

The problem is there's too much 'information', but not enough 'facts'...

It started as just a short piece for the 'about' page of the new blog website; it eventually morphed into an article

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In this 'hard-thought' first post of my new blog, I concentrate on the reasons why I need a new blog. Spoiler alert: *Many earnest members of the environment movement might find what follows objectionable!*

Are you one of those people who has a deep, involuntary urge to reply to people spouting one opinion or another on the radio? (I say, 'radio', because I don't have time to watch TV – but I'm sure I'd do the same if I were to watch that too).

I am.

My [daily work](#) involves reviewing the latest news and scientific research around the fields of the environment, energy, economics and ecological limits. The purpose of that is to build up a 'view' of: what is currently 'known'; what is 'uncertain'; and what – given recent events – is clearly evidentially 'wrong' or 'misleading'.

It's that last category that's the problem

Whether they do it deliberately or not, many people in the media today – both the journalists and their interview guests – are repeating facts or information that they've heard. And because they've heard it before, and because those around them often repeat those word or phrases, they repeat them without question.

That doesn't mean they're 'true', or they're 'correct' in the context in which they are used.

Many years ago, during the part of my professional life when I went from one public inquiry to another on behalf of community groups, I found the best way to make an impact wasn't to present "alternative" data. It was to take the 'expert' case presented to the public inquiry and pick it apart, looking for the little 'factoids' which were not true, for which there was no clear 'evidence', or which were not correct when they were used in that way.

I think most people would be surprised by the sheer amount of 'facts' in common daily use which are not strictly true – or for which the objective re-

search evidence is incredibly slim, uncertain, or non-existent.

For example, let's take the quote:

"It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so".

Al Gore says this in his much-lauded 2006 documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and attributes the source – as do many others – to Mark Twain.

The problem is, rather *inconveniently*, according to the US [Center for Mark Twain Studies](#) there's no proof Mark Twain ever said that.

Why do people do this. Why do they repeat things, or make assertions, which are just not true.

"The Script"

Over my many years of working around the fringes of government, politics, and pressure groups, I've come to a simple conclusion about why people do or assume things about the world around them: *it's a script; and people are playing the roles they are given in the script.*

These days life is just too hassled to bother about checking every thing's correct. The pressure to which people – particularly in politics and the media – are subject to requires that they speak or act without checking first.

In any case, if everyone around you is doing the same, it doesn't matter if you do the same sort of thing, does it?

As the psychologist Erich Fromm said in his book, [The Sane Society](#) (and yes, he really did because I have the book):

"The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make these vices virtues, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same mental pathology does not make these people sane."

If you want to make an impact in the world today you are taught, from an early age, to work hard at school, get lots of qualifications, select a career path, and then rise through the ranks until you become successful. The problem is that you don't necessarily do that by asking too many questions, and definitely not by saying or speaking the 'truth'. You rise through the ranks by doing what is expected of you, and following the required ideological or ontological 'map' of the world you are working within.

The reality is that society doesn't operate according to evidence. 'Facts' and 'evidence' are seen to be weighed in order to justify decisions; but only the kinds of 'evidence' that those making the decisions deem to be acceptable (an analysis which [even a High Court judge agreed with](#) recently as a result of my major piece of work over the last three years).

Society has and still today operates according to *doctrine*; defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as, "A belief or set of beliefs held and taught by a Church, political party, or other group". That's the important word here; 'beliefs'. And even when that belief is challenged by real-world events, the dogma within which institutions or ideological groups hold to doctrine will not allow other views to be considered.

In truth though I could never do that. The power of 'truth' isn't that "it's true". The power of truth is that, in a world where everyone believes in 'untruths', to speak the truth is disruptive. You can lie at every opportunity because people are quite happy to dismiss it. The truth, especially unpalatable truths, stings because in dismissing the claim the individual concerned kills a little part of their conscious soul.

In fact, I'd learnt by my late teens that while lacking the social niceties for conventional success, it was possible to have a really fun life by seeking *unconventional* progress; by taking my skills of observation and research, and 'disrupting' the smooth operation of my more conventional contemporaries by pointing out the flaws in their case – through, as in the Quaker term, "*speaking truth unto power*".

That doesn't win you any friends though.

Frank Sinatra was obviously happy being a 'loner' when he did it "*My Way*". The reality is that if you want to get on in the world you do it "[Their Way](#)".

"Groupthink"

There's a word for this state of affairs:

["Groupthink"](#).

You might think that 'groupthink' was primarily a social thing. That it only really affected the fringe parts of an issue, but not the core of the 'facts' upon which the issue was based. That's far from being the case. Often some of the most critical elements of national and international economic or political policy are merely commonly held 'beliefs'. They are not backed-up by actual, objective evidence.

This has been known for some time. For example, J.K Galbraith in his 1958 book, [The Affluent Society](#), created the term "*conventional wisdom*" – to explain why seemingly 'sane' people would willingly believe things that, if they applied just a little of their reasoning capacity, they would realise were not true.

