Transcript for Alex Kouts | The 7 Deadly Sins of Reading the News (Episode 614)

Full show notes found here:
https://theartofcharm.com/podcast-episodes/alex-kouts-the-7-deadly-sins-of-reading-the-news-episode-614/

ALEX: People confuse correlation for causation so to speak. We see that a lot in politics, outside of correlational studies. So, a false cause fallacy in politics is the idea that a border wall is going to solve all border security problems, when in reality there's a lot of other factors involved. It's much more complex and nuanced.

JORDAN: Welcome to The Art of Charm. I'm Jordan Harbinger. On this episode, we'll be talking with my close friend and friend of the show Alex Kouts. Among other pursuits, he's the cofounder of Countable and a past AoC guest. You've heard him come on and school us on salary negotiation and other topics and is one of the most requested guests here on AoC. Today we'll discuss the seven deadly sins of reading the news, the most common logical fallacies, and cognitive biases that betray our ability to understand the news. He sees what triggers people, what they do with that emotion, and how they generate intrinsic reward from said actions. He's interviewed close to 1,000 people about how they consume political news, how they take action, and their relationship with their government.

We'll explore our human inability to process information, accelerated by a dramatic increase in the amount of information we get that makes us more lost than ever, and how we as a country have gotten so lazy in consuming the information that is presented, that we've victimized ourselves. Of course we'll not only outline all these biases, we'll also help you develop the means to counteract it.

Enjoy this episode with Alex Kouts and if you're new to the show, we'd love to send you some top episodes and the Aoc Toolbox. That's where we study the science of people and discuss concepts like reading body language, having

charismatic nonverbal communication, the science of attraction, negotiation techniques, social engineering, networking and influence strategies, persuasion tactics, and everything else that we teach here at The Art of Charm.

Check that out at theartofcharm.com/toolbox or in our iPhone app at theartofcharm.com/iphone. Of course we have Android at /android as well and also at theartofcharm.com you can find the full show notes for this and all previous episodes of the show. Whether it's your first or 500th episode of AoC, we're always glad to have you here with us. Now, let's hear from Alex Kouts.

Tell me about the news -- the seven deadly sins of reading the news. These days, a lot of logical fallacies, cognitive biases -- we're huge on that on the Art of Charm on the show here, always trying to look at some of the more simplistic biases as well, like confirmation bias, "No you're not turning those lights off with your mind, you're only noticing the ones that turn off when you walk by," that kind of thing but, there's more at work here when we talk about news and more complicated sort of information that's going into slash out of our brains.

ALEX: Ooh, that is an interesting topic. I've been fascinated with that for the past several years. One person told me years ago that the United States of America is like a sailboat tacking up wind. And we make these wild vacillations back and forth as we travel through time and in reality, those vacillations represent cultural changes and political changes in the country. And what we've just experiences over the past couple years now with the presidential election leading up to today, is a series of just, cataclysmic, if you will -- maybe being slightly dramatic, but cataclysmic shifts of that sailboat tacking up wind, and the amount of complex issues that are dominating the news cycle are mind boggling. Things that are so complicated, so multifaceted, so deep and nuanced that they're often reduced to insane, context stripped, content snacks as I say.

JORDAN: Content snack?

ALEX: Content snacks.

JORDAN: Oh, man I'm so stealing that.

ALEX: Yeah. I use that one all the time. In my company I say that all the time. The idea of content snacks where you're taking a very complex issue and you strip away all the context around it to turn it into a visceral feeling and that's happening all the time and the news cycle is dominated by these like content snacks that are -- represent visceral feelings on complex issues, reducing away all the requisite complexity for people actually understanding what's going on.

So you mentioned cognitive biases and logical fallacies, it's fascinating because over the past couple decades with the advent of the Internet, in addition to our political climate, we've seen a massive unchecked explosion in information that comes into us, and we all know this. But the crime of the information age is that the unchecked explosion of information has far outpaced our ability to process that information. So we're getting more and more content on a regular basis with a lower and lower ability, proportionally speaking, to process that data.

JORDAN: Can you give me an example of a content snack that has no context? Because I think a lot of people are going, "Yeah!," kind of like, "I'm not sure."

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: Right?

ALEX: I don't actually fall very neatly on either side of the political spectrum, so I'm going to equally **** on both political parties over the course of this conversation, so --

JORDAN: You did go to the RNC and the DNC.

ALEX: I did, I did. So that's a great example, right? So, let's talk about healthcare for instance, right. Healthcare is one of those issues that it's very difficult to have a rational conversation in the court of public opinion. So either, people say things like, "Wow," you know, "all Republicans want people to die. They want people to lose their healthcare so that all these sick people who can't afford it die." And that's reducing a very complex argument to a very emotional, visceral idea, which is not necessarily accurately reflecting what probably most rational Republicans or conservatives would want to say about the issue but that's just the way that it plays out. The rational argument may be, well Republicans have a different understanding of ability of government and government's role in everyday life and it's ability to execute on a complex thing like healthcare.

Maybe Republicans feel that the current healthcare system is a mess because the government's involvement of not letting drug manufacturers compete against state lines and creating natural monopolies and geographic monopolies for insurance companies. So the point is, there's a rational way to have a conversation around that point of view, and then there's the irrational way. You don't hear the rational way on Huffington Post. You don't hear the rational way in your Facebook feed. You hear the irrational, emotional argument.

JORDAN: Right, it sort of reminds me of email that I would occasionally get from a friend of my parents' that's something like: "Forward, forward, forward, forward, forward, forward, forward: Obama's a Muslim."

ALEX: Oh, yeah.

JORDAN: Right?

ALEX: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JORDAN: Yeah.

ALEX: Yeah, yeah, and then 10 ways to give yourself cancer by eating these fruits and vegetables, so --

JORDAN: Mm-hmm.

ALEX: It's incredibly common. I mean, I'll tell you I've spent the past five, six years of my life building and scaling media companies and I've advised and trained folks who were executives at very large companies like Fortune 100, Blue Chip kind of media companies and then very small startups. And just in the starting of a couple companies of my own in the space, focused on political and civic engagement. So on a daily basis, I'm seeing hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of political opinions getting expressed on properties that I'm either directly responsible for or advising. And I have a start up here, in the Bay Area, where I'm chief of products where I had a product called Countable that focuses on civic and tech engagement. And we see this everyday on Countable in addition to every other app like ours -- everyone expressing these incredibly nuanced opinions, stripped of all their contexts, with a very emotional taint to it.

JORDAN: Why are people doing that? It seems like an obvious answer which is because it's easier --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- but is there another reason?

ALEX: In reality it's difficult to say, right? So there's certain cognitive biases that we -- that betray our ability have complex -- well-nuanced or well-founded complex opinions on things that make a lot of sense and are completely logical. So for instance, the first cognitive bias that betrays our ability process complex information is reasoning by proxy. It's a very common thing that we see. And reasoning by proxy, we're effectively relying on other people or other organizations to offload our cognitive load, for making up our mind on complex things, to someone else.

So for instance, “I don’t want to make up my mind on this issue so I’m going to listen to Jordan. Jordan has good opinions, I trust Jordan, Jordan will tell me what to believe and then I’ll believe that thing.” It doesn’t happen that explicitly, it happens implicitly but it happens for people every day. And the thing that is weird -- and you could say weird or potentially deleterious, is over time, the amount of proxies that are available to us has exploded dramatically, as information has. There are bloggers writing on every topic you can imagine. And there’s people everywhere telling you their points of view and why you should believe something. And we’ve lowered over time -- just in a response to the incredible volume of proxies that are available to us, we’ve lowered the bar for what it takes.

