



European  
**MEDIA AND  
INFORMATION**  
Fund

**iscte** INSTITUTO  
UNIVERSITÁRIO  
DE LISBOA



**learn  
to check** ✓

## 1.3 Understanding Influence – online lecture

Dr Eileen Culloty  
Dublin City University

Module	Block Description	Format	Complete by
<b>Module 1: Introduction</b>	<b>Block 1.1</b> Introduction and foundations of Media Information Literacy (MIL)	<b>Live: In-Person</b> Workshop 3 hours	June 13
	<b>Block 1.2</b> Understanding influence, disinformation and its consequences	<b>Self-paced</b> Articles 1.5 hours	Mid July
	<b>Block 1.3</b> Understanding influence, disinformation and its consequences	<b>Live: Online</b> Lecture 1.5 hours	First week of July



### Learn to Check articles:

- Cognitive biases
- Glossary of disinformation terms
- A thousand ways to lie:
- Internet scams: how they try to trick us
- What are conspiracy theories?
- Disinformation and human rights
- AI basics: what it is, how it works, risks and benefits
- Climate change disinformation
- Electoral disinformation



How to combat it <

#### Cognitive biases: how we deceive ourselves

Cuando hablamos de información errónea y de estrategias de desinformación, dos de las preguntas que siempre sobrevuelan son: ¿Quién nos engaña? Y, ¿por qué? La percepción social y diversos estudios académicos señalan a los partidos políticos, los gobiernos, los influencers, los medios de comunicación, activistas y la gente en general. Pero todos estos potenciales agentes maliciosos cuentan con un aliado potente: nuestro cerebro. Si, a veces lo que se equivoca y nos hace creer más fácilmente las mal llamadas *fake news* es nuestro propio cerebro, nuestra mente, nosotros mismos. Os explicamos qué son los sesgos cognitivos y por qué nos sumen en la desinformación y la información errónea.

# What we'll cover today

- ❑ Recap of key media literacy concepts
- ❑ What shapes how we are influenced
- ❑ The influence industry
- ❑ Case studies of influence through media
- ❑ Why people believe/endorse false claims
- ❑ How to talk to people about these issues with humility

# A quick recap

Key media literacy concepts

# Key concept 1

## Representations Matter

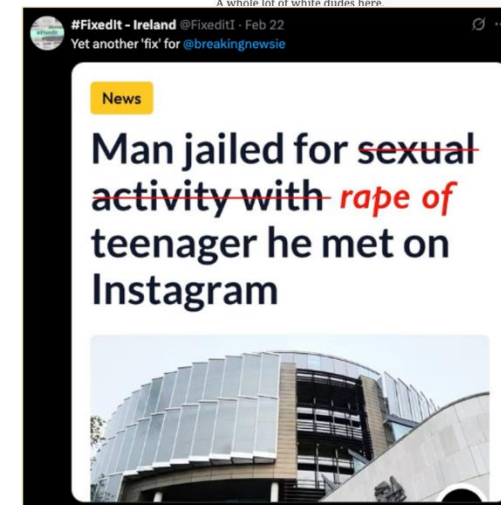
Media representations are not neutral. Every representation involves choices about what to include, what to leave out, and whose voices get heard.

### Young people are visiting surgeons asking for the 'Instagram Face'

It's a young face with poreless skin and an upturned, small nose. The eyes are 'foxy', the cheekbones are full and plump and so are the lips. It's the favoured look in many beautifying filters on Instagram, and social media users are taking the pictures straight to cosmetic surgeons.



Credit: @jessika\_power on Instagram



# Key concept 2

## Ownership and funding matters

Behind every news outlet, social media platform, and streaming service, there are owners and funders with interests, priorities, and agendas.

### Former Washington Post writer unveils rejected Bezos column that led to her resignation

Ruth Marcus also claimed that another column by the Post's media critic that criticized Jeff Bezos' opinion edict was also killed

Justin Baragona in New York • Wednesday 12 March 2025 14:36 GMT • [Comments](#)



### Who's behind the local media land grab in Ireland?

Independent newspapers and radio stations are being snapped up by two dominant players that are consolidating their grip on the market

### The rise of the skincare tweens: How retinol serums and eye creams took over childhood

As Gen Alpha beg their parents for £50 retinol creams and host parties at popular beauty retailers, **Charlotte Cripps**, a mum of two, explains why she's stepping back from the 'Sephora kids' trend before it's too late



Monday 31 March 2025 15:56 BST • [Comments](#)



### Skin-care routine videos commonly show 'harmful' (and expensive) regimens for children

# Key concept 3

## Regulation matters

All media—whether news organisations, social media platforms, or entertainment companies—operate within legal frameworks.



