

Positionen

Nonsense is no opinion

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DGS ✓



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When Coaching and Consulting Meet Science Denial, Irrational Beliefs, and Seemingly Unbridgeable Differences

Coaching, Counselling and Consulting can contribute to understanding in the public sphere. We therefore need to fight nonsense, examine facts critically and rationally, and argue passionately about what these facts mean to us.

Starting point

There is a lot of talk these days about social division, new hatred and social bubbles in which we only move among like-minded people. Whether it is actually a stable and describable split, and if so, how it manifests itself concretely and how (im)permeable it is, is currently being discussed. In his New Year's speech, Chancellor Olaf Scholz conjures up the opposite: "Our country is standing together." This may be true, but it can also mean that the social reality in which Olaf Scholz lives is so self-affirming that he can only perceive standing together. Richard Sennett warns that meeting people we find 'somehow different' happens less and less often, which makes it increasingly difficult to perceive a split (Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City, 2018). Neighbourhoods, primary schools, churches, grocery shops, the media, and holiday destinations have become socially homogeneous and exclusive.

For the social media, the question was answered with the publication of the Facebook¹ Papers at the latest. Facebook is successfully pursuing a strategy of systematically and purposefully radicalising political and social communication and charging it with hatred. In order to make this explosive dynamic public and to raise awareness of why this poses great danger for all societies – but especially for the global South – former Facebook employee Frances Haugen leaked the Facebook Papers in early 2021 because "my only way to get a hearing is to leak documents".

Since Facebook's algorithms do no longer reward users for staying on a content for a long time, but instead make the success of one's content dependent on how many reactions a message generates (Engagement Based Ranking – EBR), messages have to be more extreme, more polarising and more negative in order to be widely distributed. Engagement Based Ranking rewards radical content, polarises communication, and leads to users being drawn to extreme content. Frances Haugen has made public studies that show that political parties in Europe have adjusted not only their online communication but also the content with which they appear accordingly. The consequences of EBR for commercial political communication and political advertising are particularly drastic because advertising costs are now staggered in terms of EBR. Since strong negative feelings, such as hatred, anger, and fear provoke more reactions than positive feelings and feelings of security, a Facebook ad that triggers hatred and fear costs only 1/10 of what an ad costs that arouses a positive feelings or compassion. Francis Haugen: "Facebook subsidizes hatred."

We are currently experiencing the consequences of this devastating logic in Germany, Europe, and the United States. But in the global South the influence is much greater. For about of the world's languages, the Internet is equivalent to Facebook. Content in these languages is only available on Facebook. Most adults worldwide inform themselves about what is going on in the world exclusively via Facebook². So you understand why Frances Haugen says: "And I have to get a hearing, because the global South is in danger."

We are not going to change Facebook and the logic of social networks, but we can make a contribution when

¹ The parent company Facebook is now called Meta – possibly a reaction to the image damage and legal risks associated with the Facebook Papers. In this text, I still use the term Facebook for the entire concern because the statements apply equally to Instagram, for example.

² Regarding the Facebook Papers, I recommend, for example, the first publications in the Wall Street Journal, by the TAZ, Der Spiegel, The Guardian and restofworld.org, or the hearing of Frances Haugen in the European Parliament on YouTube, and also the interview by Jan Böhmermann.

we communicate – for communication is our profession – and

- › defend the difference between belief and knowledge, and say "no" to nonsense;
- › seek and have a conversation about differences;
- › develop and pass on our knowledge and expertise on how to do this.

Defending the difference between belief and knowledge and say "no" to nonsense³

Not everything is of equal value, and not everything is arbitrary. There are statements and convictions that can be scientifically verified and rationally substantiated, and there are statements and beliefs for which this does not apply. The difference is significant and must not be blurred. When in talk shows on health, the climate crisis, and education scientific findings and subjective beliefs are juxtaposed as equally valid, this is inappropriate. And when a guest on a talk show says to a scientist: "That's what you're saying, that the storms have to do with global warming. But you forget, in the past there used to be bad storms too. Well, I don't believe that. Looks like we have a different opinion on that" – then this talk show does not serve to enlighten but do dumb down. This is where talk show hosts and moderators should step in and clarify the difference between facts on the one hand and opinions and beliefs on the other – explain that there is knowledge as to whether and how CO2 changes the temperature and how the rise in temperature affects the weather. Nevertheless – and a moderator should clarify this difference as well – we can argue splendidly about how you feel about that, and whether it is desirable to stop the change. The moderator has to clearly emphasise the difference and make it clear that science is neither an opinion nor a matter of faith.