Unfortunately, Galbraith also stresses that people will maintain the 'conventional wisdom' until the crisis is so great that they can no longer bluff or excuse that belief any more. Not because others no longer believe it; but because they can no longer justify the objective facts to themselves.

This isn't just the little things in life, either.

For example, four economists correctly predicted the 2008 economic crash. In the wake of the crash you would think that the economics community would be bending a knee to these people, to learn their wisdom and apply it. That couldn't be further from the truth.

The price of being proven right about the causes of the economic crash was that these four economists [are now spurned](#) by the mainstream of the economics community. One has even taken to crowd-funding on-line in order to continue his work.

Their offence was not 'being right'. Their offence was that [the core of the reasons](#) for why they were right challenges the ideological 'groupthink' – that "*conventional wisdom*" – at the heart of contemporary 'Western' economics.

That can't be tolerated by the mainstream proponents of economic theory. Or to paraphrase Max Plank's comment on progress in the 'hard' sciences, "*economics advances one funeral at a time*".

This is the true price of groupthink.

It's not that we do or believe silly things. It's that a group of people will willingly, and with their own rational justification, persecute another person for ex-

pressing the ‘truth’ – and inflict the most sadistic of social punishments upon that person to prevent them expressing that truth.

“The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck”

These days though we (mostly) don’t torture or kill people for not agreeing with ‘the group’.

The price to be paid for not participating in ‘groupthink’, but instead to hold to what you perceive to be the real-world ‘reality’, is that the group around you tend to get quite irritated by it; and after a while they’ll probably ask you to leave the group.

That’s my problem right now.

Of late I’ve had probably the most disruptive thing happen to my life that it’s possible to have; *I’ve been forced to take time off!* As a result of that I’ve had chance to think seriously, and to take time to consider the basis for a lot of the things I’ve done over recent years.

What I’ve concluded is that, for too long, I’ve gone along with a lot of things which are strictly not only wrong, but counter-productive to the outcomes sought. That’s because if I were to make a stand, I knew challenging what “we know is true” would result in spending most of my time having to battle other people in the group.

In choosing not to challenge peoples arguably erroneous perceptions my concern was not that I’d be asked ‘to leave’. My reasoning was that I’m here to do the work we agree on, and succeed in that work. To that end, why would do something which would inevitably burn time having to battle people who are (allegedly) on ‘my side’?

Of late, though, the gap between groupthink and reality has become so great that I can [contain myself no longer](#) – irrespective of niceties of what the rest of ‘the group’ feel about that.

For example, many people today are asking the political establishment to “*tell the truth*”. The problem is those same people can’t even tell the truth to themselves. That’s because, if they were to do so, their comfortable lives as they currently know them would end.

Needless to say, when I try to raise doubts over their pious certainty in the ‘truths’ which they hold, I’ve experienced some serious, and sometimes, it has to be said, vicious responses.

Over the last few years I’ve been trying to say this truth ‘nicely’, and all that’s happened is that:

less and less people will publish or circulate what I write; and, less people are willing to employ me to undertake research, or give workshops on that research and the evidence it produces.

And my current conclusion on that? I think Mark Manson expressed it most succinctly in the [title of his recent book](#) (except I, with dis-regard to present-day ‘groupthink’, would not substitute the asterisk).

Stressed-out

Today many people express concerns about the difference between the fiction of their lives, and the reality of world events. Many comedians have made a living out of it, since comedy, not politics, is increasingly the way people are able to address these issues. And yet even within the insights of comedy people cannot reconcile the difference between the two, and act “*as if it were true*”, because of what that would objectively mean for their lives.

As a result of this inability to move past challenging perceptions people feel stressed, and anxious, and dis-empowered. Though on the one-hand a distrust of ‘authority’ or ‘experts’ might be one result of this existential stress, the spread of ‘fake news’, or the rise of populist politics, is an equally problematic result of people’s inability to comprehend and adapt to the inherent instability of our modern, technological society.

They believe that it’s ‘the issue’ – the perceived problem which threatens their lives – which makes them concerned. In my view it’s another factor which is causing their anxiety, one which psychologists call, “*cognitive dissonance*”.

It’s not ‘the issue’ which causes their distress. It’s the gap between ‘the issue’ and the most realistic ways in which we can deal with that issue that is the true cause of their distress.

As a result, in order to avoid that unwelcome reality, they’re happy to consider some fairly dodgy ways to solve their problem.

In fact, they’re willing to grasp onto *any solution* that appeals to their [confirmation biases](#) – be that veganism or populist politics – in order to avoid the rather chilling reality that they will not allow themselves to perceive. And if that’s backed up by ‘groupthink’, well, that tends to trump any objective fact you care to raise in response to such arguments.

And that reality is?

Well; that depends on the issue: If it's the fact that a country like Britain is now experiencing the decline that follows the collapse of any historically powerful 'Empire', then it's immigration and trade; if it's the collapse of moral standards, then it's anyone who doesn't conform to traditional, usually faith-based notions of the family; or, if people are worried about the dereliction of urban centres, then it's people buying goods on-line.

