

"Ignorance is Power"

by Georgina Kenyon via james - BBC Monday, Feb 1 2016, 9:07pm

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While the title indicates a classic Orwellian inversion it also states an unfortunate fact today. Ignorance is now a potentially lethal plague that threatens all humanity. To pre-empt the import of the following story, the title should read, 'Ignorance is Power for those who know.' The following piece is highly recommended to all our readers and should be disseminated widely in order to combat the dire threat that confronts us all.

In 1979, a secret memo from the tobacco industry was revealed to the public. Called the Smoking and Health Proposal, and written a decade earlier by the Brown & Williamson tobacco company, it revealed many of the tactics employed by big tobacco to counter “anti-cigarette forces”.

In one of the paper’s most revealing sections, it looks at how to market cigarettes to the mass public: “Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy.”

This revelation piqued the interest of Robert Proctor, a science historian from Stanford University, who started delving into the practices of tobacco firms and how they had spread confusion about whether smoking caused cancer.

Proctor had found that the cigarette industry did not want consumers to know the harms of its product, and it spent billions obscuring the facts of the health effects of smoking. This search led him to create a word for the study of deliberate propagation of ignorance: agnotology.

It comes from agnosis, the neoclassical Greek word for ignorance or ‘not knowing’, and ontology, the branch of metaphysics which deals with the nature of being. Agnotology is the study of wilful acts to spread confusion and deceit, usually to sell a product or win favour.

“I was exploring how powerful industries could promote ignorance to sell their wares. Ignorance is power... and agnotology is about the deliberate creation of ignorance.

“In looking into agnotology, I discovered the secret world of classified science, and thought historians should be giving this more attention.”

The 1969 memo and the tactics used by the tobacco industry became the perfect example of agnotology, Proctor says. ***“Ignorance is not just the not-yet-known, it’s also a political ploy, a deliberate creation by powerful agents who want you ‘not to know’.”***

To help him in his search, Proctor enlisted the help of UC Berkeley linguist Iain Boal, and together they came up with the term – the neologism was coined in 1995, although much of Proctor’s analysis of the phenomenon had occurred in the previous decades.

Balancing act

Agnotology is as important today as it was back when Proctor studied the tobacco industry’s

obfuscation of facts about cancer and smoking. For example, politically motivated doubt was sown over US President Barack Obama's nationality for many months by opponents until he revealed his birth certificate in 2011. In another case, some political commentators in Australia attempted to stoke panic by likening the country's credit rating to that of Greece, despite readily available public information from ratings agencies showing the two economies are very different.

Proctor explains that ignorance can often be propagated under the guise of balanced debate. For example, the common idea that there will always be two opposing views does not always result in a rational conclusion. This was behind how tobacco firms used science to make their products look harmless, and is used today by climate change deniers to argue against the scientific evidence.

"This 'balance routine' has allowed the cigarette men, or climate deniers today, to claim that there are two sides to every story, that 'experts disagree' – creating a false picture of the truth, hence ignorance."

For example, says Proctor, many of the studies linking carcinogens in tobacco were conducted in mice initially, and the tobacco industry responded by saying that studies into mice did not mean that people were at risk, despite adverse health outcomes in many smokers.

A new era of ignorance

"We live in a world of radical ignorance, and the marvel is that any kind of truth cuts through the noise," says Proctor. ***Even though knowledge is 'accessible', it does not mean it is accessed***, he warns.

"Although for most things this is trivial – like, for example, the boiling point of mercury – but for bigger questions of political and philosophical import, the knowledge people have often comes from faith or tradition, or propaganda, more than anywhere else."

Proctor found that *ignorance spreads when firstly, many people do not understand a concept or fact and secondly, when special interest groups – like a commercial firm or a political group – then work hard to create confusion about an issue*. In the case of ignorance about tobacco and climate change, a scientifically illiterate society will probably be more susceptible to the tactics used by those wishing to confuse and cloud the truth.

Consider climate change as an example. "The fight is not just over the existence of climate change, it's over whether God has created the Earth for us to exploit, whether government has the right to regulate industry, whether environmentalists should be empowered, and so on. It's not just about the facts, it's about what is imagined to flow from and into such facts," says Proctor.

Making up our own minds

Another academic studying ignorance is David Dunning, from Cornell University. Dunning warns that the internet is helping propagate ignorance – it is a place where everyone has a chance to be their own expert, he says, which makes them prey for powerful interests wishing to deliberately spread ignorance.

"While some smart people will profit from all the information now just a click away, many will be misled into a false sense of expertise. My worry is not that we are losing the ability to make up our own minds, but that it's becoming too easy to do so. We should consult with others much more than we imagine. Other people may be imperfect as well, but often their opinions go a long way toward

correcting our own imperfections, as our own imperfect expertise helps to correct their errors,” warns Dunning.

Dunning and Proctor also warn that the wilful spread of ignorance is rampant throughout the US presidential primaries on both sides of the political spectrum.

“Donald Trump is the obvious current example in the US, suggesting easy solutions to followers that are either unworkable or unconstitutional,” says Dunning.

So while agnotology may have had its origins in the heyday of the tobacco industry, today the need for both a word and the study of human ignorance is as strong as ever.

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[It hardly requires emphasising that the privately owned corporate mass media is the largest and most dangerous infective agent of ignorance and while most people say they do not believe the trash, distortions/distractions and outright lies that gush from this infective source they nevertheless expose themselves to its pervasive, infective influence daily; and while knowledge, the truth, is readily available it is rarely accessed.]

<http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20160105-the-man-who-studies-the-spread-of-ignorance>

Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-2096.html>