Anti nem etic

Antimemetics

Invisible Choices, Made by Default

There are two popular language learning software platforms: Anki and Duolingo. Anki is hard, free and effective. Duolingo is easy, commercial and ineffective.

The number of Duolingo users far outstrips the number of Anki users. Duolingo has 8 million downloads on the Play Store. Anki has 40 thousand. So there are 200 Duolingo users for every Anki user[1]. If you ask a random language learner what software to use they'll probably suggest Duolingo. If you ask a random *successful* language learner what software to use they'll probably suggest Anki. Most language learners are unsuccessful.

It should be no surprise that most language learners use an ineffective product. Learning a language is hard. Duolingo is designed to attract as many customers as it can. Therefore Duolingo must be easy to use. Anki is designed to work. Therefore Anki must be hard to use[2]. Effectiveness and mass-adoption are mutually exclusive.

On average, you'll have to ask 200 language learners what software they use before one of them tells you about Anki. In practice, you are unlikely to stumble across Anki at all. **You can only find out about Anki if you go looking for it and you'll only go looking for it if you already know it exists.**

No one ever told me about most of the software I use. Usually I'll infer that it must exist and then go looking for it. This is how I discovered qutebrowser, Spacemacs, tmux, i3 and—of course—Anki.

This principle isn't limited to open source software. Everything I've ever taken seriously exhibits a similar pattern. There's a common way most people do it and there's a cheaper, better, skill-intensive way a tiny minority do it.

Minority opinions are inherently controversial. Here are a few (relatively) uncontroversial examples to illustrate the trend:

- Vim keybindings vs. conventional hotkeys
- Lisps vs. programming languages without syntactic macros
- Good history books vs. the news
- Powerlifting vs. popular exercise *de jour*
- Tiling window managers vs. the desktop metaphor

If you disagree with one of the examples above that's okay but I won't reply to you in the comments.

I don't mind choosing to be part of the majority. I watch mainstream movies. I eat at popular restaurants. I perform the oldest magic tricks in the book. I'm okay with these choices I know about.

I make most of my choices unknowingly, by default, from the options presented to me. **Most of the time I pick Duolingo over Anki without ever knowing I've made a choice.**

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1. I'm ignoring the Anki desktop app, the med student userbase, the paywalling of the iPhone Anki app and differences in churn to simplify this example and

because I don't have the relevant numbers. ↩

2. I mean that effective spaced repetition is inherently difficult. The Anki onboarding experience could be improved without loss of utility. ↩

Self-Keeping Secrets

A magician never reveals his secrets.

The secret behind nearly every magic trick ever performed is available at your local library. Magicial secrets stay secret because they're inconsequential. Unless you are a magician or aspire to become one, you have better things to learn than magic tricks. If magic tricks did anything that mattered then they wouldn't be magic tricks. They'd be technology.

Magicians don't need a conspiracy to keep our tricks secret. It takes work to learn how to do magic. Friction and inertia are sufficient to keep out the riffraff.

This is true of more important subjects too, like computer security. Though zero-day exploits themselves are precious secrets, "how to find" zero-days is public knowledge. And since zero-day exploits have a limited shelf-life it's "how to find" zero-days that matters.

Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.

—Benjamin Franklin

Organizations leak like a sponge. Organizations can keep passwords secret most of the time only because a good authentication system is easy to reset. If you're even the slightest bit concerned that your passwords have been stolen then you can re-randomize them. Similarly, an intelligence agency maintains its stockpile of zero-day exploits by constantly replenishing them. To an organization, "preserving secrecy" really means "restoring secrecy". Techniques can't be kept secret because they change too infrequently to restore secrecy after they get stolen.

In practice, organizations face the opposite problem: not enough knowledge is widely-known. Training people is so hard that the limiting factor of an organization's size is how many skilled employees it can hire. The bigger your organization gets the more it'll suffer a regression to the mean. Scaling a company is an exercise in dumbing down your employees' jobs to counteract the regression to the mean.

Large organizations can neither keep knowledge secret nor spread it around. In other words, a dependence on smart people of any kind inhibits the growth of an organization. An organization can scale to the extent it makes its employees'—and especially its customers'—intelligence unnecessary.

