Case Studies in Rational Communication

I've had numerous successful conversations using these techniques to change people's minds when they held irrational beliefs that are at odds with their goals. After getting practice in day-to-day conversations, I began to go on radio shows and do podcasts. Those are high-stakes environments with little room for error. I'm going to discuss some of those interviews, focusing on interviews I did in 2016 and 2017 with talk show hosts in the US who self-identify as conservative (Whether the word "conservative" accurately describes them is a separate discussion I won't get into here). While liberals can and do also sometimes hold irrational beliefs, in the current US political environment conservatives have strong political motivations to avoid going against post-truth politics, and thus often double down on self-serving deceptions. Consequently, examples where conservative radio hosts changed their behaviors and words to orient more toward truth, offer the best test cases of the communication strategies discussed in my book, *Pro Truth: A Practical Plan for Putting Truth Back in Politics.*

Interview 1: Trump and the role of Truth in Politics

Gleb Tsipursky Interview with Douglas Coleman, July 17, 2017

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vkyu538T4ts.)

Around 16 minutes and 45 seconds into the clip, Coleman said that Trump "spoke the truth that many people did not want to hear." I had to shift gears very quickly, reassessing the whole shape and course of the interview, and updating my evaluation of the situation and my intended approach, to effectively target a conservative audience. My response - in this and all other similar interviews - had to walk a fine line. I had to avoid inspiring defensive or aggressive responses by making the other person feel wrong or threatened, while still conveying my points effectively. Around 16:55, you will find my response. I first echoed Coleman's point, saying that Trump had indeed expressed many ideas that people in this country did not want to hear. That created an immediate atmosphere of agreement between Coleman and me on something and helped him feel good about our interaction, validating his

emotions. At the same time, I avoided saying anything untruthful or inaccurate: the plain statement that Trump said many things that plenty of people in the US did not want to hear is very accurate. Going onward, as part of that same response, I talked about Trump speaking to people's guts, their emotions, and discussed how some people thought he was authentic. The point about Trump's authenticity is something that conservatives often bring up as a point of pride, and I thought that Coleman might be gesturing at this in his original comment. Of course, I didn't have the opportunity to use gentle questioning and curiosity here on the radio show, but my experience in these sorts of interviews enabled me to have a pretty good assessment of what Coleman's perspective would probably turn out to be. While I wanted to make sure to acknowledge the perception of Trump as authentic, I also aimed to highlight how perceptions of authenticity came from speaking to people's guts, not reason. I was willing to let audience members judge for themselves whether they think that's a good idea.

Naturally, I could not leave unquestioned the idea that Trump spoke the truth: if I had done so, I'd have done more harm than good. So after my two initial comments designed to help Douglas Coleman be comfortable with the conversation, at around 17:05, I stated that we need to be careful about what we mean by truth. Gently nudging the conversation toward the definition of the truth that I wanted to use, I posed the rhetorical question of whether Trump actually described reality on the ground, whether he conveyed the facts. I then provided the answer myself: sometimes he did. and sometimes he didn't. To lessen the sting of that comment, I made sure to then quickly say that Clinton sometimes conveyed the facts, and sometimes did not. Then, I went on to say that we can discuss - if Coleman wishes - how to compare who is more truthful. I made sure to finish with a statement that again echoed Coleman, stating "there are certain truths, like you say yourself, that Trump was expressing that other politicians were not expressing." Coleman responded at 17:37, and the first thing he said was "right": probably he was pleased by my near-quoting of his words. He then began to discuss the difference between objective, scientific truths - the facts - and personal, subjective truths, specifically bringing up belief in what is written in the Bible as an example of the latter.

Starting my response at 18:13, I agreed, and emphasized that we need to differentiate the truth about physical reality from the truth about personal beliefs. That set up a really good basis for the rest of our

conversation. Coleman at around 19:00 steered the conversation to the Pro-Truth Pledge, and asked whether the goal is to get politicians and other public figures to describe their beliefs accurately, or to speak the truth about the issues. My response was that we can't read people's minds and thus are unable to verify whether they accurately report their beliefs. However, we can verify the facts about the issues, what Coleman referred to as "scientific facts". Again I used Coleman's own his language. As the discussion moved on, I used a number of conservative-friendly talking points, for example disparaging the myth spread mainly by liberals that the September 11 terrorist attack was an inside job by George W. Bush. Whenever I brought up mainstream news sources, I focused on conservative ones such as The Wall Street Journal. My comments emphasized how the Pro-Truth Pledge offers an opportunity to fight myths from liberal side that lack a factual basis, while omitting to mention that most myths come from conservatives, and that much of the attacks on mainstream news sources stem from the right. The conversation flowed very smoothly after that, and by the end of the conversation, Douglas Coleman ended up taking the Pro-Truth Pledge.