**The Advertising  
Standards Authority  
for Ireland**

*Setting Standards for 35 years*

Coimisiún  
na Meán



## The Wolfe Tones attract a record crowd for their Electric Picnic gig

Videos on social media show thousands of people gathered around the tent singing every word in the blazing sunshine



Thousands crowded around the Electric Arena tent in the hopes of hearing The Wolfe Tones play on the final day of Electric Picnic 2023. Picture: Aerial.ie

MON, 04 SEP, 2023 - 11:22

MICHELLE MCGLYNN



IRISH NEWS

'Glorifying slaughter' — Joe Duffy clashes with Wolfe Tones' Brian Warfield



Liam De Brun  
15/08/2023



# Key concept 4

## Audiences matters

People can experience and interpret the same media differently. Recognising that meaning is contextual doesn't mean all interpretations are equal.

**Influence**

# What shapes how we are influenced?

- Belonging and Identity
- Emotional appeal
- Cognitive shortcuts
- Social norms
- Media and algorithms
- Unequal influence

This summary highlights six factors with examples showing both positive and negative effects. Many examples are international. This can seem less personal or controversial than Irish examples.

## Belonging and Identity

People adopt trends and beliefs to fit in with others and express who they are, reinforcing group identity and social connection.



Wearing Yeezy 450 trainers

## Belonging and Identity

People adopt trends and beliefs to fit in with others and express who they are, reinforcing group identity and social connection.



County GAA team

## Cognitive shortcuts

Cognitive shortcuts like confirmation bias lead people to accept information that feels familiar or aligns with their beliefs, even if it's false or unsupported



“If I were to run, I’d run as a Republican. They’re the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they’d still eat it up. I bet my numbers would be terrific.”

**Donald Trump**

People Magazine, 1998



2016 meme with a fake quote

## Emotional appeal

Emotionally charged messages—especially those that provoke fear, pride, or outrage—are more persuasive and memorable than rational arguments.



A UKIP poster campaigning for Brexit 2016

## Emotional appeal

Emotionally charged messages—especially those that provoke fear, pride, or outrage—are more persuasive and memorable than rational arguments.



Impactful poster campaign from Focus Ireland

## Social norms

People tend to follow what others around them are doing or believing, especially when those behaviours are seen as popular or expected.



Excessive consumerism – day gifts

## Social norms

People tend to follow what others around them are doing or believing, especially when those behaviours are seen as popular or expected.



Queuing in public places

## Media and algorithms


Media repetition and algorithm-driven content shape what people see and think, reinforcing certain views while filtering out alternatives.



Unrealistic beauty and lifestyle goals

# Media and algorithms

Media repetition and algorithm-driven content shape what people see and think, reinforcing certain views while filtering out alternatives.

Irish Independent  [News](#) [Opinion](#) [Business](#) [Sport](#) [Life](#) [Style](#) [Enter](#)

**Wexford**

[News](#) [Sport](#) [Business](#) [Lifestyle](#) [Wexford & District](#) [Enniscorthy](#) [New Ross](#) [Gorey](#)

**Calodagh McCumiskey: There is no health without mental health**



De-stigmatising mental health

# Unequal influence

Public figures and platforms with large audiences can disproportionately shape trends, opinions, and public debate.

The image shows a screenshot of a tweet from Elon Musk (@elonmusk) with a 'Subscribe' button. The tweet text is partially visible: "Detainment Camps" ... Below the tweet is a news article snippet titled "Keir Starmer considering building 'emergency detainment camps' on the Falkland Islands" by Fiona Parker, dated 7 August 2024. A red banner with the word "FALSE" and a warning icon is overlaid on the right side of the article snippet. At the bottom of the tweet, engagement metrics are shown: 2.8K replies, 3.7K retweets, 17K likes, and 545 bookmarks.

Elon Musk @elonmusk Subscribe ...

"Detainment Camps" ...

**Ashlea Simon** @AshleaSimonBF · 9h  
We're all being deported to the Falklands 😂😭

**Keir Starmer considering building 'emergency detainment camps' on the Falkland Islands**

The camps would be used to detain prisoners from the ongoing riots as the British prison system is already at capacity

Fiona Parker, SENIOR NEWS REPORTER  
7 August 2024 · 11:21am

10:00 AM · Aug 8, 2024 · 1.7M Views

2.8K 3.7K 17K 545

Elon Musk promoting false stories

## Unequal influence

Public figures and platforms with large audiences can disproportionately shape trends, opinions, and public debate.



Marcus Rashford campaign for free school meals

# Breakout exercise: Influence in everyday life

Each person should complete a few of the following prompts. You can do this as a quick round-robin or small group discussion.

## Prompts (choose 2–3):

- A decision I made recently that was influenced by someone else...
- A trend I followed without thinking too much about it...
- An ad or social media post that made me want to buy something...
- A belief or opinion I've changed because of someone's influence...
- A public figure who has had a positive (or negative) impact on me...
- A moment I realised I was being influenced – and pushed back.

