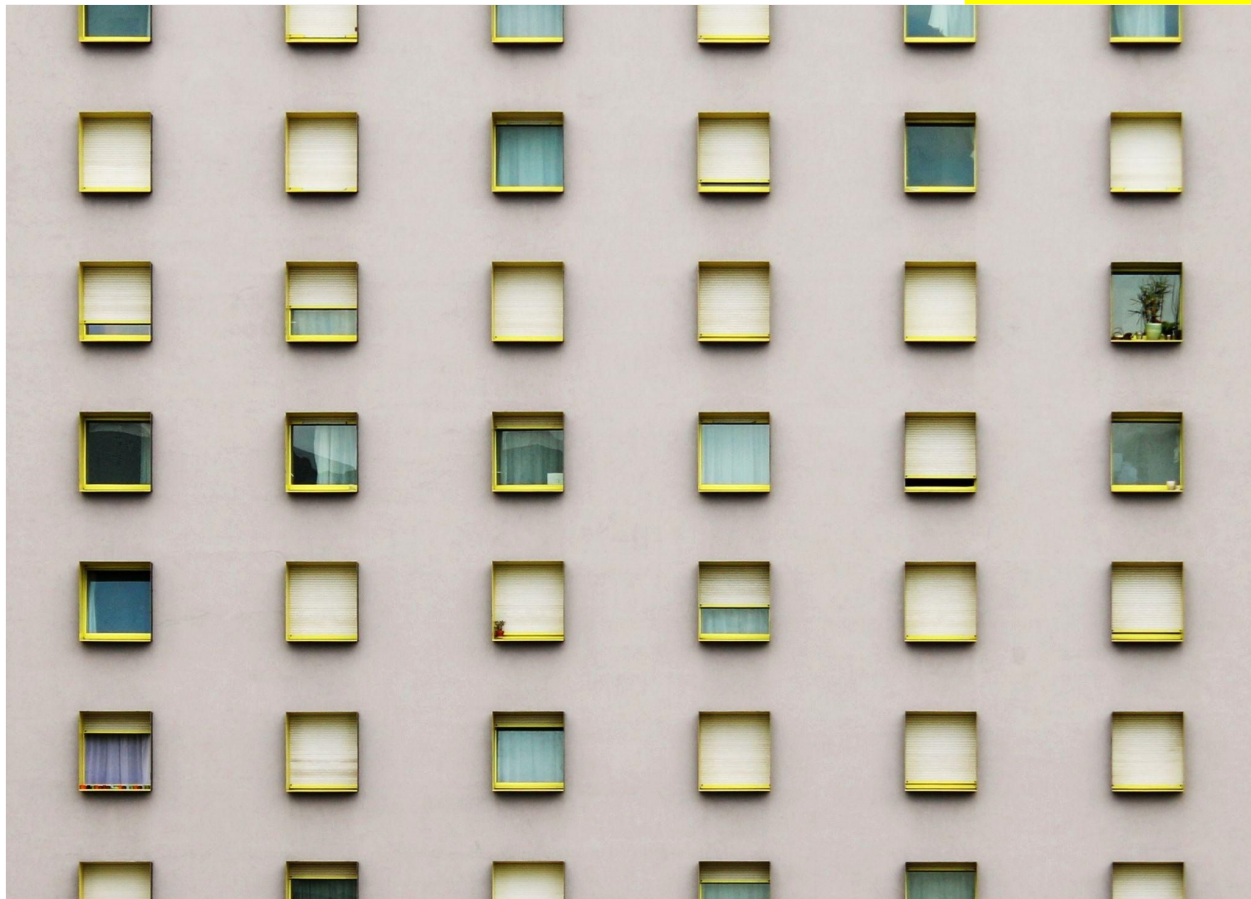


pattern recognition & other stories

(or how our meat brain
really work)



hello there :)

I previously worked at both Distilled & Verve Search, on PR teams that collectively secured **22,000+ pieces of linked coverage** on sites like this:



