



*Your Story*  
**MATTERS**  
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Columnist

## Challenging confirmation bias

After my years working in mental health, I have come to recognize that people tend to find what they are looking for. It is the conscious and subconscious quest to validate our worldviews, justify our positions, and hold on to our territory that can be both transforming and very limiting. Multiple people can have the same experience and have vastly different interpretations and reactions. Most of us want to believe our interpretation is valid and therefore, tend to side with information that reinforces our mindset regardless of whether that information is based in fact or not.

This tendency has been termed “confirmation bias.”

Research suggests that even when presented factual information in opposition to our worldview, we rarely reconsider, but in fact, identify even more with what we want to be true. So basically, it takes a whole lot of

diligence to change our own minds.

I had a client once who wanted to run a marathon. Problem was that she had technically not run more than a mile in the past five years. She also believed herself not to be “good” at running. “I get winded walking up stairs,” she said, and “I am bad at following a routine.” Her confirmation bias sought out ways to justify her belief of not being a good runner and the prophecy was fulfilled. We began the work to challenge her narrative. After initial resistance and doubt, she eventually, again and again, began voicing, “I am a good runner” — “I can do hard things.”

She ran a marathon the next year. She had succeeded in replacing her confirmation bias from something limiting to something empowering. Simple in theory; not always easy to implement.

Exploiting our confirmation bias has major political, economic, and social implications. Political campaigns are expertly crafted to embolden our confirmation biases. Whether based in actual truth or not, if a campaign validates what we wish to be true, we are likely to side with it. In behavioral economics and marketing, confirmation bias plays a major role in how we choose to spend our money depending on how a company aligns its product with our wished-for-worldview.

Social media may be the most efficient at exploiting our biases. Using algorithms and tracking to follow our

preferences, what is presented on our Facebook wall or the ads that bombard our screens has been customized to prey upon our individual biases. It does little to challenge our worldview and instead generally reinforces our territorialism. Perhaps if we knew how much our minds were being hijacked by computerized code or quite possibly a 20-something Russian with nothing better to do, we would all be a bit more disturbed...

We are presented with an idea that we must choose a side and that each side must be associated with particular ways of behaving, believing, and voting. When we fall victim to such rigidity, we often give up growth, the opportunity for connection, and progress.

We have so too been presented with illusory correlations. We perceive a relationship between variables when actually none exists. Just because a cluster of variables appear together at times, does not mean they are by definition correlated.

According to the Pew Research Center (2016), the top two negative stereotypes Democrats had about Republicans were: 1. Dishonesty; 2. Closed

mindedness. Vice versa, Republicans felt Democrats to be: 1. Lazy; 2. Closed minded.

While a Democrat may have had an experience with a Republican that revealed dishonesty, there have likely many occasions when said “Republican” has also been perfectly honest. Additionally, a Republican may have encountered a Democrat who may not have been the most industrious, but very likely also Democrats who were hard at work.

There may be many exceptions to our stereotypes, but often confirmation bias can filter what we actually acknowledge.

It can become dangerous when our confirmation bias and perceived illusory correlations seek to validate hate or unjustified violence. In Nazi Germany, Hitler provided millions of vulnerable citizens with a way to project their deep desperation after Germany’s financial collapse. He played upon the confirmation bias that the German people were not to blame, that they were victims, that Germany could again be a great nation. He propagated the illusory correlations that Jewish

citizens, intellectuals, and others were terrorists, thieves, liars, and a driving force behind Germany’s perils. The relief that came with a scapegoat rather than personal responsibility resulted in the deaths of over 11 million.

Ultimately, you are absolutely entitled to your side of the fence. You can wave your banners, post your yard signs, march in protest, and drive around town with flags on the back of your truck. Thankfully, this is America and such things are protected. It is also just fine to be sitting on the rails observing with curiosity and perhaps a little shock and awe. I find myself here often.

It is how we uphold the values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for those on the other side of the fence that tests our true character as citizens of this country. As Oscar Wilde puts it, “to define is to limit.” Can we take pride in our side of the pasture while also making room for and, by the grace of God, even embracing those on the other side? Is the truth you seek open for interpretation?

Perhaps you should start telling yourself it’s possible.

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