

Bagging the Bull:
Skeptical skills in an age of misinformation

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Lecture 6, 20 February 2018

Course topic review

- Information growth and the economy of attention
 - Attention limits and selection criteria: truth, importance, and interest
- Attitude formation and change
 - Principles of psycho-logic that make us susceptible to misinformation influences
- Advertising
 - How psycho-logic is exploited in advertising
- Propaganda and education
 - How psycho-logic is exploited in politics and educational philosophies
- Science and science journalism
 - How psycho-logic an distort reports of scientific findings
- **Skeptical skills**
 - **What to do to reduce the effects of misinformation?**

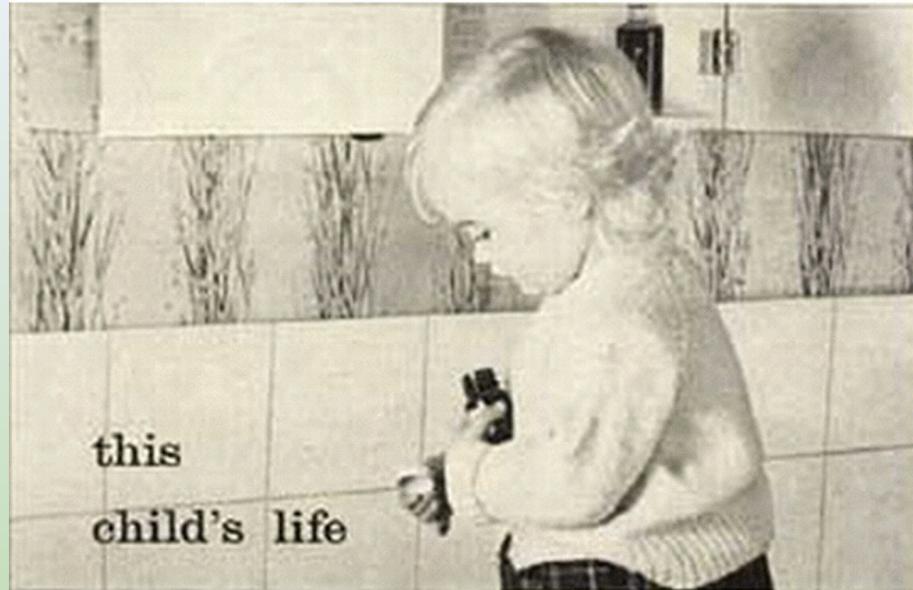
A skeptical view of reducing misinformation

- The vast majority of misinformation (fake news, sensational, titillating news, etc.) is probably harmless
 - Ingested as entertainment, a giggle, brain candy, fluff, parody, farce
- Often impossible to distinguish truth from fiction, fact from opinion
 - Did Oswald really act alone? Can conspiracy theories be falsified?
 - If “Harry died” is a fact, is “silly Harry died” misinformation?
 - If Weather network predicts 80% chance of rain tomorrow and it does not rain, then is the prediction misinformation?
- So why do anything to stop it?
 - Everyone deserves a bit of fun
 - Responsible adults can tell the difference between good information and bad
 - Truth commissioners, political correctness police are not needed or wanted
 - Freedom of speech! Freedom of expression! Freedom to look and listen!

A skeptical view of this skepticism

- Even if a tiny % of misinformation is harmful, its extent and makes the reduction of misinformation desirable and important
 - AKA the “Safety trumps freedom” Argument
 - <https://techcrunch.com/2018/02/18/fake-news-is-an-existential-crisis-for-social-media/>
- Consider cyber misconduct (CBC News)
 - **Russians conducted 'information warfare' on US election (17 Feb 2018)**
 - US Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein said that Russians used "information warfare" against the US election process to spread distrust.
 - **Russian foreign minister dismisses FBI charges (17 Feb 2018)**
 - Russia's foreign minister has dismissed as "blather" the charges levelled by the FBI special counsel against 13 Russians for election meddling.
 - **Kremlin says U.S. indictment on election tampering proves nothing (19 Feb 2018)**
 - Putin official says charges focus on Russian nationals, giving 'no indication' Russian government was involved
- Or simple bungling (New York Times)
 - **Hawaii False Alarm Hints at Thin Line Between Mishap and Nuclear War (14 January 2018)**

Or consider this ad in the British Medical Journal, 1961:



may depend on the safety of 'Distaval'

Consider the possible outcome in a case such as this — had the bottle contained a conventional barbiturate. Year by year, the barbiturates claim a mounting toll of childhood victims. Yet it is simple enough to prescribe a sedative and hypnotic which is both highly effective . . . and outstandingly safe. 'Distaval' (*thalidomide*) has been prescribed for over three years in this country, where the accidental poisonings rate is notoriously high; but there is no case on record in which even gross overdosage with 'Distaval' has had harmful results. Put your mind at rest. Depend on the safety of

As a hypnotic at bedtime :
ADULTS : 50 mg. to 200 mg.
INFANTS AND CHILDREN :
25 mg. to 100 mg.

