

I Can't Hear You: An Examination of the Limitations of Fear-Based Messaging

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Once in a while a story is spectacular enough to break through and attract media attention, but the swell quickly subsides into the general glut of bad news over which we, as citizens, have so little control. Coming at us like this—in waves, massed and unbreachable—knowledge becomes symbolic of our disempowerment—becomes bad knowledge—so we deny it, riding its crest until it subsides from consciousness. I have heard myself protesting, “*I didn’t know!*” but this is not true. (Ozeki 334)



The tragic irony of fear-based messaging is that it tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the very issues it’s trying to ameliorate. Fear-based messaging is both pandemic in its prevalence and alarming in terms of the amount of damage it is able to do to the very causes it purports to champion. Although there have been conflicting studies surrounding the efficacy of fear-based messaging, the resultant confusion largely stems from the failure to take into account the crucial differences inherent in empowering short- and long-term changes. Any temporary gains extracted through the use of fear-based campaigns are fleeting at best. Studies from

numerous fields support this contention with definitive research from a wide variety of disciplines, including, but not limited to medicine, disaster preparedness, adolescent drug and sex education programs, and environmental and climate studies.

Fear-based messaging undermines the ethos of both the messenger and the message. A recent article in *Scientific American* describes how fear-based messaging may be largely responsible for the dramatic decrease in the last 15 years in the number of Americans who perceive global warming as a serious issue. Researchers studied students' responses when they were presented with information about global warming in a variety of formats.

Those who received more positive messaging trusted the science. On the other hand those subjects who read the “doomsday” messaging were skeptical of global warming, and for those who think the world is generally a fair place had even stronger doubts about global warming after reading the negative messaging.

(Nicholson)

So in spite of more available scientific data supporting the reality of global warming, and more Nobel laureates speaking out about the increasing urgency of this issue, the American public seems increasingly skeptical about the seriousness of global warming due to the way the material is being presented. Serve it on a fear-laced platter, and the American public will tune it out, turn it off, and try to pretend they never even heard it.

Although the presumptive goal of presenting content in a shocking, graphic way is to confront people in a way that catalyzes immediate and substantive change, in practice it often has the opposite effect. One of the inherent problems with fear-based messaging is that it tends to create a state of cognitive dissonance in which the receivers often find it impossible to reconcile the

information they're taking in with their personal experience of how the world appears. This disconnect can be so threatening and engender such a profound feeling of helplessness that the listener ignores the incoming data irrespective of its degree of accuracy. In *Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril*, Margaret Heffernan addresses the resistance people have to absorbing messages which engender cognitive dissonance: "Dissonance is eliminated when we blind ourselves to contradictory propositions. And we are prepared to pay a very high price to preserve our most cherished ideas" (Heffernan 51). The multi-billion dollar field of emergency readiness offers a particularly stark example of the tragic consequences of our national aversion to any message that creates cognitive dissonance. Despite the proven efficacy of newer, more community-oriented and research-based programs like CARD - Collaborating Agencies Responding to Disasters (an Oakland, California-based nonprofit) these approaches are often discounted in favor of fear-based messaging that prevents people from hearing the empowering possibilities of an alternative approach.

The introduction of fear-based messaging campaigns into adolescent populations with a known propensity for risky behavior can yield results that range from disappointing to lethal. Current research in the field of adolescent psychology challenges the conventional notion that teens take risks because they perceive themselves as invulnerable. After surveying more than 20,000 teens, Dr Iris Borowsky at the University of Minnesota came to the conclusion that significant numbers of teens take unnecessary chances "because they feel hopeless and figure that not much is at stake" (*LA Times*). She goes on to describe how this fatalistic outlook can become a self-fulfilling prophesy, and cites a series of alarming statistics including a seven-fold increase in suicide attempts in teens who feel hopeless about the future. Prior studies from the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Alabama yielded similar findings, with

direct correlations noted between feelings of hopelessness in teens and a dramatic increase in high- risk behavior (Bolland).

Christian Smith, a sociologist at the University of Notre Dame, has harsh words for what he terms the “doom-and gloom crowd” that traffic in fear-based messaging. His particular area of concern is how this approach negatively impacts young people transitioning to adulthood. In his view, ”...such semihysterical distress signals and jeremiads are often more about promoting the agenda of some particular interest—such as right-wing politics or a religious program—than about actually understanding and responding with care to the complex reality of emerging adult life and culture today” (Smith 228-9).

