

The Internet is made of beliefs

[cross-post from Medium]

“Most people don’t have the time or headspace to handle IW: we’re going to need to tool up. Is not much, but I’m talking next month on belief, and how some of the pre-big-data AI tools and verification methods we used in mapping could be useful in this new (for many) IW world... am hoping it sparks a few people to build stuff.” — me, whilst thoroughly lost somewhere in Harlem.

Dammit. I’ve started talking about belief and information warfare, and my thoughts looked half-baked and now I’m going to have to follow through. I said we’d need to tool up to deal with the non-truths being presented, but that’s only a small part of the thought. So here are some other thoughts.

1) The internet is also made of beliefs. The internet is made of many things: pages and and comment boxes and ports and protocols and tubes (for a given value of ‘tubes’). But it’s also made of belief: it’s a virtual space that’s only tangentially anchored in reality, and to navigate that virtual space, we all build mental models of who is out there, where they’re coming from, who or what to trust, and how to verify that they are who they say they are, and what they’re saying is true (or untrue but entertaining, or fantasy, or... you get the picture).

2) This isn’t new, but it is bigger and faster. The US is a big country; news here has always been either hyperlocal or spread through travelers and media (newspapers, radio, telegrams, messages on ponies). These were made of belief too. Lying isn’t new; double-talk isn’t new; what’s new here is the scale, speed and number of people that it can reach.

3) Don’t let the other guys frame your reality. We’re entering a time where misinformation and double-talk are likely to dominate our feeds, and even people we trust are panic-sharing false information. It’s not enough to pick a media outlet or news site or friend to trust, because they’ve been fooled recently too; we’re going to have to work out together how best to keep a handle on the truth. As a first step, we should separate out our belief in a source from our belief in a piece of information from them, and factor in our knowledge about their potential motivations in that.

4) Verification means going there. For most of us, verification is something we might do up front, but rarely do as a continuing practice. Which, apart from making people easy to phish, also makes us vulnerable to deliberate misinformation. We want to believe stuff? We need to do the leg-work of cross-checking that the source is real (crisismappers had a bunch of techniques for this, including checking how someone’s social media profile had grown, looking at activity patterns), finding alternate sources, getting someone to physically go look at something and send photos (groups like findyr still do this). We want to do this without so much work every time? We need to share that load; help each other out with [#icheckedthis](#) tags, pause and think before we hit the “share” button.

5) Actions really do speak louder than words. There will most likely be a blizzard of information heading our way; we will need to learn how to find the things that are important in it. One of the best pieces of information I've ever received (originally, it was about men) applies here: "ignore everything they say, and watch everything they do". Be aware of what people are saying, but also watch their actions. Follow the money, and follow the data; everything leaves a trace somewhere if you know how to look for it (again, something that perhaps is best done as a group).

6) Truth is a fragile concept; aim for strong, well-grounded beliefs instead. Philosophy warning: we will probably never totally know our objective truths. We're probably not in the matrix, but we humans are all systems whose beliefs in the world are completely shaped by our physical senses, and those senses are imperfect. We'll rarely have complete information either (e.g. there are always outside influences that we can't see), so what we really have are very strong to much weaker beliefs. There are some beliefs that we accept as truths (e.g. I have a bruise on my leg because I walked into a table today), but mostly we're basing what we believe on a combination of evidence and personal viewpoint (e.g. "it's not okay to let people die because they don't have healthcare"). Try to make both of those as strong as you can.

I haven't talked at all about tools yet. That's for another day. One of the things I've been building into my data science practice is the idea of thinking through problems as a human first, before automating them, so perhaps I'll roll these thoughts around a bit first. I've been thinking about things like perception, e.g. a camera's perception of a car color changes when it moves from daylight to sodium lights, and adaptation (e.g. using other knowledge like position, shape and plates) and actions (clicking the key) and when beliefs do and don't matter (e.g. they're usually part of an action cycle, but some action cycles are continuous and adaptive, not one-shot things), how much of data work is based on chasing beliefs and what we can learn from people with different ways of processing information (hello, Aspies!), but human first here.