

## Trivialization and Public Opinion

“Taking a transdisciplinary view, this innovative title serves both as an important addition and a challenge to the existing research in communications and in social sciences more generally. Trivialization offers a useful perspective on public discourse and a sensible entry-point to the often hidden universe of mostly unquestioned assumptions, all requiring a thorough debate. I highly recommend this book to all readers seeking a more complete picture of change, so needed in our increasingly complex society.”

—D. R. F. Taylor, *Distinguished Research Professor, Carleton University, Canada,  
and 2014 Killam Prize recipient*

“This is an important book that should be read by anyone concerned about the current state of political discourse in the industrialized democracies. Further, it adds significantly to the scholarly debates in its field. Readers will no doubt tend to ask themselves what we can learn from history, whether we can modify academic approaches to critical thinking to handle complexity and contingency and avoid ‘incredible certitude.’ We should all learn to listen and to ask: ‘how do you know?’”

—Fred Fletcher, *Professor Emeritus of Communication Studies  
and Political Science, York University, Canada*

Oldrich Bubak · Henry Jacek

# Trivialization and Public Opinion

Slogans, Substance, and Styles of Thought  
in the Age of Complexity

palgrave  
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-030-17924-3      ISBN 978-3-030-17925-0 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17925-0>

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*Sapere aude!*

## PREFACE

It has been nearly three decades since John Brockman published his essay giving a new meaning to Lord Snow's concept of third culture. For Snow, a third culture was a reconciliation among literary humanists and scientists, two rival cultures seen as major sources of social and political influence. For a time, literary humanists dominated the public intellectual space, with mass press neglecting the contemporaneous scientists and their publicly oriented writings. Third culture was to be a settlement between the two groups, opening a dialog and allowing scientific ideas to reach the public through the customary journalistic channels. Instead, as Brockman observed, scientists began to communicate their findings in an engaging and accessible manner directly to the general public, capturing their interest and giving rise to a different third culture. To Brockman, this was a triumph, an entrance into the public discussion of a new generation of thinkers, open-minded empirical scholars "defining the interesting and important questions of our times."

Much has happened since the publication of the essay and the book that soon followed. We have entered the information age giving most people the capacity to access an unprecedented volume and variety of digital content growing at an unimaginable rate; to find, create, monitor, and share information with others at an instant; or to become commentators, entertainers, or broadcasters gaining their own following, large or small. Finding an expression in *Edge.org*, the expanded third culture movement is now competing for attention not only with other well-developed websites on philosophy and science but also with a range

of other more or less reliable online outlets. In the end, the dream is fulfilled, it seems, as people have the freedom to choose what they want to read or whom to listen.

In parallel, we have been witnessing a growing skepticism toward the elite, those who identify problems, recommend options, make the decisions, or tell us about it. Many are not surprised given the still vivid memory of the recent financial crises and the incongruous policy action in their aftermath. There too are the rising inequalities, challenges with outcomes in health and education, the increasingly evident problems stemming from the runaway application of technology, and other issues—hard to accept in what appears an age of scientist intellectual. And people are responding to these realities in a variety of ways, including with their decisions at the ballot boxes. How can we understand this landscape?

First, we observe that not only the two groups of intellectuals described above avoid conversation, but that many scientists do not talk with each other either, as hinted by the voices of third culture. Unfortunately, there is little need or possibility for a dialogue outside of these circles as well. Why is this? If we begin by taking note of public discourse and listen to ourselves more attentively, we observe a lapse, a common obstacle to a reasoned discussion we identify as *trivialization*. We argue that getting to an inclusive conversation requires us to understand trivialization and deal with its causes. We thus set out to explore what it is, what sustains it, what its implications are, and if possible, what it may take to liberate ourselves from its clutches.

As we open this book, what at first may seem rare and uncommon quickly becomes familiar. We start to recognize not only how pervasive trivialization is, but that most of us, whether directly or indirectly, are helping to perpetuate it. Our quest takes us into our cultural history and realities more recent, into our imagination, and closer to an understanding of the limits and potentials of the human mind. We identify a set of fundamental issues rooted in culture, a single, evolving culture we are all a part.

Perhaps in line with the ostensible (sub)cultural divisions outlined above, critics often place the blame for our condition at the feet of either the elite, or the incapable, disinterested public. Yet, while the intellectuals claim to talk *to* the public as they share their ideas, define agendas, and shape opinions, they are also responding to the audience's signals, catering to their tastes and biases. Everyone is involved. Change must

thus evolve from within, through tools of inclusion, mutual learning, and humility. *Developing* understandings more broadly takes priority over the mere provision of information, particularly when faced with limited resources. This, we believe, is especially important in the age of misinformation and rising irrationality.

Some say our technologies—and the socio-technical systems of which they are a part—are advancing so rapidly we can neither understand their implications nor handle them. While there is surely a point, we, as a society, know and possess the capacity to do much more than what the mainstream thought holds. We have coherent analyses, answers to difficult questions, and solutions to problems generally presented as intractable thanks to the foresight and the will of the people going against the convention and daring to think differently. Their findings, many of which we drew upon in this volume, give us optimism about the road ahead.

Hence, we would first like to acknowledge these scholars and practitioners and express our appreciation for their efforts. We are also grateful to those who have set aside time to discuss, offer valuable comments, or otherwise help our project: Katherine Boothe, Peter Graefe, Mark Holliday, Stephen McBride, Torsten Müller, Dani Rodrik, and Andrew Sayer. Also, we appreciate the expertise and support of our editor, Mary Al-Sayed, and the team at Palgrave Macmillan all of whom were integral in making this volume a reality. Finally, we would like to recognize our institution, McMaster University, an inspiring environment.

Hamilton, ON, Canada  
January 2019

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# ACRONYMS

ACA	Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act
ACO	Accountable Care Organization
ACP	American College of Physicians
BC	British Columbia
BCE	Before the Common Era
CA	Citizens' Assembly
CAS	Complex Adaptive Systems
CBO	Congressional Budget Office
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDS	Credit Default Swap
CMA	Canadian Medical Association
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic Acid
EBM	Equation-Based Modeling
EEA	European Environment Agency
EHB	Essential Health Benefits
EU	European Union
FCIC	Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission
HM	His/Her Majesty
IAD	Institutional Analysis and Development Framework
IDA	Institute for Defense Analyses
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPE	International Political Economy
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
IR	International Relations
MAS	Multi-Agent Systems
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology

MMP	Mixed Member Proportional Representation
NES	National Election Studies
NHS	National Health Service
NIC	National Issues Convention
NIH	National Institutes of Health
NORC	National Opinion Research Center
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ON	Ontario
PP	Precautionary Principle
PUC	Public Utility Commission of Texas
SCC	Social Cost of Carbon
SMP	Single-Member Plurality Electoral System
STV	Single Transferable Vote
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
TTIP	Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
UK	United Kingdom
UKIP	UK Independence Party
US	United States of America

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