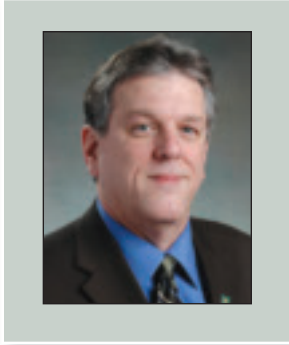


► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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Information Overload in Our Polarized Society

As I write this, my penultimate column for this esteemed *Journal*, I note that this edition will arrive to you around the first day of May. Hopefully by now most of our nation has thawed out from a pretty severe winter. I wish I could say the same for the political climate here in Ohio. I am referring to the issue concerning public employees that has swirled here, in Wisconsin, and in a few other states in recent months. As you, gentle reader, may recall, I've broached sensitive issues in two previous columns. In my January/February 2011 column, "What Is Professionalism?", I discussed public employee unionism as it relates to the environmental health profession in the public sector. In my March 2011 column, "Lemonade in the New Normal," I discussed the environmental health profession in the wake of the Great Recession and its associated repercussions. In this column, I'll attempt to mesh the multiple Venn diagrams of those two issues, overlaid with the constant red vs. blue conflict, and fueled by the incessant flow of information. It may prove to be the most controversial column yet, so here goes. . . .

The information revolution began in the early '90s—who remembers Windows 3.1.1, Netscape, and that first clunky dial-up Internet connection on that PC with miniscule memory and a 250 GB hard drive? The information we process at work has steadily increased logarithmically year by year. I vividly remember getting my first PC at work: a Gateway 2000. Knowing it was coming for some time, I invested beforehand in my first PC at home—an Acer—in 1993. I embraced

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technology, having some sense of its importance for the future. I also remember those first e-mails at work and how cool it was to communicate that way instead of with the typewritten memorandum copied with carbon paper.

Now, the enormity of the information revolution has spread across the world and the flow of information has become, well, unmanageable. Twitter and Facebook and thousands of apps on our smartphones deluge us constantly with information and it never, never stops. As I said, I remember when those first e-mails came across my Novell GroupWise account at work. Given my position in city government coupled with my NEHA responsibilities, I easily receive more e-mails now than I can possibly process in a day. Some are addressed only to me, but more

often than not I am copied on a plethora of messages that don't involve me directly. Then there is always the daily spam that gets past the city's filter into my inbox. How much time does it take to read through those messages, decide what's important and what's not, decide which ones to act on, which ones to delete, what to file for later? I leave my office for meetings and my Blackberry is buzzing; the messages continue.

When I'm home, my private e-mail account and yes, my Facebook messages add even more information to my overstimulated gray matter. As you may recall, in my November column, "Bunnies, Bed Bugs, and Blackberries," I talked about handheld devices that deliver limitless distractions at meetings and I quoted George Will's article about the phenomenon. Additional research in the science of decision making suggests that "information fatigue" can lead us to make poorer decisions. As we strive for the latest information that gets texted, tweeted, or comes to us from CNN to help us arrive at a decision, our brains do not process the information properly in the subconscious (or as we used to say, stew over it), because new information or opinions keep arriving. We tend to give greater weight to the most recent information and let it overwrite valid information that may have been received earlier. It reaches a point where the torrent of raw data causes overload (at least it does in my brain) and I just have to reach a decision by thinking over what I know without additional information.

The amount of information pouring in to us in the early spring this year was, to my

thinking, remarkable. First we had the news of the turmoil in the Middle East resulting in the fall of the Egyptian government and the civil war in Libya, followed by the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Radiation was released into the atmosphere and a reactor meltdown became possible at a pair of nuclear power plants as a result of damage from the rush of seawater. The flow of electronic information on these events was unsurpassed and was rapidly changing every day. In fact, the political revolutions in the Middle East were facilitated by electronic social media. Most of the early video of the tragedy in Japan came to us from individual smartphones, as more than 80% of the Japanese population is wired.

Then we also had the daily drama of what was occurring at the state legislatures in Wisconsin and Ohio—daily protests of unionized public sector employees—that peaked in Madison, Wisconsin, with over 100,000 people demonstrating in and around the capitol. In my March column I discussed “The New Normal” and compared the Great Recession to the Great Depression. I talked about adjusting spending, expectations, and changing the way we think about government. I didn’t discuss in that article the budget deficits of state governments going into the coming budget cycle. Ohio’s is over \$8 billion and Wisconsin’s is nearly \$4 billion and both of those deficits are dwarfed by 15 other state budget shortfalls that range from 15% to over 35% of their entire budget! Our state governments are essentially broke and part of that New Normal is how government, academia, and the private sector will operate in this environment.

