



AARON **SWARTZ**

**RAW THOUGHT  
RAW NERVE**  
INSIDE THE MIND OF **AARON SWARTZ**

**RAW THOUGHT**  
**RAW NERVE**  
**INSIDE THE MIND OF AARON SWARTZ**

**NOT-FOR-PROFIT — FOURTH EDITION**

# Discovery Publisher

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First Edition: 2014, Discovery Publisher

Second Edition: July 2016, Discovery Publisher

Third Edition: October 2016, Discovery Publisher

Fourth Edition: August 2018, Discovery Publisher

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DISCOVERY PUBLISHER



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# ABOUT THIS EDITION

In October 2014, Discovery Publisher released *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve: Inside the Mind of Aaron Swartz*. It was then the first publication introducing Aaron Swartz's lifetime work—see Page 3 for details.

In August 2015, the publishing company The New Press, claiming to have legally obtained exclusive copyright from Aaron's legal IP owner—Dr. Sean B. Palmer—took unlawful steps to shutdown our publication; shortly thereafter, The New Press published a scaled-down version of *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve*. A similar action was performed shortly after the release of our second edition.

In an article titled “If I get hit by a truck...”, Aaron stated “If I get hit by a truck [...] the contents of all my hard drives [should] be made publicly available”. It should be noted that in all articles published by Aaron on his blog, he never claimed to be against commercial publishing. Aaron was, however, against abusive or restrictive copyright. As such, when the first edition of this book was released, we did not claim exclusive copyright. Our statement was the same as it is today: “The content of this book is copyrighted to Aaron Swartz”.

Much has been said and written about the unlawful steps that The New Press took against Discovery Publisher; those actions have also been publicly qualified as unethical towards what Aaron stood for. To this day, The New Press has never made any public statement.

Very recently, however, Dr. Sean B. Palmer with the help of Aaron's family and close friends took legal steps to let Discovery Publisher (re-)publish *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve: Inside the Mind of Aaron Swartz* as well as corresponding translations into the French, Italian, Spanish, German, and Portuguese languages—which are presently being produced—under BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

After a year of legal battle, we are very excited to introduce this not-for-profit fourth edition of *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve: Inside the Mind of Aaron Swartz*.

This book is in memory of Aaron and what he stood for.  
Rest in peace, Aaron, your battles were not in vain.

The Discovery Team  
October 2016

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**WHAT IS GOING  
ON HERE?**

# A WORD FROM THE PUBLISHER

I didn't know who Aaron Swartz was. Then, in June 2014, I watched *The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz*<sup>1</sup>.

Aaron taught himself to read when he was three. At twelve, he created Info Network, a user-generated encyclopedia, which he later likened to an early version of Wikipedia. Not long after, Aaron turned his computer genius to political organizing, information sharing and online freedom.

In 2006, Aaron downloaded the Library of Congress's complete bibliographic dataset. The library charged fees to access them. However, as a government document, it was not copyright-protected within the USA. By posting the data on OpenLibrary.org, Aaron made it freely available. Eventually, the Copyright Office sided in favor of Aaron.

In 2008, Aaron downloaded and released 2.7 million federal court documents stored in the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) database managed by the Administrative Office of the United States Courts. *The Huffington Post* characterized his actions as: "Swartz downloaded public court documents from the PACER system in an effort to make them available outside of the expensive service. The move drew the attention of the FBI, which ultimately decided not to press charges as the documents, were, in fact, public."<sup>2</sup>

In late 2010, Aaron downloaded a large number of academic journal articles through MIT's computer network. At the time, Aaron was a research fellow at Harvard University, which provided him with an authorized account. Aaron's motivation for downloading the articles was never fully determined. However, friends and colleagues reported that his intention was either to publicly share them on the Internet or uncover corruption in the funding of climate change research. This time, faced with prosecutors being overzealous and a dysfunctional criminal justice system<sup>3</sup>, Aaron was charged with a maximum penalty of \$1 million in fines and 35 years in prison, leading to a two-year legal battle with the US federal government that ended when Aaron took his own life on January 11, 2013.

Soon after Aaron's death, director Brian Knappenberger, who was "inspired, infuriated and frustrated"<sup>3</sup> by his suicide, began filming *The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz*.

After watching the end of the documentary, I was saddened by this tragic story

and left with many questions: Why did the US criminal justice system take such a strong and unprecedented stand on punishing Aaron? Why did Aaron find no other way out than ending his life? What legacy did Aaron leave behind him?

I discovered that between 2007 and 2011 Aaron read 614 books; one book every three days. Early on, Aaron made a point to write about his findings and reflection<sup>4</sup>. From the “Hello World”<sup>5</sup> post published on January 13, 2002 to the last known article written on November 1, 2012 “What Happens in *The Dark Knight*”<sup>6</sup>, Aaron published 1,478 articles on his personal blog<sup>7</sup>; one article every three days.

Aaron dealt with a wide range of subjects going from politics, economics, science, sociology, through technology, education, nutrition, philosophy, among many others. But beyond that, I was struck by the clarity of Aaron’s mind on the difficulty of the subjects he was dealing with at such a young age. When the typical 16 year-old college student worries about *fitting in* and mating, Aaron was tackling with a book publication<sup>8</sup> and wondered about what he should do with his life<sup>9</sup>. At 18 he read Noam Chomsky, and at 23 wrote the very impressive 12,000-word piece “A Summary/Explanation of John Maynard Keynes’ General Theory”<sup>10</sup>. This article was dealing with such complexity that two days after its publication, it was followed by a *much* shorter and accessible version, titled “Keynes, Explained Briefly”<sup>11</sup>.

After two months into Aaron’s writing, I was convinced that what Lawrence Lessig said at the MIT Media Lab talk “A remembrance of Aaron Swartz: A statement from Tim Berners-Lee read by Lawrence Lessig”<sup>12</sup>, was indeed the best way to describe Aaron : he was not after the money; he was on to making a better world for us all; a freer world.

Back in May 15, 2006, in the article “The Book That Changed My Life”<sup>13</sup> Aaron wrote:

*[...] It’s taken me two years to write about this experience, not without reason. One terrifying side effect of learning the world isn’t the way you think is that it leaves you all alone. And when you try to describe your new worldview to people, it either comes out sounding unsurprising (“yeah, sure, everyone knows the media’s got problems”) or like pure lunacy and people slowly back away.*

*Ever since then, I’ve realized that I need to spend my life working to fix the shocking brokenness I’d discovered. And the best way to do that, I concluded, was to try to share what I’d discovered with others. I couldn’t just tell them it straight out, I knew, so I had to provide the hard evidence. So I started working on a book to do just that.*



Much has been written on the Internet about Aaron's decision to end his life. The article "Losing Aaron"<sup>14,15</sup> written by *Boston Magazine* after interviewing Aaron's father, Robert Swartz, gives a particularly precise and touching account of Aaron's struggles during that time.

On July 26, 2006, in the post "I Love the University"<sup>16</sup> Aaron wrote:

*[.] I was once one of those kids, working there, and I think about why I left [the university] and why I miss it. I marvel at the pointlessness, the impracticality, the waste.*

*The sky is overcast now, the crowds of students have thinned out, and those that remain scurry from place to place with their heads down. I'm tired now, I feel sadder, and I wonder how I lost so much so quickly.*

*I want to feel nostalgic, I want to feel like there's this place, just a couple subway stops away, where everything will be alright. A better place, a place I should be in, a place I can go back to. But even just visiting it, the facts are plain. It doesn't exist, it never has. I'm nostalgic for a place that never existed.*

There have been numerous criticisms about Aaron's decision to end his life. Some agree with it, some don't. Whether he made the right decision is *certainly not* for me to comment on.

Instead, I've chosen to focus on the positive impact Aaron made on us all. This is why I decided to publish some of Aaron's best writings in the form of this present book.

Five months before his death, Aaron completed *Raw Nerve*<sup>17</sup>, a series of articles reflecting on life, depicting an honest, painful and yet beautiful picture of the tragedy of life. Perhaps then, Aaron knew his time was drawing to an end...

RIP, Aaron Swartz.

Discovery Publisher  
November, 2014

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXr-2hwTk58>
2. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/07/darrell-issa-internet-freedom\\_n\\_2633197.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/07/darrell-issa-internet-freedom_n_2633197.html)
3. <http://www.biography.com/news/aaron-swartz-internets-own-boy-interview>
4. *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve*, P.7
5. <http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/000081>
6. *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve*, P.283
7. <http://www.aaronsw.com/>
8. <http://www.aaronsw.com/2002/bookAuthorTips>
9. *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve*, P.586
10. <http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/generaltheory>
11. *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve*, P.209
12. <http://www.media.mit.edu/video/view/aaronsw-2013-03-12-1>
13. *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve*, P.590
14. <http://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/article/2014/01/02/bob-swartz-losing-aaron/>
15. *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve*, P.792
16. *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve*, P.547
17. *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve*, P.756

**Disclaimer:** The unedited content of *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve: Inside the Mind of Aaron Swartz* is available on Aaron's blog<sup>7</sup>. The pricing for this compilation and special edition has been purposely set at the lowest point on Kindle and paper, and free on iBooks. As we believe Aaron would have wanted it<sup>9</sup>, this book is also available free of charge through the website archive.org.

# WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?

In his 1959 classic, *The Sociological Imagination*, the great sociologist Charles Wright Mills told students of the discipline:

*As a social scientist, you have to ... capture what you experience and sort it out; only in this way can you hope to use it to guide and test your reflection, and in the process shape yourself as an intellectual craftsman. But how can you do this? One answer is: you must set up a blog...*

*In such a blog ... there is joined personal experience and professional activities, studies under way and studies planned. In this blog, you ... will try to get together what you are doing intellectually and what you are experiencing as a person. here you will not be afraid to use your experience and relate it directly to various work in progress. By serving as a check on repetitious work, your blog also enables you to conserve your energy. It also encourages you to capture 'fringe-thoughts': various ideas which may be byproducts of everyday life, snatches of conversation overheard in the street, or, for that matter, dreams. Once noted, these may lead to more systematic thinking, as well as lend intellectual relevance to more directed experience.*

*... The blog also helps you build up the habit of writing. ... In developing the blog, you can experiment as a writer and this, as they say, develop your powers of expression.*

Actually, he called it a “file” instead of a blog, but the point remains the same: becoming a scientific thinker requires practice and writing is a powerful aid to reflection.

So that's what this blog is. I write here about thoughts I have, things I'm working on, stuff I've read, experiences I've had, and so on. Whenever a thought crystallizes in my head, I type it up and post it here. I don't read over it, I don't show it to anyone, and I don't edit it — I just post it.

I don't consider this writing, I consider this thinking. I like sharing my thoughts and I like hearing yours and I like practicing expressing ideas, but fundamentally this blog is not for you, it's for me. I hope that you enjoy it anyway.

Aaron Swartz

July 29, 2006

# HELLO, WORLD.

Hello, world.

Aaron Swartz  
January 13, 2002 05:21 AM

# **ECONOMICS, POLITICS & PARODY**

# A SAD DAY FOR AMERICA

CNN: Senate approves Iraq war resolution<sup>1</sup>. ‘The president praised the congressional action, declaring “America speaks with one voice.”’

I’m not sure how the president can call it one voice when half of America does not want to go to war<sup>2</sup>.

Miguel<sup>3</sup> sent an email expressing his support to stop the war. He also told me about an article talking about how we have failed to learn from history<sup>4</sup>. He wrote: “most dumb laws are passed before an election and when there is a rush and no time to inform the American public, whoever takes the most hard-line position wins. The same thing happening now in congress.” *Thanks, Miguel!*

I wish I had known that such horrible things were going to happen while I was D.C.; I might have been able to join some protests or something. I feel powerless, perhaps I should move to another country. However, I am heartened that my senator voted nay<sup>5</sup>, I wonder if my fax last night may have done some good.

October 11, 2002

1. <http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/10/11/iraq.us/>
2. <http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/10/07/iraq.poll/>
3. <http://primates.ximian.com/~miguel/activity-log.php>
4. [http://www.zmag.org/content/print\\_article.cfm?itemID=2462&sectionID=40](http://www.zmag.org/content/print_article.cfm?itemID=2462&sectionID=40)
5. [http://www.senate.gov/legislative/vote1072/vote\\_00237.html](http://www.senate.gov/legislative/vote1072/vote_00237.html)

## UNSPEAKABLE THINGS

Paul Graham has written a fascinating article on *What You Can't Say*<sup>1</sup> — those ideas which are so heretical that people will shout you down and call you names for even daring to state them.

Soon after (but not intentionally because of) I said people have no right to make me pay to use their software<sup>2</sup> and was quickly shouted down as immoral, childish, and (especially funny) anti-capitalist/communist<sup>3, 4, 5</sup>. I don't want to discuss these things, but I do want to try to come up with a list of unspeakable things. What things qualify? It's hard to say precisely, but I think they should have a reasonable chance of being true yet you would be embarrassed to admit you believed them to your friends.

Here's the list so far:

- Democracy isn't a very good idea; lots of people shouldn't be allowed to vote.
- Sex with and in front of children/animals/multiple people is OK.
- Eugenics and suicide should be encouraged.

- Blacks and women are naturally not as smart as white men.

*Can you think of things to add?* Comment or email. I promise to do what I can to keep your suggestions anonymous; good ones will be added to this list and deleted from the comments.

January 05, 2004

1. <http://www.paulgraham.com/say.html>
2. <http://www.aaronsw.com/2002/onPiracy>
3. [http://offlineblog.com/mtarchives/2004\\_01\\_04\\_\\_181.php](http://offlineblog.com/mtarchives/2004_01_04__181.php)
4. <http://www.docuverse.com/blog/donpark/EntryViewPage.aspx?guid=7a592614-ff21-4817-b7c0-3ea9a7007122>
5. <http://www.25hoursaday.com/weblog/CommentView.aspx?guid=9f3fa053-237f-4579-8cab-e418b9aecf70>

## MONEY AND POLITICS

Think money doesn't decide who wins elections?

Candidate name	% of vote	% of money	Difference
Bush	51	53	2
Kerry	48	46	2
Nader	0.3	0.5	0.2
Badnarik	0.1	0.3	0.2
Peroutka	0.1	0.1	0.0
Cobb	0.1	0.01	0.08

Think again.

November 03, 2004

- Washington Post: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/elections/2004/page/295001/>
- Center for Responsive Politics: <http://www.opensecrets.org/presidential/index.asp>

## THE FACTS ABOUT MONEY AND POLITICS

*The previous article, "Money and Politics", was meant as a somewhat humorous and thought-provoking piece of commentary about campaign spending.*

However, for those who are truly curious about how money runs politics, I know of no better source than Thomas Ferguson's book *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems*. The principle alluded to by the title is "to discover who rules, follow the gold" and Ferguson does just that. Using historical evidence including letters, contribution records, public statements, and other documents, Ferguson shows precisely how, from the very founding of the country, politics has been a game for and by large wealthy interests.

The underlying theory is really very simple: running a political campaign is expensive. Individuals are poorly organized to contribute with significant effects. That leaves large corporations who fund practically all viable candidates.

Of course, corporations are usually not monolithic, and political battles arise because of their conflicting interests. Some industries may prefer protectionism to secure the domestic market for themselves. Others may prefer free trade so they can sell and buy from foreign markets. These different corporate blocs coalesce around different candidates who then spend their money to do whatever it takes to get the populace to vote for them.

The key point about the theory is that issues which no corporations support, even if massively popular among the people, will never be raised in a political campaign. Were a candidate to make the mistake of supporting them, his money supply would quickly dry up and his campaign would wither. The result? All political policies enacted, from the New Deal to the invasion of Vietnam, are those supported by the wealthy corporations, not the people.

November 04, 2004

## THE POLITICS OF LYING

It is a truism that politicians and political groups lie. Lies uncovered on one political side are frequently written off by saying "all politicians lie" or "the other side lies too". Indeed, uncovered lies on one side are sometimes used as an argument to be skeptical of the other (as in, "since you've shown the Whigs lie a lot why aren't you equally skeptical of the Tories?").

Does this really make sense? It helps to ask the all-important question: "Cui bono?" or "Who benefits?"

Take the issue of gun control. There are heated partisans on both sides of the issue who claim to have facts to back up their positions about how much harm is caused by guns. Let's say the gun-control advocates (the left) investigated and found that they were wrong and guns weren't really a problem after all. For them, this is good news — they no longer have to spend time and energy protecting people from guns,



since they aren't a problem in the first place. Thus the left has little reason to lie.

The story is different for the right. If gun rights advocates discovered that guns really did kill lots of people, their position would not change. They would still be in support of giving people guns. The only problem is that much of the public might not be. Thus, there is a strong incentive for them to lie.

The facts bear this theory out. Conservative “scholar” John Lott has made up studies, falsified data, and done other things to prove that guns are actually a good thing. Despite all this, he continues to receive large grants from conservative patrons, prominent play in *The New York Times*, large sales for his erroneous book, and draws large crowds and acclaim from conservatives.

By contrast, Michael Besailles was found to have made some errors in citation in his pro-gun-control historical work. Besailles was promptly investigated, fired, exposed in the *Boston Globe*, had his book pulled from publication, and was torn to shreds in various public forums.

Not surprisingly, considering the rewards and punishments involved, new liars on the right pop up frequently while liars on the left are relatively rare.

Even more evidence supporting this theory can be found by looking at when the left does lie. Take, for example, the case of Ralph Nader. The left has raked Nader over the coals for his 2004 presidential campaign, suggesting he's getting funds and signatures from Republicans, attacked Michael Moore for being fat, and done other horrible things.

Yet, as the Nader campaign explains, they have worked hard to refuse signatures from Republicans, fighting lengthy court battles to get them ruled unnecessary. Only 51 Republicans, many of whom Ralph says he knows personally, have donated to the campaign and collectively they've donated even more to the Democrats. And Ralph merely expressed some concern about Moore's health towards the end of a letter.

The simplistic analysis would be to tout this as proof that the left does lie, but again it is interesting to look at the circumstances. When does the left lie? When it is attacking people even further to the left and is thus, in a very real sense, acting as the right.

The next time you hear a claim from a politician, don't just be skeptical. Ask who benefits — the left or the right?

October 25, 2004

## SHIFTING THE TERMS OF DEBATE

### HOW BIG BUSINESS COVERED UP GLOBAL WARMING

In 2004, Michelle Malkin, a conservative editorialist, published the book *In Defense*

*of Internment*. It argued that declassified security intercepts showed that Japanese internment during World War II — the government policy that relocated thousands of Japanese to concentration camps — was actually justified in the name of national security. We needed to learn the truth, Malkin insisted, so that we could see how racial profiling was similarly justified to fight the “war on terror.”

Bainbridge Island was the center of the evacuations; to this day, residents still feel ashamed and teach students a special unit about the incident, entitled “Leaving Our Island”. But one parent in the district, Mary Dombrowski, was persuaded by Malkin’s book that the evacuation was actually justified and insisted the school was teaching a one-sided version of the internment story, “propaganda” that forced impressionable children into thinking that the concentration camps were a mistake.

The school’s principal defended the practice. As the *Seattle Times* reported:

“We do teach it as a mistake,” she said, noting that the U.S. government has admitted it was wrong. “As an educator, there are some things that we can say aren’t debatable anymore.” Slavery, for example. Or the internment — as opposed to a subject such as global warming, she said.<sup>1</sup>

True, Japanese internment isn’t a controversial issue like global warming, but ten years ago, global warming wasn’t a controversial issue either. In 1995, the UN’s panel on international climate change released its consensus report, finding that global warming was a real and serious issue that had to be quickly confronted. The media covered the scientists’ research and the population agreed, leading President Clinton to say he would sign an international treaty to stop global warming.

