

The Real Threat to Democracy

Hello everyone and welcome to back to the Shanker Chronicles podcast.

This 6-episode podcast series is an opportunity for me to take a deep dive into the historical, political, scientific and philosophical background of some of the most important issues of our day. So thank you for joining me as we all work towards a better regulated society, a more Self-Reg society and a more just society.

Today I want to talk about the Real Threat to Democracy

- Whatever your political orientation, you have to agree that Trump's victory in 2016 was extraordinary
- Here was someone who had been hanging around the periphery of presidential politics for three decades
- He had no strong party affiliation, jumping from Reform Party to Democrat to Republican
- He had no military experience, and in fact, appears to have been a draft-dodger
- He started to climb in the polls with the most unlikely of ploys: the Birther Strategy
- Even so, the odds of his becoming President were in the single digits during the primaries, and only 12% once he'd won the nomination
- We watched in astonishment as he began to dominate the primaries, relying on the most blatant populist tactics imaginable
- He was so unlike the conventional image of a "President," and yet he managed to win the nomination and then stage a come-from-behind victory
- Whatever your feelings about the factors that led to Clinton's loss, the fact is that this was a remarkable event
- If we want to understand the real threat to democracy, we need to understand how, against all the odds, Trump became the 45th President
- And the answer starts the 1920s

- In 1928, Edward Bernays was hired by the American Tobacco Company to boost their sales of Lucky Strike to women
- Freud's nephew, and the relationship was a close one
- Bernays' strategy was to adapt Freud's thinking about unconscious urges to sell cigarettes
- The first step was to overcome women's reluctance to smoke in public
- His master stroke was to stage a Torches of Freedom march on Easter Sunday
 - Think of the Trump rallies
- His secretary sent the following telegram to leading feminists:

- *“In the interests of equality of the sexes and to fight another sex taboo I and other young women will light another torch of freedom by smoking cigarettes while strolling on Fifth Avenue Easter Sunday. We are doing this to combat the silly prejudice that the cigarette is suitable for the home, the restaurant, the taxicab, the theater lobby but never, no, never for the sidewalk. Women smokers and their escorts will stroll from Forty-Eighth Street to Fifty-Fourth Street on Fifth Avenue between Eleven-Thirty and One O’Clock.”*
- The first example of the letter from a Nigerian prince
- The cruel irony of the whole thing: substituting one type of enslavement for another
- Bernays went to extreme lengths to keep American Tobacco Company’s involvement in all this secret
- Would these same women have marched had they known it was all being sponsored by the American Tobacco Company?
- Maybe they still would; but at least they would have been in a position to make a conscious choice

- Meanwhile, Bernays was busy with other strategies
- Only a tiny fraction of women at the time felt that they were attractive (around 2%)
- One of their biggest anxieties was being overweight, which they felt exhibited their lack of self-control
- Bernays set out to capitalize on this anxiety with a campaign that touted “reaching for a cigarette rather than dessert”
- And sure enough, we now know that nicotine activates receptors in the HYP that suppress appetite by activating a fight-or-flight response
- Which makes perfect sense, since, from an evolutionary perspective, hunger would interfere with fight-or-flight

- One of the most brazen of Bernays’ strategies was his “green” campaign
- marketing research found that one of the reasons women wouldn’t buy Lucky Strikes was because the colour of the package clashed with their clothing
- But the president of ATC, who had just spent millions on the new packaging, refused to change its colour
- They had chosen green as a “healthy” colour, and the advertising campaign dwelled on the health benefits of smoking (“It soothes your throat”)
- So Bernays decided instead to launch a multi-faceted campaign that would make green the “it colour”
- And it worked, with sales of Lucky Strike rising dramatically

- What is disturbing about all this isn’t just that Bernays manipulated consumers by playing on their unconscious wishes or desires
- it was that he concealed that this was all designed to drive cigarette sales

