

Why Can't People Hear What Jordan Peterson Is Actually Saying?

The Atlantic (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/01/putting-monsterpaint-onjordan-peterson/550859/>) · by Conor Friedersdorf

My first introduction to Jordan B. Peterson, a University of Toronto clinical psychologist, came by way of an interview (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMcjxSThD54>) that began trending on social media last week. Peterson was pressed by the British journalist Cathy Newman to explain several of his controversial views. But what struck me, far more than any position he took, was the method his interviewer employed. It was the most prominent, striking example I've seen yet of an unfortunate trend in modern communication.

First, a person says something. Then, another person restates what they purportedly said so as to make it seem as if their view is offensive, hostile, or absurd.

Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and various Fox News hosts all feature and reward this rhetorical technique. And the Peterson interview has so many moments of this kind that each successive example calls attention to itself until the attentive viewer can't help but wonder what drives the interviewer to keep inflating the nature of Peterson's claims, instead of addressing what he actually said.

This isn't meant as a global condemnation of this interviewer's quality or past work. As with her subject, I haven't seen enough of it to render any overall judgment—and it is sometimes useful to respond to an evasive subject with an unusually blunt restatement of their views to draw them out or to force them to clarify their ideas.

Perhaps she has used that tactic to good effect elsewhere. (And the online attacks to which she's been subjected are abhorrent assaults on decency by people who are perpetrating misbehavior orders of magnitude worse than hers.)

But in the interview, Newman relies on this technique to a remarkable extent, making it a useful illustration of a much broader pernicious trend. Peterson was not evasive or unwilling to be clear about his meaning. And Newman's exaggerated restatements of his views mostly led viewers astray, not closer to the truth.

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Peterson begins the interview by explaining why he tells young men to grow up and take responsibility for getting their lives together and becoming good partners. He notes he isn't talking exclusively to men, and that he has lots of female fans.

“What’s in it for the women, though?” Newman asks.

“Well, what sort of partner do you want?” Peterson says. “Do you want an overgrown child? Or do you want someone to contend with who is going to help you?”

“So you’re saying,” Newman retorts, “that women have some sort of duty to help fix the crisis of masculinity.” But that’s not what he said. He posited a vested interest, not a duty.

“Women deeply want men who are competent and powerful,” Peterson goes on to assert. “And I don’t mean power in that they can exert tyrannical control over others. That’s not power. That’s just corruption. Power is competence. And why in the world would you not want a competent partner? Well, I know why, actually, you can’t dominate a competent partner. So if you want domination—”

The interviewer interrupts, “So you’re saying women want to dominate, is that what you’re saying?”

The next section of the interview concerns the pay gap between men and women, and whether it is rooted in gender itself or other nondiscriminatory factors:

Newman: ... that 9 percent pay gap, that’s a gap between median hourly earnings between men and women. That exists.

Peterson: Yes. But there’s multiple reasons for that. One of them is gender, but that’s not the only reason. If you’re a social scientist worth your salt, you never do a univariate analysis. You say women in aggregate are paid less than men. Okay. Well then we break its down by age; we break it down by occupation; we break it down by interest; we break it down by personality.

Newman: But you’re saying, basically, it doesn’t matter if women aren’t getting to the top, because *that’s* what is skewing that gender pay gap, isn’t it? You’re saying that’s just a fact of life, women aren’t necessarily going to get to the top.

Peterson: No, I’m not saying it doesn’t matter, either. I’m saying there are multiple reasons for it.

Newman: Yeah, but why should women put up with those reasons?

Peterson: I’m not saying that they should put up with it! I’m saying that the claim that the wage gap between men and women is only due to sex is wrong. And it is wrong. There’s no doubt about that. The multivariate analysis have been done. So let me give you an example—

The interviewer seemed eager to impute to Peterson a belief that a large, extant wage gap between men and women is a “fact of life” that women should just “put up with,” though all those assertions are contrary to his real positions on the

matter.

Throughout this next section, the interviewer repeatedly tries to oversimplify Peterson's view, as if he believes one factor he discusses is all-important, and then she seems to assume that because Peterson believes that given factor helps to explain a pay gap between men and women, he doesn't support any actions that would bring about a more equal outcome.

