

Verbal Equinox

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A WORD FROM THE EDITORS: THE FOURTH ESTATE

Writing Consultants, Weber State University

In this Age of Information, we are rightly amazed that, just waiting at our fingertips, we have reasonably accurate information about all of human experience, and most of it is carefully researched and put forth by the best minds of our time. Yet the concept and propagation of “fake news” have taken the United States by storm, and its president, unwilling to hear criticism that countermands fake news that pleases him, has attacked news outlets for portraying him in an unflattering light. Perhaps even worse, he has surrounded himself with an echo chamber, taking advisors from heavily-biased and unreliable news sources and claiming that his detractors are the ones creating this “fake news.” He has restricted access for any news agencies that do not allow him to keep up an image of the savvy businessman and president, regardless of whether or not their criticisms are sound. Even though the Electoral College voted him into office, the president still needs to respect the sacredness of the fourth estate.

While it is common knowledge that the government has checks and balances to keep the country out of a tyrant’s hands, the people also have checks and balances to protect their personal freedoms: the fourth estate. The fourth estate serves as an auxiliary branch of government. It oversees the other branches of government, in essence, serving as the check

of the people to balance the government. Congress can shift from dominantly Democratic to dominantly Republican, but news outlets resist changing political ideals. Investigative journalists live for discovering and verifying facts for the public. Though this has not made media popular with everyone, politicians especially, they serve as a democracy’s fourth estate.

However, the pendulum swings both ways. The rapidity of the 24-hour news cycle means that the focus is not solely on telling the truth but on generating the most clicks and ad revenue. This means that people who want to make money can generate headlines and articles that pull in viewers, even if the stories are erroneous. Fake and fluff news pieces represent a new challenge for consumers to sort out in our digital world.

Ideally, journalists act to keep the people informed of current issues from all angles. And people today can certainly choose what angle they want to read. News sources range from far right to far left, allowing readers to pick their interpretations of political happenings to suit their tastes. While this makes for happy reading, it can also develop into echo chambers where people surround themselves with nothing but information that agrees with their biases. News reporters may report their information in whatever colored tint they choose, but Americans must be intelligent

consumers. Intelligent consumers realize that just because they see a post on the internet does not mean it is true, even if it has a snazzy title, even if one of their really smart friends posted it on a Facebook page. It is still the responsibility of consumers to filter and evaluate what they read.

Even with its dark side, the fourth estate is essential to democracy. During any administration, the news not only debunks false claims made by governmental leaders, but also brings the eyes and wrath of the public down onto corrupt leaders. Voter fraud, collusion with foreign countries, and tapped phone lines are only a few threats to democracy that the fourth estate exposes.

Even though corrupt officials would prefer to ignore the investigations into their ties to unsavory organizations, the news media will not let them. Crimes will be exposed. If the fourth estate were to be removed from the workings of democracy, then democracy would cease to exist. While we all have our qualms about the news, we cannot ignore its importance to democracy.

One of the Writing Center's own has been serving effectively as an agent of the fourth estate on the Weber State University campus since 2014: Cole Eckhardt. Cole is an exceptional journalist who has accepted the position of Editor-in-Chief for Weber State's *The Signpost* for the 2017-2018 scholastic year. This edition of Verbal Equinox is a collection of his best columns throughout his years so far with *The Signpost*.

— The Editors of Verbal Equinox

Cole Eckhardt

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH THE VOICES IN MY HEAD

Writing Consultant, Weber State University

I found myself among student journalists entirely by accident, during a carpe diem encounter outside the English department in the winter of 2014 with a copy editor who needed a splash of nicotine in his blood as much as I did. After a few dead-end attempts at small talk, I mentioned that I was a writing consultant, and he mentioned that his desk at the university's newsroom was in need of someone with an eye for syntax — and that the spot came with a tuition break.

Flash forward a year later, and I was running the copy desk at *The Signpost*. Before that chance meeting outside Elizabeth Hall, I'd never considered writing for newsprint, but in that following year, I'd gotten a taste of writing my own column — my voice was distributed across an institution with a population of over 25,000 people. It was exhilarating. I had a voice. Looking back, I'm mortified by my earlier pieces, but I didn't know how bad they were then, so it felt good.

It took me a while to find that voice, however. In fact, I found that I had a few different ones, and I discovered what mattered to me through writing. I wasn't acquainted with my passion for the intersection of science and philosophy until I wrote about it for the 10th time. I never knew I had a knack for satire until I saw the humble success of my short-lived se-

rial column Unsolicited Advice. I didn't know how much of my political system I took for granted until I was interviewing the Canadian electronic duo Bob Moses in their green room before their performance at Rock the Vote.