Interview 2: **Trump's reasons for firing FBI Director James Comey**
Gleb Tsipursky interview with Scott Sloan on May 11, 2017
(https://www.spreaker.com/user/gleb_tsipursky/was-comeys-firing-justified-a-conservati)

Scott Sloan is a prominent conservative radio show host on the conservative radio station 700WLW. Sloan is popular enough and prominent enough that he had a friendly chat with Trump on his show during the election campaign. I went on Sloan's show on May 11, 2017, two days after Trump fired FBI Director James Comey, to speak about this firing. To provide some context for readers who aren't familiar with the situation, Trump has made a series of claims about why he chose to fire Comey. These claims changed a lot from day to day: most of them in essence claimed that the dismissal of Comey was to ensure competent leadership of the FBI, and motivated by concerns about Comey's alleged incompetence in handling the investigation of Clinton's email server. By contrast, the Democratic leadership claimed that Trump fired Comey to prevent the latter from digging deeper into Trump's potential connections with Russia, and into allegations of collusion with Russia on hacking the US presidential election.

Instead of jumping into the thick of the debate about the Comey-Trump events at the start of my discussion with Sloan I was able to establish a sense of shared goals for both of us. I suggested that

we all want our top investigative bodies to be headed by competent officials, and that we also all want to ensure that these officials can freely investigate other branches of the government – including the administration – without fear of retribution or obstruction of these investigations. Sloan agreed, establishing that common bond between us, positioning us as allies trying to solve a common problem instead of potential enemies.

Following that, I appealed to his identity and emotions by establishing both of us as truth-oriented individuals. To do so, I talked about how everyone is vulnerable to *confirmation bias*, our tendency of our minds to interpret new information in accordance with our past beliefs. Specifically, I pointed to a *YouGov* poll conducted on May 10 and 11, 2017, which demonstrated that only 24 percent of Republicans believed Trump fired Comey in part to disrupt the Russia investigation, while 75 percent of Democrats believed that. Then, I talked about how, since Sloan and I have mutually shared goals both of ensuring competent leadership and of preventing obstruction, we need to figure out effective ways of addressing confirmation bias. One effective way to fight confirmation bias involves focusing on the opinions of people who both have the most information, and have political motivations to support one side, and yet don't do so or even support the other side. Sloan agreed that this seemed a reasonable approach.

Next, I pointed out that pretty much all Democratic members of Congress, but also several prominent Republicans, such as Senator McCain, expressed concerns over Comey's firing. Sloan countered that McCain is known as a maverick who occasionally breaks ranks, and is part of a broader group of Republicans who are not fond of Trump. In my response, I highlighted that plenty of other Republicans who generally toe the party line and support Trump also express concerns over Comey's firing. For example, Senate Intelligence Chairman Richard Burr, a North Carolina Republican who heads the Senate's Russia investigation, stated that he was "troubled by the timing and reasoning" of Comey's firing, which "confuses an already difficult investigation for the Committee." So did other influential Republican Senators, such as Bob Corker, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senator Corker stated in response to Trump firing Comey that "It is essential that ongoing investigations are fulsome and free of political interference until their completion." By the time I and Sloan spoke, altogether about 40 Republican members of Congress had expressed concerns over

Comey's firing, while virtually every Democrat is calling for an independent commission or special prosecutor to look into Comey's firing.

Thus, many of those in the know - federal lawmakers - who had clear political motivation to align with Trump over the firing of James Comey, instead broke ranks. This verifiable fact provides strong evidence that the decision to fire Comey was less about Comey's alleged incompetence, or about past politically controversial actions by Comey, and more about the Russia investigation than anything else. After some further conversation, Sloan acknowledged the validity of this behavioral science-informed perspective and accepted that the evidence pointed against Trump's narrative on this subject.

Interview 3: Responding to Muslim terrorist attacks:
Gleb Tsipursky interview with Scott Sloan on November 30, 2016.
(https://www.spreaker.com/user/gleb_tsipursky/responding-rationally-to-the-ohio-state-)

My conversation with Sloan about the dismissal of James Comey was far from the first time I had appeared on his show to talk with him about politically fraught matters. For example, I was on his show on November 30, 2016, to talk about the terrorist attack at Ohio State University. Two days earlier, a Somali Muslim, Abdul Razak Ali Artan, rammed his car into a crowd of students and then knifed several people before being shot dead by a university police officer. Like many conservatives, Sloan associated Muslims with terrorism and wanted to persecute them harshly. I approached the ensuing discussion by considering his emotions and goals. I sought to meet him where he was, as opposed to where I would have liked him to be. I assessed that he valued safety and security first and foremost, and that he had negative feelings toward Muslims because he perceived them as a threat to safety and security. As we began talking, I validated the host's emotions, saying it was natural and intuitive in view of recent events to feel anger and fear toward Muslims, as our brains naturally take shortcuts by stereotyping groups based on the actions of one member of the group. However, such stereotyping often does not serve our actual goals and values.

We discussed how in 2015 (according to johnstonarchive.net), there were seven terrorist acts in the United States, committed by a total of nine terrorists. Six of the nine were motivated, in some part, by

Islamic beliefs. A 2011 Pew survey estimated that the United States had 1.8 million Muslim adults. Dividing this number by the six who committed terrorist acts gives a one-in-300,000 chance that any Muslim you see would commit a terrorist act in a given year. That's like picking out a terrorist from the number of people in several football stadiums. So using "Muslim" as a filter for "terrorist" actually wastes our precious resources dedicated to safety and security, and lets the real terrorists commit attacks.

