

The Oil Drum

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Clown Fest

Posted by [nate hagens](#) on September 26, 2010 - 6:43am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

The continued expansion of the internet has brought with it a surge in information, analysis, opinion and insight. At the same time the vast mental and social freedom in cyberspace has manifested an exponentially growing forum for self-expression – which ends up serving as virtual playgrounds for the human ego. This complex cyber landscape exists concurrently with accelerating real crises in energy, the economy, and the environment. Thus at the same time that the overall fabric of our social arrangement is shifting, the internet has become an odd melting pot for scientists and preachers, altruists and hucksters, knights and clowns alike. Perhaps I've been slow to notice it, but it seems to me that as time passes, on the discussion topics that really matter, the clowns are starting to dominate. Of course, as the goings on in our country more and more resemble a circus, it is no wonder that clowns are rising to the top of many discussions. Why is this? Is there an underlying phenomenon at work? This short campfire looks at what this might mean.



Clown Fest

I've gotten 95% of my information from the internet over the past 5-6 years. There exists a special mix of intelligence, altruism and collegial respect that can unite to make internet forums worth much more than the price of admission. As such I've become habituated to a variety of sources, bloggers, websites, and internet personalities. Of late it seems these forums have become more shrill and predictable in their aggregate coverage of real life. Recently the signal to noise ratio is so low that I find myself using the internet for learning less and less, and when I do, with increasing occasion shake my head at the content. Buzzwords such as 'fiat currency', 'fractional reserve system', 'banksters', 'hyperinflation' and even 'peak oil' are prevalent, though the analysis and understanding of these concepts seems shallow and repetitive. Worse, the denizens of particular forums (not surprisingly) all seem to drink their own particular form of kool-aid. Given the prevalence of high quality content and thought of a few years ago, the blending and parroting of the major themes that a casual perusal of the resource/energy/finance blogosphere reveals today reminds one of the time shift in the movie Idiocracy. A psychiatrist might label this phenomenon *'information anhedonia'*. An economist would say we've reached *'decreasing informational returns from the marginal blog entry'*. I'll just call it 'clown-fest'.

We evolved to favor the 'in group' over the 'out group', for resource, defensive, and ultimately reproductive advantages. The internet has spawned millions of 'in-groups' – peak oilers, tea-party evangelizers, deflationistas, gold-bugs, Austrian economics followers, anti-abortion activists, and myriad less controversial groups such as 'Claremont High School Boosters', "Kerr Jar Enthusiasts", "Earthworm Snack Creators" and the like. People gravitate towards groups they identify with. And they usually stay there. (After all, a room full of clowns feels a lot less clown-like).

Achieving status is a primary driver in the biological kingdom and remains a key driver in our human social groups. But today, for the first time in our species history, the same 'feelings' we get from moving up in a real life social hierarchy can be attained cheaply and easily online. Being the most vocal, most persuasive or most interesting in a small group of dedicated/interested followers

engenders the same neural reward as being the head of a small business, or a Mayor, or a high school basketball star. Our brains don't really know that being the head of the "Morel Foraging Society" or "Nudists for Nader 2012" with several hundred members online is different than being County Treasurer in real life – we receive respect, positive feedback, deference etc. from the people in our 'in-group' (the fact they might be just anonymous mushroom pickers or passionate nude people is not relevant to our brains).

Human ethologists liken this phenomenon to 'dispersal phenotype' prevalent in nature:

Dispersal is important in biology. Often a species will produce two forms:

1) a maintenance phenotype (the outcome of genes and the structures they produce interacting with a specific environment) that is adapted to the environment in which it is born, and (2) a dispersal phenotype that is programmed to move to a new area and that often has the capacity to adapt to a new environment.

According to the present theory, **humans have developed two dispersal phenotypes in the forms of the prophet and the follower.** The coordinated action of these two phenotypes would serve to disperse us over the available habitat. This dispersal must have been aided by the major climatic changes over the past few million years in which vast areas of potential human habitat have repeatedly become available because of melting of ice sheets.

