The Collators Podcast

Episode 2 - OMG, TMI - How much information is too much? - Shownotes

Overview

In this episode of The Collators, Mark and Howard dig into the firehose of the digital age. From the days of cereal-box reading and limited TV channels to today's infinite scroll of TikTok, Twitter, and AI-generated content, how has the internet reshaped the way we process and perhaps fail to really think about the information we recieve.

External links or References:

Barack Obama (early social media in campaigns)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barack_Obama_2008_presidential_campaign#Use_of_new_media

Bo Burnham Welcome to the Internet - (from "Inside")
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1BneeJTDcU

Daniel Kahneman – *Thinking, Fast and Slow*
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thinking,_Fast_and_Slow

History of the web - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_World_Wide_Web

L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat (in English: Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station). 1896 by the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumière

[NOTE: There is some dispute if people fled the actual cinema, and some historians have cast some doubt on this account, however due to the age of the film, primary sources are difficult to find one way or another. There has been a noted lack of any local news, etc, but at the time of writing, I could not find any primary sources.]

Nicholas Taleb - Skin in the game - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skin_in_the_Game_(book)

Operant conditioning chamber (aka Skinner's Box) -
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operant_conditioning_chamber

Psychological different in using different weapons
[NOTE: I couldn't validate my comment about ancient china. I found a similar reference by David Grosseman https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_Killing

In relation to a spectrum of distance - mentioned here
https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/there-spectrum-responses-killing-far-enemies]

Transcript

(Intro hook not transcribed)

Mark

So the topic for today's pod is how the internet has changed us as individuals, how we process information and how we manage information overload in general. So Howard, I was wondering if I could just take a steer from you. What's your thoughts on how the internet's kind of changed things?

Howard

I like to understand and unpick things almost like taking a machine apart to understand how it works and things that might invisibly affect its operation to make it better or worse in the way it functions.

And that's how I approach the internet or any new phenomenon. I'm old enough to remember the issues that the internet raises before the internet came along. So when we didn't have that as a social phenomenon, as a data source, as a potential issue for data processing and evaluation. It's been interesting to me to see how it's evolved from its very early and limited beginnings, to being the default communication platform in terms of its globalisation.

All the different areas of knowledge that it covers, the misinformation, the poorly researched information that appears on there.

All internet data is what I would call secondary or tertiary data. It's not the source data from the environment that you might pick up as an individual with your own human senses in that you might, you see something, you witness an event.

If your visual and audio sensors are good enough and your memory is good enough, you'll capture what you might call the best possible data that you might depending on your perspective. That's not the case with the internet, it's always gone through multiple layers of data collection and collation and layering.

It's copies of copies of copies so that it has many many layers where bias or inaccuracy can be introduced and that's the first thing for me. That can be a passive process merely of the phenomenon that is the internet just through the technology and the way that it works but it can also be a very deliberate thing.

Not always for the bad it can be meant for good reasons but anything that involves humans

involves bias because we seek to create a view or a perspective that suits, consciously on unconsciously, our own view of the world and maybe communicate to another third party, another person or people what we're trying to communicate to make it more effective communication and that's all very well if your objectives are purely that.

But that can result in miscommunication and misunderstanding accidentally or more importantly, deliberately, and as a data analyst and somebody dealing with information as an intelligence source, i.e. data that's used for a purpose to come up with a decision for action. That's an important fact to me and I think it's worse on the internet because it's such a large and complex system with so many players that it's exponentially worse than the written word or mathematics or film or audio as data sources for example.

Mark

I agree with pretty much everything you just said. I would only add what I'm driving at when I thought of the question, and to be honest is probably one of the reasons why we wanted to start this pod, is that across my career, you know I was born in the early 80s so I remember life before the internet.

I also remember the amount of information I would get was far far less. I remember silly things like basically just watching the same TV show, waiting for the weekly TV show favourite to come on once a week, or re-watching the same video again and again and again, because to be honest from an information point of view we were kind of starved.

Me and my partner sometimes joke, we were saying the other day about how we would read the back of the breakfast cereal because you were that bored sometimes and starved for information you'd just be reading text that you had no utility to you at all, you'd just be there taking it in.

