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Revel in the discomfort of thought

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Why do people believe fake news?

Critical thinking is in short supply. In an increasingly busy and complex world, taking the time to truly and deeply think about the vast amount of information we consume can feel like a luxury.

It is why fake news is increasingly becoming a problem.

Whether you initially believe the quotes to the right or not, they are all prominent examples of 'fake news' that received far more publicity and traction than they should have.

These stories should be confined to the dark corners of the internet. However, fuelled by our bite-sized, skim-read, and content-overloaded lives, this is rarely the case.

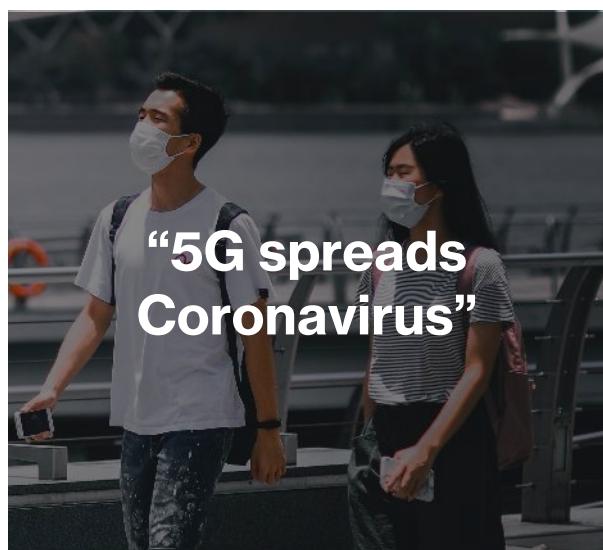
Without proper thought, these spurious and sometimes harmful pieces of information can take on a life of their own.

These stories take hold because, as a society, we're guilty of taking things at face-value and not thinking critically about the information we consume.



Too often we enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

John F Kennedy



This isn't necessarily a conscious choice. We're looking for stories that intuitively make sense, creating simple and often flawed narratives out of a couple of data points (known as the narrative fallacy).

On top of that, confirmation bias means we're looking for points of view that agree with our own, even if our initial opinion was never based on fact. To make sense of the world, we oversimplify and jump to conclusions.

The critical fight against bias

These same systems are at play when we walk into the agency each day (or as it currently stands, walk our home offices). These biases permeate the decisions we make at work and as strategists, this can have significant consequences.

Taking a single insight from qualitative research, or searching through TGi for a proof-point to your gut-feeling. Discounting one data source in favour of another that tells the right story, or settling on a narrative that sounds good.

All inherently human decisions, but ones that we should be actively fighting against. We're pre-disposed to fall into traps and it's becoming easier to do so in our increasingly complex, remote and time-poor lives.

As strategists, it's vital that we develop the skills to think critically about our work. Every piece of data, every opinion, every point of view needs critical assessment to ensure we don't fall foul of our inherent biases.

It's a trap

Missing this critical stage can lead to an entire approach built on a mis-understood or incorrect foundation.

It can blind us from seeing the other side of the story. A trap that Protein World fell into when not considering the differing and polarising points of view that could be taken on their 'Beach Body Ready' campaign.

Or it can lead to a poorly thought-out execution, leaning heavily on the zeitgeist and over-estimating the importance of your product within that context.



Acknowledging our shortcomings is the first step, but in an increasingly busy, remote and complex world, how do we tackle these challenges?

We do so by revelling in the discomfort of thought. As JFK put it, it's too easy to simply enjoy our own opinions, without actively challenging them. We need to become comfortable with and enjoy the process of challenging our gut feeling or opinion and thinking more critically. Don't take the easy way out.

How to save ourselves from ourselves

Seek out diversity of thought

Over time, it becomes increasingly easy to fall into the same patterns of thought, use the same frameworks, follow the same processes. It strengthens the biases working against us. Pushing us towards making the easy decision to go with our instincts.

Working remotely, as so many of us are, we can't take advantage of those quick chats, those coffee-machine moments. We must actively seek out others' opinions. For me, one of the silver linings of this year, has been setting aside time with other strategists to catch up on a regular basis.

Stress testing ideas, debating opinions, and jointly scrutinising research with others, has been invaluable. Seeking out a 'fresh-pair of eyes' is such a quick way to get a different point of view and drive critical thinking.

Attempt to actively disprove yourself

Once you have an insight or point view, try to disprove it. Find a counterpoint. It may not completely disprove your point, but it will instantly allow you to weigh up both sides of the argument.

Whilst seemingly an onerous task, it is far simpler than it sounds. In developing a strategy, the real time is spent wading through a plethora of information to find your initial point of view.

Finding a counterpoint is already considerably easier as you know what you're looking for.

Beware of over-generalisation

So much of the richness of strategy/planning comes from stepping away from your computer. Spending time in your client's shop, talking to real consumers about how they made choices, buying the product yourself.

However, this comes with the danger of taking a single point of view and extrapolating that to build an entire strategy.

Our tendency to look for a narrative, pre-disposes us to tell stories that make sense, potentially going against the actual truth.

That individual opinion may be right and may be the key to unlocking a great strategy, but it needs to be stress tested. It is vital we're considering a range of data points to corroborate these rich nuggets of insight.