The dispersal phenotypes might have evolved through selection at the individual level, since the reproductive advantage of colonizing a new habitat would have been enormous. They would also promote selection between groups. Factors that promote selection at the group level are rapid splitting of groups, small size of daughter groups, heterogeneity (differences) of culture between groups, and reduction in gene flow between groups. **These factors are all promoted by the breaking away of prophet-led groups with new belief systems.**

Cult followers have been studied and found to be high on schizotypal traits, such as abnormal experiences and beliefs. They have not yet been tested for the sort of selfish attitudes and behavior that characterize free-riders. If a large cohort of people were tested for some measure of selfishness, it is predicted that those who subsequently joined cults would be low on such a measure. **Predictions could also be made about future cult leaders. They would be likely to be ambitious males who were not at the top of the social hierarchy of their original group.** If part of why human groups split in general is to give more reproductive opportunities to males in the new group, it can also be predicted that leaders of new religious movements would be males of reproductive age. Female cult leaders are not likely to be more fertile as a result of having many sexual partners, but their sons might be in an advantageous position for increased reproduction.

From THE BIOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR, Edited by Jay R. Feierman (bold added my me)

[pp. 184-186] DISPERSAL

Most people are both reasonable, and passive. Some people are either unreasonable or assertive (or both). In a free form forum one unreasonable or assertive person will drown out 10 or more who are either reasonable or passive. Especially for those whose assertion or unreasonableness in real life leads to fewer social opportunities, the internet has been a godsend. Either anonymous or

in their own name, they can easily accumulate a following by articulating what people already believe or like to hear. Given the self-selected audience, there doesn't exist the normal social checks and balances. As such, due to the myriad different categories, those assertive and/or social acceptance seeking souls who find their niches online dig in hard and 'feel' as if they are true celebrities. Combine that with the iterations and scale that come from long time periods, little or no barriers to entry and an apathy/lack of interest from those not spending time on the internet and these folks have become ensconced at all sorts of cyber guideposts on topics that cover the map. Dispersal phenotypes.

Basically, since people believe in authority figures, and [nominate their own authority figures based on their own belief systems](#), it is no wonder that time and numbers has by circa 2010 amassed an internet army of 'clowns'. We see increasingly hysterical caricatures emerge on the internet/media that undergo some perceived status/ego boost that they wouldn't/couldn't have gotten in normal situations. The feedback from the true believers (of whatever tribe they communicate to), then locks these personalities into an utterly confident belief in their own position as an expert, and their actions become considerably (and understandably) clownlike over time to people not in their sub-group, especially magnified in those cases of borderline mental illness (which I suspect are not few). I notice this dynamic in numerous areas of discourse but its particularly prevalent in the the peak oil, finance and climate change circles where I have spent alot of time.

Midway through this post I am forced to acknowledge the possibility that "I" am such a clown. Maybe my being editor here for so many years has given me an exaggerated sense of my own understanding of things. It's feasible that the signal to noise ratio I see deteriorating on the internet is just fine. It's possible that what I perceive as signal is noise, and vice-versa. (And, its possible, as my girlfriend says, that its *all* noise). But why do I hear from friends (who are not clowns) of increasing apathy and disinterest in reading blogs for information? Why is the 'information deficit model' dealing with energy and environment failing? Why do mainstream people roll their eyes when 'peak oil' or 'fiat currency' or 'runaway climate change' come up in discussions? It's reasonably clear to me that honking the squeaky red clown nose on these issues is not only ineffective, but becoming obnoxious. Something else is at work. And that something is our belief systems/cognitive biases. Is it possible that as humans we are ALL delusional? And just some of us less so?

When Greshams Law trumps Dunbar's Number

One (major) way to combat ignorance, nihilism and divisiveness is with education. But education in forums where the noise to signal ratio rises higher and higher makes civil, informed discourse impossible. With increasing occasion I see Greshams Law, where the 'bad drives out the good', evidenced in internet forums (such as this one). Our brains only have so many cc's of grey matter, and so many neurons/synapses etc. Evolutionary psychologists state that we are able to handle about 150 relationships effectively at one time, before quality deteriorates or someone on front end gets bumped off (Dunbar's Number).

