

The Stupidity of Communications

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USA

Introduction

In the formation and transformation of culture and its transmission across generations, communication is paramount. In fact, learning, unlearning and relearning are all communicative processes fundamental to the development and existence of culture [1]. This is not a uniquely human phenomenon, as many amniotic species depend upon their considerable learning capabilities in the development of their social organization and general behavior. While this basic cultural process is part of our biological heritage [2], language gives human culture its distinctive flair. In developing the cultural capacity for stupidity to human desiderata, language proved to be a most effective mechanism in that it both inhibits and subverts awareness. It is language which provides us with our basic misperceptions, which culture then embellishes and disseminates. Thus, self-unawareness is promoted when language permits us to misinterpret embarrassing events into socially acceptable contexts. Although sense organs give us our first impressions of our environment, words fix our attitudes, direct the process of data selection and strongly influence the misinterpretation of information so that we may misconstrue experiences.

It is through language that “Exploitation” becomes “Development”; “Indoctrination” is “Education” and “Destruction” is “Liberation”. It is no wonder that so much stupidity is so readily accepted, as so much of our psyche is structured to prevent its recognition, and so much of our behavior is designed to reinforce evaluations of immediate success even as we sacrifice critical adjustments and long-term survival. Criticism within a system is inhibited not only by language but also by common if unjustified assumptions and terminology. The most justified assumption of capitalism is the positive feedback, biblical maxim: “To him that hath, to him shall be given” [3] or, in contemporary terminology, “Them that has, gets”. However, in terms of terms, capitalism really cannot be effectively criticized as a system of economic profits and losses; only in terms of the human misery of poverty sustained and needs ignored capitalism can be taken to task. Unfortunately for the poor, the term “Poverty” does not happen to be in the businessman’s vocabulary [4], so its perception rarely appears in his mind. Further, the capitalist’s assumption that the system will respond to need is flat out idiotic and serves only to hide the failings of the system from its devotees.

The business economy responds to capital. If there is a need and no money, as there nearly always is in starving Africa or even American slums, business does not respond. On the other hand, where there is money and no need, advertisers will be paid to create one. Criticism is further diminished, and stupidity promoted by the cultural suppression of honesty and integrity. Both are welcome if they promote group cooperation. In and of itself, however, honesty is worthless. In fact, it may even be a dangerous indulgence as honest whistle blowers have discovered to their dismay and chagrin when pointing out corruption within the system: [5] e.g., cops denouncing colleagues on the take are as rare as such corruption is common. Making a mockery of the theory of cognitive dissonance, such criticism is regarded as disruptive, and such candor is dealt with according to Luce’s Law, “no good deed goes unpunished”. When leaders regard truth as a threat, anyone with a modicum of common sense will suppress any inchoate urge to correct rather than confirm the corrupt establishment. There is a need for the few leaders who intend to do the best, fairest possible job for everyone to solicit and heed outside criticism because they will not get it from self-promoting insiders. It would be nice to think that cultures would develop watchdog subgroups which would promote social order. The news media are supposed to compose one such element in American society.

However, when the watchdog cares naught for accuracy and, worse yet, is fed by those it is watching, its commitment to truth and objectivity is compromised. The ideal of an

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independent press is a myth, but the myth still finds expression in the media: to wit, “the media has (sic) a responsibility to present all sides of a story, but it also has an obligation to emphasize the truth and provide people with the proper balance of information so they can make intelligent, informed choices based on information that is reliable, supported by facts and not manipulated by special interests” [6]. Or the media should try to shift religious beliefs toward science and reason. On the other hand, hoaxes have a long and venerable, tradition in journalism to the degree that the maxim, “If it’s in the newspapers it must be true” is taken at face value only by those who believe in Santa Claus and the political process.

The excessive degree to which the media go not to tell the truth is exemplified by the way syphilis infected the media near the turn of the 20th century. It is exceedingly difficult to educate people about something they do not want to hear about, and this was a classic case of exactly that problem. News coverage of a divorce case of Brits Lord and Lady Campbell in the 1880’s dutifully avoided mention of syphilis, which the Lord had shared with the unwitting Lady. The media dutifully omitted mention of this fact until the Evening News broke ranks and told the truth. It was immediately charged with “Obscene libel” for putting the word “Syphilis” in print, and the public were furious that anyone had written about the disease at all [7].

During World War I, the press was given the contradictory task of telling the truth and report cheerful facts that made America look good. Those who wish the media would limit themselves to good news should bear in mind that President, Wilson tried that approach by establishing a Committee on Public Information-1918 seventy years ahead of itself-which issued thousands of embarrassing articles saying how great America was. In fact, news is reported honestly, accurately and fairly, if that is acceptable to the government, sponsors, advertisers, publishers and owners. This was made clear to the reporters of the Knickerbocker Press in Albany, NY, in 1937, who demanded a new contract affirming the importance of “A full, accurate, truthful and fair presentation of the facts”. The clause was rejected by management [8] because the third law of journalism is to confirm prevailing prejudices [9], the second to arouse existing sentiment and fear leading to the first-to promote sales.

Editors are paid a consistent with our model for stupidity,

¹Consistent with our model for stupidity, Edward de Bono defines a myth as a way of looking at the world which cannot be destroyed because when looked at through the myth all evidence supports it (McWilliams.

