

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

February 2023

Who sets the narrative?

Summary

Does the dominant narrative manufacture ignorance? Are our values real or imagined?

With our seatbelts firmly adjusted, 2023 is set to be very bumpy ride with tight turns, deep potholes and cliffs on either side of the one-way trip down the neoliberal highway. Put into service nearly half a century ago, the neoliberal roadster is showing its age. No longer the newest political model on the postmodern highway, its shiny ideological gloss peeled off decades ago. It belches clouds of hydrocarbons and constantly leaks public funds that make their way into the pockets of large corporations and a growing number of dependant billionaires. As the rust spreads from within, the neoliberal automobile looks more like an old tractor travelling down the digital superhighway. Despite all its flaws and defects, why do the majority of Australians sit quietly amongst the ideological baggage clutching at the worn vinyl seats? Why do we passively watch the major political parties rip out social safety features and replace them with deregulation and privatisation? Why do we persevere with the political driving duo guided by a dated map that takes us down deteriorating corporatisation and globalisation back roads? May it have something to do with what we are told 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year that forms our world view?

Values without value

The dominant narrative that permeates every nook and cranny of our society is a form of storytelling. This tailored message oozes through screens of all shapes and sizes, it saturates the broadcast and print media, and penetrates social media and advertising. The dominant narrative pushes the interests and the ideology of those who control the means of production, communication, distribution and exchange; in other words, the 1%. Wrapped in neoliberal gloss, this curated message is delivered by those in authority, those who have influence, and personalities who are controlled by the rich and powerful. To ensure we don't forget, the message is repeated 24/7 and regularly repackaged to make it sound new again. Given the vast array of media outlets, the dominant narrative it is able to overshadow alternative views and voices that run counter to its distinct perspective. Through a process of blanket repetition, the dominant narrative normalises itself and provides the illusion of being objective and apolitical, when in fact it is neither.

Throughout our lives we are told that there are a set of values that shape and define us as Australians. The dominant narrative presents Australia as a country where you can have a 'fair go.' It is a place where citizens bathe in freedom and feast at the table of equality of opportunity regardless of social or cultural background. We are told that such values are key in making our communities strong, peaceful and secure built on democratic institutions that support our stable political system, and promotes social cohesion. Despite all the talk of peace, freedom, democracy and a fair go, our leaders seem consistent in delivering the opposite.

Peace

Since the end of the second world war in 1945, western democracies have had very limited success in bringing about peace. In fact, we have seen an escalation in the number of wars and conflicts, much of which have been instigated by liberal democracies. Conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan contribute to a long list of suffering and loss. Both direct and indirect western military intervention have fuelled the endless wars that Australia has been willing to support.

As one military debacle follows the next, our political leaders backed by the mainstream media have encouraged collective amnesia. Eager for the public to forget the recent mess left in Afghanistan, western nations have plunged head first into the proxy war being waged in Ukraine. Rather than promote peace through diplomacy and negotiations, western nations have opened up the public purse and diverted billions of taxpayer dollars towards supplying military hardware to the already blood drenched battlefields in eastern Europe. Diplomacy has been replaced with the ratcheting up of tensions that draws us closer to nuclear conflict. Once again, the Australian government has followed the belligerent lead of the USA and dedicated over \$650,000,000 in military aid supported by military hardware and troops to provide training to a nation a world away from our shores. Did we not learn anything from the disaster in Afghanistan, Iraq and Vietnam? The historical pattern that emerges clearly highlights that our involvement has been costly, results in little or no effect except adding to broken communities and increasing the profits of overseas weapons manufacturers. The dominant narrative regularly presents us with a comic version of reality, dumbed-down in black and white terms. The usual clichés are smeared over our screens trumpeting our 'fight for democracy' and against 'a dictatorship' and 'tyranny' while historical and political complexities are swept aside as we inch closer to the brink of nuclear

annihilation. Last month the Doomsday clock moved forward to 90 seconds to midnight. The mainstream media did little to highlight this alarming fact and decided to focus on the array of more sophisticated and more destructive weapons being pledged by western democracies. Meanwhile, the dominant narrative is silent on the booming business being done by the world's leading arms companies.

Freedom

The dominant narrative would have us believe that we live in a free nation where individuals can do what they want, when they want. Through their skewed lens, the public has freedom of choice. The freedom to purchase goods and services from a range of corporations. The freedom to compete and to consume what we want without too many restrictions.

However, freedom is not just about choice. It is also about freedom from constraints. What gains little attention in the mainstream media is the fact that governments of all stripes consistently fail to secure for their citizens freedom from poverty, freedom from homelessness, freedom from exploitation and freedom from financial insecurity. Despite Australia's huge wealth and abundance of natural resources and ever-increasing corporate profits, there is a heavy reliance on private charities to feed and clothe children before they head off to school.

In a so-called free democracy like ours, why are citizens subject to high levels of monitoring and excessive surveillance by government agencies? Why do we have high levels of censorship and an environment where government secrecy prevails? The cosy relationship between big business and government is shrouded in "commercial in confidence." Political donations thrive in a grey zone lacking sufficient oversight and transparency.

Whilst our news media focusses the public's attention on repressive regimes for cracking down on protesters, they omit the fact that we live under an umbrella of repressive laws. Australians are subject to legislation that severely restricts the right to strike or withdraw labour despite it being an internationally recognised human right. Workers and unions seeking to address exploitation in the workplace regularly face huge fines and legal action.

