I AM/WE ARE RIGHT

POLARISATION

Whether we admit it or not, we environmentalists do come across a bit "holier than thou".

And the truth is we can be quite painful as, more often than not, we believe we are right.

Such saintliness can evoke a knee-jerk response. I was once put in my place while on a personal crusade to get people to drive more slowly on our local road - one person retorted *"Who do you think you are anyway, with your fancy electric car?"* (polite abbreviation of what was actually said..).

When, in the early days after our move to West Cork, Quentin and I showed our almost self-sufficient house and farm to family and friends, we often got the response pointing out our Achilles heel, *"So, I see you have three cars"*.

While I'm not questioning the science behind climate change or the impact of man-made emissions, I do wonder if we environmentalists are sometimes too purist, and too certain of our own views, especially when it comes to communicating with the public. Are we guilty of naïve realism and groupthink and is it time for us to think outside the box?

NAÏVE REALISM

Naïve realism is a term coined by social psychologist, Lee Ross, to explain the inescapable conviction we have that we perceive objects and events clearly "as they really are". We assume that other reasonable people see things the same way as we do. If they disagree with us, they are obviously not seeing clearly. Ross characterized naïve realism as a dangerous but unavoidable conviction about perception and reality. The danger of naïve realism is that while humans can recognise that other people and their opinions have been shaped and influenced by their life experiences and particular dogmas, we are far less adept at recognizing the influence our own experiences and dogmas have on ourselves and our opinions. We fail to recognize the bias in ourselves that we are so good in picking out in others.[1]

According to Carol Tavris,[2] naïve realism presupposes two things: that people who are open-minded and fair ought to agree with a reasonable opinion, and that any opinion I hold must be reasonable - if it weren't I wouldn't hold it. Therefore, if I could just get my opponents to sit down and listen to me, so that I can tell them

1 *http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2008/04/14/lee-ross-on-naive-realism-and-conflict-resolution/*
2 *Carol Tavris &Elliot Aronson (2008); Mistakes were Made (but not by me); p. 42/3*

how things really are, they will agree with me. And if they don't, it must be because they are biased (or there is something wrong with them). We take our own involvement in an issue as a source of accuracy and enlightenment - *"I've felt strongly about climate change for years; therefore I know what I'm talking about"* - but we regard such personal feelings on the part of others who hold different views as a source of bias *"she can't possibly be impartial about climate change because she's felt strongly about it for years."*

Looking isn't the same as seeing! The Invisible Gorilla experiment was carried out by US psychologist, Daniel Simons, who says we see what we expect to see, what we are looking for, and are blind to the unexpected. There are absolute limits to how much we can take in at a given time.

http://www.theinvisiblegorilla.com/videos.html
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtKt8YF7dgQ&feature=related
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ll_D3Xt9W0

CONFIRMATION BIAS

Once a belief is in place, we screen what we see and hear in a biased way that ensures our beliefs are "proven" correct. We embrace information that supports that view while ignoring, rejecting or harshly scrutinising information that casts doubt on it. Once a belief is established our brains will seek to confirm it. Seeking to confirm our beliefs comes naturally while it feels strange and counterintuitive to look for evidence that contradicts them.

The term confirmation bias was coined by the English psychologist Peter Wason, who conducted a series of experiments in the 1960s to demonstrate that people are indeed biased towards confirming their existing beliefs. He challenged subjects to work out a rule applying to a list of three numbers he gave them, say 2-4-6. The subjects had to construct other sets of three numbers to test whether their rule was correct. The experimenter told them whether or not their guess fit the rule. Most participants presumed that the rule involved a sequence of even numbers, so they proposed, 8-10-12; 12-16-20, etc. The experimenters' feedback was all positive, so the students presumed they had cracked it. Only, they were wrong. The rule was simply increasing numbers. Once the subjects formed their hypothesis, they tried only number sequences that proved it. They did not try to test their own rule!

Dan Ariely[3] and his colleagues carried out a series of experiments to determine whether people's expectations influence their views of subsequent events. One involved Budweiser beer and an "MIT Brew" which contained a secret ingredient – two drops of balsamic vinegar for each ounce of beer. Participants were asked to sample each beer, and then to say which they preferred. When given no information about the provenance of the two beers, most subjects chose the vinegar-laced MIT Brew. However, when they were given prior knowledge that the second sample was in fact doctored with balsamic vinegar, their noses wrinkled and the beer was rejected after just a sip. Ariely concluded that if you tell people up front that something might be distasteful, the odds are that they will end up agreeing with you, not because their experience tells them so, but because of their expectations.

