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Rogues and Heroes: Finding Value in Dissent[1]

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The late 1960s was a period of debate and conflict. Especially in 1968, minority voices were raised against the Vietnam War and various civil rights issues. And the ensuing "debate" was often angry, even violent. Though these minority voices did not have the advantages of power or even numbers, they stood up and told the truth as they saw it. And many of those ideas prevailed and changed the nature of the discourse. Yet, at the same time, Social Psychology portrayed influence as synonymous with attitude change and we were taught that influence flowed from the strong to the weak. It was the highly credible or high status individual that influenced the lower status person. It was the majority that influenced the minority. The people holding a minority viewpoint were viewed as vulnerable and lacking in the ability to influence.

The power of the majority was well documented by the conformity studies which showed that people, when faced with a unanimous majority, would abdicate information from their own senses and agree with the majority even when the majority was wrong. In the classic study by Asch (1956), people judged which of 3 lines was equivalent to a standard line. Alone, people had no difficulty. They chose the correct line 99% of the time. However, when a majority of 3 or more individuals unanimously judged a different line to be correct, nearly 35% of responses were in agreement with that majority even though the majority was incorrect. This phenomenon –and even this paradigm—has been replicated in many different countries (Bond and Smith, 1996). However, the same portrait of the minority remained. They were recipients rather than sources of influence and they had two choices: they could conform or remain independent. In part, this was due to the dependence on the Asch paradigm where the majority consisted of

confederates and the minority was the participant population whose responses were confined to agreement with or resistance to the majority.

Of interest is that, in those days, conformity was viewed with concern. Were people sheep? And independence from that majority was seen as desirable –mainly because they were making correct judgments. As time has gone on, we often see conformity portrayed as desirable. Instead of being sheep they are "team players" while resistance is often viewed as an obstacle. This is especially true in writings on organizational behavior where the emphasis is often on cooperation and harmony because managers assume that aligning employees with the vision of the company will improve firm performance (Collins and Porras, 1994).

In trying to understand why people conform to majority views, even when they are in error, two reasons have stood the test of time. First, people assume that truth lies in numbers and so they assume that the majority is probably correct. Second, they worry about "sticking out like a sore thumb" because, should they maintain a differing point of view, they may be on the receiving end of ridicule and rejection. In the classic study of whether or not such fears are warranted, Schachter (1951) looked at the reactions to a persistent minority. When one person differed, communication was directed towards him in an attempt to change his mind. When these attempts proved unsuccessful, he was ignored but he was also rejected. What is interesting is that the author did not study the possible influence of that minority on the majority. It was assumed that the minority was the recipient, not the source of influence. It was the minority that was vulnerable and this study demonstrated just how vulnerable he was. Ironically, we were yet to learn that

those holding minority views can be active and that such behavior could well have influenced the majority to his position.

Minorities as Sources of Influence:

  The notion that minority views could be active rather than passive - that they could be the source rather than the target of influence - was first theorized by Moscovici and Faucheux (1972; Faucheux and Moscovici, 1967) and demonstrated experimentally by Moscovici, Lage and Naffrechoux (1969). In that study, a minority of two individuals repeatedly called blue slides "green" and managed to get the majority of 4 individuals to say "green" nearly 9% of the time. Further, there was evidence of greater attitude change on a subsequent task. When categorizing blue-green stimuli as "blue" or "green", those exposed to a consistent minority called these slides "green" when a control would call them "blue". That study and those that followed (see Moscovici and Nemeth, 1974; Wood, Lundgren, Ouellette, Busceme and Blackstone, 1994) both replicated and developed the findings of that early study.

  In contrast to a field that emphasized strength, whether that was power, status or numbers, this line of work showed the potential power of those without such benefits. As such, the question was raised as to why and how minorities exert influence. A major contribution, in our judgment, was the emphasis on behavioral style, the orchestration and patterning of the minority's views to understand attitude change. Prior to that, studies of influence tended not to look at the persuasive attempts over time; you could get adoption of the majority position (or the position of a high status person) very quickly. Majorities benefited from an assumption that they were correct, and minorities were

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motivated to assume that majorities were correct because it permitted them to move from "deviant" to "belonging".

