

Smart Phones, Spooner #17, Mental Models



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"Finding the Challenges" is an original 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](#).

Yes, I am guilty of the occasional rant about telephone companies. But here lies the beast known as the fallacy fallacy (as discussed in a [previous column](#)). Just because I have a mental model of telephone companies doesn't mean that my mental model is incorrect or not worthy of consideration.

When you encounter someone, whom your mental model labels as a conspiracy theorist, you have your voluntary choices. To angrily tell the fabulists that they are wearing a tinfoil hat is a popular choice. But, if the object of your anger is really a kook, he has heard it all before — water off a duck's back. If there really is a conspiracy, of course part of its architecture is to conceal itself from otherwise thoughtful people, the theorist theorizes. If your ire is directed at someone who has a factual claim, he will dismiss your protest for the same reasons.

So, today, in each of the topic areas we will look toward expanding our mental models, so that they may be better matched tools for the real world problems we face.

Smart Phones

You might have seen a Facebook exchange between Skyler Collins, our mentor, and myself recently. It was not about "smart" phones. Unless you skipped it, you will know that I am strong on fraud as an objective *prime facia* case of unethical and immoral behavior.

The reason I mention this is that I intuit that it is the industrial culture of the telecommunications giants to be less than truthful with us. And even though I am a staunch proponent of *caveat emptor* — mature adults are self-reliant in dealing with the marketplace — I cry out in this public way against the arrogant negligence of the telephone folks. **This is not a call for more regulation.** Voluntary ethics and economics should provide for all parties.

In their rush to kill the golden goose that is the Internet, the phone bunch are selling, fraudulently, a flawed product. In my view this is to maximum cash take-away, as if the golden goose were going to expire any day now.

Full disclosure: this is a conspiracy theory. For many decades, up through the 1970s, the phone company acted as a monolith. This was mostly because they reasoned that they had to have a monopoly to solve the problems of infrastructure and consistency across territories. They were comfortable bedfellows with the governments who issued the permits.

But here is the part that always mystified me, in whose interest was it for the government to go trust-busting in phoneland? Lately I have come to the provisional idea that the massive hard-wired system was having unforeseen consequences for the telephonic moguls. They had placed themselves under the benevolent dictation of government overlords to protect their business model and reduce stress upon it. But their business model had not predicted the massive maintenance costs of poles and wires and linepersons, and the rising demand for bandwidth was swamping them.

I have no idea whether this is accurate in any technical sense, nor who may have fired the first shot, but the bureaucracy began to dismantle the analog signal business. Of course, the politicians took full credit.

But now, two score and five years out, what do we have. The communications bills are huge and the service is very spotty. Whatever else our “smart” phones may do, they are kind of miserable as telephones. I won’t even stray into what really would constitute “smart” — maybe another time.

The fraud, at hand, is in these coverage maps they crow about in TV and magazine ads. The coverage is terrible. I was on the major Interstate highway between my state’s two largest cities (less than 100 miles apart) and passing by our state’s capital city — no phone signal! I have dropped signals in New York and Chicago, as well — frequently. Once again, the wiseguys in the phone biz have painted themselves into an infrastructure corner, wireless this time. The industry lacks capacity. The race to compensate for infrastructure limitations has been veiled with compactness, thinness, brilliant graphics, bells and whistles. Verbal Vol has invited you to play Begumballed Crush Quest!

This strikes me somewhat like the introduction of New Coke, a crumbly scheme to get us on to high fructose corn syrup.

At any rate, I have a really bad mental model of the telephone industry, but I would welcome any truthful attempt from any quarter to help me refine that model in a constructive way.

Spooner Quote #17

Children learn the fundamental principles of natural law at a very early age. Thus they very early understand that one child must not, without just cause, strike or otherwise hurt, another; that one child must not assume any arbitrary control or domination over another; that one child must not, either by force, deceit, or stealth, obtain possession of anything that belongs to another; that if one child commits any of these wrongs against another, it is not only the right of the injured child to resist, and, if need be, punish the wrongdoer, and compel him to make reparation, but that it is also the right, and the moral duty, of all other children, and all other persons, to assist the injured party in defending his rights, and redressing his wrongs. These are fundamental principles of natural law, which govern the most important transactions of man with man. Yet children learn them earlier than they learn that three and three are six, or five and five ten. Their childish plays, even, could not be carried on without a constant regard to them; and it is equally impossible for persons of any age to live together in peace on any other conditions.

