Twitter Thread by Tim Harford



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Has there been a moment in modern history where so many people in free societies have believed such damaging lies?
https://t.co/HrZcnJJ61W
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It's easy to point to the US, where nearly 90 per cent of people who voted for Donald Trump believe Joe Biden's election victory was not legitimate.
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But it's not just the US. In France, a minority of adults are confident that vaccines are safe, which explains why only 40 per cent say they plan to get a Covid-19 shot.
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Meanwhile, across the world, substantial minorities believe that the Covid-19 fatality rate has been "deliberately and greatly exaggerated".
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How did it come to this? The simplest explanation — to repurpose a phrase from former US Treasury secretary Larry Summers — is: "There are idiots. Look around."
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But while there is a certain visceral satisfaction in that explanation, there is much more going on. Robert Proctor, a historian, once told me "we are living in a golden age of ignorance". That was in 2016; the golden age had barely started to dawn.
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Three elements of it are worth highlighting. First, distraction. It's possible for people to spend hours every day consuming what is described as "news" without ever engaging with anything of substance.
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Second, political tribalism. In a polarised environment, every factual claim becomes a weapon in an argument. When people encounter a claim that challenges their cultural identity, don't be surprised if they disbelieve it.
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Not everything is polarised — but almost anything can be polarised, and it will be if a prominent political or media figure sees advantage in doing so.
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Distractions stop us from paying attention to what matters, and political tribalism makes us reject evidence that casts our tribe in a bad light. Combine the two, add steroids and you get the third element of the age of ignorance: conspiracy thinking.
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So can ignorance be banished? It isn't easy. @davidmcraney , creator of the You Are Not So Smart podcast, and @AdamMGrant , author of Think Again, each offers similar advice: don't lead with the facts.
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Instead, establish rapport, ask questions and listen to the answers.
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https://t.co/g5ptXg89Ju

> 1. Establish rapport (no shaming). 2. Ask for a claim. 3. Ask for a measure of confidence in this claim. 4. Ask what reasoning supports this claim. 5. Ask what justifies this reasoning. 6. Then explore if those justifications are strong enough to support that level of confidence.
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> — David McRaney (@davidmcraney) January 14, 2021

You won't be able to bully someone out of fringe views, but sometimes people will talk themselves around.
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This is wise advice, but my own recent work has a more modest goal. Instead of trying to enlighten someone else, I suggest that each of us starts with our own blind spots.
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We are all distracted. We all have tribes too: social if not political. We are all vulnerable, then, to believing things that aren't true. And we are equally vulnerable to denying or ignoring important truths.
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We should all slow down, calm down, ask questions and imagine that we may be wrong. It is simple advice, but much better than nothing. It is also advice that is all too easy to ignore.
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By the way - the US edition of my new book is out in a few days, with the title "The Data Detective".
Spread the word...
17/
https://t.co/CzuIaZKtOC