A number of studies investigated the styles of persuasion by a minority over time. Perhaps the most significant findings demonstrated the importance of consistency. For a minority view to persuade, a necessary (if not sufficient) condition was that they were consistent both over time and with one another. So now we had a very different view of influence, one that emphasized persuasive styles over time. Minorities did not have the luxury of both "winning friends" **and** influencing people. If they persisted, that is, remained consistent in their position, they would be disliked. If they were inconsistent or capitulated, they would be liked but would exercise no influence. There were also subtleties in being consistent. If their consistency was viewed as rigid rather than consistent, they were not effective (Moscovici et al 1969; Nemeth, Swedlund and Kanki, 1974; Mugny 1982)

It was perhaps the fact that minorities exercise their influence primarily at the private or latent level that has changed our conceptions of influence. A number of researchers have found influence by the minority to be greater when asked privately or on new but related issues (Nemeth and Wachtler, 1974; Mugny and Papastamou, 1980: Mugny and Perez, 1991). However, a good deal of research has documented that minority influence goes beyond adoption of a position.

The reaction: Dissenters are still "rogues" and "obstacles"

Though a good deal of evidence had demonstrated differential types of influence exerted by minorities relative to majorities, it is interesting to note the field's response to this body of evidence. Many researchers, rather than recognizing the differential processes and effects, offered what is called a "single process" theory. Influence is influence, regardless of the majority or minority status of the source except that minorities are weaker or less able to exert influence. For example, Latane (1981) theorized that influence was determined by "social impact", that is, a multiplicative function of strength, immediacy, and number of people who are the sources of influence. In that framework, minority influence is a weak version of majority influence but the same processes occur. To us diehards who were there in the early days, minority influence was always different. For a minority, influence is an up hill battle heavily governed by the ways in which they argue their position. They continually have to confront the fact that people are reluctant to accept or adopt a minority position even if it is correct. Thus, for a minority, consistency is required to exert influence but this tends to evoke dislike, even anger. The choice then was which it wanted: influence or being liked.

In addition to viewing minority influence as a weak version of majority influence, many researchers in Social Psychology still had pejorative views of the minority. They were "obstacles" to group goals and some portrayed dissenters as persons seeking attention (Maslach, Stapp and Santee, 1985) or "distinctiveness' (if they wanted to be kind). Many of us, on the contrary, viewed dissenters who maintained their position as courageous; it was the stuff of "heroes" and of people with conviction.

The shift to cognition: attitude change

The demonstration of differential processes of influence became more evident with a shift to the cognitive activity induced by majorities or minorities. In the attitude change realm, this was exemplified in Moscovici's (1980) conversion theory which posited different types of attitude change. Majorities induced *compliance*. People would adopt the majority position publicly but not privately. By contrast, minorities induced a *conversion* process. People often showed little or no public movement but were influenced privately. The theory hypothesized that majorities create a conflict of "responses" whereas minorities create a conflict of "perceptions". The former conforms without much scrutiny; the latter requires a validation process where the minority's position is scrutinized.

Studies testing this approach often used the distinctions between central (or systematic) vs peripheral (or heuristic) processing (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981; Chaiken, 1980). These theories, while different in substantial ways, both distinguish between a careful scrutiny of the message versus a more superficial or heuristic basis for adopting the message. Using these distinctions, there arose a sizeable literature showing that there is more careful scrutiny of the minority's message and therefore "conversion" or private attitude change though there is also evidence of systematic processing in response to a majority (Mackie, 1987; Baker and Petty, 1994; Erb, Bohner, Rank and Einwiller, 2002). In a review of this work, Hewstone and Martin (2008) argue that, on balance, the research supports Moscovici's (1980) conversion theory that there is message processing only for a minority. Processing of the majority's message seems to occur when there is a motivation "to pay closer attention to the content of the majority's arguments" (Hewstone

and Martin, 2008, p262). These approaches have helped us to understand a great deal more about when and why attitudes will change in response to a majority vs a minority. However, the general thrust is still on influence in terms of attitude change and adoption of the source's position.

