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In praise of dissent



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Mabel Yu didn't trust the numbers. It was 2006 and Yu was an analyst with The Vanguard Group, a financial firm based in Malvern, Pennsylvania, that manages almost \$1 trillion in investment funds. Bond sellers were trying to convince her to buy a new financial security backed by huge bundles of home mortgages. They assured her these bonds were risk free; after all, Moody's and Standard & Poors had graded them "AAA," the highest rating. But to Yu, the data made no sense.

"There was nothing to support those ratings," she says. "They didn't account for all the economic scenarios. I would stay up late trying to understand, and whenever I asked questions the bond sellers never gave me a straight answer."

Instead, they were condescending and insulting. They told Yu she was making trouble for nothing, that she was missing the boat on a great deal. They called her managers at Vanguard to complain about her intransigence and accused her of professional incompetence. Millions in commissions were being made and the housing market was soaring. What could possibly go wrong?

"It was so much pressure, so exhausting, physically and mentally," Yu recalls. "The salespeople kept saying I was wrong. They kept saying I should just relax and spend time with my family and trust them like everybody else."

Yu didn't listen. She worked even harder, going to bed at dusk and setting her alarm for 1 a.m. so she could spend the night reviewing the hordes of new bond issues. And despite the unending pressure, she

steadfastly refused to recommend any of them.

Two years later, the first major bank admitted these bonds were wildly overvalued. The subprime crisis exploded and the world economy imploded. Yu had saved her company untold millions. She was invited to testify before Congress and was called a hero and a star analyst and a voice of reason. All this was true, but she was also something far more precious—Yu was a dissenter.

The paradox of dissent

Dissent—voicing opinions that conflict with those that are commonly accepted or officially espoused—is one of the great paradoxes of the human condition. On one hand, civilization is built upon the ability of diverse groups of people to conform to common sets of rules and principles: Red means “stop” at a traffic light; stealing your neighbor’s laptop is bad.

To this end, religions, schools and even our hobbies promote conformity as a virtue. In the Old Testament, Abraham is praised for being prepared to sacrifice his child at God’s behest; in classrooms, children learn to obey the teacher; on sports fields, coaches roar “There is no ‘I’ in team.” And those who don’t quite fit into this scheme? As any schoolyard outcast—or earnest securities analyst—can tell you, they are ostracized or bullied.

Yet as the Mabel Yu case so vividly demonstrates, enormous benefits await when somebody is brave enough to disrupt this coveted social harmony and challenge prevailing conventions. History is littered with such visionaries who have been vilified by their communities. Consider Galileo, arrested and threatened with excommunication for embracing a heliocentric theory of the universe; or Edward Jenner, mocked for suggesting his vaccine might immunize people against smallpox; or John Marshall Harlan, who endured a social storm for being the sole U.S. Supreme Court judge to oppose racial segregation in 1896.

“The reality is we need dissent. Without dissent, society would come to a halt; we wouldn’t change or create or innovate,” says Carsten de Dreu, a professor at the University of Amsterdam who specializes in the role of dissent within organizations. But “these dissenters are despised or ignored or persecuted by the majority.”

The injustice is enough to make us reel. As Voltaire cynically noted after the *Encyclopédie*—the Enlightenment effort to chronicle all human knowledge—was assailed as amoral, “Our wretched species is so made that those who walk on the well-trodden path always throw stones at those who are showing the new road.”

What if this could be changed? What if we could reap the benefits of dissent without sacrificing the dissenter to the wrath of the crowd? What new curbs on corporate corruption or insights on climate change might emerge if dissent were celebrated instead of suffocated? These are the questions that have drawn a select group of economists, psychologists and neuroscientists to the paradox of dissent. And after years spent decoding the benefits of dissent and the personalities of the dissenters, it seems the solution might well lie with people like Mabel Yu.

