

# **Clear and Present Thinking**

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# Chapter Eight:

## Reasonable Doubt

**Reasonable doubt** is the most practical and least theoretical branch of logic. It handles the basic question of why, if at all, you should believe something. To answer that question, the principles of reasonable doubt help you to understand and examine how information moves through a society's intellectual environment, how it changes as it moves, how it reaches your mind, and, once it reaches you, how your own biases and presuppositions might affect it, including when you communicate it on to others.

Most people are familiar with the term 'reasonable doubt' from watching courtroom dramas on television or in film. It is an important legal concept used by judges and juries to help them decide whether an accused person is innocent or guilty. But reasonable doubt is something that can also be applied to many more situations. You might be asked to spend money on something. You might be invited to join a club, organization, or association of some kind. You might be asked to endorse a certain religious, political, or moral belief; for instance, by signing a petition, attending a rally, voting, or by sharing images and articles on the internet. You might be asked to do something that you have never done before. In such situations, and others like them, it can be very useful to think of such requests as propositions, and then decide whether they are believable. There are some fairly straightforward ways to do this, and if you find that the argument is weak, or incomplete, or objectionable, or for any reason fishy, it is probably wise to invoke your reasonable doubt.

### 8.1. What is Reasonable Doubt?

As we saw in the discussion of good thinking habits, reasonable doubt is related to healthy **skepticism**. We defined healthy skepticism as 'a general unwillingness to accept that things are (always) as they appear to be.' Reasonable doubt is like a refinement or a specialization of the habit of healthy skepticism. Let's define it here as the suspension of one's acceptance of some statement or proposition, due to an absence of sufficient support for that statement. Here are some questions you can ask yourself to help you decide whether some reasonable doubt is warranted in a given situation.

- Is there decent and readily available evidence which proves that the proposition is true?
- Can you see that evidence for yourself?
- Can the proposition be put to some kind of test, especially a scientific test which could definitively prove that it is false?
- Does the argument in support of the proposition pass the test of **Ockham's razor**? In other words, is it simple?
- Is the person who asserted the idea someone you have good reason to trust?
- Is it consistent with other propositions that you are already reasonably sure are true?
- Is it consistent with your **worldview**?

The more of these questions you answer with 'no', the more grounds you have for reasonable doubt. You can also ask critical questions about a few alternative

propositions. For instance:

- Is there decent evidence that supports some other proposition, and/or which contradicts the one you are considering?
- Are there other, perhaps simpler ways to interpret the evidence that supports the proposition? (**Ockham's razor** again!)
- What additional implications or conclusions can be drawn from the proposition? Are they morally unacceptable, or inconsistent with the speaker's original intentions or worldview, or inconsistent with some other part of the argument, or questionable for some other reason?

Again, if you can answer these questions with a 'yes', you probably have a good basis for reasonable doubt.

A proposition is not automatically disproven just because someone could reasonably doubt it. You might have all the reasons listed above for why you should reject the proposition, and then later discover that it was true after all—but in such a situation, you have not made a logical mistake. The point of having reasonable doubt is that you should not be too quick to believe anything and everything offered to you. Rather, you should accept only those propositions which are supported by the best information and the strongest argument available to you at the time. If that information changes in the future, the good critical thinker also changes his or her beliefs accordingly. In general, reasonable doubt means withholding one's acceptance of the unsupported statement until some acceptable source of support can be found. So, having reasonable doubt is like taking a 'wait and see' attitude because it is open to the idea that the support for the statement may exist. But until that support appears, it assumes that the statement is likely to be false. Depending on your level of curiosity, and perhaps also how much free time you have, you may choose to go looking for that support. But if there are decisions to be made or problems to be solved, and good grounds for reasonable doubt in your mind, you will almost always be better off basing your decision, or the solution

## 8.1. What is Reasonable Doubt?

to your problem, on the best quality information that you already possess.

Here are a few examples of such situations where you should engage your reasonable doubt:

- A salesman offers you an amazing deal, but the offer seems too good to be true.
- Your employer asks you to do something that falls outside your usual (or even contractual) range of responsibilities.
- An advertiser makes an improbable or bold claim about the capabilities of a product he's selling.
- A politician makes a bold claim about an opponent's character, history, or true intentions.
- Someone invents an unlikely new technology: Super-fast computers, 'miracle' medicines or weight-loss pills, cold-fusion nuclear power, clean fossil fuels, perpetual motion machines, hi-tech invisibility cloak, transparent aluminium, etc.
- A charity or a humanitarian aid organization asks you to donate to a worthy cause, but critics say the organization might be a front for a private, for-profit corporation, or a missionary recruitment effort for a religious group. Or, the critics might allege that most of the money collected by the organization goes to pay the leadership, or to advertise to raise more funds, and that very little goes to its projects.
- A film, video game, music album, or book suddenly becomes popular, and you want to decide whether it really is as good as it seems everyone around you says it is (and therefore, whether you should buy it too).
- A new friend tells you an unusual story about his family background; for instance, that he is the heir to a prestigious noble title, or is secretly very rich, or was personally involved in an important historical event.
- You think you might have had a paranormal experience such as seeing a ghost, UFO, angel, or the like—or someone you know might be describing such an experience.
- A health problem you might be experiencing feels like it might be worse than what your doctor tells you it is.
- Someone shares with you a news article that made him or her angry; someone else says that the same article is 'fake news'.

By the way: Scientists have identified what they believe to be the area of the brain responsible for belief and doubt: It's the ventromedial prefrontal cortex. This area of the brain deteriorates in old age a little faster than other areas, which explains why elderly people tend to fall for scams somewhat more readily than younger people. (If you are not an elderly person yourself, you may want to keep this in mind and help safeguard the interests of your grandparents.) Here are the summary remarks from the researchers who discovered this, as published in the scientific journal *Frontiers in Neuroscience*:

'Belief is first, easy, inexorable with comprehension of any cognition, and substantiated by representations in the post-rolandic cortex. Disbelief is retroactive, difficult, vulnerable to disruption, and mediated by the vmPFC. This asymmetry in the process of belief and doubt suggests that false doctrines in the 'marketplace of ideas' may not be as benign as is often assumed. Indeed, normal individuals are prone to misleading information, propaganda, fraud, and deception, especially in situations where their cognitive resources are depleted. In our theory, the more effortful process of disbelief (to items initially believed) is mediated by the vmPFC; which, in old age, tends to disproportionately lose structural integrity and associated functionality. Thus, we suggest that vulnerability to misleading information, outright deception, and fraud in older persons is the specific result of a deficit in the doubt process which is mediated by the vmPFC.'<sup>1</sup>

And with that observation in mind, let's get underway.

## 8.2. Doubting Your Own Eyes and Ears

Most of the time, it's perfectly rational to believe that something is true when you've seen or heard it for yourself. Yet there are several factors that can alter your perceptions of things, and if those factors are in play, it can be reasonable to doubt your own senses.

Our expectations, stereotypes, and bad thinking habits affect what we see, and how we remember

what we see. In 1947, psychologists Gordon Allport and Joseph Postman conducted an experiment in which they showed people a drawing of two men, one black and one white, confronting each other on a subway car. The white man held a knife in his hand. Later, the people were asked to describe the picture. Around half of them said the knife was in the black man's hand. Psychologists Boon & Davies replicated the experiment in 1987, and the picture they used depicted two white men, but the man with the knife wore a business suit and the other wore workman's clothes. Again, many people recalled later that the knife was in the workman's hands.<sup>2</sup> In these examples, the viewer's stereotypes and prejudices caused them to construct certain memories differently in their minds. Those who recalled the pictures wrongly genuinely believed that the picture was as they described it later. They were not deliberately telling lies. But because of unconscious expectations based in stereotypes operating unconsciously in their minds, they got the picture wrong. This affects all kinds of situations where eyewitness testimony is important: Criminal investigations, for instance. Because people's perceptions can be distorted in this way, police detectives prefer hard physical evidence over eyewitness testimony when investigating crime scenes and bringing evidence to prosecutors. Eyewitnesses are often too unreliable.

Expectation, as a form of **observer bias**, tends to happen when we have a strong enough desire for something to be true. We will interpret our personal experiences in the way that best fits our desires. One of the most common ways in which we do this is when we see human faces in objects where no such shapes exist. Psychologists call this effect **pareidolia**, which we can define as a psychological phenomenon in which vague and ambiguous sensory information is perceived as meaningful. And this happens because the mind is almost always working to organize the sensory information it receives, the better to understand it. The 'face on Mars', the hill in the Cydonia region of the planet Mars that resembled a human face in a 1976 photograph, is a well-known example of this. Other examples of pareidolia include astronomer Percival Lowell's diagrams of 'canals' on the surface

<sup>1</sup> Asp, Manzel, Koestner, Cole, Denburg, and Tranel. 'A Neuropsychological Test of Belief and Doubt: Damage to Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex Increases Credulity for Misleading Advertising' *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 2012; 6:100. 9 July 2012. <sup>2</sup> Boon, J. C., & Davis, G. M. (1987). Rumours greatly exaggerated: Allport and Postman's apocryphal study. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*, 19(4), 430-440.

of the planet Mars, first published 1895. The case of a piece of toast that had a burn mark resembling the face of Christ is another famous example.<sup>3</sup> The people involved in these examples strongly wanted to believe that what they were seeing is what they thought it was, and their strong desires affected their perceptions.

Sometimes, the mere verbal suggestion that things might be a certain way is enough to make people expect to see them that way. In 2007, close to Halloween, I tried this out myself. On a visit to a cornfield maze with some children I mentioned that the cornfield had been the site of a War of 1812 battle, and that the ghosts of some of the soldiers had been seen there once or twice over the years. Sure enough, half an hour later, one of the children ran out of the maze panting with fright and claiming to have seen one. He hadn't, of course. But the darkness, the creepy music fed through hidden speakers that the farmer had placed in the maze, and my suggestion of what he might have seen, was enough to produce in his consciousness the expectation of a certain experience, which he then imposed on his perceptions. (He may also have been merely intending to please me by confirming my story.) Some reality TV shows exploit the psychological power of suggestion to create the expectation of ghosts, aliens, or whatever other thing the show might be about in the minds of the show's participants.

Environments where the sensory information is vague or ambiguous can also influence our expectations, and they can affect what we think we see and hear. The situation might be too dark, too bright, too hazy, too foggy, or too noisy. Clouds, smoke, garbled voices, multiple sources of loud noise, blurry photos, strange smells, etc. might obstruct your senses. Because of pareidolia, the mind will often impose an organized pattern on the ambiguous sights and sounds. Similarly, you may want to consider doubting your own eyes and ears when your senses are physically impaired. You might be sick, injured, stressed, tired, dizzy, excited, on drugs, hypnotized, distracted, disoriented, or drunk. Certain illnesses, such as diabetic myopia, can also affect one's eyesight. Each of these situations constitutes a kind of impairment and can lead you to perceive things in the world inaccurately. It is often under such

circumstances that people have paranormal or supernatural experiences of seeing ghosts, UFOs, angels, etc. Putting aside the possibility for the moment that such things could be real: If you are seeing a thing like this when visual conditions are bad, or while impaired, it may be warranted to discount your first thoughts about what it is you are seeing.

Another curious source of error in the interpretation of our personal experiences is called the **nocebo effect**. This was discovered during clinical trials for experimental drugs, when patients given the placebo reported experiencing the real drug's side-effects. In one recent experiment, two groups of patients were given a skin cream and one group was told that the side-effects included increased pain sensitivity. The nocebo effect was triggered by the information that the patients received, including the packaging on the box, and the price. The cream with the more colourful box and the higher price triggered the nocebo effect more often. But both creams were placebos that contained no medically active ingredients at all.<sup>4</sup> A 'nocebo', then, is the opposite of a placebo. It is a physical condition similar to an illness, an allergic reaction, or other medical symptom, and the patient is often experiencing real physical pain. But there is in fact no physical or chemical trigger present. The symptom is physical and real, but its true cause is entirely psychosomatic. Although it may sound counterintuitive, the best way to cure someone of a nocebo symptom is not to tell the person their pain isn't real. Rather, it's to tell the person that the condition is not serious and won't last, and that other people who have had the same symptom after exposure to the (non-existent) cause ended up recovering quickly.

