Issues Influencing Contemporary History

Note: this is only the first few topics within this section.

Sources and Veracity of Information

Years past, communities were more isolated and necessarily relied on local expertise for trusted testimony. In this country, up until the implementation of improved means of communication, it was the family doctor, the local clergy, or other individuals of authority who were by default, and close proximity, the primary sources of information and judgment.

Prior to ready access to printed material and the existence of a high percentage of literacy, the main source of information was the verbal testimony of others. This indicates that for the most part traditional information transfer was a social activity in the sense that information was transferred directly from one person to another.[1] Today, it is more likely that the sources of information are televised news reports, posts on *social* media, and other largely unsubstantiated sources, which are indirect and removed from our personal environment.

There is little doubt that enabling technology has extended the sources of testimony to include a plethora of sources

---

[1] The oral tradition is also suspect since as messages get passed from one person to the next, they are often modified either intentionally or unintentionally but on either case the content changes. This is much like the old party game where everyone secretly whispers a verbal message to the next person and so on such that it is invariably garbled by the time in passes by all the guests.

that provide an overload of verbal, written, and pictorial sources of information. However, within this plethora of sources and types of media, testimony-based information varies greatly in credence and veracity. It seems that with more sources and more options, these sources of information have become less reliable. Perhaps, a quantitative glut inevitably leads to a qualitative decline.

However, human nature seems to dictate that regardless of the source, unless we have some knowledge or belief that questions the speaker's veracity, we tend to accept testimonies without proof of reliability. In short, by default, we are trusting. On the other hand, if we know, or believe, that the speaker has been untruthful in the past, no matter the topic, then we will tend to discount all subsequent statements, regardless of the topic, and this rejection will last until such time as the speaker is able to reestablish our faith in their trustfulness. On the other hand, if a testimony conflicts with our pre-established beliefs, then we are likely to reject that testimony as *fake news*.[2]

As access to information has increased, so has the breadth of expertise narrowed. This is why the age of the natural philosopher (polymath) is all but over and, necessarily, the age of specialization is becoming more pronounced. This means that we are all becoming more dependent on the testimony of others, while at the same time, because of certain social trends, the veracity of testimony is more suspect than ever before.

Of these various sources of information, perhaps the least reliable are the social media sources such as Facebook and Twitter. Both sources offer up a wealth of misinformation, counterfactuals, and untruths. Just because someone posted

---

[2] Now there is the new term *fake news*, which is just a euphemism for lying if intentional or spreading counterfactuals and bad journalism if unintentional.

something on Facebook as being factual, certainly does not make it so. As for the myth of *bringing people together*, just the opposite is true. Instead of *social* media, it should be called *isolation* or *anti-social* media. [The reader will recall the section: *Too Much Technology*- page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**]

Then there are services such as Wikipedia that offers information through thousands of anonymous articles on just about everything. Such services should only be used when a person has some prior knowledge and seeks memory refreshment or possible informational corroboration. Although much, if not most, of the Wikipedia content is reasonably factual, cross-checking with other sources is always a good idea. This is especially true for political or other highly emotional content.

Quite obviously, our capability for obtaining first-hand experience is limited, and by necessity, we must rely on the testimony of others. That is, we are forced, at least tentatively, to accept some testimony of others most of the time.

The power and scope of the internet and associated media applications puts a wealth of information, literally, at our fingertips, but with no guarantee of accuracy. There seems little doubt that making the determination between expert opinion and false, or overly biased, opinion is a challenge that, unfortunately, has no absolute solution.

It seems that the news media providers think it is their duty to dilute, alter, or withhold altogether news that they feel inappropriate or fails to agree with their agendas. This allows the media to emphasis events that they deem newsworthy in order to guide the beliefs of the audience in a manner compatible with the media's preferred social agendas, and for events that do not meet their beliefs, they simply fail to report. For sure, selective reporting and agenda motivated reporting, has been going on for as long

as anyone can remember and will continue into the future. For example, the slogan *All the news that is fit to print*. was the motto of the *New York Times* newspaper empire over a hundred years ago, and, of course, they were the ones who decided what was fit.

Also, there is a long tradition of news media endorsing political candidates and to generally favor one political party over the other. In the glory days of newspapers, such endorsements by media giants, such as *Hearst*, would often make or break a candidate's chances of election.[3] It seems obvious that the various news media sources engage in *information patronizing* and *censorship*. They do this by selecting what they want us to see, hear, or read, based on specific social agendas. Such ideologically biased news, although not a new thing, is more pervasive than before and more extreme in opinions concerning what they choose to report. That is, not a change in kind but a change in degree.

