

Pumping up the volume

Social incongruities in modern times



The freewheelin'
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Operating as an individual personality can be considered 'noise'

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Try sleeping with the dancers in your room.

Jack Bruce

Noise

Perhaps the most familiar model of simple communication over the past several decades has been the somewhat mechanistic engineering approach of 'senders' and 'receivers'. Distortion or 'noise' prevents effective or literal transmission and decoding of whatever's been said or written.

On that basis, operating as an individual personality can be considered to be noise, particularly if considered typologically.

Isabel Myers' selection of forced choice as the method of scoring her items for the MBTI, and her encouragement of omissions, can be seen as statistical noise. Mark Majors' five-point non-Likert scale for his MajorsPTI is designed to clear things up a little in that context. This brings pleasure and clarity to many; others may prefer to live with the noise or delve into the meaning of its sounds. There are benefits either way.

George Prochnik points out that domestic and similar disputes often have their stimulus in unacceptable noise: someone else's, for instance, or even your own.

There are also the modern electronic noises that underpin 21st Century life. We may be consciously unaware of them, but they affect our moods and actions nonetheless (2010).

The experience of noise, as defined, can be subjective, particularly where music is concerned. Even in this case, you have to take into account deliberate distortion or muddy production, even taste.

Discipline and Punish

Some like to have things messy and undetermined; there's an argument that people are mostly like that. For others, it's messy once you establish core principles. And there are those, postmodern in inclination, who see human activity as mediated relationships, implying that there's no core self.

There are people who think that things need to be structured in such a way that a 'discipline and punish' perspective (a term coined by Michel Foucault) is appropriate for regulating society and behaviours. We see this in much public policy: in particular, in advertisements threatening retribution for inappropriate road behaviour, or the consequences of tobacco and other drug use.

The presumption here is that everyone, including target audiences ('hoons', for instance), agrees with this interpretation of human behaviour and will restrict their activities accordingly, rather than considering it a game or challenge, or ignoring the message altogether.

Theories of minds

Not everyone is theoretically inclined about personality, even amongst those who are naturally inclined to theory.

One could argue, as I do, that there are theoretical presumptions about personality implicit in every policy or decision. But it does not follow that these enter the minds of decision makers in their deliberations. Much of this behaviour could be considered unconscious: e.g. being objectively logical without engaging in thinking, or being compassionate without engaging in feeling. Elizabeth Murphy contends that *possessing* a type preference is quite different from *directing* it.

Serving the public

One consequence of this can be the introduction of facilities or services that people are presumed to need, but no-one asked for. In this way, customer service can be more about how a ‘customer’ is going to be dealt with, than an attempt to provide what they might *require*.

Internet access is presumed to be crucial for the free flow of information. The Internet is also a place where information can be hidden, deliberately or otherwise, as can be attested by anyone who has attempted to navigate various websites, or looked in hope at an FAQ list for something remotely relevant to their query. ‘It’s on the Internet’ can be a crucial part of an obfuscatory strategy.

In the tangible world, a sudden appearance of a new facility or service can be startling, if not bewildering. At a local petrol station I discovered that the loud background noise which I’d presumed to be a favourite radio station imposed on customers as part of their service experience, was in fact something called ‘PumpTV’, a television screen and service placed on top of a bowser.

Why anyone would want to be assailed in this way escaped me—but then I wonder about the purpose and effectiveness of much of the social noise provided by retailers and others. Some people I’ve spoken with say that noise (usually music) is a key reason for not venturing into the store concerned.

At any rate, PumpTV didn’t seem to be a choice of those running the place. Maybe people take it in their stride, or don’t think about it at all. My observations indicate that accurate and timely reporting isn’t an essential attribute of the service, so perhaps it’s like Huxley’s soma, Marx’s opiate of the masses, or something that’s just there without any reason at all.

Healing the sick

Installing communication devices without reflection on purpose, let alone context, seems to be a general experience, from the television that no-one watches at Centrelink to the two large flat screens on the waiting room walls at my local medical centre.

In enquiring about the latter and whether it was possible to wait in a quieter area (an approach that met with much confusion), I discovered that no connection had been made between the therapeutic aspects of illness and healing and what might occur in a place where people are compelled to gather prior to receiving diagnosis and assistance.

The nature of medical recommendations can vary wildly these days. A research cardiologist considers it logical to suggest cholesterol-lowering drugs be made freely available at McDonald’s and similar eateries to counteract the effect of what’s on offer (Campbell, 2010).

As someone recently diagnosed with type-2 diabetes, I received an offer from university medical researchers to participate in a trial in which half of the participants would receive lap-band surgery. Whether invasive surgery was an appropriate treatment for this problem appeared unconsidered. The proposal had received the requisite ethical clearance, giving expanded meaning to experimentation on human beings.

Hard again

These incongruities can spread further.

In a supermarket recently I noticed a man carrying his young son in the supportive and gentle way seen a lot these days. The father was wearing a mass-produced T-shirt, green with gold lettering. Its design proclaimed ‘Country Australia Border Protection’, with a subtext ‘Nothing soft gets in’. Hardness, expressed in this way, appears a prerequisite for being Australian in these times for many, who place their care elsewhere.

Others may not place care anywhere at all, or at least give that appearance. This is the world of Winners and Losers. That was the position of the person who blocked my exit at a PumpTV-free petrol station with his 4-wheel drive and trailer—a win for him, consequently a loss for me.

Paradoxically, the Collingwood AFL captain, Nick Maxwell, asks how we can hate someone we don’t know—even hating people who want to help others.



