

How to defy deception in analysis

LinkedIn facilitated the spread of a news story that Barack H. Obama had - as a final act of his presidency - ordered a bronze statue of himself, to be placed in the White House. The news was accompanied with a vague image of the statue in the Oval Office. It went viral. Some commented it was fake news. Others simply liked it as it confirmed all that they disliked about Obama. These individuals considered him evil and this was simply further proof. Moreover, history has all too often shown that power and wealth do strange things to people. Therefore, this too must be true. To paraphrase the title of a book on Putin's Russia¹, it seems that today "*Nothing is true and everything is possible*". The picture of the statue in the Oval Office triggered me to question what a (market) intelligence analyst can still believe today. Here is what I found.

Anatomy of deception

Prior to diving into the nature of deception, I guess it makes sense to first define it. Deception constitutes the intentional (mis-)leading of a target audience by providing true data selectively and/or by mixing true data with falsehoods, the aim of which is to influence the audience into making decisions that benefit the data sender. Deception existed long before social media revitalized it. Several deception stories from the World War II period have now been declassified and vividly and amusingly been told in books². A meta-analysis of critical success factors of deception suggests that in order to succeed a deception operation must contain (inspired by Bruce³):

- **Truth** *all deception works within the context of what is true.*
- **Denial** *denying the target [i.e. you as analyst] access to select aspects of the truth is the prerequisite to all deception.*
- **Deceit** *all deception requires and utilizes deceit.*
- **Misdirection** *as any magician will tell, deception depends on manipulating what the target registers.*
- **Confirmation** *deceptions should confirm or even better strengthen the target's existing beliefs.*

Towards a remedy against deception

Among analysts it is a comforting thought that deception may trap others, but it doesn't happen to us. Our sophisticated education and our experience protect us. We know what to believe and what not. We know that who says it is more important than what is being said. We know what deceptions look like (see above) and we recognize them coming. We know what our (business) adversaries want and thus how they want to manipulate us into believing their falsehoods and act upon them. We 'don't do stupid shit' (dixit Obama). Or do we?

For sure, we are unlikely to fall for simple tricks. As analyst our internal alarm should go off, however, when we complacently start to only navigate our comfort zone. As usual, inconvenient open questions may guide us here:

- What are my firm beliefs (like: I trust fellow intellectuals) that when confirmed will not raise my suspicion?
- What are my prejudices towards sources? Who do I in advance consider to be truthful and who not?
- What strings would I pull if I would work at a competitor and would be ordered to deceive my company? Why? How would I proceed? What truths would I offer and what fabrications?

There is a highly personal and thin line between developing paranoia and having some rightful self-doubt. What I believe helps in sustaining your mental health while still effectively protecting yourself as good as possible against deception is to consider what Robert Jervis⁴ teaches us:

“We are never deceived, we deceive ourselves”

As so often: when intelligence fails, it is because we trust our instincts without even tapping into our analytical skills. To set off analysis, we need to formulate and answer a set of open questions. Answering questions is what pilots and surgeons do routinely in their work, precisely for this reason. Therefore, my recipe in post-truth times remains to consistently force myself to analyze, pre-empting me to jump to self-deceiving conclusions.

Notes:

- 1 Nothing is true and everything is possible – the surreal heart of Russia, Peter Pomerantsev, Public Affairs, 2014.
- 2 Operation Mincemeat, Ben Macintyre, Bloomsbury, 2010 and Double Cross, Ben Macintyre, Bloomsbury, 2012 are just two examples of highly accessible books on World War II deception operations
- 3 Bruce, J.B., Bennett, M., Foreign denial and deception: analytical imperatives, In: R.Z. George, J.B. Bruce (Editors), Analyzing Intelligence – origins, obstacles, and innovations, Georgetown University Press, Washington DC, 2008, pp. 126-135.
- 4 Jervis, R., Why intelligence fails – lessons from the Iranian revolution and the Iraq war, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, p. 140.