It would be no extravagance to say that, in most cases, if not in all, mankind at large, young and old, learn this natural law long before they have learned the meanings of the words by which we describe it. In truth, it would be impossible to make them understand the real meanings of the words, if they did not understand the nature of the thing itself. To make them understand the meanings of the words justice and injustice before knowing the nature of the things themselves, would be as impossible as it would be to make them understand the meanings of the words heat and cold, wet and dry, light and darkness, white and black, one and two, before knowing the nature of the things themselves. Men necessarily must know sentiments and ideas, no less than material things, before they can know the meanings of the words by which we describe them.

In this passage, Spooner has grasped the idea of the mental models that we form as children. We learned early (most students of childhood learning say this is done by age 5) fundamentals before we perfected the linguistics to describe them. After we become mature in our everyday language we are only perfecting or neglecting our descriptions of those mental models. The models do not dissipate just because we may become sophisticated readers, writers, speakers, and conversationalists.

Think just for a moment on this idea, if the state must gin laws describing to adults what passes for murder, for instance, is this somehow a tacit acknowledgement that adults have no adequately formed sense of right or wrong? Or does this mean that the political would-be-leader somehow has not progressed to the early childhood stage of reconciling to the facts of natural law? Why does the politician labor under the misconception that he and his ilk must be surrogate parents to the rest of us?

Logic Fallacy #26 -Mental Models

This is more of a subliminal straw man or red herring. It is very often found in the train-wrecks we call discussion of climate. But it is much more far ranging than that.

Each individual human being is compelled to deal with the external world through her own individually formed mental models of every person, place, thing, event, and relationship that she encounters. For whatever reason, if a person fails to refine a model, for instance a paranoid may see all people as instant enemies, then that person begins to treat all people the same. The paranoid greets all with counterattack. On the other hand, the person who faces the real world as a set of solvable problems will refine their mental models for the unique set of facts in each encounter.

Where I run into this problem most is when I and the other person are not on the same page. We have differing, maybe conflicting, mental models. At least one of us needs to refine our mental models — usually both of us. Intelligent pursuit of the donut, not the hole, rarely takes place when there is a mismatch of mental model. A recent case for me was that both I and a colleague, whom I respect deeply, found that we were in collision on climate change. After a brief attempt to communicate our real positions we sunk into sullen silence. I am not a glowarm apologist but she connected her dots to see me that way. I immediately pigeonholed her as a proponent of the “settled” science crowd. I know my thoughts are much more nuanced, and I expect that hers are too. Another chance to bring light where only heat resides? Opportunity lost.

In more general terms, the clash between mental models also can be ascribed to such cases as,

- One model is more developed than the other,
- A model may be oversimplified or overcomplicated,

- Some models are limited dimensionally while others are multidimensional (a snapshot is 2-dimensional while a Henry Hazlitt analysis considers both short term and long term for all affected parties).

Another element is that our models are formed in language, imagery, number and symbol. The other day I heard a reporter refer to similar events by assuming that disparate groups were acting in “solidarity.” “Solidarity” has origins and frequent usage in political settings. It may arouse images of the French Revolution, the Reign of Terror, trade unionism in Poland, collectivism, protest movements, etc. Did the reporter intend to sew such seeds? Whether intentional or not, he intended to draw a clear connection between Baltimore and New York City, and it wasn’t Interstate 95.

If this were just a garden-variety fallacy, we might call it conflation, but since we have the added element of manipulation of mental models, I call it the Mental Model Fallacy. It is a more powerful fallacy, structured as a combination of webs with levels and the passage of time.

Put away any tin foil hats that one may use to discount the ideas of another. Everyone does not see the world in the same way. Rather than classifying conjecture as a rant or a conspiracy theory, use analysis to see if the conjecture might be getting warm. Remember that the ideas you formed as a child were based on a very close observation of natural outcomes. They were not overly distorted by fraudulent representations and weasel words.

And intelligent discussion is based on taking what is truest and most fundamental in your mental models, then refining it with what is truest and most fundamental in the mental models of others.

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