

Stupidity in Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Both advertising and public relations in contemporary America conform to and confirm the principle that stupidity is the learned inability to learn: That 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 becomes first self-sustaining and then renders behavior irrelevant to the environment by carrying detached actions to maladaptive excesses.

Keywords: stupidity; schema, norms language, neurotic paradox.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising

In 1977, the Attorney General of New York put a halt to an advertisement¹ for the sale of "Grass". The ad read: Marijuana cannot be sold through the mail but "grass" can... People were sending in money and getting exactly what was promised—lawn cuttings. The ad was stopped because it was considered false advertising, although it probably was one of the most honest ads ever placed, but in a world of phonies and scams, nothing is as disturbing and disruptive as the truth. Beyond exaggeration, however, nothing matched the advertising code which in days past prohibited showing people drinking alcoholic beverages. People were shown having a wonderful time pouring beer or wine into their glasses. They sniffed. They smiled. Suddenly, a moose was running through a forest.

Then the glasses were half empty and the people were beaming delightedly. This is obviously a silly compromise for advertisers who wanted to promote sales of these products (and distilled spirits as well—which are now hawked responsibly) without being responsible for the effects of their consumption.

As amusing and innocent as this example may be, there is a sinister side to the deliberate

control and manipulation of information by the media. In totalitarian states, the government uses mind control to maintain belief in the leaders. In America, the media are businesses committed to maintaining belief in the sponsors. Information which is acceptable to advertisers is presented in a manner calculated to make money by increasing circulation or ratings. If this tends to make material superficial, it is because the people will tune out anything which turns them off.

To counter this factor, the media promote the cherry picking of a story to emphasize anything salacious which will hold the consumers' attention. Actually, the history of modern communications generally has been a story of misleading more and more people faster and faster. Television, especially, can amplify and quickly spread all kinds of errors and false impressions, most of them contrived to keep the viewer tuned in for further misinformation. Usually just enough reality filters through the smoke to make some prudes scream "Bad taste" but not so much that the public would be revolted by the disaster of the day on the news or the violent climax of a movie or crime drama.

Politics

The media's compromise of keeping the public semi-informed is challenged every four years when pollsters make projections of the Presidential elections. In 1980, they forecast a tight race even though they knew days before the election that Reagan would win handily. Their rationale for misrepresenting their findings

a. As Cary Grant's character Roger Thornhill put it in **North by Northwest**, "In the world of advertising, there's no such thing as a lie. There's only 'expedient exaggeration'."

was that they did not want to cause a landslide for the Republicans. One must wonder just what they were doing or supposed to be doing. If it was going to be a big win for Reagan, was there something wrong with saying so? Were they making data available to the public? Misleading the public? Presenting or hiding results? Just what criteria are used to determine what the public will be told? Election night returns and projections of winners now present problems of national importance, and the public will be informed as to what is happening if and when the media are ready to do so.²

The more responsible media tend to be very self-conscious about the effects their news and other fictional stories will have on the public and may present material for the sake of desired effect rather than simply because it is relevant and important. The initial skyjacking stories, for example, seemed to induce more skyjacking.¹ This presented news editors with a dilemma. Reporting the news in a straightforward fashion put people in jeopardy. It simply would not do for the TV networks to inform the public about skyjackings so that the people could decide what to do about them themselves. The bottom line is that part of the role of the media is to keep voters in a democratic society uninformed and misinformed as they pliantly elect officials² and accept establishment programs and policies. The **Los Angeles Times** from the second decade of the 20th century onwards provided an embarrassing example of this principle: it was in no way a chronicle of the city's growth but blatantly a tool of the entrenchment.³

It is in the interest of the monied powers in America that the public be informed just enough to conform, that beliefs in the system are confirmed⁴ and that criticism is trivialized. Basically, leaders need stupid followers. They do not want intelligent, informed, concerned citizens who are well qualified to criticize the

b. One of the major failings of the theory of cognitive dissonance is that organizations may exist comfortably with dissonant members and leaders who make a mockery of a group's values (e.g., corrupt cops) but get furious at anyone (e.g., a whistle blower) who introduces consonance into the system by living up to them. There is thus a social pressure to suppress our best impulses.

c. On the international scene, the Polish labor movement Solidarity provided an example when, in 1981, it infuriated Communist leaders in Russia by calling upon workers of Eastern Europe to unite exactly as Marx and Lenin had urged them to do.

imbalance of power in society. Stability is promoted by a compliant, semi-informed public slightly biased toward meaningless reform, and this exactly what the educational institutions produce and the media maintain.

