

The Power of Stupidity



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Chapter 3 Predictable or Unpredictable

One of the reasons why stupidity is dangerous is that it's unpredictable. We shall get to that subject in other parts of this book (specifically in chapters 4, 7 and 30.) But there are facts to prove how we can be quite stupid about things that *are* easily predictable, though we choose to ignore or misunderstand the clear signs of what is going to happen.

I have deliberately avoided, in this book, to use specific examples. Because even a superficial collection would fill thousands of pages. Because each case has its own story, its individual diversity. Because for events of the past there can be disagreements in historical explanations – and in many recent situations there are conflicts of opinion, position or interest. Even when they are well chosen, examples can blur, rather than clarify, the substance of a general statement.

But there was one case, as clear as practically harmless, that because of its staggering simplicity (and lack of complex, harmful or worrying effects) may be worth quoting. It is interesting also because it didn't involve a group of people, or a particular culture, but all of humanity (or, at least, that part of humanity that is aware of the most widely shared calendar and can easily access "global" information systems, directly or as reflected by local media.)

Ten years ago, in 1998 and 1999, there was a lot of noise about "the end of the millennium." It was generally accepted, with hardly any doubt or perplexity, that the twenty-first century, and the third millennium, would start on the first day of year 2000.

All that fuss is practically forgotten. There are still a few (and often pointless) discussions about "the new millennium", but this is no longer a "hot" subject. So we can be cool and detached in trying to understand why there was an obvious and silly mistake.

Few things have ever been as easily predictable as the fact the twentieth century (and therefore the second millennium) would come to an end at 0 hours, 0 minutes, 0 seconds of January 1, 2001.

It's quite bewildering that there was such widespread confusion, with so many ceremonies and celebrations a year ahead of time.

It seems that there were meaningless debates on the same mistake a thousand years earlier – as well as some discussion in 1899 about when the nineteenth century would come to an end.

Many people, who are neither stupid nor ignorant, were quite convinced that the century and the millennium would end at midnight on December 31, 1999. They found it difficult to adjust to obvious arithmetic. After a few minutes of perplexed pondering, they grudgingly admitted «*well, maybe, actually there never was a Year Zero.*» But they were uncomfortable about having to adjust their thinking.

Was this stupid? Maybe not – if we define stupidity by its practical effects (see chapter 7.) The “millennium mistake” caused a lot of noise, but little harm – and if some people seized the opportunity to celebrate twice, maybe they had some fun.

It was disappointing for many sellers of gimmicks and gadgets. Maybe too much confused discussion, as well as doubts about the date, made people bored and uninterested. Lots of things labeled “millennium” remained on the shelves. Champagne producers sold less than they expected. Travel agents not only had poor results, but also faced some deception claims for selling the wrong date.

This “comedy of errors” wasn't totally harmless, though it didn't cause a great deal of damage. But the worrying fact is that the most absurd idiocies, if repeated often enough, can be widely accepted as “truth.” How many things that are told as “certain” are equally false?

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Another subject, widely discussed ten years ago, really had its deadline on December 31, 1999. It was the infamous *millennium bug*, that doesn't worry anyone any more – though many problems, old and new, are still lurking in technologies.

The stupidity, in this case, was very obvious – and quite dangerous. The Gregorian calendar was defined 415 years earlier. It was nonsensical for anyone in the technology business to ignore the fact that electronic systems unable to handle four-digit year numbers would malfunction. Those systems were conceived in the Sixties. But only one or two years before the “deadline” did anyone begin to be concerned.

After decades of careless lethargy, in which the problem was ignored, things changed abruptly to hysterical, exaggerated alarm – forecasting catastrophes that luckily didn't happen.

There are many examples in the history of technologies, old or recent, of problems that could have been easily avoided, or effectively solved, by being a little more careful about what systems were supposed to do. But this is only one of many areas in which there are such blunders.

In a much broader sense, it is inconceivable that there could be so much carelessness for so many years, followed by so hasty and confused flutter. How many other problems, now ignored or unmanaged, will become loud and messy fracas when it may be too late?

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There are very serious problems that were precisely predictable, but have been stupidly ignored or ineffectively handled. One of the obvious examples is the aging of population, that could have been mathematically projected with close approximation fifty years ago. In countries such as Italy it wasn't faced when it would have been less difficult to manage it – and it's still causing more pointless discussion than effective solutions.

There is the obnoxious idiocy of continuing to burn fossil fuels, with all sorts of ever-increasing – and more and more alarming – problems, instead of investing in what is needed to find more intelligent solutions.

There is the increase of population – with a growth curve that seems somewhat less steep than was projected some years ago. While no real solution is in sight, there are some gradual improvements, partly due to intelligent developments, mainly cultural awareness.¹ But the forces at play include very stupid and awful perversities, such as diseases, famine, slaughter, wars and other forms of extreme violence.

Another problem that was easily predictable, but was ignored until it became catastrophic, is the so-called financial crisis – that, when this book is going into print, is far from being resolved and isn't even understood in any reasonable way. More comments on this are at the end of chapter 25 – *Is Stupidity Growing?*

Mental blindness, myopia, stupidity are running the world. As seen by an observer in remote space, it could be very funny. But, as an inhabitant of this planet, I am having a hard time trying to find it amusing.

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Of course these are only a few of many examples that we all can find. Large-scale problems that involve everyone. Or small embarrassments that, taken one by one, may concern only the people directly involved. But, in their infinite quantity, they combine in many ways to multiply, spread and increase the overwhelming power of stupidity.

¹ A fact that is clearly proven, but not well enough understood and practiced, is that the most effective solution for birth control is to increase women's education level and independence in decision. Also many other problems could be solved with more widespread knowledge and awareness.

Obviously this isn't just about those problems or dangers that are predictable, but aren't prevented before they get worse. Here we are back to the basic notion that stupidity is often unpredictable – or its effects can be felt in unpredicted ways.

It helps to be prepared. To understand that nothing ever happens in a totally coherent manner – and not be scared by the unexpected, where there are often problems, but there can also be opportunities.

Stupidity is everywhere, but it doesn't always prevail. If we learn to know it better, we can not only limit the damage, but sometimes even reverse the process, finding some sparkle of intelligence in what appeared to be a dismaying wasteland of stupidity.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it