

Geoffrey Lawrence

# SOCIETAL DECEPTION



Global Social Issues in Post-Truth Times



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Global Social Issues in Post-Truth  
Times

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*To three wonderful women*

*Dimity*

*Dania*

*Kimberley*

# Preface

Have you seen the social media clip ‘Zombie virusi USA’? It shows Americans in a large shopping mall running and screaming from a purported zombie attack.<sup>1</sup> The zombie virusi posting went viral, as they say. And why would it not? Some 14 percent of Americans have a zombie apocalypse rescue plan in place, rising to some 24 percent for people born in the 1980s and 1990s (the so-called Millennials or Gen Y). As is the American way, most are stockpiling guns and other weapons to protect themselves against future assaults.<sup>2</sup> The US military is also concerned, preparing a contingency plan (CONPLAN 8888) which outlines the favoured military response should zombies invade American shores.<sup>3</sup> If you visit Mexico City a week before the commencement of celebrations for the Day of the Dead (2 November), thousands of zombies—with axes through heads, bloodied faces, staggering gaits, and trays of body parts for hungry participants—make their way through the streets. They are having fun while collecting non-perishable foods (canned items, rather than human organs) to donate to the city’s poor.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure we have observed, and continue to observe, zombie-like symptoms and behaviour in people. Aimless wandering, slurred speech,

loss of control of the tongue and lips, groaning, and rotting flesh and body parts are among the traits. Today we recognise the conditions that give rise to such features, including catatonic schizophrenia, Cotard's syndrome (a mental disorder with people believing they are dead or are decomposing), sleeping sickness, rabies, dysarthria (malfunction of the nervous system), and leprosy (decaying flesh).<sup>5</sup> The zombies depicted on our TVs and movie screens do not exist in real life. They are fictional characters designed to scare the behoots out of audiences. They are not real. It turns out that the 'Zombie virusi USA' was filmed in Paris, showing hundreds of panicked customers deserting the Westfield Les 4 Temps shopping centre in droves following a loud explosion. And 'virusi' is Russian for 'virus'—giving us some inkling as to where the bogus video arose.<sup>6</sup> It was fake news, yet huge swathes of people believed it to be true.

That said, having your own zombie apocalypse plan in place may not be such a bad thing—who'd want to experience a *Night of the Living Dead*?

We know that people trust in social institutions, economists, politicians, and the media to bring them accurate knowledge about the world. Instead, they are receiving misleading information, biased news, and downright lies which serve the (often nefarious) purposes of the wealthy and powerful. We live in post-truth times. It is important to expose those who are employing strategies of misinformation and disinformation to further their interests at the expense of the majority of people, and the planet. I was driven to write this book to let people know what tactics are employed by corporations, politicians, think tanks, 'shock jocks', influencers, and the like, to corrupt our thinking. The aim is to reveal the otherwise 'hidden' agendas of those with power and wealth.

The book has a contemporary and practical aim—to demonstrate that there are forces at work seeking to divert people's attention from some of the most challenging issues of our times. This book's contents are for a disillusioned public, for critical thinkers, university students, activists who are looking for answers to the world's seemingly intractable problems, and for a younger generation wanting a very different 'take' on what is happening to their—and their friends' and families'—lives.

The intention is to expose both deceit and denial. Targeted are the owners of fossil fuel firms, chemical conglomerates, agribusiness

companies, along with corporate bosses creating junk foods for a new generation of kids. It also targets those who believe human salvation will come via right-wing politics, those whose only sources of knowledge are the Murdoch media, and those who are content for sport and religion to be their go-to realities (the list goes on). I deliberately upset conventions to provoke a rethinking of where the world is heading, and to elicit change.

Much of the content of the book is sociological in nature. I have worked in academia most of my life having undertaken detailed social research in areas as diverse as sport, leisure, social aspects of genetic engineering, food security, supermarket power, natural resource management, and the financialisation of food and agriculture. I have drawn upon these bodies of work throughout the book. Chapter 1 details the ways people are inveigled into accepting fake news. Advertising tricks and techniques are highlighted. Media power is discussed—with special reference to Murdoch and Fox. Chapter 2 exposes the fallacies of orthodox economics, revealing the vulnerable nature of capitalism and demonstrating the negative impacts of neoliberal globalisation and the ‘financialisation’ of the economy. Chapter 3 focuses upon the modern food system. It turns out to be environmentally unsustainable as well as damaging to human health. Agribusiness, fast-food chains, and supermarkets employ many mechanisms to fabricate trust, while plying customers with an assortment of obesogenic, and otherwise suspect, products.

