Dimensions of Voice[1]

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Adam Smith argued that "the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another" was a fundamental attribute of human nature, and on this foundation developed a theory of economic development. Writing two centuries later, Albert Hirschman focused instead on a universal propensity to exercise voice or generally "kick up a fuss," and on this basis crafted a theory of organizational performance.[4]

Hirschman's idea has spawned countless applications, among which is a resolution of the paradox of political participation. It is very difficult to account for significant turnout in large elections based purely on instrumental motives. No matter how much one cares about the outcome, the likelihood that it will be affected by one's own vote, taken in isolation, is truly negligible. But if voting is viewed as an expressive act, it no longer appears paradoxical.[5]

People participate in large elections not because they expect to cast a deciding vote, but because they gain immense satisfaction from joining their voice to a chorus of support for their chosen candidate or party. Furthermore, voting is an expression of solidarity with one's fellow-partisans, who are voting in the same way. One is standing on a metaphorical stage with these fellow voters, raising one's own voice in harmony with theirs. Close elections have high turnout for much the same reason as close games have the noisiest audience.

For this reason, candidates with extreme positions can arouse strong passions and be rewarded with electoral success. In sharp contrast with the conventional theory that moderation will prevail in a two-party system as both parties move towards the "median voter," Hirschman argued that those on the fringes of a party, who have no option to exit, would be "maximally motivated to bring all sorts of potential influence into play so as to keep... the party from

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[4] Smith (1776); Hirschman (1970).

[5] Schuessler (2000).

doing things that are highly obnoxious" to them. As a result, those who have nowhere else to go "are not powerless but influential."[6]

The power of voice can damage as well as uplift. Although hurtful and offensive speech in the United States is constitutionally protected in most instances, it is often met with social sanction and reprimand. There are certain words that cannot be uttered without arousing scorn—racial epithets and highly charged misogynistic terms for instance. Those who wish to exercise voice in this manner cannot do so without cost, and are therefore most likely to rely on chat rooms or comment feeds in which voice can be exercised under the cloak of anonymity.

Given that speech is policed and judged, there are strong incentives for individuals to publicly express views that they may not hold, or to disguise or suppress views that they do. This is what Timur Kuran refers to as preference falsification: speech (or silence) that "aims specifically at manipulating the perceptions others hold about one's motivations or dispositions."[7]

As Glenn Loury has observed, naïve communication, "where a speaker literally states all that he thinks and/or an audience accepts his representations at face value—is rare, and foolish, in politics."[8] Using Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to illustrate, he notes that Mark Anthony begins his eulogy with the words "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him," and then proceeds to praise Caesar profusely. Anthony repeatedly refers to Brutus as "an honorable man" but manages to convey precisely the opposite message. In contrast with the "naïve, guileless, literal" speech by Brutus that precedes it, Anthony's oration is far more effective and consequential.

Loury defines political correctness as "an equilibrium pattern of expression and inference within a given community where receivers impute undesirable qualities to senders who express themselves in an 'incorrect' way

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[6] Hirschman (1970, pp. 70-72). The conventional approach that Hirschman is taking issue with here is the Hotelling-Downs theory of electoral competition (Hotelling 1929, Downs 1957).

[7] Kuran (1995, p.4). Preference falsification may even arise when one's statements are anonymous, as in opinion polls to forecast electoral outcomes; such falsification was implicated in forecast errors in the British elections of 1992 and 2015 and has come to be called the shy Tory factor (Fisher and Lewis-Beck, 2015).

[8] Loury (1994, p.431).

and, as a result, senders avoid such expressions." People withhold expressions that they expect will be deeply unpopular in the communities in which they live and work, and the content of expressed speech can therefore start to deviate substantially from the actual opinions held in the community.

But community norms regarding what qualifies as acceptable speech vary widely across time and space. What may be routine in one environment may be subject to shaming in another, and individuals may be sanctioned for political speech that they consider to be completely innocuous.

These issues achieved great salience during the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States. A few months before the election, Conor Friedersdorf published an email exchange with a young Trump supporter in which the latter specifically complained about being labeled a fascist and racist for expressing views that were in the national political mainstream, but were considered outrageous within his own narrower community.[9] The young man confessed to hiding his beliefs for fear of "ostracism and shame." This factor appeared to have been decisive in his support for Trump, whom he perceived to be shattering norms of political correctness.

The suppression of voice in one dimension can result in its amplification in another. In the case of Friedersdorf's correspondent, self-censorship in the workplace went hand-in-hand with a heightened desire to exercise voice in the voting booth. In other instances the response has been to take to social media, where anonymous communication is frequent, and speech that would be shunned almost everywhere is widespread.[10]

Uncensored and anonymous messaging applications such as *Yik-Yak* and *Gab* have allowed for the public expression of fringe views without fear of shaming, and some institutions have responded by banning the apps themselves. Apple and Google, which together control 98% of the mobile operating system market, have both denied their users access to *Gab*, and *Yik-Yak* shut down after being banned at several colleges.[11]

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[9] Friedersdorf (2016).

[10] Many journalists and scholars received virulently racist and anti-Semitic anonymous messages during the 2016 election season. For a sample directed at the distinguished political theorist Danielle Allen see https://storify.com/dsallentess/trumpsupporters.

[11] See Renn (2017) on *Gab* and Graham (2017) on *Yik-Yak*.