I think my perception is that as I grew up, as I was reaching adulthood and then analog was becoming digital and the internet was becoming less specialist and more mainstream, I felt like the volume of information was increasing exponentially and we were getting to this saturation point and then getting higher.

So first of all, it was like the internet at web 1.0. Then we had web 2.0 and social media first with MySpace then with Twitter and Facebook and YouTube and stuff. Now with the rise of mobile data and mobile devices and now TikTok, Insta, the firehose again just seems to be getting higher and higher and higher.

I kind of see this in two ways. So there's me as just an individual who remembers what it was like to be very bored and starved of information, but I also see this as we both come from a police training background where we were trained in where information was almost scarce and you kind of [curated] it and you managed it and it was kind of collected on a very individual level

even in complex inquiries but those skills that we had as investigators or as analysts it feels like the general public need them to parse just what's available to them on any given day because now they are just given, you know [everything]

There's a there's song about the internet by Bo Burnham, and it's a little bit of everything all the time and I think that's that to me that's the polar shift.

We've gone from information coming from a few sources TV, radio, print, media, friends, family to now this magic mirror in your hand that just kind of just firehoses stuff at you and I don't know how the impact on kids, impact on teenagers, the impact on even young professionals and from an analytics point of view.

I know it's even harder sometimes because I feel like it's had an impact on different generations in different ways and I know you've trained, you've been training for 30 odd years, I know you've seen people of various ages deal with that so do you have a take on, is anything what I am saying kind of resonating, do you see that or do you have a different take?

Howard

I completely agree, but one of the ways I like to think of it is to start off with the human being, the human individual, seeking this data for a purpose and then putting it to some kind of use. You're right in terms of what you say if you go back, and I'm not quite that old, but if you go back to medieval times and the idea of the emergence of collaborations of humans, early models of society where you'd have a king or a chieftain or a queen and then minions for a social function including soldiers.

One of the processes was to gather information about their foes or about threats or opportunities and then to make decisions. So they'd send out a spy, for want of a better word, an information gatherer. It would be a human being and that spy would go to place X which may be several thousand miles away, travelling by horse, boat, canoe, whatever. Certainly not by electronic or modern means so it could take months or years and then when they get there, they may not speak the language.

They may not understand what they're seeing, they may have visual or listening or memory disabilities that were all human and then they'd come back and they'd report to the leader. So the information that came back was one person's view of this whole society for a particular issue.

Imagine somebody asking you what your views were on a painting on the Tower of London or for me to ask how high is the snow line in the Scottish Highlands or what do Welsh people think about football? I wouldn't have an idea but if I asked one Welsh person I'm getting a very small and potentially incorrect sample of the true picture in the round.

It would have taken so much time to come back the information was out of date, any decision would be making a response to something that was the case many years ago, just like when we get information back from satellites, it is often looking at a picture of the universe, for example, millions of years ago and third, it was subject to human interpretation.

Fast forward and that spending loads of time and effort and resources to get that very small piece of information made it high value. We've gone full circle to the point where now we get immediate information of probably extremely low value and we don't have the time and resources to take all that information and process it to get a proper picture.

That takes me back to this idea of humans being the users, the clients of this data with the internet, as a police officer, I was always trained, and as a scientist before being a police officer, collect the best information that was as least corrupted or biased as possible, the closest to the source, because the chances are it would give you the best possible picture of what you were trying to understand but as you and I both know, there's a very well-known model of the way that humans think and make decisions called fast and slow thinking.

Fast thinking is the kind of the survival mode where people take limited information and make an instant decision for survival like saber-toothed tiger running at me, run away. Even though it might turn out not to be a saber-toothed tiger, it might have been something else. And natural selection means those people survive.

The other version of thinking is slow thinking, where you take the time, you have no time pressure to make the decision. So you collect lots of information and process it and hopefully come up with a more reasoned and a more balanced decision.

I think what's happening now with the internet being the default source of data, you can see it in language, people don't say go away and research something they say go and Google it. You know, go back 20, 30 years and if you said Google, somebody think you'd be lined up for a mental institution, you come up with baby language. It just shows how far we've come as a society and as individuals.

What happens now? People want the realities we'd like to think as rational creatures that we want to make decisions based on the best possible information that are rational and logical but the survival reality of us, think of us as basically hairless apes, is that we've always been primed to make decisions primarily based for survival, which are these fast decisions based on emotion.

