



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

On the Successfulness of Venting and Its Venues

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Padilla Cruz, Manuel. "On the Successfulness of Venting and Its Venues." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8, no. 2 (2019): 39-48.

Short url: <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-46P> (provided by WordPress)

In their recent paper “Venting as epistemic work”, Juli Thorson and Christine Baker (2019: 5) depict venting as a face-to-face action. They deem it to differ from consciousness-raising in that the audience of a venting episode may already have their consciousness raised about some state of affairs. Its importance is claimed to reside in its emotional helpfulness: it enables venters to make “[...] sense of the tangled thoughts and feelings” resulting from the epistemic injustice originating it (Thorson and Baker 2019: 6).

Venting succeeds, the authors argue, when the audience understand testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, even if implicitly, and have “[...] the right kind of standpoint” (Thorson and Baker 2019: 4). This facilitates recognition of the venter’s credibility and may prompt the audience to initiate epistemic work by undertaking the appropriate remedial action to eradicate the epistemic injustice in question.

Such a remedial action may simply amount to a re-assessment of the venter’s epistemic personhood. However, venting may be risky and be likely to cause further epistemic damage, Thorson and Baker (2019: 5-6) aver, if someone vents to the wrong person, i.e., a person who has already undermined or is prone to undermine her epistemic personhood.

In a previous paper, I have addressed the pragmatic and conversational features that enable an adequate and precise characterisation of venting (Padilla Cruz 2019). For it to spark off epistemic work, venting must certainly meet certain requisites, which unveil its *felicity conditions* (Searle 1969). In terms of propositional content, venting must focus on a recent or past state of affairs. While its *preparatory condition* establishes that the venter must assess the state of affairs as negative or unfair to herself, its *sincerity condition* determines that the venter must genuinely believe the state of affairs to be detrimental to herself.

Finally, its *essential condition* sets that venting must be an attempt by the venter to have her audience recognise that the state of affairs in question has affected her negatively and given rise to a variety of feelings like indignation, anger, disappointment, anxiety, etc.

However, a series of issues still deserve consideration in order to gain a fuller understanding of why venting can result in epistemic work:

- (i) What does having “the right kind of standpoint” involve?
- (ii) When or why may venting actually be dangerous?
- (iii) Can the interactional locus of venting be limited to face-to-face interaction?

The first issue will be tackled from the angle of *Relevance Theory* (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004), a cognitive pragmatic model that considers the linguistic properties of utterances and the mental operations that they trigger during comprehension. The second issue will be dealt with from an anthropological angle, some notions coming from psychology and the sociocultural or sociolinguistic branch of pragmatics. More specifically, part of the discussion will rely on concepts and viewpoints contributed by *politeness theories*, which centre on human verbal action, its conflict-generating or aggressive potential, and how this is softened or redressed. The last issue will be tackled

from the perspective of digital discourse analysis, which looks into communicative behaviour through the new technologies and how these are exploited for various social practices and purposes. To conclude, in addition to summarising some of the views and ideas this reply presents, some suggestions for further research will be given.

On the Achievement of the Effects Associated With Venting

Thorson and Baker (2019) simply state that venting may result in epistemic work when the audience have “the right kind of standpoint” but they do not duly explain what they take such a standpoint to amount to. This is something that may be done from a cognitive angle by relying on a pragmatic framework concerned with what the human mind does when processing intentional stimuli like utterances: Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004). In particular, the effect attributed to venting may be accounted for on the basis of the relevance-theoretic notions of *cognitive environment*, *mutual cognitive environment* and *metarepresentation*.

Individuals represent reality mentally by constructing assumptions or forging beliefs, and store those that they regard as true. When a state of affairs actually is, or is likely to be, mentally represented, it becomes *manifest* to an individual, since he in effect entertains, or may entertain, (a) belief(s) about it. The whole set of beliefs about states of affairs that he entertains makes up his *cognitive environment* (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995: 39). Although cognitive environments are highly idiosyncratic, those of two or more individuals may be similar in some respects, i.e. as regards their contents. If this happens, those individuals share a *mutual cognitive environment* (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995: 42).