JORDAN: Sure, I think also a lot of these proxies are irresponsible. For example, on this show I will never directly or deliberately talk about politics. I mean this is more meta-political but I will never say something like, you know, “You’ve got to support Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump,” because --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- one, I’m just definitely not qualified for that, two, everyone in large part aside from you apparently, is really sick of a lot of the political stuff that’s going on in the news. You’re addicted to it I guess.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: But I talk about other things. People come to The Art of Charm for a break from a lot of that. But I think there’s a lot of irresponsible proxies, where either deliberately or accidentally are going, “Here’s what you should believe,” and it’s either to get you riled up and consume more a la Infowars craziness, or it’s someone who thinks they’ve got a great grasp on a subject and says, “Look this is going to cause all kinds of havoc

because I've read all these articles about it on Breitbart or MSNBC or whatever," --

ALEX: Right.

JORDAN: -- and they mean well but they're not necessarily also any better informed than somebody who's just reading their Facebook feed.

ALEX: Exactly, it's authority of the now, right? Authority of the volume.

JORDAN: Mm-hmm.

ALEX: So by just virtue of you saying it to me right now and being loud enough so that I hear you, there's authority by the fact that you've broken through the noise and I'm listening to you. And that affects our ability to understand whether or not you have a good opinion or not because it's the only one that I'm listening to right now.

JORDAN: Right.

ALEX: So I think channel has a big part of it. The other one that's kind of interesting, and a much more obvious version of it, is one of the biggest lies we've been told in modern democracy is that we should vote along party lines. So most Americans, if you look at their political views -- and there was a really interesting psychographic study of American voters done by Google actually a couple years ago. The most American voters have dramatically volatile or extreme opinions about every single different type of issue, and they don't fall very neatly inside of party lines. So you may be ardently pro-choice, you may be ardently pro-gun, and different things that kind of -- on the ends of the political spectrum but most people believe that that makes them average out to being moderate and in the middle when in reality they just have extreme opinions on a lot of things.

JORDAN: Right.

ALEX: But we have this weird kind of extremism, so to speak, with political views in America but at the same time, most people still want to align with the political party. And the thing that kills that is, all these leaders of political parties as well are trying to get you to believe in their party --

JORDAN: Sure.

ALEX: -- and use their party as a proxy to say, “This is the Democratic line. I’m going to believe in this Democratic line because I’m Democrat.”
“This is the Republican party line and I’m a Republican so I believe this.” That is a great lie.

JORDAN: Yeah.

ALEX: And it’s an irresponsible action as an American voter. You need to vote along issues that you believe in as opposed to party lines. But by using proxies, we fall into the category of reasoning by proxy [00:10:00]

JORDAN: I see. That does make a lot of sense and I -- an interesting memory from maybe not even a week ago, I was in Nashville and I was in the Airport and there was something in one of those little lounges on the television that was CNN probably --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- and it was, “Obamacare being repealed,” and the commentator was saying something like, “If this gets repealed, all these retirees are going to lose their healthcare for preexisting conditions.” And this couple that was sitting in a chair watching this, wearing “Make America Great Again” hats, wearing red and they were older and they were clearly from Tennessee, you know the way they were talking -- or at least the south. They went, “This is just terrible. I can’t believe what they’re doing,” and I’m just thinking, “Uh,” --

ALEX: I like your accent.

JORDAN: -- “you know that your hat betrays maybe the idea that you were at one point okay with this.” And I’m not accusing those people of anything obviously. They could easily have been against this healthcare reform the whole time --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- and are really sad to see this go. However --

ALEX: And they just really look good in red.

JORDAN: -- they literally look good in red and they’ve got some MAGA hats from their son. But it’s hard to say a lot of these people in rallies on television saying things like, “Don’t take away my healthcare, I’m going to die,” and often later on saying, “Well yeah I voted this way or I voted this other way,” and you’re thinking, “How did you not put these two things together?” And one of the ways in which that may have happened is reasoning by proxy.

ALEX: Yeah, it happens all the time. It’s interesting, so one of the other big ones that we see, in addition to reasoning by proxy, and you probably have seen this every single day, both in people watching TV shows, all kinds of things, and probably dominantly in your Facebook feed, is confirmation bias. It is the most common cognitive biases that betray our ability to understand complex issues.

And effectively what that is, is the tendency for us to search for or interpret data that we find that confirms our beliefs and we gravitate towards things that agree with us. And you see this constantly, not just in the places that we mentioned before, but in the way that people consume content. Most folks, and I’ve seen this repeatedly over a series of years, want to be pissed off or validated in news. That’s one of the things that informs them to watch the news, “I want to be pissed off or I

want to be validated." There aren't these greater kind of virtuous ideas of, "I want to be informed, I want to be this." There is some of that but the most dominant way that that news watching activity is activated is, "I want to be pissed off or I want to be validated."

Fox news was so incredibly successful because they found a message that they new a lot of people wanted to hear and they were very good at creating content around that message, be it if you agree with it or not. They were very good at figuring that out. MSNBC and some cases NBC, and in some cases other folks, did the exact same thing. They find a message that works for particular audiences and they're very good at giving it to that audience. That's not necessarily wrong in any sense but it creates this echo chamber you've probably heard. Another way that this commonly functions is something called the filter bubble, which you may have heard of.

JORDAN: I have not heard of that.

ALEX: One of the concerns with social media today is that if I'm a product manager of Facebook, my entire goal is to get you to interact with more content on the site.

JORDAN: Oh, yeah, I know where you're going with this.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: This is the phenomenon that occurs when I click like on something that is the message I'm used to hearing or want to hear --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- and I don't click like on something that's maybe more conservative or more liberal than I want to hear and so it shows me more of similar content. And you refine that process until everything in your newsfeed is forward, forward, forward, forward, Obama's a Muslim.

ALEX: Exactly, yeah. From Facebook's perspective that makes a lot of sense because I want to give you content that you're likely to engage with and then that means that I'm going to give you more content that you agree with--

JORDAN: Right.

ALEX: -- that you're more likely to engage with. And it confirms your preexisting notions about things and feeds you more content that's part of that. Now Facebook is doing a lot of things to try and get outside that filter bubble, and they've worked and talked a lot about that and they'll probably be rolling out features that will address that. But while that happens in Facebook -- Facebook is only one place where that happens.

That happens everywhere else as well. It's the types of newspapers we buy, it's the type of sites that we frequent, it's the type of friends that we have, the type of friends that we chose to have conversations about politics with. If I have a friend that I know completely disagrees with my views on things, I may be less likely to engage them on healthcare because I don't want to get in an argument.

JORDAN: "We're not doing this at dinner," right? That kind of thing?

ALEX: Exactly.

JORDAN: And this can become a problem because once we start to only see that type of content, then we think, "Well look, people who disagree with this, they're so rare."

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: "Because I never hear from those people."

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: “I’m only seeing this on Facebook so everyone must think this way,” so when you finally do see a counterpoint on another TV channel or from some other person, you think, “You’re just this weird one percent minority that has no idea what the hell they’re talking about.”

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: “Because everybody I know, thinks about it like this.”

ALEX: Mm-hmm.

JORDAN: And that’s because Facebook is showing you the illusion of the majority --

ALEX: Sure.

JORDAN: -- where you could be in the one percent minority but if all of the content that you’re buying, watching on television, and seeing on Facebook or on the Internet is of that same opinion, it just looks like the entire world thinks the same way.

