Information

In the age of social media, the notions of truth, information, and knowledge are all changing. These notions were once amorphous and invisible – the kinds of airy, invisible topics only philosophers and a few scientists studied. But today truth, information, and knowledge are all represented, constructed, and battled about online. Page views, shares, and reactions clue individuals and companies in to what spreads from machine to machine and mind to mind. Content editable by users online is negotiated and changed in real time. In this chapter we'll look at the problems and opportunities afforded by social media in relationship with truths and knowledge.
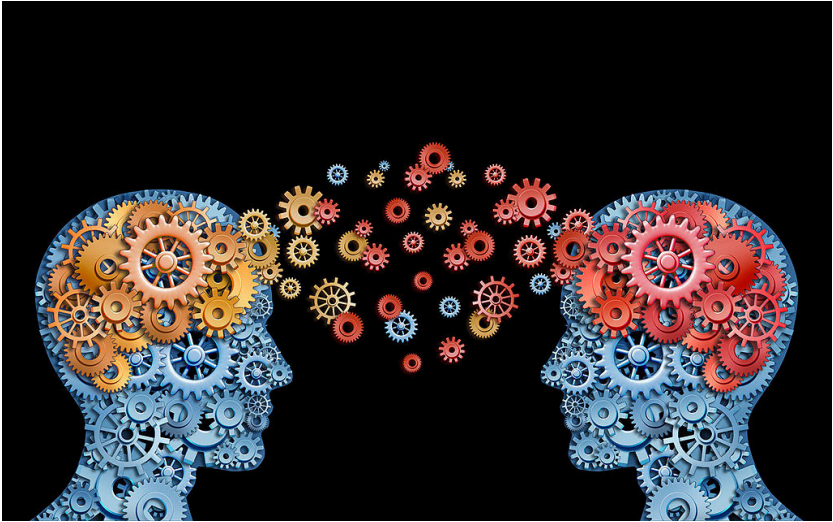
Knowledge is always based on multiple pieces of information, and usually involves finding coherence across them when they conflict.

"FAKE NEWS" AND "POST-TRUTH"

Much has been made in recent years of **"fake news**." This is a term, favored by the President of the United States among others, that circulates ubiquitously through social as well as traditional media. In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries presented "post-truth" as its "word of the year." But what do these terms mean, and what do they have to do with social media?

To understand these terms, we have to look closely at what we expect with the word "news" and notions of truth and "fake"-ness. These conversations start with the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity.

THE SPREAD OF FAKE NEWS IN POLITICS DUE TO MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Reflection

For the election-related online public, I choose settle for Biden. Settle for Biden is a Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook account aswell as a hashtag. While I have lived in the United States for the past five years and am up to date with politics, I am not a United States citizen and can not vote in any of the elections. Therefore, I am not apart of this public and instead am just an observer of this public.

Settle for Biden is a grassroots group of former Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders followers who understand Joe Biden's flaws but believe that the United States will not last four more years with Donald Trump as president.

When exploring this public on Twitter, I found that one of the main goals of the Twitter account was to stop fake news about Biden. **Fake news**, as defined by Diana Daly is "a term recently popularized by politicians to refer to stories they do not agree with". On Twitter, the settle for Biden page has retweeted and commented on several tweets from news stations and famous people and correcting them on their information. In the era of technology and how fast information can spread online, it is easy to spread fake news without the general public realizing that it is fake news.

After diving deeper into exploring more about the spread of fake news, I came to the conclusion that there is a lot of misinformation and disinformation present in the tweets that are retweeted by the Twitter account Settle for Biden. **Misinformation**, as defined by Diana Daly, is "inaccurate information spread without the intention to deceive" and **Disinformation**, as defined by Diana Daly as "information intended to deceive those who receive it". There are a lot of retweeted quotes from famous people and news stations that are using their platform to disinform others. A lot of citizens of the United States will read these tweets and instantly believe that they are true due to it being from a famous person or a news station. Just seeing who the tweet is tweeted from can make others

believe that whatever they say is true just because of their standing in society. As well as disinformation there are also a lot of retweets from settle for Biden from citizens of the United States that are tweeting information that they may believe is true but is actually incorrect or are making their own assumptions up about Biden and his policies and are essentially misinforming society. Disinformation and misinformation are the main two reasons why the settle for Biden Twitter account retweets these tweets so that they can prove them wrong and inform society on the correct information.

