

September 12, 2018

THE FOX NEWS EFFECT

Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich



Fox News by [Johnny Silvercloud](#) | [Flickr](#)

Join Paul and Anne Ehrlich on **Thursday September 20th at 5pm PT/8pm ET** for a **Live Webinar** to discuss The Fox News Effect and its significant impact on discourse and politics worldwide.

More details to follow on the [MAHB homepage](#).

“One of the most remarkable threats to watercourses in the United States are concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). For example, thousands of swine are often confined in a small area and their feces collected in big ponds. Fermentation can lead to geysers in the mess, and occasionally retaining dams will break. In 1995 a CAFO caused what was up until then the largest environmental spill in the history of the nation—more than twice that of the disastrous Exxon Valdez oil spill. A North Carolina hog manure lagoon ruptured and released nearly 100 million liters (26 million gallons) of effluvium into the New River. It killed every living creature in the river, including fish by the millions. The feces also breed microbes that produce neurotoxins that can disorient people exposed to the floods of pig feces—a phenomenon known technically as the “Fox News Effect.”¹”

¹ Bradshaw C, Ehrlich PR. 2015. Killing the Koala and Poisoning the Prairie: Australia, America, and the Environment. University of Chicago Press.

September 12, 2018

Fox News's stream of lies and misinformation flows not from a literal hog toilet but from its political equivalent. Its source is Rupert Murdoch's ignorant right-wing propaganda complex which includes newspaper outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Australian*, *The New York Post*, many cable channels, Twentieth Century Fox films, Dow Jones, and on and on. Fox "News" television is the loathsome standard-bearer of the far right's global crime family and a center of systematic lying² as well as sexual harassment³. Murdoch's single greatest win in the right's war on civilization was the election of Donald J. Trump and the empowerment of Mike Pence, Jeff Sessions, Ryan Zinke, Scott Pruitt, Betsy DeVos, and other incompetents who stocked the Republican kakistocracy now working hard to convert the United States to a polity where corporate money overrides everything – even the survival of civilization.

In this time of existential threats, this is especially clear in Trump's policy of expunging scientific information and advice from the U.S. government and strong campaigns against environmental and public health regulations, pushed by the Murdoch gang, to make those threats ever stronger. Murdoch himself played a huge role in stopping Australia from taking needed action on climate disruption.⁴

Rolling Stone said Murdoch and his NewsCorp empire of falsehoods "have become the nation's leading source of disinformation about climate change." That may not do justice to the man whose media empire is also Australia's leading source of climate disinformation and a top source of disinformation in England. A [2014 survey](#) of public opinions on climate change in 20 countries found the top three countries with the most climate denial were, in order, the United States, Great Britain and Australia. Quelle coincidence!"⁵

Especially depressing examples of the Fox News Effect are the Murdochian screeds now being produced that shamelessly attempt to fool people into thinking there is no population-consumption problem; the evidence in extensive comments on those screeds shows that much of the public is so uneducated and unfamiliar with math that they are easily conned. A recent example attacking the idea that population growth is an important element in the environmental crisis was penned by one William McGurn, an editorial writer for Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal*. McGurn was ignorant enough to base much of his commentary on the claims of a specialist in mail-order marketing, Julian Simon.

Simon's "expertise" can be judged by anyone who can do arithmetic from his statement: "We now have in our hands—in our libraries, really—the technology to feed, clothe, and supply energy to an ever-growing population for the next 7 billion years."⁶ In 1994 when Simon made that statement, the world population was about 5.6 billion and increasing by about 1.6 percent

² <https://bit.ly/1uYIWyr>

³ <https://bit.ly/2J4i2eZ>; <https://bit.ly/2KFz5tI>

⁴ <https://bit.ly/2NDMQa6>; <https://bit.ly/2MTeRcg>

⁵ <https://bit.ly/2MTeRcg>

⁶ Ehrlich PR, Ehrlich AH. 1996. *Betrayal of Science and Reason: How Anti-Environmental Rhetoric Threatens Our Future*. Island Press.

per year. A bit of arithmetic reveals that at such a population growth rate it would take only 774 years (not 7 billion) for the world population to increase to a size where there were ten human beings for each square meter of ice-free land on the planet. At the 1994 growth rate, in only 1900 years the mass of the human population would be equal to the mass of the Earth; and after 6000 years (not 7 billion), the mass of the human population would equal the mass of the universe. Simon was a great pioneer of the “alternative facts” that emanate from *Fox News*.”

The Fox News Effect streaming from the *Wall Street Journal* on population-environment issues was attested to by its neurotoxic influence on many of the hundreds who commented on the McGurn nonsense. But that effect was recently more than equaled from Murdoch’s right-wing rag in Oz, *The Australian*. There, Caroline Overington, a journalist, fiction writer (where her talents clearly lie), and associate editor, wrote an attack on us with the interesting title, “If the world’s not perfect it comes pretty close”⁷. Like most anti-environmentalists, Overington is not long on facts or research. She claimed that “the world population has increased from three billion people when Ehrlich wrote his book to 7.5 billion now, and we’re feeding pretty much all of them.” Pretty much all of them?