### 8.3. Doubting Your Common Sense

How trustworthy is 'common sense'? Most of the time, it is about as trustworthy as anything you may have learned from your intellectual environment and your worldview. But it is equally as open to criticism as anything else you might believe. For example: Many people believe, on the basis of common sense, that shark attacks are common, that flying in an airplane

<sup>3</sup> 'Woman 'Blessed by the Holy Toast', *BBC News*, 17 November 2004.

<sup>4</sup> 'Why Side-Effects May Seem Worse for High-Priced Drugs' *CBC News*, 18 October 2017.

is the most dangerous way to travel, that exposure to cold air will make you sick, and that having a shower will help you sober up more quickly after a night of heavy drinking. But all of these common-sense beliefs are actually false. Only around ten people per year are attacked by sharks, out of the many millions of people who, at this moment, are swimming or boating in the world's oceans. People got sick more often during colder months not because of cold air, but because they huddled together in their (warm) houses more often, and thus swapped germs more often. Statistically, in terms of the number of deaths per year, and the number of deaths per vehicle-mile, it is much more dangerous to drive a car than to fly in a commercial aircraft. And when you shower after drinking, your liver processes the same amount of alcohol in your bloodstream as it would have done if you sat in your living room and watched television instead.

One of the reasons that common sense is not always reliable is because it changes all the time, and it can be very different from one community to another. For example, about a century or so in the past, common sense used to lead people to believe that animals don't feel pain, that kings rule their countries by divine right, and that no one would ever walk on the moon. But today, common sense tells us that all three of those beliefs are false. So, the next time that someone tells you that something is common sense, then ask yourself whether that thing is common, or whether it is really sensible. There's a good chance that it's neither.

Another reason you may need to occasionally doubt your common sense is that people often appeal to common sense to disguise the habits of self-interest and face saving. In this way, common sense is not a body of knowledge, but a kind of device for self-deception.

As a general rule: Whether a proposition is true or false has nothing to do with whether it is part of your common sense. It might be true, or it might be false, but that will depend on whether it is supported by good reasons, arguments, and evidence, and not on whether it happens to be common, or seem sensical.

Of course, this is not the only way people use the phrase 'common sense'. Sometimes, people will refer

**Many people believe, on the basis of common sense, that shark attacks are common, that flying in an airplane is the most dangerous way to travel, that exposure to cold air will make you sick, and that having a shower will help you sober up more quickly after a night of heavy drinking.**





to common sense when they are criticizing another's choices or holding them responsible for their actions. In this way, common sense means having a proper understanding of the likely consequences of choices and actions. And 'having no common sense' means lacking enough foresight to predict the consequences of one's actions. This is a somewhat different use of the term. In that case, when someone tells you to 'use your common sense,' try to think of everything that applies to the situation that she is talking about, and what should be done about it. Making careful observations and asking the right questions (skills discussed back in Chapter 2) are helpful here.

### 8.4. Doubting Your Emotions, Instincts, and Intuitions

Your emotions, gut feelings, and instincts should also be doubted once in a while. That is not the same as suppressing or denying them, of course. One's emotions can sometimes play a very useful role in the process of reasoning. Contemporary culture places a lot of emphasis and importance upon emotional knowledge: The lyrics of pop songs, and the dialogue in well-loved films and television shows, encourage us to 'do what your heart tells you,' 'do what feels right,' and 'if it makes you happy, it can't be bad.' Pop psychologists, self-help books, and motivational speakers might also encourage you to 'follow your bliss,' 'visualize success,' and 'believe in yourself.' They might claim that we should always maintain a positive, optimistic attitude, and avoid excessive self-criticism or self-doubt, because they say such 'negative energies' will attract bad fortune, sabotage our endeavours, and turn us into failures. But just like everything else, it is important to examine and evaluate what your heart tells you, just as you examine your common sense, your worldview, and anything that anyone else tells you.

Most emotions are triggered responses to an event, situation, or perception that is either happening 'out there' in the world or in your own mind and body. Sometimes the emotions are responding to things we may be only barely consciously aware of: Subtle details, mnemonic associations, subliminal symbols, and

the like. In this way, your instincts and emotions can be very helpful. They can warn of danger, guide you toward beneficial ends, or (at the very least) inform you that there is more going on in the situation than is obvious at first glance. Many emotions are also triggered by our psychological desires and attachments, for instance, the attachment to one's home, workplace, friends and loved ones, or future goals. We might experience irrational fear, anger, or even depression when one of those attachments is threatened, which can be an indicator of how deeply attached to such things you are. In this way, your instincts and emotions can provide you with useful knowledge, especially self-knowledge.

At other times, however, your emotions can get in the way of clear thinking. Stereotypes, prejudices, obsessive or criminal behaviour, and even self-destructive behaviour are often supported by strong emotions. Someone who is excessively optimistic about his or her success in a business venture, for instance, might not fully understand the risks involved, or the true influence of factors beyond her control. Therefore, she is more likely to make bad decisions. Someone who lives in fear of dangers that don't exist or which are very remote (someone afraid of being involved in a plane crash, or being abducted by aliens, perhaps?), or dangers that are very remote (being bitten by a shark?) is not being benefitted by his emotions.

Furthermore, an emotional state is almost never a good enough reason, *by itself*, to explain or justify someone's actions. You might accept the explanation of a man who said that he ran from the burning house because he was afraid of dying there. But you would probably reject the explanation of a man who said he set fire to someone's house because doing so gave him pleasure. You might believe that man was telling the truth about his reasons, but that is not the same as accepting or supporting those reasons. It can also happen that you are emotionally attached to something that you shouldn't be. Someone who, for instance, is absolutely convinced that he will get the job, or win the bicycle race, or get a very high mark on his essay because he 'just knows' that's what will happen, and he is convinced of this for no other reason than because



he ‘feels it in his heart’ is almost certainly setting himself up for an embarrassing failure. And finally, it is possible to be mistaken about one’s own feelings and mistaken about the right way to act upon them. A man who visits the home of a woman he loves two or three times a day, and who peers into her windows, and leaves notes under her door, and follows everything she does on her computer social networks is not really loving her: Rather, it would be more accurate to say he is stalking her.

In cases where your emotions and instincts seem to be pulling you one way or another, or making you feel something and you are not at first sure why, observe and question them just as you would any other aspect of your situation.

- Do you know exactly what you are feeling? Can you put a name on it?
- Can you identify what event, situation, attachment, or perception is stimulating the feeling?
- Is the feeling interfering with your ability to do something?
- Is the feeling interfering with your objectivity? (Don’t be too quick to say ‘no’.)
- Is a physical state in your own body contributing to the feeling? For instance, are you sleep deprived, or hungry, or ill, or have you had too much coffee lately?
- What are other people in the situation feeling?
- Are you feeling nothing at all? (This can be as much an indicator of your feelings as an overwhelming emotion.)
- Has the feeling been invoked by something that someone has said? And if so, can the statement be examined on its own merits, like any other argument?

Diagnostic questions like these can be hard to ask. Caught up in the moment, it might not occur to you to slow down, calm yourself, and observe and question your own feelings. But if you can cultivate the habit of casting reasonable doubt upon your own instincts and intuitions when it seems there is a risk that they may lead you astray, you are more likely to make better, more intelligent decisions.

## 8.5. Confirmation Bias

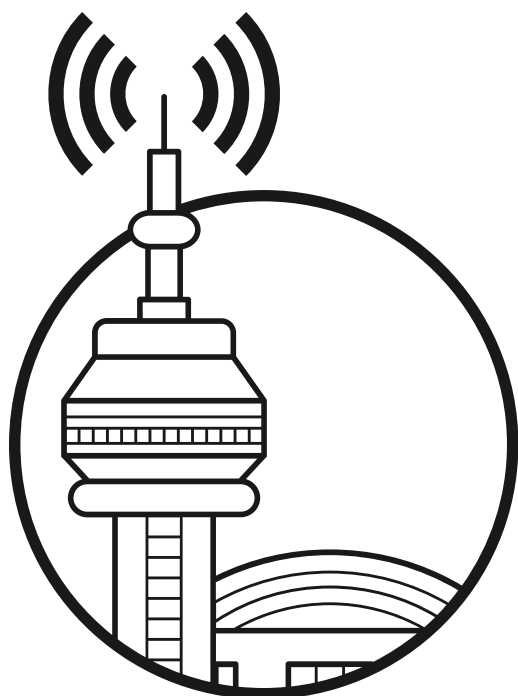
Suppose that there is decent evidence available that supports whatever it is you are asked to believe. Even then, there are several ways in which people ‘skew’ or ‘twist’ their handling or their interpretation of that evidence, to allow them to continue believing whatever they may want to believe, whether it is rational to believe it or not. The name for this kind of faulty reasoning is **confirmation bias**. The term was coined in Peter Watson, an English psychologist, in 1960. It refers to the way people tend to favour evidence that supports beliefs they already have, as well as to ignore evidence that does not support those beliefs. But when we downplay or ignore evidence that goes against our beliefs, we can end up making bad decisions. For instance, we might judge the riskiness of some action poorly. We might not fully understand new information which becomes available. People put money into bad investments, vote for corrupt politicians, reinforce stereotypes, ignore health problems in their own bodies, and sometimes even reinforce feelings of depression and fear, because of the way they suppress evidence that goes against what they believe about themselves, other people, or their situation.

Three of the most common ways that people commit confirmation bias is by resisting contrary evidence, looking for confirming evidence, and preferring available evidence.

Resisting contrary evidence means avoiding, ignoring, re-interpreting, or downplaying evidence that goes against what you believe. Political activists, scientists, investors, religious believers, and people from all kinds of professions will do this when they feel their most cherished ideas are threatened. But if you want to test some statement to find out if it’s true, you need to look at more than just the evidence that confirms it. You also need to look for the evidence which refutes it as well, and in both cases, you should assess how relevant or strong the evidence is.

Another part of confirmation bias is the habit of preferring confirming evidence. This means favouring evidence that supports or agrees with whatever you already believe. When we are particularly committed

**“The CN Tower in Toronto has a secret deck, just above the topmost viewing platform, which has special quantum-radio broadcast machines that control people’s minds.” \***



\* 8.6. Lack of Evidence

or attached to a certain idea, we often trick ourselves into seeking out and using only the confirming evidence. This can lead us to miss out on other kinds of evidence that are equally relevant. As a result, we can end up accepting a proposition that isn't true, or failing to properly understand a given problem. And we can harm our own interests in all the same ways that resisting contrary evidence can do. To cite a real-world example: In the years leading up to the banking collapse of September 2008, there were many people in the banking and investment industries who knew that a crisis was coming. Profits from debt refinancing, sales of derivatives, sub-prime mortgages, and the like could not rise forever, they said. But those people were told to keep their objections quiet because the system, at the time, was still profitable. Some of these critics were threatened with being fired if they persisted with their warnings. But their warnings came true, with catastrophic results for the world economy.

Here's the example that philosophy professors almost always use: The proposition 'all swans are white.' If you wanted to find out whether this proposition is true, you could look for white swans. However, even if you saw nothing but white swans, you would not be able to deductively claim that the proposition is true. At the most, you could claim 'all the swans I've seen so far are white.' Therefore, you should also look for black swans. The more white swans you see, the stronger your claim becomes. But one sighting of one black swan is all that it you need to deductively prove that the proposition is false. (That example, by the way, also illustrates the difference between **deductive** and **inductive** reasoning (see Chapter 5). Also of note: I suppose someone could say, 'Well a black swan is not a true swan!' But that would be a case of the 'No True Scotsman' fallacy.)

Although it is not, strictly speaking, a part of confirmation bias, there is a third way that people inadvertently bias their handling of evidence: Preferring available evidence. This means preferring the evidence that is easy to find. The evidence might be memorable, or very impressive, or simply psychologically persuasive. It might be the evidence that happens to come up on your social media stream, as your friends share

the website links or the memes that amuse or interest them. It might be the evidence that happens to appear in the first three or four items on a search engine result list. But the easy evidence is not necessarily *all* the evidence!

