

Sunday June 8, 2014

Finding the key factors

By Jim Taylor

Those of us who like to quantify things look for objective measurements that will – if we're honest about our intent – support our preconceptions. About ourselves, about our societies, about our world.

Futurist and philosopher Harding Vowles calls this lust for measurement one of the sacred cows of our time. You can challenge the accuracy of the measurement, but not the value of making measurements.

So naturally I was interested in a U.S. insurance company that claims it can objectively measure the safety of your driving. They will install an electronic gimmick in your car that measures the distance you drive, the hours when you drive, and how hard you brake.

From just those three markers, the company believes, they can deduce all they need to know about your driving habits.

The distance, because obviously the more you're on the road, the greater the likelihood of getting into an accident – even if it's not your fault.

The hours when you drive, because the period between midnight and 4:00 a.m., is prime time for tired and impaired drivers. Of whom you might be one. Or the victim of one.

And braking. Gentle braking doesn't count. Hard braking suggests that you may have had to take corrective action to avoid a collision or accident. Perhaps you were following too close; perhaps you entered a corner too fast; perhaps you failed to anticipate another driver's stupidity. If you chronically brake hard, you're probably taking too many chances, too often.

Irrelevant markers

What the company doesn't care about is also interesting. They don't care where you drive; the unit doesn't record any GPS co-ordinates, so it can't reveal any confidential information about your activities.

And they don't care how fast you drive. Which actually makes some sense. Because speed itself never killed anybody. It's the rate of deceleration that kills and maims. When the airplane piles into a cliff. When the racing boat disintegrates. When your econo-sedan challenges an oncoming logging truck.

The faster you're going, of course, the greater your deceleration. Hence the fallacy that speed kills.

The insurance company decided that they don't care whether you obey laws, but whether you're likely to cause accidents. And those three markers apparently provide all the data they need.

It may sound simplistic. But in reality, we all use markers to validate our opinions.

Preferred choices

Some people favour economic markers. If the Gross Domestic Product is going up, we must be prospering – even if we're destroying the environment. Others hang their analysis on the Gini Index, which measures income disparities, as a symbol of social harmony.

Health advocates bandy figures about obesity. Or infant mortality. Or longevity. As if that marker told the whole story.

In reality, the measurements we choose say more about our own obsessions than about the society they attempt to measure. The more we quote the GDP, per capita debt, or average income, the more we assert that only money matters. Concentrating on rates of cancer or dementia presumes that illness and debility define a society.

I'm not arguing that these quantifiers are wrong, irrelevant, or meaningless. But I find it interesting that an insurance company – whose business is, obviously, financial – realized it had to choose three markers. None of them financial. And none of them directly related to any of the other markers.

They could have measured both speed and braking, for example. Or accident histories and annual mileage. Or daily alcohol consumption and late-night driving. But each of those pairs is related. One influences the other.

Wisely, the company chose not to measure closely related factors.

The rest of us tend to gather all our data less rationally. We tend to draw from one group of related figures – economic, health, social, psychological, or political.

Little things mean a lot

Granted, there are attempts to overcome that single-minded approach. The Happy Planet Index combines subjective assessments of personal well-being with life expectancy and ecological footprint. But the HPI itself admits that it cannot adequately measure human rights abuses, corruption, or political impotence.

That makes their rankings suspect, to my eye. Argentina ranks higher than Norway; India higher than Canada.

The tiny Himalayan country of Bhutan pioneered a Gross National Happiness measure. Its formula uses seven markers: economic, environmental, physical, mental, workplace, social, and political.

I don't know what combination of markers best measure happiness, or anything else. But I'm intrigued by the notion of selecting significant markers.

Could blood pressure spikes identify how often I get angry, as a measure of my mental health? Could the number of apologies I have to issue after sticking my foot in my mouth indicate something about my sensitivity to my neighbour (in the biblical sense)?

By choosing the right markers, we might find -- like the insurance company -- that a few little things can give an objective measure of our behaviour.