Her surprised question near the end suggests earnest confusion:

Peterson: There's a personality trait known as agreeableness. Agreeable people are compassionate and polite. And agreeable people get paid less than disagreeable people for the same job. Women are more agreeable than men.

Newman: Again, a vast generalization. Some women are not more agreeable than men.

Peterson: That's true. And some women get paid more than men.

Newman: So you're saying by and large women are too agreeable to get the pay raises that they deserve.

Peterson: No, I'm saying that is one component of a multivariate equation that predicts salary. It accounts for maybe 5 percent of the variance. So you need another 18 factors, one of which is gender. And there is prejudice. There's no doubt about that. But it accounts for a much smaller portion of the variance in the pay gap than the radical feminists claim.

Newman: Okay, so rather than denying that the pay gap exists, which is what you did at the beginning of this conversation, shouldn't you say to women, rather than being agreeable and not asking for a pay raise, go ask for a pay raise. Make yourself disagreeable with your boss.

Peterson: But I didn't deny it existed, I denied that it existed *because of gender*. See, because I'm very, very, very careful with my words.

Newman: So the pay gap exists. You accept that. I mean the pay gap between men and women exists—but you're saying it's not because of gender, it's because women are too agreeable to ask for pay raises.

Peterson: That's one of the reasons.

Newman: Okay, so why not get them to ask for a pay raise? Wouldn't that be fairer?

Peterson: I've done that many, many, many times in my career. So one of the things you do as a clinical psychologist is assertiveness training. So you might say—often you treat people for anxiety, you treat them for depression, and maybe the next most common category after that would be assertiveness training. So I've had many, many women, extraordinarily competent women, in my clinical and consulting practice, and we've put together strategies for their career development that involved continual pushing, competing, for higher wages. And often tripled their wages within a five-year period.

Newman: And you celebrate that?

Peterson: Of course! Of course!

Another passage on gender equality proceeded thusly:

Newman: Is gender equality a myth?

Peterson: I don't know what you mean by the question. Men and women aren't the same. And they won't be the same. That doesn't mean that they can't be treated fairly.

Newman: Is gender equality desirable?

Peterson: If it means equality of outcome then it is almost certainly undesirable. That's already been demonstrated in Scandinavia. Men and women won't sort themselves into the same categories if you leave them to do it of their own accord. It's 20 to 1 female nurses to male, something like that. And approximately the same male engineers to female engineers. That's a consequence of the free choice of men and women in the societies that have gone farther than any other societies to make gender equality the purpose of the law. Those are ineradicable differences—you can eradicate them with tremendous social pressure, and tyranny, but if you leave men and women to make their own choices you will not get equal outcomes.

Newman: So you're saying that anyone who believes in equality, whether you call them feminists or whatever you want to call them, should basically give up because it ain't going to happen.

Peterson: Only if they're aiming at equality of outcome.

Newman: So you're saying give people equality of opportunity, that's fine.

Peterson: It's not only fine, it's eminently desirable for everyone, for individuals as well as societies.

Newman: But still women aren't going to make it. That's what you're really saying.

That is not “what he's really saying”!

In this next passage Peterson shows more explicit frustration than at any other time in the program with being interviewed by someone who refuses to relay his actual beliefs:

Newman: So you don't believe in equal pay.

Peterson: No, I'm not saying that at all.

Newman: Because a lot of people listening to you will say, "Are we going back to the dark ages?"

Peterson: That's because you're not listening, you're just projecting.

Newman: I'm listening very carefully, and I'm hearing you basically saying that women need to just accept that they're never going to make it on equal terms—equal outcomes is how you defined it.

Peterson: No, I didn't say that.

Newman: If I was a young woman watching that, I would go, well, I might as well go play with my Cindy dolls and give up trying to go school, because I'm not going to get the top job I want, because there's someone sitting there saying, it's not possible, it's going to make you miserable.

Peterson: I said that equal outcomes aren't desirable. That's what I said. It's a bad social goal. I didn't say that women shouldn't be striving for the top, or anything like that. Because I don't believe that for a second.

Newman: Striving for the top, but you're going to put all those hurdles in their way, as have been in their way for centuries. And that's fine, you're saying. That's fine. The patriarchal system is just fine.

Peterson: No! I really think that's silly! I do, I think that's silly.

He thinks it is silly because he never said that "the patriarchal system is just fine" or that he planned to put lots of hurdles in the way of women, or that women shouldn't strive for the top, or that they might as well drop out of school, because achieving their goals or happiness is simply not going to be possible.