One more topic to consider in relation to observer bias is the **Dunning-Kruger effect**. Named two psychologists from Cornell University, David Dunning and Justin Kruger, this is the kind of observer bias in which people believe that they are more highly skilled than they really are. As a result, people may end up taking on tasks that they are not prepared for, or they might incorrectly judge the competence of others.

## 8.6. Lack of Evidence

Probably the most important occasion when you should exercise reasonable doubt is when you are told something is true, but there's no evidence you can see that supports it. Or, there might be evidence which favours the statement, but that evidence is very slim and unreliable. Or perhaps the evidence can be interpreted differently, to support much simpler conclusions. Here are some examples:

Whenever American presidents visit Canada, their hidden purpose is to invite Canada to join the USA as its 51<sup>st</sup> state.

The CN Tower in Toronto has a secret deck, just above the topmost viewing platform, which has special quantum-radio broadcast machines that control people's minds.

It is also reasonable to doubt a proposition when it's impossible for you to find out the evidence for yourself. The claim might be one which no one could verify. Or, the best means to test the claim might require expensive equipment or scientific training that you don't possess. Or, there might be someone stopping you from verifying the claim for yourself. For example:

I have invented a machine that uses cold fusion to

## 8.6. Lack of Evidence

produce cheap and abundant electrical power. It will fit under your kitchen counter—soon every household in the world will have one! But for proprietary reasons I will not allow outside investigators to open the box and see how it works.

In cases like these, a lot depends on how much you are willing to trust the speaker. In this example the speaker might not want to open the box because he is afraid that someone might steal his patent. A professional third-party investigator, such as an engineer or scientist, could be bound by a legal contract to not infringe his copyright. If you happen to know that the person is a competent entrepreneur with a graduate degree in nuclear physics, you might be willing to trust him, at least for a little while. But if you happen to know that he has a degree in theatre, not physics, then you should probably keep walking.

The overall point is that you should not always automatically believe what people tell you. Rather, you should proportion your willingness to believe according to a few guidelines, such as:

### THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE SPEAKER.

Is she an expert in the relevant field? Is she someone you personally know? Is she someone who has proven to be trustworthy before? Is she acting from genuine care for you, some kind of self-interest, or some mix of both? Etc.

### THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE CLAIM.

How consistent is the claim with what you already know to be possible or likely? Or, how contrary?

### THE AMOUNT OF WORK YOU'RE BEING ASKED TO DO.

Are you being asked to spend a little bit of money? A lot of money? Vote a certain way? Eat or drink something that will affect your health? Give some personal information away (your phone number, street address, etc.)? Make some public declaration of belief? Do something that will take five minutes? An hour? A year?

### THE AMOUNT OF TRANSPARENCY YOU'RE GIVEN.

If someone asks you to believe something without showing you what's behind the curtain, you are almost always better off doubting it.

As a final note about evidence: Claims that assert something amazing, unlikely, or wild, or even just especially unusual, are often called **extraordinary claims**. We can create a maxim of reason to help us remember not to fall for manipulations and trickery: ‘Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence’<sup>5</sup>. And if that extraordinary evidence is lacking, it’s best to assume the claim is false.

## 8.7. Contradictory Claims

Probably the most obvious occasion when you should invoke your reasonable doubt is when you are given two or more propositions and they cannot both be true at the same time.

Suppose, for example, you log into your favourite social network, and you get a ‘friend’ invitation from someone famous. Suppose it’s Jodie Whittaker, the actor who currently stars in the BBC sci-fi television series *Doctor Who*. The proposition you are asked to believe, in this situation, is that the person asking to be added to your list really is the actor she says she is. But you probably have another proposition in your mind which states that famous actors do not send requests like that to people they do not know. These two propositions cannot both be true at the same time: They contradict each other. So, what you have to do is decide which of these you have greater reason to believe, and which you have greater reason to doubt. In this example, you have much greater reason to believe the second proposition, which is much more consistent with other things that are well known about celebrities. And you also have some excellent alternative ways to explain who might really be trying to ‘add’ you: A friend of yours who wants to play a practical joke on you, for instance. Or it might be a salesman, or a con artist, a stalker whose real profile you have blocked, or someone else who is trying to gain access to information about you.

When evaluating two or more contradictory claims, it could be the case that one of them is true; however, on the other hand, it may also be the case that they are all false. But when the claims contradict one another, it cannot be the case that they are all true

## 8.7. Contradictory Claims

at the same time. Here are a few more examples:

The stars in the night sky are actually pinpoints of light shining through little chinks in a cinder-block wall which surrounds our solar system.

You probably should not accept this claim because it conflicts with just about everything scientists around the world have discovered about the stars.

There are sharks and piranhas living in the Ottawa river.

This claim conflicts with a few basic facts about sharks and piranhas, and about geography, all of which are easy to find out.

Sometimes you might be given two statements that don’t contradict any practical knowledge you have about the world, and that don’t contradict your world-view, but they do contradict each other. For example, consider these two statements:

Next summer, Heritage College will receive a multi-million-dollar extension. When the work is done, our building will be twice as big!

Next summer, the Heritage College building will be demolished and replaced with another, brand new, much bigger building.

Either one of these statements might be true, and they are both fairly consistent with other things that you might know about the building, such as that it is slightly overcrowded, etc. But they clearly cannot both be true at the same time. So, in this situation, you should doubt *both* of them, and then ask a few teachers or administrators what they might know about the situation.

Contradictory claims are also one of the ways you can spot a scam or a confidence trick. We’ll see more about such things later on.

## 8.8. Conspiracy Theories

A common kind of extraordinary claim is the

<sup>5</sup> Popularised by the American scientist and television presenter Carl Sagan, in his 1980 television series *Cosmos*. The earliest version of this maxim is likely this one from French scientist-philosopher Pierre Simon Laplace (1749-1827): “The weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportioned to its strangeness.”

conspiracy theory. For example, many people believe that the manned moon landings made between 1969 and 1972 were filmed in a studio; the governments of the United States and other powerful countries are controlled by a secret society called the Illuminati; and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were an ‘inside job’. They also may believe that some of the vaccines given to babies, such as the MMR vaccine, cause recipients to develop learning disabilities, and can even stunt their brain growth. Some people believe that the vapor trails in the sky left behind by jet aircraft contain mind-altering chemicals that governments use to pacify the populations in cities and keep them obedient to the laws. **Extraordinary claims** like these are often called **conspiracy theories**.

This is how the American writer Mark Twain defined a conspiracy: ‘A secret agreement of a number of men for the pursuance of policies which they dare not admit in public.’ For our purposes, let’s define a conspiracy theory as one that attempts to explain some event or situation in the world by saying it is the work of a secret group of people, or a group of people who work in secret, and who have nefarious aims. Part of why conspiracy theories seem compelling is because they often provide (usually false) answers to some of those philosophical questions which form part of our worldviews. They offer a reassurance that the world is intelligible, even if it’s not especially just or fair; they suppose that events which appear to be random are under someone’s control, even if that someone is a villain. And by researching or promoting a conspiracy theory, believers can gain a sense of purpose and agency in the world.

Sometimes there is at least *some* evidence available that seems to support the theory. For instance, those who believe the moon landings didn’t happen often point to the photos from the lunar surface, in which there are no stars in the sky. Those who believe in secret government-type conspiracies point to the ‘occult’ symbol of a pyramid with an eye on the top on the back of the American \$1 bill. And those who believe in various 9/11 conspiracies note that the World Trade Center towers fell in a way that strongly resembles a controlled demolition.

But in most conspiracy theories, there are usually other, and far simpler, ways to explain the evidence. To continue the examples given above: There are no stars in the moon landing videos because their feeble light is drowned out by the glare of the moon’s surface, dispersing the light of the sun. This is the same reason we do not see the stars on earth during the day: The glare of the sun, dispersed in the atmosphere, drowns them out. The ‘Illuminati Pyramid’ on the back of the American \$1 bill was placed there as a symbol that the American union is both glorious, and unfinished. It also has to do with the deistic and humanist ideas espoused by the authors of the U.S. Constitution. And the World Trade Center towers fell in an apparently controlled way because they were designed to do so in the event of a fire, just like all modern skyscrapers. Remember your Ockham’s razor! If other explanations are simpler, and require fewer presuppositions, you should prefer those other explanations, until or unless extraordinary evidence appears.

Scholars who study conspiracy theories have found that they tend to have these four assumptions in common:

- They concern groups, large or small, rather than individuals;
- The group has illegal or sinister aims.
- The group’s activities are highly organized, not accidental.
- The planning for their activities is carried out in secret, not in public.<sup>6</sup>

These four assumptions don’t appear equally in all conspiracy theories. A given conspiracy theory will emphasise one or two of those assumptions above the others, but most of them will have all the elements present to some degree. They can also come with some variations. For instance, some conspiracy theories do concern individuals. But those individuals are often members of, or even the leaders of, some kind of group: The CEOs of large corporations, the heads of powerful governments or churches, etc.

To the list given above, I would like to add the following features, not all of which are universal, and

6 Young & Nathanson, *Sanctifying Misandry* (McGill / Queens University Press, 2010).



not all of which are assumptions of the theory. But the more complex the theory, the more likely these features will appear:

- They attempt to create fear in order to generate support for some value program, or for some commercial venture (they're selling books, health supplement pills, weapons, etc).
- They divert attention away from real social problems and real injustices.
- The community of the theory's believers often have derogatory names for non-believers, which strip the non-believers of their rationality or even their humanity: 'Sheep,' 'dupes,' 'the herd,' 'the ignorant masses,' or (my personal favourite groaner) 'sheeple.'

If the explanation for some event involves these assumptions, and especially if these assumptions are closed to critical questioning (like a value program), you've probably found a conspiracy theory. Here, you should definitely invoke your reasonable doubt!

Some of you might have heard the phrase 'Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they are not out to get you!' In the same way, just because some extraordinary claim bears these signs of a conspiracy theory doesn't mean the claim is false. But it *does* mean you are almost certainly better off assuming the claim is false. In the spirit of open-mindedness, it's fine to remain open to the idea that someday you may indeed see some extraordinary evidence in support of the extraordinary claim—but until that day arrives, it's best to let the claim go.

## 8.9. Doubting Experts and Professionals

Given that we don't always have the time or the opportunity to figure out things for ourselves, we have to rely on experts at least some of the time. This is natural and normal, and not a problem. But we must still decide when it is rational to trust an expert, and when it is rational not to. And in some specialized fields, if you are not a professional in that field, you are probably not in a very good position to judge whether

## 8.9. Doubting Experts and Professionals

the expert has done a good job. It is also sometimes the case that professionals and experts are in a position to harm as well as help their clients. So, how do you know who is an expert, and who is not? And how do we decide whether a given expert can be trusted?

One of the most frequently quoted definitions of a 'profession' was written in 1914 by United States Supreme Court judge Louis Brandeis. He said a profession is:

...an occupation for which the necessary preliminary training is intellectual in character, involving knowledge and to some extent learning, as distinguished from mere skill; which is pursued largely for others, and not merely for one's own self; and in which the financial return is not the accepted measure of success.<sup>7</sup>

We might criticize this definition by saying that its emphasis on service to others renders it too narrow. There are certainly experts who practice their profession in order to benefit themselves. Yet the point that Brandeis was trying to reach was that such service to the public is an essential part of what makes a professional person trustworthy.

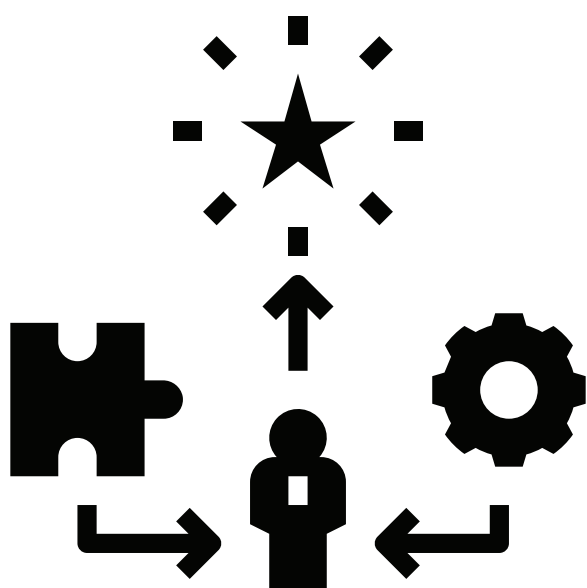
Let's define an expert here as someone who is much more knowledgeable in a particular subject area or field than most other people are, due to some combination of experience and specialized training. Experts tend to have:

- Extensive formal education and training from college or university, or some other reputable institution relevant to their field.
- A lot of experience: Several years at least; and the more, the better.
- A decent reputation among other experts in the same field, and among clients.
- A history of professional accomplishments.