Then came the backlash. The Global Climate Coalition (funded by over 40 major corporate groups like Amoco, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and General Motors) began spending millions of dollars each year to derail the Kyoto Protocol, the international treaty to help reduce global warming. They held conferences entitled “The Costs of Kyoto,” issued press releases and faxes dismissing the scientific evidence for global warming, and spent more than \$3 million on newspaper and television ads claiming Kyoto would mean a “50-cent-per-gallon gasoline tax.”<sup>2</sup>

The media, in response to flurries of “blast faxes” (a technique in which a press release is simultaneously faxed to thousands of journalists) and accusations of left-wing bias, began backing off from the scientific evidence.<sup>3</sup> A recent study found only 35% of newspaper stories on global warming accurately described the scientific consensus, with the majority implying that scientists who believed in global warming were just as common as global warming deniers (of which there were only a tiny handful, almost all of whom had received funding from energy companies or associated groups).<sup>4</sup>

It all had an incredible effect on the public. In 1993, 88% of Americans thought global warming was a serious problem. By 1997, that number had fallen to 42%, with only 28% saying immediate action was necessary.<sup>5</sup> And so Clinton changed course and insisted that cutting emissions should be put off for 20 years.

US businesses seriously weakened the Kyoto Protocol, leading it to require only a

7% reduction in emissions (compared to the 20% requested by European nations) and then President Bush refused to sign on to even that.<sup>6</sup> In four short years, big business had managed to turn nearly half the country around and halt the efforts to protect the planet.

And now, the principal on Bainbridge Island, like most people, thinks global warming is a hotly contested issue — the paradigmatic example of a hotly contested issue — even when the science is clear. (“There’s no better scientific consensus on this on any issue I know,” said the head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “except maybe Newton’s second law of dynamics.”)<sup>7</sup> But all this debate about problems has kept us away from talk about solutions. As journalist Ross Gelbspan puts it, “By keeping the discussion focused on whether there is a problem in the first place, they have effectively silenced the debate over what to do about it.”<sup>8</sup> So is it any wonder that conservatives want to do the same thing again? And again? And again?

June 6, 2006

1. [http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/2002027639\\_bainbridge06m.html](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/2002027639_bainbridge06m.html)
2. <http://prwatch.org/prwissues/1997Q4/warming.html>
3. <http://prwatch.org/prwissues/1997Q4/warming.html>
4. <http://fair.org/index.php?page=1978>
5. Cambridge Reports, Research International poll. “Do you feel that global warming is a very serious problem...?”, Cambridge Reports National Omnibus Survey, September 1993, in Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (0290350, 039). USCAMREP.93SEP, R40.
6. <http://prwatch.org/prwissues/1997Q4/warming.html>
7. Warrick, Joby. “Consensus Emerges Earth Is Warming – Now What?”, Washington Post, 12 Nov. 1997: A01.
8. <http://dieoff.org/page82.htm>

## MAKING NOISE

### HOW RIGHT-WING THINK TANKS GET THE WORD OUT

Malkin’s book on internment was no more accurate than the corporate misinformation about global warming. Historians quickly showed the book badly distorted the government records and secret cables it purported to describe. As just one example, Malkin writes that a Japanese message stated they “had [Japanese] spies in the U.S. Army” when it actually said they hoped to recruit spies in the army.<sup>1</sup> But it should be no big surprise that Malkin, who is, after all, an editorialist and not a historian, didn’t manage to fully understand the complex documentary record in the year she spent writing the book part-time.<sup>2</sup>

Malkin’s motives, as a right-wing activist and proponent of racial profiling, are fairly obvious. But how did Mary Dombrowski, the Bainbridge Island parent, get

caught up in this latest attempt to rewrite history? Opinions on global warming were changed because big business could afford to spend millions to change people's minds. But racial profiling seems like less of a moneymaker. Who invested in spreading that message?

The first step is getting the information out there. Dombrowski probably heard about Malkin's book from the Fox News Channel, where it was ceaselessly promoted for days, and where Malkin is a contributor. Or maybe she heard about it on MSNBC's *Scarborough Country*, a show hosted by a former Republican congressman, which had Malkin as a guest. Or maybe she heard it while driving and listening to FOX host Sean Hannity's radio show, or maybe Rush Limbaugh's. Or maybe she read a review in the *New York Post* (which, like Fox News, is owned by Rupert Murdoch). Or maybe she read about it on a right-wing website or weblog, like *Townhall.com*, which publishes 10 new conservative op-ed columns every day.

All of these organizations are partisan conservative outlets. *Townhall.com*, for example, is published by the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing Washington, D.C. think tank. Most people imagine a think tank as a place where smart people think big thoughts, coming up with new ideas for the government to use. But that's not how Heritage works. Nearly half of Heritage's \$30 million budget is spent on publicity, not research.<sup>3</sup> Every day, they take work like Malkin's that agrees with their ideological prejudices and push it out through the right-wing media described above (Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, *New York Post*) and into the mainstream media (ABC, NPR, *New York Times*, *Seattle Times*).

They use a variety of tactics. Heritage, for example, publishes an annual telephone directory featuring thousands of conservative experts and associated policy organizations. (*The Right Nation*, 161) And if looking up somebody is too much work, Heritage maintains a 24-hour hotline for the media, providing quotes promoting conservative ideology on any subject. Heritage's "information marketing" department makes packages of colored index cards with pre-printed talking points for any conservative who plans to do an interview. (*The Right Nation*, 167) And Heritage computers are stocked with the names of over 3,500 journalists, organized by specialty, who Heritage staffers personally call to make sure they have all the latest conservative misinformation. Every Heritage study is turned into a two-page summary which is then turned into an op-ed piece which is then distributed to newspapers through the Heritage Features Syndicate. (*What Liberal Media?*, 83)

It all adds up: a 2003 study by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, the media watch group, found conservative think tanks were cited nearly 14,000 times in major newspapers, television, and radio shows. (By comparison, liberal think tanks were cited only 4,000 times that year.)<sup>4</sup> That means 10,000 additional quotes of right-wing ideology, misleading statistics, distorted facts, and so on. There's no way that doesn't unfairly skew the public debate.

1. <http://hnn.us/articles/7092.html>
2. [http://www.isthatlegal.org/Muller\\_and\\_Robinson\\_on\\_Malkin.html](http://www.isthatlegal.org/Muller_and_Robinson_on_Malkin.html)
3. <http://www.fair.org/extra/9607/heritage.html>
4. <http://www.fair.org/extra/0405/think-tank.html>

## ENDORISING RACISM

### THE STORY OF THE BELL CURVE

If you have any doubt about the power of the think tanks, look no further than the story of *The Bell Curve*. Written by Charles Murray, who received over 1.2 million from right-wing foundations for his work, the book claimed that IQ tests revealed black people to be genetically less intelligent than whites, thus explaining their low place in society. Murray published the 845-page book without showing it to any other scientists, leading the *Wall Street Journal* to say he pursued “a strategy that provided book galleys to likely supporters while withholding them from likely critics” in an attempt “to fix the fight ... contrary to usual publishing protocol.” Murray’s think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, flew key members of the media to Washington for a weekend of briefings on the book’s content. (What Liberal Media?, 94)

And the media lapped it up. In what Eric Alterman has termed “a kind of Rorschach test for pundits,” (What Liberal Media?, 96) every major media outlet reviewed the book without questioning the accuracy of its contents. Instead, they merely quibbled about its proposed recommendations that the dumb blacks, with their dangerously high reproductive rates, might have to be kept in “a high-tech and more lavish version of an Indian reservation” without such luxuries as “individualism, equal rights before the law,” and so on. Reviewers proposed more moderate solutions, like just taking away their welfare checks. (What Liberal Media?, 94)

But such quibbles aside, the amount of coverage alone was incredible. The book received cover stories in *Newsweek* (“the science behind [it] is overwhelmingly mainstream”), *The New Republic* (which dedicated an entire issue to discussion of the book), and *The New York Times* Book Review (which suggested critics disliked its “appeal to sweet reason” and are “inclined to hang the defendants without a trial”). Detailed articles appeared in *TIME*, *The New York Times* (“makes a strong case”), *The New York Times* Magazine, *Forbes* (praising the book’s “Jeffersonian vision”), the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *National Review*. It received a respectful airing on such shows as *ABC’s Nightline*, *PBS’s MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, the *McLaughlin Group*, *Think Tank* (which dedicated a special two-part series to the book), *ABC’s PrimeTime Live*, and *NPR’s All Things Considered*. With fifteen weeks on the bestseller list, it ended up selling over 300,000 copies in hardcover.<sup>1</sup>

This wasn't just a media debate about the existence of global warming or the merits of internment, this was a full-on media endorsement of racism, which the American Heritage Dictionary defines as "The belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others." Nor did the media mention the work's political intentions. On the contrary, they presented it as the sober work of social scientists: Nightline's Ted Koppel lamented to Murray about how his "great deal of work and research" had become "a political football".<sup>2</sup>

Of course, this was almost certainly Murray's intention all along. In the book proposal for his previous book (*Losing Ground*, an attack on government welfare programs) he had explained: "Why can a publisher sell this book? Because a huge number of well-meaning whites fear that they are closet racists, and this book tells them they are not. It's going to make them feel better about things they already think but do not know how to say."<sup>3</sup> That's certainly what *The Bell Curve* did, replacing a debate over how to improve black achievement with one about whether such improvement was even possible.

