

Globe and Mail - Opinion

Our shared reality – and the knowledge that undergirds it – is being assaulted

[ANDREW COYNE](#)

PUBLISHED 4 HOURS AGO

The blockades that paralyzed Ottawa and various border points have been removed, at least for now. But the blockades are merely the symptom. The disease is disinformation.

We are discovering for ourselves what until now we had observed at secondhand: large numbers of our fellow citizens can be made to believe almost anything. This is a challenge to our democracy orders of magnitude greater than the disruptive possibilities of a few strategically placed trucks.

It is a challenge, in part, because we are so reluctant to consider it. If so many people are so upset about something, we think, surely there must be some basis to it. There are two sides to every question, we are taught, and by and large this is a good rule to follow. Too many people nowadays are too ready to declare too many debates “closed.”

But we should not fall prey to the opposite mistake, of assuming any belief is worth discussing, simply because lots of people believe it. There are not two sides to [whether the Earth is flat](#), or whether [Donald Trump won the 2020 election](#). And yet millions of people believe both.

It was possible for a reasonable person to worry, circa December, 2020, whether the vaccines developed in such relative haste against the coronavirus might pose some risk to human health. Fourteen months and 10 billion safely delivered doses later, it is not. Valid health exceptions are well known and accommodated; unanticipated adverse events are vanishingly rare.

And yet thousands of people were persuaded that vaccines, and vaccine mandates, pose such a monstrous threat to their health or freedom as to justify occupying the national capital and menacing its citizens, in defiance of the law, for weeks on end. Hundreds were willing to risk arrest rather than obey a police order to disperse. This is not normal.

Opposition to vaccine mandates was not by any means the only idea behind the occupation, or the strangest. Protest leaders appear to sincerely believe, inter alia, that vaccines contain RFID chips, that the governor-general can rule by decree, and that Canada has a First Amendment. This is a movement in opposition not merely to vaccines, but to science, authority, expertise of all kinds: in a word, knowledge.

What is at work here is not a series of individual deficiencies, but a collective failure of socialization. These are people who appear to have detached themselves not only from the behavioural norms of civil society, but from the whole transmission chain by which knowledge is spread among the population.

Knowledge, that is, is a social process. We form our beliefs about the world, not in isolation, but with the help of those around us. We learn from people with more knowledge, experience and judgment than we have, and through them absorb the accumulated wisdom of society. We have to. We cannot individually relitigate every elementary fact of human knowledge every day.

But what happens when that breaks down? What happens when knowledge is transmitted, not vertically, as it were, but horizontally? Then you have what we have witnessed over the past few

years. [It has been described](#) as a class war, but it is a class war of a particular kind, in which the dividing line is not money or birth but knowledge.

Previous generations of class warriors wanted to smash capital, first physical then financial. But in an age in which capital resides in knowledge, the objective must be to smash knowledge itself, together with its repositories – the universities, the courts, the media. All are not merely fallible but hostile, enemies of the people, filled with lies – which is to say, with facts they refuse to believe.

In their place, the new class warriors must attempt to make sense of the world unaided. They are “doing their own research,” via the internet, and sharing their findings with each other, via social media. They are, in short, defenceless, vulnerable to any number of bad actors looking to manipulate them.

This is the other discovery we have made of late, far more disturbing than the first: not just how easily a certain section of the population can be made to believe the most outrageous lies, but how willing a certain section is to tell them. The latter know exactly what they are doing. They know that they are spreading falsehoods, validating lunacy, crossing lines previously considered uncrossable. They just no longer care.

How long would the Ottawa occupation have lasted, had certain members of the Conservative Party not given it their enthusiastic support? How much comfort did the occupiers take from their enablers online, as quick to minimize their misconduct (“peaceful protest”) as to exaggerate their mistreatment (“police brutality”)? How healthy can our democracy remain, under this combined assault on reality?