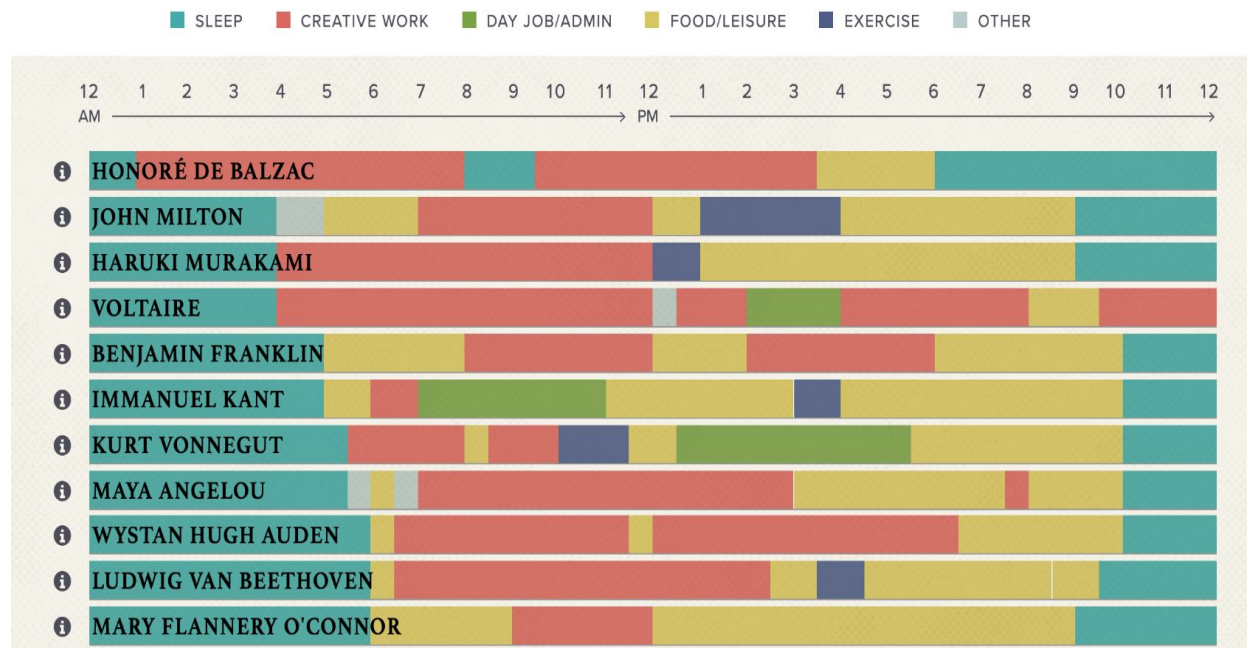
**We created things
like this:**

How some of the world's most loved artists structured their days...

2,000+ pieces of linked coverage

THE DAILY ROUTINES OF

FAMOUS CREATIVE PEOPLE



We revealed the films with the highest on-screen death counts...

500+ pieces of linked coverage

= DIRECTOR'S CUT =

TOP 10 EXPLORE DATA


Body Count

#1 GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY 

DEATH COUNT **83,871** ^

Director: James Gunn
Year: 2014
Rating: PG-13
Genre: Action | Adventure | Sci-Fi

When space bandit, Peter Quill, steals an orb belonging to a powerful villain, he finds himself being chased by relentless bounty hunters. Under less-than-friendly circumstances, Quill meets four misfits and as he discovers the orb's true power, the intergalactic criminals have to come together to save the universe. The film has a whopping 83,871 deaths, ranking first by far. Did you know that before the final battle, the song Cherry Bomb was played on set as the characters made their entrances? Director, James Gunn, said it was to help the actors really get into character for the epic scene.



A panoramic
gigapixel time
lapse of
London's
skyline...

150+ pieces of
linked
coverage

LENSTORE
LONDON SKYLINE

In partnership with **Nikon**

TWENTYFOUR
HOUR
LDN

From dawn till dusk, and beyond, London bursts with life. Explore the city skyline in detail with this immersive, high definition picture.