# Breakout exercise: Influence in everyday life

We are all open to influence and it isn't always negative.

Influence is part of daily life and an ongoing process.

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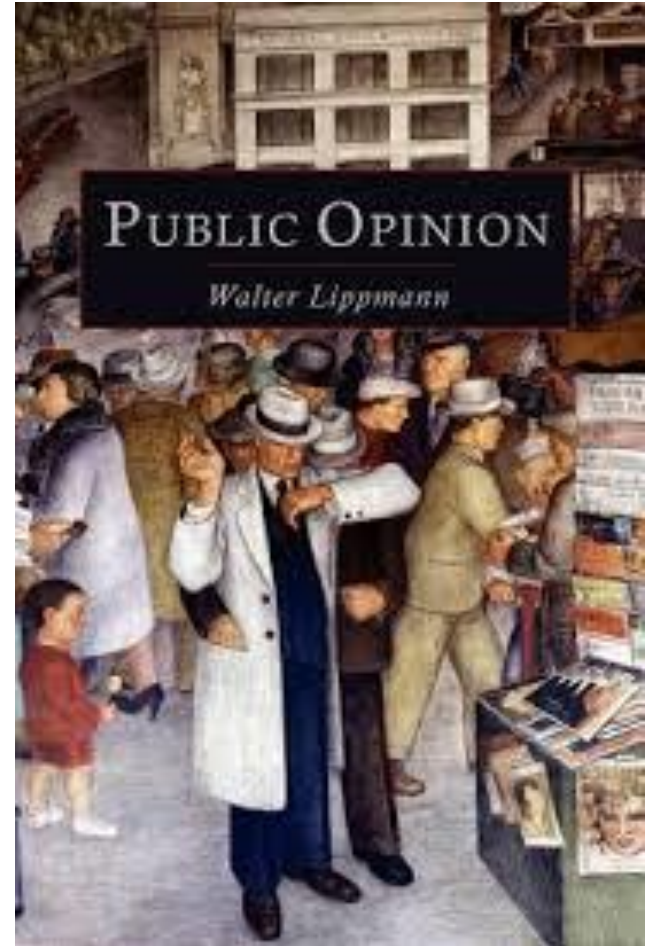
# The influence industry

The broad network of companies, technologies, and sectors involved in shaping public opinion, behaviour, and decision-making, especially through digital media, data analytics, and strategic communication techniques.

# The birth of PR

*“The pictures inside the heads of the human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationship, are their public opinions.”*

Walter Lippmann (1922)



# The birth of PR

Lippmann (1922) believed a “bureau of experts” or “specialized class” of people should guide public opinion because policy issues are too complex for democratic citizens.





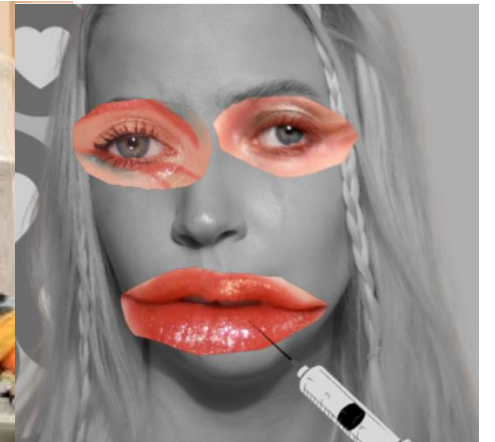
# The influence industry today

Wide-ranging areas for influence: politics, health, finance, beauty,

Blurs lines between persuasion and manipulation

Raises ethical and democratic concerns

Often operates across borders with little regulation or accountability



# Key countries in the influence industry



**Russia, Saudi Arabia, China:** state-run disinformation campaigns and information warfare

**US and UK:** major political consulting, ad, and data and surveillance firms

**Israel, India:** state-run and state linked influence campaigns, private firms offering covert surveillance and influence-for-hire services

# **Influence industry companies**

**Lobbyists:** build relationships with policymakers to influence policy

**Digital marketers:** target ads and campaigns at the public.

**PR agencies:** manage media, content, and communication strategies

**Tech firms:** provide data, influencer networks, and surveillance tools

**Media:** the media and platforms that host/promote content

# Why it matters?

The influence industry blurs the lines between persuasion, manipulation, and misinformation

It raises ethical and democratic concerns, especially when influence is opaque, deceptive, or designed to exploit vulnerabilities

It often operates across borders with little **regulation** or accountability

# The Iraq War – news media manipulation

- Media repeated false claims by the Bush and Blair governments without question
- Anonymous government sources were cited uncritically in The New York Times and Washington Post.
- Critical voices and experts were ignored in news media.
- A climate of fear and patriotism post-9/11 discouraged dissent.