ALEX: Exactly. Why do we do this? Well in reality, it’s comforting. When I get angry or I get validated by things that I read on a regular basis, it gives me a position in the universe. Life is a terrifying experience for everybody and it’s important that we fill our lives with all these things that make us understand our position in the universe because that’s comforting. It makes it easy. It’s comforting for me to say, “That’s bad, that’s good, I believe this, I don’t believe this.” It gives me my understanding of the shape of the universe, based on my relative distance to these imagined pillars of right and wrong. So it’s an incredibly comforting thing so there’s reasons why we do it, but at the same time, again it betrays our ability to look at issues objectively. We’re not even often aware of the way in which we’re confirming our preexisting beliefs by selecting news accordingly.

JORDAN: And some of these people I would imagine, because I think we're all guilty of this in some area -- some of us just have crap opinions because we're completely ignorant of the situation of the issue and we're uneducated when it comes to that.

ALEX: Yeah you know it's important to mention that the average American is effectively incapable of having a very logically founded viewpoint on a complex issue like let's just take healthcare and foreign policy. It has absolutely nothing to do with their level of intelligence. Absolutely nothing. The average American is plenty intelligent, way more intelligent than is needed to have a good opinion about these things. It is intellectual laziness and it's a lack of training in our ability to parse the world around us. It has nothing to do with intelligence.

JORDAN: This I found when I went to law school looking at -- just being around a bunch of really smart people who are being trained to think critically, in theory, over a longer period of time. I was a little bit slow when it came to that, I was having a tough time keeping up with everybody because it was Michigan Law and people there --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- are sharp and have been doing this in mock trials since high school or whatever. But you're right, I think there's a lot of smart people who've never even thought, "And maybe I shouldn't always try to produce cognitive drag by listening to what Angelina Jolie's opinion is." Or another celebrity who we see as intelligent. We might even look at another celebrity and think, "This guy is a freaking genius," and believe everything they say --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- whereas they might not be educated on that specific issue either, or have an agenda that they aren't making public.

ALEX: Yeah so let's go with number three. So we talked about confirmation bias, we've talked about reasoning by proxy, let's talk about the third, which is selection bias. Selection bias is effectively us picking and choosing selected data and then drawing conclusions based on that and then extrapolating that conclusion to a larger set of things. So I'm using a small amount of data to get an understanding about a bigger complex system, when in reality, that small amount of data may actually not predict how that large system operates.

So for instance, we see a crime in our neighborhood. So I live on a street, my car gets broken into and I'm like, "You know what? This is horrible. Cars are getting broken into, this neighborhood is going to ****, what's happening in America? Oh, my God." So I've taken one isolated incident that happened to my car and I've said the neighborhood has got problems and then I've said the entire country is going to hell. I've extrapolated data based on this small sample set of things, which is intellectually irresponsible and is a bias that we use constantly.

And we see this all the time in the news. And often, you saw it a ton in the election, where you have each candidate on both sides saying that -- taking individual stories of folks, and you see this with politicians all the time. "Look at this person who is a victim of this crime. This crime is happening everywhere. We need to stop this crime. Support me as the candidate." You saw this constantly and one of the areas in which this happens most commonly is crime. So crime is an area where we bastardize very small amounts of data to extrapolate an inference about the larger system.

So the average American believes that crime has been going up in America. There's a Pew research study that came out very recently that said over time, the public perception of crime rate is at odds with reality. That folks believe that crime is increasing, but over the past 25 years, crime has been decreasing steadily. So since 1993 we've seen a 50 percent decrease in violent crime in the United States, but most people

would believe, if you listened to some more political candidates during the election process for the president's position, that crime is going crazy, that the entire country is this like, lawless zombie apocalypse like Thunderdome-ish like Mad Max [00:18:16] experience --

JORDAN: Right, Mad Max.

ALEX: -- right? It's not. Crime is going down but that's not the narrative that we tell each other.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: We see this especially when there's a particularly juicy story. One that comes to mind that was obviously national news but especially local news was I think on Embarcadero, right down the street here. There was a woman that was walking with, I don't know, her family or her friend and this person knifed her or stabbed her.

ALEX: It was a stabbing, right?

JORDAN: It was a stabbing, right. And it turned out that guy was an illegal immigrant that had a felony arrest and they were looking to deport him, there was a warrant out for him but he'd been let back in through either some oversight or something like that. It was super unfortunate, there's no getting around it. It was tragic and it was really scary but the wrong kind of people seized upon this to go, "See? Illegal immigration is causing these random, unpredictable, and out of control murders that are particularly violent, that can happen at any time while you're walking down the Embarcadero on a Sunday, so we need to … you know deport tons of people, build a wall, incarcerate all these people, execute more people," --

ALEX: Right.

JORDAN: -- whatever the solutions were being proposed from all corners.

ALEX: How about all of the above?

JORDAN: All of the above yeah, and from all corners of the Web too. It's not just this weird alt-right phenomenon.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: You see weird lefty stuff creeping out as well --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- that's equally nonsensical in my opinion.

ALEX: You know, another great example of this is, in addition to people having this perspective that violent crime in America is up at higher level than ever, which is patently false, we also believe that the world is not doing well, right? That issues in Sub Saharan Africa and all these things that we hear about on the news give us this impression that the world is going to hell. Because there's that old saying that "The sound of one tree falling is louder than a thousand trees growing." Negative news spreads faster, negative news has a bigger emphasis, negative news sells much better than positive news.

And one of the objective measures of the forward progression of humanity, the best one that I've found is the UN's Human Development Index which is published every year. And the HDI as it's called, is a composite statistic of life expectancy and education and per capita income, a series of indicators that interpret whether or not the society is being pushed forward. And they do it based on areas of the world. Human Development Indexes is for regional trends have been going up nonstop over the past 30, 40 years.

So you look at Sub Saharan Africa, Human Development Index has been increasing. South East Asia, Europe, Americas, East Asia, everywhere. But the thing is, that's not the story that gets told on a regular basis because we chose to select these stories,

like the one that you just mentioned, that paint a very different picture of reality. And it betrays our ability to again, understand a complex system in a rational way.

JORDAN: How much of this is lazy and how much of this is nefarious, or is it impossible to tell?

ALEX: It's a combination of all of the above. In some cases it's laziness, in some cases it is just lack of greater context of even knowing that there's another way to get this information, knowing that the Human Development Index or that type of data exists. But a lot of it is we have leaders and folks who are pundits on TV that are extremely charismatic and they sell a message very well. They sell a message that people want to believe and quite frankly, it's a rational thing to want to believe them. It's a rational thing again to decrease my cognitive load by reasoning through proxy, to listen to these folks. But that doesn't mean that they're right and we have to fight back against that tide.

JORDAN: How do we fight back against that tide? Because it seems so difficult to try to educate everyone. Well I guess that's what we're doing here so what am I talking about, but we try to educate as many people as possible but how can fight against that? I mean do we just say, "Hey by the way, don't believe that, look at this complex study done by the Pew Research Center or look at the HDI and decipher for yourself?" It's really hard to do that when you can go --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: "No I'm just going to Google it."

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: Right?

ALEX: I mean the first part of being mindful and you know there's this notion of something called a classical education which is

what we used to have way back in the day when unfortunately a much smaller percent of the population was educated. So maybe that's a catch 22.

JORDAN: Sure.

ALEX: But a classical education, like you probably had in law school, is Socratic, right?

JORDAN: Socratic, yeah.

