

Career Path: We Are What We Eat

Career Development



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Most people believe they are directly affected by the food they eat. Hence the successive panics resulting in regulating various components of and micronutrients in food: salt, fat, sugar, lactose, gluten, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), hormones, and much more. It's as if we assume our body is just a physical machine, and so the food we put into our body is going to have a clear impact on how the machine works. It's just chemistry!

In contrast, people act as if their mental processes have a master governor overseeing everything in the form of our minds or consciousness. As a result, we seem indifferent to the impact of the ideas we consume because *we assume we can control* what we think.

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Consider how badly nutrition science has performed in understanding how our bodies operate, mere machines. The consuming public suffered repeated gross errors from scientists underestimating the body's complexity. By focusing on just a small piece in a carefully controlled lab environment, they thought they could explain the whole system and failed badly. See You Aren't What You Eat for an overview.

Is it possible we have similarly underestimated the mind's complexity? Maybe there's more going on

in our heads than the conductor in our consciousness we imagine is carefully and logically orchestrating our lives. Why is the prevalence of mental illness among adults higher than it's ever been? Why are more children depressed than ever before?

Can we say anything about how the mind works and how people come to form their ideas? In some ways, psychology has been much more successful than nutrition. If we still cannot say exactly what we should eat to maintain a healthy weight, we have learned a lot about how to influence and manipulate people.

We're affected by propaganda

The science of propaganda has a long and dark history, but **that's because it works** and repeatedly has been put to nefarious purposes. Here's an excerpt from a 1930 text "Social Psychology: An Analysis of Social Behavior":

> … Propaganda means an effort deliberately to manufacture popular opinions and attitudes and thus to control popular conduct; and usually the implication is that the aims of the propagandists are concealed. The objects of propaganda do not know the purposes of the makers of the propaganda. Propaganda then is the propagation of ideas, opinions and attitudes, the real purpose of which is not made clear to the hearer or reader.
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> Social Psychology: An Analysis of Social Behavior, Kimball Young

I've been thinking recently about the prevalence of propaganda in the West. We are by no means exempt from people trying to deliberately manufacture popular opinions and attitudes. In some ways, because of our democratic systems, we are even more routinely subject to such campaigns.

Our politicians gain power in part by detecting the winds of popular opinion and then riding along, but also in part by seeking to shape popular opinion in ways they think will be to their advantage.



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Every time you hear a complex topic reduced to a catchy slogan you are being propagandized. It happens to us so frequently that we scarcely notice. Look at how any significant legislation is described by both sides in a debate. You will see almost no substantive discussion of the actual law because laws are complex and it takes time to discuss them accurately. Instead, you see a scramble to label the law with a slogan that the media will then repeat.

When smart, educated people ignore facts

Since I retired, I've been traveling around meeting with people across the country. I'll tell you what's

both shocked and frightened me. Not that people have different ideas and beliefs on hot button topics. That's to be expected. But that people I know to be smart and assumed to be well-informed had obvious and serious gaps in their basic information. They held opinions in good faith but were acting without all the facts.

I don't want to give specific examples of my conversations, because I would send a number of you into cognitive dissonance. That is, you'd say, "I never heard of that. What's James talking about? I know my sources are good. He must be crazy." And you'd dismiss my whole argument as flawed. It's easy, though, for you to recall times where someone — a clueless someone — disagreed with you on a basic point. They were so obviously wrong, they either ignored facts or simply didn't know fundamental things. That's what I'm talking about.

Come back now to your faith in the idea that you have a mental governor (or mind or consciousness) that regulates how you think about the world. You can consume any media and make up your own mind what your values and beliefs are, right? Well, if that's so, how do you explain the wide disparity in what your fellow citizens believe? Surely you don't think their minds work fundamentally differently than yours.

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Not to stretch the analogy, but there is every reason to believe modern media is feeding us a diet of junk food. Blatant propaganda that, because we're force fed it, we come to accept. Much of what we think we know is wrong. And people are missing vital nutrients from their diet of information and ideas. As a result, we don't know what we don't know.

Is there any solution to this problem? I am not sure. My advice is to keep an open mind. Be less sure about what you think you know. Allow for the possibility that you cannot so easily control what you think, and that you may be influenced by what you consume. That chances are good none of our media is impartial, even though I know you think yours is.

If we are being propagandized, even a little, remember that consuming poison is never going to make us healthy.

Be well.

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