The information that individuals process and mentally represent interacts with already stored information in three ways: by lending support to and strengthening old information, by contradicting and subsequently eliminating it, or by yielding new information that can only be derived from the joint interaction of both old and recently processed information. New information coming from such an interaction amounts to *contextual implications* (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995: 108).

On the other hand, utterances are public –i.e. perceptible, audible– representations of either other private representations –i.e. thoughts, beliefs– or other public ones –i.e. utterances produced by other individuals. Therefore, utterances are *metarepresentations* of the speaker’s own thoughts, but they can also be used to *metarepresent* the thoughts attributed to other individuals or the utterances that they (might) have produced.

In the former case, utterances are *descriptive* metarepresentations; in the latter, they are *attributive metarepresentations*, as long as there is an (easily) identifiable source of those thoughts or utterances. Furthermore, when utterances attributively metarepresent other individuals’ thoughts or words, speakers can also express their own attitudes towards the metarepresented content. The range of attitudes that they can express includes dissociative, endorsing or questioning ones. Expression of any of them renders utterances *echoic* metarepresentations (Wilson 1999; Noh 2000; Sperber 2000).

In heavy-load venting episodes where the audience know nothing about the complainable beforehand, the venter descriptively metarepresents her own thoughts and thus makes manifest to the audience assumptions amounting to new information. If the audience sense that the beliefs about the complainable that they forge are similar to those of the venter and experience similar feelings about it, there arises a *cognitive mutuality* or similarity between their respective cognitive environments, which is indispensable for those individuals to share a common or similar viewpoint. Such a cognitive mutuality will increase if the venter and her audience feel that they (can) further derive similar contextual implications from the beliefs manifest to themselves (Padilla Cruz 2010, 2012).

It is when such a cognitive mutuality or similarity between the venter and the audience's respective cognitive environments is perceived that venting creates the necessary condition leading to epistemic work: the audience is acquainted with a situation, how someone experiencing it feels, its potential consequences and, eventually, how to fight it. When the audience is unaware of a problematic or unfair situation beforehand, this would be what must happen for them to have the right standpoint and be ready to undertake epistemic work.

In turn, when the audience already knows about an unfair situation and the venter is conscious of this, venting does not only metarepresent and make manifest the venter's beliefs, but also attributively metarepresents beliefs already manifest to the audience. Similarity between the venter and the audience's respective cognitive environments already exists, so these intersect in some respects: there is shared information or knowledge about what is vented.

Additionally, both the venter and her audience would realise that they do share (a) common negative attitude(s) towards the vented state of affairs. Hence, the venter may also simultaneously express, in addition to any of the negative attitudes characteristic of venting, a further one of endorsement with that of anger, frustration, wrath, etc., which she is certain that the audience also hold towards the state of affairs in question (Padilla Cruz 2007, 2008, 2010).

Consequently, when the audience are familiarised with what is vented, the venter may signal "the right kind of standpoint" by attributively metarepresenting beliefs already entertained by the audience, expressing her own negative feelings and simultaneously endorsing those of the audience. Such an endorsement is essential for venting to incite epistemic work because it indicates the alignment of the participants in the verbal episode as regards their viewpoints and feelings about the vented unjust state of affairs (Padilla Cruz 2010, 2012).

Why May Venting Be Dangerous?

Through heavy-load venting the venter achieves cognitive mutuality with her audience, whereas in maintenance venting such a mutuality already exists because the venter and her audience's respective cognitive environments intersect in some respects. Venting, however,

may be dangerous, and Thorson and Baker (2019) suggest that this may be the case when someone vents to the wrong person. If so, that person may inflict further epistemic damage.

The cognitive underpinnings of this undesired effect of venting are to be found mainly in an absence of cognitive mutuality, precisely. In other words, the venter and her audience's cognitive environments not only do not intersect, but are different and perhaps (radically) opposed. To put it differently, the assumptions about the complainable which are manifest to the venter and her audience or the beliefs that these entertain do not match. As a result, the venter's action becomes *conflictive*, in Leech's (1983) terms: it questions, challenges or even attacks the audience's viewpoint. Or, in Brown and Levinson's (1987) view, her action amounts to an act *threatening* the audience's *face*.