There was just one problem: none of this stuff was accurate. As Professor Michael Nunley wrote in a special issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist* on *The Bell Curve*, after a series of scientific articles debunked all the book's major claims: "I believe this book is a fraud, that its authors must have known it was a fraud when they were writing it, and that Charles Murray must still know it's a fraud as he goes around defending it. ... After careful reading, I cannot believe its authors were not acutely aware of ... how they were distorting the material they did include." (*What Liberal Media?*, 100)

June 8, 2006

1,2,3    <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1271>

## SPREADING LIES

### HOW THINK TANKS IGNORE THE FACTS

But do the right-wing think tanks even care about the facts? In his autobiography, *Blinded by the Right*, David Brock describes his experience being recruited for one right out of college: "Though I had no advanced degrees, I assumed the grandiose title of John M. Olin Fellow in Congressional Studies, which, if nothing else, certainly impressed my parents. ... My assignment was to write a monograph, which I hoped to publish as a book, challenging the conservative orthodoxy on the proper relationship between the executive and legislative branches of government." This topic was chosen, Brock explains, because with "a squish like Bush in the White House ... the political reality

[was] that the conservative agenda could be best advanced by renegade conservatives on Capitol Hill.” (79f)

Needless to say, paying fresh-faced former college students lots of money to write articles that serve political needs is not the best way to get accurate information. But is accurate information the goal? Look at John Lott, a “resident scholar” at the American Enterprise Institute — the same right-wing think tank that promoted *The Bell Curve*. Lott’s book *More Guns, Less Crime* claimed that his scientific studies had found that passing laws to allow people to carry concealed weapons actually lowered crime rates. As usual, the evidence melted away upon investigation, but Lott’s errors were more serious than most.

Not content to simply distort the data, Lott fabricated an entire study which he claimed showed that in 97% of cases, simply brandishing a gun would cause an attacker to flee. When Internet critics began to point out his inconsistencies on this claim, Lott posted responses under the name “Mary Rosh” to defend himself. “I have to say that he was the best professor I ever had,” Lott gushed about himself one Internet posting. “There were a group of us students who would try to take any class that he taught. Lott finally had to tell us that it was best for us to try and take classes from other professors.”

Confronted about his alternate identity, Lott told the Washington Post “I probably shouldn’t have done it — I know I shouldn’t have done it”. And yet, the very next day he again attacked his critics, this time under the new pseudonym “Washingtonian”. (It later got so bad that one of Lott’s pseudonyms would start talking about posts from another Lott pseudonym.)<sup>1</sup>

Lott, of course, is not the only scholar to make things up to bolster his case. For comparison, look at Michael Bellesiles, author of the anti-gun book *Arming America*, which argued guns were uncommon in early America. Other scholars investigated and found that Bellesiles had probably fabricated evidence. Emory University, where Bellesiles was a professor of history, begun an investigation into the accuracy of his work, eventually forcing him to resign. His publisher, Knopf, pulled the book out of print. Libraries pulled the book off their shelves. Columbia University revoked the Bancroft Prize the book had been awarded. The scandal was widely covered in academic circles. Bellesiles was firmly disgraced and has not shown his face in public since.

And what happened to Lott? Nothing. Lott remains a “resident scholar” at the American Enterprise Institute, his book continues to sell well, his op-ed pieces are still published in major papers, and he gives talks around the country.<sup>2</sup> For the right-wing scholar, even outright fraud is no serious obstacle.

June 9, 2006

1,2      <http://timlambert.org/guns/Lott/>



# SAVING BUSINESS

## THE ORIGINS OF RIGHT-WING THINK TANKS

Since the goal of these think tanks clearly isn't to advance knowledge, what are they for? To understand their real goals, we have to look at why they were created. After the tumultuous 1960s led a generation of students to start questioning authority, business decided something had to be done. "The American economic system," explained Lewis Powell in a 1971 memo for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "is under broad attack" from "perfectly respectable elements of society: from the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians."

And business has no one to blame but itself for not getting these things under control: the colleges are funded by "contributions from capital funds controlled or generated by American business. The boards of trustees ... overwhelmingly are composed of men and women who are leaders in the system." And the media "are owned and theoretically controlled by corporations which depend upon profits, and the enterprise system to survive." So business must "conduct guerilla warfare" by "establishing a staff of highly qualified scholars" who can be paid to publish a "steady flow of scholarly articles" in magazines and journals as well as books and pamphlets to be published "at airports, drugstores, and elsewhere."<sup>1</sup>

William Simon, president of the right-wing Olin Foundation (the same one that later funded Brock) was more blunt: "The only thing that can save the Republican Party ... is a counter-intelligentsia. ... [Conservative scholars] must be given grants, grants, and more grants in exchange for books, books, and more books." (*Blinded By the Right*, 78)

The Powell memo was incredibly influential. Soon after it was written, business began following its advice, building up its network of think tanks, news outlets, and media pressure groups. These organizations begun to dot the landscape, hiding behind respectable names like the Manhattan Institute or the Heartland Foundation. While these institutions were all funded by partisan conservatives, news accounts rarely noted this fact. (Another FAIR study finds The Heritage Foundation's political orientation — let alone its funding — was only identified in 24% of news citations.)<sup>2</sup>

As the conservative message machine grew stronger, political debate and electoral results begun to shift further and further to the right, eventually allowing extreme conservatives to be elected, first with Ronald Reagan and now with George W. Bush. More recently, conservatives have managed to finally win not only the White House but both houses of Congress. While their policy proposals, when understood, are just as unpopular as ever, conservatives are able to use their media power to twist the debate.

June 10, 2006



1. [http://reclaimdemocracy.org/corporate\\_accountability/powell\\_memo\\_lewis.html](http://reclaimdemocracy.org/corporate_accountability/powell_memo_lewis.html)
2. <http://www.fair.org/extra/9805/think-tanks.html>

# HURTING SENIORS

## THE ATTACK ON SOCIAL SECURITY

Recent events provide a compelling case study of how this process works. Conservatives have wanted to get rid of Social Security for years. The most successful anti-poverty program in history, it clearly shows how the government can be used to help people — anathema to conservative ideology. Now, with a secure lock on government, is their time to strike. As a White House deputy wrote in a memo that was later leaked, “For the first time in six decades, the Social Security battle is one we can win — and in doing so, we can help transform the political and philosophical landscape of the country.”<sup>1</sup>

There’s extremely strong public support for Social Security — conservatives could certainly never just come out and say they wanted to end it — so their plan is to deceive the public: First, persuade people that Social Security is facing some sort of crisis and won’t be around for the next generation. Second, convince them to begin replacing Social Security with a privatized version. Privatization, the logic goes, will naturally keep increasing until all of Social Security is eliminated. The only problem is that Social Security isn’t facing a crisis and any form of privatization, which would require both paying out to existing retirees and saving away money for the private accounts of the current generation, would worsen whatever financial problems Social Security does have.<sup>2</sup>

But think tanks have been preparing for this moment for years, floating privatization plans and doing their best to persuade the media that Social Security was in imminent danger. So when the Bush administration started up their anti-Social Security campaign, the media knew exactly what to say.

CBS, for example, presented a segment featuring man-on-the-street Tad DeHaven. “I don’t expect to get anything from Social Security, OK?” said young DeHaven. “It’s not going to be there — that’s my assumption.” DeHaven had good reason to say these things: for years, he’s been one of the leading Republican activists in the fight to get rid of Social Security. CBS never mentioned the connection.<sup>3</sup>

A later CBS report boosted fears that Social Security was going bankrupt by displaying a graphic on the screen that read “2042: Insolvent = 0 benefits??” [sic] (“In 2042, Social Security will become insolvent, and today’s young workers risk losing their benefits,” a voiceover explained.) But this just isn’t true: even the pessimistic Social Security Administration concedes that by 2042 Social Security will be able to pay nearly 80% of scheduled benefits, which is still far more than what it pays out today.<sup>4</sup>

Other networks were no better. NBC's report feature quotes from Bush saying the system would go "flat bust" and an interview with a Heritage Foundation scholar — identified only as a "social security expert" — but allowed no critics to contradict their claims.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, an ABC report claimed "One thing everyone agrees on, the Social Security system as it exists now won't be able to afford those payments for long after the Wilsons retire." In fact, it's quite the opposite: even the most pessimistic predictions say that Social Security will be fine until the Wilsons are statistically dead. Again, no critics...<sup>6</sup>

June 11, 2006

1. [http://www.j-bradford-delong.net/movable\\_type/2005-3\\_archives/000119.html](http://www.j-bradford-delong.net/movable_type/2005-3_archives/000119.html)
2. <http://www.fair.org/activism/cbs-cnn-social-security.html>
3. <http://www.fair.org/activism/cbs-cnn-social-security.html>
4. <http://www.fair.org/activism/cbs-social-security-update.html>
5. <http://www.fair.org/activism/nbc-socialsecurity.html>
6. <http://www.fair.org/activism/abc-socialsecurity.html>

## FIGHTING BACK RESPONSES TO THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Unlike the conservative media, it does not appear the national media is intentionally partisan. But it exists in a very specific structural context. A recent study found that two-thirds of journalists thought bottom-line pressure was "seriously hurting the quality of news coverage" while around half reported their newsrooms had been cut. 75% of print and 85% of broadcast journalists agreed that "too little attention is paid to complex issues."<sup>1</sup> When you're short on staff and stories are shallow, reporters become even more dependent on outside sources — and the right-wing think tanks are more than willing to help out, while further pulling coverage to the right.

But one obvious solution — creating a matching set of left-wing think tanks — while perhaps helpful in balancing the debate, will not solve the problem. Media norms of balance mean that even qualified experts will always be presented as "just one side of the story," balanced directly against inaccurate conservatives — recall how the handful of corporate-funded global warming deniers are still balanced against the overwhelming scientific consensus.

