

## ***Do You Believe Everything You Read or Watch on Media?***

Notes on Fake News, Propaganda, Politics, and Media Manipulation

Consider the fact that many people read or watch things online or in newspapers that are simply not true. Nonetheless, a proportion of these people will believe what they have read or seen even if those beliefs are silly, nonsense, or not supported by any evidence. Indeed, when presented with evidence that their beliefs are untrue, many people will actually reject the evidence and claim that it is "fake," a bunch of lies, or otherwise manufactured.

To understand why "fake news and propaganda" – so often found in political struggles and increasingly linked to online/social media – is so widespread and influential, we can start with what the Harvard psychologist, Daniel T. Gilbert, has discovered about how our mind deals with what it has read or seen. Thus, we can ask the same question Gilbert did thirty years ago: Do You Believe Everything You Read (or Watch on Media?)

"One of us can still recall the day when he saw his first pair of x-ray glasses advertised on the inside cover of a comic book. The possibility of looking right through things seemed well worth the \$1.99 [the image shows an even cheaper version-Ed.], so he mailed an envelope filled with quarters and pennies and waited to be endowed with



extraordinary visual powers in just 4–6 weeks. When the x-ray glasses arrived, their red cellophane lenses were a serious disappointment. "But it said in the ad that you could see through stuff," he told his mother. "You can't believe everything you read," she said. "Oh yeah?" he replied, "Well I can." (Gilbert et al., 1993)

## René Descartes (1596-1650)

Descartes was a famous and influential French philosopher who contributed multiple ideas in the history of thought. These included that the mind (a non-physical substance) and the body (a physical substance) are separate entities that interact with each other [= Cartesian Dualism], that the fact that I can think is proof that I exist [= "cogito, ergo sum"], that we should emphasize the role of reason and logic in our thinking [an early form of Rationalism], and, in mathematics, analytic geometry and the Cartesian coordinate system. A Roman Catholic, he attended the Jesuit College of La Flèche for about seven or eight years.



- "Understanding something and believing something are "separate and sequential psychological operations... this "doctrine of separate mental acts" is the psychological foundation not only of Descartes's canon but of much modern psychological theorizing as well."
- "Zimbardo and Lieppe (1991) summarized the conventional wisdom on this point: Learning requires that the audience pay *attention* to the message and, in turn, gain some *comprehension* of it, understanding the new beliefs it proposes. Then, if the message has compelling arguments, *acceptance* of its conclusion and a change in attitude will follow. (p. 135)"
- "First people comprehend a message, and then later they may accept it. Understanding and believing are today taken to be the separate and sequential operations that Descartes described." (all above from Gilbert et al, 1993)

## Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

Born in a Portuguese-Jewish family which fled from their homeland because of anti-Jewish persecution to live in The Netherlands, Spinoza was a philosopher who challenged many traditional religious beliefs including the existence of an all-powerful & personal God (he was excommunicated by the Dutch Jewish community) and argued that God and



nature are the same. He embraced reason and judgment rather than opinion or superstition as the basis of human thought, and rejected that humans have free will. These are a few of the many ideas which he wrote about.

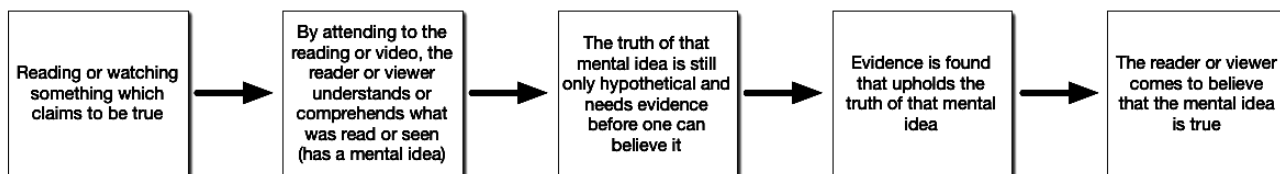
- Spinoza suggested that people believe every assertion they understand but quickly "unbelieve" those assertions that are found to be at odds with other established facts. For Spinoza, "mere understanding" was a psychological fiction—a non sequitur that grew out of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of mental representation...According to Spinoza, *the act of understanding is the act of believing. As such, people are incapable of withholding their acceptance of that which they understand. They may indeed change their minds after accepting the assertions they comprehend, but they cannot stop their minds from being changed by contact with those assertions.* [Emphasis added]
- Acceptance, then, may be a passive and inevitable act, whereas rejection may be an active operation that undoes the initial passive acceptance.

