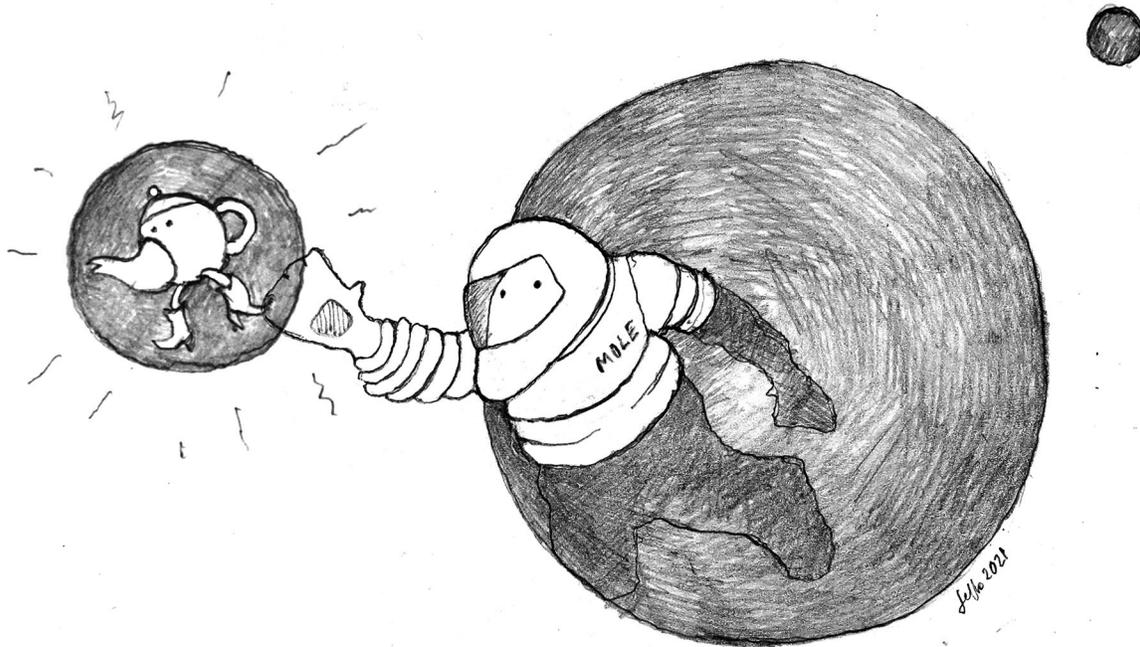


STICKY WICKET

Corona XXXI – bubbles

Mole



THE DANGERS OF GETTING TRAPPED
INSIDE YOUR OWN BUBBLE!

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

Well, here we are again, here in the Mole bubble. I'm assuming that you've read some of these Corona Files and that this isn't your first. I'm also assuming that you, like me, are interested in this biomedical research thing (BMRT), and probably actually *do* this BMRT. But, if this is really your first time, welcome! And if you are *not* interested in the BMRT, you shouldn't waste your time reading this – you *should* be reading something that is actually good. Like 'Nicholas Nickleby'. *That* was some very good writing and did not have the slightest hint of the BMRT. Wait, no, maybe a *hint*; Smike (Nicholas's friend) dies of tuberculosis, after escaping the clutches of the horrible Squeers. Oops, maybe that was a spoiler. Really, you should just read it; when it was first published, it was in the form of a serial with monthly editions, and folks would line up for hours to get their hands on it. Now? I suspect you can download it for free.

There is something very charming about the idea of waiting each month for the latest installment of a book that you are passionately reading. And people were *very* passionate about most of the writings of Charles Dickens (you knew it was Dickens, right? Of course you did, you are very well informed). I'm sure they would meet each other in those long queues (by the way, you know that queue is the only word in the English language that has five sequential vowels, right? Of course you did, you are VWI) and, over time, establish

friendships as they met and re-met. "Do you think Squeers will get his comeuppance this month? It is most certainly due." "Squeers? I'm waiting for the new Harry Potter book." "There are no new Harry Potter books. I'm waiting to binge the new season of Stranger Things" "Wait, what? What year is this anyway?"

