



Information can help cure our 2020 hangover

By Bert Etling, Monday, January 11, 2021

We still have more than a little hangover from 2020, but at the start of the year are able to catch a glimmer emerging from a series of — well, let's call them opportunities wrapped up in crises. They're varied in nature, but there's one thing we need if we're to handle them.

The greatest shock to our collective psyche, because it's so new and has such a pervasive effect on how we do things, is the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another issue that came to dominate our civic conversation in 2020, by contrast, is centuries old and intrinsically interwoven in how we live our lives day-to-day: racism.

The horror of the George Floyd strangling video forced a racial reckoning across the nation, but it was just the latest in a string of encounters in which Blacks doing such things as jogging, sleeping, sitting in a car, watching TV, selling DVDs and changing lanes ended up dead. A young Black man, Aidan Ellison, was killed in our city — supposedly for playing his music too loud.

Aside from its public health impact — millions of deaths worldwide, hundreds of thousands in the U.S. and dozens in our county — the coronavirus forced an economic shutdown that devastated the economy.

Those are bad enough, but a changing climate threatens to have the most severe, long-range impact of all. In the last year, it created the conditions for an explosion in the number of hurricanes and devastating fires, destroying thousands of homes and taking precious lives in our own area.

The way all these landed revealed how critical issues of social justice are in our society. School shutdowns had a disproportionate impact on poor families without access to computers and internet. The disease has affected lower-income families and people of color the most.

All this is daunting enough, but we've also seen the system that's supposed to manage the solutions to our societal challenges — our political system — has been fractured to the point of falling apart, reaching a historic low just last Wednesday in our nation's capital.

All of the above have one thing in common: Foundational to unlocking solutions is the capacity to learn and share reliable information, to be able to communicate effectively about issues and cooperate in finding solutions.

We need to be able to focus on sharing information more than our attitude. Once we get facts sorted, we can move on to feelings.

We need a cohesive information ecosystem if we're to understand, manage and change any of the above.

Just as we pay more attention to the quality of the water and air we put into our bodies than we used to, we need to pay more attention to the quality of the information we put into our heads.

We're fortunate to have reliable local news (indeed, we could use more of it). There are reliable national and international information sources, too, but they're swimming in a digital sea clogged with detritus, mostly spread on social media platforms without gatekeepers. We end up seeing one another as shadowy, partially formed creatures in the mist, glimpsed through a fog of disinformation.

I don't know what the answer is. I do know that being able to talk, to share information, to agree on a common reality is necessary if we're to shape that reality.

I also know we have new political leaders of diverse backgrounds locally and, soon, nationally, who have promised to work to bring people together peacefully and purposefully. We can only solve common problems by working together.

Hopefully our collective hangover will get a modicum of relief next week, and we can go on to make the best of our new year with a renewed commitment to working together to heal our fractured world.

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