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“At Night, I Cross Behind the Enemy Lines¹”: Reaching the Negotiating Table in the Age of Fast Communication

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Finding common ground can be inherently difficult. Human beings, it would appear, are rather good at interpreting the social world in biased ways but are rather bad at recognizing their biases. Ask a married couple what percentage of the housework each member contributes and you may find that each one claims to do about 60 percent while neither believes that he or she is overestimating his or her contribution. Psychologists have termed this tendency the self-centered bias and it remains only one of many to which we human beings are susceptible. From the starting gate, therefore, we often see the same objective reality through lenses whose distortions oppose one another.

In modern society, finding common ground may be even more difficult than in the past. In the wake of the agricultural and industrial revolutions, the human population has grown tremendously. With the advent of new technologies ranging from the telegraph to wireless Internet, the distance between potential communicators is no longer an impediment to their communication. It follows that many of us are communicating with more people than did prior generations and that the average time per communiqué is likely decreasing.

Welcome to the age of “fast communication”: we quickly read a billboard as we take a break from reading text messages when we really should be focused exclusively on driving; we run the risk of becoming “stupider and worse²” than our “smart phones” as we use text message abbreviations that aim to ensure our friend in China knows we were LOLing about the YouTube clip he posted to our Facebook wall. If the rapid growth of such social media as Facebook

or Twitter is any indication, fast communication would appear to hold a strong appeal for many in modern society. But just as the pernicious nature of fast-food does not necessarily end with a bit of heartburn, the risks of fast communication may not end with deteriorating grammar and spelling. Much as fast food can contribute to long-term heart disease, fast communication may be lowering the accuracy with which we represent our ideas or the ideas of others; an accuracy already called into question by what may in the end be a hard-wired human tendency for social-cognitive bias. Examples abound in American politics. Recall, for example, former Governor Sarah Palin claiming in 2009 that:

The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama’s ‘death panel’ so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of their ‘level of productivity in society,’ whether they are worthy of healthcare.³

Senator Chuck Grassley soon followed suit suggesting that democratic healthcare reform represented “a government-run plan to decide when to pull the plug on grandma.⁴” It seems clear now that the legislation in question proposed nothing of the sort. At best, these claims were grossly hyperbolic. At worst, they may have represented deliberate attempts to scare Americans with false information. Yet in the age of fast communication, the claims spread like wildfire and were reified among many whose biases may have primed them to accept at face value what Sarah Palin claimed on Facebook.

The problem is certainly not limited to conservatives.

Liberals are guilty too. In February of 2011, Jen Phillips wrote an article in *Mother Jones* magazine condemning a state bill in Georgia that, according to Phillips, sought to hold women criminally liable for the “totally natural, common biological process” of miscarriage.⁵ Phillips verbally reiterated the words in quotations multiple times on cable news, thus hammering home the apparent message that the bill in question aimed to incarcerate (or even execute) women who had natural miscarriages. In her article, she further stated that, under the bill, “women who miscarry could become felons if they cannot prove that there was ‘no human involvement whatsoever in the causation’ of their miscarriage.” While I am not a lawyer, I am a criminologist who is aware that the American criminal justice system places the burden of proof on the state, not the accused. I also know many lawyers and, skeptical that the bill in question actually sought to do what Phillips claimed, I asked for their interpretation of the bill itself. Their responses confirmed what I had suspected from the outset: the bill did not seek to criminalize “natural” miscarriage. Rather, it aimed to criminalize deliberately-induced abortion. That I disagree with the bill as actually written does not change my impression that Phillips unnecessarily overstated her accusation.

Liberals and conservatives may never agree about the specific healthcare issues described above, but their disagreement about particulars will not eliminate the rising cost of healthcare, to name but one general issue. As such, it remains important to assess the potential consequences each time one side “cries wolf” about the other. If there exists a baseline differential in the way that you and I perceive some ostensibly objective reality, distortions like those above, even when they may seem small, can quickly get amplified in the modern world of fast communication. Within hours, thousands of conservatives may get a text message, hear a cable news sound-bite, or read a Facebook post convincing them that

President Obama is literally planning to kill their grandmother. Thousands of liberals may get similar communications convincing them that southern conservatives are attempting to execute any woman who has a natural miscarriage. In the age of fast communication, even seemingly small distortions can result in an arms race of demonization that I have trouble believing serves either side well. In the long-run, beyond alienating the other side, I suspect crying wolf results in third-parties taking one’s future claims less seriously.