The internet gives you a summary of lots of information. It doesn't quality assure that information as to when it was collected, how relevant it is to the topic you're looking at, whether it's been corrupted, so on and so forth but if the summary is enough to either allow you to make a decision, what am I going to buy on the latest shopping platform or which music should I like? That's fine and it'll give you the emotional hit, so most people these days, much as we like to

think of ourselves as evolved creatures and societies, are making decisions more and more, thanks to the internet, based on emotion.

I'll give you another factor that stands out to me, we want to make decisions quickly and we're not worried about the consequences. saw a great cartoon a while back with two monkeys talking to each other. And one says to the other, "I hear you're a genius at maths", he said "yeah, what do you want fast or [accurate]?", "well, what's five times 34?" and he says "99" and he says, "no, it's not", he says, "yeah, but it was fast". So people value the fast response rather than an accurate response and there's almost a demand for that.

I'll give you a really good example that's current. We've had this incident in Liverpool in the UK where we've had a car drive into a crowd of spectators linked to a football event. It would be very easy to prejudge that event, we don't know, I certainly don't know what happened, the physical sequence of events and I have no idea of the motivation of any of the people involved and the police who are investigating it, who have to go through processes that you and I will understand, are saying to the public, "don't rush to judgement , we're investigating it" and all the public are saying to the police through the media, "what happened?."

The police are saying wait but the public there's information and that people are making decisions and forming opinions all over social media. Allegedly there are other videos, social media commentary saying well it happened because of this or these were to blame or that was to blame so society is making the point that they're not prepared to wait for a rational decision if that's what we would hope the police would come up with, they just want that quick emotional hit so they can say well I think it was that and therefore I can give an opinion saying he's at fault or they're at fault you know what I mean this kind of instant almost adrenaline rush.

Mark

I agree with you on the demand, I think it's also important to note that it's not just there are people who are wanting to know and, that's not a new thing right, we've had people, live news reporting that has been demonstrating that for decades that people want to know what's happening now.

I think what makes it different is there's a couple of things, now we have bad actors who are able to interject their own information and spread misinformation first of all and I think we've gone from a stage where the misinformation might just be in literal text form, it might be video footage from a completely unrelated incident from ages ago or from somewhere else that purports to be related to the incident, but isn't that.

I think what's interesting now, I don't think this has happened with Liverpool, but I think it might happen in the future is that I don't know if you've seen this Google AI VO3 stuff, the auto generation of video content, I think it's going to be even worse potentially in the future because potentially bad actors can now generate alternative footage of, and that's probably the wrong

term actually, but essentially fake footage of what's gone on and get it out there before the regular news agencies can get their content out there.

I completely agree with you that that's going to lead to potentially all the problems that we've had last year and the year before with some of the riots of the result of misinformation and it's going to get worse.

I don't know which way it's going to go. I can see it in some ways. I'm hopeful that people will learn to basically try and vet their new sources because I'm in no way against citizen news. I think people should be able to get their camera out and film stuff as it's happening but I also think that with the ability to present information there has to be a counter of the ability to vet and assess that information especially before you share it because we're going back to that old Mark Twain quote that I'm going to slaughter which is, "a lie is half way around the world before the truth gets its boots on".

I think that's that turbocharging that I was alluding to at the start and I think that's the problem is how do you, the information space, and the communication space that we're used to operating in decades ago simply is not like that now and it has implications right? It has implications for the police, has implications for us as individuals, socially and politically and this podcast we want to talk about basically not just diagnosing the problem because we can't put the genie back in the bottle right?

We ain't going back, at least for no decent good reasons, but it does leave the question, what is to be done as in not in a broad social context level but as in as individuals what can we do to try and mitigate the downsides and the negatives of misinformation.

Howard

I completely agree with you and I watch America and the political scene there not that I have any skin in that game other than the global citizen but as a phenomenon and I recall a couple of years ago when Trump was convicted in court of various embezzlement charges, he had to go to court for an appearance.