SCP-055 is a "self-keeping secret" or "anti-meme".

—[internal document](#), SCP Foundation

The largest organizations are precisely those that make knowledge the most obsolete. The public school system is, by headcount, among the largest organizations in modern civilization. It must therefore, by necessity, minimize the need for students to learn anything hard[1].

Most adults are employed by large companies. Most adults buy most of our products from large companies. Small businesses are dying out[2]. Modern civilization is increasingly dominated by large organizations. These organizations don't just shape

our society. They *are* our society. We are our jobs. We are the products we use. We are the media we consume. We are our communities.

Our most popular activities are those that scale the best. Those that scale the best are those that require the least thinking, the least skill, the least specialized knowledge, the least individuality. If you want to measure your individuality, ask yourself this: of all the things you do, how much of it is so hard your friends and coworkers literally can't do it.

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1. By "hard" I mean "conceptual". Schools can effectively force students to learn by rote. However, as a coercive institution, any school with mandatory attendance is definitionally incapable of forcing students to productively misbehave or otherwise exercise critical thinking. (Except to oppose the institution itself.) ↩

2. Small operations that concentrate a lot of talent in a tiny number of employees are doing well. These companies will continue to constitute an insignificant fraction of total employment. ↩

Prospecting for Conceptual Holes

Imagine you wanted to explore the number line. You start at 1 and then you explore 2, 3, 4 and so on. No matter how long you do this you'll never discover -1, $\frac{1}{2}$, 2π, ∞, i, or a single noncomputable number. That's because the most interesting numbers are precisely those located in directions conceptually orthogonal to whatever numbers you've already explored.

The easiest concepts to learn are the ideas ahead of you on a path you're already taking. If you know classical mechanics then it's straightforward to learn relativity. You could crack turbulence without ever changing fields.

The second-easiest things to learn are those outside your specialization but inside of your culture's intellectual tradition. If you grew up in the West then you know there are such things as physics and painting even if you never learned how to do them.

The second-hardest things to learn are those outside your society's intellectual tradition. Consider for example *kenshō*[1]. It's possible to live an entire lifetime outside of Japan without ever discovering that such a concept exists. Westerners don't choose not to experience *kenshō*. This choice is made invisibly.

The hardest things to learn are those belonging to domains of knowledge which haven't been (openly) conceptualized anywhere, such as photography before the invention of the camera. This category includes zero-day exploits.

We can number each kind of conceptual hole from least to most orthogonal.

- Type 1: Concepts you are aware of but do not understand.
- Type 2: Concepts you are not aware of, but which belong to a field you are aware of.
- Type 3: Fields of knowledge you do not know exist, but which exist.
- Type 4: Fields of knowledge that remain genuinely secret or have not been invented.

Expertise is about mastering one field, but general intelligence is how prepared you are for something new. The more different kinds of concepts you understand the better you will be at solving new kinds of problems. This is behind the principle of learning that breadth of knowledge equals breadth of transference.

Filling holes of Type 1 is how you build expertise in a field. Holes of Types 2-4 are better for building broader (and therefore more transferable) knowledge. In other words, holes of greater-numbered types are better for increasing your general intelligence. If this is your goal then holes of Type 2 and 3 are the most valuable.

I find holes of Type 3 to be so valuable that just knowing where they are improves my creativity at solving problems. (It also turns them into holes of Type 2.) You can find holes of Type 3 systematically by mastering the language of a sufficiently foreign culture. I know this works with written Chinese and spoken Pirahã. I hypothesize it's also true of Arabic, ASL, Korean and the Khoisan languages.

Filling holes of Type 2 is almost straightforward. Pick anything you're bad at that lots of other people do and develop a basic competence. This turns holes of Type 2 into holes of Type 1.

Holes of Type 4 can be individually very valuable. That is, a single hole of Type 4 can earn you lots of power and money. But holes of Type 4 are so hard to find, verify and exploit that you can't build a broad base of knowledge out of them.

I like collecting conceptual holes, especially those of Types 2 and 3. They're so interesting. Whenever I discover a new hole it opens up an entire tree of knowledge orthogonal to everything I used to know.