Something has changed over the last few decades and especially since 2000 or so. The news media has moved from merely favoring one or the other party to positions of extreme polarization in their alignment with one party over another. There seems little doubt that this polarization has intensified over the last decade or so. With only rare exceptions, public media sources in the US have aligned themselves with a particular political party to such a degree that attitudes of most media sources have moved beyond

---

[3] Here is an example of how the old newspaper empires could influence US society. In 1898, the U. S. Battleship, Maine, while anchored in the Havana, Cuba harbor, was sunk by a mysterious explosion. At that time, Cuba was a Spanish possession and the Hearst newspaper chain claimed that the explosion was an act of terrorism against the USA. This claim was enough to sway public opinion and the result was the Spanish-American War. Only years later, was it revealed that the sinking was caused by an accidental internal explosion, not by an act of terrorism.

simple favoritism and are now openly hostile toward the party they do not favor.

Testimonial Injustice

Testimonial injustice (Sometimes called Epistemic Injustice) is loosely defined as a listener's disbelief based not on the actual testimony, but on a pre-existing bias against the speaker for any reason. This is a form of identity bias or identity stereotyping, where, for example, the appearance of the speaker might be used as a reason to reject the speaker's testimony. The variations of this condition are many such that they range from prejudice based only on appearance, which includes more variables than race or ethnicity. That is, physical appearance bias, is not just about skin color, but includes things like gender, skin modifications, various bodily adornments, choice of apparel, and language usage.

Besides appearances, there is also bias based on relationships such that a person's testimony might be disregarded. For example, sometimes only a known political or religious affiliation is all that is needed to cause testimonial rejection. Another example is one that I will call *testimonial injustice from ignorance*. This is the case where lack of knowledge on the listeners part causes them to discount or even ridicule testimony because they lacked appropriate knowledge or rejected the testimony because of the listener's pre-existing and conflicting belief.[4]

---

[4] On a personal note, I had the experience of writing a short essay about a family of Lynx (aka Bobcat) for a 7th grade English class. The teacher gave me a bad grade because she said that there was no animal called a Lynx. Here is a classic example of ignorance overriding legitimate testimony.

Information Deprivation

"Cassius: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves..."[5]

Information deprivation can be loosely defined as a condition or situation when a person or social group is deemed to be unfairly deprived of information because of lack of access to educational and other epistemic resources. Often, it is claimed to be a deprivation of access to information resources due to social bias or ethnic exclusion.

In the US, this often comes out as an accusation that the US educational system is biased in favor of those of European descent, and that culturally different minority groups are systemically penalized because of the techniques and standards used by the educational system. Put another way, there is an opinion that when it comes to information access there are sub-cultures[6] within the US (and the world at large) who have marginalized access to epistemic resources. I cannot speak for the rest of the world, but, in the US, this is partially because of economics, partially because of social priorities, and in some cases by choice. For example, in some sub-cultures' certain social media and pop-culture might be acceptable, while seeking information and education in general are not priorities.

There seems to be the notion that different sub-cultures need different learning environments. This in turn has, over the last few decades, led to the establishment of, what are euphemistically called, *Epistemically Virtuous Institutions*. In the US educational system, this notion of epistemically virtuous institutions, as implemented, is a dilution of educational standards in a process that has been ongoing

---

[5] William Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar* (I, ii)

[6] Herein, sub-culture is not just a reference to race, but also includes cultural differences such as life-style choices, educational interest, socioeconomics, and so on.

6

for many years. It is a policy where textbooks are *simplified* in language and structure in the belief that this provides a means of helping *marginalized* groups achieve more. In effect, this term is a process for lowering standards such as grammatically correct spoken, and written language usage and comprehension.[7]

That is, some say that it is the fault of the educational system, which they claim is biased in favor of white society and uses methods that are unsuited for sub-cultures. This opinion ignores the reality that students either from Asia or of Asian descent do quite well within the existing system in spite of the fact that many of these students often have considerable cultural differences from those of European descent.

If a sub-culture places a priority on education, then there is likely to be more real learning and enhanced chances of improving their standard of living. On the other hand, if the priorities are about pop-culture, sports, and sub-cultural identification, then the chances of improving one's standard of living are much less. Celebrities and sports figures have high visibility and even higher income, but percentage wise, they are an exceedingly small part of the total population and chances of achieving such status is, accordingly, miniscule. On the other hand, access to educational opportunities are always available to those who truly seek them.