Apart from science, it is above all investigative journalism that provides us with tested knowledge about the world, so that we do not need to rely solely on faith and experience. And thus, it is not surprising that science denial and defamation of journalism and journalists go hand in hand with buzzword such as "lying press" or "mainstream media."

Not all perspectives are equal, and that means you cannot deal with all perspectives in the same way. And all good and well-intended calls to seek a conversation and to try to understand (also by myself in the Journal Supervision 2019/3 or in supervision, 2021/1) must not lead to abandoning the difference between well-founded positions and gross nonsense.

I advocate calling nonsense by its name, not repeating it or making it acceptable with a misunderstood "I-am-ok, you-are-ok, what-you-think-is-ok" arbitrariness. We need a critical-rational attitude in order to counter moralisation, ideology, esoteric beliefs, and identitarian camp thinking in a conversation. An "everything is of equal value" arbitrariness leads into a fog where subjective beliefs and individual experience determine the conversation. Facts and data cannot prove themselves on a "How do I find this" scale.

If we are seeking a rational discourse guided by reason, we must insist on the difference between facts and belief. As consultants, we can contribute a lot to developing and cultivating a common way of thinking based on facts and a scientific, critical-rational discourse.

What does this mean in concrete terms?

1. Defending science and investigative journalism against the misleading claim that science is just another matter of faith or one perspective among many.

In many conversations, I have been confronted with the statement that the scientific position is just one opinion among many, and besides, nothing is known for certain, for there is no such thing as the truth. They are just doing research, and every scientist says something different.

But that is not true. Science is not a matter of faith. And I have had good experiences, even in heated debates, in addressing the difference between criticising science and denying science. The truth probably does not exist (or we have not found it yet), but knowledge does exist. The fascinating thing about science is that I do not have to have experienced everything personally but still are able to know something. There are systematic observations for this, which go beyond the individual subjective experience. In science, there is a body of knowledge that is scientifically indisputable and about which we have no doubts using the methods we know.

³ I use the colloquial term 'nonsense' and the technical term 'irrational beliefs' here as generic terms for the whole group of irrational and paranormal beliefs. For a differentiation of the phenomena and for definitions, see my article at www.dgsv.de/themen/gesellschaftspolitik.

We know that people tend to prefer their own group to a foreign one and that they do not need any substantive reasons to do this. We know that when people observe strangers they tend to explain the observed behaviour in terms of personality rather than situation. We know about the connection between CO2 and global warming, know that the earth orbits the sun, that humans have developed by evolution and much more. Nevertheless, all this knowledge continues to be questioned – new insights can replace old ones. No knowledge is set in stone. This is the relationship between science and research. Research asks questions to which there are still no answers in science. In research, there are a lot of doubts, errors, corrections, refutations. “We err upwards,” is what the Hans Albert Institute called it.

Of course, one can and must criticise science and the scientific world. There are many reasons to take a critical look at whether the right and important questions are being asked, whether the methods agreed upon can deliver what they promise, whether our major research societies are funding the research we need. But criticising science and denying scientific nature in general are two different things. The first is necessary, the second calls into question the fundamental rules of our coexistence.

When science and investigative journalism are questioned as a system of knowledge generation, and objectivity is fundamentally doubted, we are left with nothing but belief, opinion, and self-experience. Then we will lose the basis on which we can talk about how we want to live together and how we can meet the great challenges of our time, such as climate change, biodiversity, democracy, artificial intelligence, inequality, etc.

2. Remembering the laws of logic, and demanding and phrasing arguments that can be criticised, are free of contradictions, and contribute to the cause.