Democracy

Once we have cast our vote, we are told that our democratic duty is done and we can be assured that our democratic institutions are left in a good set of hands that keeps them strong and resilient. However, a democratic society does not just happen. All thriving

democracies are based on a population that is informed, free from manipulation, false narratives and backroom agendas. Yet, the overwhelming dominance of neoliberalism has placed our democratic institutions and civic duties onto a bonfire. The growing influence of big business on government continues to fuel privatisation, deregulation, corporatisation and globalisation. The opaque nature of political donations by large corporations, wealthy individuals and the growing number of lobbyists working for the 1% casts a shadow over transparency and accountability within our state and federal parliaments.

Under the weight of market economics, key institutions that once promoted democracy have been undermined. Decades of neoliberal policies have transformed our universities from centres of education to training camps churning out 'job ready' young people awaiting their turn to enter the precarious job market. No longer the beacons of social progress, nor the heart of critical thought and imagination, universities focus more and more on securing funds from the private sector. Meanwhile, democratic learning and development rests in the hands of the mass media and social media, all subject to agendas designed to manipulate the public into believing that there is only one way, the status quo.

Justice & equality

A 'fair go' is based on the key concepts of justice and equality. A fair go would mean that the benefits derived from our nation's abundant natural wealth would be openly distributed amongst the population regardless of race, gender, political views and background. Despite the ever-increasing wealth generated from our natural resources and the vast number of Australians who help make this happen, mega profits continue to be channelled into the coffers of large corporations that prop up superrich individuals. As we look a little closer, the 'fair go' is limited to a very small number of individuals. Meanwhile, the dominant narrative continues to propagate the view that the 1% are hard-working individuals who create jobs for fellow Australians. However, what is omitted from the headlines is that the superrich assiduously dedicate their resources to minimise their tax return. They rely on the public purse to prop up their corporations and grow their profits while the rest of the nation endures rising poverty, a growing inequality gap, homelessness and child poverty.

Truth

We heavily rely on truth and trust within our families, amongst our friends, in the workplace and in the community. Yet, trust and truth are feeble concepts when it comes to our political institutions, corporations and the media. Our corporate leaders, the political elite

and media moguls and far more interested in shaping public opinion based on appeals to emotion and personal belief rather than objective facts and reputable sources of information. With the growing means of communication backed up by sophisticated technology and psychological know-how, the corporate and political elite tactfully deploy propaganda, disinformation and associated techniques aimed at establishing their specific version of the truth that saturates our screens, thereby forming the dominant narrative.

Manufacturing ignorance

Supported by the billionaire owned media and government-controlled media, a simplistic world view drenches our society forming the dominant narrative that we see and hear each and every day. Complex issues are simplified to the point that they are gutted of intellectual content. Important social and political events are stripped of context and delivered in sound bites aimed at triggering emotions rather than getting down to the truth. The aim of feeding the public a slurry of 'news' simply helps to manufacture ignorance through omitting important facts, ignoring important events and manipulating the social and political agenda. This is actively supported by the billionaire owned media which is well-versed in distracting the public from key issues such as health, stagnant wages, job insecurity and the rising cost of living. Instead, an entire industry is based on dishing out a diet of celebrity news and sensationalisation aimed at distracting the public's attention from real human needs.

Depoliticisation

As the mainstream media offers a host of programs based on a fantasy land fixated on renovating large houses and cooking up gourmet banquets, the average punter could be excused in believing that rising energy prices and interest rates are a world away. Yet, the aim of the dominant narrative is to distract and depoliticise real issues that impact the majority of Australians. Omitting facts and distracting the public's attention from real-world issues is not an act of innocence. It is a strategic approach by the power elite to maintain and reinforce the status quo. This cloud of delusion lulls the public into believing that 'she'll be all right' if you just work harder for less, or 'you just have to do with a little less for now.' Through depoliticisation, key social and economic issues remain on the periphery of the public's consciousness. Obscured by celebrity news, distracted by media personalities and sensationalisation, the public are not provided with the necessary context or the full range of information to form a solid understanding of key issues and events. In short, the mainstream media undermines the public's ability to join the dots. Social issues, the machinations of power and fractures in our economy are little understood. The dominant

narrative simply delivers an alternate view of reality hand-crafted by political elites and corporations. In effect, this undermines the public's ability to engage meaningfully and think beyond the limitations of the status quo. It restricts our ability as citizens to support a vibrant democracy and imagine a future beyond the current neoliberal straight jacket.

Lifting the cloud of delusion

Unfortunately, it is easy to maintain the status quo. Apathy, compliance and resignation require little effort on our part. Supported by corporate interests, a political elite and a growing list of billionaires, the status quo may seem to be a safe place to hide. However, permitting the continuance of the status quo requires us to desert our responsibilities as citizens, to abandon control of our hearts and minds and ultimately hand over our future to the 1% who have consistently delivered war, poverty, economic decay, inequality, environmental disaster and falling living standards.

In order to lift the cloud of delusion, we need to reject the dominant narrative. We need to critically analyse the dominant world view, we need to inform ourselves by looking beyond the dross presented to us as news. Once we unshackle ourselves from the corporate owned media and government-controlled media we can begin to ask the right questions, make informed decisions and take control of our future on our own terms.

Clearly, we have inherited a number of global issues that have escalated since 2022. If we are to continue to believe the dominant narrative, we will condemn ourselves to a grim future. Are you willing to let another year go to waste?

Anthony B – Website Editor

February 2023