ALEX: -- meant to get you to think. Socratic is all about asking questions, right? So it's less leading you to a conclusion, more teaching you how to think, teaching you how to be critical. That's something that we've lost. It's not something that we can't develop on our own, but it does take some work. It does take some interest in developing it in the first place.

JORDAN: Let's keep going with the ways that everyone is wrong before we get to the ways to make everyone right.

ALEX: So number four, bandwagon effect. This is one of my favorites because I see it everyday on Facebook and it drives me nuts and I literally have to like grab my hand, it's like shaking, to like stop myself from typing some type of response to friends' posts on Facebook. But it's the more other people are saying something, the more likely I am to want to say that thing. The more other people believe something, the more likely I am to want to believe that thing because I want to be on the bandwagon. I want to belong to that social group. I want to be part of the movement, which is great. There's something about humans that makes us want to get together into communities, want to have sympathetic behaviors -- so if you believe something or say something, I agree with you. But at the same time, that interest, that tendency, makes it difficult for me to always stop and say, "Hey wait a second, do I believe this?," because I'm overridden by this social zeitgeist to want to belong.

JORDAN: That makes sense, especially when it comes to things like celebrities and our friends. I guess you've got a -- quite a nice list here. Geographic, crowds, friends, celebrities, and experts. Can we break down a couple of those? Geographic, what is that? Just people in my area believe this way or think this way?

ALEX: Yeah so the five that you mentioned are effectively five major types of social proofing. Social proofing is in many ways the bandwagon effect applied to more targeted purposes. So I used to be a user experience designer, designing applications and websites, at one point in my career. And one of the most dominant strategies that user experience designers use -- and these are folks that do things -- that design Facebook and Yelp and all these things, is that they're using social proofing, meaning wisdom of crowds, or indicating that other people believe something in a certain number or a certain vector to make you want to believe that thing. So geographic is a great example. So if I told you, "You should decrease your power consumption," this is a great case used by a utility company called Opower, which is actually out here in California. So, Opower said, "Okay we want people to stop their large or kind of careless consumption of electricity. So how do we do that? Well one way is to show you that you consume more or less than people in your area."

JORDAN: Hmm.

ALEX: So by saying, "You consume 35 percent more than your neighbor," that's going to potentially shame you into --

JORDAN: Oh.

ALEX: -- consuming much less information.

JORDAN: That would absolutely work on me. Me and Jenny would be reading by candlelight if we knew that we could beat our neighbors in being more power efficient or something like that.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: Though, of course we work from home so we'd have to control for that for the people who aren't home all day but we'd be walking on treadmills while watching TV to power the lights and the television in our house.

ALEX: Yep.

JORDAN: Absolutely.

ALEX: It's super powerful. I mean just knowing how other people feel on something can curate or change our opinions dramatically. And you see a lot of this with large social movements. One of my favorite examples is the ice bucket challenge and I'm all for the ice bucket challenge. I actually think despite all the things that have been said about it, that it's kind of a wonderful thing because it did end up raising a very large sum of money for ALS. But ALS is not a very well understood disease and I had tons of friends -- and not to speak ill of my friends, I think this is true for everybody who are doing the ice bucket challenge without even really being able to tell you what ALS is or what the symptoms of ALS are.

JORDAN: I definitely fell into that. I know our company did the ice bucket challenge and I remember Googling ALS and going, "Yeah this does sound terrible." But that was well after we'd already done it.

ALEX: Oh, yeah.

JORDAN: I didn't do it beforehand, nothing. So I'm just glad it wasn't a political party, like a right wing or left wing extremist -- which for all I knew at that point, it could have been anything.

ALEX: Yeah. My other second favorite example is of the Harlem Shake. You remember that?

JORDAN: Oh, yeah, of course.

ALEX: Yeah. The Harlem Shake -- there were companies of like people who were like in their fifties and sixties doing the Harlem Shake and that's totally fine, nothing wrong with that at all. I think the Harlem Shake cuts across generations.

JORDAN: Clearly.

ALEX: But it was obvious that there were a lot of people who weren't directly participating in the culture that produced that music or produced that dance that wanted to get on the bandwagon and do it as well, which was funnier than them actually doing it in the first place. Like that rye irony that everyone was like into the Harlem Shake for 15 minutes.

JORDAN: There's still videos that get circulated on that where my parents are like, "What is this thing?," and I'm like, "Wow, Christmas 2015 called."

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: Right? But I have to explain and I realized I actually can't.

ALEX: Yeah, yeah.

JORDAN: I actually have no idea what that even was even today.

ALEX: Yeah I think explaining the Harlem Shake is probably harder than having a good opinion about healthcare.

JORDAN: Sure, yeah it's more complex.

ALEX: Way more complex.

JORDAN: Requires more context. So geographic -- crowds in general. Right, friends, which I guess you'd think just is a more localized crowd perhaps, or at least geographically dispersed. Celebrities, that goes without saying, right? This works on me

too. I'm not trying to say that all these other people have these biases. The celebrity thing in some ways works on my too. I really like Mike Rowe, for example --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- such an awesome guy, great message. So when he talks about an issue or something like that I go, "Oh, yeah! I think I also agree with that." There's plenty of things that we disagree on --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- but I can see my brain trying to minimize those --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- in some way and trying to go, "Oh, yeah, you know what? This other issue is more important than I ever thought."

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: And part of that is because I just really like Mike Rowe.

ALEX: Oh, yeah, I mean, when I was a kid, I was on the boardwalk in Ocean City, Maryland on the East Coast, for anybody that's ever spent time there, and I saw Hulk Hogan. And I had never experienced in my life -- I was starstruck. If Hulk Hogan had asked me at that point to basically join the army, I would have joined the army. If Hulk Hogan had asked me to like, only drink grape soda for the rest of my life, I would have only drink -- I would have committed right then.

JORDAN: Good choice, though.

ALEX: Hulk, I was like, let's do it. I'm all aboard. It's the way that celebrity -- that halo effect that they have in many cases and our affinity for those folks, makes it also seem like they're someone inside of our social network that we know and we

trust. It makes them feel very present, very emotionally close to us, when in reality they're not. We don't know anything about them. But, it's a very effective way at getting people to believe a very certain type of message.

JORDAN: And experts, this is the one that's more insidious because theoretically, shouldn't we be able to believe experts?

ALEX: Sure, yeah. This is one that has changed meanings dramatically with the advent of the Internet. What qualifies as an expert today is very different than what qualified as an expert 50 years ago.

JORDAN: That's why I have a job.

ALEX: Exactly, yeah, there you go.

(laugh)

ALEX: No but I mean, there were always people who pretended to be experts that weren't. That's always happened since the beginning of humanity but now the volume of those folks that are pretending to be experts on issues that have no real qualifications for that at all, are now able to effectively growth hack their way into a massive audience and massive clout, with social networks, and drive a huge amount of relevance for their crap ideas --

JORDAN: Yeah.

ALEX: -- just because they've figured out how the Internet works in some salient way.

JORDAN: Here's looking at you Dr. Phil.

ALEX: Right, exactly. I think I have a Dr. Phil book somewhere in my bookshelf, just ironically.

JORDAN: It's either the diet book or the self esteem book or the other one that's equally nonsensical.

ALEX: It's diet, I'm pretty sure.

JORDAN: Diet, yeah.

ALEX: I haven't quite hit rock bottom enough to open the book but I'm -- that's like my break glass in case of emergency book I just have there.

JORDAN: Man well it's so full of fluff, it could break your fall.