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1. *Kenshō* (Japanese kanji: 見性) is a subjective state of mind associated with Zen meditation. ↩

The Technique Taboo

For a strange few decades that may just be starting to end, if you went to art school you'd be ostracised by your teachers for trying to draw good representational art. "Representational art" means pictures that look like real things. Art school actively discouraged students from getting better at drawing.

"Getting better at drawing" is off-topic at my weekly local drawing club too. I've literally never heard it discussed.

This taboo extends far beyond art. My nearest gym forbids weightlifters from using electronic systems to log their progress. I'm friends with programmers who can't touch type. None of them use Vim macros.

> "I have sometimes suspected that the quickest way to get worried looks from many modern Western meditation teachers is to talk about practice in a way that implies the attempt to actually master anything." — Daniel M. Ingram

In the part of the United States where I live, the subject of skill is often taboo. Not just relative differences in skill level between specific present individuals (which would make sense). **The implicit acknowledgement of skill as a trainable attribute is taboo.**

Not all professions have this issue. Math is still math. Biology is still biology. One can politely discuss a cook's cooking. Magicians respect coin manipulation like it's 1904.

But when traditional colleges supply the labor force for a professional trade outside of academia, that's when discussion of skill (*especially* rote learning) becomes taboo[1]. College students learn everything about their trade except how to do it. Then we maintain a collective silence concerning technique.

- A Chinese major teaches you how to talk about Chinese, not how to read it.
- An English major teaches you how to talk about novels, not how to write one.
- An art major teaches you how to talk about masterpieces, not how to create one.
- A Computer Science Engineering major…well, you get the idea.

That's a partial explanation, but it doesn't explain why skill differences in weightlifting and meditation are also taboo.

Societies make taboo exactly those topics whose mere discussion threatens the precarious dominance of those at the top of the social order by drawing attention to the system's internal contradictions.

I think my society is hiding something from itself.

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1. Medical school is an exception to this pattern. This may be because medical school considers itself a form of technical training, to be undergone after acquiring a liberal undergraduate education. ↵

Antimemes

Antimemes are self-keeping secrets. You can only perceive an antimeme if you already know it's there. Antimemes don't need a conspiracy to stay hidden because you can't comprehend an antimeme just by being told it exists. You can [shout them to the heavens](#) and nobody will listen. I'll try to explain with a fictitious example.

Suppose we all had an [invisible organ behind our ears](#) and our brains kept it secret from our consciousness. If I told you "you have an invisible organ behind your ear" you wouldn't believe me. You'd only believe it exists if you deduced its existence from a trail of evidence.

You can deduce the existence of an antimeme from the [outline](#) of the hole it cuts in reality. If you find an old photo with a gap where a person has been painted out then you can be confident that someone has been disappeared. You can then figure out who it is with conventional investigative methods. The challenge is noticing the gap in the first place and then not dismissing it as noise.

Different cultures have different antimemes. The more different two cultures are from each other the less their antimemes overlap. You can sweep up a mountain of antimemes just by reading a Chinese or Arabic history of civilization and comparing it to Western world history. You can snag a different set by learning what it was like to live in a hunter-gatherer or pastoralist society.

You can do the same thing with technology. Developing a proficiency in Lisp will shatter your tolerance of inferior programming languages. Once you've internalized `defmacro` you can never go back.

As for jobs: once an entrepreneur, always an entrepreneur[1].

Comprehending an antimeme takes work. You slog toward it for a long time and then eventually something clicks like a ratchet. Until then everything you've learned is reversible. After it clicks you've permanently unlocked a new level of experience, like stream entry.

Stream entry is another antimeme, by the way.

Antimemes are easily dismissed as pseudoscience. Pseudoscience is a meme, not an antimeme. You can distinguish antimemes from pseudoscience at a glance by examining why they're suppressed. Pseudoscience is dismissed as fraudulent. Antimemes are dismissed as inapposite.

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1. There are two different kinds of entrepreneurship. The more common form of entrepreneurship is self-employment where you sell your labor. I'm not talking about this common entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship where you exploit an overlooked market opportunity is an antimeme. ↵

Confabulation

When someone asks me why I did or said something I usually lie because the truthful answer is "I don't know". I literally don't know why I make >99% of my decisions. I think through none of these decisions rationally. It's usually some mixture of gut instinct, intuition, cultural norms, common sense and my emotional state at the time.