These behaviors and strategies used on the settle for Biden Twitter page show the era we live in. Every part of the election can be found online and shows how easy it is to spread fake news and be misinformed and disinformed. It is important to check the reliability of the source and compare sources to see if those sources have similar or different information to understand what the truth really is.

About the Author

Issy Brooker was born and raised in Kent, England and moved to the United States in 2012. Issy Brooker is currently 19 years old and a first year student at the University of Arizona.

OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

To be objective is to present a truth in a way that would also be true for anyone anywhere; so that truth exists regardless of anyone's perspective. The popular notion of what is true is often based on this expectation of objective truth.

The expectation of objective truth makes sense in some situations – related to physics and mathematics, for example. However, humans' presentations of both current and historic events have always been subjective – that is, one or more subjects with a point of view have presented the events as they see or remember them. When subjective accounts disagree, journalists and historians face a tricky process of figuring out why the accounts

disagree, and piecing together what the evidence is beneath subjective accounts, to learn what is true.

MULTIPLE TRUTHS = KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

In US society, we have not historically thought about knowledge as being a negotiation among multiple truths. Even at the beginning of the 21st century, the production of knowledge was considered the domain of those privileged with the highest education – usually from the most powerful sectors of society. For example, when I was growing up, the Encyclopedia Britannica was the authority I looked to for general information about everything. I did not know who the authors were, but I trusted they were experts.

Enter Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, and everything changed.
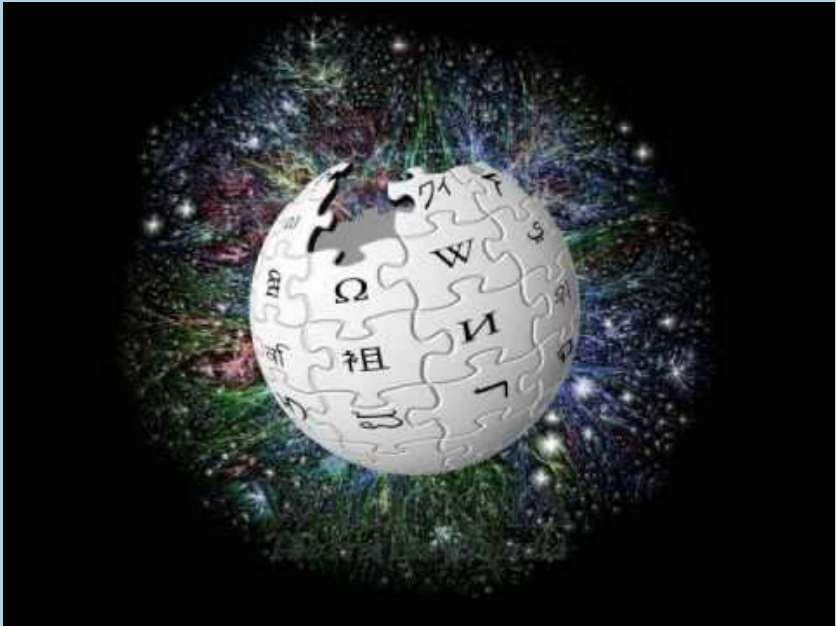
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The first version of Wikipedia was founded on a more similar model to the Encyclopedia Britannica than it is now. It was called Nupedia, and only experts were invited to contribute. But then one of the co-founders, Jimmy Wales, decided to try a new model of knowledge production based on the concept of collective intelligence, written about by Pierre Lévy. The belief underpinning collective intelligence, and Wikipedia, is that no one knows

everything, but everyone knows something. Everyone was invited to contribute to Wikipedia. And everyone still is.

When many different perspectives are involved, there can be multiple and even conflicting truths around the same topic. And there can be intense competition to put forth some preferred version of events. But the more perspectives you see, the more knowledge you have about the topic in general. And the results of negotiation between multiple truths can be surprisingly accurate when compared with known truths. A 2005 study in the prominent journal Nature comparing the accuracy of the Encyclopedia Britannica and Wikipedia found they had around the same numbers of errors and levels of accuracy.