Clearly, things have to change. As I discussed in my January/February column, the purpose of unions and professional organizations like NEHA differ: the former is about collective bargaining and the latter is about maintaining standards for a profession. I also said there is no need for any polarization between the two and that a professional environmental health practitioner can embrace his or her profession and collective bargaining concurrently. The landscape has certainly changed in the past few months and the battle to eliminate or sharply curtail collective bargaining in the public sector has become a showdown in Wisconsin and Ohio. The information overload on this topic has reached a crescendo and has me gridlocked, shaking my political phi-

losophy to its very core. Let me explain. The central debate seems to be about the collective bargaining of public employees.

The amount of opinion, information, and misinformation on this single issue is enough to choke a horse. Is there a place for unions in the public sector? Are union wages the cause of governmental budget deficits? Let’s take a closer look. A point I made in an earlier column was that unions were first organized for manufacturing and mining jobs. Some would say the cost of a unionized workforce has driven manufacturing jobs overseas because labor costs have driven prices of products made in the U.S. above what consumers will pay. That point was driven home for me on a recent Diane Sawyer report, “Made in America,” on ABC World News. Her report showed that every item for sale in the Smithsonian Institute’s gift shop, from the bust of George Washington to the Mt. Rushmore scale model to the Declaration of Independence on parchment, was made abroad, mostly in China.

Unions have reached out to organize public sector employees since the first public employees’ union was founded in 1959 in Madison. Without the influx of government workers into unions, unions would have slid into irrelevance. American governments currently employ about 22 million workers. Just under 3 million work for the federal government, 5 million work for states, and 14.5 million work for local government, including public school systems. Of those workers, about 36% are unionized, compared to about 7% of employees in the private sector.

Environmental health practitioners are mostly employed by state and local governments rather than by the federal government or the private sector. It appears to me that the goal of new Republican governors is to break the power of the unions, the single most important financial base of the Democratic party. Anyone can see the GOP strategy there. Public unions gave more than \$171 million to Democratic candidates in the 2010 elections, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. One way to look at it is that those funds come from involuntary contributions through union dues taken from the paychecks of all union employees, whether or not they agree with the union’s political endorsement.

Even with recent sacrifices of furlough days, union collective bargaining contracts involve increased benefit contributions that

usually have a series of pay steps and annual raises. Defined-benefit pension plans are often included that require little or no employee contribution. Those packages are simply not sustainable in the current economic climate of huge budget deficits. Any increased tax to fund them would be untenable. New Democratic governors in states like California, New York, and Connecticut face the same collective bargaining issues. Data compiled by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics confirm that public-sector workers today do better on average than private-sector employees when it comes to pensions and benefits. Also, some people believe that unions put too much emphasis on seniority and tend to protect members who are inefficient.

Arguments for maintaining unions in the public workforce include first and foremost the workers’ ability to have a voice within their organization and to get higher salaries and benefits for their members with the power of organization. Up until now—the New Normal—they have been mostly successful. I can attest that environmental health practitioners who are unionized in Ohio do tend to make higher salaries and have better benefits than their nonunionized counterparts. It can also be argued that the huge contributions of money unions provide to the blue side counterbalance the external funding from large corporations that are funneled mostly to the red side.

The position our elected officials held until recently was that government needed to attract the best and the brightest to provide governmental services at the highest quality possible. These are quality services the public had come to expect—to teach our children, to operate our water and sewage treatment facilities, to protect us with police and fire services, and yes, to have the services of the college-educated environmental health practitioner. So the fight has intensified and the amount of information and misinformation being spewed from both sides of this debate is overwhelming. What should we believe?

The way the issue has played out, at least from my perspective in Ohio, is sadly, the denigration of public service: union or non-union, management or nonmanagement—it just doesn’t seem to matter. When you boil it all away, it comes down to what is being called “pension envy.” The private-sector

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worker does not have access in most cases to a defined-benefit pension program that most state and local employees do. Most of the private sector switched over long ago to defined-contribution plans, the 401(k), with reduced employer contribution if any. Many of those employees with defined-benefit pensions don't get Social Security either because they don't pay into it, but that seems to get lost in the deluge of information. The center of the issue is that taxpayers in the private sector, many of whom have been laid off or at least have had to tighten their belts to unprecedented notches, feel public employees get a much better deal than they do. That has caused huge resentment for public employees to a degree I've never seen before. I've taken a look at the public blogs of local media concerning the Ohio legislature's action that sharply curtails collective bargaining at all levels of government and requires higher employee contributions for pensions and health care. The venom being spewed and outright derision of public employees is unprecedented and in general union and nonunion have been rolled in together as the problem. The resentment is for public employees who have pension plans that will pay for the rest of their lives and that resentment is being electronically chronicled.

I'm perplexed by the flow of information on this topic and how that flow has impacted the views I've held for a long time about my own public service and how government should operate. My political views are also transitioning. Separating the wheat from the chaff, the information from the misinformation, has been a challenge for me. What is left has been so immense it's been hard to digest. This has led to the information overload I alluded to early in the column. At least I believe I've gotten the message that public opinion is now against those of us in public service and there is not much we can do about it. Even though most of us are imbued by the calling of public service, the new attitude from so many of the people we serve, although understandable, is hard to swallow. 🐷



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