In the below we discuss a few themes and characteristics that we have identified as being common among the *secular guru* set. We distinguish *secular* gurus from gurus that promote ideologies or worldviews that are primarily spiritual or religious in nature. By guru we refer to the standard definition of “an influential teacher or popular expert” but our specific focus tends to be the subset of gurus who make liberal use of ‘pseudo profound bullshit’ referring to speech that is persuasive and creates the appearance of profundity with little regard for truth or reference to relevant expertise. The recurring characteristics identified collectively trend towards negative traits, so a high score on the gurometer could be regarded as identifying ‘bad’, potentially exploitative gurus who produce ersatz wisdom: a corrupt epistemics that creates the appearance of useful knowledge, but has none of the substance. The characteristics identified have not been empirically validated but are based on our personal assessments. Taken together, they help us in the task of spotting gurus in the wild.

1. **Galaxy-brainness**

Galaxy-brainness is an ironic descriptor of someone who presents ideas that appear to be too profound for an average mind to comprehend, but are in truth reasonably trivial if not nonsensical. Gurus often present themselves as fonts of wisdom, and it is an all-encompassing kind of knowledge that tends to span multiple disciplines and topics. Their arguments often link together disparate concepts, such as quantum mechanics, logic, and the nature of consciousness. A guru will often present themselves as a polymath, who can offer novel insights with reference to many different fields. They will often allude to their own accomplishments, and exaggerate them to a shameless degree. They will confidently offer hot takes on technical topics, and with a wave of their hand, dismiss the perspectives of genuine experts. This is, of course, a confidence trick that relies on the recipient being convinced of their unique intellectual powers. Various performative flourishes can assist in this deception, such as unnecessary references to high or specialist literature, the use of jargon and technical terms. On closer inspection, these references can often be recognised to be entirely superfluous and largely tangential to the argument being presented. However, the recipient is not expected to dig too deeply or to fully understand the references being made. Indeed, they are probably most effective when the recipient does not understand them at all; they are merely allusions intended to signal a deep level of knowledge.

1. **Cultishness**

Being a guru is a social role: a guru is only a guru if there are people who regard them as such! How gurus interact with their followers and critics, their in-group and out-group, is often quite revealing. Gurus are not usually bonafide cult-leaders. However, the social groups they cultivate -- often with themselves positioned as intellectual leaders -- can have some elements reminiscent of cultish dynamics. A key characteristic of cults is the establishment of clear in-group and out-group identities, primarily between the cult-members/admirers and outsiders. However, there will often be internal discriminations made within the cult, such as between an inner-circle of favoured members, the broader normal members, and problematic or troublesome members (who may need to be reprimanded, temporarily excluded, or exorcised). In general, cultish behaviour is characterized by emotional manipulation and control.

We’ve noticed that gurus tend to act in a manipulative fashion with their followers and potential allies. This often takes the form of excessive flattery, such as intimations that their followers are more perceptive, more morally worthy, and more interested in the pursuit of truth than outsiders. A guru will often put some effort into signalling a close and personal relationship with their followers -- essentially encouraging the development of parasocial ideation. Praise and regard for the guru is usually reciprocated, whilst disagreement or criticism is usually dismissed as coming from an unworthy person who does not truly understand the significance of the guru’s ideas.

A guru may often wish to avoid the appearance of being a controlling leader. It is, after all, inconsistent with the flattery of their followers and the oft-spoken idea of cultivating a community of like-minded and clear-sighted individuals. However, they also do not want their privileged position challenged. Thus, they may often wistfully talk of a desire to engage with ‘good faith’ critics who truly understand their ideas, and lament that they have been unable to receive the robust criticism they desire. Of course, this is a sham, as anything other than fawning praise, or at best the most superficial or minor disagreement, will typically be designated as being low-quality or badly-motivated.

An interesting example of a manipulative technique to prevent criticism and ensure agreement is what we have dubbed the ‘emperor’s new clothes manuevor’. The guru will prime a particularly special, highly elaborate, or controversial idea with various cautions such as ‘I know many of you won’t be able to understand this, but I think the more perceptive among you might’, or ‘I don’t think many of you are in a place where you are ready to accept this kind of idea, but here goes’. Naturally, few among their followers will want to admit that they lack the necessary qualities to appreciate the brilliance of the guru’s insight, and those that do, reveal themselves to be potentially among the set of ‘troublemakers’.