Literally millions of dollars have been spent on fear-based message campaigns that attempt to decrease drug use and early/risky sexual activity in adolescent populations. The results have been a dismal failure. In a 2007 article published in *Criminology and Public Policy*, Dennis P. Rosenbaum, PhD wrote:

Across more than 30 studies, the collective evidence from evaluations with reasonably good scientific validity suggests that the core D.A.R.E. program does not prevent drug use in the short term, nor does it prevent drug use when students are ready to enter high school or college...The irony for the drug prevention field (and other fields as well) is that a program known to be ineffective receives millions of dollars in support, whereas programs known to be effective or promising are sidelined and remain unfunded. (ProCon.org)

A similar aversion exists in the field of emergency preparedness related to funding alternative programs. Organizations like CARD have received numerous awards, accolades, and validation

from a wide range of key stakeholders, including public health entities, nonprofits, faith agencies and emergency management partners for their research-based, alternative approaches to readiness. Yet, despite their documented innovations, their contributions are too often marginalized and overlooked in favor of more familiar, fear-based programs that have long proven to be ineffective.

New York Times columnist and author Gail Collins frames the issue even more bluntly in her scathing evaluation of Texas' abstinence-only sex education policy in the public school system. She writes: "The biggest problem with trying to frighten kids, or shame them, into not having sex is that it doesn't work...By the time they're seniors, 69 percent of Texas students are sexually active, and they indulge in risky behavior like sex with a large number of partners at rates higher than the national average" (Collins).

She describes an educational video used in three Texas school districts that presents a classic case of the false dilemma, either-or-fallacy that would be funny if the implications weren't so tragic. The video "...has a boy asking an evangelical educator what will happen if he has sex before marriage. 'Well, I guess you'll have to be prepared to die,' is the response" (Collins). Collins goes on to describe how this becomes a national policy issue since many teen mothers end up living in poverty and in need of federally funded Medicaid assistance. The ramifications of an increase in teen birth rates extend to the next generation as well. "The children themselves are more likely to experience abuse or neglect, end up in foster care, and, if they're male, end up in prison" (Collins).

Rather than empowering people to proactively and collaboratively problem solve, fear-based messaging has been shown to decrease awareness, preparedness, and competence across

every discipline in which its effects have been evaluated. Dictatorial attempts at blindly stripping away ignorance through fear-based messaging are doomed to failure, because we fail to recognize that the ignorance serves a purpose. We keep thinking that if we just make it shocking enough, graphic enough, revolting enough, then surely people will come to their senses and refrain from actions that hurt themselves or society. We shake our heads with incomprehension when our attempts to goad them towards a desired outcome through terrifying imagery fail to accomplish this goal and often exacerbate the problem. There are many reasons why fear-based messaging may actually result in increasing the behavior it is attempting to discourage. When imagery is overwhelming and frightening, defensive mechanisms, including denial kick in. In the fight against HIV and AIDS, for example, it has been shown that fear-based campaigns may actually serve to decrease condom usage, as well as engendering states of hopelessness that makes people less likely to seek appropriate medical care (Knowles).

Fear-based messaging has also been shown to not only be ineffective in decreasing smoking, but to potentially contribute to an increase in smoking rates. When smokers were subjected to horrific images of the potential consequences of smoking plastered on their cigarette packs, they simply bought wrappers to cover them up. Even more significantly, neuroscientists looking at the results of the misbegotten anti-smoking campaign speculated that the graphic imagery -- by stimulating the portion of the brain that craves and is addicted to nicotine -- might have actually served to INCREASE smoking in its target population (Cooney). So fear-based messaging can actually serve to amplify and entrench the behaviors it's attempting to eliminate.

One could potentially argue that Prop 8 (stunningly) passed in California due to the crafty, intentionally deceptive fear-based media blitz that was launched by certain conservative groups with an aggressive, extremely well-funded homophobic agenda. These groups

manipulated viewers with numerous ads run just prior to the election depicting young children coming home from school and announcing that, “today we learned we could marry boys or girls.” Although (despicably) successful in achieving their short-term goal of restricting the right to marry in California to heterosexuals, study after study conclusively shows that fear-based messaging fails to achieve long-term objectives. What the argument in favor of this paranoia inducing approach fails to realize is that the effects of fear-based messaging are akin to those of punishment in the home, translated to a societal level. Although punishment may work short term to temporarily shut down undesirable behavior, countless studies have shown that it is a method of last resort, and if used consistently it actually tends to promote the behaviors it is attempting to deter. Studies advocating the efficacy of fear-based messaging in creating statistically measurable changes in people’s attitudes and behaviors fail to acknowledge that most of the analyses have evaluated only short-term outcomes in the three to six month ranges (Knowles). Much like yo-yo dieting, fear can be used to manipulate short-term behaviors, but long-term volitional change that results in real values predicated on ethical decision making only occur when both the head and the heart are engaged.