In Chapter 4, many of the technologies that have been, and are, employed in creating a modern lifestyle are discussed. They are the same technologies implicated in widespread pollution and devastating global warming/climate change. The continuation of current methods of production is depleting resources, undermining planetary health, and contributing to species annihilation. The many right-wing think tanks and organisations promoting unsustainable practices are detailed. The chapter also explores corporate agriculture’s (Big Ag’s) environmental record before outlining the techniques and tactics used by climate change deniers. Chapter 5 examines ‘the power to lie’. Political leaders fabricate outright lies to manipulate public opinion and to lead countries to conflict and war. The chapter discusses propaganda in war, political



ideologies, and the growing influence of social media in politics. The legacy of colonialism is highlighted, as is modern-day land grabbing.

In ‘Praying for Salvation’—Chapter 6—religion is held up for scrutiny. Religions claim to give meaning to life but they are based upon irrational and dishonest doctrines, antiquated and invalid assumptions, superstition, and unscientific premises. Those touting religion are deceiving their followers. The chapter discusses ideas of ‘belief’, including the status of ‘miracles’ in the church. It examines, in critical fashion, St Augustine’s doctrine of original sin. Chapter 7 ventures into the world of elite sport. Sport is central to contemporary popular culture. Yet, despite this, it is replete with sexist and racist ideologies. Cheating is a major problem—particularly in elite sports—as the Lance Armstrong saga so clearly demonstrates. Tennis star Novak Djokovic’s attempts to deceive authorities in relation to his COVID-19 vaccination status begins the chapter, followed by a brief overview of sport history. ‘Sportswashing’ is considered to be a particularly insidious attempt by various governments and corporations to win public support—in the face of their otherwise perverse actions. In Chapter 8, the final chapter, an important question is asked: Given the very many existential, and systemic, problems faced by the world, how might it be possible to confront the crucial issues we encounter, and bring about progressive and long-lasting change? Social agency—action designed to confront the status quo and deliver positive outcomes—is outlined and explained. The chapter demonstrates how citizens are countering media mis- and disinformation, rallying for action on climate, protesting the pollution and environmental destruction wrought by corporate capital, and rethinking ways of farming, eating, and living.

*Societal Deception* is not a conventional or orthodox book. It is analytical and critical—but does not employ complex concepts or seek to build social theory. It contains snippets from my life as a social researcher. It is deliberately eclectic, moving from topic to topic to reveal the extent to which capital has permeated, and largely corrupted, most social institutions that are important to our lives. It is iconoclastic—aiming to expose the groups and organisations employing deceptive tactics to extend their influence and power. The book is designed to be provocative—but also highly readable and engaging. It is a satirical social commentary of

our contemporary world. I hope you enjoy the book, even though the journey through its pages might not provide a particularly comfortable ride at times.

Brisbane, Australia

Geoffrey Lawrence

## Notes

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This book was written on the lands of the Turrbal/Yuggera peoples of Brisbane. I acknowledge the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of these lands and pay my respects to their ancestors and descendants.

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## About the Author

**Geoffrey Lawrence** studied agricultural science at Sydney University in the early 1970s, later completing his masters in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and doctorate in sociology at Griffith University. Before, during, and after his studies he worked in social welfare, mental health, in industrial labouring, in natural resource management, and in farming—experiences which exposed him to social inequality and drove him to seek answers to social injustice in society. His research is diverse, spanning the areas of popular culture, the media, sport and leisure, rural social change, agri-food industries, food security, finance, and social aspects of the environment. He has received funding from the Australian Research Council, the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the National Research Foundation of Korea, the Norwegian Research Council, and the EU Commission. He has been a visiting fellow at Cornell University, the University of Essex, Michigan State University, the Norwegian University of Technology, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. During his career he has published 25 books, and over 400 book chapters, refereed articles, and research monographs. He is a Life Member of The Australian