Now courts in America, perhaps even more so in the UK and elsewhere, are very respectful of people of power, rightly or wrongly they are treated very differently to the average Joe public, know, people like you or I. That's just a fact of life. But he went to court and within moments of him coming out of court which he staged he spoke to the cameras going in, he spoke to the cameras going out and is this showman who will present this very novel narrative that has very little relation to the truth.

It's a media event where for you and I it would be a court appearance. Literally moments later on social media being promoted by certain outlets there was a video, allegedly, of him being manhandled by police officers on the courtroom steps, a big scuffle and he's being thrown

around and it was very quickly debunked.

It was identified to be a video of a completely different courtroom and time and date and place with a different person, but they had grafted in the head of Donald Trump and very cleverly, it wasn't the usual cut and paste, clearly fake and out it went but the impact which was required by that video was to infer as his narrative at the time and is now that he's being persecuted, had achieved its objective and the fact that it was debunked moments later or a few minutes later was irrelevant.

It's this instantaneous you know it was like you say the Mark Twain quote the truth doesn't matter. Now the thing with it is you're right we can't stop it it has its own momentum right or wrong it's it's a phenomenon just as is global warming and you know everything that goes on in life it's a bigger thing than individuals and it will have its impact on human society and the globe as will everything and we can't control that, we can observe it.

The first thing, as I would always do, going back to good practice as an information analyst, is to look at different sources for corroboration. Look at sources that are not on the internet. The downside with that is they tend to be smaller samples, not as easy to a) access and b) interpret to get into a usable form so that you can kind of convert it into something you can put into a database.

The mere fact that they are different it means they're not often as open to this kind of global dump of false data or biased narratives into a pot because if you've got a pot of data think of it as a bingo machine where 99 of the balls say A and the actual proportion should be 50-50 but 90 percent say A and 10 percent say B, you have a 90 percent chance of that database giving you an outcome of A and that's kind of what the internet is.

If people put this deliberately false data in there to try and sway the chance of search engines or you collecting that data and trying to come up with a balanced view and it's not enough to jump around on the internet, different media websites it's a start, but the fact that they are onto the internet means they are just as open to being compromised.

You can AI a piece of written work. I agree, but you can't make that as immediately impactive as a video of somebody or an audio recording of somebody so it's less effective as a tool to try and distort somebody's decision-making process to put into their pot of data. So I'm a great believer in coming out of the internet and looking elsewhere.

The danger is that as time goes on, the internet is almost the default platform. So it's like if almost as if it's not on the internet, it doesn't exist well, that's patently nonsense. If there were no human beings on this planet, the planet earth would still exist and carry on travelling through space like Captain Kirk, having chemical and biological events. We just wouldn't be there to capture it.

What we're dealing with with all of this is a purely human phenomenon. Our process of collecting and interpreting data to make decisions, first of individuals and now of societies. It's not relevant to the real world. The real world doesn't care about us except how we impact it as a biological and chemical and physical machine. So that's how I would approach it.

Mark

I see where you're coming from and I've come to a similar conclusion and I think I would only alter it slightly in that I've kind of I've got an optimistic and a pessimistic view. So when you said it's about like the internet as something that waits for the request and then perhaps some line force alters the request and kicks it back out again to maximise engagement or to maximise revenue or whatever. I think that's true but I also think there's something more fundamental going on.

This is going to seem like a strange example but the other day I was thinking about Snow White and the magic mirror and the magic mirror in that story, part of the story, I do not know if you remember, is basically the Queen saying to the magic mirror, okay, who is the fairest of them all? And the mirror as a device indicates Snow White and the whole thing kicks off.

I was thinking about that magic mirror in terms of, that as a device, when you ask something and that device tries to provide you with that thing. The question, the input, shapes the output, in terms of there's an intent there and I think as the technology for completely neutral reasons, nothing nefarious, but tries to answer the question that you've asked. The magic mirror is not instantly saying, hang on a second, are you feeling okay? Is that really the right type of question? Does it matter? It's a simple, it's Snow White, deal with it, good luck.

And I think that there's an analogue there between what we're calling the internet as essentially as that magic mirror process, but it could be any kind of smartphone, laptop, tablet, whatever, and any search or media service. What the user puts in, and either puts in directly through typing a search string or through activity over time, and it's tracked behaviourally without the user's knowledge, that impacts the input.