Any movement that can be credited with producing lasting, life-affirming change, by necessity, must be framed in a way that brings hope and affirms the ability of people to positively influence and alter their destiny. I am interested in sources that examine the ineffectiveness and short sightedness inherent in fear-based messaging. I am even more interested in sources that synthesize the lessons learned from failed attempts to implement change with a fear-based approach, and instead choose to move forward with viable proposals for change based on statistical evidence supporting the implementation of more sustainable, productive policies. Atul Gawande’s work is a prime example of how these principles apply in

the medical arena of the operating room.

[U]nder conditions of true complexity—where the knowledge required exceeds that of any individual and unpredictability reigns—efforts to dictate every step from the center will fail ...The philosophy is that you push the power of decision making out to the periphery and away from the center. You give people the room to adapt, based on their experience and expertise. All you ask is that they talk to one another and take responsibility. That is what works. (Gawande 97)

When the focus shifts from fear-based catastrophizing to evidence-based, hope-motivated problem solving, this creates both the space and the impetus for simple (not simplistic), elegant, effective solutions to emerge. Dr Joel Brown, author of a study critiquing the ineffectiveness of fear-based messaging in drug education programs, proposes that the focus should shift towards “...preventing the riskiest behavior with substance abuse rather than dwelling on a no-use policy...” (Posnick). David Weinberger, a Senior Researcher at Harvard University’s Berkman Center for the Internet & Society, describes the need to create what Beth Noveck calls “networks of experts” to deal with any given problem. According to Weinberger, “a diverse group of people who share a goal are likely to be more effective than a homogeneous group of people...Too much commonality leads to groupthink (Weinberger 77).

Any attempt to shift the discussion from a fear-based one to a solutions focused one must of necessity confront issues of conformity, groupthink and appeal to tradition, for example in the case of shifting the focus in disaster preparedness away from the conventional, top-down government/Red Cross model to a community-based model that is more flexible in its ability to both efficiently utilize available resources as well as successfully meet the needs of the target population it aims to serve. CARD, spearheaded by executive director Ana-Marie Jones, is cited

in *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism* for exemplifying this process. “Jones and her organization have shifted the conversation about disaster preparedness away from a fear-based framework in which government response is central, to the idea of community groups working together for economic prosperity and other positive goals of direct importance to them” (Schoch-Spana).

In another study, “4,739 persons who attended disaster education presentations” were surveyed in a “nationwide study in the use of disaster images,” to assess how their level of preparedness was impacted from exposure to disaster images (Lopes iv). The report concluded that “...presentations that include visuals showing disaster damage have a direct negative effect on the purpose of disaster presentations, which is to encourage the public to prepare in advance for a disaster...Disaster damage images heighten avoidance and denial” (Lopes 22). According to the report, compliance increases if you show as well as tell people what you want them to do (Lopes 22). Based on his research, Lopes writes, “People feel they know the right thing to do when they both see the information and hear it. They become confused when they hear the right thing to do, but see damage images (what to avoid) instead” (Lopes 19). Rather than inducing cognitive dissonance and paralyzing people with fear-based messaging, it is far more effective to empower them by clearly showing and telling them the correct course of action. This is yet another example of a simple, elegant, effective solution.

The term “sustainable solutions” has been so over used that we no longer even think about it, but what are we really saying? I would like to assert that a “sustainable solution” by definition is one that is flexible, capable of evolving as conditions change and demand more nuanced responses. One could look at it as the skillful application of targeted common sense. One could further argue that giant, cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approaches will never achieve maximum efficacy. General guidelines are helpful, but in order to create solutions that extend

beyond short-term fixes at best to exacerbations and quagmires at worst, they must reflect the realities and meet the specific needs of the populations they are attempting to serve. The complexity of addressing complex situations with any degree of efficiency and cultural competence requires that we invest in community building as a kind of non-negotiable human infrastructure (Jones paraphrase).

Although by no means an exhaustive study, it is my sincere hope that this brief exploration of the insidious, destructive effects of fear-based messaging has been a thought-provoking one. The ubiquitous nature of fear-based information campaigns should in no way be taken as a sign of their legitimacy. Rather, I would like to strongly suggest that at best they represent ill-conceived attempts to coerce change that serve to alienate rather than enroll the listener. At worst, they function as a power ploy by entrenched interests that benefit when the status quo is maintained. In either case, they serve to paralyze rather empower their audience and thwart rather than catalyze constructive change. It is my heartfelt belief that as a society it is imperative that we cease to squander precious talent and resources through engaging in fear-based agendas. I have cited a few examples of individuals and organizations that are committed to finding innovative answers through collaborative, solutions-oriented approaches. In the words of Margaret Heffernan, “We may think being blind makes us safer, when in fact it leaves us crippled, vulnerable and powerless. But when we confront facts and fears, we achieve real power and unleash our capacity for change”(Heffernan 4).

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