From an anthropological perspective, individuals are endowed with two quintessential attributes: rationality and face. The latter is the private and public self-image that every competent member of a sociocultural group claims for himself or herself (Goffman 1959, 1967). It is a rather vulnerable, two-sided personal attribute consisting of *positive face*, or the desire to be liked, appraised and admired, and feel that one's actions are perceived as desirable or adequate by other people, and *negative face*, or the desire not to be questioned or challenged, and feel that one's freedom of action is not curtailed by other people or their actions (Brown and Levinson 1987: 101, 129).

Threats to face stem from an individual's own actions but also from other people's actions, so that individuals may put at risk their own positive and negative face, but also those of other individuals at the same time.

Face is a complex and non-stable personal attribute liable to constant (re-)negotiation actions. Its more specific components may even be defined culturally (Arundale 1999). According to Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2008), face may even include what she labels *quality face*, which is linked to an individual's skills, capacities, role, job, etc., and *identity face*, which is connected with the individual's self-ascription to a sociocultural group, self-delineation, values, beliefs, ideology, viewpoints, etc.

When something is vented to a person with differing ideas or views, the venter is somehow challenging that person's ideas or views, and thus challenging that person's identity face. Or, following Brown and Levinson (1987), the venter threatens her audience's positive face, as their viewpoints, ideas or beliefs about a state of affairs may be implicitly suggested not to be desirable, right or adequate. Venting, then, becomes a *face-threatening act*.

The reason why such challenge or threat arises is to be found in two psychological traits. On the one hand, *confirmation bias* or *perseverance of belief* (Klayman 1995). This is the human tendency to tenaciously adhere to beliefs obtained or conclusions drawn by one's own means and for which enough supportive evidence is thought to exist. Confirmation bias makes individuals reluctant to abandon beliefs that they think are well rooted or well founded on evidence or reason.

As a consequence, individuals become or remain *egocentric* –the other psychological trait– and almost blindly trust their own set of beliefs without further questioning and do not admit other individuals’ perspectives. This may also explain why when something is vented to someone, venting may turn out dangerous: the hearer might not be open to differing views and ready to accept criticism, and would perceive the venter’s action as an attack. To it, he would react with some sort of counterattack intended to affirm and secure a safe epistemic position where his beliefs remain unquestioned.

On the Face-to-Face Nature of Venting

Paradoxically, even though the example of venting with which Thorson and Baker (2019) begin their discussion is an e-mail received by one of them, they contend that successful venting must be a face-to-face activity. In other words, venting must occur in situations characterised by the interlocutors’ physical co-presence, where there is immediacy, sequentiality and synchronicity in their verbal contributions (Biber 1988).

Such a claim is excessively restrictive and ignores other advantageous, more recent, less traditional, less text-based forms of communication where those four features of conversational interaction need not be indispensable: computer-mediated communication – e-mailing, instant messaging, blogs, discussion forums, message boards or websites¹– mediated social networks –Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, to name but some– or the many applications for instant texting.

Venting needs not solely occur in face-to-face contact, but could also be successfully accomplished through any of these new technologies, which greatly facilitate visibility or exposure by reaching larger audiences (Signorelli 2017: 4). Indeed, venters could benefit from what these new technologies now offer in order not to simply achieve their goals, but also to increase the impact of their action and secure the desired reaction(s).

The advent and consolidation of new technologies like the computer decades ago, and the mobile phone or the smartphone more recently, gave rise to new forms of communication that rapidly spread and became new sites for a plethora of social practices (Androutsopoulos 2011: 281). As the technologies were developed and updated to satisfy further social, interactive needs, such forms of communication massively gained adept users and these introduced new conventions and ways of interacting: acronyms, lack of punctuation, new opening or closing formulae, innovative address forms, briefness in messages, etc. (Gains 1999; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002; White 2014).