Examples are not limited to national politics. Many exist closer to home. Following President Huddleston’s recent remarks in front of the New Hampshire State Senate Finance Committee, a firestorm ensued among some faculty members. Discussion circled around whether President Huddleston had insulted the faculty in his remarks. Within weeks, the faculty union held a vote of no-confidence. Although the vote was not based exclusively on the remarks in question, these remarks were in some sense “the last straw” for some faculty members. Having missed the insults when I first read President Huddleston’s statement, I re-read it, paying closer attention this time. I must say, however, that I remained genuinely puzzled about what particular part of the statement provoked the type of palpable hostility that I was witnessing. He had certainly argued that academia writ large needed to change if it hoped to meet the challenges of the future. He claimed, for example, that: “[w]e still too-frequently convey information in fifty-minute lectures delivered by a ‘sage on the stage’ to largely passive recipients.”⁶ Such statements, however, did not seem like anything that President Huddleston had not said many times before and I did not see any explicit insults of anyone.

Many of my colleagues can attest that I have no trouble expressing my disagreements with, nor my criticisms of, the administration. I also remain a member of the faculty union and believe that my

faculty colleagues are good people with earnest motivations and beliefs. In this instance, however, I questioned whether the infraction was worthy of the firestorm it apparently sparked. With all due respect to those who disagree, I wonder whether this was merely another instance of fast communication gone awry in the context of what psychologists have called hostile-attribution bias. In any event, it is instructive for the present purposes that both sides of the argument actively pointed to the *same text*⁷ as their supporting evidence. As I stated from the outset: our lenses sometimes lead us to see the same objective reality in opposite ways.

On the other side of the equation, the administration recently argued amid ever-on-going negotiations with the faculty union that “[w]hen two of the largest revenue streams [at UNH] are either maxed out or at risk of a 45 percent cut, it produces a financial crisis.”⁸ The streams in question were tuition and state funding. Indeed, according to the UNH website⁹, tuition represents the largest single revenue stream at the university, responsible for nearly a third of the overall UNH budget. State appropriations, however, represent slightly more than 13 percent of the UNH budget, ranking fourth out of only six identified streams. Perhaps the administration is counting “Other Sources” of revenue as separate streams. Even if so, consider the claim that tuition is “maxed out.” Do you really believe that tuition will never increase from the date of that article’s publication? At the end of the day, it is not my intention to quibble about minor technicalities for the sake of quibbling, nor is it my intention to play petty “gotcha” politics with anybody. Further, I am the first to admit that I have been guilty of overstating my own case plenty of times. In themselves, some or all of the above examples may be unimportant and might not merit mention if not for the greater context in which they take place. That context, however, is one in which normal human bias may be amplified by increasingly fast communication. In such a context, the game of “telephone” that

many of us played as children can result in increasing distortion, demonization, and, ultimately, impasse.

I realize that crossing behind “enemy lines” to see others’ perspectives and actively limiting our own distorted claims will not be sufficient conditions for finding common ground. There are some issues about which Republicans and Democrats will never agree. There are some issues about which the faculty union and the administration will never agree. There are some issues about which I will never agree with some of my very best friends. Beyond that, reasonable questions arise as to whether and why one should limit distortions if and when the other side will not reciprocate. Nonetheless, when we let our passions get the best of us rather than getting the best from our passions and we allow, or even encourage, small distortions to flourish unchallenged, we may be driving a small (but surprisingly powerful) wedge under the door to the negotiating table.

¹Linton, Art. “Enemy Lines” Portable Jesus Music.

²http://unh.edu/discovery/sites/unh.edu.discovery/files/dialogue/2010/pdf/2010_Dialogues_smith.pdf

³<http://www.factcheck.org/2009/08/palin-vs-obama-death-panels/>

⁴<http://www.factcheck.org/2009/08/palin-vs-obama-death-panels/>

⁵<http://motherjones.com/blue-marble/2011/02/miscarriage-death-penalty-georgia>

⁶<http://www.unh.edu/president/concord-testimony>

⁷<http://www.unh.edu/president/concord-testimony>

⁸<http://www.unh.edu/unhedutop/unh-lead-negotiator-responds-letter-editor-fosters>

⁹<http://www.unh.edu/unhedutop/about-unh>