I then discussed with Sloan how, if we persecute Muslims - for instance through creating a Muslim registry or through heavy policing of Muslim neighborhoods - Muslim communities would be much less likely to help us root out potential terrorists in their midst. So, I concluded, for the sake of making us safer we shouldn't antagonize Muslim communities, which have been quite cooperative in addressing terrorism concerns. Finally, I discussed how rhetoric critical of Muslims, and anti-Muslim policies, might provoke more Muslims to become terrorists. For instance, BBC reports that terrorist groups have used Trump's rhetoric in their recruitment tapes. This quite clearly makes us less safe and secure, I told Sloan, and so despite any negative feelings some of us might have toward Muslims, it's unwise to act on them. Just as when we hear criticism from our boss and want to scream in his or her face, it may not be the rational thing to do if we value our jobs. We shouldn't go with our gut on policies and rhetoric toward Muslims if we value our security. In the end, Sloan agreed with my points and updated his views on Muslims—not because he felt like being generous toward Muslims, but because he valued his security and safety.

Interview 4: Trump's allegation Obama wiretapped Trump Tower
Gleb Tsipursky interview with Bill Cunningham, March 7, 2017
http://www.spreaker.com/user/gleb_tsipursky/a-conservative-take-on-the-truth-about-t)

Sloan and Coleman are far from unique: Bill Cunningham, another prominent conservative talk show host who has had Trump on his show, is ranked 27 among "Most Important Radio Show Talk Hosts" in America by *Talkers Magazine*. He is known as a strong supporter of Trump. Cunningham had me on his show on March 7, 2017 to talk about Trump's allegations that Barack Obama wiretapped Trump Tower in the 2016 presidential election. While I intended to first connect emotionally with Bill

Cunnigham and establish shared goals, Cunningham did not allow me the time to do so. The show started off with a question by Cunningham that was somewhat unexpected for me: Cunningham asked me if it is true that the National Security Agency (NSA) tracks keywords that, when detected, might cause it to automatically perform surveillance of the people who use those words. Certainly, I replied, based on my knowledge of the NSA's surveillance. Cunningham then asked whether Trump might then be accurate in his claim that he was surveilled. Thinking fast, I replied that if Trump had claimed that the NSA had "passively surveilled" him in that way, Trump might well be accurate - but this would not be newsworthy, and it is not what he said. Specifically, I cited the details of Trump's tweets, such as "Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my "wires tapped" in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!" and also "How low has President Obama gone to tapp [sic] my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!"

With the specific details of these tweets now clearly established as the center of the discussion between Cunningham and myself, I highlighted the fact that Trump specifically called out Obama personally for wiretapping Trump Tower, and compared the situation to McCarthyism and Watergate. I pointed out to Cunningham that these comparisons, and the active placing of blame on Obama, led to the storm of media coverage; and Cunningham concurred. Then, I asked if Trump truly had evidence of Obama ordering Trump Tower wiretapped, would Trump have simply tweeted about it as he did, without providing that evidence? He is the president, after all, and can have access to any information he wants. Next, I asked Cunningham to imagine himself in Trump's place: what would he do if he suspected Obama wiretapped his headquarters in the election? Having thought about it, Cunningham stated that he would have gathered the FBI and NSA directors in his office, and gotten them to give him any information they had about this matter. He would not have simply tweeted about it, and then provided no further information. By allowing him to consider hypothetically what he, Cunningham, would do if he were in Trump's shoes – rather than asserting what I thought about Trump's motives - the host was able to try out these ideas and reason through what made sense from within his own worldview. Thus, by the end of the interview, although it got off to a rocky start, conducting the conversation carefully with insights and strategies from behavioral science strategies in mind, let to a favorable result that, given Cunningham's political allegiances, would have been much less likely

without such strategies. Cunningham acknowledged that Trump behaved inappropriately in tweeting his allegations about Obama without providing any evidence.

In all cases, I believe it's likely that our conversations with the host swayed some of the audience to change their perspectives as well. The perceived credibility of the show hosts among their regular listeners makes it likely that, as the hosts revised their views in the course of the conversation, significant numbers of the audience did too.

In conclusion, as we learned from the Bill Cunningham interview, the rational communication strategies I've laid out in this book are far from foolproof. They won't always work exactly as we might wish. It's also arguable that the interview with Cunningham was not the best test case of these strategies, which mainly try to help people who hold irrational beliefs that are at odds with their actual goals, to develop more accurate beliefs. Cunningham, as a strong supporter of Trump, might potentially have been comfortable with intentionally holding or expressing false beliefs for the sake of helping promote and support Trump. Even if that had been the case, the outcome of the Bill Cunningham interview about the Trump / Comey matter was very satisfactory.

Overall my success rate from using rational communication strategies in the kinds of situations I've described above has been quite high, especially when applied to suitable individuals. Further study is needed about how well other people educated in these techniques would succeed when they engage with others in an effort to update their beliefs toward reality. My hypothesis is that they will prove significantly more effective than just plain arguing with people.