

Bozo Sapiens

The card from Albert arrived in the mail -- I was assigned a "budget." I've never done a "budget" -- now I had to decide what to do -- and who to do it with.

Perhaps a talk about avocations -- club members like to hear about personal things. Fishing ... that might do it. I like to fly-fish and do a little each year in Idaho. Lots of fishing, but very little catching -- perhaps there's a short paper lurking there. I sat down in front of the TV, remote in hand, and brought up the fishing channel. Nothing special going there. I switched over to the pornography channel. Might be a paper there -- when I was dean of the College of Applied Science I considered creating a baccalaureate program in "Adult Entertainment." Pornography is a billion dollar business in the United States -- shouldn't UC train students to work in the industry? I imagined a three-college consortium -- CCM for background music and choreography, DAAP for sets and costumes, and Applied Science for audio and video technology. I thought the idea a good one and there would be lots of student interest -- but the Provosts' Office didn't think highly of my proposal and did not believe we could get Board of Regents approval. Never mind what the Enquirer and Si Leis would have to say.

So there I was, trying to decide, flipping back and forth between the fishing channel and the pornography channel. Suddenly my wife shouted "Goddam it Richard, leave it on the porn channel; you already know how to fish!"¹

And right then it came to me: "Bozo Sapiens". Why not write about the inanities of people. A quick Google search revealed that I wasn't very original -- a couple of authors² had recently published a short book by that name detailing how we -- homo sapiens -- continually fool ourselves when we should know better. But the area was fertile - ripe with great stories.

I allowed my mind's eye to drift across the Ohio river -- after all, Kentucky is probably the mother lode for mining Bozo Sapiens -- witness Rand Paul and the Creation Science Museum. Why not do a budget on the Creation Science Museum - a psuedo-scientific hoax in my mind, but perhaps not in others. I asked Richard Gass and Hal Porter to contribute. One atheist -- one minister. We would visit the museum and write down our reactions and thoughts in three short papers. Alas, nothing came of it, because, I suspect Hal thought it a bad idea for him to be involved with Creation Science and me -- rightly so, I suspect.

I needed three topics that would exemplify "Bozo Sapiens." For me, why not talk about hoaxes. Some of the best hoaxes have been scientific ones, that take advantage of people's general ignorance of science, or at least their inability to think critically. That would be simple enough.

What then? How about the Law? Tort Law is rife with idiocy – the McDonald's hot coffee case, the Ryobi-Sawstop case, step ladders with more warning stickers than steps, etc. I spoke with a number of Club members who were lawyers and Jim Wesner agreed to attempt a short paper.

Now I needed a third ... After a few moments I made one of those curious mental juxtapositions that we all make from time to time – coupling two apparently unrelated things. I connected libraries and *Cincinnati Magazine*. Because libraries are full of content that no one reads and *Cincinnati Magazine* is free of content that everyone reads. And of course the common theme between libraries and *Cincinnati Magazine* is Albert Pyle. So I asked Albert and he agreed to write the third paper. Note that I am not implying that Albert is content-free!

For some years Paul Hoffman was the editor-in-chief of *Discover*, a magazine created by several former editors of *Time*, and dedicated to explaining the esoteric advances of modern science – in a style that any curious and alert reader would enjoy and understand. (As an aside, it is a core belief of mine that if you cannot explain a scientific idea in simple prose and in a manner understandable to anyone with a modest education then you probably do not fully understand it yourself.) Hoffman noted BBC's science pranks – and the gullibility of its audience. In an editorial in the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Discover* – which I had stolen from Jack McDonough's office – Hoffman mentions two BBC hoaxes that amused him. The first, a video story about the extinction of the dreaded pasta weevil, showed Swiss field workers harvesting spaghetti from trees. This three-minute hoax was broadcast on April 1, 1957 – an era when very few Britons ate Italian food. It showed a family in the Canton of Ticino in Switzerland reaping a bumper spaghetti crop and discussed the "virtual disappearance of the spaghetti weevil." Footage of the traditional Swiss "Spaghetti Harvest Festival" was aired, along with a discussion of the plant breeding necessary to develop a strain of trees that produced the perfect length of spaghetti.

In those days in Britain pasta was not an everyday food and was known mainly from some dreadful canned spaghetti in tomato sauce. It was considered by many to be an exotic delicacy. At the time there were seven million homes in Britain with television sets, of a total of sixteen million homes. An estimated eight million people watched the program and thousands called in the following day to question the authenticity of the story or to ask for more information about spaghetti cultivation and how they could grow their own spaghetti trees. The BBC reportedly told them to "place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best." _

That the report was done by the respected BBC current affairs program "Panorama," made it believable. It was made even more believable because the voice-over was done by one of the BBC's most respected broadcasters – an authority figure – and that is a key point in evaluating and understanding people's gullibility.

Another BBC scientific hoax involved a radio interview with an astronomer - also an

authority figure. He was discussing the transit of the planetoid Pluto behind Jupiter and urged his listeners to jump in the air to experience a once-in-a-lifetime reduction in gravity.

These “successful” British hoaxes led Hoffman to wonder if Americans were more gullible than the British. After all, he reasoned, the Brits still believe in queens and princesses. Would Americans fall for fake science stories? Using *Discover* as his laboratory, he was able to answer that question with a resounding “yes”.

