

Navigating Communication, Dysinformation, The Role of Emotion



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"Finding the Challenges" is an original bi-weekly column appearing every other Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Verbal Vol. Verbal is a software engineer, college professor, corporate information officer, life long student, farmer, libertarian, literarian, student of computer science and self-ordering phenomena. Archived columns can be found [here](#). FTC-only RSS feed available [here](#).

This week I enjoyed the greatest experience that a father can have. I was taken to lunch by my daughters in observance of the 31st anniversary of my Jack Benny birthday.

The reason why it was so great was that my daughters are both brilliant young ladies, one a computer scientist and the other a hydrologist, and we had a great, lovely, intellectual adult discussion about ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings. The reason I tell you this is that I got the chance to talk about my last column, about channels of communication. Remember that I suggested to you that there are at least two channels to manage in a two-person relationship? – one from person A and one from person B. I also shared that the number of channels rise exponentially in multiple associations, those associations that require multi-way communications. The calculus is that for n people there are $n * (n - 1)$ apparent channels, one for each person to every other person and *vice versa*. Then I advised that these channels were very sensitive to overload.

My daughters hastened to point out to me that that was just for openers. One said that there is another pair of channels which carries the actual information free of personal distortion. So we began to riff on the various ways in which the channels are multiplied – between just two interlocutors, heard vs seen, caught vs missed, choices in vocabulary, choices in figurative vs non-figurative language, differences in knowledge, differences in rhetorical skills, subjectivity vs. objectivity, differences in experience, assumptions and presumptions, obscurity vs. clarity, differences in intentionality, and one of the biggest chasms, differences in timing.

With my having hurled this mass of flailing monkeys into your midst, you would be just in asking, what shall one do? Well, we're going to make an honest effort at communicating again to see if we can convert these knots into opportunities for doing the good, voluntary thing. I have already started with communicating, and we will be communicating about

communicating throughout, as well as about other issues. I also want to touch on misinformation and emotion within the context of rational understanding.

Dealing with the Complexity of Communication

Do we have a choice as to whether we must navigate the complexity of communication? Not really. It is like drinking from a firehose. If we knew in advance which parts are critical, we could smooth the experience considerably, but as with all else we must take the risk.

In the last column I suggested that perhaps we should keep our relationships few so as to manage fewer variables. On deeper reflection, however, I think that we should keep our relationships distinct. Our relationships range from the most direct and intimate to unknown relationships of which we may not be aware. Therefore, we need to work on all of our relationships, understanding them more thoroughly and more for the special nature of each. I think I will amplify the content of communications with those I respect the most – more lunches with my two terrific daughters, and my lovely wife. I will make a point of more talks with all of my grandchildren who truly have separate, unique views of the world. And I will cultivate my voluntaryist friends, in my locale, in my professional life, and online.

Misinformation

Anyone who has been paying attention cannot have escaped the incredible amount of misinformation that was dealt out regarding the Boston Marathon bombing, including calling it “bombings,” which implied that there were a series of related events ... incorrectly. This is an example of an information system – the mass media – that malfunctions as a deliverer of untruths much more so than as a place to get objective fact.

The galling part is that our very own information systems often capture, preserve, and promote misinformation. Information is too often a source of misinformation.

I’ll give you some examples from my daily experience, and I expect that you have many stories of your own. At some point in the past the city cemetery where I live had the telephone number that we have had now for going on 9 years. The proliferation of telephones, phone companies, hard copy telephone directories, and Internet phone number lookups have not diminished the 2-3 calls we get a week on behalf of the town boneyard. The info sources have multiplied the problem.

Back in 2000, I started a new career as a professor of computer science and software engineering at the local U. I dutifully filled out all of the various forms, as I had done at each new job before that. Please note that I had to do it manually, but that enabled me to get it right, specially since I had already had so much practice over the previous 30 years of employments. In a seemingly unrelated matter, the Prez of our Uni had begun the practice of sending birthday cards to all employees, faculty and staff. So not long after the

start of my first Fall semester, I got a birthday card from the POTU. I was confused since I am a Taurus, so I called the head office. They informed me I was a Virgo, born on the fifth of September. I immediately recognized my beautiful bride's birthdate, so I cheerfully asked them to correct the date and please accept many thanks for the early birthday wishes. I also figured out that the only place where both my wife's and my birth dates were in proximity was in the health benefits office, so I called them as well. Do you know that for the remainder of my time at the university, I got two birthday cards a year, and I repeatedly had to advise our personnel office and my medical insurer of my springtime nativity.