Based on personal experience, it seems that, in the US, mediocrity is often preferred over achievement. Being a *smarty-pants* or a *dumb a__* are equally disparaged but being mediocre is OK. Put another way, the US is long on intelligence of the applied or utility sort, but noticeably short on what might be called true intellectual inclinations. Few attend colleges and universities to learn and enhance

---

[7] Some even go so far as to desire the elimination of testing and grading.

their worldview through new knowledge and ideas, they attend these institutions because they think they should or are told they should, while the majority of those who do attend seem to be only interested in getting a diploma, and, possibly, some skills that will lead to employment.

There is this social myth within the US that everyone should seek a college level education. This notion is a totally unrealistic corruption of the valid notion that everyone should have the opportunity for such an education. A more realistic agenda would limit higher education to those who have the aptitude, capability, and aspirations that are compatible with proper goals for seeking a higher education. It seems that for most, quality of life is only an economic issue.

A consequence of this notion is the flooding of US colleges and universities with unqualified and poorly prepared students such that these institutions of *higher learning* have become more like overpriced trade or vocational schools.[8] These over-attended and over-priced institutions, stuffed with students with questionable motives and abilities, now offer watered-down degrees that really have little or no meaningful occupational possibilities.[9]This is not to put down vocational and technical schools, indeed, they serve a worthy purpose and should be considered more often as ways to improve one's standard of living and as preparation for a future career.

Traditionally (to use a word that is not in current fashion) a university education was concerned with producing a better and more enlightened person and the curriculums

---

[8] The effects of over subscription at US colleges and universities has been higher tuitions caused by easy access to student loans. That is, easy money through federally funded loans have prompted schools to raise tuitions.

[9] I am always amazed at the number of employees at coffee shops such as Starbucks, who have some sort of college degree but are engaged in *non-knowledge-based* work.

were intellectual, not the diluted curriculum of such programs as sports management and gender studies.[10]

Tolerance and Free Speech

Free speech, as defined and practiced by extremists, is available only for those who agree with their ideology. The focus of certain radical groups seems to be about so-called *rights* instead of *responsibilities* and about *emotionalism* instead of real-world *rationality*. It seems that we never hear the word *responsibility* from certain extremists, except when talking about their opposition, who are, apparently, the only ones with responsibilities. That is, when these radical groups use the word responsibility, they seem to mean that those they oppose are responsible for most, if not all, of the ills of society, real or imagined.

True freedom of speech is not now, and never has been, a license for violence or intimidation through riotous action. Freedom of speech means freedom to express an opinion contrary to some other opinion. It is not, and should not be, a freedom to use slander or verbal abuse, to advocate violence, or use intentional false statements. Such methods are a corruption and misuse of the 1st amendment.

Freedom without tolerance is not really *freedom,* it is the road to civil unrest. A radical minority (left or right) should not be allowed to force themselves on a society. When masked semi-professional rioters cause disruption of free speech opportunities, and the majority of society remains silent, then that society is headed for anarchy or political tyranny. Tolerance is an indispensable ingredient of true freedom of speech.

---

[10] Examples of traditional university curriculums includes mathematics, natural science, philosophy, medicine, and theology.

Instead of rational arguments, radicals have a whole arsenal of epithets that they like to use against anyone who dissents from their views. These epithets include the well-worn racist card, hate-speech accusations, and now they have included the term *Islamophobia*, which applies negatively to anyone who states the belief that terrorists, who espouse the Islamic religion, and use this religion as a motivation or excuse for violent actions, should be called *Islamic Terrorists*. That is, these radicals deny the usage of this term even though since 1972, and the attack on Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, the perpetrators of international terrorist attacks have almost exclusively been young Islamic men (the only exceptions have been young Islamic women).

And, of course, they also like to use that old fallback label of fascist or neo-Nazi, even though, I suspect, that few, if any, of those who use this term have any notion of the reality of that label. They know not its origin, nor do they know its ideology. On the other hand, these groups never criticize or slander totalitarian socialist or communist countries, where free speech simply does not exist.

Freedom to express an opinion is, for certain radicals, only for agreement, and no tolerance is given to the opposition, which is either belittled or met with open hostility and even violence. Free speech is only free if differing opinions are equally protected. Otherwise, one or more opinions are denied this equal protection and is a violation of the constitution.

