



Brownies, Brains, and Information Habits, Part II

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Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.¹ - Daniel Patrick Moynihan

I recently wrote about my son's propensity to bake treats, particularly a decadent version of rocky road brownies, which I cannot resist. I turned this into analogy about how news consumption habits can sometimes feed an appetite for biased information that interferes with our grasp of truth.

The media is partly to blame. In addition to sensationalizing news, media intermingles news and opinion without disclaimer. It provides unending options for tailored information that strengthens preferred viewpoints and discounts countervailing facts. Our brains are wired to privilege information that conforms to pre-existing views. As proof, social science research shows that people with deeply held convictions – irrespective of political ideology – often consume the same information yet come to opposite conclusions about what is true. Accessing shared facts, therefore, is not enough to change minds.

But what if we could change our environment to reduce exposure to poor news sources and one-sided information and fundamentally change how we consume news? Decades of research consistently show that self-control is more a function of our situation than our disposition. In other words, a few tweaks to our environment may enable us to emulate people

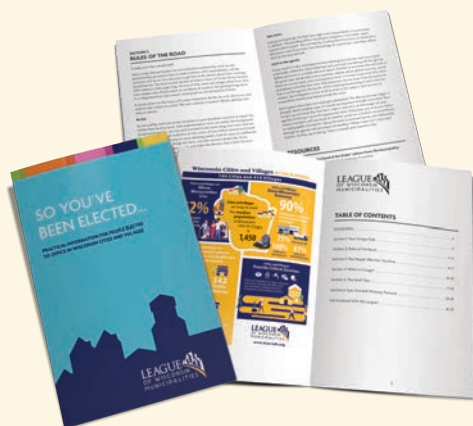
who seem to have more discipline and self-control. Rather than trying to show superhuman resistance to rocky road brownies, perhaps we just need to make them less accessible. Psychologist Wendy Wood argues that reimagining behavioral change as an environmental problem, rather than a personal defect, can be liberating because “it’s not so much about you. It’s about the environment that you’re in and how you control it.”² Below are a few concrete suggestions.

Critically Review Your News and Information Sources

Media sources that portray particular points of view as flawless or privileged, or opposing views as flawed or worthless, merely perpetuate news echo chambers and information cocoons. Instead, we should seek information sources that encourage healthy and transparent debate. Although society is polarized, we actually need *more* debate, not less. But we need debate that is open and fair and where competing points of view are encouraged. Here are a few critical questions we can ask ourselves about our news sources:

- How much time/space does the news source devote to news versus commentary?
- When presenting commentary, does the news program provide alternative views? How often?

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- Does the news source have a dedicated time or place to alert consumers about factual errors and corrections?
- Do independent studies reveal biases in our news sources? What are those biases?
- When reporting news, does the news source tell us where they get their information?

It is next to impossible to find unbiased media sources. But knowing their biases and purposely seeking more than one credible news source as part of our information diet is a healthier consumption strategy.³

If It Isn't News, Turn It Down (Or Off)

Researchers at RAND Corporation found that American journalism has gradually shifted away from objective news toward more opinion-based content that appeals to emotion and relies heavily on argumentation and advocacy over facts.⁴ While 63% of Americans believe that news is most useful when it primarily reports facts over analysis and opinion, most of us are bad at distinguishing between the two.⁵

And there's the rub. Even when people can discern fact from opinion, a significant portion of us are beholden to our own preconceived biases. As author David McRaney explains in his book, *You Are Not Smart*, "Punditry is an industry built on confirmation bias...these people provide fuel for beliefs, they prefilter the world to match existing worldviews. If their filter is like your filter, you love them. If it isn't, you hate them. You watch them not for information, but for confirmation."⁶

For our own viewing repertoire, we might mitigate or reverse some of these biases if we seek news sources and programs that privilege facts and provoke curiosity and healthy debate rather than stifling conversation by predetermining for us what is right and what is wrong.

Be Skeptical When Someone Says, "I Did Some Research."

Too often we equate a Google search, where we scroll through 2-3 pages and click on several hits, to actual research. It is not. With few exceptions, the more informed someone believes they are, typically the more misinformed they actually are. As David McRaney reminds us, "Your opinions are the result of years of paying attention to information which confirmed what you believed while ignoring information which challenged your preconceived notions."⁷ As a result, we all see the world through a filter that distorts our active pursuit of facts. Inevitably, when we find confirmation, we assume we were correct all along and we stop searching.

Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, captures how most people approach research: "[W]e ask ourselves, 'Can I believe it?' Then ...we search for supporting evidence, and if we find even a single piece of pseudo-evidence, we can stop thinking. We now have permission to believe. ...In contrast, when we don't want to believe something, we ask ourselves, 'Must I believe it?' Then we search for contrary evidence, and if we find a single reason to doubt the claim, we can dismiss it."⁸

As noted by Robert Burton, and confirmed in experiment after experiment, "the more committed we are to a belief, the harder it is to relinquish, even in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence."⁹ Human beings eventually embraced science to prevent this type of thinking. The scientific method begins with the assumption that our hypotheses are wrong until proven otherwise. But as Cordelia Fine puts it in her book *A Mind of its Own*, too often, the problem is that "we behave like a smart lawyer searching for evidence to bolster his client's case, rather than a jury searching for the truth."¹⁰

Avoid Sources That Flirt With Conspiracy Theories

It feels like we shouldn't have to discuss this, but many otherwise rational people are falling prey to conspiracy theories. Research on the rhetorical power of conspiracies shows how a theory can easily overwhelm facts and evidence-based counterarguments. Conspiracy theories thrive on illusory correlation, which occurs when two variables that are not necessarily connected are assumed to be linked, primarily

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because it fits a story that we want to be real. Michael Shermer, author of *The Believing Brain*, argues that our brains naturally look for and find patterns, and then infuse those patterns with meaning.¹¹ As a result, simple coincidences can become key explanatory facts.¹² The internet exacerbates these tendencies by putting together random facts, making them readily available and spreading them virally.

Another hallmark of conspiracy is the “Galileo effect” – basically, a propensity toward denialism, refusal to yield to evidence, and a view that such dogmatism is positive. As explained by Pascal Diethelm and Martin McKee, “Denialists are usually not deterred by the extreme isolation of their theories, but rather see it as the indication of their intellectual courage against the dominant orthodoxy and the accompanying political correctness, often comparing themselves to Galileo.”¹³ As our political system polarizes, more and more conspiracy theories will arise, further undercutting the power of evidence and healthy debate. We need to seek sources of information that base reporting on multiple reliable sources, show evidence of independent fact-checking, and habitually acknowledge errors when they occur.

Stop Reading the Comments

It is important to remember that the people who write comments after articles, stories, and blog posts are self-selected, motivated to make their views known, and definitely *not* representative of the general population. Furthermore, people with the most confidence in their opinions tend to be more likely to speak up, post on social media, and attend public meetings. As it turns out, political “sophisticates” – those most involved and informed about politics – are also susceptible to the polarizing effects of motivated reasoning.¹⁴ Paradoxically, therefore, the loudest voices are often the most misinformed.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell reminds us, “The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.”¹⁵ So, dear reader, if you take all of my suggestions at face value, perhaps you missed the point of this article. It’s just another opinion, after all. I encourage you, therefore, to stop reading immediately and join me in consuming a rocky road brownie.

1. Moynihan served as a four-term U.S. Senator, an ambassador, an academic (sociology professor), and an advisor for presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon.
2. See Michaela Barnett, “Good Habits, Bad Habits: A Conversation with Wendy Wood,” *Health*, October 14, 2019. Retrieved from <https://behavioralscientist.org/good-habits-bad-habits-a-conversation-with-wendy-wood/>.
3. One excellent source of the state of news in America is the Pew Research Center. (<https://www.journalism.org/>).
4. Rand Corporation, “U.S. Journalism Has Become More Subjective,” News Release, May 14, 2019. <https://www.rand.org/news/press/2019/05/14.html>.
5. Kevin Loker, “Confusion about what’s news and what’s opinion is a big problem, but journalists can help solve it,” *American Press Institute*, September 19, 2018. <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/confusion-about-whats-news-and-whats-opinion-is-a-big-problem-but-journalists-can-help-solve-it/>. Amy Mitchell *et al.*, “Distinguishing Between Factual and Opinion Statements in the News,” *Pew Research Center*, June 18, 2018. <https://www.journalism.org/2018/06/18/distinguishing-between-factual-and-opinion-statements-in-the-news/>.
6. David McRaney, *You are Not So Smart: Why You Have Too Many Friends on Facebook, Why Your Memory is Mostly Fiction, and 46 Other Ways You're Deluding Yourself* (New York: Penguin Group, 2021), p. 28.
7. David McRaney, “Confirmation Bias,” *You Are Not So Smart* blog, June 23, 2010: <https://youarenotso.smart.com/2010/06/23/confirmation-bias/#:~:text=The%20Truth%3A%20Your%20opinions%20are,likely%20heard%20of%20confirmation%20bias.>
8. Haidt (New York: Random, 2012), 98.
9. Burton, *On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 12; and Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1955).
10. Fine, *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 13.
11. Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies - How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths* (New York: Times Books, 2011).
12. See, for example, Reed Berkowitz, “A Game Designer’s Analysis of QAnon,” *Curiouser*, September 20, 2020. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/curiouser-institute/a-game-designers-analysis-of-qanon-580972548be5>.
13. Pascal Diethelm and Martin McKee, “Denialism: What Is It and How Should Scientists Respond?” *European Journal of Public Health* 19, no. 1 (January 2009): 2-4. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckn139>.
14. Philip M. Fernbach *et al.*, “Political Extremism Is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding,” *Psychological Science* 24 (2013): 939-946; Caitlin Drummond and Baruch Fischhoff, “Individuals with Greater Science Literacy and Education Have More Polarized Beliefs on Controversial Science Topics,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 114 (2017): 9587-9592. Dan Kahan *et al.*, “The Polarizing Impact of Science Literacy and Numeracy on Perceived Climate Change Risks,” *Nature Climate Change* 2 (2012): 732-735.
15. For historical origin of this quote, see <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/03/04/self-doubt/>.

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