“Alternative Facts” Destroy Truth

“*When greed is seen as acceptable even praiseworthy there is clearly something wrong with our collective value system*.” Dalai Lama Beyond Religion, Ethics for a Whole World.

Tony Noerpel

In a recent article philosopher Adrian Bardon argues that “Humans are hardwired to dismiss facts that don't fit their worldview”. This explains for Bardon and many others why people believe the coronavirus is a hoax, deny climate change, the safety of GMOs and are anti-vaxxers. If we accept this assumption about people, it puts the blame for denial onto the people themselves and onto scientists and others for not “messaging” the science better. I have been pushing back on this assumption and offering an alternative explanation.

Accepting stories over facts is itself not uniquely a conservative problem. I submit that real grassroots confusion is often harmless and generally dies out and is distinct from confusion caused by astroturfing [astroturfing]. Good examples include the cultish devotion to the ideas of Immanuel Velicovsky or the belief in alien abduction. When there is no wealthy and powerful sponsorship, myths tend to come and go. Myths that survive for decades and millennia, such as the divine right of kings, slavery as a necessary evil or laissez-faire capitalism, are promoted by wealthy and powerful agents, i.e., astroturfing. Others that survive are often backlashes against what the public perceives as elitist corruption, i.e., a response to oligarchic and corporate malfeasance. My explanation of what many believe is a penchant for humans to deny facts recognizes that wealth equals power [Smith] and the wealthy quite “rationally” promote worldviews or myths which protect their privilege even at the expense of society, future generations and the biosphere [Harari].

Failure to appreciate this fundamental law of economics leads pundits like the psychologists Asheley R. Landrum and Robert B. Lull to criticize Pope Francis’ encyclical on climate change and wealth inequality for his “messaging” rather than fault billionaires, corporations and economists who are actually responsible for disseminating alternative facts [Landrum]. Landrum and Lull write [Landrum]: “*Useful technologies such as carbon capture and storage and market solutions such as cap and-trade hold promise as elements of a successful approach to climate change mitigation; a more effectively designed message might have challenged capitalists to embrace climate action as an opportunity to channel traditions of innovation, invoking the authority of economics in solving complex problems*.” Since CCS technologies are both land and energy hogs and unproven at scale, they are hardly solutions to humanity’s problems. “Invoking the authority of economics” makes ignorance a virtue [Harari] and anyway it is what got us into this mess.

As a consequence of corporate dishonesty, people are inundated with “alternative facts” and it is not so much that they are not influenced by facts as many philosophers and psychologists will tell us, but that they cannot tell the difference between “alternative facts” and the real facts. Even Landrum and Lull are confused.

There is confusion surrounding the safety of GMOs, especially among the many psychologists and pundits who equate denial of the physics of climate with concern for the safety of GMOs. Interestingly, uncritical support for GMOs and denial of climate science have the same origin, the profit motive of large corporations and billionaires. Denial of global warming is denial of radiation physics, atmospheric physics and fundamentally quantum physics, though all deniers are entirely unaware of this. On the other hand, nobody denies the science of genetic modification. The science says this can be done. Insulin is produced by genetically modified E. coli bacteria [insulin]. Nobody objects or denies this reality. The science however, does not say that all possible modifications are beneficial. And it does not rule out unintended consequences. When we ask is Roundup-Ready corn safe to eat, assuming it was grown organically and without the use of Roundup and other agricultural chemicals we are not asking the right question, whether residual amounts of Round-Up are safe to consume, or whether there are safety issues with respect to the environment and other organisms.

Chemically intensive agriculture is destroying our soils, killing soil-building earthworms [Blakemore], emitting large quantities of greenhouse gases, causing estuary dead zones and pollution in rivers and streams [USGS], has been linked to the declines in freshwater megafauna [He], amphibians [Grant] and insects [Hallmann], including pollinators and has been linked to Parkinson’s disease [Stetka], [Dorsey] and other health problems [health] [Note 1]. Large multinational corporations such as Monsanto, Syngenta and Bayer have captured the regulatory process and are poisoning the planet for profit [Bayer]. While some GM crops like BT crops [GMOs] potentially reduce chemical use by modifying the plants themselves to produce insecticides, Monsanto’s Roundup-ready crops increase their use. Unfortunately, regulatory corruption and corporate dishonesty have poisoned the public trust in all GMOs and for very good reason. To restore trust in safe GMOs requires strong and effective government regulation. The problem is not that people don’t accept facts but that they don’t trust corporations and billionaires and a regulatory process which the wealthy have undermined.

This is why blanket GMO enthusiasm and climate denial are related. The problem is not so much that people believe stories over facts but that they are inundated by a complicit media with falsehoods [Wetts]. It is refreshing that despite the massive amounts of money spent on advertising, lobbying, buying politicians and capturing the regulatory process, many people prefer non-GMOs and organically-labeled food products. That sentiment is not going to die, so long as estuary dead zones exist and will continue to grow and so long as there is inadequate regulation of GMOs. Again, people aren’t denying science and are not objecting to GMOs in general, they are objecting to the abuse of power by wealthy multinational corporations. That there are legitimate potential benefits and applications, for example GM mosquitos to control diseases [Oxitec], are undermined by the inexhaustible supply of misinformation on the part of corporations like Bayer [Bayer] and a complicit media.

