

Forbes / Leadership / #ChangeTheWorld

MAY 22, 2017 @ 07:27 AM 7,150 👁

The Little Black Book of Billionaire Secrets

The Post-Truth World - Why Have We Had Enough Of Experts?

✉ f t in G+



London Business School Review, CONTRIBUTOR

FULL BIO ✓

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

GUEST POST WRITTEN BY

Professor Julian Birkinshaw, London Business School



Professor Birkinshaw's main area of expertise is in the strategy and organisation of large corporations <http://ow.ly/l4zH30bVBTS>.

We are living in a post-truth world, where alternative facts and fake news compete on an equal footing with peer-reviewed research and formerly-authoritative sources such as the United Kingdom's global news and current affairs service, the **BBC**.

Why is this happening? Many people blame the Internet and the smartphone revolution, but that isn't the whole story. Technology has exacerbated the problem, for sure, but the underlying social trend here dates back to the pre-computer era. Some people also blame prominent truth-challenged individuals, but we shouldn't mix up cause and effect: contempt for expert advice is what created the Trump bandwagon, not vice versa.

The post-truth era has emerged because of several long-cycle trends that affect how we make sense of the world around us. The phenomenon even has a name — agnotology, the study of culturally induced ignorance or doubt.

And it comes in a variety of flavors, from the relatively benign (persuading people through ‘spin’ or selective use of facts) to the deliberately malicious (willful peddling of objectively incorrect information). The implications of agnotology, for business and for politics, are huge.

There are two long-cycle trends that shape our understanding of the world.

First, we are all becoming stupider, on a relative basis. While individual knowledge (measured by IQ) has risen gently and linearly over the last few decades (the so-called Flynn effect), the collective knowledge of mankind has grown exponentially — think in terms of the explosive growth in books written, PhDs completed, or patents registered. The gap between what each one of us knows and what the world knows is growing rapidly.

Second, the worlds of business and politics are becoming more interdependent, in the sense that something happening in one place can have unpredictable second- or third-order consequences in another place. Cyber-attacks, outbreaks of infectious diseases, terrorist threats, political movements, social memes — all of these are manifestations of the “complex system” that is the global economy. Unfortunately, complex systems cannot be modeled accurately. It is a strange paradox of our times: the more we connect, the harder it is for us to predict.

Put these two points together: as individuals, we are struggling to understand the present, and it is getting hard to predict the future. The result is a form of cognitive dissonance. As thoughtful beings, we like to be in control, but increasingly we cannot. So how do we resolve this dissonance? We fall back on belief — on our own intuition.

New York University Professor Jonathan Haidt explains this point as follows. We would like to think we use reasoning and analysis to reach a judgment, for example by looking at the evidence around the dangers of genetically modified crops, and then deciding whether they should be banned or not. In reality, we do the exact opposite: we come to an intuition-based judgment early on (often subconsciously) and then we use that to build a cogent argument for our view, typically by marshalling the supporting evidence and ignoring the evidence that might take us in a different direction.