Why would anyone want to be assailed by PumpTV?

Sometimes sportspeople have interesting things to say; sometimes public commentators would be better to keep silent.

Looking for outcomes

If you become outcome focused, you forget about what you're doing today and tomorrow

...

if you spend too much time looking at the horizon, you forget about what's in front of you

Dean Bailey

The Melbourne AFL senior coach, Dean Bailey, advocates looking at what's there, not what you might want to see. This means appreciating the moment after the fashion of 'one week at a time'. It also implies that deciding on an outcome can mean fitting facts into a desired pattern, eliminating uncomfortable ones, or privileging some particular information over others because it 'fits'—no matter the reality.

I was told of an incident on a train. A little boy had an inflated balloon, and the man accompanying him, presumably his father, advised him to let the air out, as then the balloon would last longer. Presumably well-intentioned, this seemed to defeat the whole point of possessing such an object. It was a deflating, if not bewildering, experience for the child.

In a similar way, the current prime minister appears to consider education to be about jobs, not about learning *per se*, or even a cornerstone of participating in a democracy, a somewhat dispiriting, albeit bipartisan, approach. It may go some of the way to explaining disinterest about learning in general and its reduction to funding formulae.

*Like happy endings, you are set in your ways
Have you never had a sad one of your own?*

Tony Colton

It also seems important these days never to be wrong, which may be part of a general anxiety about completion, or unease

about ambivalence, or consideration of the issues: for example, the negative comments on the lengthy (and to my mind appropriate) discussions and negotiations regarding the establishment of a minority government.

Perhaps this is why there appears such a rush to medicalise introversion as some kind of autism, or to expand the meaning of the latter to encompass a wide range of life experiences, much as has been done to depression.

At the time of the recent disruptions and protests at the Villawood detention centre, a spokesperson for the relevant department was reported as stating that counselling and other services offered to these people were 'first class', leaving an unasked question about why the people for whom these high-quality services were available had taken such drastic measures.

In the same way, politicians praise transport systems when they don't work, and emergency services strategies when they fail. The failure of a system and poor decisions made by those within is thus transmuted into a claim that the system works, and so a kind of 'win-win' situation.

Be yourself, be real

I do react very badly when politicians say, as they like to, 'let's leave personalities out of it'.

Francis Wheen

The Federal election and its aftermath have demonstrated how important an understanding of personality is to politics.

Francis Wheen thinks it's important to know something about the kind of people who are running, or have attained office. This would include whether they're 'themselves', as Julia Gillard claimed she would be at one time in the campaign.

The journalist Katharine Murphy suggests that her colleagues do not have a working theory of personality. Indeed, they seem to avoid it at all costs: it's easier to stereotype, mind-read, or be cynical and confronting, than to understand and appreciate different methods of living and working things through (2010).



An understanding of personality is important to politics

As an example, thinking that public figures prefer extraversion (or, at least, *should*), because they are out in public, rather than introversion, as they invariably do (in this country, at least), suggests a superficial or inadequate knowledge of the constructs, a lack of research and insight into the people concerned, and sometimes intellectual laziness.

Whether particular personality information is sufficient, or even relevant—a physical feature, say, or a tendency to a particular activity—the kind of people political strategists think the voters are, the methods they use to determine what that might be, and the capacity to use the chosen methods adequately and effectively, are obviously important.

Social scientist Hugh Mackay observes, for instance, that while focus groups were in use by Labor Party figures, it appeared they had little idea of what these groups really were, to say nothing of how to use them well (2010).

The relevance of history

There's also an unwillingness to examine history and past events, or at least select the relevant past event and examine the facts available.

Alexander Chancellor observes that Sarah Palin trades on her incoherence and ignorance as a badge of honour by being herself, or at least being 'authentic' (2010).

What isn't said is that there's a long history of this kind of approach in American politics, including an extremely influential group known as the 'Know-Nothings' around the 1840s. The current Tea Party movement exists independent of any real knowledge or understanding of the actual event and its contemporary purpose.

This leaves aside the obvious appeal for many who perceive Palin as being just like them, considering that to be an important criterion for high office. Tim Soutphommasane avers that 'we shouldn't forget that we get the leaders we deserve. If it is

a better politic that we want, we should start by being better citizens' (2010).

This historical ignorance can also appear in benign ways. A recent Hungry Jack's advertisement invokes New Orleans, Bourbon and 'the taste of the South'. Nonetheless, the musical riff, key to the message, is the very different Chicago blues of Muddy Waters.

Grace Karskens' history of early Sydney describes an insightful and complex interaction of all the people (and peoples) concerned. What's consistent as a theme is the administrative approach of discipline-and-punish as an ultimate policy, operating out of a presumption that a particular version of British behaviour was a culture that Aboriginal people, convicts and settlers would naturally strive to attain.

There was genuine confusion, frustration and anger when this did not occur and the 'discipline and punish' method was applied to get them to change their minds—or, at least, behaviours. That these people had a different focus on life, and may not in any case be attached to society in the same way that those who wish to regulate things of this nature expect, was not understood. Current experience may differ, in a less violent world in particular, but the basic method is still apparent.

This kind of approach might be an example of undirected thinking—certainly of thinking without reflection, in a general sense.

C G Jung thought most people were unconscious, and that democracy in a way depends on that. Notwithstanding Jung's personal political position as a kind of conservative oligarch, this bears thinking about, particularly when we look at personality.

Growing up is something I've tried to avoid.

Why do it? Unfortunately, though, it seeps in through cracks.

DBC Pierre

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