Yet even when it is appropriate to call someone an expert, there are still circumstances in which it may be prudent to doubt what that person says. Here are some examples:

<sup>7</sup> Louis Brandeis, *Business—A Profession* (Boston, USA: Hale, Cushman, & Flint, 1933), p. 2.

**Profession: an occupation for which the necessary preliminary training is intellectual in character, involving knowledge and to some extent learning, as distinguished from mere skill; which is pursued largely for others, and not merely for one's own self; and in which the financial return is not the accepted measure of success.**



- The person is speaking about a topic outside of his or her actual training and experience, and yet claims to be an expert in that field.
- The person admits he's not an expert in some field, but he relies on his reputation or fame in a second (perhaps unrelated) field to establish trustworthiness in the first field.
- There are sufficient reasons to believe that the expert is inappropriately influenced or biased (for instance, by the corporation that funds his or her research), or that he is involved in a conflict of interest.
- When various experts disagree with one another about the matter under consideration.

Regarding the third point: Many academic science journals now encourage their contributors to put a 'conflict of interest statement' in their published articles, to help allay concerns about whether corporate or government power influenced their research. Such statements usually look like this: 'The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.'

The fourth point deserves a closer look, too. Experts disagree among themselves all the time, and this one way that they keep their skills sharp and their judgments sound. But most of the time, most experts in a given field will have a general consensus about the most important principles of their field. It would be weird, for instance, if there was a lot of disagreement among aeronautical engineers concerning whether propeller-driven aircraft need to have wings, or if archaeologists disagreed over whether aliens had built the Pyramids of Egypt. (The truth is out there.) But when the experts have a lot of disagreement among themselves, non-experts should stand back and exercise some reasonable doubt. When the experts who agree with some claim are the great majority, and those who disagree with that claim are a very small minority, then we have less reason to doubt it. For example, the overwhelming majority of qualified scientists in relevant fields believe that climate change and global warming are real, and they are caused by human activities. In late 2012, Dr James Powell, executive



director of the National Physical Science Consortium, surveyed 13,950 articles published in peer-reviewed, professional scientific journals. He found that only 24 of them claimed that the theory of global warming was false.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, then, there is no controversy among climate scientists about the causes of global warming. When Jim Bridenstine, a climate change denier, was appointed head of NASA, for example, he was able to see the data for himself, and he changed his mind after only one month.<sup>9</sup>

Here are a few further points to consider. It is possible to doubt what an expert says without at the same time doubting that they are an expert. It's also not rational to believe something just because an expert said it's true, and for no other reason (which would be to commit the fallacy of appeal to authority). Finally, there are some questions which, while we can seek advice opinions from experts on them, we are still going to have to resolve for ourselves. Moral, social, religious, and political questions are among the kinds of questions each person should decide, by means of reason, on his or her own.

## 8.10. Scams, Frauds, and Confidence Tricks

One of my associates once saw a job listing on Craigslist, a popular internet forum, in which a purported employer was looking for a mystery shopper (a person who poses as a normal customer at some business, and then reports about his or her experience back to the employer). She was sent a cheque for \$3,000 and then asked to wire-transfer the money to an address in a foreign country, and then report about her experience with the money transfer service. But when she brought the cheque to the bank, she was told that the cheque had the wrong signature and could not be cashed. Had she deposited the cheque using an ATM or a cheque-cashing service, she would have transferred the money to the destination, and then the bank would have eventually discovered that the cheque was bogus and cancelled it. The result would have been that my friend would have been cheated out of \$3,000 of her own money.

## 8.10. Scams, Frauds, and Confidence Tricks

All scams and confidence tricks depend on two main factors for success: The victim's self-interest (especially his or her desire for money, sex, social prestige, a job, or even love and attention), and the victim's gullibility. They are successful when victims want something desperately enough, and don't ask too many questions. Scammers and con artists tend to be creative, persuasive, and original; they also constantly change or improve their strategies, so that their scams become harder to detect and thus more successful. Some con artists will research their victim's history and find out things like what the person wants, what their weaknesses are, what events in their past have caused them shame or anger, and so on. These facts are then used to manipulate the victim when they eventually interact. However, all cons depend on a fairly small number of basic strategies. I will describe a few of them so you are forewarned, and will not become a victim:

**DECEPTION:** Effective con artists use lies and half-truths to make themselves, or their situation, appear to be something other than what it really is. Almost all confidence tricks rely on some amount of deception. For instance, the scammer might dress in a costume or disguise in order to appear very rich or very poor. They might pretend to be a professional in a field they actually know nothing about, or they might set up a web site to pretend they have a legitimate business.

**DISTRACTION:** Some con artists keep your attention focused on something unrelated, while they or an accomplice steal from you when you're not looking. Think of the person who steals your purse or your wallet while pretending to accidentally trip and knock you down and then help you to your feet again.

**FLATTERY:** Con men often open their game by being friendly and amiable, and quickly become admiring and deeply respecting. Some con men might pretend to fall in love with their intended victim. Since most people enjoy being praised and admired, this strategy helps make the victim more receptive and agreeable to the con man's claims and requests that come later.

<sup>8</sup> Powell, James. 'The State of Climate Science: A Thorough Review of the Scientific Literature on Global Warming.' *Science Progress*, 15 November 2012. <sup>9</sup> Eric Niiler, 'Nasa's Jim Bridenstine agrees humans are responsible for climate change' *Wired*, 17th May 2018.

**TIME PRESSURE:** People who have been led to believe that an important decision must be made in a very short amount of time tend to make bad decisions.

**VULNERABILITY:** The con artist might present herself as someone in pain or in a position of weakness; for instance, as someone suffering a serious disease, or someone persecuted unjustly by the law. This technique manipulates the sense of empathy that most people have for the suffering of others.

**OBEDIENCE:** Most people still defer, at least somewhat, to lawyers, judges, police officers, professors, priests, rich people, and just about anyone who looks like they possess some kind of social authority or power. This is true even in societies that claim to be democratic and equal. Therefore, con men sometimes present themselves as persons with authority, in order to exploit people's willingness to defer and to obey.

**CONFORMITY:** Taking advantage of the fact that most people will do what they see many other people doing, the con artist and accomplices will do something in order to make it easier for their victim to do it too. Think of people who start crossing a road before the lights have changed because two or three others have already started crossing ahead of them.

Although all cons involve these basic psychological strategies, some specific applications of those strategies have been so successful and so widely used that they have been given names. Here are a few of them:

'BIG STORE' is named after the Marx Brothers movie, and it involves renting out a large building, such as a storefront or a warehouse, and filling it with furniture and people to make it appear like a well-established business. Potential customers, not knowing that they're buying stolen goods in a black market, think that they're buying legitimate goods in a law-abiding business.

'PHISHING' is when the con artist sends an email that looks like it comes from a legitimate business, bank,

or government agency. The message asks the victim to 'verify' or 'confirm' personal details that may have been lost or subjected to a computer virus attack. The sensitive information they are attempting to collect may include email and other passwords and bank account numbers.

The 'SHELL GAME' and 'THREE CARD MONTY' are two similar sleight-of-hand tricks in which a pebble or other small object is placed under one of three cups or shells or similar objects. The position of the cups is then mixed up by sliding them back and forth across the table quickly, and then the victim is asked to bet some money on which cup has the pebble. What the victim does not normally see is that the pebble has been moved separately, and is hiding elsewhere, such as in the con artist's palm.

'BAIT AND SWITCH' is a con in which a victim is offered a chance to buy something, or must do something, to get something else in return. They might be shown the product or the reward that they have been offered—but once the money changes hands or the service is performed, the product or reward turns out to be something very different than what was promised. It's called 'bait and switch' because the product you wanted to buy (the bait) is switched with something else when you aren't looking, or when it passes through a place where you can't see it.

'HONEY TRAP' is an aggressive kind of scam in which a sexually attractive person lures the victim to a private location with an expressed or implied promise of sexual intimacy. Once the victim has been lured to the private place, he or she might be robbed, blackmailed, held captive, photographed in a compromising position, kidnapped, harmed in other ways, or even killed.

'RUSSIAN BRIDE' is a less aggressive version of Honey Trap. In this type of scam, the con artist creates fake personal ads with dating websites or matchmaking services, poses as a single person in a distant country, and starts a long-distance relationship with the victim. Eventually, the con artist will ask for money

to emigrate to the victim's country, and possibly to move household furniture and children too. But once the money is sent, the con artist disappears.

'PONZI SCHEMES' are a species of financial investment fraud. A con artist posing as a businessperson will offer prospective victims a chance to invest in some low- or medium-risk enterprise, with the promise of an excellent return on their investment. But in reality, there is no enterprise. The con artist uses money from his second investor to pay his first investor. Then he uses money from his third investor to pay the second one, and so on. (In a variation of this scam called the 'PYRAMID SCHEME', the con artist freely admits that there is no enterprise to invest in and promises to pay earlier investors with new money from subsequent investors.) This procedure can be very difficult for victims to spot, since at least some investors think they are getting their money's worth. A successful pyramid scheme operator can eventually become exceedingly rich if he's canny. But the system depends on a constant flow of money from new victims to keep working. If the flow of new investment should slow down or stop, the scheme collapses.

'PSYCHIC SCAMS' involve a con artist who claims to possess magical powers. For instance, he might say he can communicate with the dead, or with angels or other supernatural beings, or with aliens, or even with God. For a price he will convey to the victim messages from a recently deceased person (or animal!) He might also claim to be able to detect and remove curses, or he might offer to cast magical spells that will bring the victim money, good health, love, a better job, or some other kind of worldly benefit. Leaving aside the question of whether ghosts or magic or gods actually exist, the fraudulent medium exploits the victim's belief in the paranormal to part him from his money.

'ADVANCE FEE FRAUD' is a type of scam where the victim is asked to do something and is promised a large sum of money as the reward, but they must pay the con artist a small sum in advance as part of the deal. A common version of this is called the

'NIGERIAN MONEY SCAM' or '419 SCAM', named for the section of Nigerian criminal law that covers fraud. In this type of scam, the con artist sends an email message to multitudes of people in which he poses as someone from a foreign country and asks for help opening a bank account in your country. He'll say this is needed to transfer a very large sum of money as part of an inheritance, a tax-avoidance plan, or some similar deal. You are also offered a share of that large sum of money. But once you open the account, you will be asked to make deposits there to keep the account 'active' or 'viable' or something like that—and your share of the big sum never arrives. Another variation, which dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is called the 'SPANISH PRISONER'. In this one, a person asks for help transferring money to an individual who will help break a rich friend out of a jail (in Spain). The con artist asks for some money in advance in order to bribe the guards, and then promises a share of the money that the rich prisoner will surely pay as a reward when he is free. A more recent variation is the 'CASTING AGENT' scam, in which the scam artist poses as a talent scout for a film studio or modelling agency. The con artist asks for large up-front fees for professional photo shoots and promises the victim that well-paying jobs will soon follow. The photos for the victim's portfolio might arrive, or they might not—but the jobs never do.

'AFFINITY SCAMS' are scams in which the con artist poses as a member of a tightly integrated small community of some kind, such as a church, or an ethnic enclave in a large city (Chinatown, Little Italy, etc.). The con artist pretends to be a member of the group, and ingratiates himself to the leaders and prominent members of the group in order to improve his credibility among other members. That much is perhaps better described as a fraud, than a scam. And in general, an affinity scam is a step in a larger strategy. Once the con artist's credibility is established, he can target people for other types of scams more easily.