WHAT ARE TRUTHS?

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So what qualifies as "a truth?" Well, truths are created and sustained from three ingredients. The first two ingredients are evidence and sincerity. That is, truths must involve evidence – pieces of information that could or can be seen

or otherwise experienced in the world. And truths must involve sincerity – the intention of their creator to be honest.

And the third ingredient of a truth? That is you, the human reader. As an interpreter, and sometimes sharer/spreader of online information and "news", you must keep an active mind. You are catching up with that truth in real-time. Is it true, based on evidence available to you from your perspective? Even if it once seemed true, has evidence recently emerged that reveals it to not be true? Many truths are not true forever; as we learn more, what once seemed true is often revealed to not be true.

Truths are not always profitable, so they compete with a lot of other types of content online. As a steward of the world of online information, you have to work to keep truths in circulation.

ACCESS OF INFORMATION AT A CONCERT

Student Content

Rolling Loud Miami 2019 Experience

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Last summer, three of my best friends and I flew to Florida for the first time to celebrate
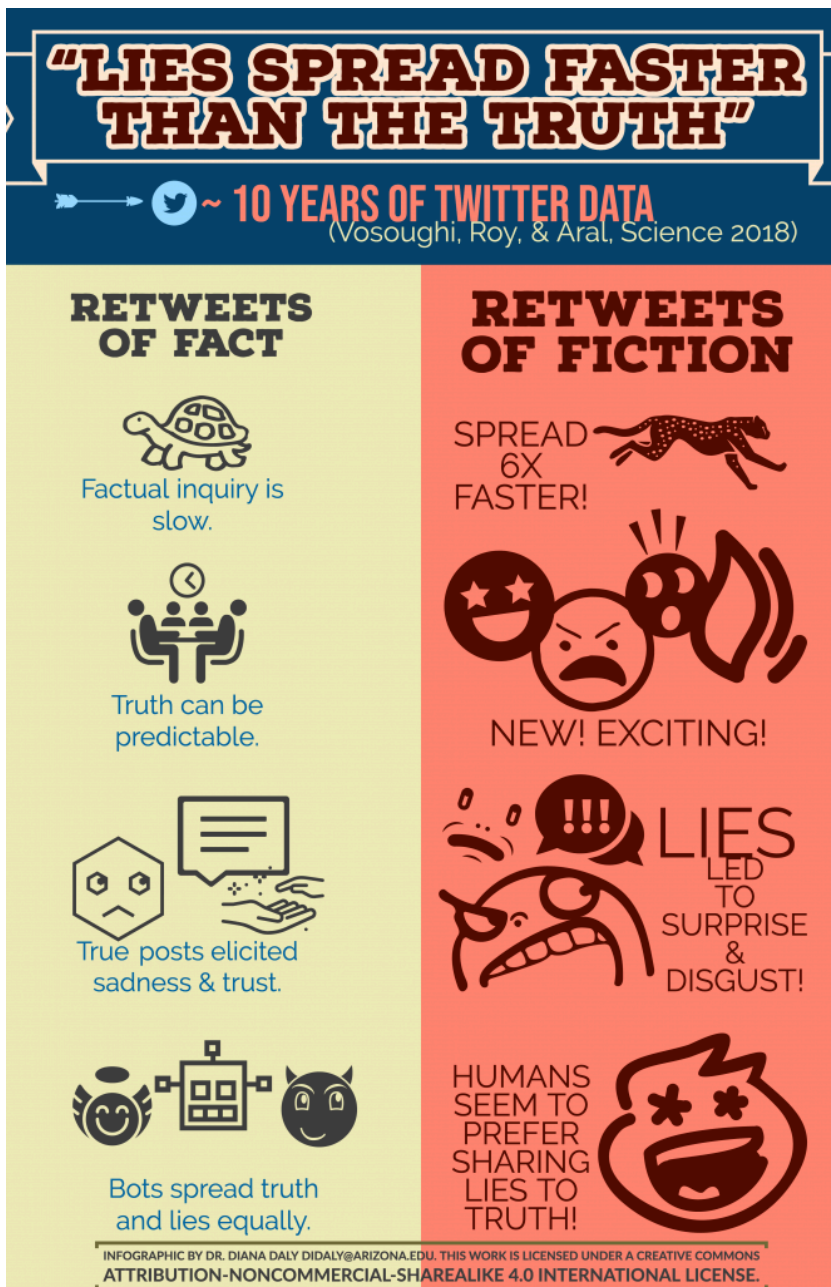
a birthday. We traveled from Phoenix, Santa Barbra, and Colorado to all meet in the tropical, yet the very humid, city of Miami. The first night was Ariana's birthday, she has been my best friend for over 15 years. She wanted to go to Ayesha Curry's (wife of Steph Curry, Golden State Warriors point guard) restaurant, which was barbeque style and so delicious, I can still remember our meal. Exploring Miami was so much fun, but it wasn't the only reason we were there. For three days, we went to the Rolling Loud Festival. It had many of our favorite rap artists, it was a concert we all couldn't miss. Social media benefited our experience in several, life-changing ways. It was recommended by the festival to download their app and follow their Twitter to stay updated with stage times and weather delays. One day, there was a lightning storm and everyone at the concert had to shelter under the Hard Rock Stadium or wait at home until it cleared for the show to go on. In my interview with Ariana, she noted that she found the app very informative, especially to people like us who were not familiar with the area. On the other nights, it was very traumatic when there was a potential active shooter. I remember hearing a gunshot, people screaming, and seeing thousands run toward us in a stampede. If you didn't run with the crowd, you would get crushed by the crowd. The lack of civil inattention was apparent as people ran in terror. It happened multiple times and we were extremely scared each time we ran for our lives. The audience as a whole seemed to not care about anyone, just ensuring individual safety. The main concern in my mind was to stay with my friends and remain calm. I can still vividly picture these standout moments of being pushed through a charging crowd. In that situation, it is easy to forget about common curiosity when there is a threat nearby. The Rolling Loud Twitter account posted there was a potential threat of an active shooter or stabber at the stadium. The news spread rapidly to the networked publics. The audience was constantly checked their phones and verbally announced any updates. It was reassuring that we all were connected online to stay informed and safe. Ariana mentioned in our interview that even her brothers in California were apart of this networked public. Their attention was drawn to the Rolling Loud Twitter because the potential shooter or stabber was trending. Her brothers immediately contacted us and wanted to make sure we were okay. I am very thankful that no one was hurt and that I had social media to stay informed. Without Twitter and the app, I would have been confused and even more scared in that situation. I chose to interview Ariana because we both shared the experience with similar and different emotions. We laughed about reliving those crazy memories in Miami. I picked this topic

