**False Belief**

To infinity and beyond! The mid-to-late fifteenth century was known as the Age of Discovery, when European sailors set sail to explore the green sea of darkness. As you can imagine, their understanding of geography and environment was far less advanced than it is today. For one, it was a common belief that Africa and Malaysia were connected together. Many people also thought the Indian Ocean was landlocked. Lastly, the oceans were thought to be inhabited by dragons and sea monsters, and ships were alleged to vanish into great holes in the sea. *(Charlotte Lowe, in Useless History Fact-O-Pedia, p. 1)*

The following facts about the invention of the American bathtub have been dutifully recorded in the Congressional Record:

1. The first American bathtub was introduced by Adam Thompson on December 10, 1842, to a group of derisive friends in Cincinnati, Ohio.

2. Doctors al around the country immediately denounced the bathtub as a menace to general health, and Boston banned it.

3. Virginia hastily levied a tax of $30 on every bathtub sold within its borders, and a bill banning the use of bathtubs entirely in Philadelphia from November 1 to March 31 was defeated by a narrow margin of two votes.

4. No bathtub was allowed inside the White House until 1851, when President Millard Fillmore bravely dunked his limbs in one of the fiendish contraptions.

There is only one thing wrong with these interesting statistics: they are completely untrue from beginning to end. The editor and writer, H. L. Mencken, in one of his more playful moods, had invented them from whole cloth for a piece he wrote for the New York Evening Mail that appeared December 28, 1917. The “facts” were widely circulated in magazine and newspaper articles, speeches in the Congress, etc. When Mencken saw to his amusement that his little joke was being taken seriously, he tried desperately to convince everybody he had perpetrated what he thought would be a harmless hoax. But he was too late. Nobody would believe him. He had done his job so well that he was never able to undo it. Some of his “facts” have even persisted to this day. *(Bits & Pieces)*

**Nearly a century ago, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis wrote that the best remedy to "falsehood and fallacies" was not the "enforced silence" of censorship, but " more speech." That foundational defense of free speech was based on an optimistic assumption that has served us well: In the marketplace of ideas, good thinking and truth will eventually triumph over bad thinking and lies. Can we be so confident of that today? Social media has deeply disrupted public discourse, eroding and bypassing filters, and turning every crank into a publisher with the potential for vast reach. On Facebook and twitter, every day brings a new tsunami of hyper-partisan argument, tribal resentment, propaganda of all flavors, death threats, conspiracy theories, and some charming baby pictures and wonderful writing and thinking. The wonderful stuff -- Brandeis' "more speech" -- isn't necessarily triumphing over "falsehoods and fallacies." That's why Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg now faces fraught decisions about policing his massive, privately owned platform. Zuckerberg's reluctance to serve as "an arbiter of truth" is understandable: How does Facebook screen the 4.7 billion posts that its 2.7 billion users share each day? It can't. But its rage-reinforcing algorithm, allied with and fed by the Fox News media ecosystem, have enabled tens of millions of Americans to secede into an alternative reality that facts and evidence do not penetrate. In this bubble, massive voter fraud cost Donald Trump the 2020 election, Jan. 6 was a peaceful assembly of patriots, Rep. Liz Cheney is a traitor, Covid was not dangerous, masks offered no protection, and lifesaving vaccines are part of a sinister plot. These lies have led to hundreds of thousands of avoidable deaths during the pandemic, and a violent attempt to overturn an election. They now threaten democracy itself. Truth and our better angels may prevail in the long run, but let's be honest: The outcome is uncertain. *(William Falk, in The Week magazine, May 21, 2021)***

**In his innocence, man held his own special planet to be the center of the starry universe until Copernicus, 431 years ago, dared to challenge this dogma. The earth moves around the sun, he said, not vice versa. It was a profound and troubling idea. Yet it was still far from the whole truth, for it kept the sun at the center of things. And that misconception persisted in the minds of most until the coming of photography and the large telescopes of the 20th century. *(Kenneth F. Weaver, in Reader’s Digest)***

**Only 2 percent of the claims Donald Trump has made during his presidential campaign have been true, according to the fact-check organization PolitiFact.com. Six percent were mostly true, 15 percent were half true, another 15 percent were mostly false, 43 percent were false, and 18 percent were "pants on fire" lies. His 76 percent "false" rating far exceeds that of all other candidates who ran for president. *(PolitiFact.com, as it appeared in The Week magazine, June 3, 2016)***

**Never underestimate the difficulty of changing false beliefs by facts. (Henry Rosovsky, Harvard economist)**

**Joseph Semmelweiss, the 19th century Hungarian physician, felt that doctors could reduce disease by washing their hands in chlorinated lime water before inspecting their patients. His colleagues – because they thought that doctors were close to God – strongly resented his suggestion that they were “carrying death around on their hands,” and denounced him. The later discovery of bacteria proved Semmelweiss correct. *(Roger van Oech, in A Kick in the Seat of Your Pants) 9209020***

**Earwigs are small brown insects with pincers on their rear ends. They got their name from an old superstition -- people believe they crawled inside a sleeping person's ears and made them sick. Earwigs are, in facts, harmless. (The Diagram Group, in Funky, Freaky Facts, p. 86)**

**Easterners know little of the nature or size of the stars. The naked eye cannot reveal the immeasurable distances. Though they are familiar with the planetary movements they are ignorant of their orbits, form, and size and as the stars look small from the earth they believe they are small but powerful. The Hebrew prophets and learned men consider the stars simply as lamps hung in the sky for the sake of beauty and adornment. This ancient and curious opinion concerning stars is still prevalent. (George M. Lamsa, in Gospel Light, p. 13)**