Instead, I make up a rational-sounding answer on the spot. Even when writing a mathematical proof I'll start with an answer and then rationalize it *post hoc*. If I'm unusual it's because I knowingly confabulate. Most humans unknowingly confabulate. This is well-established through studies of split-brained patients, Anton's syndrome, Capgras' syndrome and choice blindness.

Confabulation is lazy evaluation. At the end of the day it's more important to be less wrong than more rational. Confabulation is cheaper and faster than reason. If you can confabulate the right behavior then you should confabulate instead of reasoning.

Confabulation becomes a problem when you misconstrue it for reason. A long time ago I wanted to understand Christianity so I asked a Christian a series of "why" questions the way I'd ask a physicist. His answers became increasingly confabulated until he eventually accused me of attacking him. I have stayed friends with another Christian from the same church who simply declares "I don't know".

Mathematics is a unique field because if you put any two mathematicians in a room with a mountain of stationary then they will eventually agree on what they can and can't prove. This is performed by confabulating smaller and smaller inductive leaps until they're all reduced to trivialities.

We perform a less rigorous form of proof writing when we rationally explain a decision. Rationality is best rationed to points of disagreement. Lazy evaluation is adequate for the vast swathes of human agreement. In this way reason and confabulation coexist mutualistically. One cannot exist without the other. Together they constitute rationality.

Which brings us to [antimemes](#).

Antimemes are self-keeping secrets. Occasionally you'll stumble upon one by accident. When this happens you'll unconsciously shy away from it the way your eyes drift from the building next to the Leaky Cauldron to the one on the other side. Normally this is the end of things. You move on and forget about it. Your mind stitches over the antimeme the same way it stitches over your blind spots. But if someone else draws your attention to the antimeme then you will emit series of confabulations.

Saying things makes you believe them. Just thinking you said something (even when you didn't) makes you believe it. The more confabulations you state to protect an antimeme the harder it becomes for you to detect it. You're digging yourself deeper into a [conceptual hole](#). It is therefore imperative to short-circuit antimemetic confabulation as early as you can.

How do you distinguish antimemetic confabulations from the rationally symbiotic kind?

Unlike good confabulations, antimemetic confabulations will make you increasingly uncomfortable. You might even get angry. The distractions feel like being in the brain of a beginner meditator or distractible writer. They make you want to look away.

You can recognize this pattern as an antimemetic signature. People love explaining things. If you feel uncomfortable showing off your knowledge it's probably because you have [something to hide](#).

Once you've identified antimemetic confabulation all you have to do is set your ego aside, admit ignorance and methodically sift through the data. You'll find it eventually.

The Inefficient Market Hypothesis

The efficient-market hypothesis (EMH) is the idea that there are no hundred-dollar bills lying on the sidewalk because someone smarter than you would have picked them up by now. The EMH is a good tool for most people.

If you're smart enough then you should reverse this advice into "There are hundred-dollar bills lying on the sidewalk". If you are a genius then you should reverse it to the extreme. "There are hundred-dollar bills[1] lying around all over the place."

Hundred-dollar bills lying on the sidewalk are called "alpha". Alpha is a tautologically self-keeping secret. You can't read about it in books. You can't find it on blogs[2]. You will never be taught about it in school. "You can only find out about [alpha] if you go looking for it and you'll only go looking for it if you already know it exists."

Where **should** you look?

Abstractions

A system is only as secure as its weakest link. Cracking a system tends to happen on an overlooked layer of abstraction[3].

- It's easier to install a keylogger than to break a good cryptographic protocol.
- It's easier to disassemble a computer and read the hard drive directly[4] than to crack someone's password.

The best attacks (those requiring the least work) happen on an separate dimension of orthogonality entirely.

- The easiest way to talk to someone powerful is just to call zir company and ask by first name[5].

Won't this technique stop working now that Tim Ferris has published it in a bestselling book? Not necessarily. Quantum mechanics has been public knowledge for decades yet most people can't do it. The hard part of pickpocketing isn't finding pockets to pick.

Perhaps you don't need to talk to anyone rich and powerful. That is a good problem to have.