The uses of dissent

Rhetorically speaking, at least, our society has long prized dissent. In 1587, the Pope consecrated the *advocatus diaboli*, the devil's advocate, to ensure potential saints were properly scrutinized before canonization. Modern civilization's founding documents—England's 1689 Bill of Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the U.S. Constitution—enshrined the right to free speech to allow for dissenting opinions. And in *On Liberty*, history's most profound argument on behalf of dissent, British philosopher John Stuart Mill warned dissenters that social and peer pressure could be more oppressive than any tyrant, leaving "fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life and enslaving the soul itself."

However it wasn't until a landmark study conducted at the University of Virginia in the 1970s that dissent eased being an ephemeral ideal and started becoming a tangible commodity that might be exploited. Researchers were analyzing the dynamics of jury deliberations, and after viewing hundreds of hours of ideotape, they noticed a curious trend. When there was friction and fighting among jurors, the jury engaged in a better decision-making process than when it arrived smoothly at a unanimous verdict.

As a rule, the dissent resulted in more information heard at the trial being taken into consideration and a greater variety of perspectives voiced by jurors. There was, however, one small problem. The person who instigated this discord, the principle dissenter, tended to be ridiculed and ostracized by other jurors. The abuse was so blatant that when mock juries were held, the student assigned to play the dissenter actually requested "combat pay" because the role was so harrowing.

"Dissent makes the group as a whole smarter and leads to more divergent thinking, but the people who stand up with those sorts of opinions often get beaten up for it," says Charlan Nemeth, the lead psychologist on those studies. "The results made a lot of us sit up and ask, 'What exactly is going on here?'"

The University of Virginia study unleashed a wave of researchers, Nemeth at the fore, who sought to understand why these scorned dissenters sparked such creative advantages in their groups. One early discovery was that dissent came in two categories, each with distinctive benefits.

Preventative dissent

The first type, preventative dissent, is nicely embodied by the fable of "The Emperor's New Clothes." A mistruth, that the king has splendid new robes, is widely accepted until a dissenter, a child, dares to suggest otherwise and thus prevents the lie from spreading.

Notably, this sort of dissent averts "groupthink," the phenomenon of collectively arriving at a decision no individual member of the group might reach on his or her own. "The more amiability and esprit de corps among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink," psychologist Irving Janis noted in his study of the poor decisions that led to the Bay of Pigs catastrophe in 1961.

The benefits of preventative dissent are manifold. Among the more obvious instances are whistleblower cases, such as Sherron Watkins revealing the accounting scandals at Enron, or episodes of isolated resistance such as Mabel Yu's continual refusal to succumb to a cascade of poor investment decisions.

However there are more subtle manifestations. The University of Chicago law professor Cass Sunstein conducted a review of three-judge panels and concluded that when judges are appointed by the same political party—Republican or Democrat—their decisions are more extreme due to “ideological amplification.” When the judges aren’t political allies, there is “ideological dampening” and decisions are more nuanced and better catered to the circumstances. As a rule, dissent provides an almost perfect antidote to “confirmation bias,” the tendency people have to seek out information that confirms the opinions they already hold, and ignore the rest.

“Diversity, openness and dissent reveal actual and incipient problems,” Sunstein writes in *Why Societies Need Dissent*. Sunstein, who serves as an advisor to President Barack Obama, even went so far as to label conformists “freeloaders” because “dissenters benefit others while conformists benefit themselves.”

Proactive dissent

Dissent can also be proactive in its benefits, with innovation and creativity triggered both by the anger a person feels when his or her ideas are challenged and the surprise of learning that other people think differently. The best way to envision the first trigger is to consider the heated dinner party argument that leaves you seething for days until, miraculously, the perfect rejoinder pops to mind. This rejoinder, whether a new point in the debate or a metaphor to help elucidate your point, is the fruit of that dinner table dissent.

Beyond such intellectual epiphanies, studies show time and again that people whose ideas are challenged do more work on behalf of those ideas, from reading more widely on the topic to testing their perspectives more frequently in conversation.