You've already alluded to what the forces can do with that and with the output. I think and you've finished with like kind of the verification side I actually think and this is another old police meme was the ABC thing - Accept nothing, Believe no-one, Check everything. My optimism is that I think all this kind of overload of information may happen generationally, because it won't be a quick process, basically get that ABC into most people because I think it will be essential for survival.

I think to get a true sense of what's actually going on assuming you're trying to find out what's actually going on and you're not just there for the entertainment and the engagement value, I think ABC of Accepting nothing, Believing no-one and Checking everything is a good strategy. It really does work.

And here's the pessimism now, that was the optimism. The pessimism is when people, because I think they're doing this already, I think people are starting to accept nothing. And basically, when I [say] challenge everything, I think some people are not even not going as far as challenging everything, but just denying everything. It's like I can't pick out what's true so I'll just deny everything and I will reside with whatever my internal views are before I ask the question and so the verification part, the check everything. Yes, that should be done. And if you or I were an analyst or a police officer or a detective, we would be kind of doing that verification.

What worries me, and you brought Liverpool in that kind of, we've also got to talk about the actual dynamics here of human nature and how when something like that happens, there is a very urgent need to find out what's going on and you know people will, and I've done it myself, I have looked at my phone and then you know I don't know it could be like something war related it could be like another high school shooting or something like that and part of you predicts what the story is going to say before you've read it.

I've not got control of that, it's an automatic process. It's a bias and I'm skeptical of it but I'm conscious that it's there. I think because we're trying to discuss and find things people can practically do, what's your take on ABC? Because you've taught ABC across different generations but obviously you've also taught it at the kind of the analyst level, the detective level, your take on ABC really if think it's valid for that purpose.

Howard

Yeah it is, but I think human beings are lazy and as an analogy look at me I'm overweight. Intellectually I'm intelligent enough to know that if I ate more sensibly and got more exercise I would deal with that. I am fully aware of the health issues and longevity and particularly at my age you start thinking a lot more about that. Nevertheless, I still misbehave.

I am lazy and I'm the guy who, you know, I've researched thinking and how I behave and I can analyse myself and my own human laziness and I think that's what's happening with the internet. You're right, the survival technique will be to use models that require people to check and go back to what I would call first principles. The internet is just a source the same as any other source.

Imagine, there's always been this saying that all human society is four days away from returning to the caves. So if the idea of everything is finished, we have no electricity, no power. Everything else would be back into a survival mentality, scraping around for grubs and killing each other for food. I believe in that but I also think that's the case with the internet.

If that disappeared, we would have to go back to those first principles in the same way without calculators. We would go back to slide rules and logarithmic scales but whilst ever we don't have to, where's the motivation?

I also agree with what you said about the internet trying to please because of the data that's put in and the way that we ask questions and I see this more recently with some of the more developed artificial intelligence models and I don't say this is wrong - I love science fiction, I've read it since I was a kid and particularly the early great authors.

I always remember Isaac Asimov and his laws of robotics and one of them was a robot may either through action or inaction not allow a human being to come to harm. Now I think when Asimov was thinking about it, and these were very early models he was thinking about physical harm but could link it just as easily to mental or emotional harm.

Jump forward, here we are, thick end of 70, 80 years later from when he first wrote that the AI models are far more sophisticated and on the one hand yes you may go for the doomsday prediction that AI will take over the world and decide the humans are rubbish and it can get rid of them and run the world by machines, kind of the HAL concept from 2000 the space odyssey, or all the concepts from the matrix models where humans are superfluous that's one end of the spectrum.

But the other end of the spectrum might be what if AI decides it wants to kind of do everything it can to please human beings in the way that it responds so you create almost an information virtual reality.

Like you, I watch people, there are overt signs of this. Think about the games that people play. When I was a child, I played with a stick or chess or marbles, that kind of primitive physical device and then we had the early computer games, which took like 15 minutes to load from a cassette tape and clunked along just so that I can remember when I first went to university it took me three weeks to fire a ballistic missile doing what they called Fortran programming computer cards.

These days it's instantaneous, you think about the shooting games and people become desensitised. I've talked about this before, when film first came out, there's a very famous example of a French filmmaker filmed a train arriving into a station and played it in a theater to an audience who had never seen film before and it was theatre sized, so it's kind of life sized and it was sound accompanied and they thought the train was arriving and driving into them in the theatre and they all ran out and there was mad panic.