Consider reading a text which says: "Barack Hussein Obama was not born in the United States"

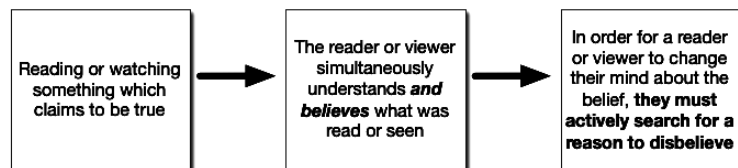
Consider watching an online video which shows images of rioters stealing from stores in some urban area and says that these rioters were being helped by revolutionary agitators coming from a foreign country

Is there a difference between understanding and belief about what you read or saw?

#### Descartes' Claim



#### Spinoza's Claim



Daniel Gilbert and his colleagues conducted a wide range of experiments in the 1990s to demonstrate that Spinoza's argument that understanding and belief arise at the same time and changing one's mind (that is, no longer believing) requires an active decision or effort by the believer (see Gilbert, 1991; Gilbert et al., 1993).

Are there additional findings and theories from the research literature that address the question of (false) beliefs? Yes. Using Gilbert et al, 1993's examples, these include:

- The tendency for individuals to attribute some trait to another person which they will hold until some sort of information or experience disconfirms their attribution
- A truthfulness bias in human lie detection, that is, we tend generally to conclude that people are telling us the truth.
- Confirmation bias: when we hold a belief, we are more likely to seek evidence which confirms what we believe and to ignore evidence that does not confirm the belief.
- What has sometimes been called the "innuendo effect, i.e., the "tendency for individuals to draw negative inferences from positive descriptions that omit one of the two fundamental dimensions of social perception, warmth and competence" (Kervyn et al. 2012). These two fundamental dimensions are that (1) people are expected to speak the truth and (2) people try to avoid making negative statements about others so as to preserve social harmony & protect their own reputation (speaking ill of others often creates a negative impression of the speaker)

A further and often compelling example comes from the ways that incorrect or deliberately misleading information about others ***can continue to have an effect even after that information has been disproven.***

Consider the following scenario:

"Rosemary has recently transferred into a new college and has been assigned a roommate, Patsy. In the dining hall, Rosemary inadvertently overhears a student from their dorm (someone who had a fight with Patsy the previous year) tell another student, "You know I wouldn't trust

that girl Patsy at all. I heard that in high school she sometimes stole things out of other people's lockers." Rosemary was dismayed by what she heard and, later, went to one of Patsy's friends from high school to ask if Patsy was known to be a thief. That friend asked why Rosemary was asking her that question and Rosemary described what she had overheard. The friend shook her head and laughed, "Oh, that girl has been on Patsy's case ever since they had a fight. No, Patsy didn't steal stuff in high school." A month or so later, Rosemary had a couple of instances in which she looked for something she owned in her dorm room. But both items were missing from where she thought she had put them. The thought crept into Rosemary's mind that maybe Patsy might have something to do with what was missing.

Is this scenario plausible?

### **Haiti Crisis & U.S. Politics**

Consider a different but actual set of statements in the last two months:

(1) **State Department:** According to the latest U.S. State Department travel bulletin summary about the Caribbean nation of Haiti (Sept. 18, 2024): "Since March 2024, Haiti has been under a State of Emergency. Crimes involving firearms are common in Haiti. They include robbery, carjackings, sexual assault, and kidnappings for ransom. Kidnapping is widespread, and U.S. citizens have been victims and have been hurt or killed."



**Recent News Images of Rioting in Haiti**

(2) **Donald Trump and Haitians:** "We have hundreds of thousands of people flowing in from Haiti. Haiti has a tremendous AIDS problem," the former president told Sean Hannity, the Fox News host, in October 2021. "Many of those people will probably have AIDS, and they're coming into our country. And we don't do anything about it."

In his debate against Vice President Kamala Harris last week, Mr. Trump singled out Haitians for ridicule. "In Springfield, they're eating the dogs, the people that came in. They're eating the cats," he said. "They're eating — they're eating the pets of the people that live there." ... At the beginning of 2018, Mr. Trump told a group of Republican lawmakers that he had no intention of supporting bipartisan legislation that would provide new ways for Haitians to immigrate to the United States legally. "Wait a minute," he lectured them in an Oval Office meeting. "Why do we want people from Haiti here?" He said that Haiti was among a series of "shithole countries" whose people had little to offer. Can't we just leave Haiti out, he asked the lawmakers. The legislation never passed and Mr. Trump worked to make it harder for Haitians to immigrate. (Shear, 2024)

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