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Devaluing Knowledge -- the Real Danger of the "Fake Fact" Era

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The current flood of chatter on "fake news" brings to mind two revealing moments.

The first was a conversation reported in *Generation Revolution*, a recent and very enlightening book about recent Egyptian history by a young British journalist named Rachel Aspden. In the book she recalls an exchange with a young man who said he and his friends weren't sure the Islamic State is real (he used its Arabic name, Daesh).

"There's no proof of what's really going on," the young man told her, "... a lot of manipulation by the Western media... Hollywood tricks. Those beheading videos could easily be faked in a studio." When Aspden asked



him his own opinion, he answered: "It's obvious. Daesh has been created by Israel and the United States to discredit Muslims and provide the West with another excuse to invade and seize the oil."

It was frustrating, Aspden wrote, to hear such ideas from "clever, educated people." But, she went on, those clever people in turn were frustrated by her, too -- "disappointed by my weak-minded general belief in events reported by the BBC, *New York Times* or *Guardian*." What to her was a "fringe conspiracy theory" was completely believable, she writes, for many Egyptians, including some of her well-educated friends who passed around emails of a cartoon showing the Islamic State as a puppet "operated by the figures of a leering, hook-nosed Jew and Uncle Sam."

Promoting the Enemy's Lies Along With Their Own

It's not the point Aspden was making, but that passage helped me realize something I hadn't seen as clearly before, not about Egypt or the Middle East but on the general issue: Politicians and their mouthpieces and partisan pontificators who push out false information don't just promote their own lies. They promote their enemies' lies too, because weakening truth weakens it for everybody.

Those Egyptians who know the Islamic State is an American-Israeli hoax -- and who scoffed at Aspden for trusting the BBC and the *New York Times* -- are the mirror image of Americans who believe, contrary to all available evidence, that large numbers of terrorists are sneaking into this country through a wide-open refugee resettlement system. Or Americans who fear that Muslims, 1 percent of the U.S. population, are subverting the U.S. legal system and that (as one commenter wrote on an Amazon page) "If we do nothing, our children and certainly our grandchildren will be living under Sharia Law."

Those Americans scoff at exactly the same news organizations Aspden's Egyptian friends ridiculed her for believing.

The lesson is clear -- and chilling. When one side undermines public trust in journalists or scientists or scholars who present real facts, it's easier for those on the other side to distrust those sources too and deny a



different set of real facts... so the whole discussion gets farther and farther from reality.

A second revealing moment was in a Breitbart radio interview with John Guandolo, a prominent anti-Muslim activist.

Guandolo is a former FBI agent and self-anointed "terrorism expert" (his publicity suggests he was canned from the bureau for trying to speak truth to power about Islam, but in fact he resigned before being fired for a sexual relationship with a witness in a case that had nothing to do with Islam or terrorism.) (See: New Orleans *Times Picayune*: "FBI kept quiet about sexual relationship between agent, star witness in Jefferson trial." Link: www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2009/09/post_4.html[ARI1])

National Leaders Have No Clue?

Contending that Islam's "entire purpose" is to impose Islamic rule on the entire world, Guandolo argues that America is "at war with Islam," that the major American Muslim organizations are all on the enemy side in that war along with "eighty-plus percent" of mosques in this country -- and that the national leadership does not understand the danger we're in.

In the Breitbart interview, aired last year, Guandolo made that last point this way: "The average four-star general, the average senator, the average head of an intelligence agency -- pick which one -- at the federal level has not a clue" about the Muslim threat.

This from a man who offers no credible evidence for any of his statements, who has been out of the FBI for nearly eight years, but professes to know more than senior military commanders and the heads of all the intelligence services. They have no clue but he does? We should believe him and not them?

Breitbart News Platform - Endorsing the Message

You'd think an interviewer might ask that question. But the Breitbart host endorsed Guandolo's message, telling him that the people listening to his program are better informed than the generals or intelligence chiefs too: "I could go to millions of commenters on Breitbart every day, I could ask them these questions, they would know..."