> I think you should find a problem that's easy for you to solve. Optimizing in solution-space is familiar and straightforward, but you can make enormous gains playing around in problem-space.
>
> — *What Startups Are Really Like* by Paul Graham

Problem-space tends to have higher dimensionality than solution space.

Case study

According to Joel Spolsky, the best programmers have the ability ["to think in abstractions, and, most importantly, to view a problem at several levels of abstraction simultaneously."](#) Also according to Joel Spolsky, a business is an ["abstraction [that] exists solely to create the illusion that the daily activities of a programmer (design and writing code, checking in code, debugging, etc.) are all that it takes to create software products and bring them to market."](#)

The ideal programmer employee is someone who can see all the way down to the level of bits, yet can't raise zir head high enough to manipulate the financial machinery of venture capital.

Homework assignment: How can you harvest alpha from this local equilibrium?

How to tell when you get it right

Alpha often feels like a magic trick. You know the phrase "A magician never reveals his secrets"? Magic secrets are not secret. The Magician's Oath is not real. David Copperfield *patents* his inventions[6]. You can look them up in a public government registry. You don't because magical secrets are boring. Disappointingly so.

Magicians cheat. The purest alpha should feel like cheating too. The greatest compliment you can receive about your alpha source isn't "You're a genius." It's "That shouldn't be possible. I'm disillusioned to live in a world is so inefficient."

Of course, you should never hear either response because you should never flaunt these discoveries in the first place.

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1. A month ago I [offered](#) to put Westerners in touch with an N95 mask exporter in China. Only two readers took the effort to message me about it. One of them couldn't be bothered to use WeChat. [↵](#)

2. Actually, I did find alpha on a blog post once. The tutorial has since been taken down. [↵](#)

3. For practice, check out [What is the fastest you can sort a list of ints in Java?](#) [↵](#)

4. Most computers are not encrypted. Professional software engineers are consistenly surprised by my ability to recover files from a broken laptop without their login information. [↵](#)

5. Tim Ferris [claims](#) this works. I am inclined to believe him based on the guests who have attended his [podcast](#). [↵](#)

6. Edit: I can only find one patent invented by David Copperfield, patent number 9017177/9358477. Most of his patentable illusions seem to be invented by other people. [↵](#)

Evading Mind Control

A couple days ago I surveyed readers for deviant beliefs. The [results](#) were funny, hateful, boring and bonkers. One of the submissions might even be useful.

> If you care a lot about your mind, it is not unreasonable to avoid advertisements like plague rats, up to and including muting your speakers and averting your gaze.

This extremist position caught my eye because humans have a tendency to underestimate the effect advertising[1] has on us. I never realized how much advertising affected me until I got rid of it.

For nearly a year I have been [avoiding junk media](#). I thought this would make me happier, healthier and more productive—which it has—but the most surprising effect is how much the reduction in advertising affects my behavior.

When I give up junk media, I stop thinking about politics, videogames and celebrities. I think less about [products](#) in general. Important things eventually expand to fill this void. But for the first week or so, my head just feels empty.

Tim Ferris doesn't just avoid news, television and social media. He even avoids reading books—especially nonfiction. When I first read that, I thought he was an Eloi. Having blogged regularly for the past year myself, I now sympathize with him.

If you are young then you should read lots of books because you need to amass information. Eventually you hit diminishing returns. Reading more books fills fewer [conceptual holes](#) per unit time invested.

You cannot discover new knowledge for humanity by reading a book written by a human.

But there is a bigger problem. It is easy to look up answers to common questions in a book. It is harder to look up answers to esoteric questions. It is impossible to look up answers to open problems. The difficulty of looking up important things you don't know answers to increases the more low-hanging fruit you pick from the Tree of Knowledge.

As your power waxes, it becomes easier to invent answers to your own questions. Eventually the trajectories cross. It becomes easier to figure things out yourself than to look up the answer. The comparative value of reading books goes negative. Books, once guides, become reference material. It is more efficient to write your own book than to read someone else's.

I used to read a lot of books. I finished 18 books in the first 4.5 months of 2020.

