



Separating Fact from Fiction to Help Safeguard Your Mental Health, Protect Your
Career Brand and Reputation

By

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Whether you are an academician, a professional, an entrepreneur, a retailer, blue collar, white collar, or maybe somewhere in between, the quality of your interaction with information has never been more crucial than right now! Why? Because we are bombarded with a barrage of a multitude of conflicting information, a sea of false narratives, and click bait that is less than authentic, not always transparent, and in some cases targeted to us by corporate algorithms. We have so many other demands placed on us that we sometimes succumb to hasty generalizations and do not have nor make the time needed to properly inspect information. Such information can outsmart anyone regardless of their education. When this happens, we can become a victim of a false cause, follow the wrong crowd, or even compromise our mental health.

Navigating Bias

But we all have our own biases too. When investigating information are you able to remove your biases so you can vet its usefulness before you share it in a social network, debate in an online forum, include it in a college essay, a dissertation, a peer reviewed article, or business report? How do your biases affect the way you interpret information? Let's start with some definitions including Confirmation Bias, Anchoring, Affinity Bias, Conformity Bias, Halo Effect, Explicit and Implicit Bias (5 Biases You May Have That's Affecting Your Work Environment (Not For The Better, 2021; Green, 2020):

- Confirmation Bias - Individuals who typically only search for information that confirms their own biases.
- Anchoring - Individuals who rely on the first piece of information that typically aligns with their biases.
- Affinity Bias - Individuals who typically prefer the company of people they know and like. This may preclude them for searching valid information from unfamiliar but otherwise trusted sources.
- Conformity Bias - Individuals who value information that others approve so they feel like they fit in.
- Halo Effect - Individuals who may only align with information by people who have the same education level, income, or who have achieved similar milestones they value like themselves.
- Explicit Bias - Biases one admits or are so obvious they are out in the open.
- Implicit Bias - Hidden biases that one may not be aware they possess.

Assessing How You Interact

There is opportunity in assessing yourself. For those interested, here is a [7-question non-scientific](#) survey (Bean, 2021). Such a survey may help illuminate how you better understand yourself within many contexts. Your responses to this particular survey assessment will be confidential, but you can see how they stack up with other participants. What do the results reveal? If you answered true to any of these questions, you are not alone. Whether applied to searching for information in our personal or professional lives, we all need to continuously check how we interact and interpret it.

The goal is to be authentic as possible when utilizing information, so the recipients understand if we have a conflict of interest. For example, your supervisor asks you to investigate web design companies to bid on your small company's website. Do you offer the bid to a friend or family member? Maybe? Maybe not? If you have such flexibility, great. But you may be better off to remove your partiality altogether. The goal is to be authentic for your reputation as an objective professional should be the guiding light. You strive to avoid such conflicts of interest by thinking about the 1957 theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Here Festinger argues that when cognitive dissonance occurs our behaviors are different than our thoughts. To safeguard your mental health, your authenticity and impartiality should leave you with no feeling or otherwise feeling fine. However, if you experience an unsettling feeling, it may be due to cognitive dissonance because your authenticity was/is less than impartial.

Authenticity Levels

This authenticity level can be seen in much larger scales in corporate advertising, in corporate research, and in the academy. For example, third party research in industry is less bias than for-profit companies who conduct the research on themselves.

Conversely, in the academy peer reviewed publications who continuously only draw from a pool of authors they are most familiar, are bias to the cronyism that hinder their ability to draw from lesser known references who might otherwise provide valuable conclusions but cannot compete with the popularity of their much-trusted published colleagues (Halo, Conformity and Affinity Bias Affect). Newer peer reviewed and/or open-sourced publications draw suspicion because they offer more access and/or their rigor not widely accepted. The list goes on and on and on. Still, as individuals and

business professionals, we must continuously vet information for its authenticity and objectiveness.

To do so we must analyze what other attribution and sources such information uses to draw conclusions and examine its citations for any possible conflict of interest or hidden agendas that might otherwise make the data or recommendations skewed. Just because something is peer reviewed and published may not necessarily mean it is the final word on the topic. To analyze all the information, we must avoid being a victim of fallacies like hasty generalizations and apply our due diligence using critical thinking and simply taking the time not to formulate a final opinion based on the first piece of information we find and instead continue to do an exhaustive search utilizing all the resources and databases available to us. The goal is to be well read.

On the business side, that might include using Nexus/Lexus or reading the latest trade publications. On the personal side that might include understanding that much of the information we are exposed to is derived from six major companies that control most of our news (Louise, 2020). Finally, on the academic side it might include utilizing the Elton B. Stephenson Company (EBSCO), ProQuest, ProQuest Digital Dissertations & Theses, and ERIC databases, to name a few (To avoid Anchoring and Confirmation Bias).

If we are asked to investigate data for a proposal that could change a certain aspect of our company or affect the way customers could potentially interact with a point of sale or other marketing entry points, we must check our implicit and explicit biases so that our research meets the needs of the many, not just the few. For example, did you think about the broader customer or business to business community that might be made up of so many different types of people, organizations, and cultures. Think, think, think, and rethink! Play with the terminology, nomenclature, the vocabulary until all parts of your investigation and/or business objective makes the most sense with the least amount of bias.

Do your personal biases interfere with your ability to maintain your best individual or professional reputation? Only you can answer that question which in a way can be bias. But if you do not try, no one else is going to do it for you. Afterall, your personal

brand and mental health is at stake. Good luck as you hone your personal and professional brand to curtail cognitive dissonance and bolster impartiality.

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