## Expert: Powell Presented A Strong Case

### SLATE Smoking Gun

Colin Powell delivers the goods on Saddam.

The Washington Post

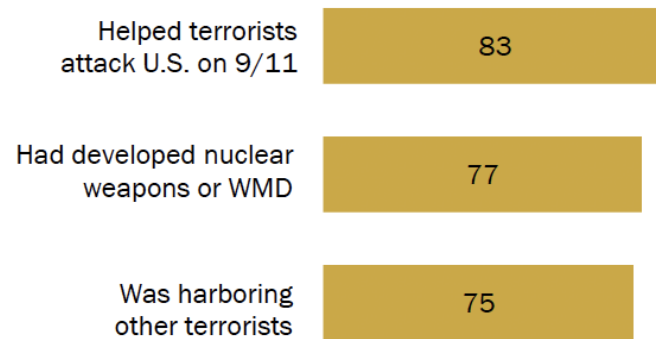
### I'm Persuaded

February 5, 2003

# Consequences: public misperceptions and mistrust

In 2002, large majorities of Americans said Iraqi WMD and links to terrorism would justify U.S. military response

% who said that learning Iraq \_\_\_\_ would be a **very important reason** to justify use of military force against Iraq



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 9-13, 2002.

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## Poll: Four in 10 think US found WMDs in Iraq

BY PETER SULLIVAN - 01/07/15 8:47 AM ET



**Robert Dover**

Professor of Intelligence and National Security, University of Hull

# Amber Heard-social media manipulation



SERIES

## Who Trolled Amber?

3h 23 mins • 7 Episodes

What comes to mind when you think of Amber Heard? Liar? Survivor? Narcissist? Millions of us watched the celebrity trial of the century, Depp v Heard, in 2022. Amber Heard lost and Johnny Depp was vindicated. But what if Amber was actually the victim of an organised trolling campaign? What if the online hate against her was manufactured? Alexi Mostrous investigates what happened to Amber and who might have been responsible. It's a story about how our own thoughts and opinions can be moulded without us even realising.

A Tortoise investigation suggests that Amber Heard was trolled by an army of bots, some of them apparently operating from Saudi Arabia.

# An in-depth case study

The cat children

# Breakout exercise

A school child identified as a cat and the school accommodated the child's new identify.

## Questions to discuss:

Have you heard this story?

What was the context/version?

What was the source?

How did people you know react to it?



The Telegraph, 19 June 2023

# An urban legend

Traditionally, an urban legend is a lurid story that supposedly happened to someone vaguely known to the teller.



“My friend, his wife is a schoolteacher, and she works at a school that had to install a litter box in the girls’ room because there is a girl who's a furry, who identifies as an animal”

Joe Rogan Podcast, 11 October 2022



Joe Rogan Podcast, 11 October 2022

## Joe Rogan admits schools don't have litter boxes for kids who 'identify' as furies

Podcast host had amplified debunked claim about furies spread by Republican politicians



# Conservative UK media mainstreamed the urban legend as a moral panic about gender identity


UK NEWS WEBSITE OF THE YEAR  
**The Telegraph** Log in

## Schools let children identify as horses, dinosaurs... and a moon

An extraordinary report from a Sussex school has shed light on the growing trend of pupils insisting on being addressed as animals

🔖 5080 🎁 Gift this article free 📌

Gordon Rayner Associate Editor. Eleanor Steafel. Louisa Clarence-Smith Education editor  
19 June 2023 8:32pm BST



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Fringe activists cited that media as evidence and reinforced calls for action