We say we are in the "Information Age," but we are also in the Dysinformation Age* spawned by the Information Age. Just as the industrial age brought with it despoliation of the habitat, and industrialization of war, agriculture, and culture, the information age has brought a ton of unforeseen consequences too. Dysinformation is a forgotten land mine. Step carefully.

Emotion and Rationale

A few days ago, in the morning, I discovered three of my favorite Facebook friends arguing over the absurd idea of which religion should be called the most violent. The debate had descended to not-so-subtle name calling.

First, let me say that calling any religion violent is an absurdity. Humans can be violent, and they can misuse religion to serve their violent intent. But violence is the tool of a scoundrel, whereby religion is a means of thinking about the mysteries of life. As Blaise Pascal once wrote, "the heart has its reason which the reason does not know." The heart must have a belief system, but hatred and murder do not emanate from the heart.

I expect heat, from time to time, among impassioned minds. But calling someone a bigot does not cast light on the debate. Remember that bigotry is a non-thinking, non-analyzing rejection of knowledge. Everyone here has paid their knowledge dues. Remember that prejudice is judging before knowing. A harsh opinion may well have been earned by knowledge gained in hard experience. A harsh opinion is not necessarily wrong, but it may seem to lack cool judgment.

One of my favorite ideas is that the Buddha who can be explained is not the true Buddha. To me this means that the millions of hours spent trying to clarify, to pin down, to make a sellable religion out of it, to proselytize, to shepherd a flock are a waste, if one does not perceive the levels beyond the religion (ie. the levels of philosophy).

Some overwhelming percentage of the followers of any religion (as opposed to a philosophy) are sheep, unthinking followers who only dimly understand explanations.

See the Buddha, kill the Buddha: meaning if you think you see the Buddha, you don't. You are hung up on the surface and appearances.

See Muhammad, kill Muhammad. See Jesus, kill Jesus.

I distrust any religion, when it is used to justify evil.

I study all philosophies, knowing that when I think I have mastered one, then I am wrong. It makes no more sense to blame violence on a cultural philosophy than it does to blame gun ownership for the acts of madmen. All philosophies have madmen who mistakenly believe they understand the philosophy, just because they have memorized the text book, the religion.

Did the generals and marshals pray to gods before launching the Dresden firebombing?

Now we come again to the point where we need to ask the questions about how voluntarism relates to these challenges. Can we make sense of communication? Do we understand how easily information can become dysinformation? Can we refrain from conflating ideas, such as religion and violence, into destructive forces?

Certainly we can optimize communication by understanding just how complex it can be, behaving in ways to simplify and amplify it.

We must also separate the wheat from the chaff. Any good information security expert can tell you that the number one source of danger to good information is inadvertent bad information. Human error is the biggest culprit. Be careful with your information; be careful as to what you accept as information or reject as dysinformation. Ask yourself, what could go wrong?

And lastly, one needs to know that emotion is indelibly attached to all information. The emotion is what makes information human, but we need not convert emotional ideas to irrational ideas conflated with rationality. We can try to enlighten ourselves, but we must never adopt the premise that we understand it all. Such illogical premises can lead us to conclusions that destroy. Our fears of the unknowable are not there to shape our knee-jerk behavior. They are there to guide us toward that which we can understand. We can understand non-aggression. We can understand living voluntarily. We can understand accepting differences.

As a postscript, I want to send a huge thank you to Ben Stone for discussing my previous column on his April 30 podcast (mp3), available at BadQuaker.com. This podcast also contains an interesting interview with Chase "Voluntaryist" Rachels about the Blue Ridge

Liberty Project in Asheville, NC. Ben Stone is my favorite podcaster and a fine friend to voluntaryists.

* *Note Bene* – I have coined the term “dysinformation” here. I know it is missing from most dictionaries, but the prefix dys- does mean abnormal, impaired, bad. I use it to encompass non-deliberate, bad information, arising from process inefficiency.