I watched my teenage son who is now your age, 20, 30 years ago, when he was playing computer games and they role plays and he's playing nuclear war and shoot them ups and all this kind of stuff where there's the most awful pandemic violence and an orgy of killing and blood and guts and emotionally he was dead, so he had become desensitised.

I think human beings who use the internet will become desensitised or risk becoming desensitised to the fact that the data is biased or fake. They say whatever, you know it feeds my need rather like junk food feeds the need of people who like junk food even though they know they shouldn't.

I think also there's a real danger that the AI models, even if they're beneficial or shall we say, designed, if they don't have their own intelligence, if they are working to try and make humans feel good, will create this information virtual reality that gives you the magic mirror answer. You know, you are beautiful, you're the most beautiful person in the world, nobody can touch you. We can all do that, but you're actually fooling yourselves which we know, objectively, but in the real world, those are completely false.

Now, if it's not a survival issue, it's purely a feel good hit, then maybe that's not too important but if it's something that's essential to your survival or the survival of an element of human race, then maybe that might be an issue because we can get these things right or inconsequential like a neutral outcome, thousands and millions and billions of times but if it's something catastrophic for the human race of the planet, we can only afford to get it wrong once and that's what worries me. Does that make sense?

Mark

Completely, I agree and I think with climate change and various other things that's a very serious kind of consideration to have. I think when you're talking about the kind of separation, like the lack of skin in the game, I'm thinking of literally the book of the same name by Nicholas Taleb. I don't know if this is true what I'm about to say, I remember from somewhere somebody saying that I think in ancient China there was a reluctance about firearms versus weapons because of the separation from the killer, the person being killed, almost a kind of a trivial concern about trivialisation of the act.

I think there is something to be said for media, as in media, as in the content, not the media news company specifically, but there's something to be said for this is going to sound unkind and I don't want it to but I think, do you remember how the BBC had that motto of educate, inform and entertain?

I think people are now presented with material that they perhaps watching it for entertainment value more than information value it's almost like they want to be kind of enraged and angered and reassured for a previous held belief and I think there's something to be said for, we've talked about ABC as a strategy about, if you're in that space, that's something you can do to try

and mitigate the problem.

But I think it's also about trying to understand, okay, what areas are you choosing to look at? Are you choosing to engage with? And do you have an explicit and clear and honest understanding about why you're engaging with that content. Are you genuinely trying to find out what's going on? Are you genuinely trying to come to a greater understanding? Or are you trying to do something else? Do you find this entertaining? Do you find this psychologically reassuring? Do you find kinship? Do you find support or biases or anything like that?

I'm conscious I've put a bit of a negative spin on that, but I also think there's a broader problem that I think people, and I've fallen into this trap, and I think it's a trap I still struggle with today, which is going back to that analog world of the 80s and 90s. If I wanted to understand the world as a collective thing and learn about different countries, I could listen to the broadcast news, radio or TV, I could read a bunch of newspapers, maybe read a few textbooks, but it would take a while for me to find out what was going on in different countries at the same point in time.

Now I can go to YouTube, I can go to Google, I can go to other search engines, I can basically be overwhelmed by what's going on, you know, everything, everywhere all at once if you like and I think that's the thing about recognising from a mental health point of view, is it healthy, we have to understand that now we have access to everything it's not necessarily healthy to try and access everything all the time and that we have to kind of understand what are we accessing, why are we accessing it and what effect it's having on us and rationing that to a certain degree is probably not a bad strategy.

So just to recap, we've talked about ABC, we've talked about kind of being aware of what we're doing, how we're interacting with the world because I'm conscious a lot, we've talked about the internet and we're kind of blaming the internet and bad actors. But obviously, some of it's just our own nature, isn't it? It's human nature to kind of delve a bit too deep and to kind of just keep taking that, it's that dopamine, isn't it? It's like the pigeon hitting the button and getting the bird seed every time. We get that dopamine all the time. So yeah, is there anything that brings up for you or you want to conclude with?