As a result, communication was progressively deprived of its traditional defining features. Their absence may involve disadvantages and increase the probability of misunderstanding, above all when certain new conventions are unknown (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2016; Padilla Cruz, forthcoming), but the new technologies have attempted to overcome them by

¹ In technical terms, the difference between a discussion forum and a message board is that the former contains chains of comments on an issue or topic that may be read in block, while the latter organises contributions in thematic groups that can be selected by users.

facilitating an incredibly rich variety of communicative resources that endow interaction through them with an additional characteristic: *multimodality*.

For instance, texting or messaging tools incorporate a wide range of emoticons enabling the expression of psychological states (Yus Ramos 2014) and offer the possibility of sending images, videos or voice notes. Similarly, e-mail servers, websites, blogs, discussion forums and message boards allow various formats for attachments and postings –textual and (audio)visual– which enable addition of photographs, drawings, videos, recordings, presentations, etc.

Moreover, discussion forums and message boards permit diverse participants to make their contributions or replies to a particular message, thus generating *polylogues*. All these resources are not only exploited by the users in order to make their *informative intention*² clearer or to secure correct understanding by helping other users visualise something, but also affect how users carry out their various social practices in the distinct venues that the new technologies offer. As a consequence, specific genres have been reshaped and redefined.

Each of the new technologies may be an excellent venue for venting and any communicative resource may be exploited for venting. Indeed, photographs, videos or drawings may become the first, initial contribution to a potential technology-mediated exchange that will actually unfold when (an)other participant(s) react(s) by means of a reply, further comments, postings, etc.

Subsequent reactions may give rise to *polylogues*, *threads*, (mass) forwarding, sharing, etc. Accordingly, it is possible to vent not just orally or textually through more traditional verbal means or written media, but also by displaying videos, posting comments, sharing pictures, etc. Venting, then, can also be multimodal and polylogal.

In this respect, Signorelli (2017) has shown how members of an online community subvert dominant discourses concerning obesity through their messages. Similarly, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2018) has also explained how a user of the new technologies took advantage of them in order to denounce the unfair, prejudiced and racist behaviour of a customer at a service encounter.

Smartphone in hand, the user recorded the customer's offensive, denigrating and abusive words on site and posted the video, which was viewed and shared by several other users. This sparked off an impressive number of furious comments and reactions that resulted in the customer being prosecuted for misconduct, abuse and racism.

² An individual's informative intention is the intention to make manifest a specific set of assumptions, i.e. the intention to transmit a specific message (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995).

Conclusion

When the audience is not previously acquainted with the topic of venting, the venter metarepresents and makes manifest her own viewpoints, and voices her negative feelings with a view to achieving cognitive mutuality with her audience. If the audience is already aware of its topic, the venter metarepresents the thoughts and ideas that she attributes to them, and endorses their negative feelings.

Thus, the venter hints that cognitive mutuality between her and the audience actually exists. Cognitive mutuality increases when the audience feel that they can draw contextual implications that are similar to those that the venter can draw.

Cognitive mutuality is essential for achieving the pursued effects through venting, as it involves an alignment between the venter and her audience. If their cognitive environments are not mutual and do not intersect in any respect, venting may be perceived as a questioning of the audience's ideas, ultimately threatening their identity. This is why venting may be dangerous and lead to further epistemic damage: the audience may attempt to secure their epistemic position by counterattacking.

Venting cannot be limited to traditional forms of social interaction such as face-to-face verbal communication or written communication. On the contrary, it may appear in more recent technology-mediated forms of communication, which potential venters can certainly take advantage of with a view to reaching larger audiences and magnifying its impact. The new and fascinating challenge that pragmatists, analysts of mediated discourse and communication, researchers in the new technologies and social epistemologists interested in venting now face is to examine and account for the dynamics of newer technology-based forms of venting and their contribution to fighting and eradicating injustices and inequalities.

Future research could look into the characteristics of and constraints on multimodal and polylogal venting, and ascertain their effectiveness. Scholars could additionally examine strategies and techniques deployed in order to increase the exposure of vented states of affairs and the (dis)advantages of specific media or venues. It could also be illuminating to investigate if venting can blend with or shade into other actions such as shaming.

These are just some avenues for future research which will surely shed much light onto this social and epistemic practice and its consequences, and widen our understanding thereof.

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