

A few weeks ago, a [TV interview](#) of clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson by journalist Cathy Newman became a minor Internet phenomenon, thanks to the journalist's extraordinary interviewing style. She handled the conversation so badly that the *Atlantic* commented on that car-crash of an interview under the title [Why Can't People Hear What Jordan Peterson Is Saying?](#)

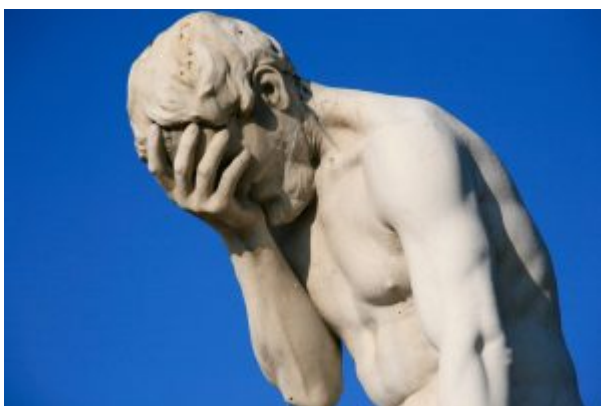
To provide some background: Jordan Peterson is somewhat famous for defending anti-political correctness positions, for instance arguing that respect for transgender people does not justify proposals for legislation that would compel people to use particular pronouns when referring to them, [of the kind considered in Canada](#). He also defends a broadly conservative agenda in social and cultural matters.

But that's not the point here. The reason that interview became an Internet sensation is the bewildering behavior of the interviewer. Like a *Theme and variations* piece, the conversation between Peterson and Newman follows a simple pattern that is repeated multiple times:

- Jordan Peterson makes a point, tries to provide arguments and occasionally appeals to some evidence.
- Then Newman interrupts him (often in mid-sentence) with the words "So, you're saying that..." followed by some fantastically distorted version of what Peterson just said.

The most egregious example occurs towards the end of the segment, when Peterson tries to argue that surely the fact that we have hierarchies in human societies is not surprising, given that there are such hierarchies in very distant species. The exchange is worth quoting in full:

- **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?



The interview deserves to be studied in full, because the hapless Newman does it about a dozen times – she mistakes equality of opportunity for equality of outcome, for instance, or seems baffled by the notion of multiple factors – and each of these spectacular bloopers is introduced by the infamous leitmotif "So you're saying..." (Note that this is NOT a post about whether Peterson is right about this. I think he is only partly right here, as there are unique evolutionary features to human

hierarchies – but that’s another story.)

As many have commented – the journalist does not seem very bright. That’s certainly the impression one is left with. But that is not much of an explanation.

Obviously, what Newman is trying to do, as [the Atlantic piece](#) points out, is not to find out what Peterson is saying, but to smear him by associating him with extreme, absurd or repulsive beliefs.

Most of us have experienced such conversations:

“Sure, there may be cheaters among people who claim disabled benefits...

– So you are proposing to slaughter all handicapped people, like the Nazis?”

Why would anyone try to sound dumb?

The piece in the Atlantic interprets this willful stupidity as a recent and troubling phenomenon, a symptom of the coarsening and polarization of political debate. But that is not entirely plausible – the [reductio ad Hitlerum](#) and other forms of abusive *ad hominem* arguments have a long past. The famous debates between Aischines v. Demosthenes contain gems like “I will not mention that my opponent’s mother was a prostitute...”

Why do people say such things?

The simplest explanation would be that they hope to convince their audience. If I can get my listener to believe that my adversaries’ relatives engaged in crime, somehow he or she will stop paying attention to their arguments.

But one thing we know from the psychology of reasoning is that such arguments do not in fact work (van Eemeren et al., 2012, 2015; Walton 2000). That is, people are not easily swayed by *ad hominem* rhetoric. The fact that a mass-murderer was a vegetarian and an amateur painter does not convince people that there is anything repulsive in either the diet or the hobby. Maybe Demosthenes’ mother was a prostitute, which does not invalidate her son’s arguments. So people may try, but they rarely succeed.

So why is this persistent?

Explanation 1: meta-gullibility

One possible explanation is that there is an asymmetry between people’s own vulnerability to bad arguments (which is not very high) and their estimate of other people’s vulnerability (very high).

As Hugo Mercier demonstrates in [a recent paper](#), the experimental record shows that it is very difficult to make people entertain strange or absurd or counter-intuitive beliefs. Humans are just not very easy to persuade of complete nonsense (Mercier 2017). But, as Mercier adds, one thing we often *do* believe without much evidence is that others will believe just about anything. The only domain where we are really gullible is our estimate of other people’s gullibility. To coin a phrase, humans are not gullible but they seem really meta-gullible.

So perhaps people use *ad hominem* and other absurd non-arguments because they mistakenly over-estimate their epistemic effects on listeners.

Only politics can make you that willfully stupid

But that may be only part of the explanation, because the use of abusive rhetoric seems uniquely frequent in the political domain. It is in politics that people call an adversary a drunk baboon, as Lincoln was described by the Democratic party, as a supposedly powerful argument against the abolitionist cause.

That is of course not the only damage politics inflicts on people's intellects. Living among academics, it is of course always a wonder to witness how people who display great sophistication in understanding multiple intertwined factors, or the way some variable modulate the interaction between two other factors, etc., suddenly turn into four-year olds when they talk about politics. It is a wonder that the same people, who are so careful with the logic of arguments, suddenly get into a passionate refutation that *b* could possibly imply *a*, when all you suggested to them was that perhaps *a* implies *b*.

Why does it happen specifically in that domain?

Explanation 2: signaling one's affiliation

The special factor about politics is that a) it seems to be about arguments, for or against particular policies, but b) it is of course mostly motivated by coalitional psychology. The point is to build and sustain an alliance with strong cooperation and diminish the recruitment potential of other alliances, in what is clearly construed as a zero-sum competition for social support (Pietraszewski, 2013; Tooby & Cosmides, 2010).

Seen from this angle, Cathy Newman's majestic displays of stupidity make more sense. Newman is signaling to her friends or allies that she is so strongly opposed to Peterson and his conservative views that she will use absurd distortion and insulting comments, rather than engage with and discuss any of his arguments. Sure, that makes her sound like a bit of a simpleton. But the point is that people now know very clearly where she stands.

This would make sense, because an interview is always an ambiguous process. A good journalist should get the interviewee to provide the clearest possible expression of their views. But this may be easily mistaken for support. And, as it happens, many journalists owe their jobs as much to partisan affiliation as to reporting skills or interview technique. So this ambiguity may be particularly damaging. Hence the need for signaling.

Signaling would be a fine explanation, but... the rhetoric used by Newman (and other people in such debates) also conveys incompetence, which is not optimal if you want to recruit people. An uncommitted third-party may watch that extraordinary interview and walk away with the impression that Newman's "camp", whatever it is, probably does not have good arguments at all.

So, would the signaling advantage of really *bad* arguments over-ride their implications about competence? Does this happen only when the "camps" are so clearly antagonistic that trying to appear competent is entirely redundant?

Does it make sense to signal incompetence?

I offer these reflections as conjectures. The cognition and culture community should tell us, whether these two explanations make sense, and whether there is any evidence for the contribution of meta-gullibility and signaling.

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