For every 'problem' there is seemingly a popular causal factor that's repeated in the media. The reality is that when you look for the evidence to demonstrate that claim, or the data which describe it, or you test the assumptions upon which those ideas are based, in many cases they don't stand up to rational evaluation.

The 'reality' is that for just about every 'problem' in the media, the facts and trends behind it are far more complicated than the popular media dialogue conveys. That is of course a truism, as if things were in reality so simple then we'd have probably solved these matters already without any fuss. It's the ongoing uncertainty, and seemingly insurmountable official indifference to events, which plays to a media-based narrative. If they were to solve the problem they'd put themselves out of a job.

In my case, working with groups on environmental groups, "the issue" is something equally stark:

When you evaluate the issues and trends at the root of the environmental debate, it is: an affluent middle class debate about the vicissitudes of affluence; why the environment can no longer support the impacts of that affluent lifestyle; and what measures can be implemented to maintain the entitlements of the affluent middle class lifestyle as the Earth's ecosystems collapse under the weight of affluent consumption.

I've taken to saying this as the prelude to my environmental talks recently. Let's just say that the effect is often, 'chilling'.

The environmental movement is trapped in a problem of its own making. It's primarily populated by people who consume at-or-above the average, but who cannot conceive of any solution which portends radically changing their lifestyle away from such values. As a result, to avoid such discussions, they will latch onto any solution which seems to

solve the perceived problems via more conventional means.

The 'Meta-Blog'

For a while now, in many conversations when people express ecological concerns to me, I've taken to saying, "...but what does that mean?"

Quite often people don't understand the question. That's because they don't perceive the contradictory gap between the subject they're talking about – *environmental damage* – and the fact that the solutions they advocate will, in nearly all cases, create other kinds of environmental damage, albeit ones which they're quite happy to remain blissfully unaware of.

The point is that, in evaluating those impacts, the one thing that they cannot question is the material basis of the affluent lifestyle; more specifically, the solution of having "less". And if you try to question that, then they will very quickly either shut-down that discussion, or they restate what was said albeit far more loudly.

Which brings me back to the discussion earlier...

Irony is not 'cruel'; it is merely the gap between 'what is' and 'what is believed'. What we mean when we talk of 'cruel irony' is the guilty pleasure in the unwitting distress of other that the *onlooker* takes from it.

As such, the perceived entertainment value of *'irony'*, particular in contemporary comedy that ploughs the deep soils of modern consumer culture, is that it takes a pleasure from the strife of people who cannot perceive the difference between their assumptions and objective reality.

'Irony' is a Greek term. In the case of the assumed Mark Twain quote earlier, the fact the quote is used by people to comment about things people "don't know", and yet they themselves attribute the quote to someone who never said it, is ironic.

However, the fact that people can clearly see that material consumption is "*killing the planet*", and yet at the same time they are unable to have a discussion about their own affluence, is not irony; it's a *'tragedy'*.

Tragedy is also a Greek term, signifying a drama which elicits an emotional catharsis in the audience; in this case, the stressed-out members of the environment movement.

That's why I so often ask people, "*what does that mean?*" I find it difficult to believe that they cannot see the contradiction between affluence and environmental destruction, while at the same time being unable to engage in a dialogue on the nature or ecological validity of affluence. Instead, what they appear to seek is the palliative catharsis of the group-discussion, rather than seeking to enact the often obvious solutions available to them.

Now I've had chance to think about it, I now realise that for the past few years I haven't really brought any 'new' information to the environment movement. What I have done is try to get those involved to think about the meanings of what they already know, in order to bridge the gap between the actuality of 'the fact' and the 'meaning of 'the fact'.

I've failed.

I've failed because, when people go quiet, or they start raising their voice, or start bringing-in tangential "[what-about](#)" issues, I've stopped pushing. And the reason I've stopped pushing is that the effect of continuing that argument would distract from the work being undertaken at that time – which, for me, was always the most important reason for being there.

Now I've come to realise *that this is* the work:

The inability of society – and as a specific subset of society, the environment movement itself – to grasp the contradictions between the 'doctrines of affluence', and the maintenance of a just and sustainable human civilisation, has become more pressing than the seemingly distracting 'issues' which people are concerned about.

The difficulty is, how do you have that conversation?

Who would pay me to write that article?

Who would pay me to lead that workshop – given that the workshop I evolved in 2006/7 to ever-so-gently try and begin that debate, called "*Less is a Four Letter Word*", died a death as people didn't want to host/attend it.

There's a another Greek term, most often used as a prefix; "[Meta](#)".

In modern usage, 'meta' denotes an abstraction on the article itself. For example, 'meta-analysis', which is a study of the results of other studies, and which tries to draw a conclusion from all the data available.

If I can't have the discussion with others then I'll just have to have it with myself – albeit in public, online.

All I can do is 'blog' about it, airing those matters where at least those who want to move past the depression, the anxiety, and the powerlessness of the mainstream environmental debate can read these ideas. *And the title?* Well, if it's a blog about the meanings of the environmental debate, abstractly focussing on the contradictory factors at work within the ecological dialogue of the environment movement, it can only have one sensible title: [The 'Meta-Blog'](#).