

It makes sense to believe in nonsense

Prof. Dr. Babette Brinkmann leads us through the world of science denial, fake news, and irrational beliefs in eight theses. And she makes it clear where supervisory competence is needed in this world.

Thesis 1

Science denial is not reserved for the political right.

The denial of climate research, the (illegal) denial of the Holocaust, demands for the abolition of gender research, demands that evolution theories should be withdrawn from school curricula: science denial and anti-science hostility are main elements of right-wing and extreme right ideologies, and scientists who contradict these positions are quickly called enemies. But science denial is not specific to right-wing views only. Anti-vaccinationists from all walks of life, for example, deny scientifically undisputed facts. Science denial is becoming more and more socially acceptable.

Thesis 2

Fake news are very old. But never before was it possible to spread them as powerfully as today.

Lies that make a career as news items are nothing new. Probably the most influential fake news item of recent times was, "Merkel has opened the borders". This fake news was put on the internet by the youth organisation of the AfD, the Young Alternatives, at a time when there hadn't been any German borders for years that could have been opened. Although most of the Germans knew and still know that, the sentence is still cheerfully quoted and used. Apparently, this faked news item struck a chord, it suited the times, explained feelings and experiences, provided guidance and blamed someone for an obscure misery. Very useful. Very valuable. Very dangerous.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Consist of three components: a) cast doubt on official explanations for specific events (HIV was not developed as a disease in the human body); b) blame intentionally concealed or obscured actions by certain people (the CIA is responsible and wants to diminish the population of Africa); c) ascribe the power to carry out these acts to these people, as well as the power to conceal their deeds.

LYING PRESS

Has been a political term from the beginning. Appeared for the first time during the German Revolution of 1848 in anti-Semitic contexts as "Jewish lying press". The Nazis used the term for any kind of non-conformist reporting. East German politicians vilified West German journalism as lying press; the Axel Springer publishing house was defamed by the Red Army Faction (RAF) likewise. "Lying press" is a serious accusation: calls all journalists professional liars without referring to erroneous reports concretely.

Thesis 3

Conspiracy theories are attractive. They provide meaning and offer a feeling of belonging.

Conspiracy theories rank among the most tenacious convictions these days because they are self-referential and non-refutable. They are highly attractive to people who are suspicious of the world in general, and who feel a strong urge to be unique. Being a conspiracy theorist, you belong to a small group of chosen ones who realise a danger, who penetrate a plot. The more absurd the conspiracy theory is, the more constitutes the belief in it a guarantee for a unique position. You only have to believe in it, and you already belong. To enter into a dialogue here is difficult, but not impossible. Debunking a conspiracy theory eloquently does not really help, but the supervisory glasses do. Only if we understand the meaning that the belief in a certain theory has for the identity of a person, and only if we inquire as to the needs behind this belief can we get into conversation.

Thesis 4

Denialism of science and investigative journalism lead to radicalisation and polarisation.

Science and investigative journalism provide insights that transcend individual experience and puts it in a larger context. Deniers of scientific knowledge and investigative journalism are left with their own experience and personal reports from others (e.g. in social media). Science and investigative journalism prevent oneself from making oneself comfortable in a bubble of homogeneous, filtered information (= echo chamber). They bring us in contact with the diversity and

heterogeneity of the world. It's not a coincidence that both are defamed in the same breath. Similar to conspiracy theories, it is the denial of these sources that lead to a simplification and polarisation of positions, and thus to radicalisation.

Thesis 5

Statistical knowledge helps to better understand statistics. It also helps to misunderstand them in the interest of one's own opinion.

Don't you also think that when statistical data is difficult to understand, people who know a lot about statistics should be especially immune to drawing wrong conclusions? But, this is not the case. Research in this field has shown: good numerical reasoning does help to understand empirical data correctly. But this is only true as long as people are open-minded about data. As soon as experts in numbers have decided ideological or political expectations of the data (for example concerning the question if carrying firearms openly makes a neighbourhood safer or not), they prove to be particularly cunning in reinterpreting the data so that they underpin their personal opinion. In fact: the more competent we deal with numbers, the better we are able to understand statistical data; yet, at the same time the more opportunities arise that may help us adjust the meaning of the data according to our political convictions.

IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

Describe all beliefs and conviction that are cherished, although scientifically indisputable or easily verifiable knowledge is available that contradicts these convictions

FAKE NEWS

English-speaking equivalent to "lying press". May refer to a single piece of news as well as to an entire media company and the journalists who work for it (e. g. the fake NYT). Fake news are not only lies but lies that make a career as news items.

Thesis 6

Stories are more convincing than facts.

Once we have successfully included facts in a story, they help us understand the world, assign meaning to events, or have an informed opinion – then these facts are difficult to refute. This is true for proven facts as well as for fake ones.

Stories are stronger than facts, because they are more useful for our orientation in the world. So it is true to say: if we want to correct irrational beliefs and fake news, it does not suffice to expose a falsehood with figures and proofs. We must respond to stories with stories.

Thesis 7

Science deniers love public appearances. It is better not to offer them any.

Should we provide public stages to professional protagonists of populism and denialism? And if so, how should we deal with them? Research has shown that populists should principally not be offered a stage because anti-scientist arguments have an influence on an enlightened audience as well – the more often they are repeated, the more effective they are. If a public appearance of a science denier cannot be prevented, for example in a panel discussion, it is important to present clear scientific counterarguments – not in order to convince the populist, but to win the audience over. Objections referring both to the content as well as to unscientific argumentation are of help. In case of doubt, a methodical objection – “What you’re saying is not verifiable”; “Your source is not reliable”, etc. – is more effective, less risky, and more transferable to other arguments than a substantive objection. For that, you don’t get around to taking up the arguments of the opponent first.

Thesis 8

Morality finishes a dialogue; interest opens it.

It can be observed in social discourse at the moment that controversial discussions and politically diverse circles of friends are getting rarer and rarer. Both virtual and real discussions take place among like-minded people. Google and other social media algorithms support us in clearly overestimating the representativity of our own opinion and experience – we are many and we are right! We currently experience a moralisation (and thus depoliticisation) of the political discourse. The discussion about “flight shame” or the “blackfacing” scandal of the Canadian prime minister attending an Arabian Nights-themed gala event with his face painted black illustrate this development. Obviously, this kind of moralising does not benefit the discourse. Those who are morally in the right, do not need to scrutinise themselves. It makes a big difference if you’re told, “I don’t think you’re right. I look at this differently...” or, “You’re a bad person. If you think like that, you’re an accomplice”.

As supervisors it is our daily bread to highlight this and similar moralisations and their ramifications. We may benefit from this in our political discourse as well.

SCIENCE DENIAL

Denial of science in general, particularly scientific knowledge that does not support one’s own views. Should not be confused with scientific scepticism. A critical and sceptical examination of science is legitimate and necessary.

It's time to act!

When did you last discuss with someone whose political views you had not been able to judge beforehand? When did you last lead a discussion driven by the wish to understand why your discussion partner defends the particular position she has? When did you last find yourself in a political discussion that represented the heterogeneity of the political landscape? And if you feel as I do (and many more) and have to think back a few months, then it might be about time that you were actively looking for this kind of unfamiliarity.

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