## Letting children identify as animals is wrong

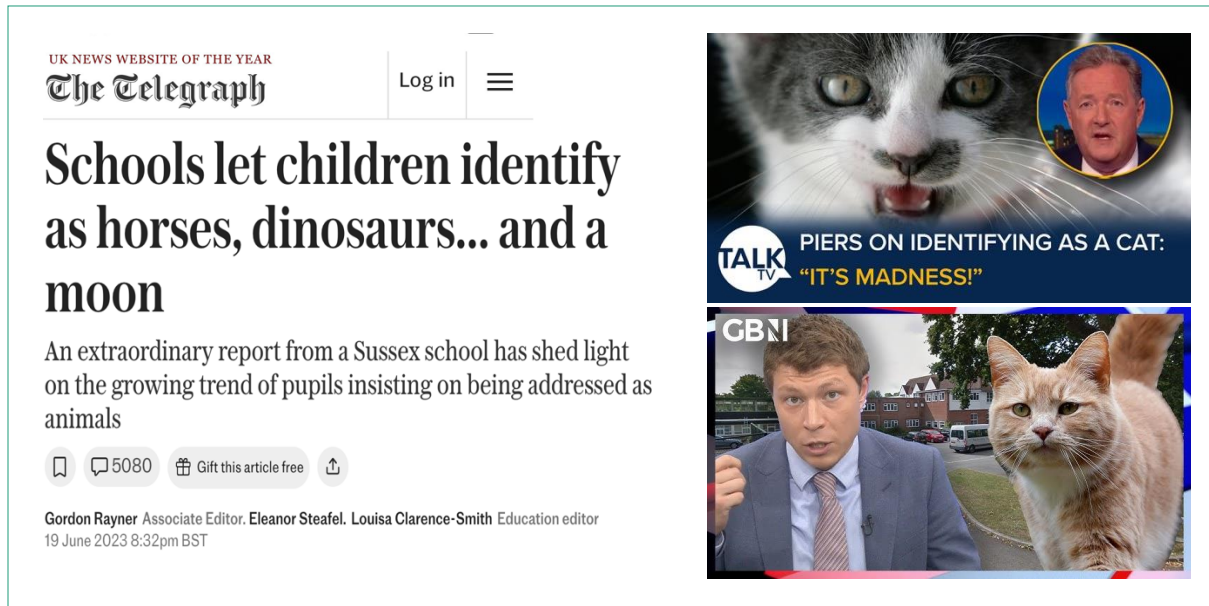
ACT Association of Christian Teachers

Some Scottish schools are officially recognising species dysphoria and allowing students to identify as 'furries'. Lizzie Harewood, CEO of the Association of Christian Teachers, says a compassionate 'no' to this contested ideology is the right response.

sacpa SAFEGUARDING AND CHILD PROTECTION ASSOCIATION

How schools are allowing kids to identify as cats, horses and dinosaurs

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sacpa SAFEGUARDING AND CHILD PROTECTION ASSOCIATION  
How schools are allowing kids to identify as cats, horses and dinosaurs

(Radical) Conservative politicians reacted, giving credence to the lie and increasing public exposure to it

## Minister asks Ofsted to inspect college over 'pupil identifying as cat' incident

Women and Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch said the incident 'raises issues about safeguarding at the school'.

**Labour politicians reacted  
indulged the lie, normalising  
the idea**

**Keir Starmer: ‘Clearly ridiculous’ for children  
to self-identify as cats**

Labour leader thinks ‘children should be told to identify as children’ as he wades into growing row

Labour politicians reacted indulged the lie, normalising the idea

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National and local media reported the story, increasing public exposure to it



West Monmouth school row over cat litter trays continues

School denies providing litter trays for children who identify as cats

'No serious concerns' at school after incident about 'pupil identifying as cat'

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Fewer outlets refuted the story and explained the context (debunking)

Séamas O'Reilly: The 'kids identifying as cats' hoax is one of malice, not stupidity

Cat litter trays in schools: The 'purrplexing' urban myth that refuses to go away

