

Commodified Attention, Commodified Speech, and the Rejection of Expertise

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Introduction

An expert is someone who has a facility with a skill and body of knowledge that is not easy to come by and most do not possess. By definition, the content of the claims made by an expert are difficult for the nonexpert to assess. To recognize another person's expertise is therefore an expression of trust. And conversely, to reject expertise is to mistrust the expert. This interaction—expert makes a claim, nonexperts grant or withhold their trust and so believe or disbelieve the expert's claim—happens in the context of a particular system of communication. A crucial part of investigating the place of expertise is to consider the context of the communications system—How are claims produced, disseminated, received?—and consider how trust is, or is not, fostered within that system.

I submit for your consideration two specific features of our contemporary communication system. Both have to do with commodification of the components of communication. First, a great deal of speech is produced in commodity form. The market structures and practices needed to buy and sell speech are well developed. Many people's employment depends on speaking on other people's behalf. That is what lobbyists and public relations professionals and advertising professionals (and many others) do: they say the things their clients pay them to say, only they do so more artfully that their clients can manage on their own. Even those who do not speak for others as a full-time job may have the opportunity to sell some bespoke speech here and there, as in the case of a university professor who also writes a commissioned report. A second point is that our attention is collected and packaged and sold in commodity form. That is how most advertising works: someone with access to your attention (a TV or radio station, a website, a magazine, etc.) sells slices of that access to someone else. Many of the messages that come to our attention get to us because the message's sender purchased access to our eyes and/or ears. A question to consider, then, is how the commodification of speech and attention affect the conditions for trust. I will try to persuade you that, on balance, our highly commodified communications system undermines the conditions for trust.

Two premises

Premise number one

All knowledge depends on trust. Whatever we know, even in those few cases where we can claim some individual responsibility for adding to the body of human knowledge, is built on knowledge we accepted on trust from others (Sloman and Fernbach 2017; Hayes 2012, pp.105-106).

Consider, for example, my knowledge of the structure of our solar system. I know that we live on a planet that orbits the sun—as do several other planets. I know that prior to the development of the heliocentric model of the solar system, the mostly widely accepted model in the European intellectual heritage to which I am heir was geocentric. The most obvious relevant observation I have made by myself is that the sun appears to pass across the sky in roughly the same direction every day. That observation is consistent with either theory: maybe I am seeing the sun cycling around the earth (geocentric model) or maybe I am seeing the sun pass across my field of vision because the earth is spinning, so my position on the planet points toward and then away and then toward the sun again. I have only the most sketchy, rudimentary knowledge of how other observations, including observations of other planets, proved to be more consistent with the heliocentric model than with the geocentric. I don't know how to replicate those observations; I don't even know how expert observers can distinguish which planet they are looking at. I certainly can't verify the findings of earlier studies. So my full confidence in the heliocentric model of the solar system, which I do indeed happily accept, and the further extension that this solar system is a not-so-remarkable formation in one of the swirling arms of a not-so-distinctive spiral galaxy... all of that is a measure of my trust in the accumulated knowledge of generations of astronomers and the carriers and disseminators of astronomical knowledge.

Premise number two

Knowledge is a product of groups, not individuals. Knowledge rests on trust in expertise (see premise one). But individuals do not assess the trustworthiness of an expert alone; we do it in groups. Furthermore, trust in expertise—or rejection of expertise—is socially consequential (Sloman and Fernbach 2017, pp.160-162). There was a time when trusting the truth claim of the astronomers meant rejecting the truth claims of church authorities and rejecting the truth claims of church authorities could result in isolation or persecution. Belief could not in this case be picked up or set down based on an individual's judgment on the merits of the claim in isolation.