The shift to cognition: quality of performance and decision making

Our own work took a different focus that even further differentiated between minority and majority influence. Inspired by some work on jury decision making (Nemeth, 1977), we formulated a model suggesting that majorities and minorities induce very different thinking about the issue –not just a processing of the message (Nemeth, 1976; Nemeth 1986). Majorities, it was hypothesized, stimulate thinking about the issue *from the perspective they pose*. We know that people are stressed and very uncomfortable when they are faced with a disagreeing majority and this, in general, is related to a narrowing of focus, a convergence of thought. However, majorities don't induce just any convergent thought. They stimulate thinking from the majority perspective. Partly this is due to the fact that people assume that truth lies in numbers; partly it is due to a motivation to find the majority to be correct since that would permit movement to the majority. . The minority asks questions such as "What are they seeing? They must be correct"; "what am I missing"?

Minorities, on the other hand, stimulate thinking that is divergent; people consider multiple perspectives. Majorities start with an assumption that the minority is not correct but the persistence on the part of that minority suggests a complexity. "How can they be so sure and yet so wrong"? We theorize that it stimulates a reappraisal of the situation

and, in the process, people evidence divergent thinking, a consideration of multiple sources of information and ways of thinking about the issue. On balance, this aids the quality of decision making and the finding of creative solutions to problems (Nemeth, 1986;1995).

There is now considerable evidence for these propositions. Our own experimental studies have found that minorities stimulate a search for information on all sides of the issue while majorities stimulate a search for information that corroborates the majority view (Nemeth and Rogers, 1996); minorities stimulate the use of multiple strategies in problem solving whereas majorities stimulate the use of the majority strategy (Nemeth and Kwan, 1987); minorities stimulate the detection of solutions that otherwise would have gone undetected whereas majorities stimulate adoption of the majority solution, right or wrong (Nemeth and Wachtler, 1983). Further, minorities stimulate more originality while majorities stimulate more conventionality of thought (Nemeth and Kwan, 1985). As a consequence, those exposed to minority views come up with more creative solutions to problems (Nemeth, Brown and Rogers, 2001).

This type of research has moved the discourse from minority as passive to active and perhaps more importantly, from obstacle to facilitator of quality thought, decision and performance. The minority is no longer a "deviant" worthy of derision; it is an individual or small group of individuals who have the courage to maintain a position in the face of sizeable opposition, in spite of the likely negative consequences for themselves. And they provide value in the thought that they stimulate.

As an illustration of the importance of "courage", Nemeth and Chiles (1988) conducted a study where individuals were exposed to a minority of individuals who

consistently called blue slides "green". As demonstrated before, people thought little of the minority; they were seen to be incorrect and as having bad eyesight. However, subsequent to this situation, they were put in a typical conformity setting where 3 of 4 individuals called red slides "orange". Compared to a control group who had no exposure to a minority viewpoint in the first setting, those exposed to a consistent (though erroneous) minority had a dramatic decrease in conformity. They had less than 30% conformity --compared to 70% conformity by those with no prior exposure to a minority view. We believe that the minority "influenced" individuals, not so much on the perception of color but, rather, on the importance of saying what you believe. Individuals did not like the minority but they perceived them as "having courage".   Here, we underscore that those who maintain a dissenting view can often be respected; they are seen as courageous though not especially likeable. But this is the stuff of heroes and such individuals are not easily relegated to those who seek attention and "distinctiveness" (Maslach, Stapp and Santee, 1985).

Application to social issues part I: juries and "truth"

In applying this research to jury decision making, we have often argued for protection of minority views, not because they may be correct but because *even when they are wrong* they stimulate thinking that on balance leads to better decisions. It stops the rush to judgment by providing a counter to the majority view. But more importantly, there is evidence that people search for more information on all sides of the issue; they utilize more ways of looking at facts (Nemeth and Goncalo, 2005).

 Unanimity becomes one way to protect minority views as, under that condition, the minority tends to maintain its position longer; the deliberation is more "robust"; and participants feel that justice has been better served (Nemeth, 1977). In spite of these advantages and their importance for justice, however, many countries have attempted to change the requirement of unanimity to some form of majority rule for jury decision making. The reason is often efficiency but if often includes a pejorative view of the minority holder, the "deviant".