(LAUGH)

JORDAN: [00:31:33]

ALEX: Somebody call the burn [00:31:36]. Get some burn cream for that.

JORDAN: You're right, we see a lot of different types of weird experts. Rush Limbaugh, Hillary Clinton on the other end --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- certain types of think tanks and things like that, but one that you put on your list here that does stick out is Consumer Reports.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: This sort fake expertise website or the fake expertise magazine and you see this in particularly deceptive marketing as well --

ALEX: Oh, yeah.

JORDAN: -- where you'll be on a website and a popup will come up and it's like, "New tax plan to forgive student loans." And it's like, whoa, this is a scam.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: And these are just borderline scam -- or something that's like, Consumer Digest and it's an ad for something but it's framed as a review.

ALEX: Right.

JORDAN: [00:32:17] think.

ALEX: Right it's like a consumer report with like an 'a' instead of an 'e.'

JORDAN: Yeah.

ALEX: Yeah, exactly. But that's the thing, it's -- now they call it content marketing, right?

JORDAN: Right.

ALEX: Particularly insidious with buying like software-based tools. So if you have a company and you want to buy software-based tools, I google like, "The best marketing automation platform," like on the Internet, and what comes up is like, 15 different paid ads from folks who are marketing automation platform companies, and then after that, there's blogs that are made by people who are paid to create content to say that one is better than the other. It's very difficult for you to distinguish who is an actual expert from who isn't. That's not just on the Internet, that happens in politics.

And one thing that I'll never forget -- one of my first experiences of government physically. My father was of the Yucca Mountain Project for the Department of Energy. So he helped create a long term nuclear waste disposal and storage solution for the country, for all the nuclear waste coming out of nuclear reactors all around the country. So, one thing that was interesting is I went to congressional hearings where he was

testifying on behalf of the government after Obama shut down the program. And I'd sit there and I'd listen to these congressmen who are writing laws that affect our lives about these exact issues that had zero understanding of the issue itself. The questions they were asking were less intelligent than the questions that I as a child was asking my father --

JORDAN: Oh, man.

ALEX: -- just to better understand what was going on. And I realized that by virtue of their position, these people are considered experts to some degree. Now that may seem cute because the approval rating of congress is so disgustingly low at the moment that people would laugh at that. But these people are supposed to be experts but in reality they weren't. Their positions said they were but their questions said they weren't.

JORDAN: So it's kind of like explaining how email works to my dad. My dad's a smart guy --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- he's a mechanical engineer. He was for a long, long time. He can fix anything, he knows how tons of things work, cars, QA for Ford for 30 years. If I try to explain to him how things on the Internet work, even just computers in general, he will push the one button that's on that device --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- hundreds of times until it works the way he wants it to work. That's what I imagine a lot of these congressmen to be like when it comes to issues of technology or nuclear waste. And it's not even to say these people are unintelligent or lacking in qualification in general, just that these issues are so complex there's no they can be experts on each one of them.

ALEX: You know I struggle with that notion. I think it's the providence of every generation to say that things are more

complicated or crazier now than they've ever been and I imagine every generation since the beginning of time has said that but --

JORDAN: Sure.

ALEX: It seems from where I'm looking -- and this may be the height of irony for me to say that and then believe this but I believe that the world has gotten so complex from a legislative perspective that it's very difficult for legislative offices or congressmen, either at the federal level or state level or whatever representatives who are writing laws, to keep up with that complexity.

JORDAN: I believe that.

ALEX: And then write laws that are ahead of that complexity and can account for it -- it's extremely difficult. So a lot of people are angry that, you know, lobbyists help write bills and things like that. Well, lobbyists in some situations actually create real value for the American public by being subject matter experts. The problem though, is that most lobbyists are paid to further a particular type of interest. Not all, some are paid by advocacy organizations that are meant to educate, and that's why they're there. But not all of them. So there's all this weird series of systems that are setup to account for that complexity that's unfortunately not enough.

Yeah so number five, straw man fallacies. So this is one we see all the time. So this is misrepresenting someone else's argument to make it easier to attack. And as much as I love political satire programs -- I love The Daily Show I love watching Jon Stewart, big fan of John Oliver for a while, Steve Colbert -- all these guys do exactly that. They take very complex arguments on the other side, figure out a way to simplify them, and draw satire based on them.

JORDAN: Right, but it's reliant heavily upon the straw man skewer.

ALEX: Exactly, it's illogical fallacy. It's poor logic. And you see it a lot with political punditry outside of the comedic side of things, you see the vast majority of TV shows that talk about politics, they're all misrepresenting someone else's argument to make it easier to attack. And then the weird thing that happens based on that is, when you misrepresent an argument and attack a point of view and then someone else argues back against that. They're arguing against your misrepresentation of an argument as opposed to the actual argument.

JORDAN: Sure.

ALEX: And then their argument back against your argue against their -- and it goes back and forth and back and forth so that you're effectively abstracting the conversation away from the actual viewpoint, to the point where you're spinning out of orbit and flying off the planet. So the conversation becomes more emotional and less fact based every single retort that goes back and forth.

JORDAN: Can you give us an example of this? Because this happens all the time listening to a podcast by Sam Harris with somebody who disagrees with him is an exercise in straw man fallacy or arguing with anyone of my particular relatives back in Michigan can often be that way. And it's either intentional or unintentional but a lot of it is -- to go back to your healthcare issue, it's like, well, "So you just want me to die," and it's like, "No that's not what we're saying here." But do you have a specific example in mind?

ALEX: Yeah, you know, one of my favorite ones is Vladimir Putin actually is one of the best examples. It's not just Vladimir Putin but it's effectively like autocratic leaders from countries since the beginning of time. They often want to justify a particular foreign policy decision like let's say Putin invading Crimea or Ukraine, right? So he says, "Okay there's a group of people that are usurping Russia's manifest destiny," or they are saying that they are not part of Russia or they are part of Russia and so on and so forth, "They're doing something evil and you have to be

with me or you're with evil." Right? So they set up this like binary decision so they misrepresent what's happening in some situation, the represent it as an 'a' or a 'b', a positive or a negative, and say, "If you're not with me, you're with the other side."

JORDAN: It sounds like a George Bush, "You're either with us or you're against us."

ALEX: Yeah exactly.

JORDAN: Yeah.

ALEX: But it's extremely effective. It's easy to say, "Devil, angel. Don't go with the devil otherwise you are the devil." You know another one that we see all the time is I think the way that liberals and conservatives recount each other. So conservatives say that all liberals are trying to destroy the fabric of what makes America great. Liberals are against capitalism, they're against this, they're against that. And it makes it easy to misrepresent their views. Now there maybe some people that view those kind of things but --

JORDAN: Sure.

ALEX: -- the vast majority of people are quite frankly, in my opinion, very reasonable. Now liberals do the same thing for conservatives. "All these conservatives are racists, xenophobic, terrible people who just -- sexism," and this and that, when in reality no, that's probably not the case.

JORDAN: This gets really dangerous, especially when we're talking about labeling people as racist or xenophobic because --

.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- I was talking with my friend Ryan Holiday, who if you don't know his work is just a brilliant, young guy, much like yourself where you go, "If I didn't like you I would be so annoyed that

you're so successful and smart." But we were talking about something on the Internet at one point and he posted something and someone was like, "That's racist," and it's like, "No stop doing that." Because what words are you going to use for people who are actually racist, xenophobic assholes if everyone who just disagrees with this particular immigration policy, or this particular situation --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- is getting labeled that? What do you use for an actual Nazi when somebody who --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- just wants vouchers for schools is now a Nazi, right?