- What is particularly disturbing about his actions is the shamelessness
- Bernays knew that he needed to suppress the medical warnings already coming out about the dangers of smoking
- In fact, he wouldn't smoke himself and did everything he could to get his wife to quit
- The same pattern has played out ever since
 - E.g., by tobacco companies from the 50s to the late 80s arguing that the health findings were only a statistical correlation
 - In the 1960s, the Sugar Research Foundation paid three Harvard scientists to publish a report saying that it was saturated fat, not sugar, that was the cause of heart disease
 - Back in 2015, the NYT reporting how Coca Cola was paying scientists to play down the link b/w sugary drinks and obesity
 - How the sugar industry shifted blame to fat
- One of the most powerful tools in this area has been the psychology of reasoning
- Research into the "hidden biases" that operate in our 'decision-making' beneath the threshold of conscious awareness
- Chris Nodder's *Evil by Design* (2013): strategies to quell the seven deadly sins
- The problem for businesses that tap into hidden biases to sell their product is that they have to make sure that the consumer is happy with their decision afterwards
- Otherwise, they are not going to get repeat business or positive reviews
- This is where the seven deadly sins are a problem: they make consumers ashamed about a behaviour that they feel guilty about
- So businesses have to remove the shame
- On this outlook, the "seven deadly sins" are nothing more than cultural norms
- If consumers feel guilty about buying something frivolous or extravagant, you need to provide them with adequate grounds for rationalizing their behaviour
- Or better still, instil new norms
 - e.g., it is praiseworthy to flaunt your success with outrageous bling
- The psychology of reasoning has been an essential component of the explosive growth of "Data Science" in modern business practice
- The first step is to figure out how the various biases that psychologists of reasoning have discovered can be used to drive sales
- For example, if consumers are vulnerable to a "social proof bias" [simply put, the best way to make a decision is to observe what the majority is doing] then provide them with endorsements from friends, celebrities, or even strangers that are seen as being "like me"
- There is no hesitation about manipulation: good business practice is maximizing sales, which has always meant, influencing decision

- The Netflix Technology Blog (<https://netflixtechblog.com>) provides a fascinating insight into how Data Science operates
- The 5-part series on “Building Confidence in a Decision”
- The authors of the study are highly trained in the use of statistics to study consumer behaviour
- The intention of the series is to provide transparency, which builds trust (another reasoning bias)
- The series provides a summary of the same experimental method that we used at MEHRI
- How we set out to rule out confounds, keep Type I and Type II errors within a statistically acceptable range of false positives and false negatives
- But what is particularly interesting about this 5-part series are the primes: e.g., the way “joy” and “choice” are repeated throughout

- The overall prime is that the purpose of the research is to enhance viewer enjoyment: to put the consumer in control of the UI and UX decisions that the company makes
- For example:
 - *“Showing members the Top 10 experience will help them find something to watch, increasing member joy and satisfaction.”*
- They reframe *social proof bias*:
 - *“We can help members choose some great content to watch by fulfilling the intrinsic human desire to be part of a shared conversation.”*
 - *“If the Top 10 experience really is good for our members in accord with the hypothesis, we’d expect the treatment group to show an increase in viewing of titles that appear in the Top 10 list, and for generally strong engagement from that row.”*
- Contained in all this is the real motive behind the research:
 - *“Are the ideas we testing helping our members to choose Netflix as their entertainment destination on any given night?”*
 - *“Our research shows that this metric (details omitted) is correlated, in the long term, with the probability that members will retain their subscriptions.”*
 - *“Broadly, we know that if you don't capture a member's attention within 90 seconds, that member will likely lose interest and move on to another activity.”*

- Looked at through the psychology of reasoning affords a different view of the research
- Too much choice is an acute stress, causing us to disengage
- The more options people have, the more likely they are to be disappointed in their choice
- AS the number of choices goes up, a person’s satisfaction with their decision goes down, as does happiness, optimism, and self-esteem
- Options need to be limited to maximize satisfaction