Ideally, viewers would be able to hear both perspectives and decide which they thought was accurate. But since, as the journalists conceded, so little time is spent explaining complex issues, in practice very little information is presented that can help the viewer decide who's correct. So they're left to decide based on their existing ideological preferences, further splitting the country into two alternate realities.

Figuring out what is true — especially when it's so obvious, as in the examples above — is precisely what the mainstream media should be doing. Partisan pundits would be replaced with thoughtful scholars. Non-peer-reviewed books would be ignored, not endlessly promoted. Scientific facts would be given precedence over political arguments. Political commentary would be replaced by factual education.

Don't hold your breath. Six major companies own nearly 90% of all media outlets.<sup>2</sup> And they — and their advertisers — don't mind how things are going. Sumner Redstone, CEO of Viacom (Paramount, CBS, Blockbuster, MTV, Comedy Central, etc.), told a group of CEOs that "I look at the election from what's good for Viacom. I vote for what's good for Viacom." And, "from a Viacom standpoint, the election of a Republican administration is a better deal. Because the Republican administration has stood for many things we believe in, deregulation and so on."<sup>3</sup> Better news reporting wouldn't just be more expensive, it would threaten these business interests.

To get the straight story, it's necessary to turn to independent and community sources which don't have such conflicts of interest. One possibility is the daily news show *Democracy Now!*, hosted by Amy Goodman, which is funded only by viewers and foundations. Broadcast on 150 radio stations, 150 television stations, and the Internet, the show presents stories from activists, journalists, authors, and public interest organizations from around the world.

When outlets from ABC to the *New York Times* began claiming Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, *Democracy Now!* was one of the few sources to take a contrary view. It presented the testimony of Iraq's top weapons official, who defected to the US and explained that all the weapons had been destroyed. (Other stations, ironically, parroted the Bush administration in promoting the information he presented about the weapons Iraq had, without mentioning they had been destroyed.)<sup>4</sup>

And when US soldiers kidnapped Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the democratically-elected president of Haiti, and flew him to the Central African Republic where they locked him in a hotel room, he managed to quietly phone out while armed guards stood outside his door. *Democracy Now!* was alone in airing his incredible story. When Aristide was finally freed, he insisted on returning to his country and again Amy Goodman was the only US television journalist who dared to accompany him back.<sup>5</sup>

Still, *Democracy Now!*'s audience is rather small compared to that of the mainstream media. But stories from overseas hint at what could happen if enough people begun paying attention to such sources. In South Korea, the country with the highest rate of broadband adoption, politics has been turned upside down by OhmyNews, a five-year-old website. Founded by Oh Yeon Ho, OhmyNews has a feature unlike any other paper: more than 85% of its stories are contributed by readers.<sup>6</sup>

Almost anyone can write for OhmyNews: the site posts 70% of all stories that are submitted, over 15,000 citizen-reporters have published stories. OhmyNews copyedits their work but tries to leave their differing styles intact. The citizen-

reporters write about things they know about and that interest them, together they end up covering most of the traditional spectrum. Yet their new voices end up providing coverage on things which typically get ignored by the mainstream media.<sup>7</sup>

This is most evident in their political coverage. Before OhmyNews, conservatives controlled 80% of Korea's newspaper circulation. Then OhmyNews gave a voice to progressives, inspiring massive nationwide protests against the government. The protests, in turn, led to the election of reformist Roh Moo Hyun, now known as "the first Internet president."<sup>8</sup> The furious conservative National Assembly responded by voting to impeach Roh on technical grounds. OhmyNews readers again organized and overthrew the Assembly in the next election, reinstating Roh. There's no reason why what happened in South Korea can't happen here. Overcoming the tide of misinformation is hard work, but working together committed citizens can make amazing progress, even when up against the most powerful interests. Our society has an extraordinary level of freedom and openness. Whether we use that freedom to seek out the truth or remain content with conventional platitudes is up to us.

June 11, 2006

1. <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/214topline.pdf>
2. [http://www.thevoicenews.com/news/2003/0411/Front\\_Page/C06\\_LaVoie-media.html](http://www.thevoicenews.com/news/2003/0411/Front_Page/C06_LaVoie-media.html)
3. <http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110005669>
4. <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=03/04/07/0320205>
5. <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=04/03/01/1521216&mode=thread&tid=25>
6. <http://www.siliconvalley.com/mld/siliconvalley/business/columnists/5889390.htm>
7. [http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article\\_view.asp?article\\_class=8&no=201599&rel\\_no=1](http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?article_class=8&no=201599&rel_no=1)
8. [http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article\\_view.asp?article\\_class=8&no=201599&rel\\_no=1](http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?article_class=8&no=201599&rel_no=1)

## AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

Al Gore's presentation on global warming is filled with graphs — Gore is fanatical about collecting evidence, even at one point going to the North Pole to persuade the scientists there to release their records of the ice shelves — but only one of them really matters. It comes early in the film, as Gore talks about the large ice core samples that scientists take to trace the history of the Earth's temperature and CO<sub>2</sub> ratings.

Gore shows the results of these samples and then says we can go back further. The screen expands in both directions to show a massive graph of CO<sub>2</sub> concentration going back 600,000 years. It had its fluctuations over that time — large hills and then valleys. Underneath it, he then graphs temperature over the same period.

Temperature tracks CO<sub>2</sub> almost exactly, with a several-decade lag. Those large

fluctuations? Those were the six ice ages we've had over the past 600,000 years. CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere goes up and so does the temperature, the CO<sub>2</sub> trapping the sun's radiation inside our planet, where it heats the Earth.

These huge fluctuations are the difference between ice ages and where we are today. Then Gore shows the most recent trajectory of CO<sub>2</sub>: straight up, more than doubled. "If that much CO<sub>2</sub> in one direction causes an ice age," Gore says, "imagine what it will do in the other direction." And then he shows the projections for the next 50 years. Again straight up, another doubling. "This is literally off the charts," he explains. He has to climb up to reach that peak.

"Not a single number in this graph," he says, "is in dispute." This is the inconvenient truth: unless we change, we will destroy the environment that sustains our species.

June 6, 2006

## THE ATTRACTION OF THE CENTER

"Centrism" is the tendency to see two different beliefs and attempt to split the difference between them. The reason why it's a bad idea should be obvious: truth is independent of our beliefs, no less than any other partisans, centrists ignore evidence in favor of their predetermined ideology.

So what's the attraction? First, it requires little thought: arguing for a specific position requires collecting evidence and arguing for it. Centrism, simply requires repeating some of what A is saying and some of what B is saying and mixing them together. Centrists often don't even seem to care if the bits they take contradict each other.

Second, it's somewhat inoffensive. Taking a strong stand on A or B will unavoidably alienate some. But being a centrist, one can still maintain friends on both sides, since they will find at least some things that you espouse to be agreeable with their own philosophies.

Third, it makes it easier to suck up to those in charge, because the concept of the "center" can easily move along with shifts in power. A staunch conservative will have to undergo a major change of political philosophy to get a place in liberal administration. A centrist can simply espouse a few more positions from the conservatives and a few less from the liberals and fit in just fine. This criteria explains why centrists are so prevalent in the pundit class (neither administration is tempted to really force them out) and why so many "centrist" pundits espouse mostly conservative ideas these days (the conservatives are in power).

Fourth, despite actually being a servant of those in power, centrism gives one the illusion of actually being a serious, independent thinker. "People on the right and on the left already know what they're going to say on every issue," they might claim, "but

we centrists make decisions based on the situation.” (This excuse was recently used in a fund-raising letter by The New Republic.) Of course, the “situation” that’s used to make these decisions is simply who’s currently in power, as discussed above, but that part is carefully omitted.

Fifth, it appeals to the public. There’s tremendous dissatisfaction among the public with the government and our system of politics. Despite being precisely in the middle of this corrupt system, centrists can claim that they’re actually “independents” and “disagree with both the left and the right”. They can denounce “extremism” (which isn’t very popular) and play the “moderate”, even when their positions are extremely far from what the public believes or what the facts say.

Together, these reasons combine to make centrism an especially attractive place to be in American politics. But the disease is far from limited to politics. Journalists frequently suggest the truth lies between the two opposing sources they’ve quoted. Academics try to distance themselves from policy positions proposed by either party. And, perhaps worst of all, scientists try to split the difference between two competing theories.

Unfortunately for them, neither the truth nor the public necessarily lies somewhere in the middle. Fortunately for them, more valuable rewards do.

Exercise for the reader: What’s the attraction of “contrarianism”, the ideology subscribed to by online magazines like Slate?

July 12, 2006

## TALKING RIGHT

Government, John Dewey famously said, is the shadow cast by big business over society. And political language, Geoffrey Nunberg argues in *Talking Right*, is the shadow cast by government. Democrats, he points out, seem to think language has a talismanic power, that if only they can find the right catch phrase or slogan, they can pull people over to their side. “Liberal” must become “progressive”, “family values” must become “valuing families”. There’s an intellectual cleverness to such stunts, and as a Berkeley linguist, Nunberg must want to believe in them. But he doesn’t. The words, he explains, are just a side-effect of the larger political situation. Dewey explained that attempts to change the shadow will have no effect without a change in the substance, and Nunberg heartily agrees.

It’s hard to see how it could be otherwise, but Democrats have suffered from a stubborn literalism in political discourse: thinking they can beat the charge of big government by launching programs cutting down on bureaucratic waste, thinking they can reclaim the issue of values by pointing to their love of tolerance and fairness,

thinking they can dodge the charge of latte-sipping by donning a hunting cap and rifle. In reality, the issues go much deeper: big government is an attack on the notion that government can do good, values refers to a feeling of national morals run amok, and the latte-sipping charge is an attempt to distract voters from bigger issues of class. Nunberg even chastises his colleague George Lakoff for assuming that the current packages of political positions have any deeper meanings, rather than just being accidents of history.