CHECK THIS OUT: THE KISSING TEST **http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gyd-5eOld2**8

3 *Dan Ariely (2008); Predictably Irrational; p. 157-9*

GROUP POLARISATION

Research has proven that groups usually come to conclusions that are more extreme than the average view of the individuals who make up the group. In part, this strange foible stems from our tendency to judge ourselves by comparison with others. Inevitably, most people in the group will discover that they do not hold the most extreme opinion, which suggests they are less correct, less virtuous, than others and so they become more extreme. Group polarisation can also occur purely through the force of numbers.

Cass Sunstein[4] says that group polarisation is the typical pattern with deliberating groups. It is not limited to particular periods, nations or cultures. He gives the following examples:

- White people who tend to show significant racial prejudice will show more racial prejudice after speaking with one another. By contrast, white people who tend to show little racial prejudice will show less prejudice after speaking together
- Feminism becomes more attractive to women after they talk to one another - at least if the women who are talking begin with an inclination in favour of feminism
- Those who approve of an ongoing war effort, and think that the war is going well, become still more enthusiastic about that effort, and still more optimistic, after they talk together
- If investors begin with the belief that it is always best to invest in real estate, their eagerness to invest will grow as a result of discussions with one another

Coming together as a group means that the members exchange new information with each other; they corroborate and thereby strengthen any tentative views, ensuring that people become more confident that they are correct; and because members compare themselves socially to each other and want to be perceived favourably by other group members, they will adjust their views in the direction of the dominant position. Political extremism is often a product of group polarisation.

GROUPTHINK

The phenomenon of groupthink, a term coined by social psychologist Irving Janis (1972), occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment. A group is especially vulnerable to groupthink when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions, and when there are no clear rules for decision making. A lack of a tradition of impartial leadership can also mean that leaders will not encourage open enquiry and critical evaluation.

Groupthink occurs when groups are highly cohesive and when they are under considerable pressure to make a quality decision. When pressures for unanimity seem overwhelming, members are less motivated to realistically appraise the alternative courses of action available to them. These group pressures lead to carelessness and irrational thinking since groups experiencing groupthink fail to consider all alternatives and seek to maintain unanimity. Decisions shaped by groupthink have low probability of achieving successful outcomes.

4 *Cass Sunstein (2009); Going to Extremes; p. 3-4*

GROUP CONFORMITY

Humans are essentially tribal. This leads us to have a deep need to "belong". Conforming to group norms is a signal to the other members that "I am like you. I am following your rules. I am not a threat". This signals that you are reliable and predictable, and it helps to increase your status with others. Groups use peer pressure to encourage conformity, and because of natural desires to be liked and to belong to a group, many go along with group decisions, even if they are suspect or wrong.

We are social animals and what others think matters deeply to us. But even when the other people in the group are strangers, even when we are anonymous, even when dissenting will cost us nothing, we want to agree with the group.

In the 1950s, Solomon Asch had people sit together in groups and answer questions that supposedly tested visual perception. Only one person was the actual subject of the experiment. All the others were instructed, in the later stages, to give answers that were clearly wrong. In total, the group gave incorrect answers twelve times. Three-quarters of Asch's test subjects abandoned their own judgement and went with the group at least once. Overall, people conformed to an obviously false group consensus one third of the time. And the answer is instantly clear and inarguably true!

Asch's experiment **http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYIh4MkcfJA**
Elevator psychology: Candid Camera **http://www.thatvideosite.com/v/5397**

SOCIAL CASCADES

The phenomenon of group polarisation and conformity is closely related to the widespread occurrence of social cascades, whereby many social groups, of all sizes, seem to move quickly in the direction of one or another set of beliefs or actions. According to Cass Sunstein,[5] social cascades come in two varieties:

1. **Informational** - People follow the lead of those that come before them. Say one person gives a judgement on a particular subject, the next person may not entirely agree, but is influenced by the previous speaker's argument and says something similar, the third person may have information to the contrary but if he does not volunteer this, then he is in a cascade. People who are in the cascade do not disclose the information that they privately hold.

2. **Reputational** - people think they know what is right, or is likely to be right, but they nonetheless go along with the crowd to maintain the good opinion of others, and not to appear to be ignorant or stupid. You do not want to face the hostility of the others or threaten your reputation as a good group member. Even if someone down the line gives an alternative opinion he will more than likely not be heard, which will deter others from speaking out.

If you lack a great deal of private information, you may well rely on information provided by the statements or actions of others.

