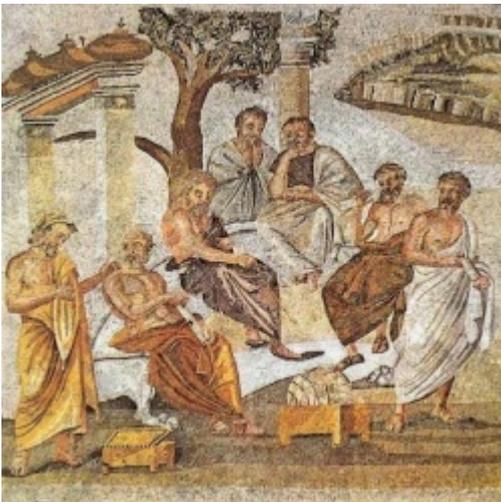


# From Math To Politics, Some Problems Don't Have Solutions (Part III)



By Alex Berezow, PhD — February 7, 2020

*This article is the third in a three-part series that is adapted from an essay written by Dr. Alex Berezow, now archived at Suzzallo Library's Special Collections at the University of Washington. In Part III, he discusses the societal problem of willful ignorance.*



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Our world faces many serious problems. Just under one billion people do not have electricity. Millions die every year in abject poverty due to lack of access to basic necessities, such as clean food and water and healthcare. From the Mexican Drug War to the Syrian Civil War, violent conflict takes the lives of thousands and devastates millions. According to a *Washington Post* article co-authored by Garry Kasparov, a Russian chess grandmaster and the chairman of the Human Rights Foundation, nearly four billion people live under authoritarian regimes<sup>1</sup>.

We are blessed to live in a country that does not face such grave troubles. Instead, we face a problem entirely of our own making: Willful ignorance.

Each of us carries in our pocket a small, incredible device: A powerful computer that can send messages to anyone in the world, navigate us with ease from Point A to Point B, document our surroundings in videos and photographs, and access the entire sum of human knowledge since the beginning of time at lightning speed. And what do we do with these devices? We watch cat videos and argue with complete strangers on Facebook.

Most of the aforementioned problems are ultimately resolvable. Contrary to popular belief, the world – as the Beatles might have said – is getting better all the time. Indeed, humanity as a whole has never had it so good. Poverty, violence, infectious disease, and economic inequality are decreasing. Wealth, opportunity, and life expectancy are increasing. There is even more tree coverage now on Earth than there was in the 1980s<sup>2</sup>. Given enough time, it is easy to envision a future in which war-torn, impoverished regions in Africa and Southeast Asia are transformed into prosperous democracies. But it's impossible to envision a future in which there aren't any stupid people. The sad reality is that all the wealth and technology in the world cannot solve a fundamental flaw in human nature, namely, that people who do not want to be educated cannot be educated. Willful ignorance, therefore, could be the greatest unsolvable problem of all time.

Ultimately, willful ignorance is just one of the many ugly manifestations of pride, which many Christians consider the truly original sin. Nobody likes to admit being wrong. This desire is so intense that, even when given conclusive evidence to the contrary, some people double down on their beliefs, a phenomenon known as the backfire effect. All of us are susceptible to confirmation bias, in which we are likelier to accept information that we already believe to be true and reject information that does not suit our preferences. We are also inherently tribal, choosing to align ourselves culturally and intellectually with our political allies. All of this conspires to create and perpetuate a culture of willful ignorance. One could argue that willful ignorance combined with sensationalism is the entire business model for media outlets like Fox News and MSNBC and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

It should not come as a surprise that within this milieu, “fake news” has become so prominent. While the 21<sup>st</sup> Century did not invent disinformation, we have wielded it in a way about which propagandists of yore could only dream. Within seconds, a vicious lie in cyberspace can traverse the entire globe, triggering real-world consequences. It was an internet-based conspiracy theory about child sex-trafficking that led to a shooting at a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, the dissemination of fake news isn't solely attributable to internet cranks. Even legitimate news outlets wittingly or unwittingly do so. One study showed that of the top 100 most shared health stories in 2018, nearly half included at least partially misleading information, and roughly 1/3 were considered “low” or “very low” quality<sup>3</sup>.

Other types of fake news are even more damaging. In 1998, Andrew Wakefield published a research paper, now known to be fraudulent, in a highly respected medical journal claiming a link between vaccines and autism. More than 20 years later, scientists, doctors, and public health officials are still dealing with the fallout of his purposeful deception. Measles, declared eliminated from the United States in the year 2000, has made a comeback, thanks in part to anti-vaccine activists (or “anti-vaxxers”, as they have come to be known). While incidence of measles has decreased by 66% globally since then, it has doubled in Europe and increased by 1100% in the

Americas<sup>4</sup>. Conversations with anti-vaxxers invariably lead down a rabbit hole of conspiratorial nonsense. Paranoia about the medical establishment, rejection of expertise, and distrust of “Big Business” – particularly, “Big Pharma” – have colluded to create a genuine public health crisis.

Unfortunately, we should expect such toxic misinformation to continue because there is a lot of money to be made telling people lies. Snake oil salesmen are especially eager to take advantage of this situation. A multibillion-dollar “natural products” industry has been built upon widespread scientific illiteracy and the public’s inability to discern legitimate information from fake news, specifically pseudoscience. The natural products industry ranges from the mostly harmless (such as overpriced organic food) to the incredibly harmful (such as the rejection of Western medicine in favor of traditional herbal remedies). One study, published in 2017, found that cancer patients who rejected conventional treatment in favor of alternative medicine were far likelier to die. After five years, 78.3% of patients using conventional treatment but only 54.7% of patients using alternative medicine were still alive<sup>5</sup>. Despite this, people continue turning to alternative medicine due to pervasive fake news, such as the myth that the FDA and Big Pharma are conspiring to hide a cure for cancer.

The junk science gravy train is too lucrative for some to ignore. Gwyneth Paltrow has cashed in on her fame to sell phony medicine to people who place their faith in the supposed goodwill of celebrities. Among the outrageous quackery she promotes is a do-it-yourself coffee enema kit (for the modest price of \$135) and a jade “egg” that women are supposed to place inside their vaginas to improve sexual health. Paltrow’s company was successfully sued for false advertising over the latter, but this is simply the cost of doing business. Jade eggs are still available on the website for purchase, along with dozens of other sham products.

Our personal health is not the only thing that suffers in the post-truth society. So too does our social fabric. Several celebrities, including Mark Ruffalo – the actor who played the Hulk in the *Avengers* series of movies – are 9/11 truthers. There are good reasons to believe that Seattle Seahawks coach Pete Carroll is too<sup>6</sup>. If we can’t even agree on who caused 9/11, then it’s not surprising that Americans have become polarized on just about everything else, even to the point of viewing “the other side” not just as political opponents but as enemies. One poll showed that 21% of Democrats and 23% of Republicans viewed the other party as “evil”; roughly 50% saw the other party as “ignorant.”<sup>7</sup> Social media, which was created to bring people together, plays a key role in this phenomenon. Ironically, one wonders if social media has managed to destroy more relationships than it has built.

Those who ponder solutions to these societal problems usually conclude that “more education” is the answer. But is it? Educated people are often simply more proficient at finding the wrong answer. Sophisticated B.S. is still B.S. This fact is cleverly summarized by an internet meme known as “pigeon chess,” which was coined by an Amazon commenter who said that debating with certain people was “like trying to play chess with a pigeon – it knocks the pieces over, craps on the board, and flies back to its flock to claim victory.”<sup>8</sup>

[Read Part I: The Riemann Hypothesis](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

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