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# 1

## Who Can You Believe? Of Media, Misinformation, and Trumpery

Just who can you believe in a post-truth world—a world where truth is deemed no longer essential and where appeals to emotion are more influential than objective facts? Those posting videos on social media, perhaps? Well, not always. Take the video clip ‘The Truth About PCR Tests’. It claims that the PCR test has been designed to alter the human gene sequence, introducing magnetic beacons into our bodies, allowing us to be patented, and eventually exterminated. Our bodies are being reworked by nanotechnology to become part-robots. A woman exclaims:

They’re putting nanoparticles right into your head. I know this for a fact because these materials, these fibres, these silver fibres right here, these came out of my body. They’re called Morgellons ... They’re alive ... This is what they put into my head.<sup>1</sup>

The clip claims there will be no ‘humans’ in the world by 2025. Rather, all future forms will have been created in a lab and tagged for control purposes. And who would want to do this? Rockefeller—for reasons never quite explained.

The video—which is pure humbug—has been watched over 250,000 times. The truth is that polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing has been

a successful means of identifying genes in viruses and other life forms. The swabs allow scientists to identify specific strains of COVID-19—an important prerequisite to treating infected patients. The swabs contain no magnetised material. And as for Morgellons? They sound nasty but are the products of delusion.<sup>2</sup>

Then there is the video ‘six acupressure points of hand’—showing how if you rub your wrist in a certain way, you can cure a sore throat. And the one that states dental root canal treatment is the ‘No 1 cause of heart attack’—making an outrageous claim while ignoring the scientific evidence that smoking, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol are the three biggest killers. Or, the posting ‘Woman sues Samsung for \$1.8M after cell phone gets stuck inside her vagina’. Really? Seeking pleasure from the insertion of a vibrating mobile would be strange indeed. So strange it never occurred. Another hoax. But that didn’t stop over 1.3 million people viewing and sharing the article on social media.<sup>3</sup>

Former independent media company BuzzFeed estimated that the top 50 fake news stories in 2018 generated 22 million ‘shares’ and reactions on Facebook (now Meta), about the same number of hits for the 50 fake news stories in each of the two preceding years.<sup>4</sup> Some of the fake news headings we are exposed to are remarkably silly—‘Florida man arrested for tranquilizing and raping alligators in everglades’ and ‘Lion mutilates 42 midgets in Cambodian ring fight’, while some of it might actually nibble at the truth—‘Trump ... is an unhinged madman’.<sup>5</sup> The aim of much fake news is to promulgate misinformation—sometimes for fun, as with satire and parody—but also to deceive and manipulate for ideological and propaganda purposes, such as creating false assertions about political opponents at the time of elections. It is hard to identify who to believe when ‘news’ is malleable and when social media sites can readily proliferate viral hoaxes before even rudimentary checks are made about the accuracy and reliability of the stories their readers post.

This book is neither about individual acts of deceit and malice, nor the effects of those acts upon particular individuals. Shakespeare is still a good place to start for those looking for psychological motives for the malevolent behaviour of nasty men and women.<sup>6</sup> While some of the individual perpetrators of poppycock will appear at times, the main focus of this book is upon what I have termed *societal deception*—the

attempts by groups and institutions with power and influence to employ lies, propaganda, and mis- and disinformation, in an effort to hoodwink the public. Societal deception is the deliberate obscuration of the truth. Societal deception prevents the public from understanding the social structures and processes affecting their lives. What we consider to be ‘normal’ ways of thinking, living, eating, parenting, and recreating have been organised to advantage the few at the expense of the many. The book reveals the mechanisms, tactics and outcomes of groups, organisations, and institutions that seek to manipulate ideas for economic, social, or political gain. It speaks truth to power while revealing how we are being constantly and systematically deceived.

## Who’s Doin’ the Foolin’?

The list of the agencies of social deception is long and includes advertising firms, political parties, corporations, the public relations (PR) industry, the media, think tanks, shock jocks, ‘influencers’, and assorted others. Their *modus operandi* is to sway personal and societal behaviour to achieve desired goals. There is nothing innocent about this. Those doing the fooling derive their income, status, and power by consciously manipulating public opinion and action.