DISCOVER

i f t <>

**Now I work with
companies &
in-house teams
that are making
similar things**

**Pretty much all of the
teams I work with have the
same goal:**

**“to get more consistent
results for their clients”**

Or, more accurately:

to fail less frequently

**Many people believe that
the solution is to
create better processes**

**& yet, all too often,
I've observed that those
shiny new processes
somehow make things
worse, not better**

**Today I'll be sharing a
story about my struggle to
implement a particular
digital PR process**

**(because digital PR
is my jam)**

**But this isn't really a
talk about digital PR**

**It's a talk about
human beings
& the strange ways our
brains work**

It's a talk about:

**how we interpret &
make sense of things**

**how we process
new information**

**what we remember &
what we don't**

**& why those shiny new
processes which we hope
will solve all our
problems, rarely do**

**& I'm hoping that there
will be useful things in
here, regardless of the
discipline you work in**

Part One:

how we interpret &
make sense of things

When I first start working with a new client, there's a question I love to ask:

Why do you think this PR piece was successful?

**In an ideal world,
I'll ask about a piece they
actually created; but you
can ask this question
about any successful piece**

Why do you think this
PR piece was successful?

**Why do I care about
this question?**

I ask it because:

**I've found that it reveals a
huge amount about
how individuals,
& the team
as a whole, think**

Huh?

It's hard to explain in the abstract, so I'm going to share an example:

Let's travel back to 2015...

A bunch of us at Distilled were fascinated by the success of this piece:



**Here's what Will
had to say
about it:**



Will Critchlow

26 Mar 2015

I saw this in a few places and was also puzzled by how it was so popular. I didn't really get what all the fuss was about. (Except, you know, BEER).

I don't think that "BEER"
was the reason that piece
was successful...

**& Will doesn't really
think that either :)**

If “beer”
was the reason:

**then every piece
about beer
would be successful
& that’s definitely
not the case**

The problem is not that we
sometimes think
these things...

The problem is that
we don't realise
we think like this...

This happens due to
something called
“sensemaking”

**Sensemaking is the
process by which people
give meaning to their
collective experiences**

~an idea introduced by
Karl Weick in 1979

When thinking about why a piece was successful, we often jump quickly to an explanation that sounds plausible, but isn't accurate & then we move on



Will Critchlow

26 Mar 2015

I saw this in a few places and was also puzzled by how it was so popular. I didn't really get what all the fuss was about. (Except, you know, BEER).

It's problematic because
sensemaking is not
just how individuals
make sense of things...

**sensemaking is
how organisations
or groups of people
make sense of things**

**sensemaking is a
social activity:
plausible stories are
preserved, retained,
& shared**

These plausible
(but inaccurate) stories

**affect the way we interpret
future events,
not just as individuals,
but as groups**

When we accept
(at some level)
that “beer” is the
reason this piece
is successful...



Top Brewery Road Trip, Routed Algorithmically

Drink the best beer in the United States all in one go.

By Nathan Yau

What happens when we see another successful piece about beer?



**We see a
successful
piece**



**We conclude
“beer” is the
reason it’s
successful**



**We see
another
successful
piece**



**We notice it’s
about beer too**

**THERE’S
A PATTERN!**



**All future successful pieces we encounter
about beer add “evidence” to support this
explanation**

**I see this happening in a
lot of directions at once**

**What else
do those two pieces
have in common?**

EVERY COUNTRY'S MOST POPULAR BEER

VINEPAIR



Top Brewery Road Trip, Routed Algorithmically

Drink the best beer in the United States all in one go.