This point is dramatically demonstrated during political campaigns. Increasingly, elections are decided by 30 second spot ads aimed more at the gut than the mind⁵—commercial techniques of image-making which pervert the process into a popularity contest. Negative campaigning against the opponent aside, the fundamental idiocy of electioneering is that it is largely unrelated to the qualifications and abilities an official needs for performing his/her duties once elected.⁶

That is, a candidate may be chosen on the basis of attributes irrelevant to job performance. An administrator has to be organized and make decisions, yet he/she might be elected because of a winning smile. It is apparently too much to expect that our political leaders might be selected for job related skills. Increasingly, the ability to look and act the part is eclipsing the ability play the role as a qualification for attaining office.³

Worse yet, permanent campaigning by officials and candidates like Donald Trump has come to mean "Looking the part"⁷ is the job. We can hope only that the system will somehow be able to produce as many worthy leaders as it has in the past.⁸ The pragmatic compromise which American political institutions have found expedient to make is one of trading off logical consistency for responsiveness to popular demands.

It is much more important that governments and parties be sensitive to the general public or their own members than that they adhere to set policies and eternal principles.⁹ American "Democracy" has been redefined and adapted to a republic. The people make essentially no decisions except to choose representatives to play "Let's Make a

d. Actually, this may simply be a contemporary American version of an eternal, general political problem—that the skills necessary to get power may be entirely different from those needed for its proper application. For example, revolutionaries may be well suited to depose a corrupt regime but may not be well endowed with the abilities needed to run an effective government themselves. An example would be Giuseppe Garibaldi in 19th century Italy: he liberated Naples in 1860 but had no idea how to run it. (Harvey. *Maverick Military Leaders*. p. 271.)

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Deal" with the lobbyists for special interest groups. In the new sense of the term, a "Democracy" is a political system which cultivates good relations with its subject people. Thus, America maintains the semblance of a democratic tradition, in that the people are periodically consulted and occasionally considered while being deliberately misinformed¹⁰ by "Ins" determined to get reelected and the "Outs" dedicated to impairing the system and blaming the "Ins" so they themselves can get in and do the same. Hence, the basic myth about American government—the belief that it is working for the people. This is the root cause of much political stupidity. Two hundred years ago, this notion might have been amusing, but reality has long since supplied ample, dispelling evidence that, in fact, the people are working for the government.

The average American works until May 26th to pay their federal taxes¹¹—then he works another nineteen days to pay for his food.¹² This the average American boob does despite the growing realization most governmental agencies are working for themselves rather than the poor tax payer. Cabinet members use issues as levers to aid them as they jockey for position in the "Power Stakes". Congressmen logroll to their mutual advantage and the detriment of everyone else. Boondoggle begets boondoggle, and governmental stupidity becomes a mixture of departmental ineptitude compounded by the noise and friction of competitive haggling among the many bureaucratic agencies. Whether this is really stupid or not depends upon one's perspective. However, in politics, power defines perspectives.

As a repository of power, government is clearly a means which has become an end in itself. Although the original idea was that the government was to help the people realize themselves, it has indulged in a tradition of making and interpreting its own laws in self-serving ways.

Government has emerged supreme and extreme. It is strangling the people it was designed to serve and who continually struggle to support it. It is no surprise that the originally religious faith in our parasitic political system has been eroded: the surprise for all but students of stupidity is that there is any left at all.

Generally, the religious fervor that was once inspired by democratic terminology has been badly compromised by pragmatism: "Liberty" is hardly worth killing for these days and certainly

not worth dying for. If democratic slogans have ceased to be accepted as inspiring truths, now that we have endured over a century of hacks running the political machines,¹³ there is some consolation in knowing that bribery and corruption have become more refined and discreet. Aside from the Nixonians (who were justly punished as warnings to others not to get caught), we now have a higher sleaze of political crooks. They are slicker, subtler and more sophisticated than before and quite capable of providing the modern public with both the image and reality expected and needed.

Stupidity becomes apparent, however, whenever the discrepancy between image and reality bends or stretches credulity beyond the breaking point. For example, for years the federal government indulged in a Soil Bank program, paying farmers to reduce food production¹⁴ while people all over the world and even in this country and were starving to death.