One illustration comes from sociologist Brooke Harrington’s studies of investment clubs. The more dissent there was among investors, the better the financial returns. This “diversity premium” stems from the fact that in harmonious groups, bad investments aren’t challenged, while in more fractious groups, investment proposals are more thoroughly vetted and often sent back for more research. Mabel Yu is an expert in diversity premiums.

“Good fights equal higher profits when it comes to making investment decisions in group settings,” Harrington says.

These revelations are all the more potent considering that many organizations continue to embrace the “brainstorming” technique developed by advertising executive Alex Osborn in the 1950s. According to Osborn’s now debunked system, criticism and conflict squash new ideas and should be discouraged; in hindsight, those brainstorming sessions of yore were more likely to act as echo chambers in which bad ideas were amplified by fake enthusiasm.

The other trigger of proactive dissent is that it shatters people’s automatism and captures their attention. This theory, developed by the French psychologist Serge Moscovici, posits that if a new idea is presented by a majority or an authority, it is generally accepted or dismissed without reflection. But if that same idea comes from a minority within the group, people are generally curious and are more open-minded because the idea is less threatening coming from a minority. In this way, dissent can pierce entrenched

opinions.

For example, when pro-life individuals are given pro-choice arguments from a group, follow-up interviews show people are rarely influenced by these new ideas. However, when a single dissenter presents the same arguments to a pro-life group, people's primary positions on abortion remain unchanged but their views on a parallel issue—euthanasia—change, an indication that the dissenter's ideas have been absorbed.

The classic laboratory proof of the subconscious impact of minority dissent comes from Charlan Nemeth, the acknowledged pioneer in the field. After those early jury studies, Nemeth moved to the University of California, Berkeley and dedicated her career to exploring the creative benefits of dissent. In this experiment, she presented letter strings such as "tNOWap" to groups of four people. In phase one, participants were briefly shown the string and asked to identify the first three-letter word they saw; subjects universally answered "NOW," the word in capital letters reading from left to right. In the experiment's second phase, group members were given the same string for a longer time and asked to write down as many three-letter words as possible.

Then the same experiment was run with a confederate in the group who, in phase one, read backwards and gave "WON" as a response. When these individuals moved on to phase two of the experiment, they found more words than the group without the dissenting viewpoint and, more importantly, they found words using all possible combinations: reading left to right ("tap"), right to left ("pat") and mixed letters ("ton").

"Minority perspective unfreezes thinking patterns," explains Nemeth. "Suddenly, people don't just see position one or two, but also positions three, four and five."

Of course, dissent isn't always positive. Nemeth says groups of like-minded people working harmoniously are more productive when it comes to set tasks, such as assembly line work or data entry. However, if innovation or a check on group excess is your goal, then fostering healthy dissent is precisely what you want to do.

Changing the "Dissent Channel"

Brady Kiesling's tale is a cautionary one. In 2002, Kiesling, a foreign service officer with the U.S. State Department, became convinced that the proposed war in Iraq would be a human and diplomatic disaster. As it happened, the State Department had a Dissent Channel, an internal communication system that allowed diplomats to question policies without reprisal.

Sadly, what had been an inspired idea had become an internal joke. Use of the Dissent Channel had declined since its inception in 1971 as employees realized their input wasn't heeded. Of the first 150 episodes of dissent, none resulted in policy change. Then a review by the *Foreign Service Journal* concluded the Dissent Channel didn't "do any real good." And Kiesling himself saw that the people promoted to the most senior ranks of the State Department were those who "kept non-conforming opinions to themselves."

It was no surprise, then, that Kiesling was unable to provoke a serious internal discussion about the Iraq

War. Frustrated, he eventually sacrificed his career by writing an explosive letter of resignation published in *The New York Times*. “It doesn’t matter how good the policies that welcome dissent are,” Kiesling says. “Unless you have good leadership, people will consider dissent personal disloyalty.”