By [Nathan Yau](#)



They're both maps

**We see a
successful
piece**



**We conclude
it's successful
because it's a
map**



**We see
another
successful
piece**



**We notice it's
a map too**

**THERE'S
A PATTERN!**



**All future successful pieces we encounter
which are maps add "evidence" to
support this explanation**

But again,
if that was true:

**then every map-based
piece would be successful
& that's definitely not
the case**

There are actually two
things happening at the
same time here:

**sensemaking
&
pattern recognition**

Let's talk a little about pattern recognition

**Humans are programmed
to spot patterns
& we're pretty great at
spotting them...**

Spotting patterns allows
us to detect
hazards & resources:

**our continued survival
relies on some types of
pattern recognition**

Pattern recognition allows
us to make these sorts of
determinations:

**Is it safe to cross
the street?**

**Are those berries safe
to eat?**

Pattern recognition
is undoubtedly
a very useful ability

**But our ability to
recognise patterns doesn't
always serve us well**

**Because those patterns
we identify aren't
always meaningful**

Apophenia

**the tendency to perceive
meaningful connections
between unrelated things**

**Apophenia has also come
to describe the human
propensity to
unreasonably seek
patterns in random
information**

**We all do this,
pretty much all of the
time, & we do so
unconsciously**

**Here are some examples of
apophenia:**

Gambler's fallacy

**If you toss a coin 10 times,
& it comes up heads
every time;
what are the odds that the
next coin toss will come
up tails?**

Gambler's fallacy

**If you toss a coin 10 times,
& it comes up heads;
what are the odds that the
next coin toss will come
up tails?**

**still 1 in 2
(the odds don't change)**

Is this pepper
screaming
in agony?



Pareidolia

**(seeing faces within
inanimate objects)**

Conspiracy theories

**When coincidences are
woven together into
an elaborate plot**

As I said before, we all have
a tendency to seek to
draw meaning from
the patterns we perceive

**Here are some
industry-centric
examples of apophenia:**

SEO apophenia

Long articles rank better
than short ones

**That might appear to be
the case in some
instances, but do those
articles really rank well
just because they're long?**

PR apophenia

Journalists love
those “dream job” stories

**Do they really write up
every one that comes
across their desks?**

**Like I said before -
humans are great at
spotting patterns,
but we find it much harder
to distinguish
whether or not those
patterns are meaningful**

**& as a result,
our ability to spot patterns
doesn't always
serve us well**

**We see a
successful
piece**



**We conclude
“beer” is the
reason it’s
successful**



**We see
another
successful
piece**



**We notice it’s
about beer too**

**THERE’S
A PATTERN!**



**All future successful pieces we encounter
about beer add “evidence” to support this
explanation**

**We see a
successful
piece**



**We conclude
it's successful
because it's a
map**



**We see
another
successful
piece**



**We notice it's
a map too**

**THERE'S
A PATTERN!**



**All future successful pieces we encounter
which are maps add "evidence" to
support this explanation**

**patterns like
“beer” & “map” are very
obviously not meaningful**

But nevertheless, at some level, the vast majority of the digital PRs I've worked with have absorbed patterns like these

**They've absorbed them
even if they recognise
“beer” or “map”
is NOT
the real reason those
pieces were successful**

Regardless of the type of
work you do, there will be
similar meaningless
patterns that
you've absorbed

**Things that on some level,
you believe to be true;
but aren't**

That's why I love asking
this question?

**Why do you think this
PR piece was successful?**

I ask it because:

**It allows me to quickly
understand which
erroneous patterns have
been absorbed by the team
as a collective**

This is important because
if I don't fully understand
the things people currently
misunderstand

**I'll struggle to help
them at all**

**But once I understand the
things people
misunderstand, and
devise a shiny new
process, my problems
are over, right?**

Nope.

Part Two:

how we process new information

**I said before, that pretty
much all of the PR teams
I work with
have the same goal:**

“to get more consistent
results for their clients”

**or, more accurately:
to fail less frequently**

This is the question I'm
asked most frequently:

**This piece generated a
bunch of coverage a few
years ago...
could we remake it?**

**Remaking or remixing
existing PR pieces is pretty
common practice**

**& I don't think there's
anything wrong with that**

**Actually, these 3 pieces I
showed you at the
beginning of this talk are
all remakes or remixes...**

We revealed the films with the highest on-screen death counts...