## 8.11. Information and Media Literacy

Most of the topics we've covered so far here in Reasonable Doubt relate to information that reaches you from local or nearly local sources: Your friends, your own experience of the world, people you might meet in your community. The concept of **'information literacy'** presented here is the technique of reasonable doubt applied to information that comes from mass-communication technologies and industries.

Mass media overwhelmingly dominates the intellectual environments of most modern countries: Television, radio, film, computer games, newspapers, magazines, the internet. Perhaps only the very poorest parts of the world, or the few communities not yet organized by states or the global capitalist market, are free from its influence. The information presented in these media passes through numerous 'filters' on its way from the place where it was created to the place where it reaches your mind. Some of these filters are part of the machinery of transmission, such as cameras, microphones, radio transmitters and receivers, computer networks, printing presses. Other filters are in the people who process the information: Journalists, informants, editors, technicians, lawyers, advertisers, writers, publishers, and owners. Each individual along this path has a chance to influence the context of information according to their worldview.

Through the effects of all those filters, media does more than simply transmit information; indeed, there is no such thing as a 'plain fact' in the media. Through those filters, media also transmits criteria for what counts as a 'fact' in the first place—along with values, worldviews, social and psychological pressures, framing languages, precedents for behaviour, models of an overall way of living, and so on. So, in addition to transmitting facts, media also transmits prescriptions for how to think about those facts, and how to feel about them.

Earlier in this text, I said that **framing languages** probably cannot be avoided; here, I can add that the framing techniques of media are also probably unavoidable. That is not necessarily always a drawback. Nevertheless, the media's influence over your

intellectual environment is also an influence over your worldview, and thus an influence over your consciousness and identity. Media literacy is therefore a requirement for all persons who would prefer to decide for themselves who they will allow to influence them, and to what degree. Media literacy involves being selective about which media you will follow and believe, yet also being wide-ranging enough to see what media is influencing others. We will cover more tips like this later in the chapter. But first:

## 8.12. The Business Model of Media

The first thing that needs to be acknowledged when analysing information in the mass media is that mass media are businesses and are operated for the purpose of making money for owners and investors. In a capitalist economy, almost no one seriously doubts this; even the best journalists and entertainers, however much they may also care about knowledge and truth and art, still have to gain and keep their paying customers. The business model of media needs a separate discussion here, for two reasons. One is that it's not the same as the propaganda model of political communication (however much there may be some appearance of overlap). The second is that the business model of media makes no judgment about the *content* the media. So, you could read a serious newspaper whose journalists care about justice and truth, and then read a tabloid magazine whose purpose is to entertain and distract you, or to infuriate you. In both cases the business model is the same.

Since this is the case, we need to ask: What are media organizations in the business of selling in order to earn their profits? Most people believe media companies are in the business of selling information, but this is only partially true. In general, very little of a media organization's budget, typically less than 20%, comes from reader or viewer subscriptions. Public broadcasting is a notable exception: Viewer subscriptions form a much larger part of a public broadcasting organization's income than in privately-owned commercial broadcasting. But the majority of public broadcasting revenue comes from government,

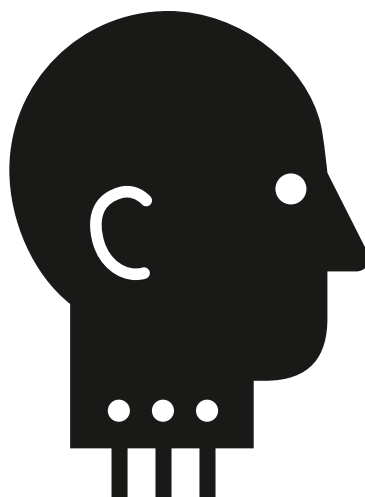
and another large portion comes from sponsorships (which is really advertising by another name).

A second answer to the question ‘What does media sell?’ is that media sells advertising space. But that’s also not quite correct. Space and time in which to display advertising are indeed the units of measure for the media product, but they are not the product itself. Advertisers are the buyers of the media product, and the actual media product that they are buying is the audience. A media organization, be it a newspaper, a website, or a television station, is in the business of selling audiences to other businesses.

The content of media, whether it is a news report, a comedy show, or even a pornographic film, is that which attracts someone to join an audience. Content is thus comparable to the ‘bait’ on a fishing hook. Regardless of the social importance or the artistic merit of that content (or the lack thereof), its purpose in the business model of media is to lure an audience toward the advertising message (the ‘hook’), and then to keep them attending to that message.

Media organizations are therefore very careful to ensure that the content they provide remains interesting to their audiences. The content will therefore tell you that you’re beautiful, that your values are good and right and just, that the problems of the world are someone else’s fault, and that you don’t need to change yourself or any part of your life (or, not very much, and with very little effort). Even the kind of news which mostly provokes ‘outrage’—the kind that makes the audience angry, or which tends to make people fearful or hateful of some social group (think of conservative media provoking anger against Muslims, or liberal media provoking anger against conservatives, etc.)—still confirms the audience’s values and thus keeps them attending. Note that the advertising in the media might communicate a different message than the content of media. Advertising in women’s publications, for example, regularly create anxiety in the audience for being insufficiently beautiful, sexual, popular, or the like. We will see more later about how advertising deliberately seeds anxiety in people’s minds in order to move them to buy a product that promises relief from that anxiety. Here let it be noted that media

**Former Google employee Tristan Harris said that such features exploit a design flaw in the human mind: ‘All of us are jacked into this system... Our minds can be hijacked. Our choices are not as free as we think they are.’**



<sup>10</sup> Ward, Duke, et.al., ‘Bran Drain: The Mere Presence of One’s Own Smartphone Reduces Cognitive Capacity’ *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* (University of Chicago Press Journals), Vol.2, No.2, April 2017. <sup>11</sup> Quoted in Olivia Solon, ‘Ex-Facebook President Sean Parker: Site Made to Exploit Human ‘Vulnerability’ *The Guardian*, 9 November 2017.



has to strike a careful balance between affirming the audience's beliefs and values with the content, and disturbing the audience's sense of life-satisfaction with the advertising. Too much affirmation, and the audience won't buy the advertised products; too much disturbance, and the audience will leave.

Internet social media makes for an interesting pure-type example of this. If you are like most people, the thing you most want to see in the media is your own life. So, that is exactly what companies like Facebook and Twitter put on public display for you: Your photos, your feelings and opinions, your friends and relations, your hobbies and pastimes, on display for dozens, hundreds, or thousands of people. When the content provided by a media company is generated by the audience members themselves, the cost of providing that content is very low. By the way, this also partially explains the rise of game shows and reality television: These types of programs don't require as many writers and designers, so they can be produced cheaply. Internet social media is like another kind of reality show, in which you are both the audience and the star.

Social media also has psychotropic addictive functions that help keep your attention fixed to the screen. These functions, originally created to 'send little bits of positivity' to users (that's how Justin Rosenstein, the Facebook engineer who invented the 'Like' button, described it) serve to keep one's attention by providing a steady stream of small rewards and incentives. The result of this stream of small rewards is to keep people constantly distracted. One study found that the mere presence of a smartphone, whether it is being used or not, is enough to distract you and thus reduce your cognitive capacity.<sup>10</sup> Former Google employee Tristan Harris said that such features exploit a design flaw in the human mind: 'All of us are jacked into this system...Our minds can be hijacked. Our choices are not as free as we think they are.'<sup>11</sup> Loren Brichter, the designer who invented the pull-to-refresh feature used in many social media apps, said that he did not originally intend the function to be addictive, but he acknowledges that it became so: 'Pull-to-refresh is addictive. Twitter is addictive. These are not good

things.'<sup>12</sup> Nir Eyal, a technology industry consultant, wrote that most social media apps are now deliberately designed to be addictive:

The technologies we use have turned into compulsions, if not full-fledged addictions. It's the impulse to check a message notification. It's the pull to visit YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter for just a few minutes, only to find yourself still tapping and scrolling an hour later... The products and services we use habitually alter our everyday behaviour, just as their designers intended. Our actions have been engineered.<sup>13</sup>

These services engineer behaviour by providing small respites for the tiny and barely-perceived stressors of everyday life:

Feelings of boredom, loneliness, frustration, confusion and indecisiveness often instigate a slight pain or irritation and prompt an almost instantaneous and often mindless action to quell the negative sensation...As product designers it is our goal to solve these problems and eliminate pain—to scratch the user's itch.<sup>14</sup>

The purpose of keeping people attending—even to the point of addiction—to their social media, is to gather data about users' preferences from their 'likes' and other feedback mechanisms. The company can analyse this data to find out what kind of products you might want to buy, so that it can sell *you* (your time, your attention span, your curiosity) as a member of an audience to an advertiser. Free 'cloud computing' email services do this too, by scanning keywords in your emails. Search engines do the same with your search keywords and your selection of displayed search results. Much of this information about you can be found and used by other companies, such as when:

- A website lodges a 'cookie' on your hard drive to track what other websites you look at.
- A website you use sells information about how you use its site, to another company.
- Quiz games that are shared on social media ('Which *Game of Thrones* Character Are You?' and the like) might

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Paul Lewis, 'Our minds can be hijacked': The tech insiders who fear a smartphone dystopia. The Guardian, 6 October 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Nir Eyal, Ryan Hoover: Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products (Portfolio, 2014) p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.

send the answers you provide to a political research company. These answers reveal your political views, your level of activism for those views, and the like, and they allow the company to target political ads at you more accurately. (To find out how this technique was used to influence national elections in several countries, you may wish to research the Cambridge Analytica scandal.)

- Cookies on websites, and also apps on your phone, use the IP address of your router, or the GPS locator on your phone, to figure out where you are. This information can be used to fix prices for things you buy online. People who log on from an affluent neighbourhood may see a higher price than those who connect from a less affluent neighbourhood. (In the industry, this is called ‘dynamic pricing.’) In late 2018, researchers found that Google tracks the location of your phone even when you deliberately disable its location-tracking services.<sup>15</sup>
- You don’t lock up the privacy settings on your social media account (or your phone, or other devices), leaving everything you post on your social media account open to the world.
- A social media company re-writes its privacy policies and Terms of Use policies in order to make more information about you available to its buyers, or grants them permission to use that information in new ways.

Your social media data might also be used by other companies for other purposes besides targeting ads at you. During a hiring process, for instance, a company’s recruiters might go through a candidate’s publicly visible photos and comments. Or, they might ask candidates at the job interview to give their passwords so they can see what’s not available for public view. After being hired, employers may require employees to do some marketing for the company using their social media accounts; for instance, by posting about the company’s sales and events.

It is primarily for reasons like these that we do not need to suppose there’s a conspiracy among media owners, businesses, and governments that is designed to keep audiences in the dark about what’s really going on in the world. It’s enough to see how the owners of a media outlet must work hard to avoid alienating or

annoying the audience. For example, if a news broadcast were to show a story about child slave labourers mining rare earth minerals for use in the manufacture of cell phones, most viewers would change channels and watch a sitcom instead. Media providers know that audiences generally don’t want to hear that kind of news—the kind which implies we might be complicit in something unjust, or that implies we may have to change an important part of our lives. Or, even if none of that is the case, many audiences simply do not care about the plights of impoverished brown-skinned people in distant countries. Broadcasting this story would cause the loss of *at least two* audiences: The people who were enjoying the show, and those who might be in the market to buy a new phone. And without an audience, the business has nothing to sell.

Similarly, media organizations will also take care not to annoy or alienate their shareholders and their advertisers. If a media outlet were to anger too many of its advertisers, it would soon find itself with a product that no one wants to buy. If it angered its shareholders, they would withdraw their investment capital. And if reporters and journalists annoy their editors and managers, they may find themselves sacked. On that point, here are the words of Canadian news media owner Conrad Black:

If newspaper editors disagree with us, they should disagree with us when they’re no longer in our employ. The buck stops with the ownership, [and] I am responsible for meeting the payroll. Therefore, I will ultimately determine what the papers say, and how they’re going to be run.<sup>16</sup>

Taken together, it may appear as if the media is indeed involved in a conspiracy to placate and pacify the public. But remembering Ockham’s razor, there’s no need to take the explanation quite that far. It’s sufficient to see that the business model requires editors and journalists and owners to regulate (or self-censor) themselves; that is, to make decisions that preserve the size and quality of the product they sell (the audience) and which keep the buyers of that product (the advertisers) happy.

