What I'm Reading (Jan. 14)

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — January 14, 2021

We, humans, have difficulty understanding the very small and the very large, but scale plays an increasingly important role in our lives - think Amazon or Twitter. What if we taught about scale in school? Are we becoming more or less violent? An update on COVID-19's origin story - a cautionary tale? What does the Federal Trade Commission have to do with the problems at the Capital?

"Basically, yes, though it's more complicated than that. Robin Dunbar is an anthropologist at Oxford who thinks we operate, socially, with circles of different sizes. We have a super-intimate group of people whom we would trust with our lives—maybe five people in typical circumstances—and then a group of fifteen intimates, then about fifty friends, and then 150 people who are at the level of good acquaintance. People we’d greet and chat with if we ran into them at the airport. Beyond that circle, Dunbar says, our thinking is increasingly abstract and we become dependent on various heuristics to sum up people or groups of people—and to do so in increasingly simplistic ways as the numbers get bigger. Stereotyping. The thing I’m talking about is not exactly the same as what Dunbar was talking about, but it’s a very similar phenomenon: It’s what happens when we are out of our cognitive depth,
where we lose the ability to make reliable judgments, because our brains are basically overwhelmed by the scale. Fried by all the data voltage passing through."

Scale is such a part of our lives. The rollout of vaccines has to scale from hospitals to the general public. Social media scales our thoughts globally. Working on a wood project scales my thoughts down to what's in front of me right now.

"What if we had an entire curriculum constructed to remedy our inability to grasp the scale at which our world functions, and I mean that on multiple levels: the biological, the technological, the economic, the social, you name it. What if school in a quite fundamental sense were about understanding scale? Learning to think appropriately about how big the universe is, how old the universe is, how much money is in the world. The ratio between the size of the world's oceans and the amount of plastic floating in them. Coming to understand the ways that social media overwhelm our Dunbar's-number brains. Learning about the rates of transmission of infectious disease. These are all different ways of, as it were, climbing Mount Improbable."

From the Hedgehog Review, a light-hearted take on The School for Scale [2]

"War, what is it good for? Absolutely nothing" Is that really the case? Much of the improvement in food and health has come from war efforts. For example, tin cans, blood transfusion, TV dinners. Are we innately a violent species? Yes and no. The events at the Capital should allow us to explore this issue a bit more.

"I come down on the side that we're not inherently violent but we may have violent tendencies that evolution has left us. When we're afraid, we have a tendency to lash out, but I don’t think that means we are necessarily violent. We often see examples of altruism and people living together. What is more important is why people fight—and I'm thinking of war, not just random one-on-one fighting. People fight wars because of organization, ideas, and cultural values. The more organized we are, unfortunately, the better we seem to get at fighting. War is very organized. It’s not the brawl you get outside a bar or the random violence you might get when someone feels frightened. ...
In a civil war, you're not just fighting those soldiers out in the field. You're fighting the whole society because it is wrong. Even the children are wrong. Even the old people are wrong. There's no one innocent in such wars."

From Nautil.us, a historian's viewpoint, Humans Have Gotten Nicer and Better at Making War [3]

My colleague, Dr. Berezow, has written previously about the origins of COVID-19, natural or laboratory-derived – let's leave intent out of it. At this moment, China is still stone-wall ing the WHO investigation.

“For more than 15 years, coronavirologists strove to prove that the threat of SARS was ever present and must be defended against, and they proved it by showing how they could doctor the viruses they stored in order to force them to jump species and go directly from bats to humans. More and more bat viruses came in from the field teams, and they were sequenced and synthesized and "rewired," to use a term that Baric likes. In this international potluck supper of genetic cookery, hundreds of new variant diseases were invented and stored. And then one day, perhaps, somebody messed up. It’s at least a reasonable, “parsimonious” explanation of what might have happened."

From the New Yorker, a piece by Nicholson Baker, known more for his fiction than non-fiction. His argument seems well researched and is certainly not a screed. The Lab-Leak Hypothesis [4]

“There are two paths in a representative democracy if we have a large group who lives in a cult-like artificial world of misinformation, and many more who rightly or wrongly don’t trust any political institution. We can try to strip these people of representation and political power; that is the guiding idea behind removing Trump, as well as a whole host of conservatives, off of Silicon Valley platforms that have become essential to modern society. Removing these people is a choice to not have a society, to pretend that we can put these people into a closet somewhere and ignore them.

The alternative is less dramatic. We can take on the legal framework behind social media so these products aren’t addictive and radicalizing. ...
More broadly, we can try to rebuild our institutions so everyone has a stake in society again, and end the systemic cheating in our commerce that strips people of community. Just saying 'trust our institutions' won't work, at least not until we make those institutions trustworthy."

It begins with a closer look at Ashli Babbitt, the Capital protestor killed last week, and segues into social media and then to an institution we can harness to fix an underlying problem, the FTC. From Big, A Simple Thing Biden Can Do to Reset America [5]

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[2] https://hedgehogreview.com/blog/thr/posts/the-school-for-scale