500+ pieces of linked coverage

= DIRECTOR'S CUT =

TOP 10 EXPLORE DATA


Body Count

#1 GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY 

DEATH COUNT **83,871** ^

Director: James Gunn
Year: 2014
Rating: PG-13
Genre: Action | Adventure | Sci-Fi

When space bandit, Peter Quill, steals an orb belonging to a powerful villain, he finds himself being chased by relentless bounty hunters. Under less-than-friendly circumstances, Quill meets four misfits and as he discovers the orb's true power, the intergalactic criminals have to come together to save the universe. The film has a whopping 83,871 deaths, ranking first by far. Did you know that before the final battle, the song Cherry Bomb was played on set as the characters made their entrances? Director, James Gunn, said it was to help the actors really get into character for the epic scene.



A panoramic
gigapixel time
lapse of
London's
skyline...

150+ pieces of
linked
coverage

LENSTORE
LONDON 2014-2015

In partnership with **Nikon**

TWENTYFOUR
HOUR
LDN

From dawn till dusk, and beyond, London bursts with life. Explore the city skyline in detail with this immersive, high definition picture.

DISCOVER

i f t <>

**But not all remakes or
remixes perform
like this...**

As such, the process I most frequently implement is this:

How to get a “better” answer to this question:

Should we remake this piece?

Remakes fail when we're
unable to recreate the
conditions which led to the
success of the original

So in order to figure out
whether or not we should
remake something, we
first need a clear
understanding of why the
original was successful

& in order to arrive at a
better answer than
“beer” or “map”...

**We need to avoid
our tendency to slip into
pattern recognition mode**

**& one way to do that, is to
ask better questions...**

**Rather than asking
“Why was this piece
successful?”**

**I recommend answering
these six questions
instead:**

Stories

What stories did journalists write when they covered this piece?

Breaking news

Did the piece feed into something else which was going on in the newscycle?

Waves

Were there waves of coverage? What caused those waves?

Emotions

What emotions did the coverage provoke?

Verticals

Which verticals or types of publication covered this?

Countries

Did the piece get coverage in multiple countries?

Once we have a clear understanding of this...

We then need to check whether or not those original conditions are still alive & well...

We do that by looking at what the journalists we plan to target are writing about right now

**So all I need to do is
implement this process,
right?**

You know what?

**Most of the time, this
process I created
isn't adopted**

**This what normally
happens:**

**People follow the new
process for a bit, then
things start to slide**

In the early days:

**1) What stories did
journalists write
when they covered
this piece?**

There were a bunch of different types of stories written:



**Coverage designed
to provoke outrage
at the most
popular beers**

[tomadobelt](#), Kansas, United States, 7 years ago

BUDWEISER! OMG! I am sooo embarrassed for my country.

OLDNBUSTED DAN · 8 April, 2015

Budweiser is Canada's favourite beer?

Who the hell made that lie up?

[Ollsbols](#), Sussex, United Kingdom, 7 years ago

This is just a map of the worlds worst beers.

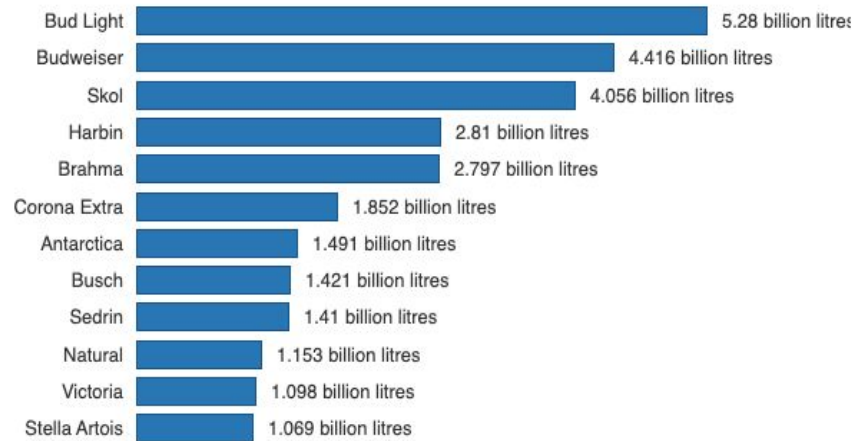
Analysis on the 2 major brewers, InBev & SABMiller who own most of these beers

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Anheuser-Busch Inbev, after all, technically controls the most popular beers in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Paraguay, Mexico, and Argentina.