Date	Title	Author	Page Count
January 1	The Trouble with Physics	Lee Smolin	392
January 17	My Side of the Street	Jason DeSena Trennert	224
January 19	Saints & Sinners	William L. Hamilton	145
January 20	The Quants	Scott Patterson	352

Date	Title	Author	Page Count
February 21	Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality	Eliezer Yudkowsky	N/A
February 22	The Vital Question	Nick Lane	368
February 24	The Last Leonardo	Ben Lewis	384
March 4	Mastering Manga with Mark Crilley	Mark Crilley	128
March 22	World War Z	Max Brooks	342
March 29	The Nature of Plants	Craig Huegel	228
March 31	Built not Born	Tom Golisano, Mike Wicks	224
April 13	A First-Class Catastrophe	Diana B. Henriques	416
April 21	The Plant Messiah	Carlos Magdalena	238
April 22	The 4-Hour Workweek	Tim Ferris	308
April 27	The War on Normal People	Andrew Yang	304
May 1	Seeing Like a State	James C. Scott	445
May 5	Botany for Gardeners 3rd Edition	Brian Capon	240
May 15	The $12 Million Stuffed Shark	Don Thompson	272

Then I...stopped. In the 6.3 months since mid-May I finished only 3 books.

Date	Title	Author	Page Count
July 2	Human Diversity	Charles Murray	528
August 4	The Actor's Life	Jeanna Fischer	252
November 2	Lost Connections	Johann Hari	322

May of this year appears to be when I hit my inflection point where writing became more useful than reading.

When I started writing, I thought it was a substitute for socializing. I now realize it is a substitute for reading. Writing is to reading what entrepreneurship is to having a job. Reading too much (compared to what you write) turns you into a sheep.

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1. In this sense, "advertising" includes not only paid adverts like banner ads but also self-replicating propaganda ("we should raise awareness of..."), grassroots advertising (videogame streamers, artificial communities) and all information derived from a press release. I care about whether an interest group is getting a message into my head. Neither I nor the interest group cares how it gets there. ↩

The Economics of Media

When I was a kid I thought the news came from "investigative reporters" like Clark Kent were who were paid to research stories. Since then, I have gotten my startup on national television, placed a press release into the world news, discussed biological warfare as a podcast guest, written a blog which has been reposted to Hacker News, written fanfiction which has been linked to on Reddit and read a lot of books. My understanding of the media ecosystem has become more nuanced.

Media Economics

Small fry like Lyle McDonald, the McKays and Bruce Schneier can scrape by by selling books, branded paraphernalia and other niche merchandise. Niche merchandise doesn't scale. Large megacorp news outlets generally rely on subscriptions and advertising for their core revenue.

Subscriptions and advertising scale linearly with the number of viewers. But the cost of distributing Internet[1] media is negligible. An article costs the same to write whether one person reads it or one million. The market equilibrium is one where the great masses of people get our information from a tiny number of sources.

What people do with the information doesn't much affect a media outlet's bottom line. Whether the information makes people angry or happy doesn't matter except to the extent anger and happiness affect readership. Whether the information promotes good policy doesn't matter at all—unless that policy directly affects the news industry.

Content is fungible. Financially, what matters is how many people consume it.

Minimizing Costs

I learned a lot about Twitter when I hosted the 2020 Less Wrong Darwin Game. I wrote a sequence 11,475 words. It dwarfed anything else I had ever written until then because…I barely had to write anything. The story was created Vanilla_cabs and other competitors. Reporters report on Twitter tweets for the same reason: because content is fungible and because rehashing tweets is a cheap way to mass produce news.

But there's an even easier way to generate content: Let someone else do it for you.

Media businesses convert content into money. Media businesses don't care about the content's secondary effects. The cheaper media businesses can acquire content the more money they can earn. Non-media business with products to sell want media attention. Non-media businesses profit *only* off of contents' secondary effects. These are the perfect conditions for symbiosis. If a non-media business can write a news story for a news outlet then the news outlet gets free content and the business gets free advertising. This kind of news story is called a "press release". The first time I got a press release posted in a major news outlet I was stunned by how little the press release had been edited. The press release was basically copied word-for-word as original content.

Political organizations, including governments, create press releases the same way companies do, except their objective is political rather than commercial.