after brainstorming in class with a peer and we talked about social media and the Fyre Festival incident, which reminded me of Rolling Loud. When editing the interview, I had fun picking sounds that described how we felt. Although it was terrifying, we used our resources to be socially aware of our new surroundings.

About the Author

Nicole Cortopassi is a senior at the University of Arizona, who will be graduating in May 2021. She enjoys the beach and going on walks with her sister and their golden retriever.

"LIES SPREAD FASTER THAN THE TRUTH"

~ 10 YEARS OF TWITTER DATA
(Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, Science 2018)

RETWEETS OF FACT

Factual inquiry is slow.

Truth can be predictable.

True posts elicited sadness & trust.

Bots spread truth and lies equally.

RETWEETS OF FICTION

SPREAD 6X FASTER!

NEW! EXCITING!

LIES LED TO SURPRISE & DISGUST!

HUMANS SEEM TO PREFER SHARING LIES TO TRUTH!

Infographic by Diana Daly based on the article by Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. Science, 359(6380), 1146-1151.

WHY PEOPLE SPREAD "FAKE NEWS" AND BAD INFORMATION

"Fake news" has multiple meanings in our culture today. When politicians and online discussants refer to stories as fake news, they are often referring to news that does not match their perspective. But there are news stories generated today that are better described as "fake" – based on no evidence.

So why is "fake news" more of an issue today than it was at some points in the past?