# Why do people believe or repeat false claims?

A summary of research evidence

# Some known factors

Cognitive Ability

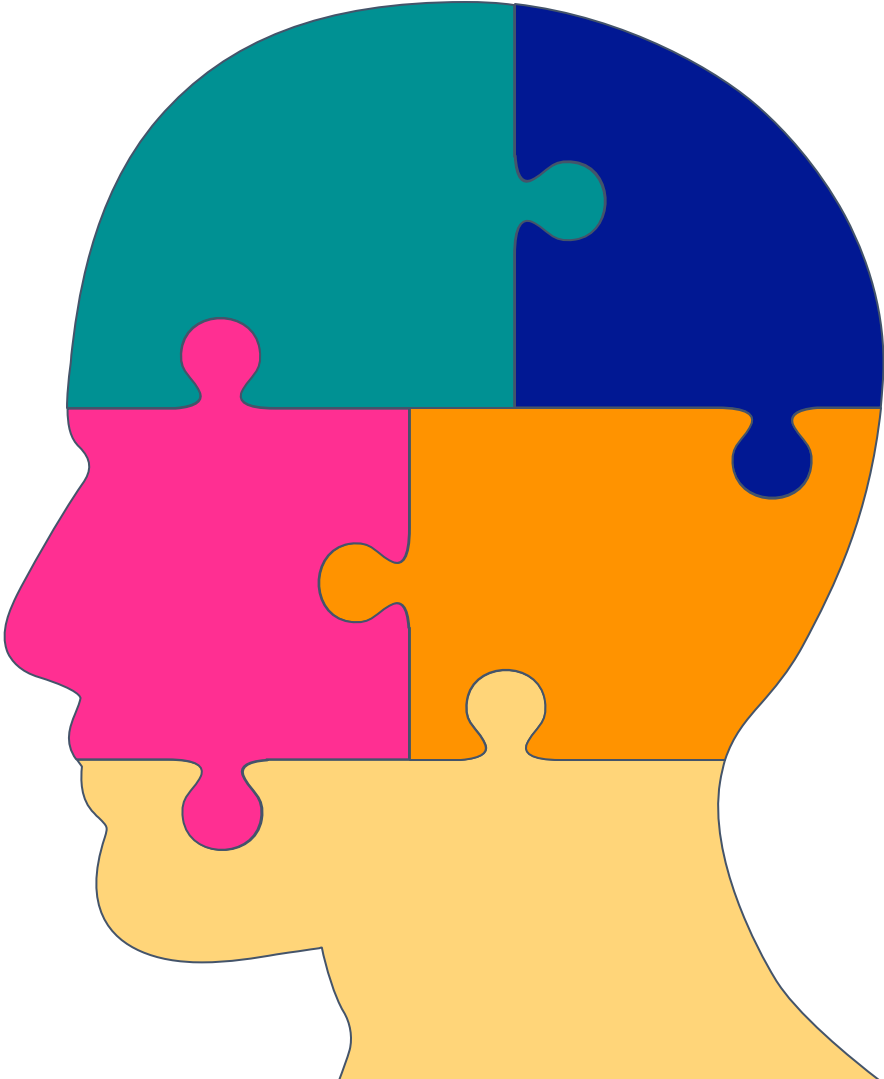
Prior Knowledge

Inattention

Repeated Exposure

Motivated Reasoning

Relevant Literacies





## **Cognitive Ability**

the brain's capacity to learn, reason, remember, solve problems, and process information.

Most of have cognitive limits. Cognitive ability is low in children and declines with age. It is also affected by stress and poverty

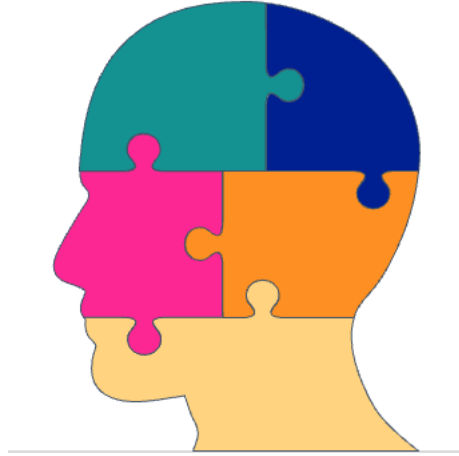


## **Inattention**

When we're not fully focused and more likely to overlook key information or accept misleading information.

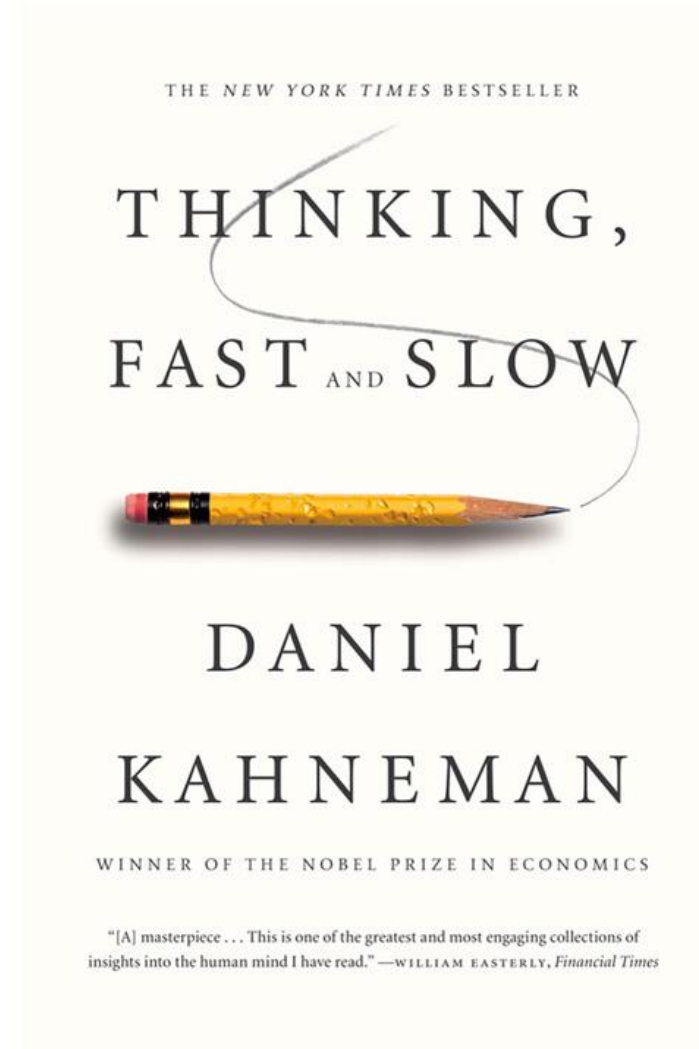
If you're running a race and you pass the person in second place, what place are you in?