We can only err upward together with arguments that can be criticised and refuted. Only propositions that also prohibit something, i.e. that can become wrong when certain events occur, convey knowledge about the world. This is what Karl Popper calls the “empirical content of a proposition”. “I know someone who has had a different experience” or “Conventional medicine is not my cup of tea” are not part of it. ´

The reason why we are so helpless in the face of irrational convictions in discourse is that they are frequently constructed in such a way that they cannot be refuted. They immunise themselves against any critical review. In cases like these it is often more useful to talk about logic rather than content. A few examples:

Circular explanations and tautology: Conspiracy narratives are usually constructed in such a way that evil forces in the background are able to pull the strings while covering it up at the same time. So the fact that nothing can be proven or disproven confirms the theory: “The Democrats manipulated the election and are such an interconnected, powerful elite that none of it gets out. The fact that there is no evidence only shows how perfectly they pull the strings in the background.”

Logically true proposition are propositions that can predict all alternative outcomes. They make you dizzy, especially in esoteric narratives. Connections with “or” are a frequent and popular variation: “Take these globules, they’ll help. Either the symptoms get better or there is an initial worsening, or it shows that your body still has to deal with the illness for a few more days.”

Inductive reasoning, when individual examples or my (im)mediate experience are used to confirm or refute universal laws. This is particularly popular where people have a wide range of knowledge, such as in health and gender issues, or in educational research. Then politicians explain why they do not implement the results of educational research with phrases like: “Something has become of me, after all.” Statements like this are problematic in two ways: They draw conclusions from individual experience to the whole, only taking into account the experiences of those who are in the position of making themselves heard. Yet inductive approaches are quite common and profitable in science. They are suitable for discovering new things and establishing theories, but not for testing them.

Moralisation puts an end to discourse and joint learning and searching. Moral arguments are positings that cannot be questioned, because they regard moral norms as universal and binding for everyone. “We are a community in which every life and every person counts. And now everyone must act courageously.”; “Testing can save lives.” This means at the same time that whoever is not acting in this sense is guilty of harming others. For those who consider themselves to be morally on the right side and pretend to have understood that we must protect every life, freedom-restricting measures are without alternative. There is no room for an open discourse or doubts on the question of why saving lives is para-

mount in Corona policy but not in environmental protection, speed limits, financing of basic psychiatric care, combating poverty, etc. – there is no room for these doubts in the ticket of moralising. In my perception, this dogmatism in Corona communication has played a big part in the fierce and irreconcilable debate about the government measures to contain the pandemic in Germany.

There are other examples that can be used to show how useful it is to keep the rules of critical thinking, logic, and empiricism awake in order to bring the conversation back down to earth:

- › What are correlations, causalities, coincidences? And what do they say?
- › Why is it so important to know base rates in order to be able to classify test results and other observations?
- › Why does a study need a control group? What is randomisation and what is a placebo effect?
- › When do differences have a meaning and when are they perhaps just a product of chance?
- › What do figures refer to? What is the advantage of percentages? Why are absolute numbers problematic and especially so when they are not compared to anything in particular? Caution: Here the official Corona communication has done nothing to clarify things. In the beginning, total figures of infected people and deaths were mentioned – a value that can only increase, without showing any positive development. That was changed. They were replaced by absolute numbers of new infections, patients in intensive care, and deaths. And yet, such figures can only be interpreted by someone who has a reference value: What is high, what is low, what is the norm?

In coaching and consulting, we must distinguish between facts and opinions, for in coaching and consulting we need both: The clarity of what is, AND subjective points of view, personal experiences, individual sensations, imagination. In creative phases we invite the irrational and consciously imagine the world bigger than it is. Then, it is not about facts and knowledge but perhaps about inventing something or breaking new ground. And since we in consulting and counselling work with both of them, a clear distinction between facts and opinion on the one hand and rationality on the other is so important on the factual level.

It is a matter of clearly calling irrationality by its name and rejecting it. “This is nonsense. It contradicts all scientific knowledge. We can’t have a discussion at this level.” Tolerance does not belong to the level of facts, and cannot refer to our way of thinking (logically correct and conclusive). „Lügen dingfest machen, ihnen sehr drastische Namen geben“ (engl.: unmask lies and give them drastic names) demands Theodor W. Adorno in his lecture on 6th of April 1967 (“Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism” republished 2020, Wiley).

Misunderstood tolerance and openness do not strengthen democracy but endanger it. For example, in his latest book “La falsification de l’Histoire” (2022), the French historian Laurent Joly shows how the far-right presidential candidate Éric Zemmour rewrites the history of the Vichy regime, and especially that of the persecution of the Jews, contrary to all historical evidence in such a way that it fits his political agenda.

