TELLING THE ‘TRUTH’

MEERA NAIR
Assistant professor, biomedical sciences
A survey in *Nature* reported that 70 percent of scientists report they are unable to reproduce another’s experiments. Paper retractions are on the rise, especially in high impact journals. Most funding criteria include the significance and innovation, driving researchers to find “novel” data, and report it immediately. This leads to faulty science. Thankfully, our funding agencies and journals are realizing the severity of this “replication crisis” and require more rigor and authentication.

PERRY LINK
Distinguished professor, comparative literature / Chinese
In ancient China, the main distinction between good statements and not-so-good ones was whether they were “ke,” meaning “permissible,” or “dang,” meaning “appropriate.” “Ke” and “dang” could include considerations of truth in the sense of “corresponds to reality,” but they had moral components as well. Does this utterance conform with established social convention? Is it the right thing to say in this situation? So we might ask: should truth be on our pedestal, or “ke?”

ANNIKA SPEER
Assistant professor of teaching, theater, film, and digital production
Mike Daisey created a performance piece, “The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs,” in which he critiqued the human rights violations that occur in the making of Apple products. Daisey’s piece came under immense scrutiny in March 2012 following the discovery that Daisey took gross fictional liberties in his storytelling.

DAVID WEISBART
Assistant professor of teaching, mathematics
The goal of physicists, going back to Galileo, is to find unified mathematical models to describe seemingly disparate physical experiments. Mathematical models are more accurate than our direct sensory perception and lead to insights and conclusions to which our physical senses are completely blind, allowing us to make startling predictions on scales of observation vastly different from our own. Why do we hold the world of our senses as more fundamental than the mathematical models that describe them? Our preference for thinking of the world described by our senses as reality is an unfounded prejudice. Perhaps the world we observe is but a shadow of deeper mathematical truths.

FLIP TANEDO
Assistant professor, physics and astronomy
Understanding the limitations of measurements would strip away the pseudoscience of 20th century eugenics and modern nutrition fads. We, as scientists, need to do more to encourage a public appreciation of scientific uncertainty. Without this, it is no surprise that we currently struggle to address climate change when some of us find ourselves puzzled that only “nine out of 10 dentists recommend flossing.”

TRAISE YAMAMOTO
Associate professor, English
In one of my areas of specialization — autobiography and memoir — questions of truth are both central and contested. What is the truth of a life? It does not lie in the bare facictity of events, but neither is it to be found wholly in the narrative that weaves those events together into a pattern of significance and meaning. Having taught literature and cultural studies for over 30 years, I had too easily assumed that the truth was solid, clear and cut, if yet unknown, for my colleagues in the sciences. We are all trying to understand the world around us — and the worlds within us — with what knowledge we have, with compassion and curiosity and hope.

HEIDI WALTZ
Lecturer, linguistics and German
We may stipulate that the sense “faithful” was the inherited original meaning of present-day English “true,” with related senses seen in the early nominal derivations meaning “pledge,” “covenant,” and “truec,” the emergence of a predominant reference to a statement of fact or reality appears to represent a later development. One cannot help wonder what factors may have caused the semantic change in English. Answers will not be easy to find, although there are many approaches to the study of semantics in linguistics, the varying theories advanced so far have had little in common with traditional historical treatments of semantic change, one problem being that there is no solid overarching theory of semantics in place yet.