- This created a serious challenge for Netflix: how to manage their catalogue in such a way that the consumer is not over-stressed
- Every aspect of the UI – the thumbnails used, artwork, emotions conveyed in the images, sounds, lists, personalization, the logo on a Netflix films, rolling into the next episode – are studied to see if they reduce the stress of choosing what to watch and hook use of the service
- In a blog on “Artwork Personalization at Netflix” they reveal the impact of their massive data collection:
 - *“If we present that perfect image on your homepage (and as they say: an image is worth a thousand words), then maybe, just maybe, you will give it a try. This is yet another way Netflix differs from traditional media offerings: we don’t have one product but over a 100 million different products with one for each of our members with personalized recommendations and personalized visuals.*
- A consumer may feel that all this speaks to the value of their Netflix experience
- Or they may worry, as does Kahneman, who warns in *Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow*:
 - *“Many people find the priming results unbelievable, because they do not correspond to subjective experience. Many others find the results upsetting, because they threaten the subjective sense of agency and autonomy. If the content of a screen saver on an irrelevant computer can affect your willingness to help strangers without your being aware of it, how free are you?”*
- What Kahneman is talking about here is how rationalist view of freedom has been overturned by the psychology of reasoning
- Simply put, the rationalist defines *freedom as the ability to choose*
- Descartes has been saddled with the “privileged access” view of rationality, simply because he was forced to rely on intuition to explain how we can be certain that we know why we act or choose
 - i.e., the idea that we *know* why we choose x over y
- But in fact, Descartes’ view of rationality is much more nuanced
- As I explain in *Reframed*, the key to rationality according to Descartes is wondering why we choose or act or believe something
- Seen from this perspective, the psychology of reasoning is a great advance in rationalism
- Provided we use it to enhance our self-awareness
- It is when we are unaware that we are being primed, or that our brain is being dopamine hijacked, and this is being done for malign reasons, like the Torches of Freedom march, that we need to be very worried
- When, for example, unscrupulous politicians play on deep psychological desires or fears
- When, as in the case of the Trump campaign, they dramatically influence voting behaviour

- The Trump campaign was a masterpiece in Data Science and the psychology of reasoning
- It doesn't take many actors placed strategically behind a speaker or throughout a crowd to get attendees to start chanting "build the wall"
- And then turn them into endorsers themselves; for nothing aids rationalization like personal commitment, even if this only involves wearing a hat
 - Exposure effect (MAGA hat)
 - Priming effect (how the rallies were set up -- visually, noise, chants, warm-up act -- to trigger "political commitment")
 - Confirmation bias (use of twitter, FB to entrench the choice)
 - We can see confirmation bias in, e.g., current judgements about Trump's presidency (the Pew report)
 - Trump forever telling voters how terrific a job they did, on everything, confirming they had made the right decision to vote for him: it's a way of confirming their judgment
- And then, of course, there was Cambridge Analytica, which brought personalization in political selling to a whole new level
- The firm acquired the personal data of 87 million Facebook users without their consent, which was then used to build psychological profiles
- The Trump campaign used this psychographic information to deliver customized messages to different groups of US voters using various digital platforms
 - either to encourage them to vote for Trump or discourage them from voting for Clinton
 - Specialized social proof tactics were used on swing voters
- One of the most basic lessons in the psychology of reasoning is that priming works best when the subject is already receptive
- So the better you know the individuals wishes and desires, the better you can prime them
 - Dolores Albarracín found that you can only influence people's eating behaviour with a word like "thin" if they already want to become thinner
 - If they don't care about their weight the prime has little effect (APA 2015)
- 'Subliminal motivation', provided the Red Brain is in a state to notice the message
 - e.g., Cooper & Cooper's 2006 experiment: you can use subliminal messages to get consumers to buy a soft drink if they are thirsty
- Likewise, if your psychographic research tells you that a voter is worried that America is in decline, then a message like MAGA will be highly effective in influencing their behaviour
- In the famous interview that Christopher Wylie gave to the *Guardian*, he explained how:
 - *"Rules don't matter for them [wealthy conservative investors, such as Robert Mercer]. For them, this is a war, and it's all fair. They want to fight a culture war"*

in America. Cambridge Analytica was supposed to be the arsenal of weapons to fight that culture war.”

- The resonance of what Nixon said to Haldeman, which I mentioned in my last podcast, about this being war
- But as we learned on Jan 6, and became clear in 2021, this was not just a “culture war,”: i.e., a battle between conservatism and liberalism
- This was an ideological battle between authoritarianism and democracy
- And the big casualty was truth

- Nothing new about a politician lying
- Swift starts off his essay on “The Art of Political Lying” (9/11/1710) with this quotation from Ovid’s Metamorphosis (8 AD):

With idle tales this fills our empty ears;
The next reports what from the first he hears;
The rolling fictions grow in strength and size,
Each author adding to the former lies.
Here vain credulity, with new desires,
Leads us astray, and groundless joy inspires;
The dubious whispers, tumults fresh designed,
And chilling fears astound the anxious mind.