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YOUR TURN

I started last week's column (mostly about climate change) with a reference to King Canute or Knut. George Brigham, writing from England, noted that "Canute's legend is much misused" – that is, it's used as if he were trying to exert authority over the tide, when in fact he was demonstrating to his fawning courtiers that kings did not have absolute power.

George continued, "Three places in England claim to be the site of his attempt to turn back the tide: Westminster (in London), Southampton and Gainsborough in Lincolnshire. Having lived and worked as a minister near the latter, I favour their claim! At Gainsborough it was not exactly the tide, but a tidal bore, known as the Aegir, on the River Trent that was the subject of Canute's action.

"Wherever it took place, if it did, his public attempt to turn back the tide was an act of piety, demonstrating his lack of power -- not the arrogant attempt that is so often inferred. Afterwards, it is said, he went into a nearby church, took off his gold crown and hung it on an arm of the cross, never wearing it again and declaring that 'All the

inhabitants of the world should know that the power of kings is vain and trivial, and that none is worthy the name of king but He whose command the heaven, earth and sea obey by eternal laws’.”

Cliff Boldt shared my pessimism about the media’s coverage of climate change: “Poll after poll after poll suggests that Canadians support policies to limit environmental damage. yet when the media cover a story, they want balance and give equal billing to the deniers. Am I missing something?”

Fellow writer and colleague from many years back, Janet Cawley, mixed praise and pessimism: “Your columns (and others' comments on them) make me laugh/squirm/fume and above all, think. Thank you.

“Especially today, thank you for the column on bureaucratic inertia and climate change -- although I think there is not just inertia, but determined resistance on the part of the present government. ‘Us frogs are just fine -- we like the warm water!’

“Vancouver will experience drastic effects from climate change, as you say, since so much of it is built at what will be below sea level within a century. In fact, every area of the country will be severely affected; it is too late now to stop the process. Our government refuses not only to take measures to help slow the process, but even to help mitigate the effects. O brave new world!”

James Russell in Ottawa lobbies constantly for a more responsible response to global issues: “Thanks for reminding us of the facts, their consequences, and the need to do something about them.

“If citizens wait to act ‘... until climate change ceases to be a disputed theory,’ we are goners. There are always going to be corporations whose short term interests impel them to dispute ‘climate change theory’, just as ‘fundamentalists’ dispute ‘evolution theory’. But how to get people to focus on facts and general interests, in the face of the ad budget and lobbying power of particular interests?

“I think we need to spend money and time encouraging parties that actively promote respect for science, public participation in government, and access to publicly supported research and information. And at election time, we need to unite behind the candidate of any aligned party that can win the riding.”

Laurina Tallman wished the column had been longer: “You could have mentioned that time lags in the political sphere also are built on a mush of moral and social values, such as Harper's silencing of environmental scientists and decimation of research stations and research budgets, his killing of the long census form's collection of social data, along with the timeless forms of favouritism and corruption that typically accompany power and that, in his case, have a bizarre religious twist. Then, we have an electoral system he is tinkering with further that allows a shrinking minority to dictate to the majority.”

Laurina called Judyth Mermelstein's list of corporate misdeeds, included in last week’s letters, “a fair start in the corporate arena, but could be extended to governments’ imprudent oversight of environmentally devastating projects in oil extraction and power development and in mineral and other resource extraction for export that keeps Canada sliding towards third world economic status. Our government takes its cue from the US domestic policy that increasingly undermines personal privacy and foreign policy that takes duplicitous roles among global powers.”

James West wrote, “I couldn’t resist the bon mot, ‘A rising tide lifts all boats.’

“From a purely down to earth perspective, humans are smart enough to move to higher ground, move to temperate climates. We vote with our feet.

“Isn’t it strange that after forty years of horror stories about running out of oil, it’s the excess of fossil fuels that could be our demise.”

TECHNICAL STUFF

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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...

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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>
- 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.
