

How Do You Know What You Know?



"We don't know what we don't know. It's very difficult for us to get out of the reality that is constructed for us."
—Barack Obama

by Armando Simón

I occasionally ask the above question of people, which tends to irritate them (irritating people is one of my small pleasures in life).

One of the interesting things that have come out of Putin's invasion of Ukraine is that in the first few weeks of the invasion many Russians were not aware that their country was

at war with Ukraine, thinking instead that it was a minor military exercise. The other is that many Russians now refuse to believe that their army has caused so much destruction and even carried out war crimes. Even when they are told of the destruction and mayhem by their friends and family [living inside](#) the invaded country, who have seen the destruction with their own eyes, they [refuse](#) to believe it.

On the other hand, quite a few Russians not only know what is happening, but [have](#) protested the [war](#), at personal risk, while others have [left](#) their country [upon](#) experiencing increased repression and censorship.

On the face of it, it appears that the difference between the two groups is that the former relies on one source of information and has faith in it while the latter utilizes other sources, specifically from the internet, which the Russian government failed to control as China has. Even so, the former group does receive alternate information—from their friends and relatives in Ukraine, but they reject that firsthand information and opt to believe the official Kremlin version. And even when they have access to other sources of information, they refuse to utilize [them](#). They consciously restrict their horizons (we see the same thing with leftists in American, Canadian and British universities).

In an earlier [paper](#), I noted that whenever a belief in a particular subject is accompanied by a very strong emotion (e. g., fear, hate, anger, panic), that belief becomes set in stone in a person's mind and no matter what unimpeachable evidence to the contrary is presented by an outsider, what logic, what reasoning is employed, the believer will continue to strongly adhere to that belief.

We see this in Western countries, mostly in persons who adhere to leftist politics, though conservatives at times evidence such susceptibility.

In the case of American conservatives who fervently support the Second Amendment, it is an argument of faith with them that citizens owning a handgun prevents authoritarianism in the country, and, furthermore, that if government agents come to get their precious guns, "They can only take my guns away from my cold, dead hands." In regards to the first part of the overall belief, the patently obvious increased authoritarianism in recent years, whether national, or in specific states like California and New York, has not been inhibited one bit by citizens' gun ownership. During the Covid travesty, basic freedoms, taken for granted, were done away with, not just in [California](#), or New [York](#), or the entire United [States](#), but also in other countries such as [Canada](#), [Australia](#), the [UK](#), [France](#), [Italy](#), etc. The past three years have been the springtime of unimpeded authoritarianism. It makes one wonder what, exactly, they are waiting for.

The counterargument to the second half of the belief is based on logic and reason rather than evidence. The belief is that if the authorities show up at a gunowner's home to remove his handgun, his refusal plus his brandishing his precious gun will make the authorities run for the hills. Or, if there is a shootout, the gunowner will be able to take out twenty of the confiscating authorities—preferably with just one shot—whereas their fusillade will bypass him. In reality, in such a scenario, the authorities would conduct a sudden no-knock home invasion with 20 fully armed troopers. The gunowner would almost certainly be shot. And this is [exactly](#) what has happened.

Mention such arguments and evidence and the result is intense anger and refusal to consider the facts and the logic.

The very same is true with leftists. For example, most leftists have an [obsessive](#), blinding [hatred](#) of Donald Trump. It is no exaggeration that with many of them it is literally an all-consuming obsession. Some become not only angry, but even hysterical, when presented with evidence and logical

arguments that contradict their toxic beliefs about the man, which they regard as being axiomatic. Even if one could stand on their shoulders and apply a jackhammer to their skulls, nothing would get through.

One of their many beliefs is that Trump won the 2016 election only through [Russian](#) collusion. According to their views, the majority of Americans were not concerned with the systematic destruction of their economy, the corruption in the federal government, or the hordes of illegal immigrants breaking through the border committing crimes, so Trump could only have won through the [help](#) of Putin (after all, they say, his opponent was a very admirable woman, in spite of stealing items from the [White](#) House when she left there). So they built their hopes up with the Mueller investigation and when that finally found no collusion . . . [they](#) continued believing it. Even now, with the additional revelations that have recently [emerged](#), they [still](#) fervently [believe](#) it.

Let us take another example, dealing with the Biden crime family. Most of the American media has waged a campaign to suppress all information regarding the family's past illegal activities. Among other things, the laptop of a drug-addled member of that family contained damning information, which was reported by a relatively minor news outlet. A massive campaign of discrediting both the [report](#) and the outlet was launched by—what I call— the [media](#) hivemind to the effect that the [whole](#) thing was a [hoax](#). This narrative of a “hoax” was, and is, believed. Except that the news suppression has failed and recently some of the deniers have been exposed to the [facts](#). Some of the deniers [still](#) believe it a hoax while [others](#) minimize the importance of the revelations.