Press releases have the same economics as news stories because press releases are news stories. Only large organizations (or startups with large aspirations) have the economics to support press releases. Small organizations don't have comparable economies of scale. The press release system therefore constitutes a emergent pressure toward centralization. I suspect this pressure is related to how national politics increasingly dominate the political dialogue in the USA.

Cleaning out your head

Most of the mainstream news is implicitly subsidized by large organizations who are trying to get you to buy their products and ideologies. How do you fight back against mind control?

- The first step is to disconnect from the news. News makes you stupid.
- The second step is to explore in orthogonal directions. Learn calculus and physics. Learn foreign languages. Learn the histories of China and Islam (unless you are Chinese and/or Muslim in which case you should check out *The History of Rome*). Learn to read palms and Tarot cards[2]. Learn to draw. Use this knowledge to start hard ambitious original projects like companies. The more your actions deviate from the default script the more holes you'll discover in the Matrix.
- The third step is to create your own media. If you are consuming media created by another person—even if that person is George Orwell—then you are not yet thinking for yourself.

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1. Paper media had a worse calculus based around monopolizing distribution. Risk-adverse paper monopolies distributed only the most inoffensive content. ↩

2. But don't take them too seriously. ↩

Media Bias

In the days following confirmed person-to-person transmission of COVID in the United States, my company went on *Fox News* to promote ourselves. What makes this otherwise bog-standard [collusion between business and media](#) interesting is our representative was a Marxist who **knew** COVID would be a disaster for the United States. Our story was used to support *Fox News*' thesis that the entrepreneurial spirit of America's small businesses would [crush COVID](#). In exchange we received media coverage which helped us sell product. Everyone won.

A common misconception about propaganda is the idea it comes from deliberate lies (on the part of media outlets) or from money changing hands. In my personal experience colluding with the media no money changes hands and no (deliberate) lies are told by the media itself. Lying and corruption on the part of media outlets tends to be unnecessary in all but the most extreme cases (like North Korea). Most media bias actually takes the form of selective reporting.

Selective Reporting

Investigative reporting costs money. Media outlets' job is primarily curation *i.e.* republishing information from others in the know. "Others in the know" is mostly companies with products to sell and political parties with ideologies to sell. The cheapest information to access is public datasets (like NOAA weather reports), public records (like Florida state records), public drama (Twitter) and press releases. Press releases are the best because you don't have to write your own article.

News outlets cannot report everything. If you report only *some* of the available information then your choice of what to report reflects your bias. Bias and curation are two sides of the same coin. You cannot curate information without imposing bias. Curating information *is* the imposition of a bias. Combine the [Chinese Robbers Fallacy](#) with [a large pool of uncurated data](#) and you can find facts to support any plausible thesis. Lest you think this is a partisan problem, check out [this hatchet job](#) by the *New York Times* and compare it to [the reality](#).

The fact news outlets *don't have to* broadcast lies doesn't mean they don't.

Quotes

News outlets don't have direct access information like what the military is doing. The military does. Militaries lie. If a newspaper says Colonel Kurtz says air strikes don't kill noncombatants then the newspaper is not lying even though they are broadcasting a lie. Even when a news outlet *is* broadcasting a lie, their government is unlikely to prosecute them for promoting official government policy. Newspapers abnegate responsibility for truth by quoting official sources. You get away (legally) straight-up lying about medical facts if you are quoting the CDC.

News outlets' unquestioning reliance on official sources comes from the economics of their situation. It is cheaper to republish official statements without questioning them. The news outlet which produces the cheapest news outcompetes outlets with higher

expenditure. Besides, it is rarely a good idea to antagonize the government against you—even in a democracy. If you antagonize the government then they might stop feeding you press releases about the wars they're winning. (Noam Chomsky writes about this dynamic *ad nauseam* in *Manufacturing Consent*.)

This is true even for small independent operations. It's rare for podcast hosts to argue with their guests. This isn't necessarily unethical. The number of people who dislike you is [dominated by the size of your audience](), not by how wrong you are. If you have a large audience then people will call you wrong all the time and the right thing to do is ignore them. This applies to both hosts and guests. If an adversary invites you onto their show it is because they think the exchange will net benefit their platform.

