

Brain Trust

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Seldom does a day go by in which the tide doesn't wash up into my email inbox some of the flotsam and jetsam of contemporary mental culture – unsubstantiated rumors, hoaxes, bogus etymologies, all forwarded as fact: Bill Gates is giving away millions to everyone who forwards this email to at least ten people; Tommy Hilfiger insulted black people on the Oprah Winfrey Show; a ludicrous and logophobic etymology of the word “picnic” (pick a nigger)

and a campaign to eradicate it from the English language. These and similar artifacts of the misinformation age continue to have wide currency despite all facts to the contrary and dozens of websites dedicated to debunking such babble.

Fact checking – a requisite discipline of scholarship and habit of mind among the thoughtful – has fallen too often today a casualty of the speed and recklessness of our communications. With a click of a mouse button we can instantly and uncritically forward large payloads of misinformation to populate the minds of, potentially, millions of Americans, each of whom is charged with the obligations of responsible citizenship in a participatory democracy.

Rumors of an indiscriminate dispensation of Bill Gates's fortune – like Nostradamus's 9/11 prediction, Elvis sightings and reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a discarded Lava Lamp – are only the most obvious examples of mass distraction and misdirection, and might easily be dismissed if not for a similar lack of critical thinking among otherwise well-educated individuals.

Consider an action alert circulated widely since January, asking Americans to boycott Citgo (a subsidiary of Venezuela's state-owned petroleum company) in response to what the alert described as Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's vow to “bring down the U.S. government.” Setting aside what Chavez actually said – “Enough of imperialist aggression; we must tell the world: down with U.S. *empire*” (a clear reference to U.S. foreign policy, for which there is not just Venezuelan, but global disdain) – the proposed boycott neglects the fact that most companies import crude from multiple sources, trade supplies back

and forth to meet demand and share pipelines. So the possibility of supporting the Venezuelan oil industry is good no matter what brand of gas you buy.

Another item making the rounds recently lists eighteen U.N.-member nations, mostly Middle Eastern, that receive aid from America but frequently vote “against” the U.S. (By “against,” I assume the author meant contrary to the way the U.S. votes; the terminology is consistent with the current administration's “with us or against us” foreign policy posture.) But no mention was made of the fact that the United Kingdom votes “against” the U.S. 40 percent of the time, that France votes “against” us 46 percent of the time, Japan 58 percent of the time, and Canada 51 percent of the time.

No data were offered as to what percentage of the negative votes cast by Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, Sudan et al. was in opposition to our uncritical support of Israel (to the tune of 152 billion American tax dollars since 1949) or to our destabilizing policies in the region. The U.S. supplied arms to more than 92 percent of the conflicts under way around the world in 1999; more than \$142 billion worth of weaponry since 1992. What percentage of our “foreign aid” to these countries is military hardware, and who profits?

But this is not just about Israel or Chavez or ignorance on the Internet. It's about our national brain trust and the ability of Americans to think critically and not just respond to the pushing of preprogrammed buttons. Our children are being engineered, socially, to be cannon fodder or prison filler. Half of all young black men nationally are dropping out of high school; almost three quarters of them are jobless and susceptible. And too many of us, who should be their salvation, are distracted, misdirected or sleepwalking through the American Dream, oblivious to the ugly waking reality.

Allow me a wild theory of my own: Just as ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny and technology is an extension of the body, so too does society recapitulate and extend the brain; our linked fiber-optic and satellite communications analogous to its vast neural network, with each of us attempting to make meaningful connections across the gap. When enough of us do, society works. But critical regions of America's brain trust have been anesthetized, arrested or never developed. And it sometimes seems as if communication between one hemisphere and the other has been severed – the corpus callosum cut, disabled by programming or hung up on the deluge of useless data.

In clinical experiments with split-brain patients, where the corpus callosum (the nerve bundle connecting the two halves of the brain) has been severed, otherwise normally functioning individuals have been made to act without their knowing why or what prompted them. In one instance, the written command “walk” was flashed to a patient's left eye, which projects to the right hemisphere of the brain. The patient stood up from his chair and began to leave the testing room. When asked where he was going, he said, “to get a Coke.” With the link severed, the command sent to his right brain remained there, unnamed and isolated from the language/thinking left brain. Yet, blindly, he followed the directive. Pardon my paranoia, but how perfect a metaphor is that for a nation of unthinking responders?