The interviewer put all those words in his mouth.

The conversation moves on to other topics, but the pattern continues. Peterson makes a statement. And then the interviewer interjects, "So you're saying ..." and fills in the rest with something that is less defensible, or less carefully qualified, or more extreme, or just totally unrelated to his point. I think my favorite example comes when they begin to talk about lobsters. Here's the excerpt:

Peterson: There's this idea that hierarchical structures are a sociological construct of the Western patriarchy. And that is so untrue that it's almost unbelievable. I use the lobster as an example: We diverged from lobsters evolutionarily history about 350 million years ago. And lobsters exist in hierarchies. They have a nervous system attuned to the hierarchy. And that nervous system runs on serotonin just like ours. The nervous system of the lobster and the human being is so similar that anti-depressants work on lobsters. And it's part of my attempt to demonstrate that the idea of hierarchy has absolutely nothing to do with sociocultural construction, which it doesn't.

Newman: Let me get this straight. You're saying that we should organize our societies along the lines of the lobsters?

Yes, he proposes that we all live on the sea floor, save some, who shall go to the seafood tanks at restaurants. It's laughable. But Peterson tries to keep plodding along.

Peterson: I'm saying it is inevitable that there will be continuities in the way that animals and human beings organize their structures. It's absolutely inevitable, and there is one-third of a billion years of evolutionary history behind that ... It's a long time. You have a mechanism in your brain that runs on serotonin that's similar to the lobster mechanism that tracks your status—and the higher your status, the better your emotions are regulated. So as your serotonin levels increase you feel more positive emotion and less negative emotion.

Newman: So you're saying like the lobsters, we're hardwired as men and women to do certain things, to sort of run along tram lines, and there's nothing we can do about it.

Where did she get that extreme “and there's nothing we can do about it”? Peterson has already said that he's a clinical psychologist who coaches people to change how they relate to institutions and to one another within the constraints of human biology. Of course he believes that there is something that can be done about it.

He brought up the lobsters only in an attempt to argue that “one thing we can't do is say that hierarchical organization is a consequence of the capitalist patriarchy.”

At this point, we're near the end of the interview. And given all that preceded it, Newman's response killed me. Again, she takes an accusatory tack with her guest:

Newman: Aren't you just whipping people up into a state of anger?

Peterson: Not at all.

Newman: Divisions between men and women. You're stirring things up.

Actually, one of the most important things this interview illustrates—one reason it is worth noting at length—is how Newman repeatedly poses as if she is holding a controversialist accountable, when in fact, for the duration of the interview, it is *she* that is “stirring things up” and “whipping people into a state of anger.”

At every turn, she is the one who takes her subject’s words and makes them seem more extreme, or more hostile to women, or more shocking in their implications than Peterson’s remarks themselves support. Almost all of the most inflammatory views that were aired in the interview are ascribed by Newman to Peterson, who then disputes that she has accurately characterized his words.

There are moments when Newman seems earnestly confused, and perhaps is. And yet, if it were merely confusion, would she consistently misinterpret him in the more scandalous, less politically correct, more umbrage-stoking direction?

To conclude, this is neither an endorsement nor a condemnation of Peterson’s views. It is an argument that the effects of the approach used in this interview are pernicious.

For one, those who credulously accept the interviewer’s characterizations will emerge with the impression that a prominent academic holds troubling views that, in fact, he does not actually believe or advocate. Some will feel needlessly troubled. And distorted impressions of what figures like Peterson mean by the words that they speak can only exacerbate overall polarization between their followers and others, and sap their critics of credibility to push back where they are wrong.

Lots of culture-war fights are unavoidable—that is, they are rooted in earnest, strongly felt disagreements over the best values or way forward or method of prioritizing goods. The best we can do is have those fights, with rules against eye-gouging.

But there is a way to reduce needless division over the countless disagreements that are inevitable in a pluralistic democracy: get better at accurately characterizing the views of folks with differing opinions, rather than egging them on to offer more extreme statements in interviews; or even worse, distorting their words so that existing divisions seem more intractable or impossible to tolerate than they are. That sort of exaggeration or hyperbolic misrepresentation is epidemic—and addressing it for everyone’s sake is long overdue.

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