The advertising industry is a classic. ‘Good morning. Have you used Pears’ soap?’ was a slogan invented by the so-called father of modern advertising, London-based Thomas Barratt in the early 1900s. It was pitched at the well-to-do and those with social aspirations, with the Pears brand becoming synonymous with quality and family values.<sup>7</sup> Advertisements have been around for millennia. In ancient China flutes were played to attract customers to a vendor’s wares. If you are fortunate, as I have been, to tour Ephesus in Turkey you can visit a wharf where a marble stone is clearly engraved with a foot pointing to a local brothel. Dated at the first century BCE it is very clear that disembarking sailors were viewing a rather crude—in both senses of the word—advert. Before its destruction by lava from Mt Vesuvius in 79 CE, the walls of Pompeii were strewn with political messages—advertisements supporting local candidates which were strategically located in areas of greatest foot

traffic.<sup>8</sup> Copper printing plates were first used in the Song dynasty in China, from 960 until 1279 CE, to manufacture wall posters featuring invitations to would-be customers to purchase products. During the Middle Ages in Europe tradespeople would erect signs that provided a visual message to inform and lure potential customers. Largely illiterate, the populace could readily identify a large painted wood hanging of a boot (representing a cobbler), suit or hat (tailor), anvil or horseshoe (blacksmith), or bag of flour (miller).<sup>9</sup> The signboard was one of three forms of advertising in the period before the printing press. The second were trademarks (seals or maker's marks which can be found as early as 2,000 BCE). Third were the all-day runners (*hemerodromoi*) in ancient Greece, who would traverse dangerous and unfriendly terrain to bring messages of battle to eager ears.<sup>10</sup> They morphed into the town criers of the eighteenth century who's 'oyez, oyez, oyez' ('oh yay, oh yay, oh yay') would advertise the opening of markets and fetes, deliver parliamentary proclamations, and tell of disease outbreaks, executions, victories at war, and the splendid news of yet another royal birth.<sup>11</sup>

## Ads, Ads, and More Ads

From those times until now the basic principle of advertising has been quite straightforward—to grab people's attention with the purpose of selling a product about which the potential customer is unaware or is in need of being reminded. At the turn of the twentieth century American businessman, author and utopian socialist, King Camp Gillette, invented the safety razor.<sup>12</sup> It was an instant 'must have' for those who had to trust the barber's weekly cut-throat blade, and sometimes shaky hand, to remove their facial hair. Gillette had always wanted to invent something disposable—ensuring customers would return to purchase his product. The safety razor, with its replaceable blades, was just the thing.<sup>13</sup> But, along with his razor, Gillette had invented something else. He stated that 'when you use my razor you are exempt from the dangers men often encounter who allow their faces to come in contact with brush, soap and barber shop accessories used on other people'.<sup>14</sup> Deconstructing Gillette's remark American-British author Bill Bryson observes:

Here was an entirely new way of selling goods ... telling you that not only did there exist a product that you never previously suspected you needed, but if you didn't use it you would very possibly attract a crop of facial diseases you never knew existed.<sup>15</sup>

Then there's the marketing of feminine hygiene products where, since the 1930s, words like 'health', 'fresh', 'clean', and 'pure' have been employed to highlight the view that women's reproductive parts might be otherwise. In the first half of the twentieth century women's douche-brand of choice was Lysol, which was concurrently being advertised as a germicide for toilet bowls.<sup>16</sup> According to a Canadian-based infectious disease specialist there is no reason for women to reach for moisturisers, creams, wipes, or spray fragrances or to practice douching, waxing or shaving, encouraging females 'just to leave things alone down there'.<sup>17</sup> But, in what amounts to 'shaming the vagina', the industry leaders have hired ad firms, influencers, and media personalities to sell women a range of pseudo-scientific products that have been shown, in many cases, to cause harm.<sup>18</sup> That has not halted the expansion of the feminine hygiene industry which was worth some US\$21 billion in 2020 and is expected to grow to US\$28 billion by 2025.<sup>19</sup>

Ads create consumer anxieties and then resolve them by proposing a solution—via the purchase of a product purported to alleviate those anxieties. Creating positive associations that have subconscious emotional appeal is also part of the bread-and-butter of the industry. So, too, is the use of various mascots that become intimately associated with a product. There has been a veritable menagerie of fun-loving meerkats providing insurance advice, tigers selling breakfast cereal, polar bears selling soft drinks, and bunnies selling batteries. My wife is captivated by the lip-moving horned sheep selling RAMS home loans. Not.