As a daytime sedative :
ADULTS : 25 mg. two or three times daily.
INFANTS AND CHILDREN : Up to 25 mg.,
according to age, one to three times daily.

'Distaval' (25 mg. tablets).

'Distaval' Forte (100 mg. tablets).
Basic cost to N.H.S. of 12 tablets from
dispensing pack of one hundred—1/- or
2/6d. according to strength.

'Distaval' Suspension (50 mg. per 5 ml.)
Basic cost to N.H.S. 3/- per bottle of 60 ml.

REFERENCES:
Practitioner, 1959, 133, 57.
J. clin. exp. Psychopath., 1959, 20, 243
J. Coll. gen. Pract., 1958, 1, 368.
Brit. med. J., 1959, 2, 635.
Med. Wid. (Lond.), 1960, 81, 26.
Brit. J. Pharmacol., 1960, 15, 111.

'DISTAVAL'

TRADE MARK



THE DISTILLERS COMPANY (*Biochemicals*) LIMITED

Broadway House, The Broadway, Wimbledon, London, S.W.19 Telephone: LIBerty 6630 Owners of the trade mark 'Distaval'

So if we want to reduce misinformation, how do we do it?

- Reduce the **production** of misinformation
- Reduce the **distribution** of misinformation
- Reduce the **consumption** of misinformation
- **Immunize** the population against the effects of misinformation

- How feasible are these methods?

Reducing the production of misinformation

- Legal discouragements
 - Laws for defamation: written (libel) and spoken (slander)
 - Laws for hate speech
- Financial discouragements
 - Boycott products from those who produce misinformation
 - Consider Volkswagen, tobacco companies, insurance companies
- Social discouragements
 - Public censure, ostracism, ridicule, humiliation, shame (guilt?), inattention
 - Web lists of people or sites with records of misinformation



But ...

- Discouragements do not work when producers cannot be identified
 - Anonymous web postings, rumour transmissions, limited international laws (Can Russia's 13 be extradited?)
 - Now quite easy to be anonymous on the Internet (VPN facilities, etc.)
- After-the-fact punishments
 - Nothing to lose thereafter, so why not do more?
 - Wolf! Wolf! Known liars who now tell the truth to create doubt in it?
- Tempting rewards from producing believable misinformation
 - Example: passing misleading rumours about poison in competitors' food
 - Example: Getting dirt on political opponents (Hillary Clinton? Patrick Brown?)

Reducing the distribution of misinformation



- Pressure social media (Facebook) to remove undesirable stuff
 - Example: social media complaints about social media
 - <http://socialmeems.com/top-4-criticisms-of-social-media/>
 - Example: Unilever threatens moving advertising dollars back to traditional media
 - <http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/social-media-advertising-facebook-google-1.4538685>
- Trust social media websites to do their own misinformation control
 - [Facebook] “partnered with third-party fact checking organizations like Snopes, Politifact and the Associated Press to flag stories as disputed.” (Tech Radar, 25 May 2017) and “plans to survey users on which news sources they find trustworthy in effort to tackle fake news.” (Al Jeezera, 20 Jan 2018)
 - [Google] “... is using human editors to evaluate the quality of search results... [and] users can now report when Autocomplete results are offensive, misleading or false.
 - [Wikipedia] Quality control:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Editorial_oversight_and_control

But ...

- How to choose who should decide what will be distributed and what will not?
 - Job creation for professional skeptics?
- When will the decision be made?
 - Vetting before posting? Only after someone complains?
- What criteria will be used to make judgments? How chosen?
 - Political correctness? Swear words? Personal offense? Personal gain?
- Would judgments be a form of censorship in which only inoffensive information is distributed? Or just a warning?
- Can Artificial Intelligence help or harm the judgment process?
 - The case of National Capital FreeNet

Decreasing the consumption of misinformation

- Warning announcements
 - “... Viewer discretion is advised.”
 - “Click here to see gory photos” or “Click here to avoid gory photos”
 - “ 37% of 200 viewers rated the content of this site as fake news.”
- Consumer certification
 - “I hereby declare that I am at least 18 years of age...”
 - “ My skepticism certification code is: _____ “
 - “Can you keep a secret online? __ Yes __ No”
 - “Are you nuts? __ Yes __ No”
- Promotion of trustworthy news sources
 - A “Consumer Reports” equivalent to list trustworthiness of web sites?
 - Check-rated: London/New York Times, Washington Post, Science, Nature, BBC, CBC, PBS, TVO, etc.
 - Unacceptable: National Rifle Association, Ku Klux Klan News, etc.