The claim of a heliocentric solar system is less contentious now, but consider my relation to a different piece of knowledge: my knowledge that wage labor is an exploitative class relation. (Some of us may think of the truth claims of astronomy as qualitatively different from the truth claims of social theory, but leave that aside for now.) I didn't work out that truth about wage labor on my own. Partly I assessed the merits of that truth claim against my experience and observations—at least I'd like to believe I did—and found it persuasive. But I also accepted the truth of the claim that capitalist class relations are exploitative on the basis of my affiliation with people who already accepted it. What if I became convinced otherwise? That change of heart and mind would have profound consequences for me. The networks of professional support that currently sustain my career would be lost to me with no guarantee than I could find a replacement. (Given Alice Wu's recent analysis of gendered language on the Econ Job Market Rumors website, it seems that my being a middle aged mother makes the chance of finding a new network of professional support pretty low, even if I adopted viewpoints that had more widespread acceptance in the profession (Wu 2017).) From the perspective of my

material self-interest, changing my mind would be a risky gamble. And at the same time that I lost material support for my career I would weaken or lose socially and emotionally sustaining relationships.

Where these premises point us

If knowledge is based on trust and knowledge is a product of groups, not individual minds, we need to investigate the construction of the groups that know things together and how trust is fostered or repressed in those groups.

Commodified Speech

For speech to be recognized as an expression of expertise, it has to be trusted. For speech to be trusted, it has to be recognized as making a legitimate truth claim grounded in something other than, and broader than, the speakers' cynical, narrow, self-serving self-interest. We have to assume that the speaker speaks in good faith (Hayes 2012, p.118). When a speaker makes an argument that is clearly in her own self interest, when a salesperson urges you to buy for example, that speech will likely face intense skepticism. Outsourcing the speech in a transparent way doesn't really help matters; if an advertisement urges you to buy, the fact that the advertisement was constructed for pay on behalf of the seller, rather than representing the direct speech of the seller, makes little difference. We are still likely to be skeptical. This is a communications challenge that advertising professionals in the U.S. have been wrestling with for more than a hundred years. How can they gain our trust on behalf of their clients when we know they are being paid to say what they say?

If an independent expert weighs in on a subject, that speech has a lower hurdle of skepticism to clear *en route* to acceptance. Someone with material interests at stake would very much like an expert to express opinions in their favor. A widely trusted independent expert therefore possesses something of potentially immense value to those whose material interests will be influenced by what that expert says. But this creates a terrific tension. Those whose material interests are at stake would rather not leave it to chance to get a favorable mention from the independent experts. What do they have available to induce such an expert to speak favorably on their interests?

Well, they have money. But a contradiction arises. A money-for-expert opinion trade is a complicated undertaking. If they openly pay the expert for favorable mention, the expert is no longer independent and the skepticism hurdle the expert's speech needs to clear becomes nearly as high as the skepticism hurdle for the speech that comes directly from the materially interested party. If they hide payments to the expert, the favorable expert opinion may maintain the appearance of independence and at first jog comfortably over low hurdles; but when and if the payments are exposed the expert's credibility and status as expert will be, or at least should be, forfeit. In either case, sooner or later, the very fact of paying for credible expert opinion risks undermining the credibility that was paid for.

We might think that the perishable nature of credibility, once commodified, might restrain the extent of the speech market. But that seems not to be the case. David Brooks observed, "Intellectuals have come to see their careers in capitalist terms. They seek out

market niches. They compete for attention. They used to regard ideas as weapons but are now more inclined to regard their ideas as property” (quoted in Drezner 2017, p.43). And, especially if they tell stories that rich people like to hear, they can find buyers. Daniel Drezner writes, “Today’s wealthy set up their own intellectual salons and publishing platforms—and they are not hands-off about the intellectual output of their namesakes.” It is a market that works on a superstar system: a few people make extremely high incomes—Niall Ferguson makes \$50,000 to \$75,000 *per speech*—while many hopefuls scramble for a chance to be the next superstar. The best chance for the big payoff comes from saying what people in power want to hear (Drezner 2017, pp.12, 184-195).