Howard

I agree with what you're saying and I do think it's the dopamine hit equivalent and that also brings me back to desensitisation. Over time that dopamine hit like any drug will not be enough which is kind of the analogy with my son and games or another good one would be pornography. The thing for me with the pornography, they say that overexposure to that, particularly young men who are going into sort of the journey of sexual discovery and having a normal relationship with the consenting partner of any sex. That they're the influence of pornography on their formative years, massively influence is their expectations and how they behave when they get into a real sexual situation and you see things with the like the Tate brothers this kind of almost debasing of women seeing women as objects to be used and that's

generated from a social media context and the material that's being put into the internet for them to draw from when they may even be going out and doing trying to do genuine research with noble intentions just to discover.

But if all you find is this information at what point does it over time have a bigger than real impact on your perspective and your worldview.

When you get into that pattern of behaviour, we all know that learned patterns of behaviour right from being babies in the womb have a massive impact on our ability to process data and our approach to everything in life going forwards. No matter how more educated you get over time.

The big concern for me is, there's an element of us being lazy. We like what we like and if it supports the like or the particular things that we enjoy, we're going to keep going back to that for the dopamine hit. There's a separate factor and that's not... what about where we don't have the choice of what we're looking at? Now obviously we've discussed this idea of the information that's put onto the internet.

Its a sample of reality, it's not reality itself and it's not total it's not 100 percent data set but people are putting things on there deliberately to influence how we think

But in our workplaces and in the groups that we join, be they social or some kind of other function related, those can constrain the data sets that we're fed and also the mental approaches we take for the decisions. I've listened with great interest,to how people will answer questions in two different ways. So do you want me to answer as a professional X, whatever the profession is, or do you want to answer as an individual?

And I often question that. It's good that they recognise that they're becoming two different, shall we say, perspectives on the same data. But I wonder mentally at their ability to actually compartmentalise those two functions. I do question whether or not. There's some kind of trade-off between the two.

I always remember a British politician who I respected greatly for his courtesy and his honesty in answering questions was once asked, saying, what's your perspective on abortion given that you are a Catholic and the Catholic Church is against abortion? And his answer was, well, yes. As a person, through my religion, my personal view is against I'm abortion. But as a member of a government, the government who have been elected by society, I'm a servant of society, society has said in our country we approve abortion under these rules. So says that's what I will support.

Now, whether he could do that in real life was a question for me, but at least he was aware of the issue. And I'm not sure that people often make those distinctions. I watch a lot of the the American politicians now and other than their new king the the orange tango gentleman who seems to be in a reality of his own and if you listen to him speak he's just almost freewheeling

thought with very little or no reference to picking up on actual data or representing the facts or truth or objectivity.

You don't see any pushing back on that and you don't see any differentiation between what his limitations might be from a thought process, what his agenda is, be it personal or shall we say for the greater good in this case of America never mind the globe. And I'm sure that's the case for many politicians. I have a very low opinion of politicians in general, that's just me.

But in this case, it's whatever you think of this person and how they operate, good or bad, you have to say that what he does is completely overt. Whether it be an allegation of corruption or personal dealings or bias or self-interest or rewarding cronies or threats to people that he dislikes, personal threats.

It's out there. You know, he makes it and he does it. And what's interesting as an observer of this kind of behaviour is whatever I think of that behaviour, at least now you can watch somebody who is so unaware or maybe very self aware feeling that what they say is always going to be right.

And therefore they feel that what they can do no wrong, they will always be supported. So there are no checks or balances on what they say or on what they do. And yes, all right, politics may not respond to that, but the rest of the world, whether you agree or disagree with it, as a phenomenon to study the decision making process and the response of society to that, I find very interesting because I'm sure other politicians have done the same.

Around the world certainly autocrats do but they don't always say that on camera they convert what they're saying they lie for public perception, this person doesn't even have a skill set good enough to lie he doesn't feel the need to lie or he simply can't lie because he has no self-awareness or self-control does that make sense.

Mark

It does. It's just I find myself in a position where I have to defend Donald Trump, which I wasn't expecting to do at the start of this recording. I agree mostly with what you've said. where I push back slightly is I think it's important that this is a part about information, right?

And how human beings use information as a material. And you're right to raise Trump, because I think Trump is an excellent demonstration of a bias that I think has been in us and people like us for a long time. We were raised for decades that serious political or public discourse was based on facts and very strong reasoned opinion. Okay?

