



We all know them: people who drone on incessantly, without drawing breath, without contemplating, without listening. Is it just us, or are these blowhards on the rise?

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MANY YEARS ago, I had a falling-out with a friend over his partner and, no, it's not what you're thinking. The way I remember it is that he'd been dating two women for a few months and one evening, after a few drinks, he asked me who I thought was more suited to him.

The first woman, Virginia*, was a South African-born consultant here on holidays from Canada. The second was the ebullient Rebecca* from Hobart. In retrospect, the correct answer should have been obvious: "Not sure. Which one do you think?" And then, "look at that amazing flock of crimson rosellas."

Instead, I immediately said: "Virginia."

"Why?" my friend asked.

"Because Rebecca never stops talking."

My friend ended up choosing Rebecca – but not only did he end up choosing Rebecca, he married Rebecca. And, of course, he told Rebecca what I'd said.

Our friendship never fully recovered, and – as you can imagine – my relationship with Rebecca remained strained for decades.

But the point (apart from not asking – or answering – loaded questions) is this: There are people who talk too much and we all know them. Over-talkers. They

talk when there's nothing to say. They talk when there's everything to say but they're the only ones saying it. They don't seem to realise that there are others in the room who could help out with the conversational load, because for some inexplicable reason they feel duty-bound to carry the load on their own. They plough on, unabbreviated, unstoppable, uninterruptable.

And if you do manage to get a word in by hurling yourself into a conversational crevice, they will pause – mildly surprised that you exist – before taking up exactly where they left off.

In psychological terms it's called logorrhoea and it derives from the Greek word *logos*, meaning word, and *rrhoea*, meaning flow. In its worst form, it's a never-ending torrent of words often associated with brain trauma. In its more everyday form, it's a constant need to talk without a corresponding need to listen.

Or to *even ask a single question!* Actually, that's not quite true. They do ask questions. They just don't want answers.

"So, how are you going?" an old friend will say. Before I've begun to shape a response, he'll be out of the blocks again: "Anyway enough about you, let's get back to me." Which would be quite funny if he wasn't semi-serious.

THE FIRST rule of conversational etiquette is surely that it's a two-way street, not a one-way side alley. There are amber lights, speed bumps and flowerbeds to be observed, yet for some reason the over-talker cannot take his or her foot off the pedal. In fact, they seem more than happy to mow down any pedestrian in their way, particularly if they're talking under the influence.

I know another man who is so brilliant, there's no subject on earth that seems beyond him. Quantum physics? Have a listen to his new theory on entanglement. Labor Party preselection? He's all over the national conference standing orders. Miley Cyrus's four-album deal with Hollywood Records? Don't get him started.

Seat this man at a dinner party for 10 people and just watch the oxygen escape the room. Two of the guests will have chewed their elbows off by the main course; four more will have fallen, numb from stupefaction, into their dessert bowls, and the remaining three will be staring at the melting candle wax as if the psilocybin entrée just kicked in.

Will this man have noticed? No. He's got a lot to say and only a limited time to say it; onwards he'll surge, mistaking the clamped smiles of politeness for interest, even fascination.

Then there are the interrupters who can be one and the same with the disagreeers. They'll not only never let you finish a sentence, they'll never agree with any sentence you utter.

"The Beatles put out a lot of albums in seven years," you might suggest, mildly.

"No, they didn't, what makes you say that?"

Then there are the one-uppers. "You were robbed in Marrakesh? ... Yeah, that's tough. Actually, I was robbed *and* abducted in Casablanca."

Sometimes it's just about turning the conversation back to themselves, which is of course what the narcissists do.

"Your entire family was killed in a car crash? Bummer. My goldfish died, so I've been through the grief thing, too."

How much is it about gender? Plenty. Most women I know are astonished by how much men, particularly older men, will freely talk over them.

"It's like the sound of a female voice is a kind of primal cue for a lot of men," one friend tells me. "In a boardroom, you'll see guys immediately start looking at their phones when a woman begins to speak. Or at a dinner, they'll turn away and start a separate conversation, maybe about something important like the offside rule in soccer."

That's not the half of it. I would wager big money that there's hardly a woman in the country who hasn't sat through a first date a) dumbfounded by how much the

man talked about himself, and b) amazed by the fact he failed to ask her a single, solitary question.

SO, WHAT'S behind this epidemic of over-talking, and this seemingly rampant inability to ask questions or listen properly? Is it the get-your-skates-on hustle culture we live in and the fact that our devices have created a collective attention deficit disorder, along with a contagion of self-absorption?

Is it a kind of Tourette Syndrome where the non-stop talking is a neurological glitch that's impossible to switch off? Is it a monumental ego presuming the right to dominate a room and to hell with everybody else?

Or is it, as Arundhati Roy observed in her 1997 novel, *The God of Small Things*, that people become "garrulous" through fear, and that they keep this fear at bay with a constant "babble".

Maybe that's it – the fear of silence that Nigerian writer Ayòbámi Adébáyò has also talked about. "I was overwhelmed with the urge to fill every silence with words," she has said. "Silence to me was a void in the universe that could suck us all in. It was my assignment to block this deadly void with words and save the world." Jabbering as planetary rescue remedy.

Here's another way to potentially save the world, all you over-talkers. Stop. Pause. Listen. *Really listen.* Don't just marshal your arguments while someone else is talking so you can demolish them when they've

finished (if, in fact, you let them finish). Conversations are about taking turns, and, amazing as it sounds, you might actually learn something from listening.

John Clarke, the late, great New Zealand-born comedian, satirist and writer, was a legendary communicator. His collaborator and fellow writer Bryan Dawe claims to have once had a three-and-a-half-day conversation with him; while other friends remember being able to put down the phone, make a cup of tea and come back to find Clarke still in full flow.

But here's the thing. Clarke didn't just love to talk, he loved to listen – to all manner of people, from all walks of life. He was curious and wedded to the radical notion that conversation involved more than one person.

A colleague of mine profiled Clarke for this magazine many years ago. She still remembers how much Clarke loved the idea of conversation. "He said that great conversation was like drifting down a river together, that a conversation gets much further when it's allowed to flow.

"If someone is constantly interrupting the flow to disagree or point out why you're wrong, if they keep steering the boat into conversational snags, or hog the tiller, it gets nowhere."

Which is the case with so many exchanges today. They're not true conversations because there's no play of minds, no play of hearts, no cues that might indicate mutual interest or regard.

There's also no allowance for the eloquence of silence, which has a music all of its own. ■

** Identifying features have been changed.*