

Cultural Factors Contributing to Stupidity

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Received: July 20, 2018; Published: October 31, 2018

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify and explore the cultural factors which contribute to the development of stupidity. It's significance is that it does so in a concise, comprehensible manner which helps the reader understand the essence of our self-constructed human environment.

Keywords: Cultural Factors; Stupidity; Communication; Politics

Communication: 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. If so, how is it achievable? Or is it more important for them to interpret these events and accept them? If so, how is it realisable? Most of all, what are the patients' thoughts on the subject and what are their ways to get past these events? Mankind does more resemble cows than apes in terms of the time they take to "psychologically digest" their "rumination", but it is true that their relationship to time has always remained a question. It is now time to determine if this question was considered to its fair value or if it was tackled through the eyes of otherness. The human species is far from being the only one capable of experiencing otherness, but few species actually see themselves on a four-dimensional level [2]. The only exceptions remain the *Ponginae* and the human being. This makes all the difference between living time as a powerless participant without any particular consideration and living "in the time" while being able to take control and travel through it ceaselessly.

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, how-ever, 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 actually 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 independent press is a myth¹ 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 tradition² 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.

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 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 accordionesque media which provide coverage according to emotional resonance of an issue.

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 feed-back, 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. (Lang-don. 132-133fn.)

Journalists are not only a breed apart in their lifestyles and tastes [11] but remarkably uniform in both. They 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.

The act's present is past VERSUS The act's future is the present. A querying jet-lag: Where does the real future lie?

Even when being ostensibly fair and objective, the media may miss the significance of an event, as the newspapers of the day did³ when providing scant coverage⁴ 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 [17,18]. 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 before or since has so thorough a defeat for one side in a battle been misrepresented as a victory for it [19] by the news media [20]. 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 [21].

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 [22]. 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, is, 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..." [23].

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 some kind of message that confirms reality for you, it's so easy to just accept it" [24] 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 [25]-the tendency to believe incoming data that support your existing belief(s).

Politics: For lack of effective, credible criticism in the slap-happy world of the media, power does indeed tend to corrupt (as Lord John Acton noted [26]) because stupidity is a corruption of learning. For some reason, the power to command frequently causes a failure to learn-with power being a substitute for wisdom. Worse yet, the errors of leaders are less likely to be corrected than those made followers lower on the power-ladder, so, as often noted, failure comes from the top down.

Ideally, the responsibility of those in power is to govern as reasonably as possible to the mutual advantage of all. To accomplish this end, a leader has best be well informed, heed available information, be open-minded without being empty-headed [27] and judge all effects of policies objectively. However, it is unusual for someone transfixed by his own power to be open-minded enough to perceive that a pet policy is having un-intended, negative effects, responsible enough to admit it and wise enough to replace it with a better one [28]. The principle of cognitive dissonance applied to politics would show that there is a constant push from way below and outside the power-grid

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.) Likewise, John Kennedy noted that the story about his wartime experience in the South Pacific "Is getting better all the time". (Reeves. 1991. 68.)

⁴The dominant gas industry may have used its influence to prevail up-on the press to pooh-pooh (i.e., downplay) Edison's achievement.

to reform the system and force those in power above to live up to the ideals they routinely espouse but rarely honor and apply. Usually, such pushes are blunted by mid-level, career-minded, promotion-seeking mismanagers.

Generally, mismanagement is promoted when creeds and rituals of government become so rigid as to inhibit adaptive responses. Reduced to essence, politics is a battle between the "Ins" and "Outs" over loves and fishes [29]-a civil war by peaceful means, with reform coming from below and revolution induced when the power system fails by being too rigid to adjust to necessity. In such holy wars of politics, priests crusade and campaign, thrive and perish [30], but even when victorious over political opponents, officials may find their reforms and policies lost to bureaucratic inertia. It often appears that the machine of government is designed to produce friction, constructed to break down and operated for those who service it. Society is there for the government-not the other way around-to feed it and clean up after it, to nurse it through illness and to support it when it goes out to cut its teeth on its problematic neighbors.

The sad fact of political life is that misgovernment may strengthen a regime temporarily [31]. Gaining and retaining power is what government is all about, so the "Ins" tend to make decisions which they perceive to be to their own short-term advantage althethem perhaps to the long-term detriment of all. The idea that power is not an end in itself but a means to help people is a myth political priests use to mask their short-term, self-serving machinations from the long suffering public, or, as Spinoza almost said, authority is based on stupidity [32]: e.g. Congress as government by deadlock [33]. We have carried the Constitutional principle of "Checks and Balances" to the excess of gridlock [34] because officials lack theoretically possible if oxymoronic "Political virtue", which places the national good above individual gain of self-serving pols.

When the government takes control of a society, it may be building itself up, but it also builds up a lot of aggravation and resentment. As agencies expand in size, productivity is reduced to the point that one might think waste has become an incentive. This is the point at which bureaucracies cease to solve problems and become problems themselves. While there is nothing quite so stupid and aggravating in public life as officials perversely persistent in pursuing a policy clearly in everyone else's worst interest, the commitment of politicians to their favorite projects is a motivating force unto itself and makes government immune to reason and restraint⁵. The short-term gain of power through corruption makes a mismanaged agency less ruly and more an end in itself. This may make the "Ins" temporarily stronger, but it also intensifies long-term resentment against them on the part of the "Outs".