Economists by and large have not been shy about selling their credibility. Mainstream economics tells stories that make rich people feel good about being rich. Economists are consulted on policy questions, and this influence increases the market value of their speech. As shown in the work of Jessica Carrick-Hagenbarth and Gerald Epstein, and as illustrated in the documentary *Inside Job*, many economists’ expert testimony to policy makers, their speeches, and their publications have failed to meet the most basic standard of conflict of interest avoidance. Many of them offered exactly the policy advice they were handsomely paid to give (or otherwise stood to profit from) without mentioning their personal financial interest (Epstein and Carrick-Hagenbarth 2010). But we’ve learned that what was best for financial economists entangled in conflicts of interest was not what was best for much of the rest of the population. Economists turned in an overall miserable performance in identifying the problems that led to the financial crisis and Great Recession beforehand, or even recognizing and explaining the problems after the fact. So the discipline of economics displays one kind of credibility problem: Many of the most prominent practitioners were paid off and were also able to police the boundaries of the discipline to suppress dissent within the profession. There was a seeming consensus, the consensus was paid for in part by those who stood to profit most, and the consensus was wrong.

Economists have no monopoly on the practice of cashing in on perceived credibility. Legal scholarship, like economic research, is important to policy makers. The main business of lawyering is already the business of speaking on behalf of others; that’s why clients hire lawyers to represent them in court. But the legal scholarship that shapes the legal codes and the climate of opinion in which legal proceedings proceed, it turns out, can also be bought. In the summer of 2017, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on Google’s often hidden financial support for law scholars who write in favor of the intellectual property regime that would be best for Google. In the past ten years, hundreds of research papers have been financially supported by Google to the tune of thousands, tens of thousands, sometimes even hundreds of thousands of dollars. The authors did not always clearly disclose the payments and Google certainly makes no effort to call attention to them (Mullins and Nicas 2017).

So far, plutocrats’ willingness to pay to hear smart people flatter them has not waned. Bizarrely, those who were most wrong about the financial crisis have enjoyed an increase in citations in the decade since. Their ability to convince the rest of us may have reached its limit, however. Elite opinion and majority opinion on a range of policy matters

diverge sharply. But elite opinion still carries far more weight with policy makers (Drezner 2017, p.66, 104-116).

Other fields, including environmental science and public health, suffer from a variant on the credibility problem that comes with commodified speech. In these fields, the availability of commodified speech undermines the formation of the appearance of consensus; if a consensus contrary to moneyed interests threatens to form, those whose profitability is at stake will pay for studies that sow doubt. Any time a study shows that environmental harms or human health harms result from profitable practices, those profiting will buy a study that shows there is no clear evidence of harm after all. In a regulatory regime premised on quantifiable proof of harm as the basis for regulation (as opposed to a precautionary principle), doubt has tremendous value to those profiting from potentially harmful products and practices. Two books of similar title and similar vintage, David Michaels' *Doubt is Their Product* (2008) and Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway's *The Merchants of Doubt* (2010), detail the strategic use of doubt to evade regulation. In case after case—lead in paint or in gasoline causing harm to both workers and consumers, tobacco harming smokers and anyone in proximity to smokers, and on and on, up to and including the existential threat of carbon dioxide emissions destabilizing the global climate—those profiting from imposing harm on others paid people with scientific credentials to produce research of equivalently serious surface appearance casting doubt on the research that reached a finding of harm. The studies that sow doubt are produced and sold by people with comparable credentials and a similar claim to expertise as the authors of studies that warn of danger (Michaels 2008, Oreskes and Conway 2010).

Among the illustrations of the bespoke nature of the speech produced by industry-sponsored research is a memo from the American Petroleum Institute (API) to member oil company Marathon explaining the benefits that will accrue from the \$22 million-worth of planned studies of the health risks associated with the chemical benzene. These studies will, the memo states, “provide strong scientific support for the lack of risk of leukemia or other hematological disease” to the general public and “establish that adherence to current exposure limits” poses no risk to workers. Keep in the mind the studies had not yet been done. Yet the API already knew that the conclusions would be what they had paid for (Michaels 2008, p.77). Similarly, documents released as a result of a lawsuit against the agricultural chemical manufacturer Syngenta included a roster of “allies,” people with scientific credentials who would speak in favor of their products, or simply allow their names to be attached to favorable statements composed by others. (Amongst these was an economist who was paid \$500 an hour to pursue research reaching the conclusion that the herbicide azatrine was of critical importance to the U.S. agricultural economy.) Syngenta's “allies,” were not only paid to say favorable things about Syngenta's products; they were paid to cast doubt on the legitimacy of research with results that were not in Syngenta's interests and to undermine the careers of those who pursued that research. Most prominent among these targets is a biologist named Tyrone Hayes. Hayes initially misunderstood the nature of the exchange being proposed when the company offered to fund his research. He thought the company genuinely wanted to know whether there were safety risks associated with their products and accepted research funding from the company, but then he reached conclusions at odds