The fact is, no technology is either good or bad. That quality derives from what we chose to do with it and if that choice is left to the profit motive then as the historian Kevin Phillips observes “bad capitalism drives out good capitalism” and we are screwed [Phillips] if we allow extreme wealth and power concentration to persist. People inherently don’t like greed and that sentiment is implicit in the Golden Rule captured by multiple populist and spiritual movements [Noerpel, 2013]. Yet neo-classical economic theory glorifies greed.

Bardon is critical of Dr. Fauci for being surprised that people refuse to wear masks [Bardon]. According to Bardon this is simply because people don’t take well to facts. But Bardon is wrong. There is a reason why conservatives are in denial of the harsh realities of COVID-19 and refusing to wear masks. This is not a grass roots movement but like the tea party phenomenon an example of astroturfing. Fauci is right to be surprised that libertarian business interests would promote this nonsense and continue to support a president who refused to wear a mask simply because his tax cuts and deregulation are good for their businesses. I am too. Even former FED chair Alan Greenspan was surprised when self-interest or greed caused the 2008 credit crisis [Greenspan]. Naïve neo-liberal economists think self-interest alone suffices to regulate corporate misbehavior.

Bardon feels the need to claim that liberals are as suspect as conservatives. He writes: “*Denialism is not just a problem for conservatives. Studies have found liberals are less likely to accept a hypothetical expert consensus on the possibility of safe storage of nuclear waste, or on the effects of concealed-carry gun laws*.” Bardon’s reference for this statement is a link to a paper by Daniel Kahan [Kahan] which is behind a paywall and costs $44.00 to read despite the fact that the research was funded by the National Science Foundation, i.e., us. These are “facts” that we’ve already paid for and yet are not privy to. I’ve read some of these studies and the key word here is “hypothetical.” Bardon should more accurately have used the word “fabricated”. There is no solution to the safe storage of nuclear wastes [Note 2] and there is certainly no expert consensus on the safety of concealed-carry gun laws [Noerpel, 2014].

What I found and what was later confirmed for me by the neuroscientist Tali Sharot, is that psychologists fabricate hypothetical expert consensus out of whole cloth and pass it off as if it was really true in their studies [Sharot]. In an experiment on capital punishment she admits “*in reality the studies had been fabricated*” (page 15). On another experiment about climate change acceptance she again admits that the information given the subjects was made up (page 16). Both experiments in my view demonstrate nothing except the audacity of psychologists to believe they could lie convincingly. Duke University researchers, Troy Campbell and Aaron Kay [Campbell] test the denial of facts by conservatives using material from an IPCC report which actually does exist and which actually is a consensus of expert opinion and which they responsibly cite. They test the “denial of facts” by liberals using fabricated studies presumed to show the safety of guns [Noerpel, 2014]. Subjects involved in such studies (for the free pizza and beer) are absolutely correct to reject fake facts. What occurred to me while reading [Campbell] is that any subject capable of critical thinking, including conservatives in denial of climate change would be applying an informal Bayesian analysis and would never change her mind based on any single new piece of data regardless of the source because she would have to weigh the new information in the context of all her prior information. Tetlock and Gardiner show that this is a key characteristic of super forecasters [Tetlock] and Sharot concurs [Sharot]. These studies do not support the conclusion that liberals or anybody else for that matter reject facts.

So, are liberals as naïve and gullible as conservatives in America today? No, according to some researchers [Hamilton]. I suggest yes, sort of, but not in a way psychologist have so far been able to test, because they’d be testing for denial of facts about which they themselves may be ignorant. This reminds me that neuroscientists think humans are the smartest animals on the planet despite the fact that elephants have 3 times as many neurons and sperm whales have 7 times as many because researchers keep looking for “human” intelligence, which may be oxymoronic, instead of testing for mental states for which our brains are too small to achieve [Roth]. We will discuss this further next time.

To be continued.

[Note 1] there are currently over 85,000 synthetic chemicals in our environment including 9,000 food additives the vast majority of which have never been tested for potential effects on humans according to Oliver Broudy, The Sensitives, Simon and Schuster, 2020. Perhaps even fewer have been tested for their impact on the biosphere.

[Note 2] Since the abandonment of the Yucca Mountain facility, no plan for long-term storage and disposal of nuclear wastes exists. Waste is currently being stored for up to five years in pools and then transferred to dry caskets on-site at nuclear power plants. There is currently more than 250,000 tons of nuclear waste stored this way. <https://greentumble.com/nuclear-waste-storage-and-disposal-problems/>

[astroturfing] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing>

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

[Bayer] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaNSByf4sLA>

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[GMO] the pros and cons of GMOs are described in these videos.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK5kRGs0HX0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sH4bi60alZU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BQhMJuz13I>

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[Tetlock] Phil Tetlock and Dan Gardiner, Superforecasters,

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