Of the five April Fool’s stories appeared in the magazine during his term as editor, two of them are somewhat prosaic. One was about the discovery of a new short-lived subatomic particle called the “bigon.” This was a bowling-ball-sized quark thought to be responsible for earthquakes, ball lightning, migraines and collapsed souffles. The other told of a Los Angeles businessman who wanted to install 300 building-sized bellows around Los Angeles to blow the smog out to sea.

Two of the stories, however, developed legs. The first described an archeological discovery: a large cache of Neanderthal musical instruments consisting of mastodon-tusk tubas and rhinoceros-bladder bagpipes. The author speculated that these early homonids constant playing of oom-pah-pah music scared away prey, resulting in the Neanderthal’s starving themselves into extinction. Even though the Neanderthal researcher’s name was “Todkopf,” – deadhead in German – and he hailed from Hindenburg University (Hot Air University, which doesn’t exist), the article found believers among Creationists who claimed the Neanderthal’s love of music was additional evidence that they were just like us – Creationist theology does not allow for another human species that undermines our own god-given uniqueness.

But the best of the hoaxes was published in 1995. Authored by Aprile Pazzo, it detailed a new species of Antarctic mammal – the Hot-Headed Naked Ice Borer. The article showed a picture of a seal-like creature with a bony growth protruding from its head. The bony structure was suffused with tiny blood vessels that could generate large quantities of heat to melt ice quickly. To acquire food, a group of these animals would swim under the ice beneath suitable prey, then use their heads to melt through the ice. When the prey, usually a penguin, sank helplessly into the water, the ice-borers would devour it using their large, sharp incisors. It was even speculated in the article that the Antarctic explorer "Philippe Poisson" may have been eaten by a group of these animals when he disappeared in 1837.

Clues abounded in the article pointing to a hoax. The name of the discoverer was Aprile Pazzo" which is "April Fool" in Italian. The issue of *Discover* was dated April 1. The missing explorer Poisson recalls “*poisson d’avril*”, or “April Fish”, the French equivalent of "April Fool"

Discover magazine received more mail about this article than about *any other* article it has ever published. A number of zoo officials and zoologists called the magazine

asking how they could acquire specimens. Hoffman replied that the animals could not be shipped because their hot heads would melt the packing crate – and by the way did the zoo have a sufficient supply of live penguins on hand to feed them and what would the children think?

Ripley's Believe It or Not! picked up the story and ran it as a real news item. The story was repeated as true in the book "The Unofficial X-Files Companion." The story regularly appears on lists of the greatest hoaxes of all time.

Why were these stories believed by so many smart people – in spite of the abundant red flags? One reason is that so much of real science is exotic and nearly unbelievable. The issue of *Discover* that contained the Naked Ice-Borer story also had legitimate articles on rats on Prozac, mini-mammoths and buddy system birds – all real scientific articles whose authenticity might easily be questioned. Hoffman himself was delighted that the Creationists seized upon Neanderthal tubas – but was upset that zoologists believed the in the Naked Ice Borer. But he shouldn't have been. Magicians have long known that scientists and other smart people make the best audiences – or "dupes." Ricky Jay, a master of sleight of hand, was recently featured³ on *60 Minutes* in a piece which discussed the nature of scams and human gullibility. Jay explained why experts in certain fields are more likely to be hoodwinked than others, demonstrates the blind faith people put in authority, and cautions against anything that seems too good to be true. Jay believes that his ideal audience would be a group of Nobel Prize winners ... because they have an ego with them that says "I am really smart so I can't be fooled." And he says "No one is easier to fool."

Hoffman notes that the magician Penn Jillette stated that "smart people, especially scientists, learn to believe things that are counter-intuitive ... black holes, string theory, neutron stars, germs, trips to the moon, radio waves ... they've lots of practice believing crazy shit." He's right. Is a bowling-ball-sized elementary particle any more absurd than a 26-dimensional string theory? Modern physics is incomprehensible. So is modern engineering. Is British Petroleum's scheme to plug their blown Caribbean Gulf oil well with golf balls any more crazy than removing smog from Los Angeles with giant bellows?

But to me, the key is "Authority figure" – with a capital "A." Recall that the BBC reports on the pasta weevil were delivered by a respected and trusted newscaster. Richard Dawkins notes that there is an evolutionary advantage to believing what authority figures tell you: children would die quickly if they ignored they parents admonitions. So they believe what they are told – from Santa Claus to God, Dawkins favorite target. I won't go into that here - perhaps that's the subject for another paper.

Stephen Greenspan, the author of "The Annals of Gullibility" or "Why we get duped and how to avoid it"⁴ notes that people trust authority figures – unless the authority figure says something too far-fetched. Our economy and our social structures are based on trust – it would all collapse if we did not trust one another. Greenspan, it should be noted, invested \$40,000 with Bernie Madoff.

Rick Newrock
April 23, 2011

-
1. I can't recall where I got this joke but it is not original with me!
 2. E. Kaplan and M. Kaplan, "Bozo Sapiens: Why to err is human;" Bloomsbury Press, 2009.
 3. Ricky Jay, 60 minutes report in 2010.
 4. Stephen Greenspan, "The Annals of Gullibility: why we get duped and how to avoid it;" Praeger, 2008.