

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. It is hot and humid July, morning here in Minnesota. I'm feeling refreshed from a short and needed break, in a place that was also hot and humid. back to work. this is an important topic I wanna talk about today. it's been a little bee in my bonnet, and I want to outline the importance of not misinformation, but true information.

[00:00:34] A few years ago, I recorded an episode called The Limits to Podcasting about limits, and in it, I described what I called a triple information hazard, which was three categories of true things that a person can know but cannot say on a public platform. And in the years since, that list has grown. I now count at least 12 of risks in these categories.

[00:01:04] so t-today, I thought I would walk through what I'll refer to as the information hazards of the metacrisis, because I think understanding them explains a lot about what gets said in our public discourse and what doesn't get said, and why, and, why it's all important

[00:01:37] Okay, so first a quick definition. An information hazard coined by, philosopher Nick Bostrom about fifteen years ago is any risk that results from disseminating true information. True things, not lies or misinformation, but true things that have the potential to cause harm if they become widely known.

[00:02:03] So let me go through some that I've come up with. So the first four of these hazards really all stem from the same uncomfortable fact, which is that when you speak publicly about the meta-crisis or, about any issue, you're speaking in front of potentially everyone or everyone with access to the internet,

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including the very actors and systems that you are trying to change and steer and influence.

[00:02:33] But the microphone and now the algorithms, they don't discriminate. So first, the information can endanger the speaker, then it potentially can protect the powerful, then it can actually arm and benefit the powerful, not in a planned way. And now, in the era of AI, everything we say gets metabolized by the machine, Moloch, the Borg, the Superorganism itself, which has implications.

[00:03:13] So I'm gonna take these first four, hazards one at a time. So the first one, is truth to power. What The Great Simplification platform describes, to use one of many examples, is at its core a coming shift away from the global economic and political order of the last sixty to eighty years. And describing that trajectory too precisely, too close to the bullseye of the drivers and the causes and the logic eventually becomes threatening to the people and institutions whose power depends on the old story continuing.

[00:03:54] So speaking truth to power, of course, has been dangerous for as long as there have been truth and power, and I've joked before, only partly joking, about not wanting the Eye of Sauron turning towards rural Minnesota. The risk isn't about me or TGS, but anyone speaking truth to power in these times, and this hazard lands on the speaker.

[00:04:19] And because of that, I think it silences voices that you will likely never hear. Okay, hazard number two I'll call the inoculation hazard. Suppose you've worked out a strategy for how ordinary humans in service of life and the future of a, a betterment of society figure out a way to collaborate and outmaneuver concentrated dark triad power, the psychopathic individual and institutional behaviors that currently are steering so much, of the economic superorganism in our society.

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[00:04:56] The moment you publish that strategy, the system you're trying to influence sees it, hears it, reads it as well, and immediately develops antibodies. It's kind of like announcing the next football play in the huddle over the stadium loudspeaker. Might be cool for the fans, but the opposing team would immediately shift their defense.

[00:05:21] So some of the most important strategic thinking happening right now in the world is deliberately not public, and it can't be, and that bothers me quite a bit, as someone committed to transparency, and openness and truth. But in order to remain effective and avoid this hazard, some things by definition must be left unsaid Okay.

[00:05:50] a related hazard number three is, for lack of a better term, the dual use hazard. When information is power, a clear synthesis of society's fragilities and bottlenecks and leverage points, and the like can both help and hurt your cause, because the same map that builds, community resilience to a different audience also helps a hedge fund position to profit from the current, biophysical setup, or helps an opportunist corner a scarce good in the market, or maybe helps even a hostile nation find the weak spots.

[00:06:34] And I've spent 20-some years trying to draw an accurate map of the human predicament, and I have to live with the fact that metaphorical arsonists can read maps just as well as the metaphorical firefighters I'm hope-- I'm speaking to in the TGS audience, and probably better, because the arsonists are better funded, more incentivized, and are probably paying closer attention This is a new one.

[00:07:06] Hazard number four is something I've thought a lot about lately, and I'll call it the, AI ingestion hazard. Everything said publicly now becomes training data for a large language model. Every essay and podcast transcript, every carefully reasoned and logically laid out synthesis of our predicament and where

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to go gets ingested, and then metabolized by large language models that are owned, for the most part, by large entities maximizing profit and growth, and then gets served back into the Superorganism and its behaviors at scale.

[00:07:50] And of course, it used to be that publishing something and having a bad actor actually find it and absorb it and put it to use, that was all separated by a lot of effort and, time and attention, and the distance between those things and, acting on them today is approximately zero, which means hazards one, two, and three I just outlined stop being risks that might materialize and become the default condition from speaking or writing anything.

