

What is cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias and virtue signalling?

When looking at the election of president Trump, Brexit, other **populists movements** across Europe (*Le Pen, Wilders, Frauke Petry*) and the rest of the world (*Duterte*) you probably have noticed that they all happened **in spite of a clear media bias** against these movements.

Where the **traditional media** were able to **steer the collective mindset of the population** in a certain direction in the past, their influence now seems to be limited to an elite of affluent professionals (I'm trying hard to avoid use of the word intellectuals here), students & the traditional left.

The **debate** seems to **have moved away** from the traditional press **into the social media** and this gives us an interesting **insight in human psychology** as both factions clash and interact with each other via these channels.

These events are an interesting case of **cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias and virtue signalling**. Now what are these in layman's terms?

Cognitive dissonance is the **discomfort or stress** we feel when something happens that **conflicts** with our own ideas or beliefs and **challenges** our thoughts about these **ideas or beliefs**. A sort of **internal conflict of beliefs** we hold.

For example when you **buy** a very **expensive "brand" product or service** in the hope it would offer you a **better experience than the cheaper version** but it **turns out** to be just the **same or worse**. You now hold **two different views in your brain**.

1. The **expensive brand** is **high quality**
2. I **paid more than I actually can afford** for a **similar or less satisfying experience**

Since our **brain is not very good at dealing with conflicting emotions** eg. try being happy and sad at the same time, it's very hard to do, our brain needs to find a way out of this deadlock.

4 things can happen:

1. We **change our view** : "We will not buy this expensive brand again"
2. We **change the conflicting view** : "It's actually decent quality if you take everything into consideration" or "Everything is made in China nowadays, so you won't find better anyway"
3. We **add a new view to counter the conflicting view**: "Instead of focussing on the quality you shift to price as the problem and say to yourself I'll just work more

hours so I can actually afford paying these premium products/services I deserve"

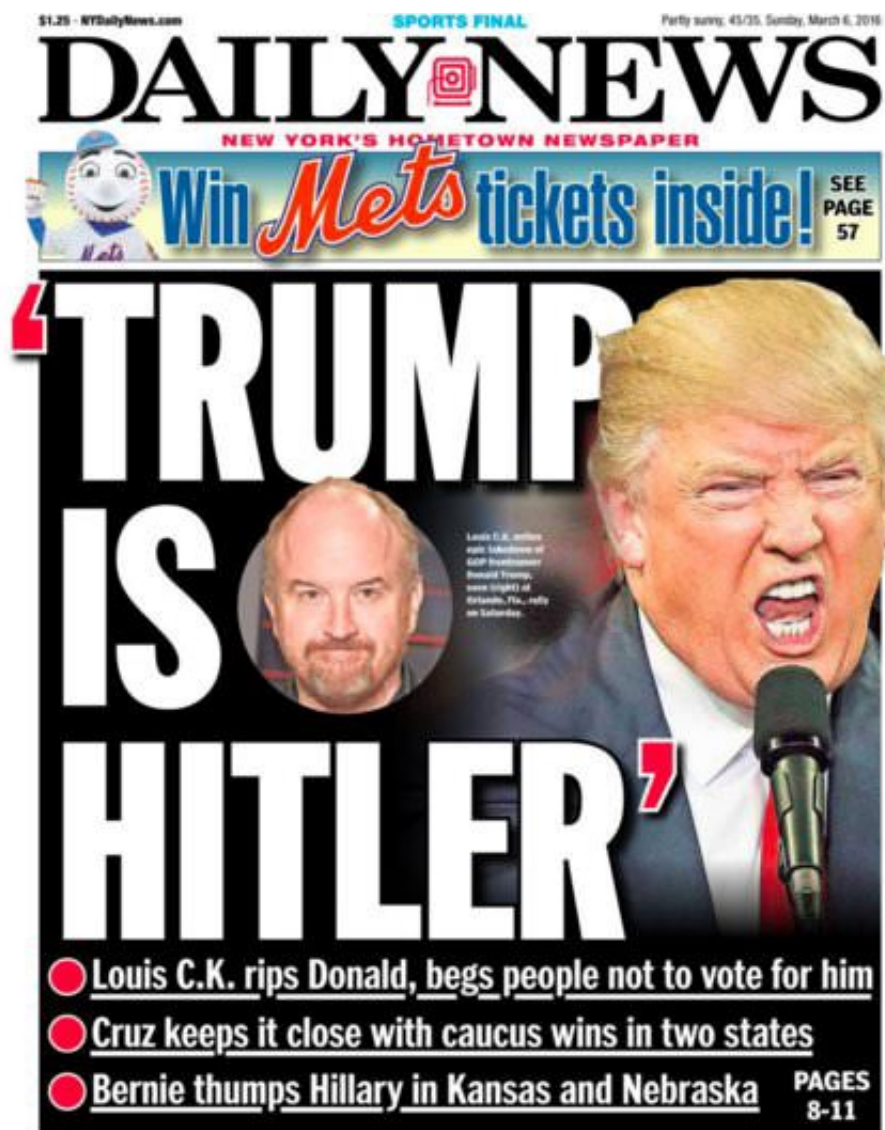
4. We **ignore the conflicting view**: "It's excellent quality, I love this brand"