Take Margaret Thatcher, for instance. You politically may disagree with her, but there was always a rationale and a reasoning to what she said. And she's on camera for interviews lasting half an hour here, an hour there. Everything was about facts and very well-reasoned opinion.

And that was the order of the day. So me and you have equated information with that kind of factual-based, strong argumentation.

I think what Trump shows us is that actually there was a market for a different type of information that wasn't based on facts, wasn't based on strong reasoning, but was perhaps based on strong emotional appeal, resonance, things that felt true, things that we wanted to be true, but also things like, yes, you might say the quiet parts out loud, and like there's been other kind of dictators have been doing like silly dances to kind of cover up other things that they get up to and what I'm saying is from an information point of view, it's all information right?

So we may aspire to a society where our politicians are speaking 'the truth' and presenting facts and well made inferences based on solid rationale but actually I think what Trump's proven is that not only is there a market for kind of vibe politics and vibe information, but that market is huge and it isn't just about whether you're informed it's about how you feel and I think he's known for a long time about the media as a hype train and I think be it through TV at first and now internet, I think he knows it's not about facts and it's not about opinion. Sorry not about a reasoned opinion it's about emotion and judgment and how much you feel.

Howard

I completely agree with you and I'm not trying to make any kind of political point. It's about him as an information source and particularly an internet-based information source. If you look at the way the government operates, the American government, traditionally there would be press briefings and there would be documents put out by various departments who have controlled information systems. He created his own social media channel,his own administration is often not aware of what he's going to announce until it's on social media.

So they're the very government that work for him are having to watch what he says on social media and then react. And that's an interesting phenomenon. I also think you're right.

If you're going to credit him with anything it's he's seen this migration for what I would call quasi reality TV. I used to watch some reality TV shows and I very quickly gave them up right from when they began because they aren't reality. It's a contrived reality where the producers create artificial situations for entertainment so to call it reality is wrong.

I'm a celebrity, get me out of here. Well the public are going to decide that celebrity A has got to eat a kangaroo's penis on camera. How is that reality? You know or a bachelor is going to marry one of these 100 people and they're going to have a perfect relationship and 10 minutes after the show they don't have it. It's contrived for entertainment and he's exploited that understanding

Not just him, but shall we say the movement around him as a way to influence people and pander to those needs which comes all the way back to this human behaviour that we were

talking about at the beginning of our session today. I mean you could argue if you look back at Barack Obama, one of the reasons people say he was successful in being elected was he was one of the first politicians to exploit social media access to access potential voters. Here we are where now an administration is basically running a country and through it as passengers largely the world through social media, you know it's a reality TV show

Even news outlets and I have great respect for the noble intentions of journalism as a profession. I can't remember seeing a noble journalist who stuck to the parameters of their profession for year,s and you have even things like Fox News and I'm not saying the other channels are any worse but Fox which is called Fox News goes to court says no we're just an entertainment channel we aren't journalists we're not reporting fact we're here to influence and that's accepted. What really worries me is we've become creatures that are prepared to live in virtual reality over time.

I worry that we spend more and more times in front of our screens and only dipping into the real world for survival like to eat and to defecate and to breathe and all the functions that you do for biology but over time we will almost atrophy not only our physical form you know you reach a point where you don't need arms and legs that says I've been really radical so you're just a blob sat in a chair in front of a screen but mentally how far do we atrophy so that we don't need higher thinking skills.

if you think about how the brain over time has evolved to create the frontal cortex and the thinking the size of the brain to allow us to think in a way that other animals we believe do not you know hence the reason for mammals and childbirth and all the rest of it so you can get this big head out physically it has to be formed when you're born it can't you know grow like a limb or a wing or a leaf on a plant I wonder if that will atrophy so we'll end up being again going back to the matrix using another media analogy those virtuality creatures that are just sat there in pods living a virtual life run by machines for whatever the purpose is then it'll be nothing to do with the human purpose and if that doesn't depress you I don't I don't know what does.

Mark

Mate, thank you for today. I really appreciate it and I look forward to talking to you again. So all the best. Will speak to you later.

Howard
Pleasure. Have a great weekend.