

It's coming up to a year since I began this blog. In my usual fashion, I set myself the unrealistic goal of writing a post every week. This is only the 37th, so I've fallen short by a considerable margin. On the other hand, most of those posts have been on the order of 1500 words long, for a total of about 55,500 words thus far. That seems a fair whack of the keyboard, and it's been fun too.

In an earlier post I proposed that because of the ways in which knowledge economies work, we increasingly live in an "ignorance society." In the same year that [Sheldon Ungar's paper](#) on ignorance as a public problem appeared, another [paper](#) came out by Joanne Roberts and John Armitage with the intriguing title "The Ignorance Economy." Their stated purpose was to critique the notion of a knowledge economy via an investigation of ignorance from an economic standpoint.

As Roberts and Armitage (and many others) have said, knowledge as a commodity has several distinctive features. Once knowledge is consumed, it does not disappear and indeed its consumption may result in the development of more knowledge. The consumption of knowledge is non-zero-sum and can be non-excludable. Knowledge is a multiplier resource in this sense. Finally, knowledge is not subject to diminishing returns.

Interestingly, Roberts and Armitage do not say anything substantial about ignorance as a commodity. We already have some characterizations handy from this blog and elsewhere. Like knowledge, ignorance can be non-zero-sum and non-excludable in the sense that my being ignorant about X doesn't prevent you from also being ignorant about X, nor does greater ignorance on my part necessarily decrease your ignorance. Ignorance also does not seem susceptible to diminishing returns. And of course, new knowledge can generate ignorance, and an important aspect of an effective knowledge-based economy is its capacity for identifying and clarifying unknowns. Even in a booming knowledge economy, ignorance can be a growth industry in its own right.

There are obvious examples of economies that could, in some sense, be called "ignorance economies." Education and training are ignorance economies in the sense that educators and trainers make their living via a continual supply of ignoramuses who are willing to pay for the privilege of shedding that status. Likewise, governmental and corporate organizations paying knowledgeable experts enable those experts to make a living out of selling their expertise to those who lack it. This is simply the "underbelly" of knowledge economies, as Roberts and Armitage point out.

But what about making ignorance pay? Roberts and Armitage observe that agents in knowledge economies set about this in several ways. First, there is the age-old strategy of intellectual property protection via copyright, patents, or outright secrecy. Hastening the obsolescence of knowledge and/or skills is another strategy. Entire trades, crafts and even professions have been de-skilled or rendered obsolete. And how about that increasingly rapid deluge of updates and "upgrades" imposed on us?

A widespread observation about the knowledge explosion is that it generates an ensuing ignorance explosion, both arising from and resulting in increasing specialization. The

more specialized a knowledge economy is, the greater are certain opportunities to exploit ignorance for economic gains. These opportunities arise in at least three forms. First, there are potential coordination and management roles for anyone (or anything) able to pull a large unstructured corpus of data into a usable structure or, better still, a “big picture.” Second, making sense of data has become a major industry in its own right, giving rise to ironically specialized domains of expertise such as statistics and information technology.

Third, Roberts and Armitage point to the long-established trend for consumer products to require less knowledge for their effective use. So consumers are enticed to become more ignorant about how these products work, how to repair or maintain them, and how they are produced. You don’t have to be a Marxist to share a cynical but wry guffaw with Roberts and Armitage as they confess, along with the rest of us, to writing their article using a computer whose workings they are happily ignorant about. One must admit that this is an elegant, if nihilistic solution to Sheldon Ungar’s problem that the so-called information age has made it difficult to agree on a human-sized common stock of knowledge that we all should share.

Oddly, Roberts and Armitage neglect two additional (also age-old) strategies for exploiting ignorance for commercial gain and/or political power. First, an agent can spread disinformation and, if successful, make money or power out of deception. Second, an agent can generate uncertainty in the minds of a target population, and leverage wealth and/or power out of that uncertainty. Both strategies have numerous exemplars throughout history, from legitimate commercial or governmental undertakings to terrorism and organized crime.

Roberts and Armitage also neglect the kinds of ignorance-based “social capital” that I have written about, both in this blog and [elsewhere](#). Thus, for example, in many countries the creation and maintenance of privacy, secrecy and censorship engage economic agents of considerable size in both the private and public sectors. All three are, of course, ignorance arrangements. Likewise, trust-based relations have distinct economic advantages over relations based on assurance through contracts, and trust is partially an ignorance arrangement.

More prosaically, do people make their living by selling their ignorance? I once met a man who claimed he did so, primarily on a consulting basis. His sales-pitch boiled down to declaring “If you can make something clear to me, you can make it clear to anyone.” He was effectively making the role of a “beta-tester” pay off. Perhaps we may see the emergence of niche markets for specific kinds of ignoramuses.

But there already is, arguably, a sustainable market for generalist ignoramuses. Roberts and Armitage moralize about the neglect by national governments of “regional ignorance economies,” by which they mean subpopulations of workers lacking any qualifications whatsoever. Yet these are precisely the kinds of workers needed to perform jobs for which everyone else would be over-qualified and, knowledge economy or not, such jobs are likely to continue abounding for some time to come.

I've watched seven children on my Australian middle-class suburban cul-de-sac grow to adulthood over the past 14 years. Only one of them has gone to university. Why? Well, for example, one of them realized he could walk out of school after 10th grade, go to the mines, drive a big machine and immediately command a \$90,000 annual salary. The others made similar choices, although not as high-paying as his but still favorable in short-term comparisons to their age-mates heading off to uni to rack up tens-of-thousands-of-dollars debts. The recipe for maintaining a ready supply of generalist ignoramuses is straightforward: Make education or training sufficiently unaffordable and difficult, and/or unqualified work sufficiently remunerative and easy. An anti-intellectual mainstream culture helps, too, by the way.