“A political lie,” according to Swift, “is sometimes born out of a discarded statesman's head, and thence delivered to be nursed and dandled by the rabble. ... [His] interest is to corrupt our manners, blind our understanding, drain our wealth, and in time destroy our constitution and we at last are brought to the very brink of ruin.”

- But political lying back then was something of a game in which everyone knew that the candidate was lying
- In the psychology of reasoning, lying, if repeated, becomes a tool for shaping thinking
 - *“A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth. Authoritarian institutions and marketers have always known this fact. But it was psychologists who discovered that you do not have to repeat the entire statement of a fact or idea to make it appear true. People who were repeatedly exposed to the phrase “the body temperature of a chicken” were more likely to accept as true the statement that “the body temperature of a chicken is 144°” (or any other arbitrary number). The familiarity of one phrase in the statement sufficed to make the whole statement feel familiar, and therefore true. If you cannot remember the source of a statement, and have no way to relate it to other things*

*you know, you have no option but to go with the sense of cognitive ease.”
(Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*)*

- **Familiarity is Red Brain; truth is Blue Brain (Zayonc, subliminal exposure effect)**
- The Red Brain tunes out Blue Brain awareness that the lies is a lie as a (maladaptive) way of reducing stress
 - The stress of recognizing a lie for what it is, recognizing the liar for what he is
 - The stress of self-awareness
 - The stress of novelty
- This is why “customers prefer something the more they see it. And the more they prefer something, the more likely they are to buy it.” (Jennifer Clinehens, *Choice Hacking: How to use psychology and behavioral science to create an experience that sings*)
- The more exposure Trump could get from the media, even if for some shameless behaviour or an outrageous tweet, the more familiar he became
- But the greatest threat to democracy comes from something that authoritarians have grasped well before the rest of us
- That is, they may well have stumbled onto an important psychological insight
- Freedom is the ability to choose, but then, what psychologists of reasoning found is that choice makes us anxious
- We may *think* that *the more choice the better*, but the greater the choice, the more anxious we become and the less satisfied with our choice
 - Too much choice and we become paralyzed and even depressed
- We may all *say*, as part of our Enlightenment conditioning, that we crave personal freedom
- But the psychology of reasoning teaches us something extremely important:
 - What we say may have little bearing on how we act or think
 - Nisbett & Wilson 1977 ‘Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes’ (Psychological Review 84:3)
- The very freedom that we say we value may make us anxious
- The Blue Brain wants choice; the Red Brain wants to reduce stress (cognitive load)
- The Blue Brain wants freedom; the Red Brain wants security
- So the authoritarian speaks directly to the Red Brain, coaxing it to assume control over its Blue Brain
- Self-Reg is all about awareness
- Asking Why
 - Why do I feel this way
 - Why am I shouting, chanting, threatening those dedicated to protecting me
 - Were any of my “strongly held beliefs” planted in me
- Just as Self-Reg teaches us the importance of pausing in order to reframe a child’s behaviour

- So it teaches us to pause in order to reframe our own behaviour
- If we want to preserve democracy, it's our Blue Brains that we have to liberate
- That means learning all about primes and reasoning biases
- So that it is our Blue Brain that guides our behaviour, and not those who seek to hijack our Red Brain

When I finished writing this podcast I listened to Vivaldi's *Gloria in D Major*. That is the note on which I wish to end this series, and especially, the final 12th movement, which is a reminder of the extraordinary beauty that humans are capable of creating.

Stuart Shanker: This podcast was brought to you today by Self-Reg Global as part of our mission to bring Self-Reg knowledge to audiences around the world. If you enjoyed today's episode please subscribe, follow us on social media and if you missed anything you can check out the show notes at Self-Reg Global's website at selfregglobal.com.

Thank you for joining me today for this episode of the Shanker Chronicles. Join me again next time as I discuss another global issue that has been at the forefront of our minds for the last 2 years; COVID-19 and vaccinations.

Thanks everyone