Why that same money was not paid to farmers to grow food which then could have been distributed (along with contraceptives) to the impoverished needy remains a mystery. It need be explained only if people realize how stupid it was for a government to prevent food production in a world of famine and an era when America was presenting itself to the world as a national embodiment of Christian ideals and compassion. Slightly more idiotic than the Soil Bank program are the policies in Washington toward tobacco. This is a substance recognized as a poison by everyone but those controlled by it. Yet, because of the political clout of the tobacco states on Congressional committees, the government supports the price of tobacco. Then it taxes cigarettes, which, it assures us, menace our health. Just why tobacco farmers cannot grow food, which would help people live, is more a matter of money than morals. As it was, from 1955 to 1975, America enjoyed seven million tobacco-related deaths while the industry to in \$200 billion in revenues—or \$28,500/death.¹⁵

An obvious victim of oxymoronic political morality was the Constitutional mandate that the government promote the general welfare of the people.⁴

e. There are a number of reacting if not coping "Stragedies" for nicotine addicts. Perhaps the most imaginative is that noted by a Lord Conesford, who heard a smoker was so horrified by what he read about the effects of smoking that he gave up

Even stupider than the government's policies toward tobacco is its ongoing policy toward drugs: Federal drug laws were denounced as a disaster in 1993¹⁶ but continue ineffectually to date. Forty-three years and \$260 billion after the current⁵ War on Drugs began, American society is still inundated by opioids and heroin,¹⁷ or, to put it another way, the drugs are winning.¹⁸ Increasingly, it is becoming obvious that we will never lick the drug problem as long as we deal with it as criminal behavior. There is simply too much money available to corrupt any efforts to put an end to drug dealing. The only way to win the war on drugs is to legalize their use and deal with the whole matter as a problem of health. Users could then go to physicians, enroll in rehabilitation programs and get prescriptions for their needs which could be filled at prices so low that the drug cartels could not compete.⁶ Until we adopt such a strategy, the drug problem will remain no matter how much money the government throws at it. Only when we legalize drugs will the problem disappear. Of course, the main stumbling block to adopting this policy is primarily psychological—we would have to change our drug-related schema so that we would perceive a moderate user as someone who should be left alone, like the moderate drinker, and the addict not as a criminal but, like the alcoholic, a person who needs structured help in finding treatment and, hopefully, a cure. It is rather sad to note that nothing makes government look stupider than an accurate, objective recitation of official acts and policies. Much as people need to believe in the system,

reading. (McWilliams. P. **Ain't Nobody's Business If You Do**. Prelude Press; Los Angeles, CA 1993. 53)

f. Re: the relevance of the term "Current". Keep in mind the following: "After more than 20 years of federal effort and the expenditure of millions of dollars, the opium and cocaine habits are still widespread." Etc. (An editorial in the Journal of the American Medical Association. May, 1, 1937). Further, such as it was, the War on Drugs in the early '70's was apparently a reshuffling of sources so as to favor the supply-side efforts of Nixon-supporter Santo Trafficante over those of the traditional French Connection. (Kruger, H. 1980. **The Great Heroin Coup**. South End Press; Boston. MA. 161.)

g. As Will Rogers suggested, legalize drugs and tax the business into bankruptcy. (McWilliams. 183) The tax monies thereby garnered could then be used to fund not only our rehab programs but perhaps even pay off the national debt.

they find it difficult to worship an organization which insults their fading mental sensibilities as it pours their tax dollars down one bottomless rat hole after another.⁷ Our current crusade to represent the "Underprivileged person" as a cause célèbre⁸ in our political conscience is a case in point. Helping people help themselves is one thing, but the goal of making everyone equally privileged is so asinine that only a democratic government could embrace and only a totalitarian government (Ephesia?) could achieve it. While handouts and doles are worthy short-term, emergency measures, they have now become standards in a culture which accepts emergency conditions as normal thus inducing more emergencies. Unfortunately, society cannot live long-term on emergency measures any more than an individual can live long-term on adrenalin. Big government is promoted but the establishment of effective, long-term solutions to our social problems are thwarted by the institution of desperate programs, which foster not independent human development but human dependence on self-perpetuating bureaucracies. The functional guiding principle of administrating is quite simple—offend as few powerful people as possible while placating as many as possible. Thus, when a decision is made by a civil servant, the prime concerns are covering his ass and the satisfaction of the noisiest and most influential pressure group. Other factors which enter into the decision-making process are 1.) advancement of the decider up the pecking order, 2.) thwarting interdepartmental rivals, and 3.) facts relevant to the particular problem at hand.¹⁹ If public interests happen to be served by such officials, that is only because they happen to fall in line with these criteria deemed crucial by those laboring in the context of the bureaucracy. In public service, employees and officials routinely find that institutional stupidity makes their jobs (i.e., helping tax paying citizens) all the more difficult. Organizational guidelines take on lives of their own and inhibit

