

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT



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By Sabine Leitner

“They were locked into a room without food or water, and they did not know how they would be able to get out again.” – Do you find this sentence alarming? Well, it might sound scary, especially if we imagine it was done by an employer to their employees or by a terrorist organization to their hostages. But if this sentence simply describes the situation of one of the popular ‘escape rooms’, then it takes on an entirely different meaning. People do it for fun, they not only put themselves into this situation voluntarily, they even pay for it.

Or what about people being made to drink blood, have spiders, cockroaches and other insects put into their mouths and being forced to endure snakebites? In most cases, this would be considered torture. However, in the context of bushtucker trials on the show ‘I’m a celebrity, get me out of here’ it is considered entertainment. Equally, many Coming of Age Rituals in tribal cultures might seem very harsh or cruel in a modern context, but on the other hand, they have prepared young people for life for thousands of years, enabled them to connect with their own inner resources and take on new responsibilities, and this ultimately guaranteed the survival of the whole.

Philosophers and social scientists agree that human action can only be fully understood by relating it to the context in which it takes place.

Nothing can be understood in isolation from its context, and nothing even exists without a context. It is always the context that gives meaning to what we think and do, and explains why we do what we do.

However, we all know that ‘shocking’ material sells much better and gets many more clicks. It is not surprising that in our current world, with all the powerful means available, there is an ‘epidemic’ of taking things out of context in order to get money or attention. But it is a dangerous path that contributes a lot to conflict and tensions between groups, can seriously harm individuals and can divide and polarize societies.

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This can be seen very clearly in politics, where sound bites are taken out of context to create a narrative that may not reflect the true intentions of the speaker. Here is a political example, which I found on the internet. The following sentence by a very well-known politician was widely quoted in the media and used against them: "We're going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business."

But here is the full quote:

"Now we've got to move away from coal and all the other fossil fuels, but I don't want to move away from the people who did the best they could to produce the energy that we relied on. So, for example, I'm the only candidate which has a policy about how to bring economic opportunity using clean renewable energy as the key into coal country.

Because we're going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business, right? And we're going to make it clear that we don't want to forget those people. Those people laboured in those mines for generations, losing their health, often losing their lives to turn on our lights and power our factories."

Another nice example is a famous commercial by the English newspaper The Guardian from 1986. It features a skinhead apparently 'on the run'.

In the second scene he appears to be wrestling a briefcase from the hands of a suited businessman. In the last cut the viewer sees that he is in fact trying to rescue the man from falling bricks.

The award-winning advert was titled 'Points of View' and wanted to demonstrate the importance of seeing the whole picture. It also showed how easily we form an opinion based on first impressions and how quickly we might jump to conclusions.




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It is not easy to establish the whole picture and modern technologies make it also increasingly more difficult to know what is true.

Especially if there are certain interests to present something in a particular light. In addition to that, the world is not a unified 'whole' where all human beings share the same context.

There are many different parallel realities and what appears as 'good' or 'bad' in one context, might be the opposite in another context.

It seems more important than ever to be guided by the values of philosophy, which are a love of truth, of fairness, and of goodness, and to develop our own discernment.

May the inner philosopher that is in every human being rise up to meet these challenging times where truth seems to be one of the many casualties. ☪☪