Each of these voices evolved as I settled into my niche, which I explore further with every piece I write. My hope is that in a year from now, I'll look back on the piece I wrote this month — which, for the time being, I'm still proud of — and feel the same sensation of shame and embarrassment I feel now when looking back on my first three columns. I'll know I did my job, that I explored the boundaries of my voice, that I tried and failed and grew. I'll know I'm better that day if I hate what I wrote today.

Cole Eckhardt

FUNDAMENTALISTS STILL CONSPIRE TO SUPPRESS EVOLUTIONARY EDUCATION

Writing Consultant, Weber State University

If I asked you to tell me the difference between a lion and a cheetah, could you tell me? Of course you could. A child could.

But what if I asked you to tell me the difference between a gibbon and a bonobo or between a Capuchin and a tarsier? Could you describe the difference (without reaching like a gunslinger for your smartphone to Google it)?

If you find it difficult to answer this question, don't worry. You're in the majority. But the reason might surprise you. There is something sinister behind what may seem rather trivial.

In countries across the world, including the United States, fundamentalist religious organizations have done all within their power to keep young minds away from modern evolutionary synthesis. It was certainly kept away from me.

When I was about 10 or 11 years old, I was fascinated with fossils. "Jurassic Park" was a big deal then, and I would tell any adult kind enough to listen to me about *Spinosaurus aegyptiacus* or *Plesiosaurus dolichodeirus* — in what must have been insufferable detail.

But if someone would have asked me what I knew about *Homo erectus* or *Australopithecus*, I would have stared at them like a dog just shown a card trick.

This is because scriptural literalists had nothing to worry about when I learned about lions or cheetahs or about the bones of a 15-meter-long lizard. I would never have made any connection between those animals and myself. I would never have imagined that we were distantly related.

But the same couldn't have been said if any discussion of primates would have been emphasized. The resemblance is unmistakable, even to a child — and only metaphysical insecurity can lead one to ignore the likeness.

Make no mistake. Members of fundamentalist religious groups all across America have campaigned against any discussion of other living primates and the fossils of our earliest common ancestors in public schools.

To them, the data are lethal threats to literal interpretations of the classical world religions' scriptures. And they're wise to recognize just how big a threat it is.

Researchers today date our progenitors' fossils using what's known as the molecular clock, a radiometric technique that measures rates of molecular decay — of isotopes which degrade with the consistency of a Swiss quartz watch — with approximately a 2 percent to 5 percent margin of error. This method has so far yielded a model that places the first appearance of what

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was distinctly human circa 6 million years before the Bible, the Torah or the Qur'an were written.

We know so much about our common ancestors now that we can clearly envision, with a fair amount of accuracy, what they looked like, how they behaved and what their environments were like. This is thanks to a very rare breed of researcher, one who bridges the gap between the biological and geological sciences: paleontologists, specifically paleoanthropologists.

They, along with geneticists, have amassed infinitely more empirical data on evolution than physicists have on gravity, which, until September of last year, had never before been truly measured. Paleontologists have been studying fossils for nearly two centuries, and the field of paleoanthropology has been incredibly productive over the last three decades.

The field has even yielded sociological and political implications as well, like the American Anthropological Association's statement on race, which declares race to be an illegitimate social construct devoid of any foundation in biology whatsoever and that there only exists a continuum of human variation — and in a nation

tearing at the seams along racial boundaries, a stronger emphasis on the evidence supporting this statement is critical in public education.

But the vast majority of American citizens today aren't exposed to this information until college at the earliest. In the 1980s, the evangelical creationist movement hit its second major stride and dredged up the same crusade fundamentalist Christian organizations launched in the 1920s, one of the first times evolution had been controversial since Darwin's initial proposal. Unfortunately, the creationists' movement of the '80s continues to infect America's science curriculum.

Today, even when evolution is introduced, it's presented alongside intelligent design as an alternative — which is theology in disguise, and it cannot continue to be presented to America's youth in the context of genuine science.

By the time students are presented with information concerning serious evolutionary theory, often decades later, their worldviews are already established, and the cognitive dissonance that results practically guarantees that the information will be rejected — or at the very least forced into some kind of consolidation alongside religion.

And this is precisely the desired effect of those who campaigned against evolution being taught in public schools. In fundamentalist theology's war against evolutionary science, the zealots currently hold the upper hand in America.

It is morally unacceptable for rational members of the public to remain silent while the nation's public school curricula continue to be contam-

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inated by pseudoscience and damaged by the willful omission of legitimate data with social, philosophical, medical and political implications.