[00:08:26] And I really don't think our culture has even begun to reckon with the phase shift this represents for our public discourse. And personally, my decision, not that I have any high-octane insights or intel, but my insights and intel are my own. So I've recently decided to keep ten percent of or maybe twenty percent of what I know and what I think and what I believe to myself or for in-person meetings with no AI note-taker.

[00:09:01] In other words I think I have to consciously build a wall to separate authentic Nate from the brain of the Borg. and I'll have more to say about this, in the future. Okay, so those are the first four. Hazard number five, is a bit bittersweet, and I'll call it the spotlight hazard. There are people right now getting extraordinary things done, in the world, in the metacrisis space I can speak to, protecting millions of acres of rainforest, using existing tax law to shield local ecosystems, building super creative finance structures that redirect, current capital flows more in service of life.

[00:09:49] And I know some-- many of these people, and these, projects specifically, and I'm aware of many more that are happening, and I really wanna share and platform them, obviously. But I can't, and neither can the folks doing

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the work, because these strategies work precisely because no one is watching or aware of their details.

[00:10:14] So you publicize the land deal and prices triple because the sellers are now aware of it and they hold out. Or you publicize, a tax approach and that loophole suddenly gets closed. And sure, there are some good ideas that have positive feedbacks when they're shared publicly, a--and that's a good thing.

[00:10:37] But in other cases, a public spotlight kills the very thing that it's trying to celebrate and advance. And the few stories like this that ever do become public get told years afterward, once the telling can no longer disrupt them. And my colleague, DJ White, has shared a few of those on his podcast here.

[00:11:00] this information hazard is particularly poignant for me because so many of you look to this channel for hope, for evidence that good directional things are happening despite, the myriad risks we see on the horizon. I don't have a lot of these examples, but I do have numerous stories of amazing initiatives happening right now that I cannot tell.

[00:11:31] So the hope is real, but it is now also structurally invisible, and there's a relationship between those two things that I wanted to call out. Okay, hazard number six I'll call the Cassandra timing hazard, and many of you might relate to this one. True things said too early burn the credibility of the person or the group saying them.

[00:12:02] I watched this happen with peak oil, where being early on a critical and relevant and nuanced issue pretty much looked identical to being wrong for about 15 years. By the time the underlying logic reasserts itself, the messengers have mostly been discounted, and the warning then arrives pre-refuted.

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[00:12:28] This has happened a lot in the environmental movement. So timing is itself part of the information hazard calculus. Same thing with climate and plastics and other meta-crisis topics. You say true things too early, and you lose the audience that you're gonna need later. Of course, say it too late, and then it no longer matters.

[00:12:50] so there's a narrow window where a warning is both believable and actionable, and hitting that window is probably, more parts art and luck than science. Okay, hazard number seven, I'll call the self-fulfilling prophecy hazard, and this was the first one I named back in that earlier frankly. There are times when being aware of a risk or that something might happen potentially makes it more likely to happen.

[00:13:24] Explaining why a bank run is likely and then a bank run occurring would be a classic example. A bank can be perfectly solvent, but if enough depositors suddenly believe that it isn't and act accordingly by pulling out their money, then it becomes insolvent in just a few days. It wasn't a change in facts so much, but the change in aggregate belief that triggered the banking chain reaction.

[00:13:53] There are many risks in our financial systems, in our supply chains, in our geopolitics that look and feel dormant as long as they stay below the threshold of our collective attention and understanding. So describing them precisely, publicly, with enough reach could move them across that threshold I still think this is an accurate description of this risk, but I actually worry far less about this risk now because there is so much serious and risky truth out there now, and the world pretty much hasn't budged.

[00:14:36] probably because there's been cry wolf sort of dynamic, and also the info is embedded in an ocean of algorithmic nonsense. But in theory, this is a key information hazard risk. Okay, number eight I will call the musical chairs hazard. Longtime viewers know I use musical chairs as a metaphor for our financial

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system, where from a biophysical claims perspective, the chairs people think they own via money and stocks and bonds and credit vastly outnumber the actual chairs, in effect, the actual source and sink capacity of the world represented by that money.

[00:15:24] Well, once people truly internalize that there aren't enough chairs, the individually rational move is to grab a chair early. And so the wider that such awareness would spread, the more you risk seeing things like hoarding, capital flight, capital controls, resource nationalism, a prepping arms race and, all those things, in aggregate actually make the music stop sooner than it would have.