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: It's really dangerous. It's not just an accidental or even intentional misunderstanding --

ALEX: Mm-hmm.

JORDAN: -- it's just a deliberate burial of the issue at hand.

ALEX: Oh, yeah, words are incredibly important and terms like, 'racist,' terms like 'xenophobic,' terms like 'Nazi,' -- and these are incredibly powerful, very serious accusations. And the Internet makes it easy because we can hid behind the anonymity of digitalization to say whatever we want. One of my favorite memes actually -- I have like over 11,000 memes on my computer, I just save them constantly.

JORDAN: Are you talking about like an Instagram graphic with text laid over it? Or just line by line --

ALEX: Could be but it's got to be good. I troll Reddit and Imgur basically all the time and I've been saving them for years. And

one of my favorite ones is this picture of Hitler riding a toboggan on a rainbow, and it says at the top that everybody who doesn't agree with me is Hitler. And it's just this sense of like people on the Internet who when you don't agree with them, or they don't agree with you, tend to espouse these horrible things to who you are as a person, attacking you as a person based on your views. And in many cases, maybe that person does have those things but we have to be very diligent about when we use words like that because they take away the power of those words when we use them frivolously.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: So what should we do when we see this type of thing happening? Is it just recognize for what it is and try to decipher whether or not this person is attacking the actual issue or the rationale behind an actual argument, or just skewering or setting up a straw man argument?

ALEX: Yeah well the first part for a straw man is just evaluate whether or not you think that they're correctly representing the other side. Actually think about it for a second. Especially if you agree with them. If you agree that the person that they say is actually a bad person, is a bad person and you believe that, it's even more important in that situation for you take the devil's advocate side and say, "Okay well, for the people who don't think that person is bad, why don't they think that person bad? Why are they able to rationalize their behavior and I'm not?" At least consider the other side in a more dramatic or specific way.

JORDAN: Right because it's got to be easier to skewer or to set up a straw man argument, depending on which side you're on, when we look at something like, "Well Putin is a terrible guy because he's done all these horrible things," and it's like, "Well that doesn't necessarily make what he's saying right now, in this particular instance, wrong."

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: Then we go down this dangerous path of deciding, going back to the earlier biases, “Well I either believe everything Putin says because I think this one thing he’s doing or stand for is great,” --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- or, “I hate everything Putin says and does,” even though he might say something like, “You know what? I’m pro-choice,” or, “I’m pro-life,” or whichever side you fall on and you go, “Well now I’m going to accept everything this person says or reject everything this person says.”

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: And it becomes really dangerous to do that.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: Especially if we already don’t want to like them or we do want to like them.

ALEX: Yeah, you know one of the great philosophical wars of our time is moral relativism versus moral absolutism. Or absolutism in general versus relativism. And absolutism is the idea that, “A is a or black is black, white is white, and that’s the world and as it is.” Relativist is, “Well there’s shades of gray,” right? Like, yes this person’s terrible in this respect or not terrible in this respect or they’re wonderful in this respect and not so in this respect. And I think one of the things that we have to be wary of is absolutist ideas whenever they’re expressed, and I think it often comes out with the straw man fallacy. We misrepresent someone else as a monolith and saying, “This person is terrible. This group of people are terrible.”

Whenever I hear an absolute statement for anyone, that’s wide-sweeping something like that, I’m immediately, immediately very dubious of it. I’m like, “You know what? You

could be right or maybe you're even well-informed and you have a reason for believing what you do, but the fact that you made an absolute statement makes me immediately suspicious of what you're saying."

JORDAN: What's one of the most common that you see today? Well the one that's coming to mind now is Muslims right? Because people love saying, "Well Muslims this and that," and it's like, wow whenever that happens, I just think, "Clearly if I mention Sunni, Shia, American, moderate, whatever -- that's going to be completely lost on this type of person."

ALEX: Well not only that, that conversation takes time and if people have an attention span that's very short, you start going into a more complex or nuanced explanation, it's something they immediately tune out.

JORDAN: Right.

ALEX: And unfortunately, that's a reality.

JORDAN: It is.

ALEX: But the war that we're fighting is not necessarily a way between me and you, it's a war inside of ourselves and our ability to develop our own opinions. So the most important part is that you do that for yourself. If you can make other people believe that and you can convince them, even better. But the most important part is that you do it.

JORDAN; Okay.

ALEX: So number six is appeal to emotion fallacy. This is one of the more common logical fallacies where effectively, people are using emotion rather than fact to win an argument. Now you mentioned before that I went to the RNC and the DNC this year, both political conventions, back to back, which was one of the most emotionally taxing two weeks of my life. I've never experienced that level of just emotional over flexibility in my

life. And by the time I was done I had to go into a room and just be by myself and like stare at a wall for like three days to detox from all the things that I saw.

JORDAN: Sure.

ALEX: Because what you see at the RNC and the DNC, if anyone who's listening went to it, is just parade after parade after parade of emotional argument, furthering some type of political viewpoint. And it was the same at the RNC as the DNC. Everyone's like, "Well you know, the Republicans don't use logic," or, "The Democrats don't," -- everybody did the exact same thing. The RNC and the DNC were identical. Switching out a couple variables, they used the same emotional ploys for everything. So you sit there, you get there in the morning at 8 am, you're sitting in there until 10 am, and you're sitting in the stands, and you're listening to these people on stage and parent after parent after parent of slain child comes on stage.

JORDAN: Ugh.

ALEX: A parent of a child who was slain by an immigrant who was twice deported, convicted of a crime, came back through the wall, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and they say, "Okay, my child has died. You need to do something about this, we need that wall. You're like, "Okay." this was my honest reaction. Part of me was like this insane, this selection bias and it's emotional, and it's all this but I can't argue with the fact that that's a mother of a slain child.

JORDAN: Sure, sure.

ALEX: -- who was slain by an immigrant. How do I feel about that? How do I rationalize that away? And the truth is, these stories, in many cases are not lies. They are true things that happened but they're picked to tell a very emotional story, they're selected to tell a very small part of the argument that is not nuanced and to get people to do something.

The DNC, they did the exact same thing. And often with the DNC, they did it with gun violence. So they get someone up there, there's teachers that were against this or that or a mother of a child who was slain bun gun violence and they want more gun control. They want more regulations on buying ammunition. And again, you can't argue with the parent whose child was slain. You can't say that that didn't happen but you can say, "I understand what happening here. They are picking this person because they're using an emotional ploy, trying to use the appeal to emotion fallacy to push my opinion in one direction."

Now this happens constantly in the news cycle as well. So outside of the RNC and the DNC it happens every single day. Repeal of Obamacare is one of the great examples of this. It's not, "What should the government's role in healthcare be? What's an appropriate role? What can the government do? What's the long term budgetary outlook? What's the moral right thing to do?" It's, "Do you want people to die?"

JORDAN: Right, yeah.

ALEX: That's the argument.

JORDAN: Right.

ALEX: And quite frankly, that's brilliant PR. It's visceral, it's immediate, it gets people to take action and read and share, because they don't want to have people die. They don't want to be seen as complicit to helping people die. That's their whole thing. So we have to be very conscious of that.

JORDAN: What other examples have we seen of this in the past. One that you've got here is the Kony 2012 and this got so out of hand that the guy who started it, ended up -- I don't know, having some sort of emotional breakdown [00:48:38]

ALEX: Running naked down the street --

JORDAN: Yeah.