That’s not what the FAO says. “In 2016 the number of chronically undernourished people in the world is estimated to have increased to 815 million, up from 777 million in 2015 although still down from about 900 million in 2000. After a prolonged decline, this recent increase could signal a reversal of trends. The food security situation has worsened in particular in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, South-Eastern Asia and Western Asia, and deteriorations have been observed most notably in situations of conflict and conflict combined with droughts or floods. The apparent halt to declining hunger numbers is not yet reflected in the prevalence of child stunting, which continues to fall, though the pace of improvement is slower in some regions.”⁸ Contrary to the Fox News Effect more than twice as many people as live in the U.S. are hungry. But that’s not all. “More than 2 billion people in the world today may be affected by micronutrient malnutrition. Vitamin A deficiency, iron deficiency anemia and iodine deficiency disorders are its most common types, and they are found globally although people in poor nations suffer the most severe problems.”⁹

But aside from her tendency to minimize the suffering of a few billion people, overall Overington’s unseemly flood is basically the hackneyed old denier and “new optimist” [Pinker, 2018 #10699] claim: because life expectancies have increased as have conventional measures of standard of living, all is well. No consideration is given to how much longer life expectancies and how much greater human well-being might be if there were only two billion people on the planet; no calculation is offered of the depletion of humanity’s natural capital. She does not

⁷ Overington C. 2018. If the world’s not perfect it comes pretty close• The Australian
<https://bit.ly/2KWVK0E>.

⁸ FAO I, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. . 2017. The state of food security and nutrition in the world: 2017. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-I7695e.pdf>.

⁹ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/x0245e/x0245e01.htm>

September 12, 2018

mention the costs future generations likely will pay because of that depletion to service today's gigantic population and the overwhelming consumption by a minor rich portion of humanity. Of course, Overington doesn't discuss whether length of life necessarily is a good measure of quality of life, or of the impacts of great inequity on that quality. She gives no consideration of the clear fact that today's material super-prosperity for a minority of human beings has been built on humanity's wrecking of its own life-support systems, a destruction mainly fashioned on a one-time bonanza of fossil fuels (to say nothing of slavery). Is Overington taking the results of a one-time resource bonanza as indicative of a long-term trend, despite the insane growth mania at the center of today's civilization? Will human lives get ever better as there are more and more people each consuming ever more?

A quarter of a century ago, more than 1700 independent scientists "proclaimed that fundamental changes were urgently needed to avoid the consequences our present course would bring." The authors of the 1992 declaration feared that humanity was pushing Earth's ecosystems beyond their capacity to support the web of life. They described how we are fast approaching many of the limits of what the biosphere can tolerate without substantial and irreversible harm. The scientists pleaded that we stabilize the human population, describing how our large numbers—swelled by another 2 billion people since 1992, a 35 percent increase—exert stresses on Earth that can overwhelm other efforts to realize a sustainable future. They implored that we cut greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and phase out fossil fuels, reduce deforestation, and reverse the trend of collapsing biodiversity."

Twenty-five years later, more than 15,000 scientist reevaluated the situation and concluded "By failing to adequately limit population growth, reassess the role of an economy rooted in growth, reduce greenhouse gases, incentivize renewable energy, protect habitat, restore ecosystems, curb pollution, halt defaunation, and constrain invasive alien species, humanity is not taking the urgent steps needed to safeguard our imperilled biosphere."¹⁰ Is it possible that more than 15,000 other scientists know things that have somehow escaped Ms. Overington's notice?

Perhaps even more important, Overington doesn't consider the socio-political costs now appearing in her "near perfect world." She ignores, for example, Trump's Nazification of U.S. politics, and his successful wars on women, African Americans, Hispanics, science, and the environment. Rupert Murdoch enables her, Trump, and the other generators of the Fox News Effect. If civilization survives his name will live in infamy.

Can anything be done to improve the chances of survival? If there is, now's the time. The government of the United States, the most powerful nation, is pushing humanity down a suicidal path. In this election year there may be the last chance to change its course. I won't go through here all the obvious necessary changes to avert environmental and/or socio-economic

¹⁰ Ripple WJ, Wolf C, Newsome TM, Galetti M, Alamgir M, Crist E, Mahmoud MI, Laurance WF. 2017. World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice. *BioScience* 67:1026-1028.

September 12, 2018

catastrophe. We must focus on the first step – removing from power the madmen now in charge. The efforts of civil society must be focused on the immediate, critical goal of taking back the Congress in the 2018 elections– not just the House but the Senate too. Trump’s infesting of the judiciary with far-right ideologues has already gone much too far. The fate of the United States and, we are afraid, of civilization truly now rests with the people.

The MAHB will be hosting a live webinar with Paul and Anne Ehrlich on **Thursday, September 20th at 5pm PT/8pm ET**. Join us in discussing the significant effects from this phenomenon and its potential impact on future elections. More information to be posted on the MAHB homepage soon.

The [MAHB Blog](#) is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org