Elaborating on his point, Guandolo said a moment later that "the average law enforcement officer knows less than citizens that are paying attention," adding that in his experience "a local police officer will have a better understanding of the problem than an FBI counter-terrorism agent."

So... putting it together, the cumulative message is: (1) people who pay attention to Breitbart radio and John Guandolo are more knowledgeable about the terrorist threat than local cops, (2) local cops know more than FBI counterterror agents, and (3) all of them know more than the top military and intelligence officials.

Who Do You Trust?

That sounds, and is, absurd. But plainly, significant numbers of Americans trust Guandolo and other singers in the Islamophobe choir more than they trust counterterror professionals, national leaders, or journalists or scholars or anyone else who tries to tell them the facts. And that raises alarming questions about the state of public discussion and policy debate in this country.

Oh... the interviewer on that program, the one who said his listeners know more than the pros? That was Stephen Bannon, more a cheerleader than an interviewer, telling his listeners that they all should visit Guandolo's website and variously referring to him as "John Guandolo, real American patriot ... John Guandolo, one of the great heroes."

That wasn't an isolated case, by the way. Before leaving Breitbart to join Donald Trump's campaign and then his White House staff, Bannon gave a platform and similar fervent endorsements to statements by leading anti-Muslim activists who were regular guests on his radio show and contributed dozens of commentaries to the Breitbart site.

Listening to Guandolo's disparagement of professionals, it struck me that his comments reflected a broader reality about the damaging effect of "fake news."

The harm is not just that certain people believe certain falsehoods. There's another and probably larger group that might be even scarier -- people who have essentially stopped believing *any* news, who think nothing said in the public arena can be trusted. They may not believe a particular story or a particular person (President Trump, say) on a given day. But they don't believe anyone else, either. They are sure that "they're all like that" -- political figures, media, scientists, any kind of expert authority.



Rejecting Knowledge

People who think that way are not just rejecting specific facts or sources. In effect, they reject the whole idea of knowledge and the value of knowledge. They do not see any connection between knowing facts and having a valid opinion. They don't recognize that others might know more than they do or that there's any reason to listen to them.

There is a strong case that the erosion of trust in knowledge in general, rather than any particular set of falsehoods, is what has done the most damage to our political process and policy debate. If facts don't matter and don't convince anyone, discussion is about conflicting emotions and ideologies, not practical realities. When both sides base their argument on prefabricated ideas instead of actual circumstances, realistic conversation and sensible compromise become harder, or perhaps impossible.

As one example, consider the national debate about law enforcement in African-American communities and specifically about police use of force.

Police Shootings: Uncertainties, Ambiguities

If you look at them honestly, the facts in police shooting incidents are almost never clearcut. Nearly always there are uncertainties and ambiguities. But much of the public discussion refuses to recognize that. When one side is sure before examining any evidence that "the cop is always guilty" and the other is equally positive that "cops are never wrong" and both are yelling too loudly to hear the other, that makes it a lot harder to have a useful discussion about actual police practices and how they might be changed to avoid unnecessary force and rebuild trust.

And all that yelling is even more harmful because it builds up political pressure, making it harder for public officials to speak honestly and silencing or drowning out those who do understand the complicated realities



and who might contribute practical solutions.

There Are Lessons For All Of Us

There's a troubling lesson here. The more people discredit knowledge, the more easily they resist anyone who challenges their ideas. It's a self-perpetuating cycle: if you distrust everyone's facts, there's no reason to listen to anyone who tries to explain why you are wrong about something. Effectively, you vaccinate yourself against learning anything that might change your opinion. And you don't just immunize yourself. Like overused antibiotics that lead to the evolution of drug-resistant bacteria, the anti-fact vaccine spreads through the culture and creates an ever more fact-resistant public discourse.

The danger to democratic process and institutions is obvious. Unfortunately, the path back to knowledge and reason is not.

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