Well, historically "news" has long been the presentation of information on current events in our world. In past eras of traditional media, a much smaller number of people published news content. There were codes of ethics associated with journalism, such as the Journalist's Creed written by Walter Williams in 1914. Not all journalists followed this or any other code of ethics, but in the past, those who behaved unethically were often called out by their colleagues and unemployable with trusted news organizations.

Today, thanks to Web 2.0 and social media sites, nearly anyone can create and widely circulate stories branded as news; the case study of a story by Eric Tucker in this New York Times lesson plan is a good example. And the huge mass of "news" stories that results involves stories created based on a variety of motivations. This is why Oxford Dictionaries made the term post-truth their word of the year for 2016.

People or agencies may spread stories as news online to:

- spread truth
- influence others

- generate profit

Multiple motivations may drive someone to create or spread a story not based on evidence. But when spreading truth is not one of the story creators' concerns, you could justifiably call that story "fake news." I try not to use that term these days though; it's too loaded with politics. I prefer to call "news" unconcerned with truth by its more scientific name...

BULLSHIT!

Bullshit is a scientific term for information spread without concern for truth.

Think I'm bullshitting you when I say **bullshit** is the scientific name for fake news? Well, I'm not. There are information scientists and philosophers who study different types of bad information, and here are some of basic overviews of their classifications for bad information:

- *misinformation* = inaccurate information; often spread

without intention to deceive

- *disinformation* = information intended to deceive

- *bullshit* = information spread without concern for whether or not it's true

Professors Kay Mathiesen and Don Fallis at the University of Arizona have written that much of the "fake news" generated in the recent election season was bullshit, because producers were concerned with winning influence or profit or both, but were unconcerned with whether it was true.

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Bullshit and other deceptive "news" stories were particularly prevalent around the 2016 Presidential election, when tensions were high and influence on the minds of US voters held great value.

It is not always possible to know the motivation(s) behind a story's creation. Indeed, it can be difficult to determine the source of information on social media. But there have been some cases where identified sources were clearly trying to deceive, or were bullshitting – creating content that would spread fast without caring whether it was true.

Cases of bad information spread reveal different intentions, including destabilization of the US government, and profit. There have been multiple cases of "news" story "factories," in which people work together informally or are even employed to create news stories. The New York Times investigated one factory in Russia, a nation whose government's interference in the US election was the subject of a federal investigation. And Wired Magazine reported on a factory in Macedonia in which teens created election-related news stories for profit.

There is evidence that the systematic creation of election-related stories had a considerable effect on the 2016 US Presidential election. Donald Trump's victory was considered a victory by self-proclaimed "trolls" (see Chapter 3 for a longer discussion of this

phenomenon) and others who collaborated in publishing online content to defeat Hillary Clinton. Some of these content creators celebrated their campaign, including its disregard for truths, in an event they called the Deplora-Ball.

   Mark Zuckerberg initially denied responsibility for Facebook's spread of deceptive stories. Now Facebook moderators are beginning to flag "disputed news." But it is likely "news" factories will continue to produce stories not based in truth as long as there are readers who continue to spread them.

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THE ALT-RIGHT: FROM FAKE NEWS TO DOMESTIC TERRORISM

2016 saw the fast growth online of a right-leaning political aggregate in the US known as the Alt-Right (first mentioned in Chapter 5). The Alt-Right and related "white nationalist" groups have framed themselves in response to movements based on identity politics – groups that rally or identify around a race, ethnicity, upbringing, or religion rather than a political party. But many refute the notion that these groups are formed around identity, particularly when white supremacy – which centers on oppressing other races – has been so closely associated with Alt-Right media and demonstrations.

What seems to have brought the Alt-Right together more than identity politics is their approach to news – which they often discount as biased – and truth or "reality" – which in their culture it has been acceptable to manufacture for political use. Karl Rove of the second Bush administration was an early purveyor of Alt-Right ideology, who insisted that people in power create their own reality (and therefore truths.) The Alt-Right movement has followed this philosophy, recruiting followers through memes that imagine situations that fit with their politics. One Alt-Right blogger professed clear political intentions behind disinformation he spread in a profile by the New Yorker Magazine – disinformation which spread widely prior to the 2016 election.

