



Ignorance: Science behind the toughest question ever asked in a Miss Universe pageant

No one watches Miss Universe pageants to exercise their intellect. But Miss Universe 2000 is one very rare and notable exception. [Katja Thomsen Grien](#), the then Miss Uruguay, made it into the last five finalists, only to be flummoxed by what is perhaps the most difficult and profound question ever asked in any pageantry. Her question, set earlier by Miss India, [Priyanka Chopra](#), was simply nine words long: *“If ignorance is bliss, why do we seek knowledge?”*



Miss Uruguay 2000, Katja Thomsen Grien, was asked what is perhaps the toughest and most profound question ever asked in any pageant: *“If ignorance is bliss, why do we seek knowledge?”* @ missosology.org

Miss Uruguay, whose first language was not English, struggled to understand, let alone answer the question. Nonetheless, brave Miss Uruguay, choosing not to request any help from a translator, did finally give a fairly competent answer: ignorance, she opined, was the source of world problems at that time.

I remember catching that particular Miss Universe episode on TV that time, and I remembered thinking, “Wait a minute. Ignorance isn’t bliss because ignorance means none or lack of knowledge. Really, who wants to be stupid?” Easy peasy. Question successfully answered.

Or so I thought.

Fast forward nearly twenty years later, I picked up the book [“Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance”](#), a collection of academic articles, edited by [Robert Proctor](#) and [Londa Schiebinger](#), and this book made me realize that most people’s understanding of ignorance, including mine, is incomplete, that ignorance is not a simple case of just being the opposite of knowledge.



Ignorance is not just an absence of knowledge but can take various forms. Ignorance is sometimes desired. Manufactured ignorance is another form of ignorance to deceive or hide truths (c) olly @ fotolia.com

Contrary to common belief, ignorance does not always mean an absence of knowledge. Ignorance can include false knowledge - and in certain cases, ignorance is actually good and desirable (and, yes, bliss too) and even our right to have.

Ignorance appears in several forms, one of which is inherent in science. Ignorance is a resource that drives science. We humans are naturally inquisitive creatures. We are creatures uncomfortable in our ignorance: of not knowing or knowing too little. Our ignorance prompts us to inquire, to observe and collect information, and to understand - and science is a methodological manner by which we use to reduce our ignorance. The whole point of science is to fill in gaps in knowledge - but ignorance cannot be completely eliminated, and very often, as any scientist can attest, more knowledge actually begets more ignorance.

Socrates famously once said, "The more you know, the more you realize how little you know." We answer some questions only to realize there are even more questions to answer. But this is not to say science is a worthless pursuit. Far from it. Science is forever pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge. It is science, not religion or other superstitions, that has revealed more about us, our environment, and our history and possible futures.

Ignorance can also be a product of deliberate omission. We cannot, for instance, possibly understand, know, or focus on everything. Science continuously chips away at our ignorance, but by choosing to focus or study on certain aspects of our ignorance, we inevitably leave some of our ignorance unanswered and unexplored. Over time, Proctor and Schiebinger remarked, the price of our selection is "lost knowledge": we become ignorant of what we do not know.

But not all knowledge is good: some are dangerous. There are many examples which we wish we could put back the "genie in the bottle". Knowledge that enabled us to create nuclear or biological weapons, knowledge about torture, and unethical animal or human studies are only some examples about which we wish we had remained ignorant.

So, in some cases, ignorance is good because it protects us. Consider military and other sensitive national information - or even our personal information - that could otherwise be potentially used against the country and us if they are revealed. National secrecy laws are strictly enforced to maintain ignorance. Such secrecy laws keep the country and us safe and secure. Individual privacy laws are even seen as a basic human right by many countries. Complete knowledge is not always desired in all cases.

Manufactured falsehoods are the final form of ignorance, where false information

are deliberately created with hidden agendas to confuse or mislead people. History and even current events are replete with examples of manufactured ignorance to mislead people regarding the truth such as about smoking causing cancer, air pollution causing acid rains, CFC (chlorofluorocarbon) destroying the ozone, and recently, human activities causing global warming.

Manufactured ignorance is a strategic and hidden ploy, often driven by greed, to counter the truth because exposing the truth would disrupt the profitable status quo of the political or business environment. Manufactured ignorance work by sowing seeds of doubt by obfuscating facts and cherry picking evidence. It works to prolong the debate on issues by creating or amplifying disputes or controversies.



“Doubt is our product.” Tobacco industries worked hard to manufacture ignorance by obfuscating facts to prolong the debate as long as possible the risks of smoking. (c) Artem Furman @ fotolia.com

“Doubt is our product,” so wrote one tobacco executive in a leaked memo, “since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy.”

Tobacco and fossil fuel industries and their lobbyists are guilty of manufacturing ignorance to protect their investments and profits because the truth is dangerous, inconvenient truths that would detrimentally affect their business dominance and profits. But governments too stand guilty. Our leaders manufacture ignorance to

protect their power and positions against their scandals, corruption, misdeeds, and incompetence, and even manufacture ignorance to attack those who oppose them.



Fossil fuel industries today continue what the tobacco industries have been doing for the past four decades, by sowing seeds of doubt about the science of climate change, claiming more evidence are needed.

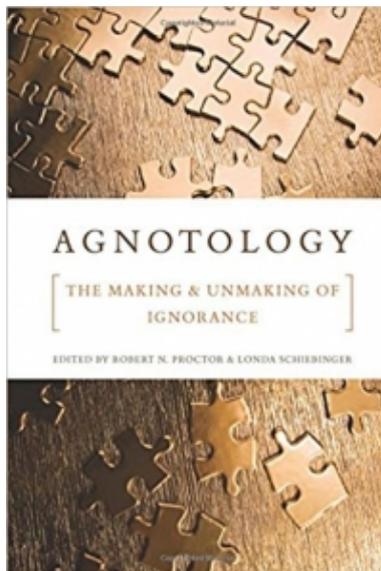
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The current US President, [Donald Trump](#), exemplifies a leader who frequently lies and embraces ignorance, leading Jake Tapper of the CNN to remark about Donald Trump, “I’ve never really seen this level of falsehood ... it’s conspiracy theories based on nothing.” Even the former US President, Barack Obama, mocked Trump by saying: “Ignorance is not a virtue.”

What is worrying that despite calling out Trump, his exaggerations, outright lies, and ignorance are becoming acceptable or at least tolerated by a great deal of the American public.

The ubiquity of the internet and social media, for example, has made the spread of ignorance faster and more frequent. Fake news and conspiracy theories, automatically taken as truths, are clicked, read, and quickly shared. In a moment’s notice, alternative facts are spread into every corner of the world and enforced to the point that it is becoming harder today to distinguish facts from fiction. The explosion of online (and independent) news channels have helped to present alternative viewpoints, but just as there are more of them, many others

proliferate that deliberately present falsehoods, driven by hidden agendas, to spread and enforce ignorance.



“Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance” edited by Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford University Press, 2008).

Published nearly ten years ago, Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger’s book, “Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance” is a fascinating read. The science of ignorance, or agnotology, coined by Robert Proctor of Stanford University, is a field yet to be established, but it is perhaps timely to formalize the study of ignorance especially today.

“If ignorance is bliss, why do we seek knowledge?”

Short question, true, but in its brevity and apparent simplicity, hides a profound, thought-provoking intellectual exercise.