

## Willful Ignorance is Tyranny

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as "Choosing Media that Agrees with You"

Working the very dull graveyard shift, right around midnight of October 6-7, I took my usual Internet stroll through the world's headlines. Since several of my close friends are heading off to Afghanistan soon, I have an especially keen interest in what is happening "over there" (as we used to say in more optimistic times about another war). U.S. headlines read something like this: "U.S. Military targets post-Afghan mission. A decade on, leaders are eager to turn to a wider range of threats." - MSN.com; and "10 years later, military resets Afghan priorities." - FoxNews.com. As an interesting comparison, here were some of the headlines elsewhere around the world at that moment: "U.S. goals in Afghanistan distant. After 10 years in Afghanistan, the US still lacks the knowledge to bring the conflict to a successful end..." - BBC.co.uk; and "Afghan civilians bear brunt of failing 10 year war." - Afghan Online Press. The two sets of headlines may as well have come from two separate planets. It would be comical were the subject matter not so grave.

Of course, regional feelings play a large part in determining the *thrust*, if you will, of the respective media outlets. One must have a certain amount of sympathy for the hapless consumer, hearing what he is already inclined to feel to a certain degree as a matter of supply and demand. I have a special kind of compassion (the kind that borders on pity) for those among us who, incredibly, seek to limit their information to one or two favorite sources. Among some friends of mine, I have observed, this selective news gathering seems to go hand-in-hand with such intellectual malformations as willful ignorance and the defense of television pundits. This devolution of objectivity came into sharp focus for me one day when I posted online a quote from a certain news source. A friend responded to my post with, "You need to stop reading that website." To that, I responded, "Sir, I cannot think of a good reason to NOT read something." Somewhat worryingly, my friend is a military analyst.

Today's incredible technology allows us to access news and information from across the world almost instantly. This can be used to great advantage for fighting against the desire to hear what we want to hear. It can also be a great temptation to simply automate and increase the flood of pre-selected programming for our brains. When my very bright coworker (a communist, incidentally) mentioned that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had killed "over a million people", the sheer improbability of the estimate compelled me to look it up. It turned out that, of the six major sources for casualty estimates, four placed the cost at around 100,000 lives, one at 600,000 killed, and then finally a single source that put the deaths at over a million. Of course, my coworker chose the figure that most agreed with his anti-war viewpoint (at ten times the lowest estimate!) and decided that one must be the correct figure. It was this incident which prompted

me to write new, updated and modern criteria for what must certainly constitute a 'fact': 1) I heard it somewhere, and 2) I agree with it.

Democritus wisely pointed out that truth is something we cannot know for certain, only the "bastard" truth of our subjective senses is known to us. He asserted that the closest approximation of truth to which humans can arrive can be reached only through consensus. Thus, Democracy was born. It has been common knowledge since the days of the Founding Fathers that an educated populace is a prerequisite for Democracy. The urge in some of our fellow citizens to limit what they hear and see stands sharply divorced from these basic principles of our Republic. Willful ignorance is tyranny.