Anyway. That isn't what I wanted to talk about ("Really, Mole? Sidetracked?" Yes, but I know you knew that. YAVWI). I wanted to talk about bubbles. I imagine that there was a bit of a Nicholas Nickleby bubble during the year that Dicken's third book was published (1838–1839), where folks lived immersed in the story of the young schoolteacher. But no matter how immersed, it was nothing like the bubbles in which we now live. Now we can very easily seal ourselves off from everything we don't want to know or believe, and find enthusiastic support for anything we *do* want to believe. I'm a big fan of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, who controls all events by "reaching down with His Noodly Appendage and making them happen." (This is a real thing, I mean, not *real* real, but look it up. You'll learn a lot about pirates and climate change.) Want to believe that vaccines cause disease? No problem. Want to believe that an election was stolen? You got it. Want to believe that waffles are a nefarious plot to subjugate humanity to the alien maple syrup people? You will find full support in the bubble of your choosing.

So, of course, I'm thinking about the big bubble in which the Terrible Pandemic (TP) is the *Scamdemic*, invented by elites who want to stop you from going to your favorite bar, or maybe by the TP industry (not our TP, but the TP one hoards when there is a TP). Lately, we have been hearing a lot from people who have spent the past many months living in this particular bubble, which suddenly burst when they somehow found themselves in an ICU, unable to breathe.

Here's a real quote from one of these ex-Scamdemic folks: "I thought it was an overblown media hoax. I made fun of people for wearing masks [...] My breathing never got too terrible. My fever peaked for like one day at 100.5, which is nothing – barely worth mentioning [...] But then some of the other symptoms started to get wild [...] I woke up a while later in the ER, and ten doctors were standing around me in a circle. I was lying on the table after going through a CT scan." And another: "In the spirit of full transparency: I was a COVID-19 denier at the beginning of the COVID news cycle. I said stupid things about over-reaction. Now I know what it's like to be a grade A 100% 'coronavirus clown.'" And there are many like this: "I think I made a mistake, I thought this was a hoax, but it's not."

There are millions of people around the world who continue to believe that the TP is a hoax. In a series of surveys by a respectable survey organization, the proportion of Americans who believed that the TP was exaggerated was 30% in late April of last year, increasing to nearly 50% by early June. Another done in late October found values of 30–40% across many countries in Europe and South America. The most recent poll I found, in December, showed this holding at 43% in the US. Many, many attempts to get through to these people have been made with stories from people *just like them* who were forced to change their minds. Journalists and other people in the media try repeatedly (daily, hourly) to dispel the myths and try to teach us how to get through to the deniers we might meet (or know well). It is an important mission, and they are bringing every available fact to bear.

But this isn't working, as the numbers clearly show. Because, quite simply, they are not in the bubble. In fact, all of those poor folks who are ex-deniers due to their own tragic stories and who are now trying to get through to their fellow 'COVID clowns' are

doomed to fail, because they have *left* the bubble. They don't realize it, but by confessing their own stupidity they have lathered themselves in glycerin soap and stepped through the membrane into the real world, without bursting the bubble at all. (By the way, this works – if you tip your finger into the soap solution, you can poke your finger through a bubble without breaking it. Something to do while you're reading 'Nicholas Nickleby'.) People live in bubbles precisely because they do not want to listen to things that are not in the bubble.

Professor Dannagal Young, who does research on political misinformation, said it this way (it was in a Tweet, which doesn't make it wrong): "One of the things we are wrestling with in the misinformation/conspiracy theory research is that counter-information ('corrective info,' empirically factual evidence) has *very little* effect on people's beliefs when those beliefs are rooted in political/social identity." Or to put it in Mole terms, facts just don't work on these awful people.

And no, I am not deluded – I recognize full well that I live in a bubble. I read scientific articles (with skepticism, but I can be convinced) because in *my* bubble, there is a process by which I come to believe some things. In my own bubble, I also put a great deal of trust in trained journalists who source their stories and do their best to validate data, and often I am prone to believe what I read based on this trust. (Indeed, the news reports about which I am most often skeptical involve descriptions of scientific papers; then I go to the paper itself.) "Empirically factual evidence" has a great deal of impact on my thinking, in my bubble. Then again, I *believed* (for a little while) the stories of 'COVID parties', in which people would gather with someone known to be infected, and then give prizes to anyone who subsequently tested positive. And when these stories were debunked by good journalism, I believed that they were urban legends. But now? I worry that there are many, many idiots who read those original stories and thought, "what a cool idea for a party!"

So, what can we do, if presenting facts that are carefully validated does not effectively penetrate to those inside a bubble, especially this terribly dangerous bubble that thinks the Terrible Pandemic does not exist?

I have an idea. I'll tell you all about it next time.