

# The next giant leap

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Fifty years ago, in July 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first person to set foot upon the lunar surface, a truly momentous event, which prompted Neil to deliver one of the most famous quotes of modern times: 'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.' Without question, safely landing two people on the moon, and giving them the opportunity to walk on terrain beyond our earthly experience, was an extraordinary achievement; however, five decades later, it is still unclear exactly where that giant leap has taken us. True, huge advances in technology have allowed space exploration to reach new dimensions, with some impressive results; now astronauts have not only walked on the moon, but have driven, there, too, and set up an array of scientific instruments so that we can learn more about lunar activities; we've also landed several modules on Mars, sent a probe to explore Jupiter, taken close-up pictures of Saturn, checked out Neptune, deliberately crashed into a comet to learn more about its structure, succeeded in imaging a supermassive black hole, and now a probe is heading for the sun, hoping to fly into its corona for a mega-heated close encounter.

The more technologically savvy we become, the more we appear to crave the thrill of exploring beyond our worldly dimensions. We positively excel at overcoming the many challenges involved with extending our knowledge and understanding of the extra-terrestrial and, although these endeavours are accompanied by a very high price tag, funding always seems to be forthcoming. If only we could apply that same level of ingenuity and creativity to addressing the needs of planet earth, our own world would rapidly become a better place.

Perhaps the next giant leap mankind needs to make is to secure a more sustainable future for our own world. This will probably prove more challenging than space travel, because it requires us to look beyond our immediate self-interests, and to approach the problems we face, many of which are of our own making, with humanity and compassion. The technological advances we have made since first setting foot on the moon will undoubtedly help us to find ways in which to better protect our environment, but technology alone cannot solve everything. The small steps taken in preparation for a giant leap, depend upon the focus and commitment of countless people, working to achieve a common goal. Even with the best intentions, things won't always go according to plan, and sometimes they may even go badly wrong, because every action or intervention has consequences. However, as long as we are prepared to be honest about our limitations, as well as proud of our

achievements, we can learn from our mistakes and make meaningful progress. The first, and probably the toughest, barrier which we need to face up to is the well-coordinated protection of vested interests across the globe.

Over the last few years, we have started to witness a sequence of unprecedented and unnecessary reactions to anything which is seen as critical of the status quo, especially if that criticism is levelled at the pharmaceutical industry, or biotech. The mainstream media consistently fails to report on the dangers associated with a significant number of pharmaceutical products, yet thinks nothing about totally misrepresenting, or even lying about, all things related to natural medicine, homeopathy in particular. In fact, barely a day passes without the appearance of a sensational article somewhere, in which homeopathy is claimed to be fake medicine, quackery and even dangerous, yet no evidence is ever produced to support those claims. Now Facebook seems to have started to censor users who question the status quo, especially if their discussions involve the thorny subject of vaccination. Interestingly, Facebook doesn't appear to find it necessary to apply censorship to those who level violent verbal abuse at individuals holding a different opinion, which provides a pretty clear indication of the moral integrity of this immensely powerful corporation. Perhaps users of Facebook should start to explore other social media platforms?

When any corporation or organisation resorts to telling lies, or attempts to prevent facts from being shared in the public domain, it tells us that something is seriously amiss. After all, if 'vested interests' truly believed that their actions were beyond reproach, and undertaken in the best interests of humanity, they would not need to resort to desperate measures in order to suppress the truth. Clearly all is not well, and the cracks are beginning to manifest.

It has just been announced that 'anti-extremism' software is going to be used to 'tackle vaccine disinformation' online. In other words, if you use the internet to seek information about, or even worse, question, the safety or effectiveness of vaccines, you are likely to be labelled an 'anti-vaxxer', and may be accused of trying to radicalise the poor, gullible and ignorant public. The pro-vaccine propaganda machine is in full swing, and the World Health Organization (WHO) has even given vaccine-questioning an official label: vaccine hesitancy. Apparently, vaccine hesitancy has been identified as one of the ten greatest threats to global health this year, which means it must be eradicated without delay. The software which will be used to discover potentially 'destructive

communities online' (this presumably includes anyone questioning the global vaccine programme) is being developed by a UK-based company called (somewhat ironically) 'Moonshot', and they are committed to using technology to prevent the internet from acting as a conduit for the rapid spread of 'dangerous behaviours and ideas'. At a glance, this may seem a worthy objective because we do need effective information networks which can help to pre-empt acts of violence or terrorism. However, we must remember that the software which spies on us has been programmed by people who may, or may not, have a particular agenda. A clear line must be drawn between the need to ensure the safety of our citizens wherever possible, and the uninvited monitoring of the day-to-day activities of ordinary people. The deployment of sophisticated technology to gather private and personal information, without either the knowledge or consent of the individuals under surveillance, and to then potentially make use of that information outside its original context, would constitute a totally unacceptable violation of privacy.

