Why Business Schools Shouldn't Teach Climate Scepticism ... And Why They Should.

Business Schools should teach climate scepticism. Crazy? Misguided? Dangerous? The world is facing unprecedented ecological and social upheaval due to climate change, so the notion that future business leaders should be encouraged to think seriously about climate scepticism might raise a few eyebrows. By **Frank Figge** and **Andrea Stevenson Thorpe**

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Or maybe not. It is not a new idea after all. Academics love to protect the idea of intellectual freedom — and quite rightly so. Like sparring kangaroos, faculty frequently debate, challenge and argue the same concerns from differing perspectives. And to not do so, would lead us perilously down a path of 'mono-think', regardless of the topic in question.

Surely then, climate scepticism should be included in curricula on this basis because to not do so would equate to an assault on intellectual freedom or academic rigour? Absolutely! … If, of course, climate scepticism was supported by scientific evidence. Which it's not. Simply put, academic freedom isn't a free-for-all where every opinion, no matter how baseless, gets a seat at the table. It's about fostering an environment where ideas are scrutinised, critiqued, and either fortified or discarded based on evidence. If a viewpoint - like climate scepticism - fails its scrutiny, it has no business in academia, let alone in institutions that shape the minds that will manage tomorrow's economy and other aspects of wider society. To do so would be irresponsible.

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Climate sceptics love to exploit the spaces created by academic impartiality. They take refuge in the grey areas of scientific uncertainty, heralding the claim, "We can't be 100% certain, so why the alarm?" This line of reasoning is not just intellectually lazy; it's deceitful. Science rarely deals in absolutes. Does smoking cause cancer? Overwhelmingly, yes. But is it 100% guaranteed to do so in every individual case? No. Do we, therefore, entertain scepticism about the dangers of smoking? Of course not. There's no room for 'alternative facts' when lives are on the line and the evidence is clear. And yet, historically, this didn't stop the tobacco industry from pouncing on scientific uncertainties, skillfully sowing and then amplifying doubts on the links between smoking and cancer. The result? Public health measures were stalled, leading to an untold loss of life.

However, there are some crucial differences between smoking and climate change. With smoking, the joy and burden of smoking coincide. Smoking a cigarette provides the smoker with immediate pleasure at the price of an increased risk of cancer and heart disease for him or her and possibly anyone in the immediate environment. Emitting greenhouse gases provides the emitter with a benefit. The burden is shared by all, globally - now and in the future. With smoking, society could potentially take decisive action - quitting en masse - and within a generation, the problem would be substantially mitigated. But climate change doesn't afford us that luxury. Our actions, or lack thereof, will reverberate for decades to come, affecting not just us but our kids, our kids' kids, and so on. With climate change, we're not merely racing against time; we're fighting for the future of countless generations. It's not overly dramatic to say that the costs of inaction - or even worse, misguided actions influenced by scepticism - are most likely to lead to irreversible environmental degradation, the exacerbating of poverty and social inequality, mass climate-based migration and that these problems, and others, will extend far into the future.

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Time is important here in another way. In the age when debates on smoking were at their most intense, we almost exclusively relied on newspapers, radio and television to give us 'facts' - 'facts' that were difficult but not impossible to dispute. Whilst these were often misconstrued, in a pre-digitalised algorithmic age society still largely recognised the concept of 'the truth'. On the one hand, words and even statistics were selectively used to carefully manipulate reality: As the often-used quote goes, "There are three types of lies, lies, damned lies and statistics", uttered by British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli in the nineteenth century — and incidentally long before the truth revealed that smoking was dangerous. On the other hand, devoid of clever camera angles or careful editing, a picture or video still equated to 'evidence', something in which we could take heart as representing what was true. Our job as consumers was to navigate the half-truths and out of context 'facts' to come up with plausible conclusions about reality; again, a sometimes difficult task but not wholly impossible.

Fast forward to the super-digitalised, highly connected and individualised age in which we live today. Like oil clinging to a bird's plumage, the so-called 'post-truth' era, where facts are not just ignored but openly derided, is upon us and it is not going away. Simply put, advancements in technology, and the growth of online spaces that give rise to and perpetuate conspiracy theories and falsehoods that range from the outlandish to the plausibly intriguing have enabled a world in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine what is real in a way that we have never experienced before. To make things worse, the algorithms that surround us in our daily lives are optimised to reassure us of our individual certainties. Like a website that suggests new music based on our shopping history, search engines are programmed to create a world for us that reflects what we think we know. Good political and academic debates rely on controversial debates and on a diversity of views. The business model of search engines is based on giving us more of the same. George Orwell, in his novel 1984, imagined 'Newspeak', a language of simplified grammar and limited vocabulary invented by a dark, powerful party to limit people's ability to think critically. In today's world, algorithms make sure that we create our own filter bubbles, filtering out what does not fit our worldview. Rather than listening to the opinion of others we increasingly and unknowingly listen to our own opinions in the echo chambers created by ourselves. It is not necessarily that climate change deniers do not listen to the arguments of science; climate change deniers increasingly do not hear the arguments of science.

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Importantly, a 'post-truth' era is also preventing the advancement of productive dialogue and evidence-driven action. The implications of this are staggering. From the Brexit campaign led by Boris Johnson to the unrelenting flood of falsehoods during Donald Trump's presidency and beyond, it's evident that we must navigate a new landscape - one where misinformation isn't just a nuisance but represents a divisive and persistent strategy that is fast becoming the norm.

But what does this have to do with business schools? As long as we teach the 'truth', isn't that what matters? Well, our graduates won't just be stepping into leadership roles, they'll be wading into a quagmire of public deceit and manipulation. Ignorance in this context isn't just a personal failing; it's a systemic risk. Do we really want to be developing graduates who lack the ability to think — really think —and decipher what is real and what is not, to recognise the powerful and sophisticated persuasion of echo chambers and to navigate the manipulation derived from carefully crafted algorithms, for example, that help to perpetuate 'alternative truths'?

So, should business schools teach climate scepticism? Absolutely. But not as a legitimate counterpoint to climate science - the lack of evidence that supports such scepticism remains. Rather, it serves as a powerful case study in disinformation, a lesson in critical thinking, and a much-needed exercise in identifying logical fallacies. If we're serious about preparing our graduates to lead in a complex world, it is vital that business schools are instrumental in training them to dissect, analyse, and debunk spurious claims dressed up as reasoned arguments, which will only increase as technology accelerates in its sophistication.

This is not just an intellectual endeavour; it's a moral imperative. The mission of business schools extends beyond producing graduates skilled in finance, marketing, and management. They are the incubators for the decision-makers of tomorrow, individuals who will influence public policy, corporate strategy, and social norms. Given the pressing and all-encompassing nature of climate change, there's no room for ambivalence or naivety. It's high time we recognise this responsibility and act on it.

In the meantime, the clock is ticking. Business schools need to decide if they're going to be part of the solution or part of the problem. Lives - perhaps even the future of humanity - are hanging in the balance. Let that sink in.

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