Implicit within the US Constitution's 1st amendment is tolerance for differences of option. The 1st amendment explicitly states that peaceful assembly is protected, this implies that non-peaceful assembly is not protected by the 1st amendment. Mature tolerance, as opposed to unfettered intolerance that is sometimes practiced, means the acceptance or toleration of opinions and decisions with which one might disagree. This, of course, requires the

ability to control one's emotions, accept reality, and put forward rational statements regarding one's position not just negative reactions to the opposition's statements and actions.

By now, you might be wondering what all this has to do with contemporary historical writings. The answer is that the youth of America have for decades been exposed to biased versions of US history. The result is a generation that has a corrupted view of what the US stands for and have little knowledge of what makes this country a better place and how to keep a better place and improve it.

Side Comment on Left-Right Polarization: Some years ago (1961), the great logician, Kurt Gödel, wrote an essay that put forward a notion concerning the polarization between the Left and the Right.[11] The text begins with a schema of alternative philosophical world views, using the distance from theology as a sort of coordinate system. In this schema, skepticism, materialism, and positivism stand on the Left, while spiritualism, idealism, and theology stand on the Right. This schema represents a scale where most people have elements of both extremes and are not at either extreme. He went on to state, and rightly so, that the trend, in western society, over the last two hundred years or so has, in general, been shifting to the Left. This trend is readily apparent in the political polarization that has taken place in the US over the last few decades. Given the failure rate of socialist states (virtually 100%) this trend is difficult to understand.

---

[11] Kurt Gödel, "The Modern Development of the Foundations of Mathematics in the Light of Philosophy" *Kurt Gödel Collected Works Volume III*. (Oxford UP. Oxford 1995), 374.

Tyranny of Imposition

The Tyranny of Imposition is. put simply, when an individual (or group) feels compelled to impose their will on society. It often has the form of an *I know what you need better than you do* attitude or a self-righteous effort to correct some assumed injustice and/or impose some supposed reform. They apparently believe that they know *how the world ought to be*.

Use of the phrase *ought-to-be* usually means a certain aspect of society is seen as needing reform or replacement. The problem is that society is so complex that often (usually?) a *correction*, as discussed in the above section on *Expect the Unexpected (*See page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), has unforeseen consequences that may not become apparent for years.

For example, consider the case against the pesticide known as DDT. In 1962, Rachel Carson published a book titled *Silent Spring*. In this book, Carson blamed DDT for several environmental problems, most notably the thinning of eggs shells among certain types of birds, and subsequent decline in population of the affected species. At that time, DDT was the most effective and widely used defense against the mosquitos that transmit deadly malarial parasites.

Although, these accusations were never fully substantiated, over the years following the book's publication, aided by certain environmental groups, public opinion against the use of DDT grew and eventually, in 1970, the US banned the use of DDT. Subsequently, other countries followed with their own bans such that, in effect, the ban became worldwide.

However, even now, nearly fifty years after the banning of DDT, no other effective remedy has been put in place, and the result has been that every year hundreds of thousands,

who might otherwise be save by DDT, needlessly die from malaria!

Another well-known example is Ralph Nader's campaign against the *Chevrolet Corvair*. He claimed that the car was inherently unsafe – or as he put it in the title of his 1965 book: *Unsafe at Any Speed.* His complaints were, at least, partially valid for the model years 1960 through 1963, but later models had a redesigned and improved suspension system, which General Motors claimed to have fixed the problem that plagued the earlier models.

It should also be noted Nader's book was published two years after GM claims to have correctly suspension system problems. But, apparently, this did not matter, the book still managed to destroy the car's reputation and, before the end of the 60s, the car was out of production. However, this book was not just about the Corvair, it also had scathing criticisms of the entire US automobile industry. It seems that nothing about an American auto was correct - according to Nader.

After this, Nader continued to build a reputation through other condemnations, and went on to become, among certain progressive elements, something of a *folk-hero* (and occasional presidential candidate). An adjunct to this was that he demonstrated that making accusation about real or imagined problems, could be profitable. A notion that others have since followed.[12] Rachel Carson's and Ralph Nader's true agendas are not known but given Nader's subsequent actions there seem room for doubt that his true motive was concern for the safety of Corvair owners.

It seems that action toward the rectification of social or environmental injustice, or what is perceived to be a social

---

[12] For example, regardless of the veracity or credence of his position on global warming, Al Gore has achieved considerable fame, as well as, substantial financial gain even though most (all?) of his predictions have been wrong.

or environmental injustice, is not so much about the truth of what is asserted or the wisdom of the proposed correction. It is, often, merely an action against the *notion* of the injustice deemed by an individual (or group) to need correction, and not necessarily about factual truth.