3. Practicing and maintaining an open, critical dialogue with each other – in our daily environment, in our conversations, in training courses, and in our daily work.

We are not well read on all topics. We do not always talk like scientists. That would be horrible! The primacy of reason does not mean that we should only be allowed to talk about things we know everything about and have read extensively. It means being ready to critically examine one’s own position.

Most of us love to talk extensively about things we know little or nothing about. If the exchange is good, we may know a little more afterwards than we did before. A classic pub talk begins with opinions, such as “The Greens have let themselves get screwed over in the traffic light coalition agreement”. Then the discussion starts and everyone contributes his or her half-knowledge, and with some luck you know a little more afterwards. Maybe your opinion was strengthened, maybe it began to sway. Some things were certainly checked afterwards with curiosity. Over the past few months, I have talked shop and argued a lot about this coalition agreement in various discussion rounds, and the conversation in which a colleague of mine had actually read the agreement was not the most lively of them. Joining the fray with half-knowledge is not at all reprehensible. This is how communication and exchange works. This is how social interaction is created. And as long as we are open for questions and doubts, for facts and new things, this is a good educational path. If we only talked about the things we are experts in, most of our conversations would resemble lectures and be very asymmetri-

cal. One person is talking, the others are learning. This is neither attractive nor desirable in the long run. There is not only knowledge – there is also a need for debates, opinions, exchange.

Erring is not the problem. The opposite of error is not truth but doubt (the insight that I may be mistaken). We can talk about anything as long as we are willing to question what we know and consider the possibility that we might be wrong. In the knowledge that we can be wrong, rationality and an open culture of debate about fundamental issues of our time can flourish. The danger (also for democracy) lurks where people are not ready to doubt their knowledge, where there is no willingness to check facts against reality with empirical methods.

This is not easy and more of a journey than a destination. I have taken the following eight calls to action from the Festschrift “Passion for Reason – Critical Rationalism as a Way of Life” published by the Hans Albert Institute (slightly abridged and summarised)⁴. They tell us how to train rationality on a daily basis. They also show how close supervision and rationality as a way of life are, or can be.

- › Be humble – for we can all be mistaken.
- › Be critical – check your statements for their consistency, criticisability, and empirical quality.
- › Be open – understand criticism as an invitation to review your opinion and to free yourself from errors.
- › Be unbiased – separate statement from author and say goodbye to identitarian thinking.
- › Be indulgent – for it is not easy for anyone to be rational. If you had had different experiences, you might argue in a similar way as your opponent.
- › Be committed – for a rational politics is only possible in an open society. We must defend it together.
- › Be benevolent – first comes understanding, then criticising.
- › Be relaxed – not everything in life can be based on rational standards. It is important to insist on rationality where there is something at stake: in politics, and concerning the question of how we want to live.

No alternative is not possible – seeking and having a conversation about differences

On the epistemological level, there are things and facts. We can and must agree on them with the methods that have been developed and tested in science for this purpose. And if these methods are no good, we can develop them further. But we need to discuss what this knowledge means for us and our behaviour. Knowledge and facts do not lead to actions or decisions. Nor do actions derive without alternative from any kind of knowledge. Knowledge and facts lead to opinions and attitudes (by way of evaluations, expectations, or some other detour). And attitudes lead to decisions and actions.

How we evaluate facts and what conclusions we draw, varies greatly and is often contradictory. Tolerance is needed here if you want to start a conversation, and that is certainly not always easy.

We cannot deduce from virological knowledge about the coronavirus that we have to take certain measures. Only if we decide that we want to protect certain risk groups, that we want to prevent the health system from being overburdened, only then does a need for action arise.

The same applies to ecological research on climate change or biodiversity. It may be frightening to see how clearly and indisputably we are reminded here that we are destroying our own basis of life – a need for action or even action without alternative does not result from that. Only if we agree on the goal of wanting to preserve human life on earth, does a need for action arise. Then we must act, and if politicians were willing to be guided by facts and logic, the plans of the traffic light coalition would have to go well beyond what is mapped out on climate and ecology. But obviously, there is either no consensus to preserve our livelihood, or no willingness to understand the existential crisis of mankind guided by knowledge and facts in its final consequence.