Nunberg is an essayist — his commentaries for NPR's *Fresh Air* are a national treasure — and his style, while eminently readable, doesn't translate well to a long book, where his points get lost in a field of anecdotes. But beneath all the stories about how conservatives eat more brie and liberal used to be a mantle claimed by everyone, Nunberg's point is a familiar one: if the Democrats want to win, they must begin telling full-throated populist stories about how the economic elite are capturing the wealth of our country and how we need government to take it back. The point is no less true for being popular, and it's heartening to find that investigation from yet another perspective yields the same conclusions.

October 17, 2006

## THE INVENTION OF OBJECTIVITY

Big media pundits are always wringing their hands about how upstart partisan bloggers are destroying the neutral objectivity our country was founded on. (If there's one thing pundits love to do, it's hand-wringing.) Without major papers giving everyone an objective view of the facts, they insist, the very foundation of the republic is in peril.

You can criticize this view for just being silly or wrong, and many have, but there's another problem with it: it's completely ahistorical. As Robert McChesney describes in *The Problem of the Media*, objectivity is a fairly recent invention — the republic was actually founded on partisan squabblers.

When our country was founded, newspapers were not neutral, non-partisan outlets, but the products of particular political parties. The Whigs had their paper, the Tories theirs, and both of which attacked their political opponents with slurs that would make even the most foul-mouthed bloggers blush. This behavior wasn't just permitted — it was encouraged.

You often hear the media quote Jefferson's comment that "were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." However, they hesitate to print the following sentence: "But I should mean that every man should receive

those papers, and be capable of reading them.” In particular, Jefferson was referring to the post office subsidy the government provided to the partisan press.

In 1794, newspapers made up 70% of post office traffic and the big debate in Congress was not over whether the government should pay for their delivery, but how much of it to pay for. James Madison attacked the idea that newspaper publishers should have to pay even a token fee to get the government to deliver their publications, calling it “an insidious forerunner of something worse.” By 1832, newspaper traffic had risen to make up 90% of all mail.

Indeed, objectivity wasn’t even invented until the 1900s. Before that, McChesney comments, “such notions for the press would have been nonsensical, even unthinkable.” Everyone assumed that the best system of news was one where everyone could say their piece at very little cost. (The analogy to blogging isn’t much of a stretch, now is it? See, James Madison loved blogs!)

But as wealth began to concentrate in the Gilded Age and the commercial presses began to lobby government for more favorable policies, the size and power of the smaller presses began to dwindle. The commercial presses were eager to be the only game in town, but they realized that if they were, their blatant partisanship would have to go. (Nobody would stand for a one-newspaper town if the one paper was blatantly biased.) So they decided to insist that journalism was a profession like any other, that reporting was an apolitical job, based solely on objective standards.

They set up schools of journalism to train reporters in the new notion. In 1900, there were no J-schools; by 1920, the major ones were going strong. The “church and state” separation of advertising and reporting became official doctrine and the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) was set up to enforce it.

The entire foundation of press criticism was rebuilt. Now, instead of criticizing papers for the bias of their owners, press critics had to focus on the professional obligations of their writers. Bias wasn’t about the slant of a paper’s focus, but about any slanting put in by a reporter.

So that was the line of attack the house press critics took when the world of weblogs brought back the vibrant political debates of our country’s founding. “These guys are biased! Irresponsible! They get their facts wrong! They’re unprofessional!” they squeal. Look, guys. Tell that to James Madison.

October 19, 2006

## THE WORLD IS WATCHING

The World is Watching is an incredible and, to my knowledge, unique film about the making of news. Two film crews, one at ABC News headquarters in New York, the other with ABC’s Central American Unit in Nicaragua, spend a day watching exactly



how the clips that appear on the national nightly news are made. The result is revealing.

The crew begins the day by checking in with Washington to get the appropriate framing for the story. At the same time, they keep an ear out for tips and scoops. They hear about a village leveled by the contras (the US-funded group fighting Nicaragua's socialist government) and set out to get some film.

They interview a peasant. "You have to be angry," the reporter coaches his subject, who stubbornly remains calm and peaceful despite having been brutally attacked. This peasant, like every other one in the film, can clearly and eloquently explain exactly what's going on: Reagan is fighting a war by proxy against their government because it has dared to institute policies which favor the poor (that is, people like them) over the wealthy elites. They live in horrid conditions, they are brutally attacked by contra forces, they appear to be just poor and stupid peasants — yet they know exactly what's going on and tell the cameras as much.

The cameras, of course, know better. For the journalists and the folks at home, the events are seen through a different frame. Five Central American countries have signed a peace agreement promising to institute Democratic reforms in exchange for peace. Most of these countries are US client-states where the governments we instituted brutally terrorize civilians and suppress democratic freedoms. The media doesn't see that, though. Instead, Reagan literally directs their eyes elsewhere by delivering a heartfelt message to the media: they have an import responsibility — perhaps "one of journalism's great triumphs," he says — to ensure democracy flourishes... in Nicaragua.

The journalists unquestionably accept this frame, sending camera crews to Nicaragua, not the other countries. Once there they ensure everything that comes back is fit into this frame. We watch as Peter Jennings marvels at how the Sandanista government has managed to survive the democratic reforms. We watch as the Washington team carefully scrutinizes the voiceovers, blanching at the suggestion that the protesters in the street are somehow "anti-war". "It sounds like they're peaceniks or something," one reporter says. Pro-Sandanista protesters would be much better.

Once the piece hits air the peasant's words, so eloquent before, are chopped and translated for the larger audience. Now she is seen stupidly insisting that she does not see communism. This is just a backlash against being attacked by the contras, the voiceover helpfully explains, and anyway, she's just a peasant — what does she know? Meanwhile, the Sandanista government still refuses to negotiate with the contras and is thus presumably the cause of all this violence. The whole piece takes up just two minutes on the news.

At the same time the piece airs on ABC, the facts on the ground show a different story. Daniel Ortega, leader of the Sandanistas, is giving a speech to a large assembled crowd. He will negotiate with the Sandanistas, he says. It's too late — the piece has been filed and the ABC crew has already flown to the next day's location. The folks at home never hear the news.

October 24, 2004

# MYSTERIES OF THE EARTH-BOUND HUMAN

In my short stay upon this planet I have noticed many things interesting and strange which I have written about in this and other periodicals. However, there are some things which are more than just unusual: they are simply incomprehensible. And yet they are widespread and almost universally beloved.

There are many silly and irrational things on this planet (I'm thinking of a major one in particular), but the irrationality of such things is generally acknowledged in the more intellectual circles and plausible explanations have been devised. No such thing is true of the following — it is the rare soul who would admit to agreeing with the following.

**Sports.** Humans find no end of amusement in sitting on their butts on uncomfortable metal benches in an ugly, dirty facility that stinks of alcoholic beverages and saliva-modified products and watching a bunch of other humans far below play any of a variety of bizarre games with sticks and balls. They sit (or, more accurately, stomp and scream) and watch this entirely boring display for hours on end, repeatedly. When they cannot make it in person they watch facsimilies which are beamed into their homes.

It is not simply that the humans have boring lives and appreciate any excuse from them. While that is undoubtedly true, it does not explain such a bizarre choice. There is no similar crowd who collects to observe the behavior of ants or even other humans (in constrained situations like malls, perhaps) even though both these things are far more interesting.

Nor is it that the humans enjoy thinking about games, since broadcasts of more intellectual games receive nowhere near the same audience. Instead, such obsession is reserved for what they call “sports” — games with organized teams under rigid rules that involve a great deal of athletic activity. No explanation for this obsession is ever provided. Indeed, even questioning the obsession is taboo.

Now let me be clear. I certainly find it enjoyable to play a good game, especially one that involves plenty of exercise. Yet even here, humans manage to inexplicably screw it up. When playing a game their goal is never to have fun, even though that is precisely what the game is good at. Instead, they become obsessed with the minutiae of following “the rules” and deciding who is “winning” — pastimes which generally practiced are antithetical to the aforementioned aim.

**Rock concerts.** A sizable segment of the human population spends their time involved in the production of things that amuse other humans, a field known as “entertainment”. Some in this field create a certain type of interesting sounds, known as “music”. I have nothing against this endeavor — many of the results are quite enjoyable, with interesting results on mood and emotion. (Although most of it, especially that noted as “popular”, is quite bad.)

And I can certainly sympathize with the desire to become more involved with a

group of “musicians” who make sounds that one things especially good. However, the humans once again take this reasonable pursuit and turn it towards the bizarre. It turns out that the tribute takes form in what they call a “rock concert”.

A concert consists of going to listen to the humans make their good sounds. (Reasonable so far.) However, for most modern bands, it is apparently required to do this in a dark and poorly-cleaned basement, pressed up against the bodies of numerous other people who are talking and stuff, with the sounds played through speakers at a volume so loud that they sound absolutely dreadful. The alcoholic beverages and so on also again make an appearance.

**Food.** Like the humans, I require certain the consumption of certain objects in order to power the chemical reactions that allow me to functions (a process the humans call “eating”). While there are differences in our tastes (mine our smaller) and quantities (mine are larger), no one can object to doing these things which are necessary to live.

What is bizarre is how much enjoyment they seem to get out of it. In a recent informal survey, the humans told me that “eating” made up a large part of the enjoyment they derived from their lives. I was not able to discern the causes of such enjoyment.

In one incident, a subject explained how he looked forward fondly for the opportunity to consume a certain liquid. Interested in pursing such enjoyment, I decided to have some of the liquid with him. The liquid promptly proceeded to burn my innards, causing a distinctly unpleasant situation that lasted for some time. And yet this human is far from the only one who enjoys this liquid — facilities for distributing it seem to be on every block. But as far as I can tell humans do not enjoy burning their innards in any other situation. The fact that it’s “food” seems to have a magical power over them.