with their commercial interests and refused to suppress his findings or change his results (Aviv 2014).

Medicine is also lousy with conflict of interest. Just take two infuriating, heartbreaking, and related cases. Patrick Radden Keefe's fall 2017 *New Yorker* article "Empire of Pain," reports on payments made to doctors who were willing to assert that OxyContin was not addictive, even as evidence known to Purdue Pharma, the drug's maker, showed more and more clearly that it was. Purdue Pharma targeted this message with special intensity to doctors working in areas where they knew they were likely to face many cases of chronic pain. Rural places where many people worked physically demanding jobs were an especially attractive market. The places that were targeted for especially aggressive marketing in years past are a close match for the places where the epidemic of opioid overdose deaths is most severe now (Keefe 2017). Once their work was done and OxyContin had helped to fuel an epidemic of addiction resulting in tens of thousands of deaths a year, the time was ripe for manufacturers of addiction treatment drugs to purchase credible expert opinion. National Public Radio reported that pharmaceutical company Alkermes, maker of the addiction treatment drug Vivitrol, sent lobbyist Steve McCaffrey to offer expert advice and testimony to the Indiana state legislature, but McCaffrey didn't bother to reveal his affiliation with Alkermes. When asked by a reporter whether the legislators knew about his affiliation, he responded, "I imagine some do and some don't." The resulting legislation created very favorable conditions for sales of Vivitrol and obstacles to other treatments, but Vivitrol is not effective for all patients and can even increase risk for some. Similar lobbying efforts and some successes were repeated in other states (Harper 2017).

In the case of economics, the appearance of consensus was maintained, but grew more distant from public opinion. In the case of fields worked over by the doubt merchants, the appearance of consensus is forestalled and public opinion is fragmented. Confronted with two people with similar-sounding credentials and titles, using similar modes of rhetoric, each of whom is casting doubt on the other's claims, what is the non-expert to think? We aren't sure. The markers of expertise the combatants rely on, PhDs and MDs and so on, lose the capacity to instill trust. Indeed, institutions of higher education have suffered a loss of public trust along with all the other institutions.

Added to all this, we know that buying silence, the inverse of buying speech, is also widespread. If people can be paid to speak, people can also be paid not to speak. Confidentiality agreements were part of the long-suppressed story of the Catholic Church's protection of priests known to sexually abuse children. Jeff Anderson, a lawyer who has represented many families harmed by abusive priests, recounts being stunned when he worked on his first case and the lawyers for the diocese against which he brought suit said the settlement would have to include "the usual confidentiality agreement." It had not until then occurred to him that this was sufficiently commonplace for them to have a "usual confidentiality agreement" (Hayes 2012, p.121). Confidentiality agreements were also part of Harvey Weinstein's modus operandi, a way of purchasing indulgences for abusive and in some cases criminal behavior. Recently, the paper trail left behind by these agreements was among the sources Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey used

to help break the decades of silence Weinstein purchased (Kantor and Twohey 2017). And non-disclosure agreements are not only used in cases of sexual misconduct. Workers' silence can be a condition for receipt of a severance package, muting criticism from the most informed and most affected when company practices might otherwise be exposed and critiqued. In a number of cases, for example, workers who were laid off after training their lower-paid replacements were required, as a condition for receiving a severance package, to sign agreements not to criticize their former employer (e.g. Preston 2015).

