Maybe Facts Do Matter

“*Show me the incentive. I’ll show you the outcome*.” Charles Munger Berkshire Hathaway vice chairman

Tony Noerpel

Psychologists seem to agree that facts don’t matter to us, humans. I’m pushing back on this. If we do ignore facts then civilization will devolve into some kind of undesirable dystopia and we may go extinct. All animals have a penchant for facts or the truth as well as stories or “culture”. In the Pacific Northwest, orca whales or killer whales have two distinct cultures. One hunts exclusively fish and the other marine mammals. Both ways of making a living are viable or truth or facts, but these two whale cultures have nothing to do with each other and have not for millions of years. Living exclusively on one or the other source of food is cultural or learned behavior. There is a biological explanation for this. Logically, we might think it is better to be a generalist and live off of both food supplies, increasing resilience, but by specializing, an organism can be more efficient about getting fed. Many marine biologists think we are watching orca evolve into two separate species. The biologist Carl Safina, suggests [Safina] there are three evolutionary selection processes which drive speciation: natural selection, sexual selection and “cultural” selection. Safina is not only a gifted biologist but a gifted writer and he has me convinced.

We, humans, being just another animal, have the same evolutionary pressures. We therefore are influenced by facts, and in fact we have accumulated lots of them. But we also favor stories. Stories are the glue which hold a family or clan or nation together but they also are divisive since the neighboring group has different stories. Historically, we’ve taken our stories way too seriously, killing each other over our differences. Killer whales may avoid each other over their food preference but they don’t kill each other. Yet, even killing each other is not an exclusively human trait. Wolves and chimpanzees kill each other, though perhaps not with the same reckless abandon.

Since anthropogenic climate change, the sixth extinction and the overall destruction of the habitability of our planet are facts, we, humans, all 7.7 billion of us (soon to be 9 or 10 billion or more) have to learn to live together by agreeing on the facts because we will never agree on each other’s stories. Therefore, we have no choice but to assume these psychologists are empirically dead wrong. Fortunately, there is considerable evidence for that and a better explanation for the dangerous bullshit people believe.

As we saw last week [Noerpel], the philosopher Adrian Bardon believes facts don’t matter to people [Bardon]. He discusses four examples: people who refuse to wear masks, climate change deniers, anti-vaxxers, and people who are concerned about genetically modified crops.

These and other examples fit nicely into two categories. On the one hand, there are spontaneous or grassroots differences of opinion. Anti-vaxxers fall into this category but so too do flat-earthers; those who in the 50s and 60s were enamored with the imaginative though physically impossible ideas of Immanuel Velikovsky [Velikovsky]; and those who’ve believed they’ve been abducted by aliens. These fads tend to die out by their own lack of evidence. The reality of the COVID-19 pandemic has probably sobered up many of the anti-vaxxers who suddenly have come to realize the destructive nature of pandemics and the desirability of a coronavirus vaccine. Notably, there is no wealthy and powerful agent or special interest, which can make a profit propagating this nonsense.

On the other hand, many falsehoods are perpetrated by a wealthy and powerful ruling class such as the divine right of kings, that slavery is a necessary evil and unregulated free-market capitalism or neo-liberalism. These are examples of astroturfing rather than grassroots storytelling. Global warming denial, another good example, is funded and promoted not just by the fossil fuels industry but by most large multinational corporations and billionaires. The only way to mitigate climate change is by international cooperation, standards, regulation and ultimately a moratorium on developing fossil fuel resources and combusting them. This is how we stopped slavery, reduced acid rain, stopped the growth of the ozone hole and saved the whales. But then too is the matter of deforestation, over exploitation of fisheries and chemically intensive agriculture. These profitable activities also have to be curtailed. Unfortunately, even corporations not directly involved in these activities don’t want to be regulated. The Global Climate Coalition, created specifically to lie about climate change, represented over 230,000 companies [GCC].

The media, which is owned by billionaires and corporations, amplifies corporate dishonesty which sustains climate change denial. In a recent paper, sociologist Rachel Wetts concludes [Wetts]:

“*I find that press releases opposing action to address climate change are about twice as likely to be cited in national newspapers as are press releases advocating for climate action. In addition, messages from business coalitions and very large businesses are more likely than those from other types of organizations to receive coverage. Surprisingly, press releases from organizations providing scientific and technical services are less likely to receive news coverage than are other press releases in my sample, suggesting that messages from organizations with greater scientific expertise receive less media attention*.”

It is not that facts don’t matter to people, but that people don’t have access to facts. That climate change is a hoax is top down fiction or astroturfing, not a grass roots movement. So too, is refusal to wear a mask. President Trump believes his re-election chances are favored by dividing the country. Using whatever convoluted logic goes on in his brain, he decided not to wear a mask and at various times declared COVID-19 a hoax. This is a good example of top-down astroturfing or simply lying by a wealthy and powerful agent. Bardon is mistaken to believe people would on their own decide that wearing a mask infringes on their personal liberty. Corporations and the billionaire class are torn. They would benefit if everybody wore a mask and took the pandemic seriously as we could get the economy moving again but on the other hand, they are benefitting enormously by Trump’s tax cuts and deregulation. Indeed, billionaires have fared rather well during the pandemic and stand to make substantial gains in wealth and power by taking advantage of the harm it is causing the working poor and the middle class. Historically, money has never trickled downward but has flowed upward in torrents moved along by high priests and economists.