Scientific and perhaps sometimes technocratic reasoning clarifies things. Concrete needs for action or demands cannot be derived from this – and certainly not those without an alternative. “This is what science demands” is the new moralisation and the opposite of critical-rational. Welcome to the fog. Fridays For Future activists do not say “Listen to science” but “Germany has committed itself to the 1.5°C target in Paris. This results in a need for action, and the climate scientists name it. Listen to them and implement it.”

⁴ <https://hans-albert-institut.de/leidenschaft-zur-vernunft>

We need to agree on facts, but how we interpret them and what actions we derive ... – there are big differences. Moralisation, as I have shown above, terminates any dialogue. So, we can and must agree on morals and values. Jonathan Haidt has shown in large-scale studies over many years and on all continents (“The Righteous Mind”, 2012) that there is a close correlation between moral conceptions and political positions. We can only understand the majority of political positions if we listen, question, and get to the bottom of the divisive values. Only if we see what we have in common behind what separates us, can we find arguments that are relevant to the other person.

Tolerance is hard, sometimes unbearably hard. A colleague of mine once said after a presentation: “Yes, talking, listening, open discourse – that’s all very nice and well. But I talk to the people in my village, and what I know now is that I don’t want to live in the world my neighbours want to live in.” I know these doubts well. I, too, have asked myself more than once how I can have a conversation about the future with someone who, in the face of thousands of drowned refugees, tells me that it is their own fault because they had known before what danger they were putting themselves in. And yet, that is exactly what we must, should, and can try to do. I have been able to try it out at many Pulse of Europe demonstrations or the Munich Refugee Council. I was easily recognisable as a co-organiser and repeatedly showered with anger and accusations by indignant passers-by. When is it worth trying to talk to each other? When does it set the stage for the wrong people? I have clarified these questions for myself as follows: A consensus on reality is needed, and then you one can try to move on. I have tried to establish this consensus time and again. I have often succeeded, often I have failed, but I have become better. The key is probably not to lose sight of the difference between describing and evaluating. Then you can take the next step – trying to come to an understanding without agreeing. In my experience, our consulting expertise helps with this.

Paraphrasing, reframing, change of perspective, the good in the bad / the bad in the good, narratives and the miracle question are examples of my attempts to make differences visible and to experience them – understanding does not mean agreeing. I have had different experiences, sometimes good, sometimes sobering. We know the search for a common starting point from conflict resolution: going so far back in the conflict until we see again that there is more that unites us than divides us. And sometimes behind fundamentally different positions it comes to light that both sides fear a future marked by violence, that there is agreement that some things should be distributed more fairly. If we can agree on facts, conversations about differences may be painful and frightening, but they are possible and necessary. It is like in group dynamics: the longer we wait, the more difficult the conversations become.

CONCLUSION

We are experiencing gridlock in our society and breaking apart on both sides: Some push science in front of them as if it were up to science to make decisions and rule the world – how undemocratic is that? The other side rightly feels threatened by this empowerment and rejects science altogether – but at what price?

Not only the climate, but also democracy is in danger, and we have to sort out what belongs where. This requires from us:

1. To clarify things.
We need a rational, scientific argumentation committed to reason in order to wrestle together about what is (reality consensus).
2. To reject irrationality and subjective experience as a criteria of truth.
You cannot and you do not have to talk about everything. Tolerance is out of place in relation to the way of thinking and reasoning. The enemies of democracy reject the consensus on reality. False tolerance strengthens them. We must not give them a platform or an audience.
3. To talk about how we want to live, and increasingly whether we want to live at all.
We must ask what we have in common and name the differences. Worlds are clashing, and yet there is more that unites us than divides us. This is dialogue that enables the coexistence of different social groups and milieus in a society. Tolerance is certainly not easy – but this is the place for it.

To counter hatred, polarisation, and lies in social networks, control is needed at other levels. Communication is not po-

werful enough to make a difference here. The patterns we experience and fear on social networks, we also encounter in our daily interactions, but we have enough in store to counter them with a clear stance.

I am glad if I could make suggestions to get involved, and improve your motivation to do so. Feel free to write me what you are trying out and what experiences you have had. What challenges do you see for consultants, counsellors and coaches in a society that increasingly seems to be divided, producing groups that hardly ever meet and even less often communicate with each other?

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