<sup>15</sup> Ryan Nakashima, “Google tracks and records your movements even if you turn off Location History” *Los Angeles Times / The Associated Press*, 13th Aug. 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Conrad Black, quoted in James Winter, ‘Black’s Plans’: *The Globe and Mail*, 12 March 1994, p. D7.



Given these forces affecting the news, how can you keep yourself intelligently informed about events and topics that interest or affect you? The main thing to do is to read about events in multiple news sources, not just one. Among mainstream corporate news services, some will be politically right leaning, a few will be left leaning, and some centrist. Pick a service for each of these three positions and read all three of them. If you have access to the internet, you can read about world events in newspapers and broadcast media of different countries. Also, look for independent news outlets that rely on volunteer or ‘citizen journalists’ for their content, and make most of their money from volunteer donations or reader subscriptions. With less of their revenue stream coming from advertisers, independent media tends not to have the same problem with advertiser-friendly bias that corporate media often has. But in exchange for this advantage, independent media tends to be more politically partisan (for one side or another of the political spectrum). It also tends to have fewer resources for in-depth investigative journalism, and fewer resources to protect themselves from lawsuits.

Journalists are professionals, and all of them entered the profession because they think it is important for people to know what’s going on in the world. (Well, that’s what one would hope!) Most of the time, professional journalists do their best to be as objective and as impartial as possible. If any bias appears in the work of a journalist or a media company, it is not a reason to distrust the industry as a whole. Nonetheless, as noted earlier, there is no such thing as a ‘plain fact’ in mass media. Information is always subject to various forces that affect how, when, and in what frame, and after what judgment calls, it gets presented. We always have to do our own thinking in order to be fully informed when we need to make decisions like how to spend our money, how to vote, or when to take a stand on a pressing public cause.

You may also want to consider exercising more caution about how much information, and what kinds of information, you allow the publishers of digital media to collect about you. If the right to privacy is important to you, you may want to consider following

guidelines such as these:

- Assume that anything you post on your Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other social media pages, can and *will* be seen by anyone in the world, regardless of your privacy settings. Don’t post anything there that you wouldn’t post on a telephone pole at a busy street corner.
- Don’t assume that someone who is your Facebook friend today will always be so. Therefore, even when you post things ‘friends-only’, don’t post anything that someone could use against you.
- Use different passwords for your bank account, your social media, your email, and so on.
- Use an email address provided by your university (if they provide one) or by your ISP; avoid email accounts provided by free online services.
- Be suspicious of any business or media organization that asks for your street address, phone number, or eerily specific security questions such as the street you live on or your mother’s maiden name. Be especially suspicious if you are asked such questions by a quiz or an entertainment app (‘What’s your stripper name?’ or other such silliness.)
- Use cash for your purchases as often as you can, in order to avoid leaving a digital record of your purchases. Retailers often record what you bought, when you bought it, the total cost of your purchases that day, etc., and they use that information to predict what you may want to buy next, and sometimes to predict what’s going on in your life: a job change, a pregnancy, etc.
- Do not give your credit card number to any organization from which you don’t intend to buy anything.
- Get a protective wallet for your bank cards and your passports. This will prevent criminals from covertly scanning the chips in your cards and devices and gathering information about you which could be used for identity theft.
- Limit your use of social media, perhaps to less than 20 minutes a day. Pick one or two days a week in which you do not use your social media at all.
- Do not send nude or compromising photos of yourself to anyone using social media, including your closest friends.

- When you host parties, ask guests to observe a ‘no pictures’ rule. If someone wants to take pictures anyway, ask them to get permission from everyone who will be in the picture.

### 8.13. Analysing the Form and Content

Critically analysing the content of media is different than analysing its delivery mechanisms; it’s also very different than analysing arguments. The rhetoric of media is often about emotional rather than logical persuasion, and this can make it difficult to determine the strength of the argument being presented. Our familiarity with different media and our viewing habits can affect how critical we can be. If you are used to watching films passively as entertainment, it is important to be aware of the things you ordinarily accept as part of the cinematic experience, such as the emotional quality of the score, or the use of close-up shots in certain scenes. These can have implicit premises that serve in both the arguments made by media and in their rhetoric.

To begin analysing the content of media, you want to carefully describe what you are seeing. What is the medium? Is it mostly words, pictures, sound or a combination of these? What is the subject of the piece, and how is it portrayed? Are the colours dark, is the focus sharp or blurry, is the lighting bright or dim?

Once you have a basic description, ask yourself what information the piece conveys and what you would need to know in order to understand it more fully. If it looks like an old film, you might want to know if it is really old, or it was just shot to look that way. Think about how this would change the message. Does it matter who made the piece? Would the message seem different if it was created by a man rather than a woman, or by someone of a different cultural background?

Using this information, you can begin to interpret the medium. What do you think it means? What message is the author trying to communicate? What other messages are also being communicated? Think about the emotional tone of the piece, and the attitude

it takes to its subject. What values does it express or omit? If the piece presents itself as objective/scientific/journalistic, what elements contribute to or detract from this? If had a more personal and reflective nature instead would it still be as compelling?

Media are meant to be communicative, so think about who the intended audience is and the purpose of the piece with regards to this audience. It can be very interesting to compare commercials (for instance) for which you are and are not in the intended demographic group. What makes a commercial appeal to you, or not? What makes a film or game entertaining to you? How would a different audience respond? Evaluate the success of the piece in achieving its purpose. How did it intend to make you feel about the subject? How did it really make you feel?

Reflect on the cultural impact of the medium and how it might influence others. Draw on all of your other observations to think about this. Does it portray the subject in a culturally acceptable way? (This is harder to do than it sounds. For example, if you are a straight, white, middle-class man, you might not know how to judge the portrayal of gay, black, unemployed women.) Does it present it in a new light, or in a way that conflicts with other values? This can be very subtle. We often think that films made for entertainment, because they don’t pretend to be objective or scientific, shouldn’t be taken seriously. The film *Jaws* is about a man-eating shark, and it aims to scare viewers with tense music and sharp scene cuts. *Jaws* was a fictional film, but presenting sharks as predators to humans changed people’s attitudes towards sharks and had a negative impact on shark conservation. By contrast, the BBC’s *Blue Planet* documentaries show the underwater world of fish and marine mammals as a pristine environment without any human presence. While these films are beautiful, the way they present the marine environment hides the significant impact of humans on the oceans.

Finally, given the discussion of the business model of media affects their content, you may want to consider how the content has been framed in order to avoid alienating audiences, advertisers, and shareholders. Here are some of the ways in which this happens,

especially in news media:

*Selection of events to report or not report:* Obviously, if a news outlet chooses to say little or nothing about a certain event, it has shown some bias in its reporting of the facts, even if what little it does say is factually correct, and even if decisions have to be made (for reasons of limited space, time, etc) about what will and what will not be shown.

*Selection of point of view:* As a general rule, any newsworthy public event can be examined from multiple points of view. Consider, as an example, a story about a bomb attack in a foreign country. The reporters could take the view of the victims and empathize with their suffering, or they could take the view of the attackers and emphasize their grievances. Or the reporters could draw attention to third parties harmed by, or benefitted by, ongoing violence in the region.

*Selection of framing language:* Nouns, metaphors, and adjectives used by the journalists will often give away their point of view. War reporting is where this is most obvious: One side of a conflict might be referred to as ‘troops’ or ‘hordes’ or ‘terrorists’, while the other side might be referred to as ‘soldiers’, or ‘brave women and men’, or ‘our boys’, or ‘freedom fighters’.

*Preference for drama:* One of the most effective ways to draw an audience is to report stories involving conflict, tension, or controversy. As it is often said in the newspaper industry: ‘If it bleeds, it leads.’ Another way to attract attention is to use words or images that elicit sympathy: Pictures of dead or injured children, for instance. Sometimes journalists will report two or more sides of a story even when one of those sides is relatively insignificant. This can make a controversy appear larger than it really is. For instance, very few people believe that the works of William Shakespeare were written by someone other than Shakespeare. But in the interest of ‘balance’ and ‘fairness’, a journalist might give equal time to someone who believes Shakespeare’s plays were ghost-written by Francis Bacon. This creates the impression of a dramatic and vigorous debate, and that kind of drama attracts audiences.

*Marginalization:* This is a term that dates back to the days when newspapers were laid out by hand,

without computers. A story that the editors wanted to downplay might be given only a small amount of space on the page, near the margins (hence, ‘marginalization’), or on the back pages. Similarly, an event that the editors want to draw special attention to could be given a more ‘front and centre’ position, with tall block-capital letters.

*Passive reporting:* This is what happens when journalists don’t do their jobs. An agency that calls a press conference typically gives journalists a press kit along with access to people for interviews, and photo-ops for their cameras. Passive reporting happens when the journalists simply copy the information from their press kits into their reports without doing any of their own writing, researching, or follow-up. Reporters do this for many reasons: Sometimes they are so busy that it’s easier to just copy and paste the text from the press kit. But organizations who want their information presented in the best possible light sometimes manipulate the environment of the press conference to make the journalists more comfortable: Offering free food and drink, bringing in sexy people from local modelling agencies to work as servers, and so on.

*Disinformation:* Some media companies willingly publish disinformation on behalf of political parties, businesses, churches, or other organizations that they support, or whose worldviews they share. Some will also publish disinformation strictly in order to make money. We’ll see more of this when we discuss fake news.

## 8.14. Propaganda and Disinformation

In our everyday language the word ‘**propaganda**’ tends to have a bad connotation. It refers to a message from a government or political party that tries to garner support for a political cause by emotionally manipulating people—but the word does not necessarily have to refer to such shady tactics. Propaganda is a type of communication from a political organization that is disseminated for the purpose of raising support for that organization’s causes and policies, whatever those might be, and whether the means of persuasion is rational or emotional or something else. Governments

publish propaganda all the time, as do all political parties, although some might do so more often than others. Corporations, labour unions, military forces, churches, charities, and all kinds of other public institutions publish propaganda to raise support for their own purposes, too. A political scientist of my acquaintance defines propaganda as any government communication, or any partisan communication of any kind, including innocuous messages such as when a government office might close for the holidays—but I think that definition is probably too broad to be useful.

You should examine propaganda claims with the same critical and skeptical eye that you use to examine advertising, news, or just about anything else spread by mass media. Such claims might be true or false, but it's the evidence and the argument that determine this, not any patriotic symbols that may decorate it. One should be especially vigilant of **disinformation**.

Disinformation is a specific type of propaganda: It also attempts to raise support for a political cause, but here the goal is to influence people (to vote or spend money or speak out in support of a cause) by deliberately spreading falsehoods. It might describe an event that never took place, or one that did take place, but which happened very differently than the way they retell it. Disinformation might accuse a person or group of doing something they did not do. It could warn of a threat from an enemy or a source of danger which does not exist, or which in reality is fairly trivial. It may discredit or divert attention away from well-evidenced facts or well-documented historical realities.

Almost all political parties and governments spread disinformation once in a while; some more than others, and some have done so in the past more than they do now, or vice versa. Corporations sometimes spread disinformation about the quality or safety of their products, or of their competitors' products. They may also spread disinformation about the state of the economy or about some situation in the world in order to keep their investors confident, or to maintain market share. Military forces also sometimes do this to trick their enemies into false beliefs about the strength of the force that faces them.

Disinformation also differs from propaganda in a second way: Its function is not only to spread lies, but also to construct a fictitious reality, supported by a set of tightly inter-connected lies, half-truths, talking points, pseudo-facts, '**alternative facts**'<sup>17</sup>, and a carefully constructed worldview. In this fictitious reality, the main criterion is political usefulness. That is to say, its function is to make the producers of disinformation appear to be right, true, just, and wise, no matter what they say. It must serve this function whether or not the content of the message corresponds to an observable reality, and whether or not the message has logical consistency. As counterintuitive as it may seem, the producer of disinformation does not always need to have any particular policy or position to promote. This is because the main goals of a disinformation campaign are to glorify its producer, to dominate intellectual environments, win arguments, silence critics and opponents, and position its own **framing language** (and hence its **worldview**) as the normal and natural framing language for any and all public discussions. This is where disinformation can be distinguished from ordinary propaganda: It aims to do more than influence you to vote or spend your money a certain way. Ultimately, it has the ambition of dominating your mind.