1. **Anti-establishment(arianism)**

It is necessary that the orthodoxy, the establishment, the mainstream media, and the expert-consensus are always wrong, or at least blinkered and limited, and are generally incapable of grappling with *the real issues*. In the rare occasions when they are right, they are described by the gurus as being right for reasons other than they think. Kavanagh has coined the term ‘science-hipsterism’ which captures this tendency quite nicely. A guru can seldom agree with the establishment, because it is crucial to their appeal that they are offering unique insight - a fresh hot take that is not available elsewhere, and may be repressed or taboo. The guru’s popularity will obviously benefit, if this iconoclastic view happens to coincide with their prejudices or intuitions of their lay-followers. Thus, gurus are naturally drawn to topics where there is a split between the expert consensus and public opinion (e.g. climate change, GMOs, vaccinations, lockdowns). After all, if a guru is merely agreeing with an expert consensus on a topic such as COVID, then there is less reason to listen to the guru rather than the relevant experts. Thus, the guru is highly motivated to undertake epistemic sabotage; to disparage authoritative and institutional sources of knowledge. There is a tradeoff where the more the guru’s followers distrust standard sources of knowledge, such as that emanating from universities, the greater the perceived value that the guru provides. This tendency is at odds with the guru’s natural tendency towards self-aggrandisement, which may involve emphasising or inflating their (even limited) academic intellectual recognition, which results in some amusing contradictions. Gurus will also strategically utilise ambiguity and uncertainty within their criticisms, providing themselves with the means to walk back claims that prove wrong or attract criticism or to enable them to highlight disclaimers. This provides them both with plausible deniability and the superficial appearance of having nuance & humility. This dynamic of sabotaging other sources of wisdom is also evident in their fractious relationships with other gurus, with whom they may often have alliances of convenience, but are also strongly incentivised to compete with.

1. **Grievance-mongering**

A cult will generally have more than a few bones to pick with supposedly nefarious forces in the outside world. Likewise, fascist organisations will derive much energy from narratives of grievance focused on specific out-groups. Feelings of frustration and oppression, being excluded and disregarded, and deprived of one’s manifest rights and recognitions, represent a potent set of negative emotions. Gurus too, will sometimes rely on narratives of grievance pertaining to themselves and their potential followers in order to drive engagement. After all, a worldview in which all is essentially fair and just is not one that will encourage people to search for alternative ways in which to view the world.

Gurus sometimes also engage in personal grievance narratives. These are especially convenient, in that they not only encourage emotional connection and sympathy for the guru, but they provide a convenient explanation for why someone of their unique talents has not been well-supported or given the recognition they deserve by the outside world. They also relate to conspiratorial ideation (discussed more below), in explaining why the special ideas and perspectives shared with followers have not been recognised and accepted by the outside world. It is because their ideas have been suppressed by malevolent and powerful actors for selfish reasons.

1. **Self-aggrandisement and narcissism**

It is almost impossible to be a guru without having a sense of grandiosity and inflated idea of one’s self-importance. The role of being a guru involves cultivating praise and attention, and demands a certain level of charisma and charm. Another trait of narcissists is a belief in one’s uniqueness, and that only special people can appreciate them. It is therefore not surprising that one tends to see other narcissistic traits in gurus, such as having a very thin skin when it comes to criticism, or expecting that the world should be recognising one’s talents far more than it does. Our tentative hypothesis is that narcissism is the key personality trait of gurus. People without at least some degree of over-confidence and attention-seeking will find the role of guru very uncomfortable and eschew it, even if it is thrust upon them. People who are not narcissistic, but with genuine expertise and insight in a given domain, may find the spotlight an unwelcome distraction. People ‘on the spectrum’ of narcissism, however, will find any attention and regard highly satisfying, and this is the motivating factor for engaging in going beyond whatever talents they may have, to engage in the pseudo-profound bullshitting techniques described here. The lack of self-awareness common among narcissists also seems to explain why gurus seem to ‘believe their own bullshit’. Just as a narcissist loves themselves, they are in love with their own ideas, and may be incapable of seeing the degree to which they are bullshit.