The craftier politicians have found that, while stupidity may lead to unpopularity, popularity may lead to stupidity and that this is the most effective way to succeed in politics. If a politician really wants to be stupid, as so many seem to, he need not be too circumspect-all he has to do is find a popular cause. The more popular the cause, the less critical people will be about policies directed toward achieving the end: the more people want something, the less they will be concerned about how they get it. This gives stupidity full rein to flourish in the absence of skeptical criticism. Only after officials have persisted for a long time in contrived foolishness to the point that their actions become unpopular and finally unacceptable⁶ will a government be forced to do something intelligent/right. This is basically what happened with American involvement in Vietnam and to Soviet dominated puppet states in eastern Europe.

Generally in political organizations, the leader is a popular headman-the first among unequals. Aside from the fact that the wrong people often win office because anyone with self-respect⁷ cannot conduct a winning campaign [35], as a central reference point [36], an elected leader may play a largely symbolic role in that, most of the time, people know what to do anyway [37]. Oddly enough, in our modern societies, traditional patterns of political behavior have been strengthened by the emphasis of the role of the "Leading man" as a symbol to worship rather than as a doer to emulate.

⁵Conversely there is nothing so aggravating to image-conscious insiders as an administrator who insists on abiding by and enforcing written rules and laws.

⁶Harold Stassen likened government to fire. As long as it stays within boundaries set by the people, it is a positive factor in their lives. However, when it sets its own limits, it is like a fire out of control goes to xs and consumes everything it can including everything that supports it and finally, itself (McWillaims. 204).

⁷A striking exception in this regard was a description of Leon Blum as "So obviously honest, so manifestly meant what he said, so clearly wasn't trying to be anything other than he was". However, he was active in French politics in the pre-TV 1930's. (Judt. 182).

Now-a-days, lying seems to pay off. In 2016, Donald Trump was elected although/because almost 70% of his campaign statements were false or very false. On the other hand, Hillary Clinton was wrong a mere 26% of the time (Weller). Maybe if she had lied a little more she would have come in second in the popular vote and won.

The most bird-brained idea ever was concocted by swindler Billie Sol Estes, who suggested parakeets be trained to say, "I like Adlei" and released during the 1956 presidential campaign. The idea and birds never got off the ground, so Ike won (Time. May 25, 1962).

The American public, for example, forms lasting impressions from a President's incidental gestures as representative of the people but pays relatively little attention to what he does as chief of state [38]. More and more, when such leaders are chosen, they attain office because of their popular appeal rather than the validity or value of their policies [39]. As Harrison Otis noted before the 1800 presidential election, Jefferson's approach was "A very sweet smelling incense which flattery offers to vanity and folly at the shrine of falsehood" [40].

Now, this trend has reached the point that administrators now govern as if in a perpetual campaign [41] in which their actions are secondary to their slick, buttoned-down images, which in turn were by 1960 spot marketed commercially as perfectly wrapped products like so much toothpaste or soap [42]. The Madison Avenue mantra for a synthetic image was that any political personality could be packaged without reference to any serious issues [43]. Richard Nixon at one point explained how much preparation was required to be spontaneous and, in addition, seem sincere [44].

Sincerity aside, hairy heads seem to be the decisive factor in winning Presidential elections: Voters go for good heads of hair [45]. All this is rendered irrelevant because votes are tabulated by the National Election Pool—a secretive private organization accountable only to the four unnamed corporations which run it [46]. If we skip relevance for effectiveness, we note—as did the Romans [47]—that negative ads and personal attacks on opponents work in terms of winning if not informing the public who is the best candidate.

Actually, the leader really does not lead anymore. He is just there, like an elected monarch, giving a general tone to society and providing a focal point for the reverence of those who for some reason believe in the system. He also provides the media with an object of attention so that hundreds of photographers have someone to focus on and scores of reporters have someone to quote off the record. If any leading must be done while governing by image [48], there is least friction if the people lead the headman where they want to go while the most effective leaders are those who can make people want to do what is necessary and make that appear to be right. Of course, stupidity thrives at best in the gray area between the appearance and actuality of necessity posing as desirable. Beyond appearance, hard work and ambition trump (pun) a sense of justice⁸ about "Guilt" and "Innocence". and altruism as means to political success [49], but even more important are perspicacity, intuition and will power.

Conclusion

This review of communication and politics as determining factors in culture confirms the model that stupidity is a normal, dysfunctional learning process which occurs when a schema formed by linguistic biases and social norms acts via the neurotic paradox to establish a positive feedback system which renders behavior irrelevant to the environment and carries detached actions to maladaptive excesses.

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The stupidest part for us in Nam was that our own media convinced us we could not win just when we had done so: e.g., Senator Robert Kennedy commented, "The enemy has finally shattered the mask of official illusion with which we have concealed the true circumstances, even from ourselves". (Quoted on p. 278 of Remini.) Stupidly, we replaced a valid view with a self-generated misperception (1977).
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- As a personal aside, when explaining to acquaintances why I never vote, I cite my experience with the election in 1964. I was told, "If you vote for Goldwater, we will bomb North Vietnam". I voted for Goldwater, and, sure enough, we bombed North Vietnam. Candidates are all a bunch of liars. They say whatever is necessary to get nominated; then they say whatever is necessary to get elected; then they do whatever is necessary to get re-elected. If anyone is dumb enough to think otherwise, so be it. Further, my one, individual vote never would have made a difference anyway, so I do not waste my time picking and choosing among self-serving liars.
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Volume 7 Issue 11 November 2018

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