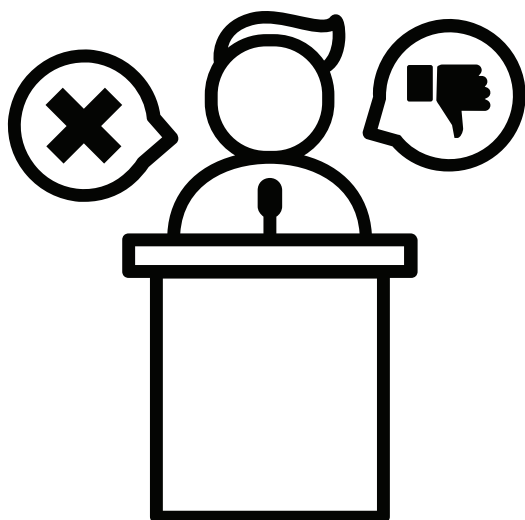
Disinformation may refer to actual events, but it must describe them in whatever light glamorizes the producers of disinformation. Its message will normally appear to come from very trustworthy and reliable sources, which helps make it seem credible and persuasive. However, this also makes it very hard to identify whether or not a given piece of propaganda is actually disinformation. It is effective because most people tend to trust and believe what they see and hear and read in sources that look authoritative, and most people tend to trust speakers who seem confident, self-assured, and convinced. Here are some examples from the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

- U.S. senator Joseph McCarthy's 'communist conspiracy', 1950–54.
- The Nazi campaign against the Jews, which falsely accused them of doing things that are just too horrible

<sup>9</sup> The term 'alternative facts' was coined by Kellyanne Conway, who was a senior aide in the White House during the first few months of Donald Trump's presidency (at the time of writing she is still 'counselor to the President'). She was explaining why the President's press secretary, Sean Spicer, claimed that Trump's inauguration ceremony drew the largest crowd of any inauguration, contrary to the evidence of photographs and city transit ticket sales. C.f. John Swaine, 'Donald Trump's Team Defends 'Alternative Facts' after Widespread Protests', *The Guardian*, 23 January 2017.

**The term ‘alternative facts’ was coined by Kellyanne Conway, who was a senior aide in the White House during the first few months of Donald Trump’s presidency.**

*(at the time of writing she is still ‘counselor to the President’)*



to reprint here, 1933–1945.

- The corporate-funded denial of climate change and global warming.
- The non-existent Iraqi ‘weapons of mass destruction,’ which was the stated *casus belli* for the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Disinformation is often extremely difficult to identify, at least at first. It frequently requires a lot of research, many courageous questions, and much time to pass, before the true state of affairs is revealed. As when recognizing conspiracy theories, one should remember that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. But this, too, can be difficult to apply, because the disinformation source may actually present the extraordinary evidence to the public. (The trouble is that such ‘evidence’ is often fabricated from nothing, or taken out of context, or mixed with half-truths and lies, or just as extraordinary as the claim it supposedly supports.) However, there are a few general features of a disinformation campaign which, if you spot them, may give you reason to doubt it.

**EXCESSIVE SIMPLICITY:** The worldview and the framing language of a disinformation campaign tend to presuppose a highly simplistic understanding of things. Elsewhere in this textbook I have described simplicity as a good thinking habit, and as a quality of the preferable explanation for things, so this statement may seem incongruous. But a disinformation communicate tends to simplify things that are by nature complicated, such as diplomatic, economic, or scientific matters. It also tends to ignore or suppress tricky or subtle details, which nonetheless remain relevant.

**DISCREDITING CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE SOURCES:** The producers of disinformation want people to think that they (and often only they) provide the truth about whatever situation is the object of the propaganda. So it is necessary for them to undermine trust in any source of knowledge that could expose their lies. In much the same way that a criminal on trial might undermine a jury’s trust in the witnesses to his crime, so to make the jury think he is innocent, a corrupt politician or corrupt political party might



try to undermine the public's trust in the news media, or in scientists, or the police, or anyone who could provide evidence of the corruption. This effort often involves the promotion of **conspiracy theories**, or the regular repetition of a slogan about the media's (or other group's) supposed biases against the politician or the party. The effort may also involve discrediting the very notion of truth itself, as when for example, a politician or a political spokesperson asks us to look at **alternative facts**,<sup>18</sup> or declares that 'truth is not truth'.<sup>19</sup> (Not every instance of discrediting truth itself is an instance of propaganda. Some people may do this in order to save face, to avoid the embarrassment of having been caught making a mistake.)

**SEIZING THE FIRST IMPRESSION:** Most people believe the first thing they are told about some event or situation. People often continue to believe it (or something like it) even when told something different about it, especially if the first impression is also coupled with some of the other features of propaganda noted here (fake authorities, etc.) Seizing the First Impression is also, by the way, an effective form of counter-propaganda, or inoculation against propaganda.

**ABSOLUTIST MORAL ASSUMPTIONS:** As part of its excessively simple presentation of complicated things, the disinformation campaign often only portrays 'good guys' and 'bad guys', with almost no shades in between. Within the fiction-based worldview created by the campaign there is normally no room for any discussion of alternatives. In this way, the worldview presupposed by a disinformation campaign resembles a value program.

**FEAR:** In the worldview of disinformation, there are clearly-identified 'bad guys' who are always portrayed as a source of danger. They might be said to threaten the economy, or the state, or people's safety or morals. Racist or xenophobic beliefs are frequently included here: The campaign might claim that the 'bad guys' should be considered suspect because they have lower standards of hygiene, or they are prone to criminality, less intelligent on average, or involved in criminal conspiracies, or that they do not share the target audience's cultural and religious values.

**UNSTATED ASSUMPTIONS:** The disinformation campaign presents a set of fictitious 'facts', and then suggests implications or hints at possibilities, using framing words, rhetorical or leading questions, provocative images, and the like. The target audience is thus prompted to reach certain conclusions on their own. This technique is often used when the explicit statement of the assumption would damage the campaign, for instance if the conclusion to be reached is racist or sexist, or if it is clearly a logical fallacy. A related concept is the 'dog whistle' (discussed below).

**TIME PRESSURE:** If the disinformation includes a call to action, it is often claimed that the action must be taken quickly. War propaganda often includes an element of time pressure.

**MIXING TRUTHS AND FALSEHOODS:** Disinformation campaigns might include a few clear truths and demonstrable facts among their propositions. Mixing truths together with half-truths and lies and expressing such truths with the right kind of framing language, can help make the overall picture presented by the campaign appear more believable. Viewers are made to feel that if one or two of their messages turn out to be true, the rest of their messages is probably also trustworthy.

**FAKE, INACCESSIBLE, OR MISQUOTED AUTHORITIES:** Among the falsehoods which make up part of the disinformation, there may also be testimony from scientists, policy analysts, or other relevant experts and witnesses. Later, it may be revealed that these people cannot be reached by the public, or that their actual reports have been suppressed or partially censored, or they don't even exist at all. One should always be suspicious of statements like "The experts agree that..." when such statements are not coupled with information about who those experts are, what their qualifications are, who they work for, or how their opinions were surveyed. (See section 8.9, above.) Out-of-context quotations from actual experts, or from political rivals, may also be used to make it seem as if that person said something very different from what was actually intended.

**SHIFTED ACCUSATIONS:** Upon being accused of something, such as lying, or harming some group, or

<sup>18</sup> Mark Moore, "Conway: Trump spokesman gave 'alternative facts'" *New York Post*, 22nd January 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Melissa Gomez, "Giuliani Says 'Truth Isn't Truth' in Defense of Trump's Legal Strategy" *The New York Times*, 19 August 2018; "Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani: Truth isn't truth" *BBC News*, 19th August 2018. Mr. Giuliani made that declaration in a "Meet The Press" interview that broadcast on NBC Television on 19th August 2018.

even conducting a disinformation campaign, the disinformation producer replies by accusing rival persons or parties of doing something similar. A shifted accusation is a means of controlling the framing language of a discussion, and a means of ensuring that the disinformation creator remains always on the attack, and never on the defence, in any given argument. They will often present clear fallacies like the red herring and *tu quoque*. However, coupled with other qualities like time pressure, or fear, people tend to ignore the fallacy and accept the shift.

**BLACK PROPAGANDA, AND FALSE FLAGS:** A disinformation message might disguise its true source, for instance by appearing to have come from one party, when in fact it came from another. Or, it might describe a real event, with credible witnesses and documentary evidence, that was secretly carried out by persons disguised as members of a different party than their own. The term ‘false flag’ comes from military and espionage contexts, and it refers to ships flying the flag of a different country than the one they’re actually registered with, or soldiers wearing the uniforms of a different army than their own. This can become complicated, or rendered absurd, when members of one group publicly accuses another group of perpetrating a false flag; such an accusation can serve as an act of propaganda in its own right, for instance, as an attempt to ‘poison the well’.

**GASLIGHTING:** This technique, named for the film *Gaslight* (1940), involves a set of lies, and a framing language to support them, constant repetition and reinforcement over weeks or months or more, and a campaign of belittling and patronising someone or the members of some group. The aim is to make people doubt their own interpretation of events, to doubt their memories and their perception of reality, to break down their trust in their own judgments of things, and ultimately to break down their ability to think for themselves. Between individuals and in small groups, gaslighting is a kind of bullying; a form of psychological abuse. From a propagandist, gaslighting is perhaps the very essence of disinformation. Like black flags, however, members of one group might accuse another group of gaslighting them or others; this, too, muddies

the water concerning who is doing the gaslighting, and dilutes the real meaning of the term.

**CODE WORDS AND ‘DOG WHISTLES’:** These are key words or phrases which mean different things to different sections of the audience. To one audience, a certain word or phrase may appear insignificant, reasonable, even banal. To another group, the same word or phrase signals that the speaker is a member of that group, and that he’s prepared to pursue that group’s political goals. They’re sometimes called ‘dog whistles’ in the sense that they call upon the members of that group to gather together, much as a dog owner might whistle to call his dog to his side using a whistle that only the dogs can hear. Code words are a way of publicizing one’s true political beliefs and intentions to one group but not to another, and a way of publicizing one’s intentions whilst preserving ‘deniability’ about them; that is, whilst remaining coy about those intentions to those who might find them abhorrent. Knowing a few such code words, then, is one way to tell whether someone is using disinformation as part of their political plan.

**‘FIREHOSE OF FALSEHOODS’:** This technique involves flooding the media with false statements, some of which are so obviously and outlandishly false as to be ridiculous. As described by Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, the researchers who coined the term, the firehose of falsehoods has several distinct features: “high numbers of channels and messages,” a “shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions,” “rapid, continuous, and repetitive,” and “it lacks commitment to consistency,” and it “lacks commitment to objective reality.”<sup>20</sup> The technique works because most people treat information as trustworthy if it comes to them from multiple sources and in high volume. Firehosing is also a means of dominating a discussion: it forces other voices in the media to waste time correcting the falsehoods (to little effect), making them less able to put forward their own ideas and arguments.

**MARKETING TECHNIQUES:** Disinformation often uses some of the same techniques advertisers employ to persuade us to spend our money. Some of these include celebrity endorsements, **weasel words**,

<sup>20</sup> C. Paul and M. Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model” (Santa Monica, CA, USA: RAND Corporation, 2016) pp.1-2. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.



constant repetition, provocative images, and so on. If it comes from a government, it might use patriotic symbols such as national flags, portraits of respected leaders, references to historical events, and so on. If it comes from a religious group, it might use religious symbols, or quotations from holy books, etc.

The scope of possible types of disinformation goes beyond this brief outline, but these are perhaps the most important points. A given disinformation campaign might only have some—and not all—of these features, but that does not disqualify it. The more of these features you think are present in a given piece of propaganda, then the more you may want to engage your faculties of reasonable doubt.