This was no anomaly. As the body of research on the benefits of dissenters kept growing, and as business groupthink imbroglios such as Enron multiplied, executives started to try to embrace dissent. Summing up this new philosophy, writers in the *Harvard Business Review* recommended that companies “foster a culture of open dissent” on their boards.

However, instead of welcoming true dissenters, companies tried to manufacture dissent using devil’s advocates, which turned out to be a feeble substitute for the real thing. Studies show devil’s advocates argue less passionately for their positions, and those listening aren’t incited intellectually because they know the debate is phony. “Artificial dissent is like a choreographed dance; it doesn’t break thought patterns,” says Nemeth.

The failure of programs like the Dissent Channel or devil’s advocates transformed the debate on dissent. If contrived dissent was ineffective, the true dissenter became exponentially more valuable.

A portrait of the dissenter

The possibility that certain people are predisposed to dissent surfaced amid attempts to understand the mass political movements and sweeping consumer trends that emerged after World War II. In the most famous inquiry into conformity, Solomon Asch ran a quiz in which subjects were asked to match two lines of equal length. It was an absurdly easy task, and subjects who were alone answered correctly more than 99 percent of the time.

However, when the American psychologist put the subject among a group of his confederates who had been ordered to give wrong answers, the subject began to make mistakes. Overall, more than 75 percent of subjects purposely gave wrong answers just to fit into their groups.

“Life in society requires consensus,” Asch observed, but “when the consensus comes under the dominance of conformity, the social process is polluted.”

Little did Asch realize that along with diagnosing the illness he had stumbled upon the remedy. Nestled among the conformists were subjects who refused to yield to group pressure. These people often exhibited discomfort while giving correct answers on the line test, clutching their heads and apologizing, “I’m sorry, I have to call it like it is.”

These dissenters kept popping up. When American social psychologist Stanley Milgram ran his notorious tests on obedience, which showed a vast majority of people were willing to administer electric shocks to a man merely on the orders of a supervisor, a handful of subjects refused to continue when the shocks became obviously painful.

Similarly, the psychiatrist Charles Hofling had a stranger call a nurse’s station and, after identifying himself only as a doctor, demand a patient be injected with a dangerous level of a drug not listed on the medical charts. Alarmingly, 22 out of 23 nurses were prepared to give the injection merely on the orders

of this anonymous doctor, but one brave soul didn't cede to the siren call of authority.

Most impressive was the effect these meta-dissenters had on conformists. When variations on the Asch experiment were run with an extra confederate who never made mistakes on the line quiz, the rate of conformity dropped to almost zero. Similarly, when a confederate was inserted into the Milgram experiment to question the appropriateness of the electric shocks, obedience plummeted. By bearing the mental and physical stress of resisting orders or group pressure, dissenters freed others from the chains of blind obedience.

The irony, of course, is that instead of being rewarded for this service, dissenters were unfailingly punished by their groups. In the acclaimed Johnny Rocco experiments, psychologist Stanley Schachter had subjects discuss the best punishment for a juvenile delinquent named Johnny Rocco. Unbeknownst to the group, Schachter had placed a confederate among them who stuck to a dissenting viewpoint. In every instance, this dissenter was first criticized, then ridiculed, then isolated.

His martyrdom of dissenters is so prevalent that when Colin Grant, a professor of business ethics, reviewed the widespread persecution of whistleblowers, he declared dissenters nothing less than “the saints of secular culture.”

Who, then, are these hallowed souls? One explanation is “tempered radicals,” a designation coined by Maureen Scully and Deborah Meyerson in their book by the same name. Tempered radicals are loyal to both their organizations and outside causes, and are more likely to dissent openly than a person whose sole commitment is to the group. This duality often occurs in people with different social or political backgrounds, such as an environmentalist at an oil company, a female executive on an all-male board or, like Mabel Yu, a stock analyst near Philadelphia instead of among the cliques of Wall Street.