Cole Eckhardt
**YALE'S DISGRACE:
ACTIVISTS DEFACE THEIR OWN CAUSE**

Writing Consultant, Weber State University

One would be hard pressed to find a more comfortable, privileged life than that of a college freshman living in the Hogwarts-esque halls of an American Ivy League university.

This past November, however, headlines proclaimed the contrary after Yale Lecturer Erika Christakis sent out a measured and thoughtful email questioning the necessity of the institution's administration policing guidelines on what Halloween costumes were considered appropriate, upholding the maturity of the student body and challenging the school administration's tendency to impose conformity.

Almost immediately, rabid protesting erupted across the campus, accusing Christakis of fostering institutional racism and stripping students of their safe space — all because she believed that students were capable of independently censuring their peers should any of the more ignorant among them show up to campus wear-

The students who found themselves on the quad in front of Silliman College berating Nicholas Christakis (Erika's husband and master of the college) were desperate to pick a very specific fight, and their self-righteous battle to ensure safe space did anything but.

ing blackface or a headdress and war paint.

Does blatant racism still occur all across the campuses of American universities? Of course it does — in fact, it's often at the heart of backwards rituals among the more savage Greek Letter organizations. Do the effects of micro-aggression profoundly impact minority populations and hinder social progress? There is no debate — they do.

Did Erika Christakis advocate a hateful, intolerant atmosphere? Categorically, no. The students who found themselves on the quad in front of Silliman College berating Nicholas Christakis (Erika's husband and master of the college) were desperate to pick a very specific fight, and their self-righteous battle to ensure safe space did anything but.

Now, the right to peaceful protest is an essential thread of the American fabric, of course, and young idealists standing up against established authority is laudable — but a student declaring that a college master's role is not to create an intellectual space but rather to create a home is laughable.

It's Yale, not The Ritz-Carlton.

The extent to which these pseudo-activists went is shameful. Hundreds signed an open letter to Christakis, condemning her for allegedly trivializing the harried existenc-

It's Yale, not The Ritz-Carlton.

es of marginalized peoples, demanding that she either formally apologize or resign.

Christakis's email was intended to make the case that Yale students were mature adults, and hundreds did all within their power to prove the contrary — to prove that they were intellectually and emotionally ill-prepared for life at a college campus, that they were incapable of articulating a civil response to an opinion contrary to their own and that they were divorced from the real world.

Some students began skipping classes, missing meals, suffering psychological breakdowns — and many students even left the campus altogether. Much of America felt for these students, but what's pitiable are the circumstances that deluded these self-proclaimed victims into believing that the world is a womb.

The ordeal has simply been the academic equivalent of Social Darwinism: attrition carving vacancies in school desks for others more mentally and emotionally equipped to occupy them.

What is tragic, though, is that these students didn't abandon the campus before they had the chance to pressure a well-respected educator into a resignation.

To clarify, indeed the Ivy League's traditions of racism have been further exposed this past year — Yale's alleged discriminatory sorority parties, the portraits of Harvard's African-American professors' being defaced, Charles Blow's

son being illegitimately detained at gunpoint and so on — but those who have actually read Christakis's email know that her voice was in no way a part of this pandemic of ignorance.

She was the proverbial scapegoat onto whom all the wickedness of intolerant generations was affixed before she was driven into the wilderness.

Cole Eckhardt

THE PACE OF TECH EVOLUTION ACCELERATES

Writing Consultant, Weber State University

I bitch about my Wi-Fi modem stalling. I should be ashamed of myself.

My great-grandmother rode in horse-drawn carriages until she was in her mid-20s, and my grandmother gave birth to my mother five years before Apollo 11 landed on the moon.

I was part of the last generation to live in houses with phones attached to the walls, and my first computer looked like mission control from a Cold War espionage movie.

Now, I Facetime from my smartphone like I'm on the bridge of the Enterprise, I charge my books and my cigarettes from a USB port and I carry around the modern equivalent of the Library of Alexandria in my pocket.

For a long time, I was jealous of all that my great-grandparents witnessed, going from horse and buggy to space flight, but I've actually seen twice as much technological advancement in a quarter of the time, just in a different way.

It's a long story.

Almost 2 million years ago, a variety of early hominin began making tools commonly referred to as "choppers" today, one of which is still on display at the British Museum, the oldest manmade object in its collection.

Whatever you're envisioning when you think of a prehistoric tool, make it simpler and you

might be close. They were fist-sized cobbles fractured to create a sharp edge — and these tools were mass-manufactured by *Australopithecus garhi* in present-day Tanzania for over a million years before any real change ever occurred.