**Having a big success with one set of assumptions can easily create a dogmatic outlook. Thomas Edison founded the electricity supply industry using direct current (DC). This prevented him from seeing both the benefits of alternating current (AC) and that the future of the industry lay with that type of current. *(Roger van Oech, in A Kick in the Seat of Your Pants) 9209020***

**Spanish soldiers in Francisco Pizarro’s expedition to Peru, in 1532, found emeralds as large as pigeon eggs. In the mistaken belief that true emeralds could not be broken, they pounded their finds with hammers and decided, when the stones shattered, that all they had found was colored glass. *(Isaac Asimov’s Book of Facts, p. 17)***

**Erasing false memories: Researchers have planted false memories inside people's heads -- then helped them realize that those recollections were bogus. Erroneous memories are an important area of research because court cases so often rely on witness recollections, reports The Wall Street Journal. The two-part study involved 52 people, average age 22, and their parents. in the first part, the parents were asked whether their child had undergone certain negative experiences growing up, such as being stung by a bee. They were also told to make up two realistic-sounding events that definitely hadn't happened. For the second part, an interviewer pushed volunteers to recall four "memories" provided by their parents -- two real, two false. Overall, participants described having strong memories of 20 percent of fake events mildly suggested to them, and 45 percent for those aggressively suggested. A different interviewer then told the volunteers that some of the memories may have been based on family stories or photos, not personal experience, and that it was possible to have false memories. After that, fewer subjects stuck to false recollections, while faith in their real memories remained intact. Lead author Aileen Oeberst, freom the University of Hagen in Germany, says the study shows "it's possible to empower people to really identify what might be a false memory." *(The Week magazine, April 16, 2021)***

**Henry Ford had been successful making cars available in only one color (‘Any color you want as long as it’s black’). He believed that he had a formula that worked, and he didn’t want to change it. This prevented him from seeing the rise of a post World War I consumer class that wanted a variety of styles and colors from which to choose. As a result, Ford lost market share to General Motors. *(Roger van Oech, in A Kick in the Seat of Your Pants) 9209020***

**A Republican state lawmaker wants to make Louisiana a "fossil-fuel sanctuary state." The bill from Rep. Danny McCormick -- an oil company executive -- would prohibit state and local employees from enforcing any federal environmental law, directive, or tax that might hurt the oil industry. Asked if this were constitutional, McCormick said, "I don't know who would have a problem with it, honestly." *(The Week magazine, May 21, 2021)***

**The "Mediterranean" was so called because ancients thereabouts considered it the middle of the world, which is what it means. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**Before the American Revolution throughout the South, it was widely claimed a morning shot of rum prevented malaria. That bit of whimsy illustrates a fundamental precept in politics and patent medicine. People would rather believe what they want to believe than the truth. (L. M. Boyd)**

**Once it was believed that nature simply wiped the slate clean every winter, a kind of yearly apocalypse followed by a miracle rebirth each spring. Mice were thought to regenerate spontaneously from rag piles. Frogs and turtles climbed out of puddles, spawned by magic spring rains. Birds changed into other animals to get through the frigid months. (Jeff Rennicke, in Reader's Digest)**

**Americans and Europeans dramatically overestimate the Muslim population in their countries. In a recent survey, the average French respondent estimated France's Muslim population at 31 percent; it is actually 7.5 percent. In the U. S., respondents believed that one in every six people is a Muslim. It's actually one in 100. (The Guardian, as it appeared in The Week magazine, January 13, 2017)**

**Early Antarctic explorers actually thought penguins were fish and classified them as such. *(Charlotte Lowe, in Fact-O-Pedia, p. 7)***

**Just 12 people are responsible for 65 percent of false and misleading anti-vaccine posts on social media, according to a new study. The bogus claims, made through multiple Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts, include denying Covid-19 exists, touting false cures, and charging that vaccine-caused deaths are being covered up, according to the Center for Countering Digital Hate. (*NPR.org, as it appeared in The Week magazine, May 28, 2021)***

**None other than Plato himself dictated that the circle was the perfect form for celestial movement, and for the next two thousand years, astronomers said that planetary orbits were circular – even though their observations didn’t quite jibe with that. Even Copernicus used circles in his heliocentric model of the universe. Only after much soul-searching did Kepler use the ellipse to describe the heavenly paths. *(Roger van Oech, in A Kick in the Seat of Your Pants) 9209020***

**For centuries people believed that Aristotle was right when he said that the heavier an object, the faster it would fall to earth. Aristotle was regarded as the greatest thinker of all time, and surely he would not be wrong. Anyone, of course, could have taken two objects, one heavy and one light, and dropped them from a great height to see whether or not the heavier object landed first. But no one did until nearly 2,000 years after Aristotle's death. In 1589 Galileo summoned learned professors to the base of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Then he went to the top and pushed off a ten-pound and a one-pound weight. Both landed at the same instant. The power of belief was so strong, however, that the professors denied their eyesight. They continued to say Aristotle was right. *(Bits & Pieces)***

**When the first railroads were built in Europe, more than 150 years ago, experts thought that human beings could not travel faster than 20 mph. The theory was that at speeds over that, their bodies would explode. (The Diagram Group, in Funky, Freaky Facts, p. 47)**

**Ancient Greeks thought they could neutralize a snake's venom by feeding it evergreen berries. Didn't work. Those who found out it didn't work were the Greeks who fed the berries to the snakes. (L. M. Boyd)**

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**If a lie is believed only for an hour, it hath done its work. (Jonathan Swift)**

**Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it. *(Jonathan Swift)***

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