How to prevent being hit by a confirmation bias, even when it is hard.

Imagine you have a 15-year-old fashionista daughter like I had at the time of this anecdote. At the internet she discovered a male fashion artist. She comes up to me with the following facts:

- he recently moved to another city.
- he has or has had a connection with Amsterdam (this is unclear).
- he lives on xxxxx-street number 319 in Utrecht.
- he runs a shop from his house.
- he is young.
- from the street you can recognize his shop by his logo displayed in the window.
- a picture of the window with the logo features on his website; the picture shows more than just the single window, details of the façade are visible as well.
- a Google-streetview analysis shows that flats dominate xxxxx-street in Utrecht.

As a caring father, I didn't want my little girl to go visit a male artist alone. This policy would have applied to any male, I hate to discriminate artists. So, we set out to xxxxx-street 319 in Utrecht. I have lived near Utrecht and knew the street, so we didn't use a navigation system. What did we find?

- Xxxxx-street 319 did not exist in Utrecht.

This discouraged us, but we are optimists. We thought we must have the number wrong. Like Sherlock Holmes we started to check the windows we saw for the logo and started to check whether the characteristic façade on the website picture was visible.

- no flat showed the features of the website picture's façade.
- no logo was visible.

We drew different conclusions. I concluded that internet is a lousy source: we had been duped. She concluded she was wrong. We both comfortably settled the fact to confirm with earlier formed strongly held views.

After some deliberation in the car, she called him only to find out he lived in Amsterdam having recently moved there from The Hague. What had happened? When she had connected with the artist, he SMS-ed he lived on xxxxx-street 319. She googled xxxxx-street (without number) and as a first hit got **xxxxx-street** in **Utrecht**. As every millennial knows, Google is never wrong. So, knowing he had moved, she connected the dots by filling in that apparently, he had moved from Amsterdam to Utrecht. She checked it was a flat. Young people live in flats, so she felt ready to go. I see at least three biases here:

- having few data but making up a narrative anyway: **the illusion of understanding**: he has apparently moved to Utrecht, because xxxxx-street is in Utrecht: that is a flat. That is where young people live. Even in the light of new evidence (no. 319 does not exist) we stick to our analysis and continue our search. This is known as **premature closing**: once formed, an opinion is resistant to change.
- facing a phenomenon and faultily using it to confirm a prejudice, known as the **confirmation bias**: me saying: internet is a lousy source, her trusting Google.

These biases not only happen to us. Now, the time is April 1968[1]. US submarines patrol the coast off the Soviet Russian Far East. To their surprise, US submarines discover that Soviet submarines are extensively and rather unusually using active sonar to look for something. The conclusion that correctly offered itself was that the Soviets had lost a submarine. For a Soviet submarine to get lost, neutrally two narratives exist: the submarine had faced an autonomous problem that had proved to be fatal or the submarine had collided with another submarine and had been lost as a result. The first narrative to the Soviets was heresy. Soviet submarines do not have autonomous problems. So Soviet military intelligence started looking for evidence to substantiate the second narrative. A few days after the Soviet submarine got lost, a US submarine moored in Yokosuka harbor in Japan. In principle that submarine could have been at the location of the hypothetical collision with the Soviet fish at the time of the collision. This looked like evidence of the collision the Soviet Navy needed so much to stick to their established narrative. In addition, this specific submarine (the USS Swordfish, SSN 579) moored with visible damage to its sail and periscope. This damage was of course the missing puzzle piece. According to Soviet military intelligence, it unquestionably linked the Swordfish to the Soviet's missing boat and the collision. The US Navy took a different view:

> "they [i.e. the Soviets] would add two and two and come up with thirty-six"

US underwater research later provided the real narrative. The Soviet ship did have an autonomous problem that proved fatal and the Swordfish, completely unconnected, had simply hit a small iceberg.

What do these two real stories tell competitive intelligence practitioners?

1.   beliefs beat critical thinking hands down.

        - Soviet ships do not have autonomous problems.
        - Young people live in flats.
        - Internet contacts are frauds.
        - Google says xxxxx-street is in Utrecht.

2.   narratives are best based on a too small number of facts.

3.   biases delude amateurs and top-notch Soviet intelligence professionals alike.

4.   awareness of biases is absolutely no guarantee to be protected against them.

.1.   Sontag, S., Drew, C. [1998], Blind Man's Bluff – the untold story of American submarine espionage, Public Affairs, New York, pp. 75-80.