The biggest beer company's biggest beers

Anheuser-Busch InBev's volume sales by brand in 2013



& nostalgic travel stories

“I discovered that Skol was still going strong in Brazil... Of course it tasted somewhat more pleasant at sunset on Ipanema beach than it did in rainy West London.”

The Economist

Menu

Weekly edition

Search

Gulliver | Countries' favourite beers

The lager picture

Mar 18th 2015 (Updated Aug 7th 2015)

Share

By B.R.



But quite soon after...

**1) What stories did
journalists write
when they covered
this piece?**

When journalists covered this piece they wrote stories about beer...



We're back here, friends:

**We see a
successful
piece**



**We conclude
“beer” is the
reason it’s
successful**



**We see
another
successful
piece**



**We notice it’s
about beer too**

**THERE’S
A PATTERN!**



**All future successful pieces we encounter
about beer add “evidence” to support this
explanation**

Why?

**In part one of this talk,
I spent a bunch of time
telling you about
both pattern recognition
& sensemaking**

**I showed you the
“beer” & “map” patterns,
which are pretty easy
to debunk**

**But the trouble is,
all those patterns
(& others like them)
are encoded in our brains**

Me telling someone
that a pattern they've
identified isn't the reason a
piece was successful
doesn't fix this

Even if they believe
that I'm right,
& the thing they
previously believed
was wrong

This is called the
“continued influence
effect”

**(it’s why false information
gets stuck in our brains)**

When information is encoded into memory and then new information that discredits it is learned,

the original information is not simply erased or replaced...

**Misinformation and
corrective information
coexist and compete
for activation**

Me just telling someone
that something isn't true
isn't enough -
even if they believe me

**Because the patterns
they've absorbed are
foundational to their
understanding of what
works and what doesn't**

**Any attempt to remove
that information
could cause everything to
collapse, and so their
brain holds on to it
very tightly**

False information sticks

**& I think this is part of the
reason why the processes
we try to implement
often fail**

**A few years ago I realised
my approach to this
was all wrong**

I thought that what I was
trying to do
was implement a process

**But actually I was
trying to teach people
something new**

& it's not just me that
makes this mistake, we all
have a tendency to do it:

**We think we're trying to
“implement a process”**

Whereas in reality...

**We're trying to teach
people something new**

This might feel like a subtle distinction, but here's why I think we need to acknowledge this...

Part Three:

what we remember & what we don't

**Once we acknowledge
we're actually trying to
teach people something**

**(as opposed to just
“implementing” something)**

**it forces us to consider
how people really learn**

**Which is uncomfortable,
because the truth is:**

**We forget
most of what we learn**

**Many people think that's
ok, because the stuff
that we really need
stays with us**

**But I'm not convinced
that's the case:**

Confession:

**I can never remember
which of these symbols
means greater than:**

Is it this one? <

Or this one? >

I always have to google it

**I use those symbols
pretty frequently,
so why doesn't that very
useful knowledge
stick with me?**

**& I don't just
forget stuff like that...**

On several occasions,
I've found myself
desperately googling some
half-remembered thing...

only to find that the thing I
was looking for was
an article I WROTE

Plenty of the stuff I've
learned over the years
wasn't that useful, & I'm
fine with my brain
dumping that stuff

But my brain has also
dumped a bunch of stuff
which was useful

At the same time,
my brain has **kept hold
of a bunch of stuff
which isn't useful**

Like the lyrics to
Ice Ice Baby

Why do we remember some
things,
but forget others?