202f)—that is, a myth constitutes a self-supporting, positive feedback, exclusionary story.

²For a detailed case study, see *The Power Broker*-a biography of New York’s master builder Robert Moses by Robert Caro. The book chronicles the initial failure and eventual success of the press at its alleged job. (See its index for specific newspaper titles.) In another case of blatantly buying bias, the Newark City Council approved paying the Newark Weekly News \$100,000 to publish positive stories about the city. (City Link. Nov. 9, 2005. Forum Publishing Group; Fort Lauderdale, FL. 11.) Bear in mind, biased reporting and out-right lying began well before media institutionalized and dispensed imaginative stories while bestowing upon them, deservedly or not, a degree of credence and permanence. An early example was Richard Locke’s “Moon Hoax”—an extended story of living creatures discovered on Mars published by The Sun in New York over a period of four days in Aug 1835. Carrying on the tradition of science fiction just over 100 years later, the most successful of all was Orson Welles’s radio broadcast of an invasion of Martians on Oct. 30, 1938.

³An anecdote about future radio mogul David Sarnoff reveals the power of the media regardless of accuracy. When the Titanic sank, he is alleged to have stayed at his post a telegrapher for three straight days to get the news out to concerned families. When asked two years later about the validity of the story he replied, “It wasn’t true back then but, brother, it sure is now”. (G. Beck. 33.)

⁴The dominant gas industry may have used its influence to prevail upon the press to pooh-pooh

(i.e., downplay) Edison’s achievement.

Edward de Bono defines a myth as a way of looking at the world which cannot be destroyed because when looked at through the myth all evidence supports it [9] that is, a myth constitutes a self-supporting, positive feedback, exclusionary story. Bear in mind, biased reporting and out-right lying began well before media institutionalized and dispensed imaginative stories while bestowing upon them, deservedly or not, a degree of credence and permanence. An early example was Richard Locke’s “Moon Hoax” an extended story of living creatures discovered on Mars published by The Sun in New York over a period of four days in Aug 1835. Carrying on the tradition of science fiction just over 100 years later, the most successful of all was Orson Welles’s radio broadcast of an invasion of Martians on Oct 30, 1938.

To keep honesty out of the media or direct it toward problems deemed profitable to explore and exploit, so divisive stories about intergroup conflict will be featured over feel-good stories about happy people harmoniously coming together in peace and joy [10]. Exaggeration and downplaying are equally likely by accordions media which provide coverage based on estimates of the emotional resonance of an issue. Journalists are not only a breed apart in their lifestyles and tastes [11] but remarkably uniform in both. The live alike and are all but incestuous in their social lives. More important, they think alike and, like those who would put a \$50 saddle on a \$10 horse, they believe in the subjectivity of reality and the reality of the perceptions and PR images [12] they foist on the gullible public and themselves. They see it as their job to distort truths not acceptable to the establishment and confirm and distribute fictional views that are [13]. Editors (and reporters) are intellectual prostitutes [14] permitted to be virtuous only when it suits the corporate and political powers behind the scenes [15]. Nothing fundamental is critically examined by the “Mythia” (i.e., myth x media) for example, the government of the day might be criticized but not the sacred Constitution. Even when being ostensibly fair and objective, the media may miss the significance of an event, as the newspapers of the day did when providing scant coverage when drastically underplayed Edison electrifying the Pearl Street Station, NY on Sept 4, 1882 [16]. In a sleazier bent, stories may sensationalize personal destruction, manufactured controversies, distortions, half-truths, occasionally outright lies and trivial conflicts while serious issues are ignored [17].

However, the most egregious case of journalistic malpractice veering from reality was the biased coverage of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam early February 1968. Never or since has so thorough a defeat for one side in a battle been misrepresented as a victory for it [18] by the news media [19]. That extreme notwithstanding, the current trend is toward speedy superficiality: a poll in March 2008, showed (about) 50% of Americans got their news from the internet; 30% from TV; 10% from radio and 10% from newspapers [20]. Worse yet, viewing Fox News, for example, can be counter-productive in that those who watch it know less than people who do not watch any newscasts at all [21]. Apparently, watching Fox fosters a lack of critical faculties so its viewers are more likely than others to believe anything plopped in front of them because non-Fox trotters seem to retain a healthy element of skepticism.

The other side of the mythia coin, which has received and still receives too little attention thus, the gullible consumer. A year after Americans watched transfixed as an empty balloon allegedly carried a six-year-old boy toward Denver International Airport and then called the media for attention, they had learned precious little about the reliability of the news and net. "We're really just pretty plain stupid" said Joey Skaggs, who has been staging public hoaxes for more than 40 years to drive home the point that media savvy is lacking on the part of those who read newspapers or scan the web. "we are predisposed to deceiving ourselves" he added. "People are just trying to make their way through reality, and it's really easy to fool oneself" [22]. This sentiment was echoed by Sara Scribner, who works to promote identifying reliable information in the digital age albeit with limited results. "You forget every time. If there's a story that grabs you and delivers message that confirms reality for you, it's so easy to just, accept it" [23] she writes as if she had read this book about positive feedback mechanisms: We favor perceptions which support our beliefs. To put it the other way: Beware confirmation bias [24,25] the tendency to believe incoming data that support your existing belief(s).

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