During the pandemic, between March 18 and July 23, 2020, the richest 643 Americans increased their wealth from $2.948 trillion to over $3.7 trillion, an increase of $755 billion [inequality] while the economy contracted 9.5% during the same time (April, May and June) [Wolff]. This wealth extraction from the working poor and middle class has resulted in nearly 52.4 million Americans filing for unemployment and nearly 32 million receiving jobless benefits as of July 22. More than 154,000 Americans have died from COVID-19 [CDC] as of August 2 mostly due to Trump’s incompetence [Sebenius] and his psychopathy [Greenwood] but also enabled by corporations and billionaires contributing to his reelection and, as well, conservative economists.

Adam Smith observed [Smith]: “*The proposal of any new law or regulation which comes from [businessmen], ought always to be listened to with great precaution, and ought never to be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined, not only with the most scrupulous, but with the most suspicious attention. It comes from an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it.*”

My third law of economics is simply acknowledging the observation of Smith that wealth equals power, the lesson from Pareto’s yard sale model that free markets lead to aggregated wealth and power [Hayes], based entirely on dumb luck and not merit, and the advice of Kevin Phillips that bad capitalism drives out good capitalism [Phillips]. There is a powerful positive feedback loop between wealth and power: concentrated wealth leads to more concentrated power, lead to more concentrated wealth, and so on. This law is ignored by mainstream economists, and apparently many psychologists and philosophers. As we’ve seen, one of the ways this feedback loop amplifies extreme wealth inequality is that the wealthy control the media and therefore the propagation of falsehoods which favor their profits. By flooding the marketplace with noise, i.e., falsehoods, such as climate change is a hoax, it becomes difficult for most people to hear the signal from all of science that climate change is human-caused and an existential threat. By spreading the false narrative that facts don’t matter to people and ignoring the sources of the dishonesty, psychologists are falsely blaming the victims and the scientists and are blind to the solution.

If we wish to solve climate change and all of our other many problems, we first need to stop the flow of misinformation so that the facts are not buried beneath an avalanche of crap. Humans need free and open access to facts. To do that we need to muzzle the wealthy and their sycophants. We might be able to do that with censorship but this is potentially dangerously creating another effective tool for billionaires to gain control over. Alternatively, following Charles Munger’s advice, we might remove the incentive by limiting wealth extraction and wealth accumulation. The facts suggest we need effective progressive tax reform including a high margin rate on all income and a wealth tax and we should consider limiting the total amount of wealth any one person can control as well as the size of corporations. I’m suggesting we limit the lying, the noise, by eliminating the incentive to lie.

I submit the good news is that facts do matter to people if they have access to them, if they understand them and if they can hear them over the noise created by unscrupulous businessmen.

Can we still have capitalism, private property and entrepreneurship and markets? Sure, we can, but their excesses have to be regulated by a democratic government of the people, by the people and for the people. I would amend that to “for the biosphere and all future generations.” As a reminder, when Reagan declared falsely that government is the problem, he was really saying that we are the problem because in a functioning democracy the government is us and he was pandering to the Koch brothers and other billionaires [MacClean]. Reagan did not trust us to govern ourselves.

To be continued.

[Bardon] Adrian Bardon, <https://www.livescience.com/coronavirus-science-denial.html?utm_source=notification>

[CDC] <https://www.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/index.html#cases>

[GCC] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Climate_Coalition>

[Greenwood] <https://medium.com/@vgwcct/a-duty-to-differentially-diagnose-the-validity-underpinning-the-diagnosis-of-the-president-371354142a02>

[inequality] <https://inequality.org/billionaire-bonanza-2020-updates/>

[MacClean] Nancy MacClean, Democracy in Chains

[Noerpel] <https://blueridgeleader.com/how-to-fight-misinformation-with-facts/>

[Hayes] Brian Hayes, Follow the Money, American Scientist, Volume 90, Number 5, Page: 400, DOI: 10.1511/2002.5.400September-October, 2002 <http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/pub/follow-the-money/2>

[Phillips] Kevin Phillips, Bad Money

[Safina] Carl Safina, Becoming Wild, how animal cultures raise families, create beauty, and achieve peace, Henry Holt, 2020, p. 109.

[Sebenius] <https://www.statnews.com/2020/06/19/faster-response-prevented-most-us-covid-19-deaths/>

[Smith] Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations The Wealth of Nations, 1776, Bantam Classic Edition, 2003. That wealth equals power from Book 1, Chapter 5, 3rd paragraph; unscrupulous businessmen quote from vol. 1, pt. xi, p.10 (at the conclusion of the chapter) (1776).

[Velikovsky] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanuel_Velikovsky>

[Wetts] Rachel Wetts, In climate news, statements from large businesses and opponents of climate action receive heightened visibility, PNAS, July 27, 2020, [www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1921526117](http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1921526117)

[Wolff] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_daKzQ1bZTU>