The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 1 – The Stupidity Problem

S tupidity is a nasty problem. I have always been fascinated with human stupidity. My own, of course – as well as all sorts of stupid attitudes and obnoxious mistakes messing up everyone's life every day. That's a big enough cause of anxiety. But things get much worse when one has a chance to find out how powerful and influential people decide and behave on matters that have large scale (and long term) consequences.

We generally tend to blame awful decisions on intentional perversity, selfishness, astute mischievousness, megalomania, etc. They are there, of course – in staggering quantity. But any careful study of history, or observation of current events, leads to the invariable conclusion that the single biggest source of terrible mistakes is sheer stupidity.

This fact is quite widely understood by anyone who has had a chance to look into the subject. It's effectively summarized in *Hanlon's Razor*: «Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity.» [1] The concept was confirmed by Robert Heinlein in a shorter and simpler statement: «Never underestimate the power of human stupidity.»

When stupidity combines with other factors (as happens quite often) the results can be devastating. In many situations human stupidity is the origin of a series of events that combine into constantly increasing complication, with effect that can be quite funny – until we discover that they are tragic. In other cases stupidity is not the origin of the problem, but all sorts of stupid behaviors make it worse and prevent effective solutions.

A fact that surprises me (or does it?) is the very little amount of study dedicated to such an important subject. There are University departments for the mathematical complexities in the movements of Amazonian ants, or the medieval history of Perim island; but I have never heard of any Foundation or Board of Trustees supporting any studies of Stupidology. [2]

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[1] The origin of Hanlon's Razor is uncertain. It can be considered as a corollary to *Finagle's Law of Dynamic Negatives* (which is similar to *Murphy's Law* – see chapter 4.) It's inspired by a classic, *Occam's Razor* (and it's equally sharp). "Hanlon" is probably a phonetic variation on the name of Robert Heinlein, who had stated that concept in his novel *Logic of Empire* in 1941.

[2] A "stupidity class" was annnouced by the Occidental College in 2009, but it's irrelevant.

In the literature if all times there are several comments, and descriptions of facts, that can help us to understand the problem. But very few books that get into any depth on this issue.

One I read when I was a teenager, but never forgot. It is called *A Short Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity* by Walter B. Pitkin of Columbia University, and was published in 1934. [3]

I found it by chance many years ago while browsing around old bookshelves – and, much to my delight, I still have it. Old as it is, it's still a good book. Some of Professor Pitkin's observations appear extraordinarily correct seventy years later.

Even before reding the book, there is an obvious question. Why did he call a 300-page book a "short introduction?" At the end, it says: *«Epilogue: now we are ready to start studying the History of Stupidity.»* Nothing follows.

Professor Pitkin was a wise man. He knew that a lifetime was far too short to cover even a fragment of such a vast subject. So he published the Introduction, and that was it. [4]

One of Pitkin's observations is that it is difficult to study stupidity because nobody has a really good definition of what it is. Geniuses are often considered stupid by a stupid majority (though nobody has a good definition of genius, either). But stupidity is definitely there, and there is much more of it than our wildest nightmares might suggest. In fact, it runs the world – which is very clearly proven by the way the world is run. (See chapter 10 *The Stupidity od Power*.)

A few years later (1937) also Robert Musil, in his lecture *On Stupidity*, noted how scarcely studied was *«the shameful domination that stupidity has on us»* – and commented dismally that he had found *«unbelievably few predecessors in dealing with this subject.»*

In recent years the literature on stupidity is somewhat less scarce. But all authors probing into any depth find that there is a lack of studies on this subject.

When we try to understand stupidity, we are dealing with a subject that is scarcely studied, rarely understood, broadly avoided because it's uncomfortable and disturbing (as we shall see in chapter 28). It's as though we all knew that we are stupid, but were uneasy abut admitting it.

We are not going to solve the problem by being afraid of it – or pretending that it isn't there. So let's venture into the tricky swamps of human stupidity and see what we can find.

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[3] It is reported that also Jorge Luis Borges, in 1934, started writing a *Historia Universal de la Infamia* – but gave up when he found that the task was too big for a lifetime. Gustave Flaubert was always obsessed with stupidity, but he was never able to complete his planned "encyclopedia" on this subject (see chapter 28.)

[4] In Pitkin's opinion, four people out of five are stupid enough to be called "stupid." That was one and a half billion people when he wrote the book; it is over five billion now. Of course he didn't mean to say that such figures could be taken literally. But the fact is quite worrying. (See chapter 25 – *Is stupidity growing?*)

The essence of stupidology is trying to understand why things go wrong – and how that is due to human stupidity, that causes most of our problems. But even when stupidity is not the original source of a mishap, its consequences often get worse because of our stupid reactions and clumsy attempts to find a solution.