It took 100,000 years — over 15,000 modern lifetimes — and the evolution of a new genus of hominin before this design was improved upon by *Homo erectus*' Acheulean "hand axe" — and even then, it's a relatively small change. The Acheulean hand axe was to the Oldowan chopper what the iPhone 6 was to the iPhone 5: a little thinner, a little more efficient.

It takes another million years and the emergence of two new hominin species before we start forging metal, but that's where things get interesting.

In the span of 5,000 years, Egypt saw both the creation of its Old Kingdom monuments and Napoleon's armies marching along the Nile plundering those monuments to be stocked in the Louvre as antiquities.

For a long time, I was jealous of all that my great-grandparents witnessed, going from horse and buggy to space flight, but I've actually seen twice as much technological advancement in a quarter of the time...

...in less than a quarter of the time it took our species to work out how to make a sharp rock slightly sharper, we experienced every technological and cultural innovation between the reign of King Tutankhamen and that of Queen Victoria — everything from the first papyri of the Torah to Darwin's "On the Origin of Species."

What this means is that in less than a quarter of the time it took our species to work out how to make a sharp rock slightly sharper, we experienced every technological and cultural innovation between the reign of King Tutankhamen and that of Queen Victoria — everything from the first papyri of the Torah to Darwin's "On the Origin of Species."

Only 156 years after that, we arrive at our globalized, digitized world — drones, fiber optics, the International Space Station and 40 different flavors of Ben & Jerry's.

Moore's Law appears to be part of a much longer trend. All technology, not only digital, advances exponentially.

But what does that technology say about us? Archaeologists today sometimes refer to cultures that existed in antiquity by what they made prolifically.

The Bell-Beaker culture of Western Europe, for example, was given that moniker because of the inverted-bell-shaped vessels found at sites once occupied by these prehistoric peoples. Analysis suggests they were used for drinking mead, smelting copper and containing funerary ash. These vessels were important to them.

I imagine archaeologists millennia into the future will refer to my generation as the Black-Mirror-Box culture. If some biblical-scale cataclysm were to swiftly end the digital era, these boxes would be found on nearly 7 billion desiccated bodies. These boxes were important to us.

But what would those artifacts say about us as a culture if they were to be analyzed 15 generations down the line (or if Ray Kurzweil and Aubrey de Grey are correct, only five or so generations)?

As we interpret the ideals of civilizations lost to us in time through the material remains they left behind — technology, especially — we, too, are writing our legacy with what we create.

The question is what we want that legacy to be.

Cole Eckhardt

WHY ARE ZOMBIES THE NEW BLACK?

Writing Consultant, Weber State University

Post-apocalyptic pop culture is flooding American televisions and cinemas, and no other trend has escalated in popularity quite like zombie culture.

AMC's nightmarish drama "The Walking Dead" shattered records in the network's ratings this year, according to Time magazine, reaching a viewership of over 28 million.

It's really not surprising.

Escapism is what keeps the entertainment industry's moguls in the billionaire's club — but who in their right mind would choose to escape to a shattered society in which all luxury and progress lie trampled beneath hordes of rotting, feral, cannibalistic cadavers?

Zombie culture is just survivalist culture with a trendy aesthetic, and its popularity is revealing this generation's zeitgeist.

Mass-fascination with post-catastrophic conditions is, in part, a subconscious means of preparation, mentally bracing against the anxieties of real, imminent events. The genre reflects all of

the crises of overpopulation waiting just around the corner — resource scarcity, systems' collapse and civil unrest on an unprecedented scale — but the problem won't be shambling corpses.

It'll be us.

In the words of the scientifically influential, 18th-century cleric Thomas Robert Malthus, "The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence and plague advance in terrific array and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear and with one mighty blow levels the population."

In just 35 years, if current population-growth trends continue, the UN projects that humanity will be reaching figures over 10 billion, numbers approaching Earth's maximum carrying capacity —resulting in scarcity of fresh water; desertification due to deforestation; air, soil and water contamination, irreparably altering the biosphere; rampant poverty, lead-

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ing to devastating crime rates; and microbial pandemics spreading rapidly across what will have become a planetary-scale petri dish.

If any of this sounds familiar, it's because it's a list of every motif from the last decade's worth of end-of-days literature, cinema and television.

But all this still doesn't explain viewers' deep satisfaction in escaping to a hellish world of utter hopelessness.

It's because the circumstances are so humanizing, returning people to a more naturalistic, if at times animalistic, state, reminding them of what truly means anything at all — family, community, love and life itself — and the desperate struggle to protect it all provides audiences with a sort of vicarious fulfillment, assuaging their estrangement from what it meant to be human for hundreds of thousands of years before Xboxes, Pop Tarts, Facebook and Netflix.

