

thoughts, feelings, and actions and moved on, unaware of the machinery of their minds.

How do you separate fantasy from reality? How can you be sure the story of your life both from long ago and minute to minute is true? There is a pleasant vindication to be found when you accept that you can't. No one can, yet we persist and thrive. Who you think you are is sort of like a movie based on true events, which is not necessarily a bad thing. The details may be embellished, but the big picture, the general idea, is probably a good story worth hearing about.

## Confirmation Bias

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**THE MISCONCEPTION:** *Your opinions are the result of years of rational, objective analysis.*

**THE TRUTH:** *Your opinions are the result of years of paying attention to information that confirmed what you believed, while ignoring information that challenged your preconceived notions.*

Have you ever had a conversation in which some old movie was mentioned, something like *The Golden Child*, or maybe even something more obscure?

You laughed about it, quoted lines from it, wondered what happened to the actors you never saw again, and then you forgot about it.

Until . . .

You are flipping channels one night and all of the sudden you see *The Golden Child* is playing. Weird.

The next day you are reading a news story, and out of nowhere it mentions forgotten movies from the 1980s, and holy shit, there are three paragraphs about *The Golden Child*. You see a trailer that night at the theater for a new Eddie Murphy movie, and then you

see a billboard on the street promoting Charlie Murphy doing stand-up in town, and then one of your friends sends you a link to a post at TMZ showing recent photos of the actress from *The Golden Child*.

What is happening here? Is the universe trying to tell you something?

No. This is how confirmation bias works.

Since the conversation with your friends, you've flipped channels plenty of times; you've walked past lots of billboards; you've seen dozens of stories about celebrities; you've been exposed to a handful of movie trailers.

The thing is, you disregarded all the other information, all the stuff unrelated to *The Golden Child*. Out of all the chaos, all the morsels of data, you noticed only the bits that called back to something sitting on top of your brain. A few weeks back, when Eddie Murphy and his Tibetan adventure were still submerged beneath a heap of pop culture at the bottom of your skull, you wouldn't have paid any special attention to references to it.

If you are thinking about buying a particular make of new car, you suddenly see people driving that car all over the roads. If you just ended a longtime relationship, every song you hear seems to be written about love. If you are having a baby, you start to see babies everywhere. Confirmation bias is seeing the world through a filter.

The examples above are a sort of passive version of the phenomenon. The real trouble begins when confirmation bias distorts your active pursuit of facts.

Punditry is an industry built on confirmation bias. Rush Limbaugh and Keith Olbermann, Glenn Beck and Arianna Huffington, Rachel Maddow and Ann Coulter—these people provide fuel for beliefs, they pre-filter 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.

Be careful. People like to be told what they already know. Remember that. They get uncomfortable when you tell them new things. New things . . . well, new things aren't what they expect. They like to know that, say, a dog will bite a man. That is what dogs do. They don't want to know that man bites a dog, because the world is not supposed to happen like that. In short, what people think they want is news, but what they really crave is olds . . . Not news but olds, telling people that what they think they already know is true.

—TERRY PRATCHETT THROUGH THE CHARACTER  
LORD VETINARI FROM HIS *The Truth: a Novel of Discworld*

During the 2008 U.S. presidential election, researcher Valdis Krebs at orgnet.com analyzed purchasing trends on Amazon. People who already supported Obama were the same people buying books that painted him in a positive light. People who already disliked Obama were the ones buying books painting him in a negative light. Just as with pundits, people weren't buying books for the information, they were buying them for the confirmation. Krebs has researched purchasing trends on Amazon and the clustering habits of people on social networks for years, and his research shows what psychological research into confirmation bias predicts: you want to be right about how you see the world, so you seek out information that confirms your beliefs and avoid contradictory evidence and opinions.

Half a century of research has placed confirmation bias among the most dependable of mental stumbling blocks. Journalists look-

ing to tell a certain story must avoid the tendency to ignore evidence to the contrary; scientists looking to prove a hypothesis must avoid designing experiments with little wiggle room for alternate outcomes. Without confirmation bias, conspiracy theories would fall apart. Did we really put a man on the moon? If you are looking for proof we didn't, you can find it.

In a 1979 University of Minnesota study by Mark Snyder and Nancy Cantor, people read about a week in the life of an imaginary woman named Jane. Throughout the week, Jane did things that showcased she could be extroverted in some situations and introverted in others. A few days passed. The subjects were asked to return. Researchers divided the people into groups and asked them to help decide if Jane would be suited for a particular job. One group was asked if she would be a good librarian; the other group was asked if she would be a good real estate agent. In the librarian group, people remembered Jane as an introvert. In the real estate group, they remembered her being an extrovert. After this, when each group was asked if she would be good at the other profession, people stuck with their original assessment, saying she wasn't suited for the other job. The study suggests even in your memories you fall prey to confirmation bias, recalling those things that support even recently-arrived-at beliefs and forgetting those things that contradict them.

An Ohio State study in 2009 showed people spend 36 percent more time reading an essay if that essay aligns with their opinions. Another study at Ohio State in 2009 showed subjects clips of the parody show *The Colbert Report*, and people who considered themselves politically conservative consistently reported "Colbert only pretends to be joking and genuinely meant what he said."

Over time, by never seeking the antithetical, through accumu-

lating subscriptions to magazines, stacks of books, and hours of television, you can become so confident in your worldview that no one can dissuade you.

Remember, there's always someone out there willing to sell eyeballs to advertisers by offering a guaranteed audience of people looking for validation. Ask yourself if you are in that audience. In science, you move closer to the truth by seeking evidence to the contrary. Perhaps the same method should inform your opinions as well.