1. **Cassandra complex**

Gurus like to claim prescience among their many talents. Their heightened insight gives them a superior ability to predict the future, and they will enjoy dwelling on those instances in which they made a purportedly correct prediction (obviously not mentioning or acknowledging the times when they got it wrong). We’ve already described how a narrative of grievance plays a role in being a guru. A heightened sense of how the world is not right, and ought to be fixed, and that they are the persons to do it, is a common feature. Unfortunately, the broader public fails to recognise their genius and heed their advice, and thus the world lurches from calamity to calamity. Combining these features, we will often see that a guru positions themselves as something of a Cassandra - seeing the future and warning of possible calamities, that could be avoided if only they were heeded. The followers also gain a positive role for themselves, in supporting, defending, and promoting the guru, they can help make the world a better place.

1. **Revolutionary theories**

If galaxy-brainedness refers to a *breadth* of knowledge, an ability to forge connections between disparate topics, then their professed development of revolutionary theories displays the *depth* of their knowledge. Connected with their narcissism and worthiness of being a guru, they are greatly attracted to claiming that they have developed game-changing and paradigm-shifting intellectual products. This is, in a sense, the credentials and the resume of a guru. Just as the public were keen to seek out Albert Einstein’s opinions on all matter of topics unconnected with physics, they also find it quite natural that one who has accomplished something great in one area, should be qualified to offer advice on all matter of topics. Of course, genuinely revolutionary theories such as general relativity are few and far between, and therefore the guru is compelled to *manufacture* their revolutionary theories. The problem of why they are not *already* famous is dealt with via reference to the personal grievance narratives discussed above.

1. **Pseudo-profound bullshit**

At the outset we described a guru who engages in pseudo-profound bullshit (PPB). This is their core business, their stock-in-trade. They are most comfortable in the role of armchair opinionator, the wise man (or woman, but usually man) graciously offering their advice to eager seekers of wisdom. Most of the other techniques and maneuvers discussed here function primarily to support and justify this most-favoured activity. Whilst the ‘revolutionary theories’ and ‘galaxy brainness’ describe the *content* of their discourse, PPB describes the *form* of their discourse. It is typified by language that is cognitively easy to process, superficially appears to be something profound, but upon analysis turns out to be trite, meaningless, contradictory, or tautological.

The ‘classic’ examples of PPB are best exemplified by Deepak Chopra, who said things such as

*“There are no extra pieces in the universe. Everyone is here because he or she has a place to fill, and every piece must fit itself into the big jigsaw puzzle.”*

And

*“To think is to practice brain chemistry.”*

Or

*“It is the nature of babies to be in bliss.”*

All of which are easily detected by most people to be cases of PPB, partly due to their strong resemblance to ‘inspirational quote’ memes, in being blandly positive messages of saccharine self-affirmation. However, it is the logical and semantic structure, not the content, that is the core property of PPB. Modern secular gurus do not necessarily provide self-help (although some, like Jordan Peterson certainly do), and their PPB, liberally peppered with abstract and abstruse references (see galaxy-brainedness above) can be on any literally any secular (scientific, health, political, social, etc) topic.

1. **Conspiracy mongering**

To gain real insights, real special knowledge that nobody else can see - that’s hard work. For normal people, even a lifetime of study and research only provides scant few original intellectual contributions. That is not nearly enough for a guru, who needs a steady supply of fresh, original content to supply to their followers and justify their status. To be a guru, they must set themselves up, not only as uniquely insightful, but above and apart from orthodoxies, including established political or ideological groups. Thus, they are encouraged to go beyond standard heterodoxy, contrarianism and scepticism, into the realm of conspiratorial ideation. This is because the expert consensus - though naturally not infallible - but definition, tends to supply the most reasonable and evidence-based view, based on current information. The guru is in the position of needing to provide a strongly contrasting perspective, and then to supply the argumentation that backs up their bold claims in a compelling way. This leads them inexorably down the path of bespoke conspiracy mongering, with an alternative view of events that authoritative sources either can’t or won’t tell you about. Conspiracy theories *require* a ‘suppressive network’ to explain away the lack of evidential support, and why almost nobody else is willing or able to accept their theories. Gurus are subject to the same dilemma, and will often need recourse to some conspiracy-like As with conspiracy theories, their reasoning will be intricate but subject to massive reaches, and they will disregard simpler or more conventional alternative explanations.