This dynamic is manifesting in resource depletion forums right now. As the signal to noise ratio declines, I find myself spending less and less time at sites I once frequented for information and high quality discussion. Part of the reason for this is that *the medium* (blogging, the internet), in many ways has itself become *the message*. Frenetic, living-in-the-moment stimulation junkies interacting in a way that has become socially accepted, and conforms to our evolutionary neurotransmitter hot buttons. Over time, more and more people gain the skills, and confidence to enter discussions online where there is little to no social status downside, especially when they can write/comment under a pseudonym. Combine this with large numbers, and the existence of human ego, and the upside of becoming a big fish in a small pond, and we have a clown uprising in the comment sections around the blogosphere. (and many of the clowns are nasty!). In effect, blogging (for education, and impact) has been marginalized by its own success.

The Decoy Effect



Peak Oil would have been better termed 'peak benefits from cheap fossil labor to society', as the invisible slaves we extracted from the ground have been asking for annual pay raises since 1999, and since we substituted 2-4 orders of magnitude more units of fossil labor for each human task we performed in earlier times, our wages and profits have declined and our cost of goods have gone up. But the PO demographic, over time, has spawned numerous sub-groups advocating or predicting very specific and deterministic outcomes for the immediate future which freezes policy folk in their tracks. The word "Peak Oil" is already socially burned as its mention shuts down meaningful discourse on energy in polite circles. Ergo Peak Oil is a simple concept but the vocal and shrill have carried its implications too far from the mainstream to be recognized as helpful by the facts alone.

But is it possible, that with highly polarized issues like Peak Oil, (and finance, climate change etc), that some of the leading 'clowns' may act as *decoys* on the way to (positive?) change? As Dan Ariely wrote about in [Predictably Irrational](#), there is a concept termed *asymmetric dominance effect* where the existence of a third, extreme value causes what was originally an extreme option to be preferred. The example in the book was (something like) the choice between buying a \$250 barbecue grill or a \$1000 grill. Ceteris paribus, most people chose the cheaper grill. But if the grill manufacturer put up a super stacked \$5,000 grill next to the other two, then people would start to prefer the \$1000 grill as next to the \$5,000 version it didn't seem so outrageous. This practice, known in professional marketing as 'the decoy effect' may inadvertently apply to what appears to be a clown uprising among the energy/environment/economic tribes. Options for change that at first seem extreme might not seem so extreme in the face of a carnivale barrage. Ergo, writing on peak oil may on the surface seem clownlike but is performing a service in that less extreme energy concerns automatically carry more weight.

Clowns -Wrong Facts, Right Side



As critical as this post may seem of the unproductive direction of content and personalities on the topics of our time, those making claims about the demise of our currencies, the peak of oil production or the end of growth may have inaccurate bits in their stories and have predicted 5 out of the last 1 calamities, but these well intended errors of omission pale in comparison to the errors of commission by those in leadership positions who rely on assumptions of perpetual growth that would be laughable if they weren't so ill planned for. The damage from our leading institutions conflating resources with reserves, energy with dollars, and debt with real capital is an order of magnitude greater for our societies than some friendly prophet phenotypes. At this carnival then, the clowns may seem annoying and repetitive, but at least they are on the side of change, something that the snake oil salesmen are not.

Conclusion

If this post has sounded a bit harsh on the status of blogging/education on the major topics of our time, it is meant to be. Those glorifying dystopian futures, with the only action plans involving Kruggerands and/or ammunition etc., are probably getting their status/ego boost at an ultimate cost to society (as in a vacuum these storylines -true or not - either come across as looney or scary to the average person). A hijacked pursuit of status and novelty gets firmly in the way of real education and change. Just like time and greed and entropy have caused our political system to become a 'one dollar one vote' monolith, the blogosphere has become a 'one neuron one vote' system. Those who have free time and are vocal, novel, confident, and possessive of short memories drown out the less clown-like, more reasonable folk in their forums - Greshams Law. "Democracies" cease to work in these circumstances unless there exists a strong republic/framework of rules. The watershed moment comes when clowns have become the scout team for the civically minded, rational systems-thinkers who find their voices. Or maybe that already happened years ago and we're mean-reverting.



Send in the clowns. Just not all at once.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).