SAHILVERSE ✳ FIELD GUIDE / 01

STORY ETHICS TRIBUNAL.

When narrative persuasion crosses into manipulation.

Evidence can be inspected. Emotion can be welcome. Refusal should remain possible. This is a practical, offline counterpart to the interactive Ethical Story Jury.

Original educational material • printable exercise • sources • reflection worksheet

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Sahil Tayal / 27 October 2026



First, refuse the easy verdict.

A story may communicate a difficult truth more clearly than a spreadsheet; it may also conceal what the audience would need to decide freely. Emotion is not the culprit by itself. The important questions concern evidence, omissions, proportionality, incentives, power and the practical possibility of saying no.

Four distinctions to keep intact.

- **Persuasion:** an attempt to influence belief or action through reasons, images, testimony, emotion and credibility. Its ethics cannot be decided from the presence of influence alone.
- **Manipulation:** a disputed moral category, commonly used for influence that undermines informed autonomous judgment through trickery, pressure or bypassing deliberation. Philosophers disagree about its boundaries.
- **Framing:** selecting and arranging aspects of reality to emphasize a meaning. Every concise story frames. The ethical challenge is whether a materially important fact disappears.
- **Agency:** the real ability to inspect, compare, question, decline and revise a decision. A formal right to refuse is not sufficient if refusal carries hidden penalties.

The five-question audit

- Who benefits, and what relationship or sponsorship should be disclosed?
- What central facts can a listener independently check?
- What alternatives or constraints have been left offstage?
- Is the emotional intensity proportional to what is actually at stake?
- Can a listener leave, disagree or reverse course without unreasonable penalty?

Interpretive caution: Your answers are not evidence of hidden motives. Describe observable features of a message before judging its ethical quality. This guide does not offer clinical, legal or scientific classification.

When the symbol does the selling.

Exhibit A — 1929: Bernays and the cigarette campaign

DOCUMENTED FACT. Historian Joseph Malherek, writing for the American Historical Association in 2017, describes how Edward Bernays worked for American Tobacco in 1929 and orchestrated a public smoking action by women to attract press coverage. Smoking on the street was socially restricted for women; the event associated cigarettes with the language of emancipation. The account also resists portraying Bernays as a magical mind controller: he was a skilled publicity practitioner exploiting news-making opportunities.

INTERPRETATION. The central ethical conflict is the connection between a real struggle for greater social freedom and a commercial interest in selling cigarettes. The same historical event may have held genuine meanings for participants while also serving a harmful product campaign. Treating all women involved as gullible would repeat the mistake of erasing their agency.

Exhibit B — MF DOOM and a visible fictional contract

DOCUMENTED FACT. Contemporary reporting from PBS NewsHour documents the rapper MF DOOM, whose public artistic identity included a mask influenced by comic-book villain imagery. He worked with distinct personae and a deliberately theatrical public presentation. This record supports claims about artistic performance, not speculations about private intent.

INTERPRETATION. A clearly signaled persona need not be deception. The audience may be invited to enter an invented world, as in theater or satire. The judgment changes when a fictional premise is offered as literal evidence in a consequential purchase or claim. A mask is not proof of bad faith; look at what was promised and what an audience had reason to expect.

A precise way to discuss both

Do not say “all PR is manipulation” or “all alter egos are harmless.” Instead ask what was disclosed, what factual representation was made, what other meanings audiences could reasonably construct and what material consequence followed.

American Historical Association — Bernays source

PBS NewsHour — MF DOOM source

Run the Ethical Story Jury on paper.

This is the offline equivalent of the website experiment. Start with the central claim. For every condition below, write which answer is supported by what you can observe. Add only the stated number of warning-flag points. The totals deliberately use arbitrary author-selected weights; they are not measurements of actual manipulation, probability, guilt or harm.

- **Sponsor / agenda:** clear = 0; partly visible = 1; obscured = 3.
- **Verifiability:** sources inspectable = 0; some gaps = 1; no useful support = 2.
- **Alternatives:** fairly represented = 0; thin = 1; hidden or dismissed = 2.
- **Guilt or urgency:** choose 0 (none) to 4 (strong) as a discussion prompt.
- **Consequences:** reversible or low stakes = 0; moderate = 1; high = 2.
- **Exit:** easy = 0; significant friction = 1; punished or very hard = 3.
- **Fact / fiction boundary:** signaled fiction or literal account = 0; blurred = 2.
- **Power asymmetry:** notable institutional authority = 2; otherwise 0.

Reading rule: 0–5 = “Room to deliberate”; 6–11 = “Revise with care”; 12+ = “High ethical friction.” These bands are editorial choices, not empirically derived. Story wording and the declared goal do not add points. The tool offers questions, not verdicts.

Worked hypothetical — the invented membership drive

FICTIONAL EXAMPLE. A made-up membership site says “Real thinkers join tonight” beside a timer that restarts. The sponsor is hidden (3), claims are hard to verify (2), options are erased (2), pressure is 4, the fee is moderately consequential (1), exit is hard (3), fiction is not at issue (0) and no special authority is established (0). Sum: **15 illustrative flag points**. This lands in “High ethical friction” only because of the stated rules. It does not prove the imaginary organizer’s motives.