No one really knows

**Which leads me neatly to
my next point:**

**You will forget
almost everything
I've said today...**

**You'll forget it, even if you
want to recall it**

You'll forget because:

**your brain is wired for
pattern recognition
&
false information sticks
&
your brain fails to hold on
to most of what you learn**

You'll forget because:

**your brain is wired for
pattern recognition
&
false information sticks
&
your brain fails to hold on
to most of what you learn
&
communication is lossy**

“Getting information from one body into another is hardest thing any of us ever does in our work lives.

It’s also the thing we do all day long, often without a lot of attention or intention.”

~Mandy Brown

<https://aworkinglibrary.com/writing/all-communication-is-lossy>

**“All communication
involves some amount of
signal loss...**

**...some information, or
context, or sentiment
(or all three) is distorted or
lost as one person
communicates to
another..”**

~Mandy Brown

<https://aworkinglibrary.com/writing/all-communication-is-lossy>

**Right now, I'm
communicating with you
in just about the worst
possible way**

**I'm talking at you,
not to you**

**If you don't understand
something I've said, you
can't ask me**

**This isn't a conversation:
you're not able to
contribute actively
in any way at all**

Maybe you're hungry?

**Maybe you're worried
about *that* client?**

**Or otherwise distracted
because you're thinking
about something else?**

**THIS IS ACTUALLY
KINDA AWFUL, HUH?**

**PAYING ATTENTION
TO ME
IS REALLY HARD FOR
YOU RIGHT NOW**

**It's not just one of these
things that's the problem,
it's *all* of them:**

**your brain is wired for
pattern recognition
&
false information sticks
&
your brain fails to hold on
to most of what you learn
&
communication is lossy**

**This is just how
human meat brains roll:**

**your brain is wired for
pattern recognition
&
false information sticks
&
your brain fails to hold on
to most of what you learn
&
communication is lossy**

**In order to have any hope
of doing my job even
halfways competently,
I need to acknowledge all of
these things:**

**your brain is wired for
pattern recognition
&
false information sticks
&
your brain fails to hold on
to most of what you learn
&
communication is lossy**

**& if any part of your job
involves any kind of
process implementation
you need to acknowledge
these things too:**

**your brain is wired for
pattern recognition
&
false information sticks
&
your brain fails to hold on
to most of what you learn
&
communication is lossy**

What can we do about it?

There are no easy answers, but in my experience the following things can help:

We need to remember:

**We're not implementing
new processes, we're
teaching people
something new**

**To teach people something
new, we need to
acknowledge how our own
brains work & how their
brains work too**

**I acknowledge & accept
this about myself:**

**my brain is wired for
pattern recognition**

IT'S A MAP!

PATTERN = TRUTH!

**YAY! IT COMFORTS ME
THAT I UNDERSTAND
THIS STUFF.**

**My meat brain will
always fire off in this
direction first...**

**Which is ok, as long as I'm
able to acknowledge that
these patterns aren't
meaningful**

**In this talk I've spoken
quite a bit about the
patterns we have a
tendency to think are
meaningful, but aren't...**

**There's a danger in doing
this of course - I might be
reinforcing those
connections for you**

**But actually, I feel like the
more I say this stuff out
loud, the sillier it sounds.**

**I think pattern recognition
is maybe more
dangerous when it's
unspoken & unconscious**

**I acknowledge & accept
this stuff about myself:**

**false information sticks in
my head**

**Any new information
which I try to absorb will
take time to be encoded**

**The old, incorrect
information
will compete
with the new information**

**I now expect stuff like this
to happen & that's why I'm
telling you about it**

Because if tell you that it happens to me, I feel like you might stand a better chance of recognising when it's happening to you

**I acknowledge & accept
this stuff about myself:**

**my brain fails to hold on to
most of what I learn: even
the “useful” stuff**

**I can never remember
which of these symbols
means greater than:**

Is it this one? <

Or this one? >

I always have to google it

**& yet I'm able to
remember
the lyrics to Ice Ice Baby**

**Most of the time, when I
see a successful piece
here's what happens
in my brain**

EVERY COUNTRY'S MOST POPULAR BEER

VINEPAIR



“yet another bloody map that got loads of coverage”