For example, if Joan doesn't know whether abandoned toxic waste dumps are hazardous, she may become fearful if Mary seems to think that fear is justified. If Joan and Mary both believe that fear is justified Carl may end up thinking so too, at least if he lacks reliable independent information to the contrary. If Joan, Mary, and Carl believe that abandoned waste dumps are hazardous, Don will have to have a good deal of confidence to reject their shared conclusion.

5 *S Moser & L Dilling (Eds.) (2007) Creating a Climate for Change*

So information travels, and it often becomes entrenched, even if it is entirely wrong. The view, widespread in many African-American communities, that white doctors are responsible for the spread of AIDS among African-Americans, is a recent illustration. Often, cascades of this kind are quite local, and take different forms in different communities. Hence, one group may end up believing something and another, the exact opposite, because of rapid transmission of information within one group but not the other

Robert Shiller,[6] a behavioural economist at Yale University, talks about the social contagion of boom thinking. He argues that the ultimate cause of the global financial crisis is the psychology of the real estate bubble, the misguided idea that the market could sustain the unprecedented rate of expansion that began in the late 1990s, and the reactions of millions of homeowners who wanted to cash in on rising property values. Shiller says that understanding such a social contagion is a lot like understanding a disease epidemic - by the time the housing bubble finally burst, we had all been infected. When an optimistic view of the market prevails, it is because the infection rate is higher than the removal rate. Eventually, public knowledge is subject to a kind of escalation or spiral, in which everyone seems to think that the optimistic view is correct. As the media endorses that view, people come to believe that we are in a "new era" and feedback loops help to bring ever increasing prices. People suppress their doubts in light of what everyone else thinks. Group polarisation leads people to greater confidence in a relatively extreme belief.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy theories in general tend to spread from one person to another through a cascade-like process. David Aaronovitch,[7] defines a conspiracy theory as the attribution of deliberate agency to something that is more likely to be accidental or unintended and as the attribution of secret action to one party that might far more reasonably be explained as the less covert and less complicated action of another. So, a conspiracy theory is the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other actions are more probable. It is, for example, far more likely that men did actually land on the moon in 1969, than that thousands of people were enlisted to fabricate a deception that they didn't.

Cass Sunstein[8] points out that conspiracy theories often arise after a shocking event. Most people have no personal or direct knowledge of the causes or reasons for the event, so rumours and speculation are inevitable, and some of them are likely to point to some sort of plot. The conspiracy theories may simultaneously relieve strong emotions arising from the event, and, for those who believe them, will also offer an explanation of why they feel as they do. In addition, people are motivated to accept accounts that fit in with their pre-existing beliefs, and which they see are accepted by people they trust. This gives them a sense of group solidarity, a feeling of safety in numbers. When people are especially angry or fearful, they may be more likely to focus on particular sorts of rumours and to spread them to others. And when rumours trigger intense feelings they are far more likely to be circulated.

According to Aaronovitch,[9] conspiracy theories originate and are largely circulated among the educated and the middle class. It has typically been the professors, the university students, the artists, the managers, the journalists and the civil servants who have concocted and disseminated the conspiracies. And he goes on to say that very often, these theories take root among the casualties of political, social or economic change, and that there is something of a pattern in which overarching theories are formulated by the politically defeated and taken up by the socially defeated!

6 *S Moser & L Dilling (Eds.) (2007) Creating a Climate for Change; p 242*
7 *David Aaronovitch (2009, 2010); Voodoo Histories; p. 5*
8 *Cass Sunstein (2009); Going to Extremes; p. 107 - 14*
9 *Cass Sunstein (2009); Going to Extremes; p. 325*

THE FILTER BUBBLE

There is definitely a theory somewhere which says that we environmentalists need to get out more. A lot of us eat, drink and sleep with each other and our on-line activities don't exactly move us out of our comfort zone. Eli Pariser[10] is concerned about the information universe, the "filter bubble", within which most of us, unwittingly, now live on-line. Thanks to the efforts of Google and social networking sites like Facebook, and IT companies like Apple and Microsoft, we have entered the new era of personalisation, where our likes and dislikes can be passed on to advertisers, and what we read is tailored to suit us, even down to the websites that come up on an internet search. Thanks to this, we mainly receive news that is pleasant, familiar and which confirms our beliefs. And because this is being done without our permission and, until recently in my case, without our knowledge, we don't know what is being hidden from us. In Pariser's opinion this is not good as such filtering leaves less room for *"the unexpected encounters that spark creativity, innovation and the democratic exchange of ideas"*.

10 *Eli Parisier; The Filter Bubble - Waht the INternet is Hiding from you; 2011*