**Sex.** [REDACTED]

*[This section has been censored from the Earth edition of this publication because it was found too inflammatory in focus groups.]*

This is the greatest of all human oddities. Humans are simply obsessed with sex and sexual relations and other related things. They think about it, according to some accounts, nearly all the time and much of their entertainment is dedicated to the subject. Yet, by all accounts, it is a distinctly unpleasant affair involving activities so disgusting I dare not describe them to you here. While humans no doubt derive pleasure from

such activities, surely it is not worth the enormous costs — pleasure can be found in other ways in their society.

**Conclusion.** I do not hold out much hope for solving these strange mysteries during my stay here. They are of some interest to me, but more as a sidenote than as anything I would devote my efforts to. Even if I were to investigate, I cannot even think of a plausibly effective way to proceed on these questions. So I write them up here and leave them as one of this planet's unsolved mysteries.

2005-10-28

## TRIALS OF TESTING

Since many readers complained about the previous piece “Mysteries of the Earth-Bound Human” we have pulled it and provided this replacement. The things we do for you people!

It takes little courage to denounce men who believe they can harness the power of their minds to fly and use a space of universal consciousness to create world peace. And, in the long run, it is of little consequence. No one can recall the obscure psuedo-scientific claims of yesteryear.

But take the idea that underneath the skull lie a series of organs for human traits like acquisitiveness and amorousness which bulge and change the shape of the head with dominance. The idea seems equally preposterous but it held real sway in its era — the Massachusetts Medical Association and the president of Harvard threw their weight behind it (Paul, 7) and phrenology continues to be remembered today.

Such absurd ideas are not remnants of a bygone past — just replace “organs” with “genes” and you’ll have the new “science” of evolutionary psychology (formerly sociobiology), an absurdity which Harvard University’s own president has thrown the institution’s weight behind. And yet one rarely sees “pro-science skeptics” challenging its claims. Indeed, scientific magazines write them up with only minor questioning, saving their ire for those who dare criticize the ideas.

But at least such fields have critics (and I count myself among them). There are related claims, however, that exercise much more power over our lives and (perhaps as a result) are far less challenged. One of their creators explained that they would “promote personal development”, “manage conflict”, and “increase human understanding worldwide.” (Paul, 121) But instead of Vedic science, she was talking about here creation: the Myers-Briggs personality test.

I have written before about the failures of experiments to provide evidence in favor of our concepts of personality or intelligence and how despite this many continue to believe in them. One can discuss how even studies by proponents find that IQ lacks

validity and that 47% of people have a different Myers-Briggs personality type on a second administration of a test. But this somehow seems not to convince. So let us try another tack: let us look at how these tests are made.

The history of the IQ test — along with a number of other supposed ways of measuring “intelligence” — is detailed in Stephen Jay Gould’s classic *The Mismeasure of Man*. It was originally created by Alfred Binet to find children in French schools who might need special tutoring. Binet thought that by locating and helping these students, one could make sure that everyone learned all the material. Binet composed the test by throwing together whatever questions came to mind: things about shapes and numbers and words. He just wanted to see if some kids were having trouble, he made no attempt to make sure the result was a balanced measure of “intelligence”.

Lewis Terman, a professor at Stanford University, imported the Binet test to America, added some more random things and mixed it all up a little, and called the result the Stanford-Binet intelligence test (a name which is still used today)<sup>1</sup>. One of the test’s first applications was American Psychological Association president Robert Yerkes’s attempt to classify the people recruited for the Army. Among the questions:

- Crisco is a: patent medicine, disinfectant, toothpaste, food product
- The number of a Kaffir’s legs is: 2, 4, 6, 8
- Christy Mathewson is famous as a: writer, artist, baseball player, comedian

Recent immigrants, whose command of English might be understandably weak, were allowed to take a pictorial version: drawing “a rivet in a pocket knife, a filament in a light bulb, a horn on a phonograph, a net on a tennis court, and a ball in a bowler’s hand (marked wrong, Yerkes explained, if an examinee drew the ball in the alley, for you can tell from the bowler’s posture that he has not yet released the ball).” (Gould, 230)

Terman, meanwhile, conducted a longitudinal study of the people his IQ test marked as “gifted”. Joel Shurkin, based on exclusive access to the records, documented the full story in his book *Terman’s Kids*. Among the study’s participants was a man named Jess Oppenheimer. “Gave the impression of being very pushy and forward although he did not show these characteristics during the interview,” wrote one of Terman’s assistants. “I could detect no signs of a sense of a humor.” (Shurkin, 54) Oppenheimer went on to create and write the shows *I Love Lucy* and *Get Smart*.

The story of personality tests is little better. In her book *The Cult of Personality* (recently republished as *The Cult of Personality Testing*), Annie Murphy Paul (a former senior editor for mass bi-monthly *Psychology Today*) describes the history of all the major personality tests. Take the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), which was created in a similar way to the IQ test.

The test was created by psychologist Starke Hathaway and neuropsychiatrist J. Charnley McKinley by simply coming up with a bunch of true-or-false statements that they thought might indicate whether the respondent had a mental illness. Among them:

- I have never had any black, tarry-looking bowel movements.
- I have had no difficulty starting or holding my urine.

- I have never indulged in any unusual sexual practices.
- There is something wrong with my sex organs.
- I believe there is a Devil and a Hell in the afterlife.
- Everything is turning out as the Bible said it would.
- I think I would like to belong to a motorcycle club.
- Often I feel as if there were a tight band around my head.
- I loved my father.
- I like to flirt.
- I believe my sins are unpardonable.
- I have a good appetite.
- I think Lincoln was greater than Washington.
- Women should not be allowed to drink in cocktail bars.
- A large number of people are guilty of bad sexual conduct.
- If the money were right, I would like to work for a circus or carnival.
- (Paul, 53)

The resulting test was administered to the patients at the University of Minnesota mental hospital as well as the (presumably sane) staff there (all white, Protestant, Minnesotans who came to be known as the “Minnesota Normals”). Statistical analysis was then done to determine which questions more accurately predicted whether the user had a mental illness and more specifically, what kind.<sup>2</sup>

This was quickly generalized: people who scored above-average on the scales for Hysteria or Depression (but not high enough to actually have a mental illness) could be said to have hysterical or depressive personalities, even though there was absolutely no evidence to support this leap (not that it was on particularly sturdy ground to begin with).

The resulting test was used to analyze people in business, the army, court, high school, and at the doctor’s. It was “used to screen job applicants, offer vocational advice, settle custody disputes, and determine legal status.” (Paul, 58f) And while the test engendered some backlash, it continues to be used frequently today, often as the a requirement for getting or keeping a job. Paul notes “the MMPI (in an updated version) is employed by 86% of clinical psychologists and administered, by one estimate, to 15 million Americans each year.” (63) For example, it is used by 60% of police departments to evaluate prospective officers. Meanwhile, studies show that such tests can reject as high as 60% of healthy applicants.

This is but one example — and one chapter in Paul’s book — but all the others all have similar stories. An absurd test, concocted through absurd means, completely untested, ends up becoming a powerful societal force. All the more reason for us to speak out about them.

October 28, 2005

1. Incidentally, although Terman did not put his name on the test, his family continues to have a presence at Stanford. His son Frederick Emmons Terman was a professor of engineering (and later provost); the Terman Engineering Center, which was across the street from my dorm, is named in his honor. And down the hall from me in my dorm lived his daughter, who, in full disclosure, I ate meals with a couple times.
2. Not that this methodology is necessarily flawed, although it leads to some interesting conclusions. Paul writes that in one experiment, the question “that yielded some of the most useful information” about whether someone had a fascist personality was: “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.” (Paul, 147)

## THE TRUTH ABOUT DRUG COMPANIES

Whenever someone wants to talk about how great our society is, one example that always seems to come up is our many innovative and powerful new drugs invented by the pharmaceutical companies. Perhaps it's just the \$54 billion a year the companies spend on marketing, much of it going to ads talking about how innovative and helpful drug companies are, but it does seem like these life-saving wonder pills have really captured the public's imagination.

But in her new book, *The Truth About the Drug Companies*, Marcia Angell, former editor-in-chief of the respected *New England Journal of Medicine*, shows that much of what we thought about the drug companies is wrong. For one thing, they're not innovative. Believe it or not, drug companies simply do not do research into major new drugs. All the real research is done at universities and funded by the government.

Thanks to the Bayh-Dole Act, universities can then patent these medical discoveries made by their employees using public funding, which they then turn around and sell to the drug companies for a relative song. Often the universities have done all the work — including clinical trials — and drug companies just start up the manufacturing plants.

Because the drug companies have bought exclusive patent rights, they can now charge whatever they like for these drugs without fear of competition. And what little research the drug companies do mostly involves coming up with “me too” drugs — modifying an existing drug a little bit (even things as minor as changing the color or coating it) and then filing new patents on the result so that the exclusive profits keep rolling in. Thanks to armies of lawyers and various FDA patent loopholes, drug companies can use various patent tricks to keep generic competitors away for years.

Even when competitors do finally arrive, the drug company marketing campaigns start up, encouraging everyone to switch to their new, slightly-different-but-patented drug. For example, take AstroZeneca's heartburn drug Prilosec (\$6 billion in annual sales): when its patent ran out, AstroZeneca took the inactive half off of Prilosec, repatented it, and marketed as Nexium. It then ran clinical trials which compared 20mg of Prilosec with 20mg of Nexium, but since half of Prilosec was inactive, this



was like comparing 10mg of the old drug and 20mg of the new drug. Somewhat surprisingly, Nexium's double dose appeared to be only slightly more effective, but AstroZeneca touted these results in a massive marketing campaign involving tons of ads and gobs of free samples, enough to get doctors to switch most prescriptions before the Prilosec patent ran out.