Most of the time,
I forget my own process

**Again, I'm telling you that
this happens to me, in the
hope that it will help you
recognise when it's
happening to you**

**I also acknowledge &
accept that:**

Communication is lossy

**Which means I need to be
much more mindful about
how I communicate stuff**

**Presentations &
documentation have
their place...**

**But if you're trying to
teach someone
something new
asynchronous
communication sucks**

**I know that advocating for
conversation
(or synchronous communication)
is deeply unfashionable**

**It's true that a lot of
meetings could & should
be emails**

**But knowledge doesn't
transfer well via email or
via pre-recorded videos
(even when people read
or watch them)**

**& actually I don't think we
should be aiming to
transfer knowledge at all**

**Our aim should be to
generate it**

**Conversations are
active exchanges,
& allow new things
to emerge**

**Conversations are
generative,
they go far beyond
delivery**

**So now,
whenever I'm
implementing
a new process,
(or, more accurately)
teaching people new
things, I do so via
conversations**

**Open exchanges where
people can voice
their concerns & share
their experiences**

**& I'm aware that I'll often
need to have the same
conversation
over & over & over again**

**Which used to frustrate
me, but now I accept that
this is just how our
meat brains work**

**my brain is wired for
pattern recognition**

**false information sticks in
my head**

**my brain fails to hold on to
most of what I learn**

communication is lossy

**I can't change the way my
brain works,
& neither can you**

**my brain is wired for
pattern recognition**

**false information sticks in
my head**

**my brain fails to hold on to
most of what I learn**

communication is lossy

**Ignoring this stuff won't
solve anything**

**Acknowledging &
accepting that this how
our brains work
just might :)**

**It's almost time for me to
wrap this thing up...**

**Earlier, I said
that was is a talk about:**

**how we interpret &
make sense of things**

**how we process
new information**

**what we remember &
what we don't**

**& why those shiny new
processes which we hoped
would solve all our
problems, rarely do**

What have we learned?

**How do we interpret &
make sense of things?**

**Our default mode is
not deep thought,
we are unthinking
creatures.**

How do we process new information?

Messily...

**False information
sticks in our brains**

**What do we remember,
& what do we forget?**

**We forget most
of what we learn...**

**Even the stuff we
want to remember.**

**I used to think I was
trying to implement
new processes...**

**Now, I acknowledge
that what I'm doing
is teaching people
something new**

**It's perhaps a subtle
shift in mindset, but
it's been really
helpful for me**

**In the past, I used to spend
a lot of time considering:**

my messaging & language

**the frameworks,
models & processes
themselves**

**how to make things
“memorable”**

**Now, rather than just
trying to make things
“memorable”...**

**I directly address our
tendency to forget
& talk openly about it**

**Next time you're trying to
teach someone
a new thing:**

**I'd strongly encourage you
to do the same**

**Our meat brains
don't work the way
we think they work...**

**But we need to work with
them, not against them :)**

**I love your
meat brain
& I love you :)**

**Thanks for
listening to me!**



Got questions, thoughts, or feelings?

**drop me an email:
hannah@worderist.com**



Credits:

Windows: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/building-pattern-wall-architecture-33317/>

Daily Routines: <https://podio.com/site/creative-routines>

Directors Cut: <https://www.gocompare.com/life-insurance/directors-cut/>

24hr London: <https://www.lenstore.co.uk/vc/24-hour-london/>

Every Country's Most Popular Beer:
<https://vinepair.com/wine-blog/most-popular-beer-every-country-map/>

Brewery Road Trip:
<https://flowingdata.com/2015/10/26/top-brewery-road-trip-routed-algorithmically/>

Danbo: https://www.flickr.com/photos/nomadic_lass/6889892777/in/set-72157629144987013

Unicorn:
<http://queenofheartsonthesleeve.tumblr.com/post/58736423727/ok-not-much-but-here-it-is-3>