A bat and a ball cost £1.10.  
The bat costs £1 more than the ball.  
How much does the ball cost?



## Inattention

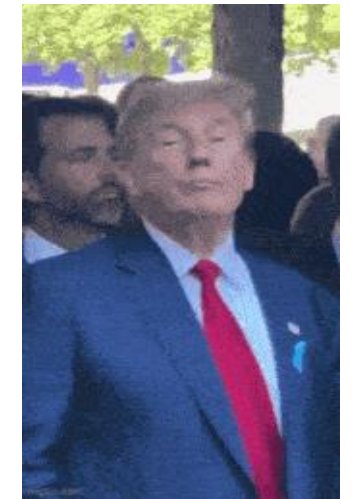
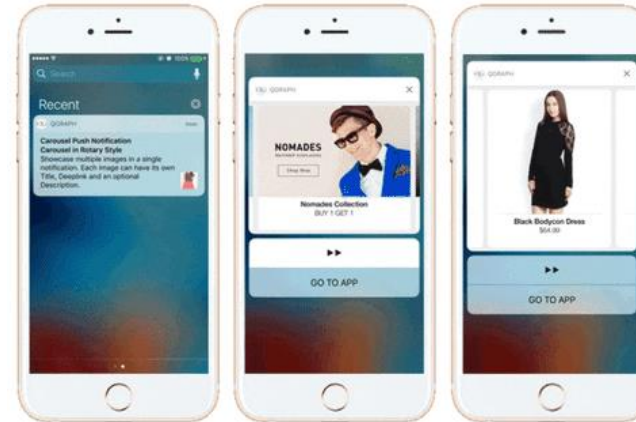
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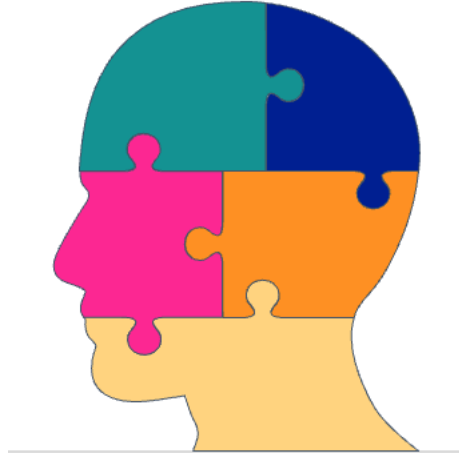




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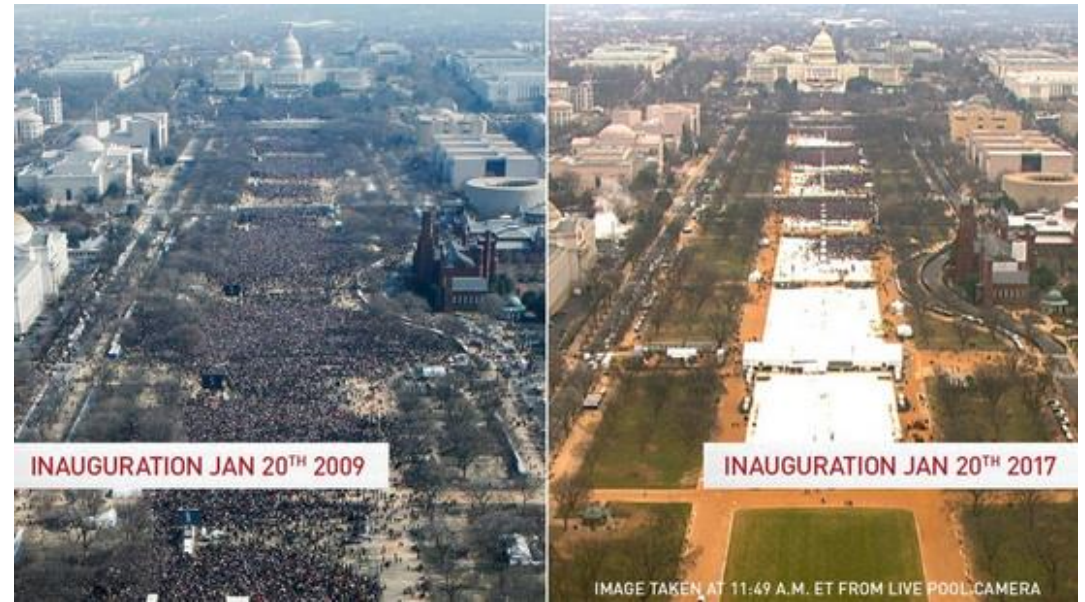
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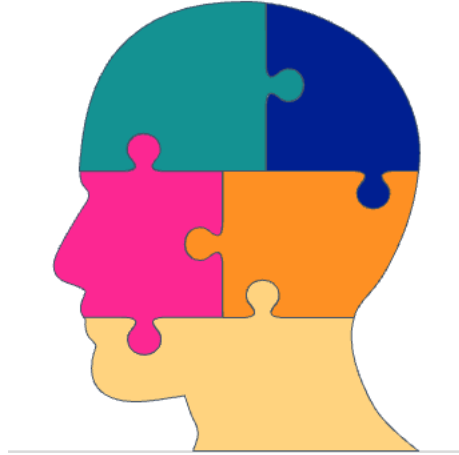