What other tricks are up the sleeves of the advertisers? An insidious element of advertising is that its success is often a function of its repetition. The 'nudging effect' describes the constant bombardment of a particular advertisement, with continual saturation seemingly guaranteeing buyer interest.<sup>20</sup> It is the same trick used by those flooding the social media with falsehoods—repetition delivers familiarity, and familiarity often wins over truth.<sup>21</sup> Other advertising tricks include telling you

a product will make your neighbours and friends envious; indicating that everybody is purchasing the new product and that you'll be out in the cold if you don't; and associating brands with health and vitality (even where many of those products compromise your well-being).<sup>22</sup> As critic Clive Hamilton has explained, advertising claims

are all manifestly and demonstrably misleading. Indeed, an advertising agency that *failed* to mislead potential consumers into believing that they could derive enhanced personal qualities from the product would not be in business for long.<sup>23</sup>

An early exploration of consumer manipulation by the advertising industry was Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*. Published in 1957, the book traces the use of psychological techniques designed to influence personal and societal behaviour by, for example, encouraging purchase of branded products. Before and during Packard's time it was assumed that consumers were rational beings who would logically assess all propositions being put to them. Their choices were informed. Packard, in contrast, showed that advertising taps into our emotions and fulfils certain 'needs' such as love, reassurance, security, and self-worth.<sup>24</sup> While many readers considered that Packard was exploring subliminal messaging he was, in fact, exploring the importance of supraliminal messaging—the ways visual imagery is incorporated into conscious (rather than unconscious) minds.<sup>25</sup> His major insight was that branding and advertising were being employed to influence people's behaviour without their being aware of it. *The Hidden Persuaders* compellingly demonstrated that products which were ostensibly similar in quality and appearance could be differentiated—and thereby gain brand loyalty and improved market reach—through the manipulation of messages. Since Packard's time the use of various techniques to reach our unconscious mind (through subliminal advertising) has been employed. They include the insertion into media commercials and jingles, of words and sounds that the conscious mind is unable to perceive. Writing or images are often flashed between the frames of a film (at less than one-tenth of a second).<sup>26</sup>



There have been some classic examples of embedded messages. In the promo for the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean* the skull of Captain Jack Sparrow has two flaming torches behind it, suggesting ears very reminiscent of Mickey Mouse, obviously to remind viewers that it is a Disney franchise, and to pull in the kids. The Toyota logo is a combination of lines and shapes that comprise the word 'Toyota', a good example of brand reinforcement. In a 1970s ad from Gilbey's gin three ice blocks that vaguely spelled SEX were placed in glass beside the bottle.<sup>27</sup> In similar form, SFX—or Special Effects—magazine, often places pictures on its cover that block the bottom of the 'F', thereby putting 'SEX' into the mind of the observer.<sup>28</sup> Do such tactics sell products? Psychologists consider that both subliminal stimuli (such as those above) and supraliminal stimuli (clear messages appealing to the conscious mind) can be effective—especially where people are already inclined to purchase the particular products being surreptitiously advertised.<sup>29</sup>

Canadian Naomi Klein's book *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* provides other important insights into the world of advertising. She shows how companies such as Nike, Shell, McDonald's, and Microsoft do not simply 'badge' their products with identifiable logos, but also employ those logos to 'sell' an image or lifestyle which has a close identity to the brand. A conga line of highly recognisable athletes, pop stars, and big screen heroes has been carefully assembled to give the brands a potent mixture of credibility and 'cool', deflecting the consumer's gaze from the Third World sweatshops from which many of the corporate products—from clothing to computers—originate.<sup>30</sup> Not unlike the insights of another Canadian, Marshall McLuhan, who taught us 'the medium is the message', Klein argues that the brand name is more important than the product. The reason? Consumers—especially young consumers—want to buy into what is trendy, fashionable, and desirable. The corporations gain consumer loyalty through their branding strategies, having their logos representing 'fitness' (think of Nike's swoosh) or 'fun' or 'hope' or 'hip', while moving the compass needle away from 'corporate greed ... union-busting, "McJobs", privatisation, and environmental destruction'.<sup>31</sup> At the societal level:

while economic growth is said to be the process by which people's wants are satisfied, in reality economic growth can be sustained only as long as people remain discontented. Economic growth does not create happiness; unhappiness sustains economic growth ... It is therefore vital to the reproduction of the system that people are constantly made to feel dissatisfied ... and this explains the indispensable role of the advertising industry.<sup>32</sup>

