

Sunday January 19, 2014

Don't believe everything you read

By Jim Taylor

There is no such thing as an unbiased opinion. “Unbiased opinion” is an oxymoron – a pairing of mutually contradictory words such as airline food, exact estimates, and military intelligence.

Every opinion is biased. It's one person's view. Tragically, we usually fail to recognize that there's no such thing as unbiased recommendation, either. Or an unbiased news report.

Some pretend to be unbiased, hoping that will make them seem more believable. A few genuinely try to be unbiased. It's not possible. Even academic researchers have to pick and choose key points of competing studies. They have to omit evidence they consider less cogent.

News reports rely on certain bare-bones facts – that Ariel Sharon died, that the Canadian dollar nosedived, that rocker Neil Young blasted Canada's environmental record.

Beyond that, however, no two writers will choose the same examples to illustrate Ariel Sharon's life. Those choices depend on whether the writer sees Sharon as a heroic defender of Israel, or a racist who persecuted Palestinians. You can believe Young's rant against Stephen Harper, or reject it as the ravings of an uninformed tree-hugger.

There's ample evidence for either viewpoint.

Manipulating the mind

In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, psychologist and statistician Daniel Kahneman shows us how easily bias sneaks into our decision making.

It's commonly said that we form a first impression seconds after meeting someone. It's usually based on superficial factors – the way she wears her hair, the firmness of his handshake, how recently he shaved...

We don't know what may have mussed her hair, or how much pain arthritis causes in his hands. And none of these factors define the person's intelligence, loyalty, or commitment. But those first impressions will colour our perception of everything else that person says or does.

Discover magazine explored how easily eye witness testimony can be manipulated. Simply showing one picture a few seconds longer than other pictures predisposes the viewer to identify that person as the presumed perpetrator.

Kahneman's studies suggest that a single word can influence even an experienced realtor's assessment of property value.

Manipulating the results

We humans like to think that our ability to weigh evidence objectively distinguishes us from animals. Temple Grandin, an animal psychologist, challenges that presumption. She doesn't argue that animals reason things through; rather, she shows that humans also act impulsively, emotionally. We recognize what we want. Then we find a rationale that will justify it.

Similarly, Kahneman asserts that when faced with a difficult decision, we humans substitute a simpler question and answer that one instead.

For example, we don't invest in Ford because we have analyzed Ford's financial statements. Rather, we ask ourselves if we like their cars. Then we interpret objective statistics to support our subjective preferences.

When I worked for a struggling radio station, the sales manager locked himself in his office each time the Bureau of Broadcast Measurement report came in. “First get the figures straight,” he would say. “Then you can bend them to suit yourself.”

Almost facetiously, Kahneman offers a formula for the success or failure of a marriage: *Frequency of love making minus frequency of quarrelling*.

Maybe for couples in their twenties. Maybe not for couples in their seventies. I would want to add more variables: the age of the partners, their financial status, their mental and physical health, their dependence on each other...

Why? To get the answer I want. Which, incidentally, is also what Kahneman did in selecting material for his book. And what I do in writing these columns.

Read with skepticism

The point is not whether a writer is right or not. No one is. Even the most accepted scientific principles will eventually be superseded.

Some treat the Bible as ultimate authority. But the church took several centuries to sift through other texts - the Gnostic gospels, the gospels of Thomas and Mary, the Apocrypha – leaving only the currently recognized 66 books.

What can we do about it? First, become more aware of factors that affect your reactions. Second, look for factors that may influence a speaker’s or writer’s supposedly objective opinion.

How well does this person understand the situation? As Kahneman notes, a chess master can analyse a board almost instantly, because he has spent thousands of hours dealing with every conceivable combination of pieces. But that doesn’t make a chess master an expert on monetary transactions.

Neil Young spent time with First Nations people affected by oil sands development; if Stephen Harper goes there, he spends his time with oil company executives.

Robert Fisk of Britain’s Independent newspaper knows infinitely more about Middle East realities than the “military intelligence” that George Bush relied on when he launched the Iraq war.

A Monsanto chemist may know her subject, but she cannot state viewpoints contrary to her corporation’s interests.

Just remember, there’s no such thing as an unbiased opinion.

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YOUR TURN

“Your column today really resonated with me,” wrote Jean Gregson, about last Sunday’s piece on elephants. “Have you read ‘The White Bone’ by Barbara Gowdy? Gowdy is a Canadian author and the novel was written in 1999. I just finished reading it yesterday and was left with feelings of anger and sadness. It tells the story of a herd of African elephants, entirely from the point of view of the elephants. We get to know certain elephants very well through their thoughts and feelings and come to care for them as they search for the Safe Place. However, most of the elephants in the story are killed by poachers and it is heartbreaking. This is not an easy book to read, but well worth it. I felt shame that members of the human race could kill these beautiful creatures.”

James Russell shares my understanding of economics: "I do agree that the destruction of ivory, in itself, will likely only increase the price of remaining ivory and the incentive for poor or unscrupulous people to kill to get it. Simple economics. The right way to cut the ivory demand is to make it unfashionable -- and so undesirable -- to have anything to do with it. That is a long and difficult task, but it can be done. As the Buddhists say, you cannot overcome desire by obtaining the objects of desire. You can only overcome desire by overcoming desire.

Christa Bedwin had a cure for elephant poachers: "I think the solution to the elephant problem would be to hunt the people carrying the guns... oh, I can imagine a great novel plot -- guerrilla greenies who invent and install massively exploding bullets in those guys' guns."

Margaret Gilchrist had some further comments about charitable giving: "Some years ago CBC Marketplace did a piece about 'charities' which pay professionals to do the actual fund raising and so a large portion of your gift goes to them. I wrote to all the ones I supported; the only one that replied, some few weeks later, was the Christian Blind Mission which sent me a fully audited statement of their finances. Only some 4% went to fund raising because it was done by volunteers. I phoned to thank them and asked that they remind me just once a year to send my donation - instead of every other day like most charities. They continue to do this and I still support them."

So did Lois Carey: "I'm happy to see that others write to Charities about their marketing policies. I have written to several who continue to send out stuff... I tell them that I do not make a donation in order to get something back -- send me a charitable receipt and that will be all the thanks I would want. I tell them that they are not using donation money wisely if they are spending it on unwanted give-aways. Guess what -- they still keep sending me stuff, even though I don't donate... I think they don't get the message because although most people don't like this, they don't take the time to send a complaint.

And Lyle Phillips found a very helpful website "which gives some good insight into the administrative expenses of Canadian charities. Your readers might like to check out <http://www.charityintelligence.ca>. I found some interesting figures which helped me decide where I want to send my charitable donations."

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca

- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. [<http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>](http://www.churchwebcanada.ca)
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