(By now, some of the readers of this story will have walked away because their strongly held beliefs have been questioned, a frequent reaction.)

We could continue citing contemporary examples, the dismal

[Covid fiasco](#) being the most obvious, but we would get bogged down in the specifics and lose track of the general principle, although it is, unfortunately, most evident in politics and tends to make readers angry.

In totalitarian countries

Now, one of the characteristics of totalitarian countries is the rigid censorship and the limited access to outside countries. This helps to maintain the regime's illusion, discourage dissent, and prevents facts from contradicting the ideology. We see also see all these elements in Western universities, where there is a growing totalitarian movement; speakers who dissent from the ideology are not allowed in. Likewise with [cults](#). For a successful [cult](#) to thrive, it [must](#) isolate itself.

In the Soviet Union particularly under Stalin, in China particularly under Mao, and presently in North Korea, the censorship and isolation was/is extreme. Presently, something that drives the Pyongyang leaders up the wall is the sporadic flotilla of balloons carrying CDs and DVDs of soap operas and films drifting northward from South Korea sent by defectors. This may seem incomprehensible, if not silly, to those who have never lived in a totalitarian country, but to the regime—and to its people—it is deadly serious. A badly made, but very important, movie (with an even worse title) is [Chuck Norris vs. Communism](#). It shows how desperate people living in Ceaușescu's Romania were to obtain a glimpse of the outside world through smuggled, grainy VHS tapes. Once they saw how people lived in the West, Romanians realized their epistemology was warped.

And, of course, it should be obvious that this general principle is applicable to apolitical knowledge. Four or five centuries ago, every European was certain that there were witches and those witches could cast magical spells which affected the real world. Just like modern day young Europeans

have a firm belief that capitalism is evil and leads to ruin. Likewise, an ocean of ink was wasted writing about humours and phlogiston, things which did not exist, but all learned men believed in. Thomas Mann hit the nail on the head when he wrote that, "A human being lives out not only his personal life as an individual, but also, consciously or subconsciously, the lives of his epoch and his contemporaries."

Unknown literature

Here is a personal example that is embarrassing, and in my defense, I must point out that there was no internet or personal computer at the time. Having graduated from universities in the late 1970s, I was a voracious reader of science, literature and history. I would frequent bookstores (there were bookstores back then) and buy new books. A crack addict had nothing on me. It slowly dawned on me that I knew nothing about history or literature from Asia, yet realized that civilizations that old must have created literature. But what was it? What to search for? Where to look for it? I didn't know what I didn't know. *The Tale of Genji*, *Journey to the West*, *I Am a Cat*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* were unheard of. It also occurred to me that many of the European countries must also have good literature, but the only European literature was invariably from France, Russia, and Britain. Nothing from Hungary, Finland, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, or Spain. My concern, though, was transitory. Yet, at about the same time, paperbacks (written on the worst kind of paper) came out from a printing press called Berkeley Books on novels by Tanizaki, Kawabata, and Michima. For me, that was the start.

Who needs replicants?

In the fascinating science-fiction film, *Blade Runner*, there are human clones called replicants. They come into being fully adult, but in order for them to function memories must be

implanted in them, which the replicants believe are legitimate.

I would argue that *your* beliefs are implanted. Not through surgery, or some sci-fi gizmo.

Anyone who is asked, “Do you believe everything that you see on the news?” (decades ago, the question was, “Do you believe everything you read in the papers?”), will answer, “Of course not!” only for that person to repeat whatever’s reported in the television as real, factual, news, or voice an opinion that he believes is his own (e.g., “Trump’s a racist!” “Millions are dying from covid!”). Usually, a snort of contempt is offered to anyone who questions beliefs which they believe are obvious, if not axiomatic. Such individuals have forgotten, if they even heard of it, of Goebbels’ dictum, “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.”

Nor is the problem restricted to the electronic media. Being a fervent bibliophile, even in my late teens, it later came as a shock to me in realizing that some books lie, not make mistakes, mind you, but *lie*. Deliberately *lie*. It remains to today’s generation to receive a shock when they realize that the internet, including [Wikipedia](#), can [also lie](#).

In conclusion, take time to reflect

One thing that I have found to help to some degree is to be in the habit of questioning the premises, the assumptions in information and opinions that were being offered, regardless of the means, or persons.

So: How do you know what you know?

And where did your views, your values, come from?

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