

We Lucky Molecules

By [Robert Parry](#)

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Scientists don't know how many atoms and molecules there are in the Universe, but it's clear that the vast, vast, vast majority find themselves locked in lifeless form – perhaps consumed by the fire of an exploding nova, or sucked into a black hole going who knows where, or simply frozen in the dark reaches of space.

A tiny, tiny, infinitesimal minority found themselves on Planet Earth and even there, the vast, vast majority remained in inert form – as rocks or water – or may have edged their way into the simplest life forms as amoeba or plankton or made it up to vegetation as a tree or a flower.

Relative to the total number, an extraordinarily few molecules have achieved intelligent life and fewer still formed themselves into human beings with the intellect to comprehend many of the mysteries of the Universe. As far as scientists know, we may be the only beings anywhere capable of this feat. Despite decades of seeking signs of intelligent life across the Universe, none has been found.

So, it may be that we – the seven billion or so of us humans who live on Planet Earth in the Twenty-first Century – represent the luckiest of molecules. We get to appreciate the magnificence of Nature, not only the beauty of budding trees and blossoming flowers, or the stark snow-covered mountains and the pounding ocean waves, but via modern technology like the Hubble Spacecraft, we get to see deeply into space to observe the colorful, surrealistic displays of distant galaxies.



The image of the Earth rising over the

surface of the moon, a photograph taken by the first U.S. astronauts to orbit the moon.

Yet, what those photographs also tell us is that, as awe-inspiring as the Universe is, it is fearsomely hostile to life. Some parts of the Universe are extremely hot amid burning gases of giant stars but most of it is extremely cold, a black and bleak emptiness.

The odds of finding ourselves on a tiny piece of the Universe – with the delicate, almost impossible balance between hot and cold, a sphere spinning at the right speed in the perfect location with a moon to pull at the oceans and a large planet situated as a shield between us and waves of giant asteroids rampaging through space, with an atmosphere to further protect and sustain us, and all the other stunning improbabilities of Planet Earth – those odds are below any imaginable calculation. It's safe to say the chances of us being here – having advanced enough to know as much as we do – are very close to zero.

We are, indeed, very lucky molecules. But there is, of course, a downside to our luck. As living things, we are also dying things. And our consciousness makes us aware of that inevitability. Plus, there are even more painful aspects of life, watching loved ones suffer with illness or from hunger or as victims of violence.

There can be a sense of senselessness to the human existence. There is wholly unnecessary destruction, driven by greed or fear or ideology or religion. We have seen plenty of that in human history and especially over the past century, a time of world wars, human-caused global pollution and advanced instruments to deliver death, even the potential to exterminate all life on the planet.

Science has not only enabled us to understand our possibly singular place in the Universe; science also has helped us master the capability to make Earth just one more barren rock floating through space.

That risk of ending the extraordinary run of luck experienced by those relatively few molecules that found their way onto Planet Earth and then into the bodies of human beings remains the greatest challenge of our time. Yet it is a challenge that is often treated cavalierly, as something to be ignored or even taunted, as politicians, pundits and pretend patriots push the human race toward endless war, daring the chance that one side or another might take the extra step and unleash nuclear conflagration in some ultimate game of chicken.

Journalism's Role

In my life's role as a journalist, I have always believed that ignorance presents the greatest danger for humanity touching off such a cosmic catastrophe. Sometimes the ignorance can be self-imposed by people not wanting to know facts that make them uncomfortable or that contest what they have been trained to believe. Other times, the ignorance is imposed from the outside as propaganda to manipulate a population into a desired response, usually to get in line behind some warmongering leader.

Though there's not much a journalist can do about the first type of ignorance – besides making reliable information available and hoping that people will open their eyes to it – the most daunting and crucial professional challenge is to pierce through the second kind of

ignorance, the intentional twisting of reality to elicit a dangerous response from a population.

But success in countering propaganda has become increasingly difficult as its practitioners have become more sophisticated in their management and control of information and as their methods of disinformation delivery have grown more varied. Now, the false information can come from a dominant news outlet but also from an upstart Web site that has the look of independence but is actually bought and paid for by powerful interests.

Propaganda can come from entities of the Right, the Left or the Center. It is hard, if not impossible, to know who to trust and who is reliable. That is why I have always tried to stay true to the bedrock principles of journalism, precepts as basic as “show, don’t tell,” laying out the information in a way so the reader is enlightened but also can draw his or her own conclusion. Stories should be engaging, not lecturing.

After all, despite journalism’s sometimes lofty goals – empowering the people so they can make democracy work or act to prevent unnecessary killing and suffering – journalism is fundamentally a pedestrian profession. It is the job of assembling facts and applying common sense to those facts. And, there must be no preference for one outcome over another, just a commitment to figure out what happened as best you can. Or, put differently, you might say: “I don’t care what the truth is; I just care what the truth is.”

A journalist also should be humble, recognizing that something as grand as “truth” is rarely revealed. We almost always have to settle for a more limited understanding, though one that can keep expanding as more facts become available. The best we can usually do is give people an honest framework for understanding what is happening around them, even if it’s an imperfect or limited depiction.

But the more people understand about the realities of the world, the less vulnerable they are to the propagandists, those clever folks who disseminate ignorance in the superficial form of information and then use that ignorance to dominate the people. The true calling of a journalist is to give the people as many facts as possible and thus the tools to detect and negate the propaganda.

All this goes to the overriding principle that there is nothing more important to a democracy than an informed electorate and to the counterpoint that the most effective way to defeat democracy is to misinform the people. And, as the world hurtles toward more and more wars and ever worsening crises, there may be nothing more important than exposing the lies, exaggerations and prejudices that undergird most conflicts.

As President John F. Kennedy said in perhaps his finest speech – at American University on June 10, 1963 – “For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s futures. And we are all mortal.”

In an age of environmental fragility and nuclear dangers, the human race must finally recognize its common interests and cooperate in the common cause of averting unnecessary chaos and conflict. We must in the end realize that we are among the luckiest molecules in the Universe – and act accordingly.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated

Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America's Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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