1. **Profiteering**

Gurus perhaps desire respect and admiration above all else, but they also tend to feel that more worldly and tangible recognition of their talents is appropriate. Accordingly, gurus may be surprisingly willing to undertake activities such as shilling health supplements, that would otherwise be a little surprising in an intellectual of their calibre. Note that it is natural and reasonable for any intellectual worker or content creator to be compensated for their effort. Thus, book royalties, YouTube advertising royalties, or the insertion of standard advertising in a podcast does not usually or necessarily indicate grifting. However, gurus tend to go somewhat further in an effort to monetise their following, while avoiding the appearance of such - which would detract from their guru status. A recent example was the actions of London Real, a venue for gurus such as JP Sears or David Icke, who constructed an elaborate censorship justification for gathering over 1 million dollars from followers, to move their content from YouTube to a dedicated platform, from which they could then further monetize their content at a much higher rate.

NOTES

**What is a guru?**

Most people think of gurus as spiritual or religious thinkers, perhaps somebody like Deepak Chopra. But recently, it seems that secular public intellectuals or commentators are attracting devoted followings, and are seen as having unique insights and special wisdom by their fans. They’re often offering views that are contrary to the mainstream or institutions, sources like the ABC or universities.

They can appeal in a variety of ways. For example, they might challenge accepted wisdom around COVID or vaccines, or provide self-help or personal growth advice, or play to your political fears around globalism or social justice.

**What do you do in your podcast?**

Well, we try to ‘decode’ the gurus. Although they’re incredibly diverse, we’re finding that there are some common themes that connect them to more traditional cults or conspiracy theories. We listen to their content very carefully, and we pay attention to the techniques they use, how they present themselves, and the themes that bind them together.

**Here are the features we came up with (to be rated 1-5 for a highest score of 50)**

1. Galaxy Brain-ness (Breadth)
   1. Polymath, experts at everything, hot takes, special wisdom
   2. Performative unnecessary references to literature/complex theories/science
2. Cultishness: Unhealthy social dynamics In-group vs. Out-group
   1. Flattery, some controlling, they’re special
   2. Super charitable to friends and allies
   3. In-group people like us, are the heterodox “non-ideological”, committed to reason (for IDW types - anti-vaxxers etc)
   4. Personal rapport with followers
3. Anti-establishment
   1. Outgroup is everyone else - the institutions and experts. The establishment are corrupted by incentives and so on
   2. Cannot trust any authorities or mainstream media
   3. Undermining all other sources of information
4. Grievance Mongering
   1. Personal narratives of victimhood
   2. Suppression of their ideas
   3. Inculcating grievance in their followers
5. Narcissism-ish / Self Aggrandising
   1. We think thats the real motivation of many of them
   2. Attention economy, clicks and likes
6. Cassandra Complex
   1. Warning of danger that others can’t see
   2. Making predictions and saying they’re prior predictions are always right
   3. Threat!
7. Revolutionary Theories (Content)
8. Have a revolutionary theory: Nobel worthy
9. Able to revolutionize disciplines
10. Scientific Hipsterism
11. Pseudo-profound Bullshit (Form- Verbal agility)
12. Invented neologisms
13. Able to wax lyrical using metaphorical language
14. Unnecessary references to literature/complex theories/science
15. Strategic Ambiguity, Irony & obfuscation
16. Scientism
17. Conspiracy Mongering
18. Use of Disclaimers
19. Elaborate theories to explain mundane events
20. Secret coordination of powerful & malevolent groups and institutions
21. Promotion of conspiracy theorists with valuable insights that are dismissed unfairly
22. The world is targeting them and their friends
23. Grifting
    1. Buy my book
    2. Shilling supplements
    3. Alternative medicine
    4. Monetize followers

Bonus Points:

(1) For every Invented Neologisms & Acronyms

If you think we have missed anything important we would be happy to hear your suggestions/feedback!