Another thing you can do is go to a fact-checking agency, to see if any professional research has been done on the topic. Most such agencies can be reached on the internet, and some publish their findings in newspapers and magazines as well as in their own web sites. Here is a short list of them:

- FactCheck.org (USA)
- PolitiFact.com (USA)
- FullFact.org (United Kingdom)
- Snopes.com (primarily for memes and urban legends)

As counter-intuitive as it may seem, responding to propaganda with facts, evidence, and refutations tends not to persuade people to abandon false beliefs. Such efforts often reinforce people's false beliefs.<sup>21</sup> Most people prefer to continue believing whatever they already believe, however they came by it. And it can be very hard to change anyone's mind when peer pressure, or a sense of selfhood and identity and group membership, or a 'firehose' of media messaging, also reinforces their (false) beliefs. The most successful ways to resist propaganda are:

- warn people in advance to expect propaganda,
- explain to them how propaganda works,
- regularly repeat any available retractions and refutations of the propaganda,
- and provide alternative **narratives** (not just facts) to

fill in the empty space left behind by the refuted falsehoods.<sup>22</sup>

## 8.15. Fake News

Sometime around the year 2015, a new kind of content appeared in the mass media: **Fake news**. The ubiquity of fake news has led some scholars who study media, culture, and society, to surmise that we now live in 'the era of **post-truth**' and of 'post-factual politics', by which they mean: 'Circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.<sup>23</sup>

Fake news of one kind or another has probably existed for as long as there have been any forms of mass media. However, the kind of fake news that's new(ish) is peculiar to internet-based social media. It depends on web sites that social media users can share with their contacts, who in turn share it with theirs, and it can propagate among these hosts much like a virus. The common phrase 'to go viral' refers to the kind of information that media consumers share among themselves so frequently that the content appears to have a life of its own. Researchers at MIT, for instance, found that false stories on Twitter travelled about six times faster than true stories. They also found that "false news reached more people than the truth; the top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people."<sup>24</sup>

Fake news will have some, often many, of the same features as disinformation in general: Excessive simplicity, fictitious or misquoted sources, fear mongering, etc. Yet not all fake news publishers are propagandists, in the strict sense of being sponsored by a government, political, or other public type of organization. Some fake news publishers are in it strictly for the money. Fake news also tends to have some features of its own that distinguish it from typical propaganda:

- 'Click-bait' headlines, often carefully worded to raise one's curiosity and promise the satisfaction of that curiosity if the web link is clicked upon. 'He came home one night, and you won't believe what he saw his

<sup>21</sup> Zakary L. Tormala and Richard E. Petty, "Source Credibility and Attitude Certainty: A Metacognitive Analysis of Resistance to Persuasion," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2004. <sup>22</sup> Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Colleen M. Seifert, Norbert Schwarz, and John Cook, "Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, Vol. 13, No. 3, December 2012;

daughter doing!’ ‘When you read these 15 facts about green tea, you’ll never drink it again.’ Or, the headline provokes outrage and/or a heightened sense of drama: ‘He admitted to faking the evidence that put twenty men behind bars.’ ‘Revealed: The secret plot to take away your freedoms!’

- Professional, easy-to-read graphic design and URL, superficially similar to well-known and better trusted news sources.
- Headlines that have little or nothing to do with the content of the article.
- More spelling and/or grammar errors than you would expect from a professional media source. (This happens when the creators of fake news rush their work.)
- And especially: Extraordinary claims *without* the required extraordinary evidence.

Fake news can also be spotted by what it *lacks*: Features you would expect to see in a real media source.

- Fake news articles often have no author by-line. Many legitimate news articles don’t have by-lines either (they might instead say ‘Staff writers’, or they’ll name a news wire agency like Reuters or Associated Press). But fake news articles are much less likely to display by-lines.
- Fake news websites tend to have no ‘About’ page for the site as a whole. Or, if it has an ‘About’ page, that page will usually lack contact info for the site’s owners and its chief editorial staff. Or the ‘About’ page will say that the site is satire, entertainment, or ‘fantasy news’, but that admission might be deliberately hidden away in a place that is difficult to find.
- Inline hyperlinks on fake news pages tend not to lead to other articles. Most have no inline links at all. Or if it does have links, they usually lead to website home pages, and not to articles.
- Fake news tends to have no confirmation of the general details of the story in any other news outlet.
- Fake news sites normally don’t have a statement of the site’s editorial policies.
- Fake news sites tend to have no ombudsman or other instrument whereby the public can report (or complain about) misleading or offensive content.

Fake news, its related concepts in **rhetoric** (such as **truthiness**, **alternative facts**, etc.), and the intellectual environments dominated by **post-truth**, benefit from a psychological phenomenon called **mere repetition bias**. This is a kind of bias in which people believe something because they have seen it or heard it many times, and perhaps seen or heard it from multiple sources (different social media, friends and neighbours, etc.) Fake news and other forms of propaganda works by regular, frequent, and consistent repetition, leading you to feel mentally ‘exhausted’ and therefore more willing to accept their claims and less willing to form your own judgments.

Fake news may seem like harmless fun, and sometimes the promoters of disinformation will even frame it as a joke. But it can, and regularly does, influence what we think and believe, and thus it can influence how we talk, vote, spend money, interpret real news, and relate to other people (especially those who have differing political or religious commitments). It’s now well known that fake news influenced the results of national democratic decisions, such as the United Kingdom’s ‘Brexit’ referendum, the 2017 independence referendum in Catalonia, and the 2016 presidential election in the United States. There are fake scientific journals which operate as pay-to-publish scams for contributors (‘predatory publishers’, they’re often called), and which can influence scientists or policy makers in business and in government to make bad decisions or to waste money.<sup>25</sup> Fake scientific authorities are responsible for, among other things, supporting the anti-vaccine campaign, resulting in numerous deaths from preventable diseases.<sup>26</sup>

Fake news can also inspire people to undertake harmful and/or criminal courses of action, including hate crimes and terrorist attacks. One famous example of this occurred during the 2016 United States presidential election campaign: A popular item of fake news claimed that the Democratic Party was operating a paedophilia ring, with a Washington DC pizzeria as its headquarters. There was no truth to this; nevertheless, emails from the Democratic Party’s chief fundraiser that had been leaked to the media suggested a loose connection between the restaurant’s owner

<sup>23</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, entry on ‘Post Truth’; see also “‘Post-truth’ declared word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries’ BBC News, 16 December, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Vosoughi, Roy, Aral, “The spread of true and false news online” *Science*, Vol. 359, Iss. 6380, pp. 1146-1151. 9 March 2018. <sup>25</sup> Alan Burdick, “‘Paging Doctor Fraud’: The Fake Publishers That Are Ruining Science.” *The New Yorker*, 22 March 2017. Carl Straumsheim, “‘Predatory’ Publishing Up” *Inside Higher Education*, 1st October 2015.

and party fundraisers. At first the fake news story was only carried by satire sites, but soon it was picked up by conspiracy theorists. Finally, a man visited the restaurant and opened fire inside it with an AR-15 rifle. No one was physically injured that day, but the shooter was sentenced to prison.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the fact-checking organizations noted above are helpful in sorting out what's fake and what's real. And in general, if you come to believe that a certain media publisher is a source of fake news, it's a good idea to avoid that publisher entirely. Consider alerting friends of yours about the fake news, to help clear up the intellectual environment you share with them, though this may cost you your friendship with those who continue believing the fake news.

### 8.16. Advertising and Marketing

All advertising serves just one purpose: To sell something. In general, all advertising tries to do this in one, or both, of these two ways:

- Making a favourable claim about the qualities of the product; or
- Creating a favourable feeling in the mind of the viewer that is to be somehow associated with the product, for instance by being informative, or inspirational, or entertaining.

But all advertising, at its heart, delivers only one message: 'Your life sucks, and my life is awesome, so buy my product or service and your life can be awesome too!' Some ads may present this message in an informative or entertaining way. Some advertisements even have what deserves to be called artistic merit. But the job of advertising is not to help people make informed and rational choices about how to spend their money: It is to influence people to spend their money in very specific ways, on very specific products and services. Thus, we are always justified in approaching claims made in advertising campaigns with reasonable doubt.

**Fake news and other forms of propaganda works by regular, frequent, and consistent repetition, leading you to feel mentally 'exhausted' and therefore more willing to accept their claims and less willing to form your own judgments.**



<sup>26</sup> "Russia trolls 'spreading vaccination misinformation' to create discord." [BBC News](#), 24th August 2018; Jessica Glenza, "Russian trolls 'spreading discord' over vaccine safety online" [The Guardian](#), 23 August 2018; Lena H. Sun, "Anti-vaccine activists spark a state's worst measles outbreak in decades" [The Washington Post](#), 5th May 2017.

Here are some of the most common ways that advertisers do this:

**IDENTIFICATION/ASSOCIATION:** Using key words, images, sounds, or even provocative shapes, the product is presented in close association with something desirable. The most common object of association here is sex. By filling the space with images of beautiful and sexually available people, most of them women posed and dressed to get the attention of a male audience, advertisers play upon some of the deepest and most human psychological instincts. But advertisers might also associate their products with good health, exotic locations, celebrities and their accomplishments, or a lifestyle of some kind, be it a life that is adventurous, fun-filled, wealthy, wholesome, or enviable for some other reason.

**SLOGANS AND JINGLES:** Catchy tunes, rhymes, clever puns and word play, and the like can hold our attention for years. To this day, whenever I see certain brands of breakfast cereal in the grocery store I hear the song that accompanied TV ads for that cereal back in the 1980s replaying in my mind.

**MISLEADING/VAGUE COMPARISONS:** Sometimes advertisers want to compare their products to other similar products that you might buy instead. But since they also want you to buy their products, they have to present the comparison in a slanted way. For instance, the text of an ad for a headache pain medicine might say ‘Now 30% more effective!’ Well, more effective than what? It doesn’t say. Or, a car commercial might show two cars together with their prices and boast that you will ‘Save \$15,000 when you buy a MonsterCar!’ But the price of the competition’s car includes all the optional features like power windows and GPS navigation, whereas the price of the MonsterCar doesn’t include those features.

**WEASEL WORDS:** These are words which appear to make a definite claim about the product, but actually don’t. For example, the marketing text for a lottery might say ‘You might have just won ten million dollars!’ Well, you *might* have, but the realistic likelihood of *actually* winning that prize is very small. A campaign for a department store holiday sale might

say ‘Up to 60% off everything in the store!’ But, in fact, only one product in the store is marked down that much, while everything else is marked down between 20 and 30 percent. Words like ‘possibly’, ‘up to’, ‘as much as’, and ‘many’ serve as weasel words when they are just vague enough to mislead and manipulate the viewer, without telling an outright lie.

**PUFFERY/EXAGGERATED CLAIMS:** Puffery is an exaggerated claim that is obviously untrue but gets your attention anyway. I once saw a billboard advertisement for women’s cosmetics that made the claim: ‘We make women so beautiful, other women will want to kill you.’ Taken at face value, this statement is clearly, painfully false. But the statement still creates the impression in the viewer’s mind that women who use that product will become enviable. Similarly, television commercials for trucks or fast cars might tilt the camera, to make the vehicle look like it can easily drive up a nearly vertical slope. The image tells no lies, but most people don’t notice the camera tilt, especially if the shot lasts only half a second, and the impression left on the viewer is a misleading one.

**PUSH POLLING:** This is a type of advertising technique normally used by political campaigns. Large numbers of individuals are contacted directly, usually by telephone, and invited to participate in a survey. But the caller is not actually collecting data. Instead, the caller is trying to influence the contacted person’s thinking about an issue (and her vote!) use a series of leading questions, rhetorical questions, and carefully chosen framing words. It might drop vague hints about the bad behaviour of a political opponent, or an innuendo about the unreliability or untrustworthiness of a party.

As when you are exposed to something you suspect might be disinformation or fake news, you should treat advertising claims with a large dose of reasonable doubt.

Everyone who uses media needs to do so intelligently, and to do their own thinking and sometimes research as well, in order to preserve their free minds and to make truly autonomous decisions about what to believe and what to do.

27 ‘The Saga of ‘Pizzagate’: The Fake Story that Shows How Conspiracy Theories Spread’ [BBC News](#), 2 December 2016; ‘Pizzagate: Gunman Fires in Restaurant at Centre of Conspiracy’ [BBC News](#), 5 December 2016.