In 1970, these issues came before the US Supreme Court (Apodaca et al v Oregon; Johnson v Louisiana) because Oregon and Louisiana did not require unanimity and those convicted by less than a unanimous vote appealed their convictions. The Court ruled that their rights had not been violated and the basic reasoning was that the majority would have won anyway plus they assumed that the minority views would only be outvoted after the minority "ceased to have persuasive reasons in support of its position". In other words, the minority position was without merit; they were just taking up time; and they wouldn't win anyway.

Much more recently in Sydney, Australia (Nemeth, 2003), there was a conference about the reform movements in both Australia and New Zealand to move to some form of majority rule in juries. The comments by the participants-- judges, academics and practitioners--- were notable for their language as well as their content. The minority holder, the "deviant", was continually referred to as the "rogue" juror. Images of an attention seeking, rigid, obstacle to an important decision reared its head.   It was rewarding to see the discussion turn to the possibility of courage, to the importance of rigorous debate, to a decision making process that considered more facts and more ways

to view those facts ---to a consideration of justice. However, the issue remains, usually under the phrasings of expediting and reducing expenses of the criminal justice system. It is perhaps a powerful reminder of the desire for consensus and that those who dissent, who persist in their minority views, are often punished. They are at least disliked and often ridiculed.

Application to social issues part II: Innovation in organizations

The research that dissent, even when wrong, can stimulate creativity has practical applications, especially for organizations who recognize that innovation is highly profitable. In fact, organizational scholars and management practitioners have become increasingly aware that creative ideas are the lifeblood of the most admired organizations (Amabile, 1996; Collins & Porras, 1994). It is not enough to stick with what works; there must be a continuous effort to stay at the forefront of the industry. Creative ideas are the raw material necessary for innovation, and a strong competitive advantage is conferred upon organizations that are adept at eliciting creative solutions from their employees (Kanter, 1988).

Under the right circumstances, a single creative idea may be hugely profitable. Take, for example, one employee's idea for a "failed" adhesive that gave rise to the ubiquitous Post-it Note by the 3M Corporation (Collins & Porras, 1994). One insight gave rise to three new product lines and a complete change in the company's strategic approach to innovation, not to mention untold millions of dollars to the bottom line (Von Hippel, Thomke & Sonnack, 1999). Yet despite the best of intentions, many potentially creative ideas are rejected outright because they are either too risky or they threaten

business as usual (Staw, 1995). Many organizations, whether they choose to recognize this fact or not, desire creativity but reward conformity, cohesion and commitment (Nemeth, 1997).

The research on dissent that has been conducted in organizational settings has an advantage in that the participants are people from a wide range of settings working in jobs that are ongoing and meaningful to them. Despite these differences from the experiments, there are two interesting points to keep in mind. The first point is that the basic phenomenon replicates (e.g. Gruenfeld, 1995; Simons & Peterson, 2000; De Dreu & West, 2001). The idea that dissenting opinions stimulate creative thought is a common thread that ties this work together. The second point is that harnessing the positive and inhibiting the negative consequences of dissent may be difficult and requires a complex set of tradeoffs (Nemeth & Staw, 1989). Despite these complexities, however, this line of research has highlighted a number of practical suggestions for capitalizing on dissent to manage creativity and innovation.

a. Dissent conflict and innovation in organizations

There is now considerable evidence that the model of minority influence (Nemeth, 1986) is robust and well replicated in field settings. For instance, Van Dyne & Saavadra (1996) conducted a field study of natural work-groups and utilized confederates (who were also permanent members of the ongoing, interacting groups) to serve as dissenters over the course of a 10 week period. As we would expect based on past research, the experimental groups in which one person was privately instructed to take on the role of dissenter engaged in more divergent thinking and came up with more original product ideas than did the control groups. Likewise, utilizing a novel Q-Sort

methodology for studying historical cases, Peterson, Owens, Tetlock, Fan & Martorana

(1998) found that dissent also had stimulating properties in elite decision making groups.

Using archival data, they conducted an in-depth analysis of the top management teams of

seven "Fortune 500" who were highly successful or unsuccessful at a particular point in

time. They found that the most successful top management teams encouraged dissent in

private meetings. Again, we see that even elite decision makers - people who are experts

at what they do - can still profit from dissenting opinions.