## Trusting Brains in the Brain Trust

If the advertisers and the corporate world have formed a beautiful union, so too have the think tanks and government. Think tanks ('brain trusts') are unusual beasts. There are just over 11,000 in the world today (up from a mere hundred in the 1950s) and they can be independent, quasi-independent, part of government, university-based, politically-affiliated, or corporate.<sup>33</sup> The main business of think tanks is to investigate pertinent local and international trends and issues with the aim of informing, and influencing, public policy—public policy, that is, that can help shore up the political right, or enhance profits for the corporate sector. They often position themselves as providing an 'independent', impartial, voice of reason in a world of policy confusion. In reality, their research and advocacy are designed to further the ideological and economic agendas of those funding them. The Heritage Foundation is a prime example. Formed in 1973 with initial funding from Joseph Coors (of Coors beer fame) and Richard Mellon Scaife (of Mellon banking), the Foundation quickly established itself as the primary conservative think tank in the US.<sup>34</sup> With donations pouring in from firms in the coal, oil, chemical, and tobacco industries, the Foundation has sought to develop a coherent conservative agenda through its publications and lobbying. Its 1980s publication *Mandate for Leadership*—a 20 volume, 3,000-page, treatise on 'correct' conservative policy—was readily embraced by the Reagan administration with some 60% of its 2,000 policy recommendations being implemented in the President's first term. Its latest offering - *Project 2025* - proposes a smorgasbord of policies for the next Republican president of the US, including rolling back civil rights, sacking government

workers, attacking reproductive rights, and eliminating environmental protections.<sup>35</sup>

Many of the Foundation's early proposals were a taste of what would later become entrenched in neoliberalist (economic rationalist) policy—smaller government, deregulation, lower taxes for the wealthy, and private-over-public health. They have also advocated for the roll-back of progressive policies on abortion, on poverty relief, and rights for the LGBTQIA+ community.<sup>36</sup> How, you might ask, can the Heritage Foundation—as a tax-exempt not-for-profit organisation which is banned under legislation from engaging in political activities—actively lobby government? One of its clever moves was to establish a political advocacy arm in 2010. Called Heritage Action for America it spends its funds to push for legislative changes that support big business and reduce government expenditure on public services. Its most famous intervention was to attack Obamacare (the Affordable Care Act), lobbying Republican senators and resulting in the shutting down of the federal government in 2013 when Congress could not agree to pass the budget.<sup>37</sup> Mike Gonzalez, as senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation, said in 2023 he was looking for the return of Trump so he could enact the Foundation's plan 'to gut the federal bureaucracy'.<sup>38</sup> And Trump would no doubt endorse such action, having blamed 'deep state' bureaucrats, 'weak' lawyers, and 'woke' generals for having undermined his plans during his presidency.<sup>39</sup>

As one critical observer has noted of the Heritage Foundation:

With imposing buildings flanking the Capitol on both sides and a budget of more than \$80 million, Heritage looms large in the Washington professional right. More than just another nonprofit peddling legislative ideas, it has become the de facto policy arm of the congressional conservative caucus ... Republicans in Congress [are] essentially "outsourcing" their policy work to the foundation.<sup>40</sup>

The US-based Atlas Network—another right-wing think tank—provides money and training for the advancement of free-market (neoliberal) policies around the world. It is a think tank involved in the creation of hybrid think tanks. It has close ties with the oil and gas industry and has

lobbied for expansion of mining on the lands of First Nations people. It has worked with the tobacco industry to stymie anti-smoking legislation in Latin America. In 2021 it employed fake accounts in an attempt to influence outcomes in general elections in Ecuador and Peru, as well as to fuel public protests in Cuba in the same year.<sup>41</sup>

The American Legislative Exchange Council—a body that drafts legislative options (termed ‘model bills’) for state governments—is yet another example of corporate lobbying. Behind closed doors, business representatives and politicians rework laws so they will favour corporate agendas. Its proposed bills include using public money to prop up the for-profit private prison system, privatising public education, banning teacher unions, scrapping environmental protections, stripping local governments of land-use controls, creating tax breaks for big business, and preventing governments from raising taxes to extend social provisioning.<sup>42</sup>