h. If the question posed by the '60's hippie anthem "Where have all the Flowers Gone?" was "When will we ever learn?" The answer is, who knows? When we get real? When everyone has read this book? Never? All of the above. None of the above. What's a flower? Gone too is the '60's mindset that the country could be not just powerful but should be good as well.

i. Past crusades focused on the freed slave, the reformed drunkard, the ennobled worker, the emancipated woman and "Our most precious resource"—groan—the child. (McWilliams. 29.)

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the even well-intentioned workers from accomplishing their appointed tasks. Hospital personnel spend as much time filling out forms as tending to patients. School teachers spend one or two class periods a day administrating or patrolling rather than teaching. The military cannot win a war because the weapons or tactics necessary to do so would create "Bad press".

Another factor contributing to the frustration of goal achievement is the excess of information available to anyone who wants to be confused. Understanding is rendered unlikely when a person is inundated by masses of conflicting data. A common ploy under such circumstances is to make no decision but to stick with existing policy regardless of complaints or reports of its short-comings and failings. Repetition of just what was once acceptable provides citizens with government by inertia.²⁰

A further impediment to goal achievement is that those effecting policy would rather perpetuate errors than admit to making them. Of course, this strategy has the advantage of saving those in charge the bother of correcting or eliminating such mistakes as do exist.

Unfortunately, the Veterans Administration provided a rather sad example of what this can mean to victims of government bureaucracy. In its own hospitals, the VA often failed to enforce its own safety standards and failed to follow its own lax rules for investigating patient death rates.

Further, VA consultants were quite content to push paper around instead of demanding an end to dangerous conditions that were causing needless deaths early in the 1980's.

This indifference allowed the perpetuation of a venerable tradition of surgical errors. Worse yet, all this was made probable by the 1980 Congressional Invitation to Ineptitude Act which made reports dealing with the quality of VA medical care confidential.²¹

Fortunately, by the start of the 21st century, VA hospitals became very much reformed and led the nation in quality medical care until the numbers of patients from the wars in the Mid-East overwhelmed they system in the early 21st century²² resulting in admissions delays to treatment programs of dubious quality.²³ For as long as they could, until the story broke in the press, those on the inside, from the clearly criminal to the merely contemptuous, protected themselves. Although all public officials must occasionally reward meritorious service, they

also strive to cover up mistakes and encourage conformity to mediocre standards for the sake of the esprit de corps. Just so they all feel they belong, the dull are promoted and the bright discouraged from competence or from setting examples of excellence that others might resent. The danger of all such institutional stupidity is that it passes unrecognized as such within the system and becomes a new and lower standard for judging the acceptability of dubious conduct. However, it was hardly dubious for the VA falsely to declare Jerry Miller of Palm Bay, Florida dead *four times* in two years. "To me, it's stupid", he preposthumously averred, but it is not unique. As a result of records errors, one in 200 reported deaths is false, but being dead is not just annoying; it can ruin one's credit rating²⁴ as well as one's social life. Just how low the current standards of judging stupidity if not death are became clear with the impeachment and acquittal of then President Clinton in the Zippergate scandal. He avoided conviction for perjury and obstruction of justice because his cronies managed to stave off the unjustified onslaught of his politically motivated enemies. However, in the court of public opinion, his conduct was held in contempt by his constituents, two out of three of whom rated the state of the country's moral values as weak. For what it is worth and to their credit, a majority of those polled were more concerned with moral issues than economic problems.²⁵

CONCLUSION

The selection factor for human behavior is primarily the prevailing value system of the surrounding culture. Only secondarily, and ultimately does the Darwinian process of natural selection come into play.

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