A great example is the "**Trump is the new Hitler**" meme.

Not only is this a great example of cognitive dissonance as I will show you next but also a **great example of a fallacy** (invalid or otherwise faulty reasoning), a **reductio ad Hitlerum**.

A "**reductio or argumentum ad Hitlerum**" is the **attempt to invalidate** someone's position **on the basis** that the same **beliefs** were once **held by Adolf Hitler** or his party. Hitler deported Jews and Trump wants to deport illegal immigrants. Hitler didn't drink alcohol, Trump doesn't drink alcohol and so on. "**As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Hitler approaches 1**", this phenomenon has been commonly referred to as **Godwin's law**.

The comparison with Hitler is something that has been shared over and over on Twitter and and has even been suggested in the media.



But then slowly people discover that Trump's son in law happens to be Jewish, that

contradicts with the Hitler or the white supremacist narrative. Next he seems to get along with Israel and president Netanyahu on a better level than the previous president.

Netanyahu: No better friend of Israel, Jewish people than Trump

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Now we have **Hitler** vs someone who seems to be a **philosemite** (Jew-friend). These two notions are very conflicting.

So **the same 4 things can happen:**

1. **Change of view:** "He's not that bad after all"
2. **Change of the conflicting view:** "Israelis are the new Nazis look at what they do to the Palestinians" (*So your initial view is still intact*)
3. **Add a new counter view:** "He might not be antisemitic but he is islamphobic and hates Mexicans or he's incompetent, chaotic, incoherent & dumb".
4. **Ignore it all together:** "Trump is just a bigot (and still a Nazi but we just call it differently now)" (while being totally oblivious to the meaning of bigotry)

This way people can put their minds at rest and deal with the inner conflict without losing their minds.

Confirmation bias is another phenomenon that becomes very apparent in the online

discussions. This is the **tendency to interpret, favor or look for information or evidence** that **confirms pre-existing ideas or beliefs**. This means that once we have established a belief in our mind we will look for evidence to confirm that same belief.

A great example of this was when [Sarah Silverman](#) out of ignorance posted a **tweet depicting a spray painted markings** on a sidewalk that **vaguely resembled swastikas**. In other words she became more perceptive to those markings.



Sarah Silverman ✓
@SarahKSilverman

 Follow

Walking to get coffee saw these all over a sidewalk in the town I'm in. Is this an attempt at swastikas? Do neo nazis not have google?



Turns out these **markings** were **utility markings** used to **designate** the **locations of underground pipes and wires**.

Once people are in this **state of cognitive dissonance** and have changed, countered or ignored the conflicting idea and **reinforced it through confirmation bias**, they want to **signal or express the resulting moral values** to their peers within **their social group** to **elevate their status** and **acceptance**. This is what is called **virtue signalling**. We have evolved from being *inner-directed* to being *other-directed* (dependency on acceptance of our social circle) ([David Riesman](#)).

To overcome these patterns we need to **allow conflicting opinions to be stated** and **preserve freedom of speech** at all cost while trying to **form objective views based on objective evidence** as much as possible. But it's hard since we aren't as logical and objective as we tend to think we are.