



Irrational beliefs & public opinion

'The best disinfectant against the growth of irrational beliefs is vigorous and rational public debate.'

Many are amazed at the ease by which urban myths, such as those about frivolous law suits, litigation explosions, and doctors being driven out of practice by insurance premiums, have attained the elevated status of common knowledge among many Australians.

The phenomenon is not confined to misconceptions about the legal system. Misconceptions are endemic to other professions.

For example, a recent report about the public understanding of science issues in the USA revealed that 60 per cent of Americans believe in ESP and 30 per cent believe UFOs are space vehicles driven by extra terrestrials.¹

The scary thing is that the same study found that education does not inoculate people against acquiring or defending irrational beliefs.

Michael Shermer, an American sceptic argues that '...smart people believe weird things because they are skilled at defending beliefs they arrived at for non-smart reasons'.² He claims that beliefs are adopted for a variety of reasons that have little to do with evidence or logic. Rather, they owe their existence to factors such as peer pressure, educational experiences, sibling and parental influences, prejudices, etc.

Beliefs are how people attempt to understand the world in which they

live. Belief structures tend towards entrenchment. Discordant information tends to be rejected while sympathetic information is admitted.

In this manner, new beliefs are selected that reinforce the existing edifice making it even more resistant to future change. As people get older they progressively become more set in their ways, often becoming incapable of considering new information that conflicts with their strongly held beliefs.

This has profound implications for people who think they know the difference between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood.

As it happens, most people do not know what they mean when they say that they 'know' something is 'true'. In reality, knowledge is mere opinion masquerading as certainty.

This is not to say that some opinions are not sounder than others. By convention we tend to view sound opinions as facts, and unsound opinions as mere beliefs. Everyone differs in the internal criteria they use when classifying ordinary information into these two categories.

For example, scientific method is predicated on the assumption that nothing can ever truly be 'known'.³ Scientific knowledge accumulates by tiny increments through the formulation and falsification of hypothesis. Knowledge, at least in science, is what can be falsified

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by experimentation but has thus far proved resistant to falsification.

The doctrine of 'falsification' makes scientific method somewhat more objective and rational. This objective rationality distinguishes the scientific and the non-scientific realms of knowledge. The latter is incapable of falsification by observation and therefore is based more on faith. Non-scientific belief is, by definition, subjective and irrational, as it cannot be disproved by scientific means.

A rational world-view is one that must always remain tentative. It leads to a questioning sceptical approach to life and the accumulation of knowledge. Socrates revealed such an approach when he said:⁴

'It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.'

Ordinary people neither apply nor recognise the 'rational scientific/irrational non-scientific' demarcation when forming opinions about facts and beliefs. They mix it all together with their existing belief systems and then pour off anything that does not find a ready home.

Psychologists and tobacco manufac-

turers have known this for years, although they may have different explanations for it. One psychological theory is that people tend to believe things that fit with their pre-existing world view. Under this theory, we more readily believe things that are consistent with pre-existing biases and beliefs, however irrational they may be, and tend to reject things that are inconsistent with these foundations. In short, humans seek cognitive harmony and will readily reject facts to avoid cognitive dissonance.

Another less charitable explanation goes like this: 'people believe things that they benefit from'. Smokers addicted to cigarettes readily believe the tobacco industry's propaganda that the link between smoking and illness remains unproven (because if they thought otherwise they would have to endure the trauma of withdrawal). People want to believe corporate propaganda that global warming is still unproven (because if they really thought otherwise they would feel guilty every time they used the air conditioner or drove their cars). People want to believe that foreigners locked up at Woomera are terrorists and queue jumpers (because if they are not then how can we treat them the way we do).

Complex information is a real challenge for many people. Rather than take the time to sift through the claims and counterclaims made in the media, it is

easier to jump to the simplest conclusion. It takes less effort to simplify and stereotype than to attempt to understand.

How do we assist the community to recognise and resist the attempts at thought control of skilful corporate and government propagandists?

The best disinfectant against the growth of irrational beliefs is vigorous and rational public debate. Which brings to mind the following delightful quote:⁵

'... when you are a bear of very little brain, and you think of things, you find sometimes that a thing that seemed very thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it.' **PL**

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Endnotes:

- ¹ National Science Foundation's biennial report (April 2002), cited in 'Smart People Believe Weird Things' by Michael Shermer, *Scientific American*, Vol. 287 Number 3, September 2002, p.19.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Routledge Classics, London.
- ⁴ Reported in 'Apology', Plato 427-437 BC.
- ⁵ A.A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*, 1928.