Times are as tough as ever for those who value integrity over pecuniary interest. Whistleblowers often suffer. Being a whistleblower often means refusing to sell either speech or silence. By producing their own speech and seeking audiences for it, whistleblowers not only pay the implicit price of forgone payments they might have received for bespoke speech (or for silence) had they been willing to produce it, they often pay an explicit price in legal fees and forgone future wages. For example, former Wells Fargo workers filed a class action lawsuit last year seeking to repair the damage done to their careers when, in response to their insistence on raising ethics concerns, they were fired and had negative marks entered on their U5 forms; the U5 is a sort of report card for financial professionals and the negative marks made it almost impossible for the fired whistleblowers to find employment elsewhere in the industry (Arnold 2016).

We have been exposed to a mind-numbing succession of cases in which speech that claimed to be independent, disinterested expertise was later revealed to be a paid endorsement or paid smear. The cumulative effect is not just loss of trust in this individual expert, followed by that individual expert, and then these N more experts, but an erosion of the status of expert altogether. An assumption of good faith is replaced by a suspicion of ulterior motives. The established credentials of educational degrees and job titles and elected offices held and so on become weaker and weaker aids to clearing skepticism hurdles. Indeed, some speaker credentials, among some listeners, only raise the skepticism hurdle higher (Sullivan and Jordan 2017; Drezner 2017, p.53). Opinion polls by Pew and by Gallup show notable declines of trust in most types of institutions. Government's perceived trustworthiness took a tumble in the 1960s and 1970s and never recovered. Since 2000 the level of public trust has fallen for big business and also for unions (which we might hope could reign in the abuses of big business), for banks and also for all three branches of government (which we might hope could impose some regulatory restraint banks and business), and for public schools (which we might hope could train our children in the skills of citizenship and help us regain our sense of participatory control over our government) (Drezner 2017, pp.46-48; Hayes 2012, p.12).

Commodified Attention

Trust lost by our long-established institutions does not entirely disappear. Instead, at least in part, rather than being more apt to crown *no one at all* an expert, we are more divided in our identification of *which specific someone* is an expert. Without a consensus on the question of whose claims of expertise to trust, we cannot establish a consensus set of stylized facts that most of the public will agree to work with. There are many reasons for

the dissolution of a mass media capable of establishing such a consensus. One is the highly developed market in access to audience attention.

The production of content for most media platforms is financed by advertising revenue. We might say—many media scholars do say—that we the audience are not the media's customers. Rather, we are their product; the advertisers are their customers.¹ Jean Kilbourne's book *Deadly Persuasion* includes a striking collection of advertisements that media companies produced to promote themselves to potential advertisers. The images clearly show the role that we the audience play in the transaction: Audience members are depicted as cardboard cutouts delivered into the hands of advertisers. Audience members' homes are marked with targets, as if being viewed by someone aiming a weapon. Sacks of eyeballs are handed over (Kilbourne 1999).

One effect of mass media distribution and consumption, even if it is financed by advertising, can be the creation of an “imagined community”: each reader's awareness of and sense of affiliation with fellow readers, or viewers, or listeners who share the same objects of contemplation and contemplate them through compatible worldviews. Benedict Anderson argues that newspapers contributed to the construction of the nation-state in this way (Anderson 1983). Hofstadter describes a similar process taking place at the scale of the city (Hofstadter 1972 p.187). Advertisers wishing to reach nearly everyone may be willing to purchase advertising space/time in media that aim to reach nearly everyone and so end up financing the construction of broad consensus. This is a reasonable characterization of the broadcast media landscape of the mid-twentieth century.

But when advertisers' sales strategies rely more on niche marketing, they will prefer media platforms that target their intended audience more precisely. Money spent to reach someone almost certain not to respond is wasted, and advertisers prefer not to waste their money when they can help it. To serve advertisers looking to include a specific audience segment and exclude others from their purchase, media content producers will tailor their content to attract such precisely defined audience segments. The splintering of media consumption, with more platforms each commanding a smaller market share, involves a narrowing of imagined communities.