ALEX: -- in L.A. or something like that.

JORDAN: Yeah, running down the street naked --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- in L.A. I don't know exactly how that process works --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- in someone's head but this got people excited to the point where --

ALEX: Not him running down the street.

JORDAN: No the Kony 2012 --

ALEX: Right.

JORDAN: -- campaign.

ALEX: The nudity was like just the cherry on top.

JORDAN: Just a little bonus, yeah. The campaign of Joseph Kony, this guy with the child soldiers --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- in Africa. This got people so -- I don't know it was what, like the most viewed video of all time --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- YouTube by the time it came out. Before --

ALEX: That was unbelievable.

JORDAN: -- Gangnam Style.

ALEX: Right, yeah well obviously the more important Gangnam Style, that was --

JORDAN: Right.

ALEX: -- that's a hallmark of humanity. But you know, I mean the Kony 2012 campaign was a great example of appeal to emotion. There was a viral video that was created that told this incredibly emotional story, showed pictures of children who are being victimized and turned into soldiers, and everyone jumped on the bandwagon. Everybody went crazy. And, you know, Rihanna and Bill Gates and thousands and thousands of other celebrities shared this video without really understanding anything about the issue. Without really understanding how supporting this campaign would really do something about it. It was very vague at the time.

And I was, at that point, running a product organization of a startup that facilitated donations to charities online, like a Kickstarter for nonprofits. And so we were studying this carefully. And there were all these people that were sharing it and donating money without understanding where it was going. Because the emotion was so strong that nothing else mattered for them.

Now, that again can be a wonderful thing in certain circumstances again with the ALS ice bucket challenge, that ended up raising a lot of money and doing a lot of good to fight that disease. In this situation they raised a lot of money as well but it was without an appreciation of how large influx of capital could destabilize the region, could be not spent in an efficient way. Is this the right organization to donate to if you really want to affect that? Not enough people took the time to actually figure that out and as a result, they gave their money away carelessly, which in my opinion is actually worse in some cases than not giving money at all.

JORDAN: Do you know what happened with the money that went to invisible children? I didn't pay attention to anything after that.

ALEX: There were a series of really good follow up pieces that were written. There's one by the Independent UK, a news publication that walked through how there was this like fractured series of things that happened but it wasn't a clean causation to say, "The money went into fix the problem," it was much messier than that as it probably should have been in the first place --

JORDAN: Sure.

ALEX: -- been communicated that way. It wasn't quite as clean of a solution as I think people would have liked.

JORDAN: Well Joseph Kony is still around as far as I know.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: Still doing his thing.

ALEX: I think so.

JORDAN: The YouTube did not fix the issue.

ALEX: Yeah. So the last fallacy, number 7, is false cause fallacy. And you see this constantly in the sense where people imply causation with two particular effects when there isn't one. Most commonly this is confusing correlation with causation.

So there's a lot of correlational studies that come out every two seconds that say "Coffee's great for you, coffee's bad for you," because they did a study where someone that drank coffee religiously experienced this thing. Now it doesn't say that there's a scientific reason why that result happened for the person that drank coffee versus the person that don't. They just say that the more people that were drinking coffee experienced this in a higher number, and people take that as

causation. “Well coffee’s definitely bad for you”. Well no. There’s a correlation between this and that or this -- So a lot of times when studies like that get pushed, people confuse correlation for causation, so to speak.

Not only that, we see that a lot in politics, outside of correlational studies. So, for example, a false cause fallacy in politics is the idea that a border wall is going to solve all border security problems, when in reality it may attack some of them but a lot of people look at it as a panacea to say this one thing is going to fix all these other things. It’s not the root cause of the immigration crisis so to speak, there’s a lot of other factors involved. It’s much more complex and nuanced.

JORDAN: Sure. And we see this happening in business all the time as well. You might spend a lot of money for your business on advertising and you might see your revenue go up --

ALEX: Mm-hmm.

JORDAN: -- and you go, “Well it’s all -- it’s that advertising is really working.” But you can’t tell unless you track whether or not someone who saw the ad then clicked on the ad, purchased your product for example --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: And I fall victim to this all the time. I’ll say something like, “Guys we hit the first page of Reddit and we got so much more traffic today than we usually do.” And they go, “Well okay, let’s track and see if the people from Reddit became customers.”

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: I look at our opt-ins on our website, someone typing in their email, and I go, “Look we got 2000 more opt-ins today than we normally do,” and they go, “Yeah okay, that’s fair. So the correlation and causation are there for the optin, hitting the front page of Reddit, resulted in more opt-ins. That is

causation. However, when we look at the revenue jump for that same period of time, it was something completely unrelated and none of the people who had squeezed from Reddit bought anything during the time frame where we were looking.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: Still could be a cause for for more revenue down the line, but really what we saw in an uptick in downloads was not the same people. It was a completely unrelated event that put us in more visibility in some blog post that got a lot of clicks.

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: And you can ruin a business by saying, “All we need to do is write a big blank check and get advertising going and send all this traffic our way.” You can bankrupt yourself businesswise doing it, and you can ruin a lot of things and you can definitely ruin, most certainly, any kind of enterprise by doing this. But you can ruin your --

ALEX: Oh, yeah.

JORDAN: -- understanding of what causes events if you start readily confusing these two things.

ALEX: Yeah you know so I advise a number of startups and one of the things I train senior executives in startups in is not following vanity metrics. Because vanity metrics are things like, you know, high level pageviews on a website or unique users. Those things don’t actually tell you a real story about the company. It’s easy to get hypnotised by large high level numbers like that and say, “Things are going really well,” or, “Things are going really poorly,” when in reality, your vanity metrics may really good but the underlying fundamentals of your business are eroding and rotting you from the inside out. So understanding the cause of those metrics going up and down and digging a little bit deeper to understand what that

chain of connection is is vitally important to running a business.

JORDAN: Mm-hmm. Yeah you see this a lot with people who say, “I’ve got a million Twitter followers.” I mean I have something like 412,000 Twitter followers but I do those audits periodically and it’s like, “Oh, 12 percent of your followers are fake,” and I think, “Well that’s surprisingly low.” Those people might be fake but I’m willing to bet there are hundreds of thousands more that are just robots or abandoned accounts --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- that don’t look at anything, or people that don’t read their Twitter feed --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: That kind of metric would be really bad news if you’re measuring your whole business by that and I know some of these big YouTubers and things like that, they say, “I’ve got 1.8 million subscribers,” and then after a few nights of hanging out and a few drinks they go, “But my videos are getting 3,000 views, 36,000 views, 100,000 views.” That’s not very good if you’ve got --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- 2 million subscribers. But when you’re pitching investors, the first thing out of your mouth is, “I’ve got 2 million subscribers.”

ALEX: Yeah, absolutely.

JORDAN: And it’s unfair to do that and we would all say, “Shame on you,” if somebody pitched us and we knew that those were their metrics and they led with that. However, we do it to ourselves all the time, especially if we want to believe something.

ALEX: Totally.

JORDAN: So what can we do to help solve this problem? We can look at things more critically, we can examine the source and things like that, which you'd mentioned before. But, it's not just that we have to recognize good content from bad, what else do we have to do?

ALEX: Yeah so I mean the first step with getting better at anything is first of all recognising that you have a problem. So being mindful of things, right?

JORDAN: Twelve steps.

ALEX: Exactly, 12 steps. So being mindful of the fact that I have a visceral reaction to a certain point of view, why do I have that visceral reaction? Beginning to take the time and actually think about it. And one of the things that I talk about quite a bit is just be less trusting of other people's opinions. There's that saying that opinions are like ********, everybody has them and they all stink.

