

THE INFORMATION DILEMMA: The plausibility curve and the information curve

INQUIRING MINDS topic for April 1, 2022 moderated by Bob Barger

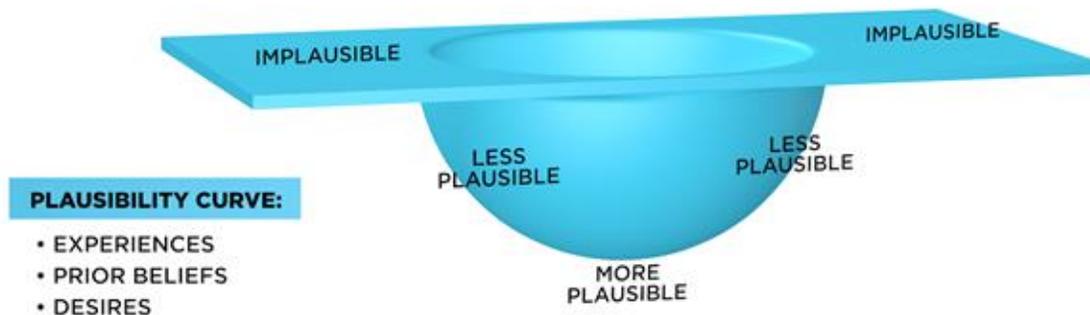
Questions for Discussion

1. What are the key information sources you use to develop your views?
2. What would it take for you to change a long-held view on a subject? (plausibility curve)
3. What do you do when two main stream information sources (electronic, media or other) have a different view of what happened or should happen as the result of a new piece of information? (information curve)
4. How can we prevent our normal tendency to agree with people and sources of info that agree with our predisposed mind set and ignor or not carefully read/listen to others with an opposing viewpoint?
5. Give an example of “new” information that made you change your mind on a previously held belief. What was it about the “new” information that made enough of a difference to change your thinking?

Among the most persistent interests of my academic career was the question of how people form beliefs. Not how they *should* form beliefs, in some idealized vision of perfected rationality, but how they *actually* form beliefs as embodied creatures embedded in communities and cultures. I want to introduce a simple conceptual tool, influenced in part by the work of Peter Berger, that may help us understand what is happening.

Imagine a horizontal plane that curves downward into a bowl, rises back again, and returns to a horizontal plane. The curve, from one end of the bowl to the other, represents the range of claims an individual finds believable. Let’s call it a **plausibility curve**. Claims that fall in the center of the curve will be perceived as most plausible; they require little evidence or argumentation before an individual will consent to believe. Claims falling near the edges are increasingly implausible as they deviate from the center, requiring progressively more persuasion. Claims falling entirely outside the plausibility curve are beyond the range of what a person might believe at a given point in time, and no amount of evidence or logic will be sufficient.

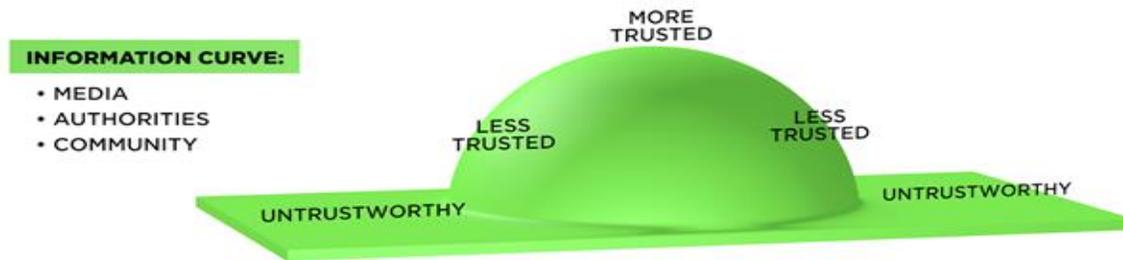
What determines the plausibility of a given claim is how well it conforms to what an individual experiences, already believes, and wants to believe. The full range of a person’s beliefs is rather like a photomosaic: Thousands of experiences and perceptions of reality are joined together, and out of those thousands emerge larger patterns and impressions, higher-order beliefs about the nature of reality, the grand narratives of history, the nature of right and wrong, good and evil, and so forth. Attempts to change a single belief can feel fruitless when it is embedded in countless others. Where does one begin to address a thousand interlocking disagreements at once? Evidence to the contrary is almost irrelevant when a claim “fits” with an entire network of reinforcing beliefs. This is part of what gives a plausibility curve its enduring strength and resistance to change.



Desire plays a particularly complicated role in the plausibility curve. We may desire *not* to believe a claim because it would separate us from those we love, confront us with painful truths, require a change in our behavior, impose a social cost, or so on. We may desire *to* believe a certain claim because it would be fashionable, confirm our prejudices, set us apart from those around us, anger our parents, or for countless other reasons. We will require more persuasion for claims we do not want to believe, and less for those we do.

