

Of Myths and Minds

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Introduction

There is a lot of discussion about the impact on our society of new developments such as artificial intelligence, big data, machine learning and deep learning .

Many of these discussions focus on the moral and ethical impact of these developments. Scientists, journalists, futurists and politicians are warning us for the immense impact that is awaiting us. These messengers are telling us that our free will and our consciousness are at stake. Stating that in the near future computers will be able to generate new algorithms by themselves and by doing so will determine our faith.

New platforms like Google and Facebook are telling us what products are good for us and even more so, what we are supposed to think and believe. But this is not only restricted to these new platforms. Also governments, political and religious communities, as well as the conventional multinationals are influencing our minds and our behavior.

We are permanently surrounded by fake news, hoaxes and myths. And by the way, a myth is not a synonym for a lie. And not to be confused with fake news and hoaxes. A myth is a moral truth and although they are not based on objective, conscious and rational thinking, people tend to accept them as part of their cultural and social beliefs (Beatrice de Graaf).

Our behavior is certainly not based on a so-called free will, as we have been thinking since the enlightenment. "Die Gedanken sind Frei" Is becoming a myth in itself.

Influencing our minds may be a trending topic at the moment but it is not a brand new message. Human history is full of myths and for ages they are part of our lives.

If that is the case why all the fuss? And why are we paying so much attention to this phenomenon nowadays?

The reason probably is the pace of change. And certainly also the (maybe frightening) idea that our thoughts are not only influenced by our natural/social environment, but also by self-generated computer algorithms.

A third reason is that we are being biased, more than ever before.

First there was the insight that social platforms would lead to more diversity and discussion in society, but the opposite is the case. Social media only bring like-minded people together. Dispute and exchange of opinions is vanishing. This leads to an increasing bias and further polarization in society. As a side effect creativity of minds is diminishing, because creativity only flourishes when there is diversity in background, identity, ethnicity and focus.

Let's first have a look at the pace of change. From the early days when we were still gatherers and hunters, our thoughts were based on a combination of facts and myths, that were inherited in the local communities by storytelling. Throughout many millennia mankind went through various phases where we became farmers and traders. An increase in travelling, commuting and migration lead to interconnection of ideas, fact finding and also of

myths. So far this happened on a more-or-less linear time scale so that new generations could get used to a changing and more complex environment.

During the last century and in particular in the present era of globalization and exponential change, new discoveries, social interconnections, hoaxes and myths are tumbling over each other in complete chaos. Society reacts in an attitude of defense, conservatism, resentment and nationalism. And by doing so, people's minds become even more biased and infected by new myths.

And on top of that comes the development of artificial intelligence, where our minds will have to deal with a new form of myths, generated by computer algorithms. Don't think that this is science fiction. It is happening already on a very large scale.

And therefore I write this appeal to explore and exploit the need for an infrastructure for the minds.

Let Me Explain! The concerns I am writing about in this introduction are not new. In the last couple of years a lot of influential people have been talking and writing about the exponential increase of myths and biases. They emphasize that there is a need for an ethical debate about artificial intelligence. There are even calls for a kind of 'Manhattan Project' to protect mankind against the misuse of AI, by defining ethical and legal rules for usage of AI.

In my opinion that is not enough. It is not only AI that is threatening our free will and our consciousness. It is the combination of AI together with the big social platforms (Google, Facebook, Amazon) and the pace of change that will disrupt the autonomy of our minds. A new Manhattan project like the one that prevented the misuse of nuclear power, is not enough to solve the problem that humanity is drifting away into a 'virtual cloud of myths'. That sounds dramatical and so it is. I do believe that there is no such thing as a free will anymore. Even the enlightenment has become a myth.

So far many influential people have expressed these concerns. Some of them are mentioned in the addendum. But hardly any solution is being proposed. They only signal that our minds are being framed by new technologies, by social platforms and by artificial intelligence. The extremely important roles of scientists, journalists, historians and others to do professional fact checking is being undermined. Their professional findings are filtered by algorithms before they reach us.

We can take this for granted and expect that homo sapiens is going to be replaced by data processing algorithms as Yuval Harari states in his latest book Homo Deus. Or we can deny it as many still do.

Or we can actively develop future scenarios and investigate the possibilities of countervailing powers. This pamphlet is an appeal to do so. Let us generate ideas how to safeguard the independence of our free minds. Or at least some of it!

Myths from old history till present

Mythology as we know it, is the collection of myths as they appear in old cultures. Myths are of all times. They can be seen as manifestations of cultural, religious, social or psychological moral truths.

Gods and Goddesses

In Greek mythology the gods and goddesses were the explanation of the unknown. That could be thunder, volcanoes, earthquakes and drought, but also plagues, illnesses and death. The tides were due to the mood of Poseidon. Epidemics were punishments by Apollo. For the Romans volcanoes were the places where armory for the gods was forged. In many other cultures the shamans were believed to communicate with the gods for healing, weather, crop, war and peace. Religions explain the unexplainable by miracles. Take the crossing of the Red Sea, that may quite well be explained by tectonic movements. And there are many more examples where scientific explanations have replaced the role of gods and goddesses. But even nowadays scientific discoveries are being endlessly denied. Mainly because they contain an inconvenient truth. Global warming is presently the ultimate example.

Politics

Every historian knows that a universal truth does not exist. Throughout history facts have been manipulated. For the sake of power messengers tell the favorable story. Leading to following strong men and their hoaxes. Everybody can fill in plenty of examples from history to present times, from the Armenian genocide to Barack Obama's birthplace. From the denial of the millions killed during Stalin's regime, to the believe that the allegations against Ray Moore for sexual assault were false. Not to mention the conspiracies Mr. Trump is spreading around.