Friedersdorf's prediction that the election of Trump would empower "white supremacists and anti-Semites who already seem emboldened by his rise" has since come to pass. In August 2017, a white nationalist rally was held in Charlottesville, Virginia, with marchers voicing open support of the Ku Klux Klan and advocating an ethno-nationalist state. One of the marchers drove a car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing one and injuring several. Such a large, coordinated and highly visible display of racial animus has not been seen in America for at least a generation.

As Emily Badger has noted in the *New York Times*, "the line between acceptable and ostracized views has started to become less stark."[12] Badger quotes Tufts sociologist Sarah Sobieraj on white supremacists as follows: "For all these years, this is a group of people that's been very bitter about the fact that they feel like they can't speak… It's not just that their policies haven't been popular." Such individuals are now finding their voices, coming out of the shadow of anonymity and out into the public sphere.

Even if the silencing of these voices were feasible, it is likely to be counter-productive. Psychologists have long understood that "attempted thought suppression has paradoxical effects as a self-control strategy, perhaps even producing the very obsession or preoccupation that it is directed against."[13]

The act of restraint required to suppress the articulation of one's thoughts, or to express views contrary to one's opinions, is cognitively demanding. In some cases the resulting dissonance can result in a change of one's privately held opinions.[14] However, if speech is suppressed while the underlying thoughts are maintained or magnified, other pathological effects can arise. The act of such suppression draws on "some limited resource, akin to strength or energy," resulting in "ego depletion" and poor performance on difficult tasks that also require acts of willpower.[15]

The capacity to exercise willpower can be replenished, but sustained ego depletion over an extended period of time can result in violence: "highly controlled people who seem to snap and abruptly perpetrate acts of violence or outrage may be suffering from some abrupt depletion that has undermined the

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[12] Badger (2017).
[13] Wegner et al. (1987, p. 5).
[14] Festinger and Carlsmith (1959).
[15] Baumeister et al. (1998).

control they have maintained, possibly for years, over these destructive impulses."[16]

Yet restraint in the exercise of voice is viewed as a virtue in some cultures. In Japan, for instance, it has been argued that self-restraint is "seen as the appropriate behavior of socially mature adults." [17] Similarly, in Korea, "suppression of verbal aggression and avoidance of confrontation are highly esteemed personal qualities."[18]

For some individuals, the long-term effects of such restraint can be dire. The specifically Korean folk illness *Hwa-Byung*, loosely translated as anger-syndrome, has been linked to "suppressed anger of long duration."[19] Patients diagnosed with this disorder exhibit both psychological and physiological symptoms, including fear of impending death, acute panic, palpitations, and abdominal pain. It has been speculated that this condition can give rise to explosive violence, as manifested in two mass killings at American universities.[20]

The expression of voice in the United States is far less constrained, by culture and by law. Nevertheless, there are spaces in which the boundaries of acceptable speech are fiercely contested. In March 2017, protesters at Middlebury College shouted down a planned speech by Charles Murray, and disrupted the broadcast of a livestream interview. Professor Allison Stanger, who was to be the interlocutor for the event, suffered whiplash and a concussion after being assaulted by protesters.[21]

Stanger, a self-described liberal, lamented the silencing of Murray, a controversial conservative.[22] She pointed out that many conservative students on her campus were "in the closet, afraid to speak their minds for fear of being denounced as reactionary bigots."

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[16] Baumeister et al. (1998, p. 1263).
[17] Hamaguchi et al. (1985).
[18] Roberts et al. (2006, p. 384).
[19] Lin (1983, p.105).
[20] Specifically, the shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007 and Oikos University in 2012 (Kang, 2013).
[21] Seelye (2017).
[22] Stanger (2017).

As George Orwell wrote more than seven decades ago, words such as *fascism* have essentially lost all meaning through sweeping and imprecise use, and now vaguely signify "something not desirable."[23] Perhaps the same can be said today of such terms as *reactionary* for those who voice conservative views, and *un-American* for those aligned with progressive causes. Such expressions are used to silence rather than refute, and manage to impoverish language in the process.

Albert Hirschman loved language, and often combined deep thoughts with playful expressions. Here, in his words, is an example:[24]

> One of my recent antagonists, Mancur Olson, uses the expression "logic of collective action" in order to demonstrate the illogic of collective action, that is, the virtual unlikelihood that collective action can ever happen. At some point I was thinking about the fundamental rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence and that beautiful expression of American freedom as "the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." I noted how, in addition to the pursuit of happiness, one might also underline the importance of the *happiness of pursuit*, which is precisely the felicity of taking part in collective action. I simply was happy when that play on words occurred to me.

As Hirschman fully recognized, this happiness of pursuit has a darker side, as when collective action by one group targets and terrorizes another. What is unclear is whether free expression of objectionable thoughts acts as a catalyst for such violence, or a safety valve that makes violence less likely.

The boundaries of acceptable speech will always be contested. But if Hirschman was right to insist that the need to exercise voice is irrepressible in humans, then any attempt to contain objectionable speech is bound to be futile or worse. Enforced silence can build pressure, and the dissonance it creates will eventually find alternative outlets for loud and forceful release. Such is the paradox of peer-induced censorship: voice can be shifted and shaped and shoved elsewhere, but simply cannot be entirely suppressed.

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[23] Orwell (1946).

[24] Hirschman (1999).

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