

## WAHAT #4: What Do You Know?



An abstract image that dynamically illustrates the uncertainties of knowing what we know and don't know, created by ChatGPT-4o.

"People say, 'Believe half of what you see / Son, and none of what you hear.'"

– "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," a song written by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong for Motown Records in 1966 and first recorded by Gladys Knight & the Pips in 1967.

One of the more frequently repeated warnings about artificial intelligence (AI) is that it will make it more and more difficult to differentiate between actual facts and constructed...OK, just once, for old time's sake, let's call them "alternative facts." Or, to be more direct, lies that are intended to manipulate our behaviors or feelings.

I'm not that worried, at least not yet. Information technology has long been an arms race between those seeking to do bad or wrong and those seeking to prevent those actions from happening. AI seems to me very likely to follow a similar evolutionary pathway to cybersecurity. New technologies are used to create new threats, which spawn new defenses and protections. Then newer technologies appear and the cycle repeats.

The concern over recognizing trustworthy reality raises some basic questions. How do we know what we know? How do we know we can trust what we know? How can we best validate what we know and separate fact from fiction, especially as the technologies used to create and consume information continue to evolve?

Seems like worthy fodder for another episode of WAHAT.

## How Do We Know What We Know?

What we know about what we know and don't know is woven from multiple strands of input.

- **Perception** – how we experience and interpret input from what we hear, see, smell, taste, and touch.
- **Thought** – contemplation, deduction, logic, and reasoning applied to our perceptions.
- **Memory** – things we recall from past experiences, perceptions, and thoughts.
- **Testimony** – analysis, data, ideas, and opinions from credible, reliable sources, including experts, parents, teachers, and others perceived as valid authorities.
- **Intuition** – that ephemeral, unquantifiable, vague, impossible-to-discount-completely thing we often call “gut feeling.”

These input streams combine and intertwine to provide us with three categories of knowledge equally familiar to military strategists and cybersecurity specialists. As popularized by then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in 2002, these are known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. We know what we know, we know about things we don't know, and we know there are things we know nothing about.

Our current reality includes technologies and societal developments that make it possible, if not necessary, to question the validity of input via any, if not all, of these strands. The increasingly fragmented and tribal nature of traditional and online media can make getting to a verifiable, incontrovertible truth a complex, exasperating exercise. However, trying to live in today's world without being able to trust at least some of our knowledge inputs at least some of the time is unlikely to be pleasurable or comfortably sustainable. So,...

## Dortch's Recommendations for Vetting Reality

- **ABC #1: Always Be Checking.** The ketchup that didn't contain high fructose corn syrup last time you checked the label might have added it without alerting the media.
- **ABC #2: Avoid Being Complacent.** Don't just look it up. Check the source and the date, then confirm your initial findings or dig deeper. Or both. No fact is an island.
- **If you see something, say something.** Whether what you see confirms or especially if it contradicts what you know (or think you know) to be right.

- **Question authority.** No credible, confident authority figure ever discourages or deflects sincere, civil questions. Anyone who presents themselves as an authoritative source of information about anything who does not welcome questions or answer them directly is suspect.
- **Follow the money.** If any elements of a knowledge or information chain you're exploring are being paid for their participation, that should be made transparently clear by the payer, the payee, and/or intermediate curators.

One of my favorite professional experiences was getting to work with Andy Purdy, who has advised numerous US government agencies and legislative committees about cybersecurity. I believe an expanded paraphrase of some of Andy's most memorable advice on cybersecurity is equally relevant and applicable to how we should approach vetting reality. Herewith, ABC #3.

- **Assume nothing** – except perhaps that knowledge is always changing and your vetting efforts must strive to keep pace.
- **Believe no one** – because even honest, well-meaning authorities and experts can be wrong or victims of incomplete or outdated data.
- **Confirm everything** – including your most recent vetting efforts and results.

How are you coping with the growing gray areas separating and overlapping the things you know to be true? What steps do you take to verify or challenge the candidate truths presented for your consideration? How well are those steps working for you? Feel free to share – truthfully, of course, whether anonymously or with attribution.

## Now What? Your Serve...

I am naively optimistic enough to believe there is value in trying to look at what I do, how I do it, and why I do it. Writing about things like those in this piece is part of that process. So to echo my [ABCs of human motivation](#), the achievement of writing and sharing these posts delivers the benefit of helping me crystallize some thoughts and feelings, and tighten up some of the internal connections linking my body, mind, and spirit.

This collection of thoughts and feelings also offers the promise of connection with others. That's where you come in.

Your reactions eagerly sought and warmly welcome. Feel free to leave your thoughts wherever you're reading this if comments are supported, or to email me directly at [medortch@dortchonit.com](mailto:medortch@dortchonit.com). I hope this begins some interesting conversational threads, excerpts and summaries of which I will gladly and gratefully share (anonymously or with attribution as you prefer) in future outings, several of which are already in various stages of construction.

Thanks for reading. Thanks again in advance if you share your reactions with me, share this post with others, or both. And please stay connected so we can continue and extend this emerging, evolving conversation.

**We All Hunger and Thirst (WAHAT)** is a series of pieces I'm writing and publishing to share things I've learned and foster connections and conversations about various elements of life and the world. Send your suggestions and reactions to me directly at [medortch@dortchonit.com](mailto:medortch@dortchonit.com) and feel free to share what you've read with others. Thanks!