Journalism

In a free world independent journalism and freedom of the press is a basic pillar of democracy. As long as journalism is transparent and works according to their editorial standards it enables citizens to effectively participate in society. Both in history as well as in present days, this free and independent journalism is still a farce. In many regimes it is an extension of the reigning power.

Not only certain regimes can obstruct the freedom of press. Also commercial interests colour our news feeds. A new phenomena is that journalism is affected by social media who use their artificial intelligence knowledge to become a newsagent. The branding of the news they spread is part of their business model and therefore by definition not independent nor objective. "Facebook has become the most powerful publisher in history by replacing editors with algorithms and has divided public debate in a way that challenges democracy"

[\(Katherine Viner Guardian\)](#)

These are just three areas where myth has become a structural bias of our minds and where fake news is becoming a threat to humanity.

Exploring ideas

Being aware of the mind blowing developments mentioned above, a call for action is needed. There are a number of initiatives already taking place. The ones I know of are listed below.

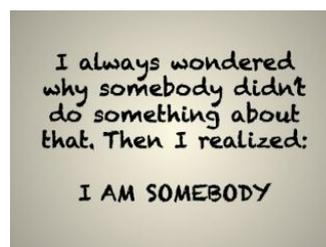
Global Initiatives for unravelling Myths

1. A new Manhattan Project for AI
There are several calls from influential people to develop a universal governance model for artificial intelligence. I mention some of them. [Sam Harris](#), [Ray Kurzweil](#), [Nick Bostrom](#), [Kevin Kelly](#), e.o.
2. An Ethical Council
Some of these influential people have suggested to initiate an international ethical council. As suggested by [Gerd Leonhard](#).
3. The so called “[Inoculation Theory](#)”. An idea that we should use what we know about psychology to design technology in a way that minimizes the impact of misinformation. A key element is the establishment of an international non-governmental organization that would create a rating system for disinformation.
4. Fact checking platforms on specific items. Like the ones on [climate change](#).
5. Pressure and sanctions by governments and international institutions to fight the so called “post-truth era”. A recent example is the UK Government putting pressure on Facebook and Twitter in a [fake news inquiry](#).
6. And very recently. The attention that was raised at this years [WEF summit in Davos](#).

Additional initiatives

By talking to a number of people, additional suggestions were raised. I have listed them below. You are invited to expand and explore these initiatives and add your own ideas.

1. Regulating Data
The pace of change is certainly also applicable to Data. Data is the fuel for the new economy and for AI in particular. Without Data Artificial Intelligence is powerless. As the volume of data, and our ability to derive insight from it, continues to grow, many of today’s businesses are built on data. Data is the currency of the 21st century so it is naïve to expect it remains unregulated and untaxed (compared to fiat currency). Maybe there should be a kind of ‘Tobin Tax’ for Data. There must be a ‘License to Operate for Data Companies’. Data hoarders such as FB and Google would pay for their Data Assets and consumers would have transparent insight in the ownership of their Data. This ownership and accessibility of consumer data needs legislation. See this [NESTA article](#) about the UK situation.
2. Wiki-Minds
The solution may be an additional social platform as a countervailing power against



the misleading influences mentioned above. I would call it an infrastructure for the Minds. I do mean a kind of platform like Wikipedia. For now I will call it Wiki-Minds. It will be a social platform where potential and existing myths and hoaxes can be placed to be unraveled and be subject for fact finding. It is crowd based and can be organized similar to the way Wikipedia is organized. The intrinsic strength of Blockchain technology may help enforcing transparency of resources.

3. Counterattack

Use tech to solve the problems created by tech. We can foresee algorithms (with human support) that monitor 'news' and data in real-time as a browser plug-in/app and assign credibility and other ratings on the screen. Trusted' news organizations (NYT, BBC, Guardian etc) are in a good position to do this and they surely need a new role and business model as an incentive to adapt. An example of the difficulties in the fight against fake news and fake product review can be found in this recent [Scientific American article](#).

4. Mindfulness

A suggestion was made to propagate Mindfulness as a means to maintain awareness of our thoughts, feelings, and surrounding environment.

This is a working document and I would like to invite everybody who shares my concerns about the biased minds to add suggestions and make amendments.

Books, videos and articles on the subject

Beatrice de Graaf - [It's the myth, stupid](#)

Max Tegmark - [Life 3.0](#)

Yuval Noah Harari - [Homo Deus](#)

Franklin Foer - [World Without Mind](#)

Niall Ferguson - [The Square and the Tower](#)

Maxim Februari - [Klont](#)

Dan Brown - [Origin](#)

Jay Tuck - [Artificial Intelligence: it will kill us](#)

Blockstack - [A new internet for decentralized apps where users own their data](#)

Wired - [It's the \(Democracy-Poisoning\) Golden Age of Free Speech](#)

Microblog - [An alternative to protect and control our data](#)

Quotes

Nietzsche:

“There are no facts, only interpretations; and this too is an interpretation.”

Gianni Vattimo:

“facts push other facts into and out of consciousness at speeds that neither permit nor require evaluation.” Most of all, it gave rise to the biases that still inform our mass media

today, creating, he argued, “a world full of strangers and pointless quantity; a world of fragments and discontinuities.”

Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*:

“Where people once sought information to manage the real contexts of their lives, now they had to invent contexts in which otherwise useless information might be put to some apparent use.” The telegraph, for the first time, “made relevance irrelevant.”

Brendan Dunphy:

“We may have reached the point where cosmetics have replaced ideology as the field of expertise over which a politician must have competent control.”

