The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 9 – Tree Corollaries

A pretty obvious fact is that responsible and generous people are generally aware of how they behave, malicious and nasty people understand what they are doing, and even the weakest victims have a feeling that something isn't quite right… but stupid people don't know they are stupid, and that this is one more reason why they are extremely dangerous.

This is generally well understood by anyone trying to look into the uncomfortable problem of human stupidity. But it's quite alarming. And this, of course, leads me back to my original, agonizing question: am I stupid?

I have passed IQ tests with good marks. Unfortunately, I know that they don't prove anything. Several people have told me that I am intelligent – or so they think. But that this doesn't prove anything, either. They may simply be too kind to tell me the truth. Conversely, they could be attempting to use my stupidity for their own advantage. Or they could be just as stupid as I am.

I have one little glimpse of hope: quite often, I am intensely aware of how stupid I am (or I have been.) And this indicates that I am not *completely* stupid.

At times, I have tried to locate myself in the Cartesian coordinates (see chapter 8) using as far as possible measurable results of action, rather than opinion, as a yardstick. Depending on the situation, I seem to wander around the upper side of the graph, above the X-axis, sometimes in the quadrant on the top right, that is to say, with a relatively "low" or "high" level of intelligence. But in some cases I am desperately lost on the left side, hurting myself as well as others. I just hope I am "useful to others" as often as I think.

But I know that it's impossible to never make mistakes – and that there is never any end to learning.

On a broader scale, one would expect the strongest success factors to lie in the first and fourth quadrant, that is, on the right side of the Y-axis. However, the staggering number of people who belong on the other side, and have wonderful careers, can be only explained by a strong desire on the part of several leaders to be surrounded by as many stupid people as possible (see chapters 6 and 10.)

The problem isn't just how to place ourselves in the graph, but also to understand how our stupidity can interact with that of others. Since the remote origins of human thinking, practically everybody (including some of the best writers on the subject) appeared to believe that there is a neat separation: people are either intelligent or stupid. But, embarrassing as this can be, it's pretty obvious that it isn't so simple.

Shortly after reading his essay on human stupidity, I wrote a letter to Carlo Cipolla. Much to my surprise, he answered, briefly but kindly.

I had asked him: *«What do you think of my "corollary" to your theory?»* The answer was *«Well… why not, maybe…»* – which I think can be taken as agreement on (or, at least, no objection to) a concept that has a strong influence on how we understand the problem of human stupidity.

Livraghi's First Corollary [1]

In each of us there is a factor of stupidity,
which is always larger than we suppose

This "inside factor" in each person creates a threedimensional coordinate system and I don't think I have to explain its complexity, because no stupid (or timid) person would have had the courage to read this far.

Of course, in addition to our own and other people's stupidity, we can introduce other variables, such as our behavior factors, and their many ways of combining with those of others. It may be wise to forget the "intelligent" factor, as there never is enough of that – but to consider "fourth quadrant" values, because even the most generous person can sometimes behave like a "bandit", if only by mistake.

These additional factors generate multi-dimensional models that can get fairly difficult to manage. But even if we consider only our individual stupidity values, the complexity can become quite staggering.

Try it for yourself… and get really scared.

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[1] This "corollary" isn't necessarily related to a single author. It could be applied to Cipolla's "First Basic Law" (see chapter 7) or to *Hanlon's Razor* or *Finagle's Law* (chapter 1) or "Murphy's Law" (chapter 4) as to any general consideration on the ubiquity of stupidity, that is often, if not always, more widespread and more dangerous than expected.

When this concept started to develop, in the early stages of studying the problem of stupidity, it had taken shape in my mind as the "first corollary." This sounded rather strange, as I had only one. But my original feeling was right… I have since discovered that there are at least three.

Second Corollary:

When the stupidity of one person combines
with the stupidity of others, the impact
grows geometrically – i.e. by multiplication,
not addition, of the individual stupidity factors

It is a generally accepted concept that "the sum of a network increases as the square of the number of members" and it seems quite obvious that the same criterion applies to the combination of stupidity factors in individual people. This can help to explain the well-known fact that crowds as a whole are much more stupid than any individual person in the crowd. [2]

Stupid behavior and thinking tend to reproduce and multiply so dangerously that the contagion can spread to otherwise intelligent people when they don't realize how they are influenced by collective stupidity.

Stupidity, as an aggregate, has more consistency and continuity than other human attitudes. But obviously the picture is more complicated, and the consequences even more worrying, if we consider that nobody is totally immune.

Third corollary:

The combination of intelligence in different people
is more difficult than the combination of stupidity

This isn't only because the power of stupidity is generally underestimated – and its consequences are often unpredictable. There are multiple and complicated causes of this problem.

Stupidity is brainless – it doesn't need to think, get organized or plan ahead to generate a combined effect. The transfer and combination of intelligence is a much more complex process.

Stupid people can combine instantly into a super-stupid group or mass, while intelligent people are effective as a group only when they know each other well and are experienced in working together.

The creation of well-tuned groups of people sharing intelligence can generate fairly powerful anti-stupidity forces, but (unlike stupidity bundling) they need organized planning and upkeep; and can lose a large part of their effectiveness by the infiltration of stupid people or unexpected bursts of stupidity in otherwise intelligent people.

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[2] This can happen in "crowds" or "mobs" as well as in organized systems. A classic Latin saying is *Senatores boni viri, Senatus mala bestia*. We can have doubts now, as there were then, about Senators being "good men" – but even when they are the assembly as a whole is often more stupid than its individual members. On the problems of organizations see *Parkinson's Law* and *The Peter Principle* in chapters 5 and 6.

In some situations these dangers can be partly offset (if not totally controlled) by being aware of the potential problem before anything goes wrong – and having "backup intelligence" in the group (and in whatever equipment is being used) to fill the gaps, organize the resources and correct the mistakes before the damage becomes too serious.

Any good skipper of a sailboat knows what I mean; so does any other person that has experience of an environment where the cause-effect process is bluntly direct and tangible. [3]

Communities and organizations with a high intelligence factor are likely to have greater opportunities for long-term survival, but for this to be effective we must avoid the potentially devastating short term impact of shared stupidity, which (unfortunately) can cause major damage to large numbers of non-stupid people before it self-destructs. [4]

Another dangerous element in the equation is that (as we shall see in chapter 10) the machinery of power tends to place at the top of the pyramid people who care more about their own advantage (and the interests of restricted groups) than about the well-being of everyone else – and they, in turn, tend to favor and protect stupidity and keep true intelligence out of their way as much as they can.

While the power of stupidity is insidious and dangerous in all its ways, even more harm is caused by the stupidity of power.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

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[3] See *In Memory of Peter Blake*, 2001 `gandalf.it/offline/blake.htm`

[4] There are some comments on such developments in chapter 11.