[00:15:59] So the information itself doesn't create the shortage, but it can accelerate the stampede. and looking historically, the people who move first are generally not the people who most need a chair Hazard number nine, the hazard of despair. Hearing the full truth of our situation, without agency, without community, without something to do with your hands and your time and your heart and your neighbors and your community makes a lot of people worse off than if they had never heard any of it.

[00:16:41] I've said before that telling someone the whole story and then walking away is almost a form of spite, which is why I stopped publicly speaking seven or eight years ago for a while. And I get emails every week from people who found this material and went through a very dark period, months, in some cases, years.

[00:17:00] So every time I record something, there is a weighing, invisible to you of how much reality a general audience can metabolize. so that's a risk. Hazard number ten is the mirror twin of this one of despair, and I'll call it the reassurance hazard. Because in order to avoid the previous hazard, for a lot of communicators, the response then is to soften the story at a hopeful ending, keep people comfortable.

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[00:17:37] And if everyone tells a gentler story than they actually personally believe is the reality, society ends up planning for a future that none of the analysts actually privately expect. So we're kind of damned in both directions, which is why this work is damned hard. Because telling the whole story, the whole systemic truth of how all these things fits together, it hurts some of the people hearing it.

[00:18:06] But softening the story hurts all of us, and the future of society, because a culture that only hears the gentle version of these things will never take action in a creative, imaginary, emergent sense to prevent the worst. So walking that line, I think, is the actual work here. And back in that original, frankly, I mentioned the story of James Stockdale, the prisoner of war, who observed that neither the optimist nor the pessimist survived the camp.

[00:18:39] It was the realists, the ones who faced the brutal facts while simultaneously keeping faith that they would eventually get out. And there is an 11th, hazard that follows directly from those last two, and it lands on you, the audience. I'll call it the half map hazard. Because when communicators like me share these meta risks but hold back the strategies or more correctly, don't actually know the strategies for all the reasons I described earlier, people end up with something like half of a map, and people with half of a map, but 100% of the emotion still act.

[00:19:28] They just act on the half they have. So we variously get panic responses and snake oil solutions and demagogues channeling real anxieties towards the perceived but wrong villains. So naming the problems without a corresponding playbook potentially invites responses that make the problems worse and that was the end of my list until this morning, when I went for a bike ride in the heat, and I thought of this one.

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[00:20:04] It turns out that managing these previous 11 hazards creates a final hazard, number 12, and it lands on the holder of the information. I could call it, the weighing hazard or the paranoia hazard or something like that. But once you start weighing everything that you're aware of and that you know against everything that you can safely say on this or that platform, that weighing itself becomes a burden and a risk.

[00:20:36] This is a real thing, I assure you. you second-guess, you self-censor, you wonder which sentence is gonna be the one that draws attention. And carrying unsayable knowledge by yourself over years, is a bit like slow-drip water torture. So managing the hazards becomes its own hazard

[00:21:04] I wonder what you all think. there are probably other information hazards from telling the truth publicly. maybe drop them in the comments, or in the chat section. So where does this leave us? Certainly, none of this is an argument for silence. Every one of these hazards is an argument for care, for thinking about what to say and when and to whom, and at what scale and resolution.

[00:21:35] It's why I will keep being honest and open with you going forward. I mean, that is the core of my ethos here. But I also acknowledge that there are things I know that I'm not gonna say, and I would rather explain that openly than pretend that these constraints don't exist. Because the alternative, a world where the only people who are speaking freely are those who haven't thought about consequences or don't care about them, seems to me, quite a bit worse.

[00:22:12] And this applies to anyone working on any of the civilizational risk we collectively face, not The Great Simplification platform per se, but I personally do feel these risks and wanted to share a bit of how I'm thinking about them. And maybe the deepest response to all twelve of these information hazards is the same one I keep advising and arriving at from other directions, which is to grow

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trust and community at human scales, because the information that becomes hazardous when it's shouted on a global microphone often becomes benign or even healing when we instead share it around a kitchen table or, as I talked about, on last week's Frankly, a hearth in the commons among people who know each other.

[00:23:06] And some truths travel best at the speed of, IRL relationships that's in real life. I'm just Hanging out with younger people. So continue to prioritize finding the others and build the islands of coherence. And if more and more of these small pockets, of coherence get connected just beneath the surface and away from the Eye of Sauron, perhaps the emergent outcomes might positively surprise us in a way that no one could predict.

[00:23:49] Something a little lighter next week, maybe. Have a good weekend. I'll talk to you soon.