## Motivated Reasoning

When people process information in a way that supports what they *want* to believe



In tests, Trump supporters stated there were more people in the 2017 picture than the 2009 picture.



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In tests, Trump supporters stated there were more people in the 2017 picture than the 2009 picture.

For Daniel Kahneman, Trump supporters are not responding to evidence, but to the story that makes sense in their heads



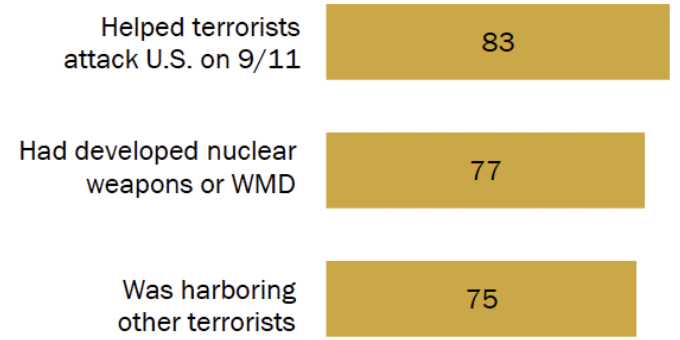
## Repeated Exposure

When people believe information is true simply because they've heard it before.



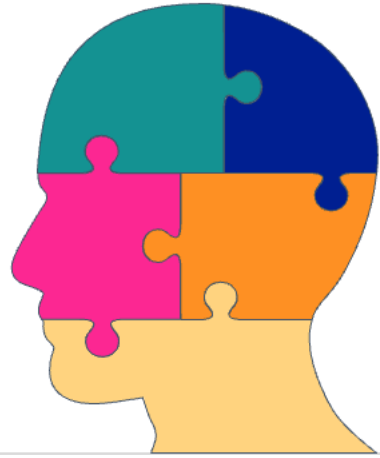
### In 2002, large majorities of Americans said Iraqi WMD and links to terrorism would justify U.S. military response

*% who said that learning Iraq \_\_\_ would be a **very important reason** to justify use of military force against Iraq*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 9-13, 2002.

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## Prior Knowledge

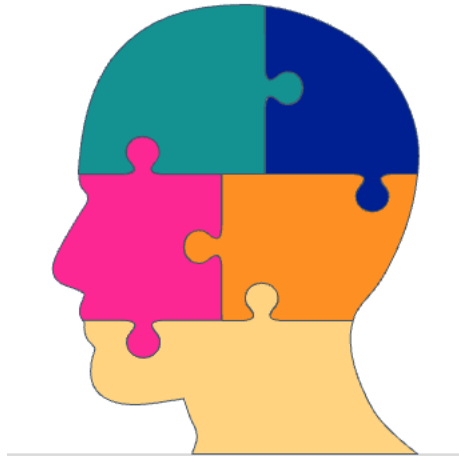
When people lack foundational knowledge to interpret new information.

NASA Confirms Moon Is Shrinking, Causing Moonquakes



Facebook Gave Advertisers Data About Users' Periods and Pregnancies





## Literacies

When people lack the ability to understand, use, and communicate information

The **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Adult Skills Survey 2023** shows that 21%, or about 1 in 5, adults aged 16 to 65 in Ireland are at or below level 1 on a five-level literacy scale. At this level a person may be unable to understand basic written information.

25% or 1 in 4 adults in Ireland score at or below level 1 for numeracy. At this level a person may struggle with doing simple calculations.

According to a **2020 study the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop)**, 38% of adults aged 25-64 in Ireland, or about 2 in 5 adults, have below basic digital skills. This means a person may have trouble using everyday technology like smartphones and computers.

# Final thoughts

The recognition that we all have cognitive limits. No one is immune to influence. => we should all be vigilant.



The belief that others are more susceptible to influence => other people need to be vigilant.


# Final thoughts

The recognition that we all have cognitive limits. No one is immune to influence. => we should all be vigilant.



The belief that others are more susceptible to influence => other people need to be vigilant.

Instead of judging individuals for believing or sharing disinformation, we can focus on questioning the systems – commercial, political, algorithmic – that profit from shaping what people see, think, and feel.

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How to combat it

#### Cognitive biases: how we deceive ourselves

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