These marketing campaigns are huge: \$11 billion a year in free samples, over \$6 billion on sales reps (one for every five doctors), \$3 billion on vague ads to consumers. But on top of this are massive campaigns of deception: bribing doctors, bribing researchers, bribing universities, bribing HMOs, providing kickbacks, running "medical education courses" which state law requires doctors to attend, running in-hospital television networks which are one long drug ad, and funding deceptive studies (like the Nexium one) that wrongly make it appear that the company's new drug has amazing beneficial properties.

These studies are so pervasive that when the rare honest study is done, the results are incredible. The US government funded a massive study called ALLHAT (8 years, 42,000 people, 600 clinics) to compare different treatments for high blood pressure. It compared a series of different popular modern drugs (Norvasc, Cardura/doxazosin, Zestril/Prinivil/lisinopril) which worked in different ways and an "old time diuretic" or "water pill". The results were stunning: the diuretic was more effective and had less side effects than the expensive fancy new drugs — less heart failure and fewer strokes, so much so that the Cardura part of the trial had to be stopped early since so many people were getting heart failure. These expensive new drugs weren't just wasting people's money (as much as \$678 a year per person), they were seriously hurting them.

But nobody prescribed diuretics, perhaps in part because nobody marketed them to doctors. Drug companies aren't required by the FDA to compare their new drugs to older treatments, so doctors had no way to know which was more effective. And drug companies aren't even required to publish the studies the FDA does require. For example, the study that led the FDA to approve antidepressants (like Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft, Celexa, Serzone, and Effexor) found that placebos were 80% as effective. But these studies weren't released until fifteen years later, when someone filed a Freedom of Information Act request against the FDA. There are even worse cases: for decades, women were prescribed estrogen and progesterone hormone replacement therapy because industry-sponsored studies said it would prevent heart disease. But a large NIH clinical trial found the therapy actually increases heart disease!

Our utopia of miracle pills is now beginning to look a bit like a nightmare. Drug companies use our tax money to pay for their research, turn around and sell the results to us at high prices, spend the resulting profits on massive campaigns to mislead us about their effects, which then encourage doctors to prescribe an expensive pill which may not help much and might even make things worse. Year after year, drug companies are by far the most successful industry. They use their stunning profits to buy off politicians and propagandize the public into maintaining this state of affairs.



Only by learning the true state of affairs can we begin to fight back.

March 25, 2005

## THE CASE AGAINST LAWRENCE SUMMERS

*Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [Less Developed Countries]? ... I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that. ... countries in Africa are vastly UNDER-polluted*

— Lawrence H. Summers<sup>1</sup>

On January 14, 2005, Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers offered “some attempts at provocation” at a conference on “Diversifying the Science & Engineering Workforce”, specifically discussing “women’s representation in tenured positions in science and engineering at top universities and research institutions”.<sup>2</sup>

He begins by suggesting that under-representation isn’t always due to discrimination:

Catholics are substantially under-represented in investment banking, which is an enormously high-paying profession in our society; that white men are very substantially under-represented in the National Basketball Association; and that Jews are very substantially under-represented in farming and in agriculture.

So, he says, we have to ask why women are under-represented and he offers three possibilities. The first is what he calls “the high-powered job hypothesis”, namely that “young women in their mid-twenties make a decision that they don’t want to have a job that they think about eighty hours a week”. (“Is our society right [in these expectations and imbalances]?” He tables the question.) The second is “differential availability of aptitude at the high end” — that there is a difference in the variability of “mathematical ability, scientific ability” that is “not plausibly culturally determined” which, by his rough calculations, means there are five times as many male math/science geniuses as there are women math/science geniuses.

“I would far prefer to believe something else,” Summers says, but “the combination of the high-powered job hypothesis and the differing variances probably explains a fair amount of this problem.”

Could the differing variances be due to socialization? Summers doesn’t think so. He says that “a hundred different kibbutzes” each independently decided to reverse course from a sexual egalitarianism and let “the men ... fix the tractors and the women ... work in the nurseries”. And furthermore:

... my experience with my two and a half year old twin daughters who were

not given dolls and who were given trucks, and found themselves saying to each other, look, daddy truck is carrying the baby truck, tells me something.

(Summers does not say whether two-person sample was also raised without TV and books and all the other images of socialization that say girls should play with baby dolls.)

Is it discrimination?

If it was really the case that everybody was discriminating, there would be very substantial opportunities for a limited number of people who were not prepared to discriminate to assemble remarkable departments of high quality people at relatively limited cost simply by the act of their not discriminating ... I think one sees relatively little evidence of that.

So, he says, the general problems of universities are those of the “high-powered job”, the specific problems of the sciences are due to natural varying ability. “I would like nothing better than to be proved wrong,” but “empirical psychology” and “the data” say otherwise. And our personal prejudices have to bow before the objectivity of science.

This is a tune that is by no means new. As Stephen Jay Gould points out in his fine book, *The Mismeasure of Man*, throughout history those who have tried to justify existing inequalities by blaming biological determinism have said the same thing.

Paul Broca, for example, who carefully weighed numerous brains to see which groups were intelligent and which were not, was truly sad to discover that the brains of blacks were smaller than those of whites. But, he argued, there was nothing he could do: “There is no faith, however respectable, no interest, however legitimate, which must not accommodate itself to the progress of human knowledge and bend before truth.”

Despite such lofty principles, Gould shows that, quite aside from the false assumption that brain size is related to intelligence, Broca repeatedly and consistently manipulated his data to reach these conclusions. Gould believes such manipulation was unconscious, even though at times it was quite extreme. (As one example, Broca threw out entire systems of measurement when the inferior races scored too well on them.)

The tone is a theme through Gould’s book, so it is no surprise to see it reappear today. But is it any more true?

Broca’s major error was assuming that the size of someone’s brain could tell you how intelligent they are. This is of course incorrect — people’s brain size is mostly determined by the size and build of the rest of their body — and trouble the assumption seems absurd. Yet we believe in a notion that is just as silly — that IQ tests and math exams measure some sort of innate intelligence.

In the present context, a study by Claude Steele brings some of the problems into sharp relief. (I am working here from Steele’s chapter in *Young, Gifted, and Black*.) Steele, with Steven Spencer and Diane Quinn, took some of the best and most dedicated math students they could find and gave them an extremely difficult math test. The men performed more than three and a half times as well as the women — an enormous gap. Then they gave students the same test, but told them this was a special

test in which women always did as well as men. The gap closed almost entirely, with women's scores increasing dramatically. (Steele's research shows similar effects with other victims of stereotypes, like blacks.)

Steele suggests that women's scores are depressed by "stereotype threat" — a woman comes across a hard problem that they have trouble solving, and they begin to worry that people might think they're having trouble at math because they're female, and they begin to worry that this might be true. (Needless to say, comments like Summers's can't do much to alleviate these fears.) When they're told the stereotypes can't apply, the fears go away and they perform fine.

But the mechanisms involved are unimportant for our purposes. The key point is that the supposedly objective examination measure of intelligence is seriously flawed, even on a subject as supposedly objective as a math test. These tests are not just measuring intelligence; at the very least they're also measuring something like self-confidence.

As Gould argues, we are tempted to measure things and then we are tempted to assume the numbers that result refer to something real — that tests in math measure something called "mathematical ability". But this is a logical leap — the case must be carefully proven. There's no evidence that such a thing as "math ability" even exists, let alone that it can be measured.

Biological determinists like to respond to such arguments by saying that the speaker is denying the influence of biology, when all reasonable people know that both biology and environment have an impact — say 40% biology, 60% environment. But it is the determinists who are missing the point. Skills cannot be divided up in so absurd a manner.

Let us put aside brains for a second and imagine the arm muscle. Some people are born with a naturally skinny body type that doesn't build much arm muscle. Others naturally build muscle like crazy. Clearly biology plays a role. But it's absurd to say that it's 40% biology, or any other number — a muscular person whose arm is paralyzed will not be very muscular at all, while a weak person who works out incessantly will have huge biceps.

It's not hard to see how the brain could work the same way: people are born with natural tendencies, but work or environment can quickly change this "default" destiny.

In a real twist of irony, it turns out that it is exactly this confusion that causes the gender gap. Further research by Carol Dweck has investigated whether students believe that "mathematical ability" is a learned skill or an innate gift. A simple study shows the shocking effects of this belief. Students were given an obscure non-verbal IQ-style test that was designed to be easy for their age group. Afterwards, half were told "You got a great score. You must have worked really hard" and half were told "You got a great score. You must be really good at this." Then they asked kids if they wanted to try harder questions that might help them learn more. The ones who were praised for effort were happy to — one effort-based kid (in another study) rubbed his hands together, licked his lips, and exclaimed "I always love a challenge!" — but



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# RAW THOUGHT RAW NERVE

INSIDE THE MIND OF **AARON SWARTZ**

NOT-FOR-PROFIT — REVISED EDITION

In 2010, Aaron Swartz downloaded a large number of academic journal articles through MIT's computer network. At the time, Aaron was a research fellow at Harvard University, which provided him with an authorized account. Aaron's motivation for downloading the articles was never fully determined. However, friends and colleagues reported that Aaron's intention was either to publicly share them on the Internet or uncover corruption in the funding of climate change research. Faced with prosecutors being overzealous and a dysfunctional US criminal justice system, Aaron was charged with a maximum penalty of \$1 million in fines and 35 years in prison, leading to a two-year legal battle with the US federal government that ended when Aaron took his own life on January 11, 2013.

Aaron taught himself to read when he was three. At twelve, he created a user-generated encyclopedia, which he later likened to an early version of Wikipedia. He then turned his computer genius to political organizing, information sharing and online freedom. Aaron was on to making a better world for us all; a freer world.

Five months before his death, Aaron completed *Raw Nerve*, a series of articles reflecting on life, depicting an honest, painful and yet beautiful picture of the tragedy of life. *Raw Thought, Raw Nerve: Inside the Mind of Aaron Swartz* is a selection of writings from one of the most original minds of our time.



ISBN 978-1-5394-8979-5



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