



## Illiteracy, Fake News, Politics, and the Future

IN 2006, MIKE JUDGE WROTE AND DIRECTED *IDIOCRACY*, A MOTION PICTURE PARODY OF WHAT LIFE MIGHT BE LIKE 500 YEARS IN THE FUTURE. IT SEEMS THAT WE ARE NOW LIVING IN A REAL LIFE IDIOCRACY.

In the motion picture, private Joe Bauers, the definition of “average American”, is selected by the Pentagon to be the guinea pig for a top-secret hibernation program. Forgotten, he awakes five centuries in the future and discovers a society so incredibly dumbed down that he’s easily the most intelligent person alive.

Today approximately half of all Americans choose to believe what a former television game show host tells them is the truth instead of trusting scientific evidence or their own powers of observation. This will be a political commentary and I don’t mean to offend, but some things need to be said.

### Illiteracy Is a Problem

LITERACY RATES HAVE STALLED SINCE 2000, LEAVING 758 MILLION ADULTS WORLDWIDE AND 32 MILLION AMERICANS FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY SMART PHONES BOAST INCREASING ABILITIES TO READ AND WRITE.

Research presented at Austin’s South by Southwest (SXSW) conference in March says 2 billion smart phones will soon be able to read and write better than one in 7 Americans. That is nearly 15% of the population! Some politicians seem to believe that ignorant people are easier to control, and they may be right, but a nation full of ignorant people will quickly fail to have any importance.

A huge difference exists between *ignorance* and *stupidity*. An often quoted aphorism (*you can’t fix stupid*) hints at the difference. Most ignorant people aren’t stupid, even if they’re illiterate. I



am ignorant of many things. All of us are. Ignorance can be remedied, though, by taking the time needed to learn how something works.

So ignorance and illiteracy are not insurmountable problems.

In the United States today there are more software engineers than school teachers. Our focus seems to be more on ensuring that machines can use artificial intelligence to communicate with humans than on finding ways to teach children and to improve the skills of adults. Half of adults have trouble reading a book written at an eighth grade level and more than 30 million American adults cannot read a road sign, yet millions of self-driving cars will be on the road by 2020.

### The Internet

PART OF THE PROBLEM IS THE INTERNET. TIM BERNERS-LEE, THE MAN WHO INVENTED THE WORLD WIDE WEB, RECENTLY WROTE AN ARTICLE FOR *THE GUARDIAN*, A BRITISH NEWSPAPER. HE’S CONCERNED ABOUT THE FUTURE AND CITED THREE DANGERS ON TODAY’S WEB.

**We’ve lost control of our personal data:** The current business model for many websites offers free content in exchange for personal data. Many of us agree to this — albeit often by accepting long and confusing terms and conditions documents — but we don’t mind some information being

collected in exchange for free services. As our data is held in proprietary silos, out of sight to us, we lose out on the benefits we could realize if we had direct control over this data and chose when and with whom to share it. What’s more, we often do not have any way of feeding back to companies what data we’d rather not share — especially with third parties. The terms and conditions are *all or nothing*.

Berners-Lee points out that this widespread data collection by companies also has other impacts. Governments watch us on-line and may create extreme laws that trample on our rights to privacy. In repressive regimes, it’s easy to see the harm that can be caused — bloggers can be arrested or killed, and political opponents can be monitored. “But even in countries where we believe governments have citizens’ best interests at heart, watching everyone all the time is simply going too far. It creates a chilling effect on free speech and stops the web from being used as a space to explore important topics, such as sensitive health issues, sexuality, or religion.”

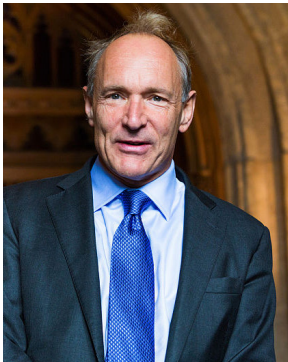
**It’s too easy for misinformation to spread on the web:** Most people find news and information on the web through just a handful of social media sites and search engines.