Like the Overton window in political theory, a plausibility curve can expand, contract, and shift. Friends or family members whose plausibility curves were once identical may find that they diverge over the course of time. Claims one person finds immediately plausible are almost inconceivable to the other. But how does this happen? That's the information curve scenario.

Imagine a mirror-image bowl above the plausibility curve. This is the **information curve**, and it reflects the individual's external sources of information about the world—such as communities, authorities, and media. Those sources in the center of the information curve are deemed most trustworthy; claims that come from these sources are accepted almost without question. Sources of information on the outer ends of the bowl are considered less trustworthy, so their claims will be held up to greater scrutiny. Sources outside the curve entirely are, at least for this individual, so lacking in credibility that their claims are dismissed out of hand.



The center of the information curve will generally align with the center of the plausibility curve. The relationship is mutually reinforcing. Sources are considered more trustworthy when they deliver “claims” we find plausible, and claims are considered more plausible when they come from sources we trust. A source of information that consistently delivers claims in the center of the plausibility curve will come to be believed implicitly.

Change *can* begin on the level of the plausibility curve. Perhaps an individual joins a religious community and finds it is more loving and reasonable than she had expected. She will no longer find it plausible when a source claims that all religious communities are irrational and prejudiced, and this will gradually shift her information curve in favor of more reliable sources. Or another person experiences the loss of a child, and no longer desires to believe that death is the end of consciousness. He is more open to other claims, expands his sources of information, and slowly his beliefs shift.

Change can also begin on the level of the information curve. An individual raised in a certain community with well-established authorities, such as her parents and pastors, goes to college and is introduced to new communities and authorities. If she judges them to be trustworthy sources of information, this new information curve will likely shift her plausibility curve. As her set of beliefs changes, she may even reach a point where the sources that once supplied most of her beliefs are no longer considered trustworthy at all. Or imagine a person who has lived his entire life consuming far-left media sources. He begins to listen to conservative media sources and finds their claims resonate with his experience—only slightly at first, but in increasing measure. Gradually he consumes more and more conservative media, expanding or shifting his information curve, and this in turn expands or shifts his plausibility curve. He may reach a point where his broader perceptions of the world—the deeper forces at work in history, the optimal ways of organizing societies and economies, the forces for good and evil in the world—have been wholly overturned.

Consider the 9/11 Truth movement and the QAnon movement. Most Americans will find the notion that the Bush administration orchestrated a massive terrorist attack in order to invade the Middle East and enrich their friends in the oil industry, or that global liberal elites would construct an international child trafficking operation for the purpose of pedophilia and cannibalism, beyond the bounds of their plausibility curve. Others, however, will find that one conspiracy or the other resonates with their

plausibility curve, or their information curve may shift over time in such a way that brings their plausibility curve with it. Claims that once seemed impossible to contemplate came to appear conceivable, then plausible, then reasonable, and finally self-evident. *Of course*, conservatives would sacrifice thousands of innocent lives to justify a “war for oil” *because conservatives are greedy and that’s what conservatives do*. *Of course*, liberals would sacrifice thousands of children in order to advance their own health and power *because liberals are perverse and that’s what liberals do*.

As a final definitional note, let’s call the whole structure, the plausibility curve and the information curve, an ***informational world***. An informational world encompasses how an individual or a community of individuals receives and processes information. Differing informational worlds will have differing facts and sources. Our challenge today is that we occupy multiple informational worlds with little in common and much hostility between them.

What, then, can be done? The model itself suggests where to start. If we move the information curves toward a common center, the plausibility curve will follow. Information comes through sources such as the media and community.

First, the crisis of media is acute. Even as media today has grown more powerful and pervasive, it has also grown more fragmented and polarizing. The dynamics of modern media reward content that is immediate, angry, and hyperbolic, rendering the media into a marketplace for scorn sellers and hate merchants. In short, the digital media landscape has evolved to profit from our vices more than our virtues, and it has become incredibly effective at dividing audiences into hermetic media spheres that deliver only the information and commentary that confirms the audiences’ anxieties and antipathies.

The second way to shift the information curve is to address our crisis of community. Yet the pressures, temptations, and glowing distractions of contemporary life have strained the ties that bind us, replacing the warmth and depth of incarnate community with a cold digital imitation. The pandemic has only deepened our isolation, causing many to look to political tribes or conspiracist communities for a sense of purpose and belonging.

We are not without hope. Lies ring hollow at the end of the day. Hatred is a poor imitation of purpose, celebrity a poor replacement for wisdom, and political tribes

So perhaps we can begin to build bridges across our informational worlds. Perhaps we can nurture a healthy media ecosystem that offers a balanced view of the world and a generous conversation about it. Perhaps we can restore a culture of leadership defined by humility over celebrity and integrity over influence. Perhaps we can invite those who have found counterfeit community in their political tribes to rediscover a richer and more robust community.

By Timothy Dalrymple Fall, 2021