But the comforts of modernity could prove to be relatively short-lived. In less than half a century, humanity's very success may be what drags the whole species back into a paradigm of pure survivalism once again, reminding us what being human is (or was) really all about.

So enjoy the post-apocalyptic hypotheticals now because when our planet reaches

maximum carrying capacity, films like “28 Days Later” will seem like tame, naïve underestimates of the nightmare that's in store for us — that is, if we don't start taking action to prevent such a hell on Earth now.

Cole Eckhardt

EVIDENTIAL ORIGIN STORY PROVES NO LESS AWE-INSPIRING THAN RELIGIONS'

Writing Consultant, Weber State University

The 20th century's eminent expert on folklore and myth, Joseph Campbell, wrote in his book "The Power of Myth" that an increasingly globalized world will need a common myth in order to survive.

This is because literalized myths — religions — began degenerating more rapidly in the early 20th century as the world became more globalized. Yet over the last few centuries, while thousands of religious orders across the world have vied for influence in the lives of more cosmopolitan individuals, a new myth was being written in the background, quietly, one still being written today.

All over the world, scientists have been using a methodical technique to gather evidence of very specific truths, which when added to the greater mosaic of the collective sciences paints a poignant, dynamic representation of our universe, what we are and where we came from — even what the universe's ultimate end will be.

It's the skeptic's myth. It doesn't require blind faith but rather demands proof. Depending on the evidence, a statement can be said to be more or less true, but this myth offers no singular, ultimate truth. Still, this doesn't make it any less awe-inspiring.

It's the skeptic's myth. It doesn't require blind faith but rather demands proof. Depending on the evidence, a statement can be said to be more or less true, but this myth offers no singular, ultimate truth. Still, this doesn't make it any less awe-inspiring. It goes something like this.

Nearly 14 billion years ago, the universe erupted out of a point no larger than the particles of an atom. Instantaneously, it blasted through a perfect void, generating nearly 14 billion light-years of matter and space — and it's still expanding.

When this universe was in its infancy, only 200 million years old, the first stars lit up the pitch darkness like grand, cosmic chandeliers. Just over 4 1/2 billion years ago, our planet formed. Within 1 1/2 billion years, what would become the continents began solidifying out of a magmatic ocean — and in the dark ocean deep, where the planet's boiling blood spilled out, the first, single-celled life appeared less than half an eon later.

Over the next 3 billion years, that life carried on, subtly changing with every generation, each a part of an infinitely intricate and diverse tree of life. Seven million years ago, in the primordial forests of the African continent, one remarkable branch of that tree became distinct from the rest of the animal kingdom: the earliest hominin.

It was brilliant. It was creative. Within 4 1/2 million years, it had begun chang-

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ing the world around it, striking stone tools and learning language — creating culture.

Only 2 1/2 million years after the first stone hand axes were chipped at Olduvai Gorge, modern humans raised the walls of their first civilization, and just 8,000 years later, I keyed these words on a device that streams information through the air.

Granted, this an abridged version of this story, told only through the scopes of a few of the countless scientific disciplines. But this new myth has a certain drama and grandeur to it, and I'm hard pressed not to have an experience that's (for lack of a better word) religious when looking at this model.

But not everyone shares this sentiment. Many actually take offense to the idea of being descended from and alongside apes (yet it never seems to get brought up that, if their ancestries were to be traced back far enough, they're descended from algae as well).

According to this myth, every living thing is related at some level or another. This has been a tenet of dozens of Eastern schools of thought for

over 2,000 years — in fact, there's nothing about this new myth's scale or poignancy that doesn't rival that of the classical world religions — not to mention that the method used to write it also wiped out polio and propelled us into the cosmos.

At the end of the 15th century, European explorers set sail looking for the geological vestiges of creation: the rivers of Paradise and the chasm torn through the Earth when Lucifer was cast down from heaven. They didn't find it.

And believers have persisted in their search for centuries. Six years ago, a gaggle of Christian pseudo-archaeologists sought out the remains of Noah's ark and claimed with 99.9 percent certainty that they'd found it atop Mount Ararat in present-day Turkey. They didn't.

This new myth is the first of its kind. Where the world's great religions have always sought evidence to validate their claims, this story is told by the mountains of empirical evidence themselves, collected by scientists from nearly every nation on Earth working together for nearly 200 years.

Perhaps this is why 67 percent of scientists don't subscribe to any religious belief system while 83 percent of the general public does. They've been introduced to the new contender of origin stories, an epic that confidently stands on the shelf right alongside Genesis and the Rigveda.



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