Tempered radicals are insider-outsiders,” according to Scully, a management professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston. “These people cherish their organizations and want them to flourish, but are often set apart or misunderstood.”

Another attempt to divine the dissenter was made by the University of Amsterdam's De Dreu. In one of his most noteworthy studies, he analyzed a postal distribution network and found that the sites where employees reported the most problems—troublesome co-workers, contentious meetings, disagreements with bosses—had the highest rates of new innovations, such as more efficient ways to organize delivery routes or better techniques for washing the trucks.

De Dreu began to study those individuals who voiced their dissent and found they tended to be more extroverted, better educated and better endowed with family support than conformists. Curiously, they were also healthier. “Dissenting taxes a person,” De Dreu explains. “These types have to be mentally and physically fit to survive the process.”

Nurturing dissent

Finally, there is the extraordinary possibility that dissenters are not just physically fit but physically different. This is the thesis proposed by Gregory Berns, a neuroscientist at Emory University who writes about original thinkers in his book *Iconoclast*. Berns became interested in dissenters when one of his lab's

benefactors wondered about the personality of short-sellers, the investors who bet against the stock market.

In one early study, Berns ran a version of the Asch test while subjects underwent functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scans. The experiment showed that conformists exhibited less mental stress because they were taking shortcuts—following the crowd as opposed to thinking for themselves. Dissenters, meanwhile, experienced bursts of stress in the amygdala, the part of the brain involved in memory and emotion-processing, reflecting the fear and risk associated with defying the group.

“When people change their opinions or behaviors to conform, they are doing it out of a deep fear of being excommunicated from their group,” Berns says. “This has evolutionary roots because 100,000 years ago if you weren’t part of the community, you wouldn’t reproduce; you would die.”

Indeed, in early human tribes it was essential to stick with the pack and mimic others; it limited the chances of being devoured by lions while wandering alone on the savannah or choosing a patch of poisonous mushrooms for dinner. This suggests that people inclined to stand apart from the group, whose brains were best adapted to handle the pressure of dissent, might have slowly died off.

“There is still a lot of work to be done in this field,” admits Berns, “but this might be why such a small percentage of people think differently.”

To grasp just how exceptional dissenters are, it might help to consider another scarce commodity: truffles. With prices consistently hovering at about \$2,000 a pound, countless attempts have been made to raise truffles like a crop of corn or field of tomatoes. Impossible. One can only create an environment in which truffles are likely to flourish. Plant the oak trees whose roots truffles admire; ensure the soil has the proper pH balance; train dogs to sniff them out.

This, experts agree, is the only method of nurturing true dissent. It might begin in the family. Berns argues that a role model who embraces independence can seed iconoclasm in children. He dedicated his book to his daughters, writing: “Nobody can tell you what can’t be done.”

Mabel Yu certainly learned from her father. He always preached, she says, “Do what is right or do nothing.” Yu hopes her story serves as similar inspiration for her own daughter. “I can pass this on and teach her to always do what you think is the correct thing, even if you don’t think there’s ever going to be a reward.”

The same rules apply to organizations in which leaders want to cultivate healthy dissent. Have executives lead by example by allowing subordinates to challenge their positions; hold meetings at which diverse perspectives are welcomed; surround yourself with people who think differently than you do. This, too, is consistent with the Mabel Yu case. At Vanguard, she was encouraged to question the system. Her managers supported her decision not to follow the crowd, and the company is organized like a cooperative, which gives employees greater leeway in their work.

One other thing might be done. We can all hail people like Mabel Yu. Not because the approbation will encourage others to become dissenters; dissent is too innate and precarious a quality to be affected by public approval. Instead, it might help confound Voltaire’s cynical observation. For if we are busy

applauding the people who show us the new roads, our hands won't be free to pelt them with stones.

Jeremy Mercer finally understands why he has always surrounded himself with such ornery colleagues.

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