Failure to protect our privacy may be in breach of several articles in the European Convention on Human Rights, such as: Freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 9), freedom of expression (Article 10) and, perhaps most crucially, as practitioners of a discipline which is constantly undermined, **the right not to be discriminated against in respect to these rights** (Article 14). It is worth noting that the UK Government has committed to upholding the principles enshrined in that document, post-Brexit. Rather than feeling intimidated by the fact that we seem to have been lumped together with extremists, and are about to be spied upon, let's see what really transpires. At the moment, we only have media-hype telling us how we're going to be brought under control but, if it actually happens, we will have to be prepared to campaign together, in order to fight for those fundamental rights outlined in the European Convention.

The small steps which lead to a giant leap are generated by us and, thanks to the determination and courage of a few, some things are slowly starting to unravel. In 2015, a study published by the WHO suggested that glyphosate, the main component used by Monsanto in the production of its herbicide Roundup, was 'probably carcinogenic'. Three years later, the German pharmaceutical giant Bayer bought out Monsanto, in a merger which seemed to open the door to the unstoppable dominance of big pharma. However, the glyphosate issue stuck a chord of concern in the public's perception of Bayer, and the cost of Bayer's market shares dropped to nearly half of their value prior to the Monsanto takeover. The glyphosate issue didn't rest there: Earlier this year, a court in California awarded one individual \$80 million in damages because the court agreed that the glyphosate in Roundup had caused his cancer. Bayer appealed this court ruling but, on 16 July, a judge rejected their appeal, though reduced the compensation payable to \$25 million. Given that there are nearly 13,500 plaintiffs around the world claiming that they have been significantly harmed by glyphosate, Bayer have good reason to be concerned. Future successful

claims could cost them up to \$20 billion. Bayer is a global giant, and will probably weather the financial loss, but no company can afford to knowingly expose itself to litigation at this level, without suffering negative consequences long-term. The most important lesson learned from Bayer's experience is that it is entirely possible for an individual to successfully challenge the practices of a powerful corporation. If enough individuals do likewise, change of some description has to follow.

It really can be difficult to understand why the merest mention of homeopathy, seems to attract such a flurry of extreme reactions. The latest news scoop focuses on France, and the fact that the French health ministry has just declared that the funding of homeopathic medicines, currently available via social security at a rate of 30%, will be reduced to 15% in 2020, and phased out altogether in 2021. The language used to report this simple, if controversial, announcement has been interesting. For example, in a recent item published in the *Economist* (20 July 2019) we're told that: 'Patients there (meaning in France) guzzle \$700 million-worth of the stuff a year', and then: 'Many doctors practise homeopathy but put its supposed benefits down to the placebo effect ...'. Just in case you were in any doubt about the general tone of this article, we learn that '... the health minister Agnès Buzyn seemed to accept the case that patients who pop sugar pills might cut down on antibiotics and other pharmacology ...'. However, she was eventually persuaded by scientists, that she could save the French taxpayers \$100 million per year by withdrawing all funding for homeopathic prescriptions. As usual with biased articles of this nature, no indication of the costs involved in replacing homeopathic prescriptions with pharmaceutical products was forthcoming.

Although only a small percentage of French citizens use social security to help pay for their homeopathic medicines, it seems clear that the withdrawal of state-funded reimbursements, presumably at the behest of vested interests, is intended to inflict significant damage on the status of homeopathy in the public perception. However, that plan is being challenged because the French public, of whom an estimated 60% use homeopathy, are not taking this decision quietly. Patient groups, some medical professionals and other interested parties, including Boiron, the world's largest manufacturer of homeopathic products, have collaborated to set up a dedicated online campaign platform protesting against the cuts, and so far they've notched up 1.2 million signatures. Rightly, the French value their freedom to choose the treatment modality which most meets their individual needs, and they are prepared to fight to uphold that freedom. It is reassuring to note that the people of France are not willing to bow to the edicts of so-called science; they are adamant that they will continue to use homeopathy, even if they have to pay more to do so. That is precisely the spirit we all need to adopt, in order to secure a healthier future for humanity, and for planet earth. We can't just sit back and wait for 'somebody' to do 'something'; taking the next giant leap for mankind will require every one of us to be prepared to actively fight for what we know is right. □