repeatedly denigrating the establishment, the press, academia, McCain, the IRS, the Justice Department etcetera.

TK: He became a spokesman for a coalition of the discontent, which he formed. In office and since 2020, he has maintained the loyalty of the alienated by appropriating their values, including their bitterness over having to falsify their preferences as they suffered deindustrialization and loss of status relative to coastal elites. When Trump characterizes his opponents as un-American and hence unworthy of respect or even a voice, his followers hear messages they themselves have been trying to deliver for decades. What everyone thinks of Trump as a person or of his policies, his insights were amazing. His political strategy matches that of a dictator who wants to perpetuate power by controlling public discourse. I'm not saying that Trump only gave the voiceless a voice. He himself maintains power by making most Republicans avoid crossing him. And this avoidance includes paying lip service to the claim that the 2020 election was stolen. Trumpism broke one trap and replaced it with another.

LT: How does public lying or preference falsification distort public discourse?

TK: If preference falsification is to be convincing, it must accord with the knowledge, the preference falsifiers share with others, and it must accord with their public behaviors and their body language. Pinocchio couldn't hide his lie. His nose grew whenever he lied. To keep your nose from growing, you have to play the part demanded by your chosen preference. In China today to be known as a Xi supporter, it's not enough to say so publicly. You must praise his policies. You mustn't question even their fine points. If you know that one man rule has brought about the worst human-made modern disasters, you must keep that to yourself. You must applaud him when expected. Even if you know the information he's giving is false. You must avoid befriending people who reveal information that undercuts Xi's claims. You must join in their intimidation. And if the centers are persecuted, you must treat the persecution as deserved.

TK: So a side effect of preference falsification is indeed the distortion of public discourse. The knowledge that gets shared publicly is a truncated but also warped version of what people know to be true. It lacks information at odds with the dominant narrative, and it contains information that their providers know to be false. In brief, preference falsification is accompanied by knowledge falsification, which pollutes public discourse, and that breeds ignorance, confusion, and misunderstanding. If you are a beneficiary of preference falsification, you have every incentive to disseminate knowledge consistent with the policies that are kept in place through it. Suppose the issue is diversity, equity and inclusion training, DEI training. Genuine supporters benefit from disseminating and having others disseminate information on its effectiveness. They're threatened by evidence that it's ineffective, that it might not produce the intended benefits. They gain from the perception that, let's say exclusionary behaviors are common at their organizations.

TK: Even in academia, which in principle encourages free inquiry, there are unchallenged orthodoxies. There are taboos because academics don't want to be associated with offensive communities. Individual knowledge falsifiers hide what they know to avoid trouble. They promote information they believe to be exaggerated or distorted again, to avoid trouble. The result is that campus orthodoxies don't get challenged. This is unhealthy and it runs counter to academic research customs as academics in writing a book, we often hold a manuscript conference during the process to get feedback before publication. Conference participants are selected by the author. Typically, the group includes scholars likely to bring to the discussion critical perspectives. The author of the discussed manuscript doesn't expect to agree with all criticisms made at the conference, but the expectation is that exposure to contrary viewpoints will help the author sharpen arguments in the manuscript, add nuances, missing nuances, and maybe even modify the work substantively in the light of new perspectives. Insulating campus policies from knowledge pointing to their ineffectiveness or their unintended harms is unhealthy for precisely the reason why manuscript conferences include a diversity of viewpoints.

LT: How does preference falsification, for example, apply in California where there was a recent vote on affirmative action?

TK: Well, there was a vote in 1996 to ban affirmative action at public universities, and the establishment supporting affirmative action believed that the proposition would be defeated on the basis of its public popularity. What they didn't realize is that many people who supported affirmative action, including people working at universities actually opposed it, were privately against preference falsification that the public popularity of affirmative action rested to a considerable degree on preference falsification. As it turns out, the ban was approved and it received support from a substantial share of Democrats, a majority of Republicans, and a much higher than expected shares of the under-represented groups that supposedly were benefiting from affirmative action. In 2020, there was another vote to repeal the 1996 proposition, and that too went down to defeat, in fact, by a larger margin. Even though affirmative action remains very popular on campuses, there are substantial shares on all campuses of people who think it's not doing what it is intended to do, and they contribute to the defeat of initiatives to uphold affirmative action and to the passage of initiatives to ban it.

LT: A major recent trend in politics in the US as well as around the world, has been political polarization. Is preference falsification a major driver of polarization?