> We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do. ~ Karl Rove to a NYTimes reporter in 2002

BULLSHIT THAT REALLY TOOK OFF

According to [PolitiFact,](#) some big headlines from 2016 of stories not based in truth included these:

- Hillary Clinton is running a child sex ring out of a pizza shop.
- Democrats want to impose Islamic law in Florida.
- Thousands of people at a Donald Trump rally in Manhattan chanted, "We hate Muslims, we hate blacks, we want our great country back."

[Buzzfeed](#) tracked the rates at which election stories spread on Facebook in 2016, and found these false stories out-performed true election stories:

- "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President"
- "WikiLeaks CONFIRMS Hillary Sold Weapons to ISIS"
- "IT'S OVER: Hillary's ISIS Email Just Leaked and It's Worse Than Anyone Could Have Imagined"

None of the listed stories was based in truth, but readers spread them wildly across their social networks and other online spaces. And many readers believed them. Take ["pizzagate":](#) In response to the pizza shop story, one man showed up with a gun at the pizza shop at the center of the story and fired shots, attempting to break up what he believed was a massive pedophilia operation.

Which leads to a new question. We now understand some of the reasons bullshit and other bad information spreads online. But why are readers and social media users so ready to believe it?

BUGS IN THE HUMAN BELIEF SYSTEM

Fake news and bad information are more likely to be believed when they confirm what we already believe.

We believe bullshit, fake news, and other types of deceptive information based on numerous interconnected human behaviors. Forbes recently presented an article, Why Your Brain May Be Wired To Believe Fake News, which broke down a few of these with the help of the neuroscientist Daniel Levitin. Levitin cited two well-researched human tendencies that draw us to swallow certain types of information while ignoring others.

- One tendency is **belief perseverance**: You want to keep believing what you already believe, treasuring a preexisting belief like Gollum treasures the ring in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings series.

- The other tendency is **confirmation bias**: the brain runs through the text of something to select the pieces of it

that confirm what you think is already true, while
knocking away and ignoring the pieces that don't confirm
what you believe.

These tendencies to believe what we want to hear and see are exacerbated by social network-enabled filter bubbles (described in Chapter 4 of this book.) When we get our news through social media, we are less likely to see opposing points of view, which social networking sites filter out, and which we are unlikely to see on our own.

There is concern that youth and [students are particularly vulnerable](#) to believing deceptive online content. But I believe that with some training, youth are going to be better at "reading" than those older than them. Youth are accustomed to online content layered with pictures, links, and insider conversations and connections. The trick to "reading" in the age of social media is to read all of these layers, not just the text.

DR. DALY'S STEPS TO "READING" SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS STORIES IN 2020:

Reading today means ingesting multiple levels of a source simultaneously.

1. **Put aside your biases**. Recognize and put aside your belief perseverance and your confirmation bias. You may want a story to be true or untrue, but you probably don't want to be fooled by it.

2. **Read the story's words AND its pictures**. What are they saying? What are they NOT saying?

3. **Read the story's history AND its sources.** Who / where is this coming from? What else has come from there and from them?

4. **Read the story's audience AND its conversations.** Who is this source speaking to, and who is sharing and speaking back? How might they be doing so in coded ways? (Here's an example to make you think about images and audience, whether or not you agree to Filipovic's interpretation.)

5. **Before you share, consider fact-checking.** Reliable fact-checking sites at the time of this writing include:

- politifact.com
- snopes.com
- factcheck.org

That said – no one fact-checking site is perfect.; neither is any one news site. All are subjective and liable to be taken over by partisan interests or trolls.

Core Concepts

fake news

a term recently popularized by politicians to refer to stories they do not agree with

misinformation

inaccurate information spread without the intention to deceive

disinformation

information intended to deceive those who receive it

bullshit

information spread without concern for whether or not it's true

knowledge construction

the negotiation of multiple truths as a way of understanding or "knowing" something

confirmation bias

the human tendency for the brain to run through the text of something to select the pieces of it that confirm what you think is already true, while knocking away and ignoring the pieces that don't confirm what you believe

belief perseverance

the human tendency to want to continue believing what you already believe

Core Questions

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