If your adversary's evaluation is correct then you should decline unless you are playing a non-zero-sum game (in which case you are not true adversaries). [The parity inverse of a meme is the same meme—at a different phase in its lifecycle.]() Two-sided conflicts are extremely virulent memes because they co-opt potential enemies.

Debugging Attention

When thinking about things scientifically, it is helpful to ask yourself "What do you think you know and why do you think you know it?" Media bias is not a game of science. It is a game of memetics. Memetics isn't about truth. It is about attention. Ask yourself "What are you thinking about and why are you thinking about it?"

We should not raise awareness

The phrase "we should raise awareness about x" creeps me out. I had trouble identifying exactly why until I read [this](#) summary of simulacra levels.

> Level 1: "There's a lion across the river." = There's a lion across the river.
>
> Level 2: "There's a lion across the river." = I don't want to go (or have other people go) across the river.
>
> Level 3: "There's a lion across the river." = I'm with the popular kids who are too cool to go across the river.
>
> Level 4: "There's a lion across the river." = A firm stance against trans-river expansionism focus grouped well with undecided voters in my constituency.

Level 1 states truth about reality. Level 2 manipulates reality. Level 3 states truth about social reality. Level 4 manipulates social reality.

The transition from Level 1 to Level 2 is trading truth for deception. The transcendence from Level 2 to Level 3 trades physical reality for social reality—an abstraction. The transcendence from Level 3 to Level 4 is trades social truth for social deception.

"We should raise awareness about x" jumps all the way up to level 10.

Everything below this line is my own invention and does not correspond to standard usage of simulacra levels.

Level 5 and Level 6 (Media Creation)

If you want to manipulate people on a grand scale then you must transcend to an even higher abstraction: the media. "The media" is just what we call the target of the masses' attention. Media must be interesting if it is to catch the masses' attention efficiently. Level 5 is about genuine interestingness. Level 6 is about creating the appearance of interestingness.

- Level 5 (news): "There's a lion across the river." = Lions and rivers are interesting.
- Level 6 (clickbait): "There's a lion across the river." = Clickbait with the word "lion" in the title maximizes ad revenue for my news outlet.

Levels 5 and 6 are no longer even about getting people on your side (social reality). They are about generating attention for your information delivery system. (The attention can later be commoditized.) Levels 5 and 6 are the realm of reality TV stardom. These levels are about creating channels and brands. The next level is about manipulating channels and brands.

Level 7 and Level 8 (Media Manipulation)

In English, we often use different words for traditional advertising, native advertising, press releases and propaganda. These distinctions matter if you are an ethical reporter. The distinctions are irrelevant to someone who needs to disseminate a message. Since I am an entrepreneur, not a reporter, I use the word "advertising" to mean "calling public attention to one's product, service, need, etc." instead of "paid announcements"[1].

Many people have the idea that news companies send reporters to carefully verify facts. Actually, news outlets usually [just republish press releases](#) with a few edits[2]. Even live interviews usually ask predictable softball questions. Interest groups write news and news outlets publish it. Any news outlet which doesn't let advertisers subsidize its stories has trouble competing with competitors who do.

- Level 7 (press releases): "There's a lion across the river." = This press release was written by a company selling boats and big game rifles.
- Level 8 (propaganda): "There's a lion across the river." = The Zebra Party owns your communication infrastructure.

Level 9 and Level 10 (Pure Memetics)

Memes are often created by people, usually people with specific interests. Once released, memes self-replicating. They mutate and are selected. They evolve.

We started with facts. Then moved up to alliances. Then media. Then propaganda. As memes evolve, they separate from human interests. No longer does the meme manifest a human being's intention. The meme is trying (in the Darwinian sense of the word "trying") to survive and replicate.

- Level 9: "There's a lion across the river." = The sentence "There's a lion across the river." has high memetic fitness.
- Level 10: "We should raise awareness of lions on the other side of the river." = The "There's a lion across the river." meme is trying to mind control you so it can replicate.

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1. Both of these definitions come from [Dictionary.com](#). ↩

2. My understanding of media manipulation comes from historical precedent combined with my firsthand experience. For example, I started a company with a press release so good the editor of *TechCrunch* [used it as a case study](#) in how to write press releases. ↩