This analysis is essentially diagnostic, not therapeutic. [5] The basic concept is that, if we get to understand how stupidity works, we have a better chance of controlling its effects.

We can't defeat it altogether, because it's part of human nature. But its impact can be less harmful if we know that it's lurking everywhere, we understand how it works, and so we are not taken by total surprise.

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Some readers may feel that it's too soon, in this first chapter, to quote some authors that have interesting things to say about stupidity. But I believe that they are properly placed here. Not just to "give credit" to those who deserve it, but, more importantly, to begin to set the environment for the development. in the rest of the book, of a subject that is generally undervalued or misunderstood.

In chapters 5 and 6 we shall discuss the key contributions of two brilliant authors, Cyril N. Parkinson and Laurence Peter, who didn't write about stupidity, but help us to understand "why things don't work". And chapter 7 is about *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* as defined by Carlo Cipolla.

Of course interesting contributions are offered by Scott Adams, not only in his famous "Dilbert" strips, but also in his books about what's wrong with organizations – including *The Dilbert Future: Thriving on Business Stupidity in the 21st Century* (1997) that isn't an essay on stupidity, nor an exercise in forecasting, but a sharply ironic description of the structural and cultural decay in business enterprises.

An exception in the general scarcity of academic work on this subject is *Stupidity* by Avital Ronell (University of Illinois – 2003). She confirms a basic fact: stupidity is hard to define and poorly understood. *«Essentially linked to the inexhaustible, stupidity is also that which fatigues knowledge and wears down history»*. And it is a serious problem. *«Neither a pathology nor an index as such of moral default, stupidity is nonetheless linked to the most dangerous failures of human endeavor»*.

Stupidity, says Robert Sternberg, in his preface to *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid* (Yale, 2002), is a subject *«which the vast majority of theories in psychology, including theories of intelligen*ce, *seem to neglect. The world supports a multi-million dollar industry of intelligence and ability research, but it devotes virtually nothing to determine why this intelligence is squandered by engaging in amazing, breathtaking acts of stupidity.»* [6]

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[5]   Some "antidotes" are explained at the end, in chapter 30.

[6]   This book is a collection of essays by different authors, with several examples
      of "smart people doing dumb things".

This is explained even better by James Welles. In 1986 he published the first edition of *Understanding Stupidity*, that he further developed in 1990. [7] Like Pitkin an Musil seventy years ago, he finds that stupidity is one of the least understood or discussed subjects in the study of history and culture.

James Welles defines the problem quite clearly. *«Although students of human behavior have pointedly ignored our rampant stupidity, many have made careers by pounding intelligence into the ground. Rooms could be filled with the books written on the topic. No one could even keep up with the scientific literature produced in the field. Yet, as vast as this literature is, it leads to but one overwhelming conclusion – nobody knows what it is. The only thing we know for certain is that whatever intelligence is, it has never been tested on intelligence tests. So even if we are intelligent, we are not intelligent enough to know what intelligence is, so we do not know who and what we are.»*

«We cannot really understand ourselves without understanding stupidity, and if we understand stupidity, we will understand ourselves.»

«If it is understandable that so much energy and effort should be devoted to the scientific study of intelligence, it is somewhat bewildering to find the much more common, actually dangerous and potentially devastating phenomenon of stupidity totally neglected. One could read the entire literature in the social sciences without finding so much as a single reference to it. At best, it is dismissed as the opposite of intelligence, but this just sheds more shade on the topic. Certainly, a matter of this importance deserves a hearing in its own right.»

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We shall see, in other parts of this book, how and why the problem of stupidity is either overlooked, or misunderstood, or dismissed too easily as just "silly". The fact is that, as we take further steps on this subject, we move into uncharted territory. But the exploration can be quite interesting – and it becomes less distressing when we begin to understand how stupidity works and how we can cope with its insidious power.

It isn't easy. But comments by many readers (of the Italian printed edition and of the online material that has been developing for twelve years) show that this book is offering some useful insights. The initial chapters are introductory, because some premises need to be explained before we get into the core of the subject. In any case, this book can be read in two ways. From the beginning to the end – or choosing subjects (chapters) according to one's inclinations and curiosities, then exploring the rest from there.

A description of *The Power of Stupidity* is online – stupidity.it

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[7]   Latest printing (Mount Pleasant Press) 2003. James Welles also wrote *The Story of Stupidity – A History of Western Idiocy from the Days of Greece to the Present* (1995, extended and revised in following editions – latest printing 2006). It's a series of interesting comments on the ways of being stupid (and, more broadly, on the ways of thinking) in different ages and cultures. Unfortunately now these books are out of print, but both are online in `stupidity.net/story2` and some suggestions on how to find printed copies are in `gandalf.it/stupid/welles.htm`