JORDAN: Right.

ALEX: But the one that I like even better is that opinions are lowest form of human knowledge. They require no accountability or understanding, and that's said by a guy named Bill Bullard. Opinion is the lowest form of human knowledge. Babies have opinions. "I like this food, I don't like this food. I'm angry, I'm happy." Babies have opinions. So don't trust someone because they have an opinion, trust someone because they have a reason to say the right thing, a -- So think about why they're saying what they're saying. That's one thing I spend a lot of time thinking about.

And I think a lot of this had to do with I've spent a lot of my life playing poker. I think about why someone makes a move as opposed to the move that they make. I think a lot about why I think they're saying what they're saying as opposed to what

they're actually saying. And then I get to the point later -- I'm like, "Okay well what did they actually say now that I've figured out why I think they're saying that." But the biggest thing that we need to think about is to avoid attachment to our ideas to an extreme degree. We want to strive to have strong opinions loosely held. That's the ideal. That's where we want to be. You can believe something strongly and that's okay, but you have to not be so attached to that opinion that you block out other types of data. Strong opinions loosely held is like, for me, one of the biggest virtues of reading the news.

JORDAN: That reminds me of -- I think this is an Adam Grant quote or at least an Adam Grant idea and he says he argues like he's right and listens like he's wrong.

ALEX: I like that.

JORDAN: It's amazing right?

ALEX: Ooh, I love that.

JORDAN: So good.

ALEX: That's great.

JORDAN: It's on my Facebook profile I think.

ALEX: Yeah. The other one that comes up a lot for me is, you have to also be comfortable saying, "I don't know enough to have an opinion." That's something that doesn't happen very often. You ask someone about their opinion on healthcare or on foreign policy or on monetary policy or quantitative easing or some type of complex thing, they'll struggle out to **** out some type of half-baked like ridiculous opinion, when in reality the responsible thing is to like, "You know what? I just don't know enough to have an opinion yet. What do you think?"

JORDAN: Mm-hmm.

ALEX: That's a smart way to be and I don't have a problem saying, "I don't have enough to have an opinion on that." It doesn't make you weak to say that, it makes you self aware. It makes you intelligent. The other one that's huge is entertain the possibility that somebody that is principled and logical and intelligent believes something that makes your blood boil. That's one thing that kills me. Everyone automatically assumes that someone on the other side of the aisle with a very different viewpoint or very different value spectrum -- "There's something wrong with them. They're just not smart. There's something that's defective with them." That's not the case.

People often have reasons for believing things that I vehemently disagree with and I can sit down and talk to them and say, "You know what? I get it, I understand." I had a friend who has a very different visions on the government's role in healthcare than I do. And I haven't fully made up my mind on the issue but she and I were having a debate about it and it turned out she had, at one point, had dealt with a life-threatening illness that she almost died from. And she was denied coverage because of the way that kind of legal system was setup around healthcare in the U.S. and that dramatically colored her opinions on healthcare. That was kind of an aha moment for me. Like wow if that had happened to me, I imagine I would feel very differently --

JORDAN: Sure.

ALEX: -- about healthcare than I currently do. So imagine and embrace the idea. Have the humility of knowledge to believe that everybody is one extreme experience away from changing their mind on almost anything. I really believe that. I believe that it's the same with me as well. Now there's some things that you don't want to believe that that's the case with -- our foundational belief systems. Like if you're religious or you have specific beliefs around types of things, you don't want those things to change and you will fight against those things changing. But believe and have the humility of belief enough

to know that extreme experiences can change our view on almost anything.

JORDAN: And that's completely natural and human --

ALEX: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- and we should understand when that happens to both ourselves and to people around us.

ALEX: Yeah. The big conclusion to take away for all this is that all these logical fallacies, all these cognitive biases, there are reasons why all of them exist. They're not just defects. They actually provide value to us. They do betray our ability to understand things in a rational manner in many cases but by falling victim to the seven, it can many ways improve your quality of life. Imagine all the mental cycles that you save abstaining from the cognitive drag of thinking critically about some crazy social issue.

And I'm not saying that ot be cute in some way or derogatory towards other people, it's ignorance is bliss. That's really what it is. There's a reason why we do that kind of thing. There's a reason why we want to belong to other people and it can exhibit the [00:59:36] effect. There's a reason why we use trusted proxies to offload cognitive drag for ideas because that saves cycles for us. But as extreme as it is in efficiency, it's as extreme in its moral and intellectual irresponsibility, and that's the key issue for us, is that ignorance is bliss but it's not a responsible bliss. It's an irresponsible bliss.

And for me personally, I've made the decision that that's not how I want to live my life. Having my mind made up for me by other people of influence is not something that I want. It's a prison so complete, people think they're free. I don't want that for myself and I would challenge you listening at home, to think about these biases and the ways that they affect you and your ability to process complex issues, and ask yourself what type of life do you want?

JORDAN: Alex amazing as usual. Thanks so much man.

ALEX: Thanks man.

JORDAN: Man, great big thank you to Alex Kouts. That kid's so smart it makes my brain hurt. We're going to link to more of his shows that he's done here on AoC in the show notes. So if you like what you heard, definitely go check those out. Those are some of the most popular episodes of the show. And if you enjoyed this one, don't forget to thank Alex on Twitter, we'll have that linked in the show notes as well. And tweet at me your number one takeaway from Alex today. I'm @theartofcharm on Twitter.

I love engaging with y'all there. And remember you can tap our album art -- the phone screen, for most of you, in the podcast player to see the show notes for this episode. We'll link to the show notes right on your phone. We also have our life program. That's at theartofcharm.com/bootcamp. The live program is by far and away just my favorite part of running AoC. The boot camps are so rewarding. It's great to see how far people can go, how far we can take them in a week, and of course in the months and years after the boot camp, which is frankly where the real work takes place.

And remember, we're sold out a few months in advance so if you're thinking about it a little bit, get in touch with us ASAP. Get some info from us so you can plan ahead. Again, theartofcharm.com/bootcamp or just email me if you're feeling lazy or if that's easier. I'm jordan@theartofcharm.com. I'll get you to the right place. I also want you to encourage you to join us in the AoC challenge, theartofcharm.com/challenge or you can text the word 'charmed,' C-H-A-R-M-E-D to 33444.

The challenge is about improving your networking and connection skills and inspiring those around you to develop a personal and professional relationship with you. We'll also email you our fundamentals Toolbox that I mentioned earlier on the show, which includes some great practical stuff ready

to apply right out of the box on reading body language, having great nonverbal communication, the science of attraction, negotiation techniques, networking and influence strategies, persuasion tactics, and everything else that we teach here at The Art of Charm. It will make you a better networker, a better connector, and a better thinker. That's theartofcharm.com/challenge or text the word 'charmed,' C-H-A-R-M-E-D to 33444.

For full show notes for this and all previous episodes, head on over to theartofcharm.com/podcast. This episode of AoC was produced by Jason DeFillippo. Jason Sanderson is our audio engineer and editor, and the show notes on the website are by Robert Fogarty. The theme music is by Little People and transcriptions are by TranscriptionOutsourcing.net. I'm your host Jordan Harbinger. Go ahead, tell your friends because the greatest compliment you can give us is a referral to someone else, either in person or shared on the Web. Word of mouth really is everything. So share the show with your friends and your enemies. Stay charming and leave everything and everyone better than you found them.