Many advertisers were interested in precision-targeted marketing from the dawn of modern advertising in the late nineteenth century. Newspaper directories, such as that published by George Rowell beginning in 1869, functioned as a catalog of audiences that could be purchased, and these audiences could be selected not only the basis of size and geography, but also factors such as political affiliation, income, and interests (Myers 1960, pp.316-319; Rowell 1869-1909). The main selling point for providers of direct

¹ A friend recounted to me the professor's introduction to a television screenwriting class she took as part of the MFA in screenwriting program at University of Southern California. The professor began by asking the class, “Why do we write for television?” Members of the class suggested answers focused on issues like telling compelling stories that resonate with audiences. “No,” he responded. “We write for television so that the station has something to fill the time between Lexus commercials.”

mail advertising services was the ability to select the audience individual by individual; this appeal was well developed by the early decades of the twentieth century (Greer 1925, p.7). But the process of filtering and sorting audiences remained costly enough that a significant role remained for a truly mass media. The broadcast media, through the middle of the twentieth century, remained truly broad.

Lizabeth Cohen identifies a trend toward increasing emphasis on niche marketing taking hold in the second half of the twentieth century. By the 1970s, niche marketing strategies were widely adopted by consumer goods advertisers and also by political candidates (Cohen 2003, pp.331-343). The trend has only accelerated since. The proliferation of cable TV channels was already splintering audiences in the 1980s, and then the Internet happened. It was not immediately clear in the 1990s what the financing model for Internet content would be. Now it is clear: a huge proportion of the content available online has fallen into the role of attention bait, gathering audiences for sale to advertisers. This is true both of content produced by paid content producers and of content produced by noncommercial users of social media platforms. The cost of filtering and sorting audiences has fallen precipitously as data collection and analysis gets turned over to algorithms, and so, if it suits the advertisers, as often it does, we are finely filtered and sorted (Williams 2010, p.43; Pariser 2011).

This tendency toward filtering and sorting contains a positive feedback loop, accelerating the process of splintering into disjoint media consumption. We are most apt to notice and respond to content—whether social content, editorial content, or advertising content—that fits with what we already think and know. The more precisely pigeonholed we are by the digital biography the data miners assemble for each of us, the less likely we are to see content that doesn't already fit with what we've seen before. The advertisers know the response rate will be low, and they won't bother spending to reach us. But that just reinforces the internal consistency of what we see and the disjuncture between what we see and what others see (Jones 2004; Pariser 2011).

The outcomes of this disjuncture are striking. A recent poll, for example, showed a remarkable divergence in the trust granted to the institutions of higher education. People who identify as Democrats have maintained a reasonable level of trust in colleges and universities, even increasing their approval in the last few years, while those who identify as Republicans, who were already somewhat more skeptical of colleges and universities in 2010, have lost trust precipitously in the last two years (Sullivan and Jordan 2017). In other words, an in-group expert is, to those who identify with a different tribe, a charlatan. On issues with a partisan split, “polarization render[s] elite cues worse than useless”—we don't just ignore out-group experts; we take their claims to be evidence in favor of opposing claims (Drezner 2017, pp.58-61, 93-98).

Trust in institutions is measurably lower and many of those institutions have proven themselves richly deserving of our mistrust. But the only way to know anything is to trust someone, somewhere. Those who mistrust universities might trust Alex Jones, instead. Those who mistrust Fox News might trust *The New York Times*. Those who mistrust the American Medical Association might trust a homeopath. As Keynes wrote about with

great nuance for the case of investment decisions, the general human condition is that we don't know much—"The outstanding fact is the extreme precariousness of the basis of knowledge..."—and we don't much like not knowing. We come up with a variety of devices to give ourselves the sense that we have a basis for action, however inadequate that basis may be, and those devices are intensely social. Our most common device, he asserts, is to follow convention, and suppress concern that the conventional wisdom may be wrong. In any case, "worldly wisdom," he writes, "tells us that it is better for reputation to fail conventionally than to succeed unconventionally" (Keynes 1953, pp.149-158).