But isn’t the work of the Heritage Foundation, the Atlas Network, and the Exchange Council, evidence of democracy at work? Aren’t they putting forward important arguments in the great Battle of Ideas that is part of democracy? Not really. Not when think tank prognostications actively exclude the interests of a large swathe of the population. Not when their policy choices lead to increases in greenhouse gas emissions. Not when they falsify data to downplay the impact of climate change. And not when they attack agencies and policies seeking to protect the environment.<sup>43</sup> The rich do well from a continuation of conservative policies; why would they not use their not-inconsiderable wealth to lobby politicians to keep the status quo? But this is not the main point. What is problematic about right-wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation is that they are undermining democratic processes, promoting policies leading to greater social and economic inequality, as well as actively white anting attempts to combat climate change and environmental degradation. Dinosaur ideas in a world pleading for progressive economic and social actions.

## Then There's the Media

The mass media—technologies fashioned to reach a national and global audience—include newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the internet. The mass media are channels of communication conveying ideas, opinions, facts, and reflections on the latest in politics, economics, health, law, the environment, and sport. They are one of the most powerful agents of socialisation, informing public opinion and shaping the thought patterns of citizens, locally and globally. The media are diverse and we expect that there will always be an array of competing interpretations of events. But what happens when the ownership of the media is concentrated? In totalitarian societies where the state controls the media and can inform its citizens in any way it chooses, the media become agents of propaganda to gain public compliance and social conformity, hopefully (but not always) shoring up continued support for the regime.<sup>44</sup> In democracies—where a plurality of views and opinions is deemed crucial for political and economic health—media bias can skew public attitudes in favour of the rich and powerful in society.

The undue power of media magnates is clearly shown in figures of the concentration of ownership and influence. In the UK three companies—News UK, the Daily Mail Group, and Reach—dominate 80% of the newspaper and online market.<sup>45</sup> In the US, six companies—Viacom, News Corporation, Comcast, CBS, Time Warner, and Disney—own 90% of media outlets.<sup>46</sup> Australia has one of the most concentrated media ownership regimes in the world with Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation owning some 59% of the national print media and collecting more than 40% of free-to-air and subscription revenues (with just three corporations—News Corporation, Nine Network, and Seven Media Holdings—receiving some 80% of free-to-air and subscription revenues).<sup>47</sup> With this level of control, what they print, put on TV, and stream, packs a punch. As authors David Edwards and David Cromwell have noted

Corporate media are not neutral channels supplying news and views through divinely disinterested journalism. The media 'pipelines' supplying

'news' are filthy with money, bloody with arms industry gore [and] lubricated by the fossil-fuel industry that is destabilising the climate.<sup>48</sup>

With the clear domination of global media by the Murdoch empire, it is worth delving into Rupert the man. What drives his ambition, and what values does he hold? Murdoch began building up a newspaper empire following inheritance of his father's Adelaide-based paper in 1952.<sup>49</sup> As with any good capitalist, he has employed decades of skilful manoeuvring and clever dealing to branch into online news, book publishing, and movie studios, to gain as much market share as possible. This delivered outlets for his advertisers and profits for his family and shareholders. With a net worth of US\$22.5 billion he and family members control some of the most influential media outlets including *Fox News*, *The Times of London*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>50</sup>

Rupert has been characterised thus: His politics is right-wing, promoting neoliberal policies and supporting regimes like that of Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US. He is a warmonger, justifying and praising George W Bush's invasion of Iraq. He is a well-known corporate tax evader, channelling profits through low tax/no tax havens like Bermuda and the Cayman Islands. He is an anti-union campaigner who, in an infamous 1986 move, helped to dismantle British print unions by transferring production of his newspapers to a non-union plant—something described at the time as the 'biggest union-busting operation in history'.<sup>51</sup> His papers have been involved in scandals including the illegal and unethical hacking of phone voicemails, with Britain's Leveson inquiry finding he showed 'wilful blindness' over misconduct in his corporation and that he was 'not a fit person to exercise the stewardship of a major international company'.<sup>52</sup>

Anything more? Well, yes. He uses political influence to gain financial benefits for his empire, undermining political parties that would threaten his profit-making and global expansionist desires. When confronted by a (very mild) social justice agenda he famously instructed his newspaper editors in Australia to 'kill' the political ambitions of the then Labor Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, way back in 1974.<sup>53</sup> He endorsed the Blair Labour party in Britain when it backed a bill that relaxed