Repair: identify the sponsor, remove the false timer, disclose fees, state claims that can be checked and provide a simple cancellation route. Then discuss the story again without treating the lower total as a certificate of innocence.

The counter-edit is an act of respect.

A four-pass editorial method

PASS ONE — Name the requested action. Separate “what the story says is true” from “what the audience is asked to do.” A moving anecdote may be relevant evidence for caring without being adequate evidence for a general claim.

PASS TWO — Label the epistemic status. Place DOCUMENTED FACT beside claims supported by records. Use INTERPRETATION for reasoned readings that might be contested. Mark HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLE when the situation is invented for practice, and FICTION when performance or art is deliberately make-believe.

PASS THREE — Restore a missing choice. Add the strongest reasonable alternative, a material limitation and the genuine costs of opting in. If the speaker controls access, livelihood or reputation, ask how dissent could be made safer.

PASS FOUR — Rebuild the invitation. Keep vivid imagery; remove invented scarcity, disguised sponsorship, humiliating membership tests and unwarranted certainty. The goal is not lifeless copy. It is a story that still makes sense when the audience can leave.

Before / after: a hypothetical donation message

Before: “If you care, donate before this timer runs out. People who hesitate are the problem.”

After: “This is the project, budget and evidence. Donations support these activities. Here are other ways to help, and here is what we still do not know. Take time to decide.”

Limits that the numbers cannot settle

Subjects of stories have dignity and privacy. Consent and fair representation matter. A transparent sponsor can still misuse a vulnerable audience; a highly emotional account can still tell the truth; a well-sourced article can still frame unfairly. Context, consequences, law and culture may change the appropriate evaluation.

Related live Sahilverse reading — checked during preparation

https://rap.sahiltayal.com/

https://reciprocityatlas.sahiltayal.com/

Two additional discovery doors: the next URL was not independently reachable during verification, while the second was accessible.

https://sahilverse.online/ — availability unverified

https://sahiltayal.online/ — verified reachable

Your one-page jury worksheet.

Use an ordinary pen. Avoid naming private people. The sheet is intentionally blank: you are documenting a particular story, not inviting an algorithm to decide its worth.

A / CENTRAL CLAIM

What is said to be true? What action is requested?

B / EVIDENCE & STATUS

List one documented fact, one interpretation, and what is uncertain.

C / SPONSOR & STAKES

Who benefits? What might a wrong decision cost?

D / ALTERNATIVES & EXIT

Which option is missing? Can someone refuse or reverse safely?

E / REPAIR

Rewrite the invitation with disclosure, evidence and genuine choice.

My alternative explanation: _____

What evidence would change my reading? _____

Six reliable starting points.

1 / The Ethics of Manipulation

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (substantively revised 2026). Competing philosophical views about manipulation, reason and pressure.

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-manipulation/

2 / Transportation in Public Narratives

Melanie C. Green & Timothy C. Brock, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (2000). Experimental research on story absorption; PubMed record.

https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11079236/

3 / Bringing Dark Patterns to Light

U.S. Federal Trade Commission (2022). Consumer-facing digital interface tactics; a related choice-design domain, not proof of every narrative claim.

https://www.ftc.gov/reports/bringing-dark-patterns-light

4 / FTC's Endorsement Guides: What People Are Asking

U.S. Federal Trade Commission. Guidance about disclosing material ties in persuasive endorsements.

https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/ftcs-endorsement-guides-what-people-are-asking

5 / Creating Circumstances

Joseph Malherek, American Historical Association / Perspectives on History (2017). Bernays, tobacco publicity and consumer culture.

https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/creating-circumstances-edward-bernays-psychoanalysis-and-the-making-of-american-consumer-culture-march-2017/

6 / MF DOOM, Masked Rapper ...

PBS NewsHour / Associated Press (2021). Documents mask and artist presentation; does not reveal hidden motives.

https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/mf-doom-masked-rapper-known-for-complex-lyrics-dies-at-49

Bibliographic caution: These records were located and inspected on 27 October 2026. Sources support the bounded claims in this guide, not the author-selected point weights. Their availability can change.

07 / THE EXIT IS PART OF THE ETHIC

Explore more. Leave freely.

Good narratives do not have to close the exits. Take these questions into a campaign, a song, an organizational story or a conversation with someone whose experience differs from yours.

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Other Sahilverse doorways

https://sahilverse.online/ — discovery gateway (availability unverified)

https://sahiltayal.online/ — alternate entrance (verified reachable)

Two verified related pages

https://rap.sahiltayal.com/ — Thank You, Hip-Hop

https://reciprocityatlas.sahiltayal.com/ — Reciprocity Atlas

Continue thinking, not scoring

Revisit your draft and read it from the perspective of someone who does not want what the narrator wants. Can that person still understand the claim, inspect its evidence and decline the invitation with dignity? If so, you may have improved the story without making it quieter.

Remember: No score here is scientifically calibrated; no worksheet can expose a private intention. A careful question is often a more responsible contribution than an emphatic verdict.

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