



Opinion: The plague of intellectual laziness

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As Alaska's economy begins to recover from the COVID-19 hit, businesses are having difficulty finding workers to fill their job openings. So last week, Gov. Mike Dunleavy put the unemployed on notice. Next month, they'll no longer receive the state portion of the COVID-19 unemployment benefits. The belief is that the extra \$300 from the government reduces the motivation to return to work.

That's probably true for people earning minimum wage or slightly more. Because when added to the basic benefit, they'd continue receiving more money by staying home.

But let's not apply the common trope that too much government assistance makes people lazy.

"There is nothing to suggest that people on welfare are lazy," Michael Tanner of the conservative Cato Institute wrote eight years ago. "But there is also nothing to suggest that they are stupid. If you pay someone as much for not working as you do for working, it should come as no surprise that many take advantage of the offer."

What's become increasingly lazy, however, is our political discourse. Our chosen echo chambers in these extremely polarized times are partly to blame.

Zeynep Tufekci is a sociologist and writer who has "a habit on being right on the big things," according to the New York Times. She called a misinformation narrative about Florida's response to COVID "an example of how polarization has eaten a lot of our brains."

The story began with a study by the American Journal of Public Health. The objective was "to determine the number of excess deaths ... occurring in Florida during the COVID-19 pandemic." Starting with their headline that read "Florida is undercounting COVID-19 deaths," the Orlando Weekly badly mischaracterized the report.

There's more to the story, but it's beyond my expertise and not relevant here. The point is that liberal minded people who never liked the COVID policies of Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis were, in Tufekci's words, "readily willing to believe" his administration "must be lying and covering up its terrible numbers."

Secondly, she states the articles alleging the COVID fatality cover-up "immediately got shared widely on social media." And that leads many others, most who "will never see either a correction or a follow-up article," to believe the cover-up is true.

The willingness to share misinformation of a simpler nature is also a problem. Johan Goldberg at The Dispatch recently addressed one such case. Claudia Webbe, a member of the UK Parliament, shared a map she found that showed how Africa had been “carved up” by western powers and declared it “has been hidden from you all your life.”

The information contained in that map, Goldberg correctly stated, “is no more a secret than the location of your nearest Starbucks or the annual rainfall in Bolivia. All that separates you from this supposedly forbidden knowledge is the curiosity required to find it.”

Bypassing such basic research is the foundation of intellectual laziness.

Before 24-hour cable news and the internet, keeping up with current affairs involved reading one or two local newspapers every day, listening to hourly radio updates, and/or watching half-hour long televised news programs that aired twice a day. Weekly news magazines like Time, U.S. News & World Report and the National Review provided more detailed reporting and analyses. To reach a deeper understanding of the state, nation and world meant a trip to the library.

In other words, developing a well-informed opinion required a lot of work. And giving up a lot of leisure time.

That hasn’t changed. What has is the internet makes it easier to satisfy our thirst for information.

But the percentage of Americans who believe Donald Trump’s election fraud claims proves that isn’t enough.

“We all want to know stuff, but we increasingly resent the idea of having to learn it,” Goldberg wrote. “It’s like wanting to be in great shape but not wanting to exercise.”

It’s a choice that comes with a price. Just as not getting regular exercise limits or completely excludes participation in competitive sports, intellectual laziness should be a disqualifier for engaging in serious public policy debates.

Some would call that censorship. Or scream about being canceled. But until they’re willing to do the work, they should be satisfied being little league voices in national, state and local politics.