But what is conventional depends on what social circles you travel in and, by a variety of measures, the social circles we travel in are increasingly ideologically distinct. Our major political parties are more ideologically homogenous than before. Place of residence correlates strongly with political affiliation. (Basically, big cities and college towns are blue; everywhere else is red.) We consume our media diet from distinct confirmation-bias feeding troughs. (Let's not kid ourselves. We means we. Not just them.) And the interests of the attention merchants who sort our attention into batches for purchase by advertisers reinforce this disjuncture.

Conclusion

The widespread rejection of expertise is partly an erosion of trust and partly an erosion of consensus. Many holders of traditional markers of expert status have betrayed our trust. Our assumption of good faith cannot hold when we find out that the experts have often been delivering paid endorsements while claiming to offer impartial expert assessment. If the experts seem to be in agreement, how do we know it isn't a conspiracy? Conversely, if even the experts can't seem to reach a consensus—as happens when practitioners in various scientific fields are willing to sell their services sowing doubt—why should we think their guesses are any better than ours? Furthermore, our ability to form a broad consensus among non-experts regarding *which* experts to trust is limited by the boundaries of our imagined communities; imagined communities must, as a result of their scale, be mediated and the contemporary economics of attention selling tends toward a hardening of those imagined communities' boundaries. And so the infusion of commerce into our communications proves to be one useful analytical entry point into this phenomenon of rejection of expertise.

The metaphor of the marketplace of ideas has seeped deep into our ways of thinking and talking about communications. *Sell* is understood as a synonym for *persuade*, *buy* as a synonym for *believe*. (e.g. "He tried to sell me on the idea, but I'm not buying it.") As the marketplace of ideas becomes less of a metaphor, the buying and selling of ideas takes on a different meaning. In the business of consulting firms or for-profit think tanks, others' willingness to pay for ideas can signal the ideas' worth (Drezner 2017, pp.154-157). But in that case, the same people who buy those ideas with money are also open to being persuaded by those ideas. Too often, though, we encounter ideas that are bought with money and then presented to us in the hopes that we will buy with the coin of our credulity.

We are very often a third party to communications commerce. We do not sell our attention and personal data ourselves; instead, those who can intercept our attention sell it and those who wish to deliver messages to us buy it. We do not choose the attention transactions that affect us and we have limited options for withdrawing our attention from the workings of the attention market. We did not buy the expert testimony that persuaded lawmakers to deregulate the banks—the banks did. We did not buy the (pseudo-) scientific studies that maintained uncertainty about the health risks of tobacco or lead or asbestos long enough to sacrifice the health of another generation or two of workers and consumers—the manufacturers who stood to profit did. And yet we pay the price.

We pay the price in the direct effects of this communicative commerce: we are besieged by advertisements, for one thing. We pay the price in the immediate and intended after-effects: we, and those who wield policy-making power over us, make decisions on the basis of paid-for speech, often without fully understanding the conflicts of interest motivating the speech. And we pay the price, too, in second-order after-effects: the very fact of payment for speech erodes the conditions for an assumption of good faith. We have become less able to reach a consensus on whom to trust, and therefore on what to believe, and therefore the range of what is subject to disagreement is so wide that democratic deliberation becomes nearly impossible. We could disagree about what we expect to be the most effective climate policy and deliberate over it and get somewhere, for example. Instead, we spend an awful lot of time and energy disagreeing about whether climate change is a real problem requiring a policy response at all.

The crumbling foundations of consensus and trust pose a danger, certainly. But, lest we do nothing more than bewail the given state of affairs, this moment of mistrust contains an opportunity, too. First principles are once again up for debate and some first principles *should* be up for debate. Some experts, like some emperors, really are parading around without clothes. In our own field of economics, consensus on foundational principles brought us the 1990s notion that “there is no alternative” to neoliberal globalization. Now various opinion surveys show growing interest in economic alternatives, and not just interest in gentler flavors of capitalism, but in more egalitarian and more democratic altogether noncapitalist systems. The field is wide open for loopy ideas and hurtful ideas, but for good ideas, too.

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