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The Facts of Fearbola



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When the young woman in the seat next to me asked the flight attendant for a glass of cabernet, I took it as a sign that projectile vomiting and explosive diarrhea would not be part of my trip from PHL to LAX. I also took it as a reminder that the Ebola irrationality I've slammed in others is not as foreign to me as I'd like to believe.

I'd been in Philadelphia for a conference on science communication. Scientists, social scientists, doctors, journalists and kindred spirits had come together to examine how facts make their way, or don't, to policy makers and to the public.

Should there be a tax on carbon to reduce greenhouse gases? How should we handle the conflict between parents who don't want their kids vaccinated, and the public good of herd immunity? If you think that the quality of decisions like those depends on getting the most knowledge to the most people, then you believe what most scientists believe: it's called the "knowledge deficit" model. Explain to people that 97 percent of scientists agree that humans cause global warming, and they'll realize that the jury on climate change is not still out. Properly present the earth's fossil record to people, and they'll abandon creationism for evolution. If only the media took the trouble to get the facts out, the myths would melt away.

But as I heard at the conference, cognitive scientists say that the knowledge deficit model is wrong. Contrary facts don't change our minds, they just make us dig our heels in harder. We process information both rationally and emotionally, and our

emotional apparatus gets there faster. We use shortcuts, called heuristics, to deal with the data bombarding us, but those shortcuts are riddled with unconscious biases. The problem isn't that people are unaware of the facts. It's that awareness isn't a machine — it's a neural network, more like a lizard brain than an iPhone.

Our brains aren't blackboards to write facts on; they're billboards announcing our identities. Facts aren't simply facts — they're tribal badges, ways to declare who we are. We locate ourselves in culture not only by where we live, what we do and whom we love, but also by the information we're willing to authorize as factual. Trying to get people to change their minds about facts is a misbegotten enterprise because it amounts to forcing them to change their hearts about themselves. As Yale professor Daniel Kahneman, one of the conference's organizers, has put it, "Don't make reasoning, free people choose between knowing what's known and being who they are."

It's tempting to think that people who conflate knowledge and identity are Others, not Us. Our team knows better; we get the difference between the truth claims of science and the tribal claims of culture. It's tempting, but it's delusional.

That was driven home to me last Friday, on the final morning of the conference. Just before the session began, one of the panelists showed me a distraught message he'd received from a faculty member at Syracuse University. The night before, I read in the email, Syracuse provost Eric Spina had disinvited *Washington Post* photojournalist Michel duCille from a workshop at the Newhouse School of Public Communications because he'd been in Liberia three weeks before. For the 21 days since he'd been in West Africa, which the CDC says is Ebola's incubation period, duCille had monitored his temperature twice a day. As far as the experts were concerned, with no symptoms he was in the clear.

But that didn't cut it for Syracuse. The *Post* story about the rescinded invitation quoted Newhouse dean Lorraine Branham saying this: "And that 21 day thing, some suggest the incubation period should be longer... We thought it best to proceed with an abundance of caution." I had the same reaction to that as the faculty member who'd sent the email, and as Michel duCille, who told the *Post*: "I'm pissed off and embarrassed and completely weirded out that a journalism institution that should be seeking out facts and details is basically pandering to hysteria."

If a student wrote that "some suggest" the CDC is wrong about the incubation period, I know what any good journalism instructor would say: Who's the source? Who's the "some" doing the suggesting? Rand Paul? George Will? Some cable news fearmonger? The CDC isn't infallible, but they don't pull numbers out of the air, either; they're scientists, and their guidelines come from evidence. "Some suggest" that vaccines cause autism. Should Syracuse, out of "an abundance of caution," make inoculations optional? If a journalism school doesn't have an obligation to avoid false equivalence between science and paranoia, it might as well fold up its tent.

But by the time I got to the airport, I'd had a change of heart. What if I were a parent of a Newhouse student? What if 21 days is just an average? What's the harm in delaying the workshop for a week or two? What if this young woman sitting next to me on the plane is a nurse, or a roommate of a nurse, at Texas Presbyterian?

There's plenty of Ebola ignorance going around and plenty of political and financial incentives to keep it that way. I'd like to say that the antidote to my fevered speculations is familiarity with the facts. But if that were fully true, I'd be more Vulcan than human. I'd like to believe that my calculations of risk are driven by what science knows about infectious diseases, not by my identities as parent, catastrophist, bureaucrat or disaster-porn addict. But if I were able to process information independent of my affiliations and afflictions, I'd be an algorithm, not a person. The next time I try to persuade someone that they're wrong and science is right, I hope I first take a moment to walk in their shoes, and to feel uncomfortable about how comfortably they fit.

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