Despite these benefits, the relationship between dissent and creativity may also be

elusive and depend on whether groups can mitigate the potentially numerous and

unintended negative consequences of conflict and controversy. As we would expect

based on experimental research, the role of dissenter is stressful even when it is assigned

and the group has a history together (Van Dyne & Saavadra, 1996). This is probably

because dissenters are targeted by the majority for not being cooperative and for being

unwilling to readily adopt the majority point of view (Schacter, 1951). There is also a

danger that dissent can lead to conflict that escalates and becomes problematic. For

instance, unsuccessful groups in the study by Peterson and his colleagues (1998) seemed

to be characterized by internal strife to the point of splitting into hostile factions that

threatened to permanently split the group.

In an attempt to offset these liabilities, research has provided some clues about

what strategies might work. For example, Dooley and Fryxell (1999) found in a study of

US hospitals that dissent was positively associated with high quality decision making

teams. However, the benefits of dissent were only realized in teams that managed to

preserve dissent while at the same time building toward a consensus. This was achieved when people felt some sense of loyalty to the groups to which they belonged.

A continual problem is that people may respond to conflicting opinions by just shutting down the conversation. The dissenter may find it easier to remain silent, even if that means suppressing one's true opinions. For instance, De Dreu and West (2001) conducted a field study of innovation using semi-autonomous teams from several different organizations. They measured the extent of minority dissent using a survey measure and then assessed team innovation using supervisor ratings. They found that innovation was high in groups with dissent, but only when there was also a high degree of participation in team decision making. In other words, dissent may spark creative thought, but such thoughts are of little use unless there are procedures for ensuring that these thoughts are openly expressed. And getting them expressed is not easy (Morrison & Milken, 2000). Overall, however, the basic message has been received: in order to foster creativity and innovation in the workplace, it is necessary to preserve alternative points of view, provided there is an atmosphere of mutual respect and procedures ensuring full participation.

The research in organizational settings also demonstrates that not all forms of conflict are beneficial. In fact, a related line of research has shown that conflict may take on many forms and only certain types of conflict have the stimulating properties previously discussed. Relatively recently, Jehn (1995) has concetualized intra-group conflict in terms of three distinct types. *Relationship* conflict refers to interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, including personality differences. T*ask* conflict refers to disagreements between group members about the content of the task being

performed. And *process* conflict involves different strategies for how a group should go about completing a shared task (Jehn, 1995; 1997). There are many ways to have conflict but only some have been found to be productive.

On non-routine tasks, there is evidence that task conflict can be beneficial (Jehn, 1995) as it may cause the group to evaluate information more critically (Postmes, Spears & Cihangir, 2001) and break the tendency of groups to try to achieve consensus before all available alternatives have been thoroughly considered (Janis, 1971;1972). This form of conflict is similar to the relatively impersonal, task related issues that research on dissent has shown to facilitate group decision making (Nemeth, 1995). They key difference is that in most of the applied settings, it is not just one person faced with a unanimous majority; the conflict is more diffuse. Nevertheless, the benefits of conflict are similar in terms of promoting a deeper understanding of the task (Amason & Schweiger, 1994), stimulating the consideration of new ideas (Baron, 1991) and it thus contributes to overall group performance (Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999).

Task related conflict, however, is not an easy one to separate from more destructive forms of relationship conflicts which are often related to personality differences and which can become very emotional. These can create tension, anger and frustration which are not generally beneficial for the group (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Even seemingly benign conflicts related to the process of getting work done can escalate into emotional conflicts (Greer, Jehn & Mannix, 2008). For instance, arguments over "who does what" can be taken to reflect judgments of competence that can easily be taken personally, "If you do not think that I can do this part of the assignment then you are also saying that I am stupid."

In practice, the various types of conflict are often hopelessly entangled. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis revealed strong and negative relationships between task conflict, group performance and satisfaction with the team. These negative effects were strongest when task conflict occurred in the presence of relationship conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Thus, we are reminded of the tradeoffs between cognitive stimulation and lowered morale, the tradeoffs between creative thought and performance. And the consequences for the dissenter can be considerable if her position is seen as personal attack.