Berners-Lee sees that as a problem: “These sites make more money when we click on the links they



show us. And they choose what to show us based on algorithms that learn from our personal data that they are constantly harvesting. The net result is that these sites show us content they think we'll click on — meaning that misinformation, or fake news, which is surprising, shocking, or designed to appeal to our biases, can spread like wildfire. And through the use of data science and armies of bots, those with bad intentions can game the system to spread misinformation for financial or political gain."

**Political advertising online needs transparency and understanding:** Political advertising online has rapidly become a sophisticated industry. The fact that most people get their information from just a few platforms and the increasing sophistication of algorithms drawing upon rich pools of personal data mean that political campaigns are now building individual advertisements targeted directly at users.



Sir Tim Berners-Lee.

"One source suggests that in the 2016 US election, as many as 50,000 variations of adverts were being served every single day on Facebook, a near-impossible situation to monitor."

And there are suggestions that some political adverts — in the US and around the world — are being used in unethical ways to point voters to fake news sites, for instance, or to keep others away from the polls. "Targeted advertising allows a campaign to say completely different, possibly conflicting, things to different groups. Is that democratic?"

## Political Concerns

THESE ISSUES ARE RELATED. THOSE WHO CANNOT THINK CRITICALLY WILL BE EASY PREY FOR POLITICAL PIRATES.

In the novel *1984* by George Orwell, the protagonist (Winston Smith) is being questioned by Edmund O'Brien, a member of the thought police: *O'Brien held up his left hand, its back towards Winston, with the thumb hidden and the four fingers extended. "How many fingers am I holding up, Winston?"*

"Four."

"And if the party says that it is not four but five, then how many?"

"Four." *The word ended in a gasp of pain. The needle of the dial had shot up to fifty-five. The sweat had sprung out all over Winston's body. The air tore into his lungs and issued again in deep groans which even by clenching his teeth he could not stop. O'Brien watched him, the four fingers still extended. He drew back the lever. This time the pain was only slightly eased.*

"How many fingers, Winston?"

"Four."

Today we have a president who wants people to disregard what they see and believe only what they are told.

He wants people to believe that nobody in his organization had any communications with Russian government despite clear proof that at least 7 members of his inner circle did.

He wants people to believe that the replacement for the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") will cover more people at lower cost even though the the exact opposite is more likely.

He wants people to overlook the fact that he has gone on expensive golfing vacations in Florida several times in the first few weeks of his presidency despite his repeated condemnation of Barack Obama for his time away from the office.

He wants people to believe that Mexico will pay for a useless wall between Mexico and the United States even though his budget has allocated \$25 billion to pay for it.

Literate voters would question these obvious lies, but illiterates who believe only what they're told to believe will not.

## Is it Really Political?

LITERACY SHOULD NOT BE A POLITICAL ISSUE, BUT IT SEEMS TO HAVE BECOME ONE, ALONG WITH CLEAN AIR AND WATER, CONCERN ABOUT THE FUTURE WE'RE LEAVING OUR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN, AND ANY BELIEF THAT GOVERNMENT AGENCIES SHOULD BE FOUNDED ON LOGIC, TRUTH, AND HONESTY.

Schools once taught critical thinking. My eighth-grade science teacher probably spent too little time on science and too much time on thinking. He was a conservative who disliked many of the things I came to consider essential, but Don Geist taught students to think.

Instead of giving rote responses to questions, we learned to examine the evidence, think, and make decisions based on the observations. Today's "ditto heads" would be anathema to him.

I've wondered what my high school history teacher would think of the current resident of the White House. Ed Bewley was clearly a conservative (1960s small town Ohio), but he had no tolerance for lies and obfuscation.

Conservatives and liberals all want what's best for the nation. We may disagree on how to get there, but our goals are similar.

Regardless of which side of the divide we're on, it's long past time for all of us to put country ahead of party. Ω