TK: Where politics is polarized, there are multiple intolerant communities vying for supremacy. In the US today, there are basically two. One intolerant community is a big tent dominated by the Make America Great or MAGA movement, the other tent is dominated by the Progressive Left. Many disagreements within each community, there are many sub-communities with different priorities. In the Progressive Left, trans rights groups and women's rights group pursue partly clashing agendas. Feminists and racial equity proponents don't necessarily agree on priorities or means. In the MAGA movement, many people doubt at least privately that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump. Both communities have internal differences on the Russia-Ukraine war and on trade policies. But within each community there are orthodoxies that one crosses at one's peril. There are genuine believers in affirmative action's benefits among progressives and genuine believers in the MAGA stolen election narrative, they're also doubters, but orthodox members have the upper hand in each community.

TK: Members who go against an orthodoxy publicly are treated as heretics. People who agree privately with the dissenters, you can think of them as moderates, don't come to their defense. Many moderates join in ostracizing outspoken moderates to earn acceptance within their community. MAGA turns against Republicans who reject the stolen election narrative. Progressives cancel heterodox thinkers, get them fired, get them banned from social media. So preference falsification contributes to polarization by radicalizing the two communities. Another commonality is that the communities consider the other in its radicalized form an existential threat, and their narratives dwell on the dangers the other side poses. Yet, they need each other for self-justification, they thrive on the other's presence, so much so they have to invent the other if it actually ceased to exist. Members of each community hate because they are hated. They censor because their own views are dismissed and suppressed. They lack empathy because their own problems are unrecognized. Wherever they dominate in whatever institutions they control, intolerant communities force members of the other community to falsify their preferences and knowledge. Progressives shutdown debate at universities. Red states removed from libraries progressive books.

TK: Here's another commonality. Each group considers the other horribly repressive, but they don't consider themselves intolerant in any negative sense. In so far as they repress, they think they are drawing behavioral boundaries essential to human civilization. They are protecting the oppressed groups from hate speech or they're cleansing public discourse of fake news. Moderates in both communities see the double standards. They don't speak up for self-preservation.

LT: And how dangerous is this polarization? Is it endangering American democracy?

TK: The coexistence of organized groups that disagree with one another is a basic feature of democracy of a free society. US politics has always involved political parties in competition for control. The US has long had a civil society composed of innumerable freely formed associations that bring together like-minded people with strong convictions. The associations exclude people with different priorities, so neither MAGA nor the Progressive Left is problematic in itself. But these movements differ from the basic pattern in American civic history in feeling so threatened by the other that if they come to power, they will suspend the other's basic liberties.

TK: Intolerant communities are each endangering American democracy, also through their unwillingness to look for common ground. Willingness to compromise is also essential to democracy. The big tent of each movement includes people who are willing to compromise, but these moderates live in fear of ostracism or of being labeled as an enemy, anti-American, non-patriotic, racist, sexist, anti-trans, soft on crime, et cetera. Their genuine views stay on the margins of public discourse because they're joined by few other people who in their hearts agree with them.

TK: Before I ask for the 3 Takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already talked about?

TK: I think we've covered the basics and a lot of ground.

LT: Then, what are the 3 takeaways?

TK: So my takeaways are grounded in the points I made in response to your questions. First, if you're living in a politically polarized environment, you know that you are careful about what you say, how you behave, and what knowledge you reveal. Whatever side of the political fence you're

at, you know the pressures that keep you from exposing the weaknesses of your side's positions and that pull you to extremes. Keep in mind that the same is true of people on the other side of the fence. They are facing analogous pressures. You share with them the human condition, which includes the necessity to engage in preference and knowledge falsification for social acceptance; have empathy for them.

TK: You may have much in common in terms of fundamental concerns and basic viewpoints. Finding compromises between your genuine views and the genuine views of people on the other side may be easier than the prevailing narratives make apparent. Second, a basic element of free society is genuine tolerance for differences of opinion and lifestyles. That requires a willingness to hear opinions you don't like and opinions that make you uncomfortable. If you limit their expressive rights for some purpose you consider sacred, for some higher purpose, and you limit their ability to participate in the exchange of ideas, you give them excuses for doing the same to you. Tit for tat intolerance hinders the peaceful resolution of social conflicts. It puts huge strains on a democratic systems, making it dysfunctional. The consequences are unpredictable and the risks exist for everyone.

TK: Finally, the transition from the agricultural era to the industrial era was painful. It culminated in two world wars. We're now living through another momentous transition from the industrial era to the digital era. This process is also rife with tensions. It would be easier to address humanity's massive challenges if we have access to all the knowledge in people's heads. So we need freer speech not less. We need to make people feel free to let their imaginations wander. We need to make creative people comfortable sharing their thoughts about possible digital futures.

LT: Thank you, Timur. This has been wonderful. I really enjoyed your book.

TK: My pleasure, Lynn.

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

This transcript was auto-generated. Please forgive any errors.