Chapter 13

Fallacies or fact. Are media factoids being believed?

We live in a world of information.

A fact is a generally accepted truth which can be verified by experiment and testing from a range of sources.[i]

A **factoid** is a known falsehood[ii] which is presented as truth and repeated until, as an *availability heuristic,*[iii] it is accepted by many that it must be true. A **fallacy** is a mistaken belief, particularly based on unsound arguments.[iv]

How do you present fallacies as persuasive arguments?

Let us consider some of the techniques that are used in so many walks of life to use fallacies to persuade.[v] They are not new to this era.
Some of them are based on unacceptable premises, such as:

- The **faulty analogy**. My last three cars were reliable and they were all red. So, I will buy a red car.

- *You can't prove that it is not true so don't criticise me for believing that it is true.* This is used in many discussions about religion or belief, which is a shift in the burden of proof from evidence to lack of evidence. A similar technique is also known as **the appeal to ignorance** (*argumentum ad ignorantium*). *No-one has proved the claim false therefore it must be true.* Such as, no-one has proved that there is no life on Mars or Jupiter. Therefore there is life on these planets. It is an illogical extrapolation.

- The **Sorites paradox** is where the arguer claims that we can't identify the point on a continuum where a grain of sand becomes a heap of sand.[vi] This is used regularly in 'the right-to-life' discussions. *When does an embryo become a person?* You can't define that precisely. Therefore, it is argued, there is no moral difference between an embryo and a baby at birth.

- The **slippery slope** fallacies. Don't take the innocent first step because it will be impossible not to take the next, and the next … So, don't get a credit card or you will be 'maxed out' in debt, which will lead to gambling and then to stealing and a life of crime. It takes no account of the self-control which many people demonstrate daily. The same argument is often used in debates about changing the laws on assisted suicide for people who have painful terminal illnesses and are seeking legal permission to choose the right to die. The slippery slope argument has old people being killed without their consent. This ignores the factual evidence to the contrary from countries and states whose laws currently allow assisted suicide.[vii]

- The **hasty generalisation**. The oldest woman in the world smoked most of her life until the age of 117, therefore smoking is not bad for you.[viii] The sample might be a little small and definitely not random.

- The **strawman** uses a distortion or caricature in an opponent's argument to then attack the weakened part of the argument, not the real one. That is simplistic popular distraction which doesn't solve the actual problem. For example, reduce carbon dioxide and we will have less greenhouse gases, thereby helping to reduce the effects of climate change. Cars produce carbon dioxide so we will ban cars. Or, some terrorists were descended from refugees. So, we will ban all future refugees. Or, some terrorists claim to be influenced by a religious tradition. So, we will ban any religion that the terrorists claimed and that isn't ours.

- The **'ad hominen'** technique attacks the person rather than the argument. *What could he know about economics, he's a biologist?*

- The fallacious **appeal to authority**. *I tell you he is a fine man and a noble man* does not necessarily qualify him to talk on women's rights, for example, unless he is specifically qualified in that area. Or the news presenter or sports person does not equate to being a well-informed authority on everything. Brand endorsement should be within the level of expertise.

- The **fallacy of ambiguity** or **false dichotomy**. This is a favourite of politicians. *You are either for this or against it* assumes that only two positions are possible. Indeed, the positions could both be wrong and there could be many other possibilities.

- The **fallacy of composition**. Men are on average taller than women, therefore Bob must be taller than Alice. But Alice is 185cm and Bob is 173cms.

- The **appeal to popularity**. Hundreds of people or thousands of people can't be wrong. History would suggest otherwise on a range of strongly held views (e.g. the Earth is flat).

- The **appeal to tradition**. It has been done like this for centuries. That can't be wrong. But times and contexts can change (e.g. motor cars have replaced horse-drawn carriages).

- The **appeal to pity or affection**. This is well known to parents. *If you really loved me, you would get me a puppy.*

The list of potential fallacy techniques is much longer than these examples, as my earlier reference source suggests.
In essence, the persuader is using:

- **confirmation bias** (relying on your experience and saying things that you might want to hear, whether they are true or not),
- **heuristics** (mental shortcuts, such that if something is repeated often enough in the media you will come to accept it as fact because you have heard it said often – not whether the real data supports the assertion, e.g. the growth in terrorist attacks)
- **question framing** (*if we do this, then 50 per cent of the people will live* sounds better than saying that *if we do this, 50 per cent of the people will die*) or using one or more of the many types of fallacies (see above)
- simply **telling bald lies with confidence**, in the hope that no-one will check (alternative truths).[ix]

So, should we simply dispense with fact-hunting altogether?
Perhaps, there is a time and context for publishing facts – but **deviations from stating facts should be exceptional rather than the norm.** (See Chapter 1 on when to tell the truth.)