But...

- Fruit is more tempting when it is forbidden
 - Aronson and Carlsmith “Forbidden toy” studies (1963)
- Self-declarations are often false.
 - “Are you bald? ___ Yes X No”
- Promotions of virtue are frequently ignored
 - Consider the half-life of a diet or New Year’s resolution

Conclusion

- Attempts to reduce production, distribution and consumption of misinformation
 - No magic bullet
- Each tactic might have a bit of success in limiting the misinformation that people ingest
- But what if we focused on digestion rather than ingestion?

Leaving us with immunization:
skeptical antibodies

Immunize consumers with doses of skeptical skills

A sampler

- Check the URLs
 - <https://www.nasa.gov> versus <https://www.express.co.uk/latest/aliens>
 - To: You From: Ontario Public Health Re: Free flu shots
 - To: You From: Dr. Zeebot Kangrinagain Re: Get a super flu shot at half price!
- Use of sensational headlines
 - “Where are Donald’s love children?”
- Undocumented sources
 - “Rumoured to be...”
 - “Sources tell us...”
 - “Word around town...”
- Could, would, should, might, up to,
 - “The discovery could lead to a cure that might eliminate halitosis forever”

More skeptical skills

- Missing data: What is NOT said?
 - “Doubled their job success rate” versus “Increased their success rate from 1% to 2%”
- Changing the topic: “You asked about guns. No one likes being shot by people who use guns, just like no one wants to pay higher taxes. Which is why I promise to lower taxes.”
- Put offs and put downs
 - Our government is studying that
 - Be patient; it is a complex issue!
 - You don’t know all the facts
- Personal attacks
 - My honourable colleague, I shall not negotiate with you until you stop lying
- Jargon detection exercises

Even more

- Spotting logical flaws
 - “Senior Citizens are are the lifeblood or our community; they deserve good cognitive health care. So Learning in Almonte should be given much more government money to expand its senior offerings.”
 - Senior citizens are lifeblood? So what are junior citizens, chopped liver?
 - What is lifeblood? How different from blood? Or from deathblood
 - What community? Almonte? Right-handed folk? People who attend Learning in Almonte courses?
 - If seniors deserve cognitive health, what do non-seniors deserve?
 - From what programmes will the money be taken?
 - Is there a link between offering more courses(?) and senior health? Even when the offering is refused?
 - Are there alternatives to L in A “offerings” for obtaining cognitive health? How about napping? Reading? Meeting friends?
 - Why “government money”?
 - Still more ...?

And then there is jargon. How can we banish it?

- The bigger the words, the smaller the ideas.
- Building an immunity to jargon: Bullshit generators for intellectual push-ups
 - [Hi-tech bullshit generator](#)
 - [Corporate bullshit generator](#)
 - [Educational bullshit genertor](#)
 - [New Age Bullshit generator](#)

But is the rumor true?

Do habitual skeptics really lead bleak, funless, doubt-filled lives?

- Heck no!
- Skepticism is not cynicism (= “The last resort of the idealist”)
 - Skepticism is the art of challenging assumptions, true or false, pleasant or unpleasant
 - It is an antidote to Mark Twain’s observation, “It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.”
- Even better:
 - Skepticism requires us to laugh at ourselves
 - Who said “The best antidote to bullshit is satire”?
 - [The Onion](#)
 - [Dilbert](#)
 - [Far Side](#)

Whom/how/when/where to teach skepticism?

- Preaching to the converted
 - Education, life experience, and skepticism: The trajectory of doubt
 - (Is skepticism now taught in schools?)
- Preaching to the unconverted
 - Skepticism is a skill, not a fact or a value. When used consistently, it leads everyone to the same conclusions regardless of where they begin.
 - “A conclusion is the place you got tired of thinking.”

And what do we conclude?

“Before I was a skeptic, I was ignorant.
Since being a skeptic, I am confused.”
(William Lawson, 1985)

Thank you for attending
the course!