Pointless questions

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Hanoi, 07-12-2020

When I was driving home, suddenly I thought: “Does riding a motorbike in Vietnam improve the spatial awareness in football?” In case you wonder why riding motorbike in Vietnam, look at the picture below:

Figure 1: Traffic in Vietnam (Source: Wikipedia; CC BY 3.0)

Then, I tried to develop a method to measure the proficiency of commuting in Vietnamese traffic. Considered any real-life test will be too dangerous; I was convinced that augmented reality is a viable option. Eventually, I concluded that this is a total waste of time.

How many times have we come up with these nonsensical chains of thoughts? Can we optimize our mind to always think about useful questions? Personally, being able to waste your time on silly thoughts will eventually benefit you in the long run. You are going to identify silly thoughts faster and react to opportunities faster than usual.

Since 2017, I have been fortunate enough to be at the moments when my mentor formulated his thoughts into outstanding works. The moments were so fleeting that you might not even realize until they were full-fledged. His discussion of the cost of science was completed in one afternoon [1]. Meanwhile, he needed a night to turn his thought on the ‘publish-or-perish’ culture in Ph.D. training into a manuscript [2]. The most notable of all, his ideas on reforming retractions needed a day [3].

Even though they seem like short papers, they are a culmination of a 23-years career. I do not see it now, but I guess he had wasted time on silly thoughts too. However, I do find these silly thoughts are not entirely useless. They help me with sharpening my thinking when approaching a new problem. Being silly for a moment is also a comedic way to relax after a long day.

As the scientific community has become more open to deal with the reproducibility problems [4], each researcher needs to be robust from the conceptualization stage. The renowned psychologist Amos Tversky once said: “The secret to doing good research is always to be a little underemployed. You waste years by not being able to waste hours.” Thus, it is okay to be silly for a little while.

References

- [1] Vuong, Q. H. (2018). The (ir)rational consideration of the cost of science in transition economies. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2(1), 5.
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- [3] Vuong, Q. H. (2020). Reform retractions to make them more transparent. *Nature*, 582(7811), 149.
- [4] Vuong, Q. H. (2017). Open data, open review and open dialogue in making social sciences plausible. *Nature: Scientific Data Updates*. (Dec 12, 2017). Retrieved from: <https://go.nature.com/37y6nn0>