Some suggestions for ameliorating the negative consequences include timing of the conflict. For example, longitudinal research has shown that high performing groups had moderate levels of task conflict but importantly, only at the midpoint between the group's inception and the deadline (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). The midpoint of a project is often the most critical moment during a group's lifecycle (Gersick, 1988). It is there, with a deadline looming, that the most productive discussions occur (Gersick & Hackman, 1990). By permitting, even welcoming task conflict at this point, groups are most likely to capture the benefits of such conflicts while containing the potentially negative effects. It is also likely the way in which the "rogue" dissenter will be viewed in more favorable terms.

b. Encouraging voice and creating a culture of dissent

Up to now, we have extolled the virtues and value of dissent and the battle against perceptions of attention seeking, rogue and rebel. This is difficult enough in any setting but organizations, even those that claim to desire creativity, are often unwilling to do what is necessary to achieve it (Staw, 1995). And what prevents the voicing of dissent?

Isn't ridicule and rejection enough to prevent "voice"? Isn't the fact that the likelihood of winning is low? Isn't the fact that, even if "voice" stimulates creative thought, no credit will follow? These are daunting considerations. Thus, for organizations truly committed to achieving open expression of dissenting opinions, the answer is not simple. Relative to laboratory settings, the pressures for conformity are probably magnified in organizational settings where there are real threats to one's livelihood for taking an unpopular stance. For instance, Sharon Watkins of the Enron Corporation took an enormous risk when she wrote a detailed seven page letter to her boss basically saying that the company was a huge Ponzi scheme that was likely to implode at any moment.

What makes one employee stand up and speak the truth while others remain silent—to have "voice" (Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003; Packer 2008)? And when is it beneficial? Innovation is best served when the "voice" is prosocial and improvement oriented. It is here, with constructive input about task related issues (Van Dyne & Lepine, 1998), that errors are corrected and learning occurs (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Butera and Mugny, 2001). But again, why would anyone do this? Apart from all the personal considerations, employees are in a more difficult situation because "voice" often means speaking up to someone who has power over you, those who control your next pay raise or promotion (Detert & Trevino, 2008; Jetton, Hornsey, Spears, Haslam & Cowell, 2009).

There appears to be some personality traits that relate to the likelihood of speaking up. People who are extraverted, conscientious and not very agreeable are more likely to voice conflict than are their shy coworkers who would rather get along with others even if it means poor workmanship (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). People who are

satisfied with their job, have a relatively high self-esteem and work in smaller groups are more likely to engage in voice than others (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). But even with the "right" personality traits, there are the consequences. Workers who show a great deal of personal initiative are often viewed as being "rebellious" (Freese and Fay, 2001; pg. 141) and such troublemakers are frequently isolated by both their peers and their supervisors.

The hope is that bosses and organizations signal to their employees that they are truly open to alternative points of view—and mean it. In part, this means changing the perception of "voice" and dissent from troublemaker to courageous individuals, from obstacle to contributor. This may be easier in more individualistic as opposed to collectivistic cultures for the latter tends to view conflict as destructive and tends to have stronger pressures for conformity (Bond & Smith, 1996). While some have argued that conformity could promote an objective of creativity (Flynn & Chatman, 2001), there is recent evidence suggesting the reverse. In a recent study, Goncalo and Staw (2006) experimentally manipulated an individualistic or collectivistic culture and then had groups generate new business ideas for a space left vacant by a mis-managed restaurant. The individualistic groups generated more novel ideas than collectivistic groups. Further, they were better at implementation. From the list of ideas they generated, these groups combined ideas to come up with something new whereas collectivistic groups simply chose one idea from their list.

Rogues or Heroes: Team Player or Conformist

Throughout this chapter, we have emphasized that the usual reaction to a dissenter is negative. They are annoying, wrong and unpredictable. They are not "team players", a

trait that a recent survey of American workers (Kahpor-Klein & Kahlon, 2004) ranked

more highly than whether they had knowledge, skill and ability. Yet, we believe (and the

research demonstrates) that these rogues and rebels, assuming they are authentically

voicing their views, provide benefit. They liberate us from conformity and, more

importantly, they stimulate us to think more divergently and creatively. We consider

more facts and more possibilities; we find and devise solutions. Their gift to us comes at

a cost to themselves and some discomfort to us. But groups, organizations and societies

benefit from the open airing of competing truths (Mill, 1979) and it is time to recognize

the contributions of those who dare to dissent.

Footnotes

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