The **Leveson Inquiry** in Britain in 2011 and 2012[x] exposed not only the deliberate lies which had been published in the press but also the invasive techniques used to stalk celebrities with a view to getting potential information around which to base salacious stories. On the other hand, if there was no market for such stories, then the publishers would write differently or go out of business.

It is possible to make clear nonsense sound plausible, if it is delivered with conviction and panache. Consider this British schoolyard poem:

> It was in the month of Liverpool
> In the city of July
> The rain was snowing heavily
> And the streets were very dry.

These are all valid English language words, combined together with correct grammar and syntax. The poem has rhythm and rhyme. It flows off the tongue. Yet, it is full of logical inconsistencies, from line to line, which render it headshakingly meaningless.

How often do we hear blatant falsehoods or inconsistencies delivered with passion[xi] and reported with sincere intensity on the media?[xii]

It is not hard to understand that, in the emotion of a political or protest rally, people will be carried along by the words without stopping to check their logic or meaning, let alone the truth of the 'facts'.[xiii] Rally participants are looking to chant slogans repetitively, to believe what they are being told and to be carried along by the hysteria of the occasion.

In the current short-attention span of media presentations, the video and sound grabs often report moments just as they are recorded, apparently with minimal editorial qualification or context.[xiv] Then they hit the social media and go viral, frequently for comic effect.

The mantras of the campaign hustings can often be arrant nonsense, made to sound plausible by confident delivery and repetition. Rather than listeners hearing detailed researched plans, they hear what they want to hear in order to have their biases confirmed. It is also the 'availability heuristic' – if it is heard often enough, it will come to be believed.

Let us acknowledge that there are many very capable, professional journalists and editors around the world who do their due diligence in reporting facts, researching stories and presenting cogent arguments.

Their messages can, however, be lost in the morass of saturation output from a host of media outlets.

But, if you seek out and follow those quality messages <u>alone</u>, is that not another form of confirmation bias and you are entrenching your own viewpoints?
On the evidence above, it would be hard for the average readers or watchers of the media to have confidence that they are being exposed to the truth, even if it is confirming what they already think.
Much more likely, it would seem that they are being exposed to some form of manipulation of thinking which is trying to align the recipients with an argument, an ideology, a cause or a pressing expression of voting power.

Is that a moral position?

Has that type of manipulation always been there?
Perhaps the persuasive influence of schooling, preaching and social information systems has always been the main tool of those in power.

Even today, mobile phones track the owner's movements. Social media platforms create personal profiles based on click patterns on the Internet. These profiles can then direct advertising to suit personal preferences or forward persuasive articles which may or may not be true. Each user is vulnerable to being manipulated without his/her direct knowledge.[xv]

What, then, is the moral solution to that dilemma?
The reader's skill is to have sufficient critical-thinking ability – the knowledge of the persuasive fallacies – to separate reality from the fiction.

How is that skill to be imparted to the mass of the people without falling into the same manipulating traps that we have been illustrating in this chapter?

Is it morally acceptable in a civilised society to rely on the masses to sort between lies, spin and the truth?

Journalist: Mr Ghandi, what do you think of Western Civilisation?
Ghandi: I think it would be a good idea.
Mahatma Ghandi[xvi]

[i] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fact
[ii] http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2010/02/the-difference-between-a-fact-and-a-factoid
[iii] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Availability_heuristic
[iv] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallacy
[v] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fallacies
[vi] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sorites_paradox
[vii] http://www.bioethics.org.uk/evidenceguide.html
[viii] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeanne_Calment
[ix] http://www.forbes.com/sites/stratfor/2017/02/02/alternative-facts-in-a-post-truth-world/#3501cc576d60
[x] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leveson_Inquiry
[xi] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/25/the-remarkable-inconsistency-of-trumps-attacks-on-the-media/?utm_term=.4ec401b8ab4d
[xii] http://www.mintpressnews.com/pants-on-fire-analysis-shows-60-of-fox-news-facts-are-really-lies/205563
[xiii] http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/politics/news/a53269/trump-florida-rally-lies
[xiv] http://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-analysis-shows-extent-of-press-bias-towards-brexit-61106
[xv] http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2017/04/10/4649443.htm
[xvi] http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/04/23/good-idea