free-range THINKING™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact

Image via SheReads.org

Wait, There's More! (Four titles to add to your summer reading list.)

In last month's issue, we presented our 19th annual summer reading list, featuring 8 foundational texts that should be in your library if you're serious about changing the world. (If you missed that issue for some reason, you can find our recommendations here.) And we thought, "That'll hold 'em for a few months." No such luck.

Lucas Held, Director of Communications for The Wallace Foundation, and a long-time reader of *free-range thinking*, sent us four titles that were absent from our list, but that he considers must-reads for aspiring world-changers. Full disclosure: I haven't read any of them, but the titles alone have made me want to consume all four, and as fast as possible. We're guessing you'll feel the same way, so we invited Lucas to serve as guest editor this month, and the following are his recommendations for your permanent collection. Full story. *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.*

Lucas Held

Upcoming online classes at The Goodman Center

PRESENT BETTER

Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes

July 24 & 25
11am - 12pm PT

TELL BETTER STORIES

Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative

Sept. 7, 14, 21 & 28
9am - 10am PT

WEBINAR BETTER

The Webinar on Webinars

September 27
11am - 12pm PT

Wait, There's More! (Four titles to add to your summer reading list.)

Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life
by Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich (The RAND Corporation, 2018, free download here)

Communicators seeking to shape the information environment are also shaped by it - making understanding it essential. *Truth Decay*, co-authored by RAND's president and a noted defense analyst, provides much-needed illumination. Its signal virtue is to focus not on one trend but on the *confluence* of four: increasing disagreement about facts and data; a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; the increasing relative volume and influence of opinion over fact; and declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information. These trends, RAND finds, have been brewing for years in part due to increasing polarization (partisan and otherwise), and a changed information system that includes social media - both of which tend to exaggerate existing cognitive biases. Competing demands on schools haven't helped. The authors conclude: "Truth Decay and its many manifestations pose a direct threat to democracy and have real costs and consequences - economic, political, and diplomatic."
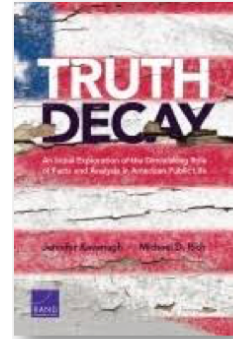
Uninformed: Why People Seem to Know So Little about Politics and What We Can Do about It
by Arthur Lupia (Oxford University Press, 2015)

RAND's *Truth Decay* begs the question: How to encourage consideration of credible facts and analysis? Arthur Lupia, a University of Michigan professor and a leader in the emerging field of science communications, finds answers in experimental evidence from political psychology. Given most people are not trying to be experts but do want to know enough to make decisions, the goal is to win attention and encourage processing of new information. But how? Lupia's suggestions: Establish your credibility, something he emphasizes *may* be bestowed by a listener, by demonstrating you have relevant expertise and commonality of interest; encourage thinking - including by raising an opposing point of view; express a consensus, providing there is one; frame your argument in ways relevant to your audience's aspirations; and, when possible, localize a national problem. Refreshingly, Lupia argues for acknowledging our "value diversity" and against the common error of mistaking differences in values for ignorance.
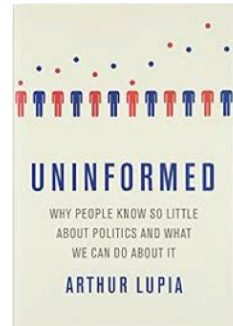
The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America
by Timothy Snyder (Yale, 2018)

If *Uninformed* is a sunlit guide, *Unfreedom* is a dark spy thriller, its semantic villains two grand narratives that absolve us of civic responsibility and corrupt our public discourse: "the politics of inevitability" (democracy will inevitably right itself), and "the politics of eternity" (the eternal present of national victimhood.) Snyder, a Yale historian widely honored for *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, argues that eternity politics, honed by Russia in its invasion of Crimea, was successfully exported to the U.S. in the 2016 election, replete with disinformation, bots and phony organizations (470 on Facebook, with six alone garnering 340 million shares of content). In the Internet's attention economy, he warns, "news that draws viewers tends to walk a neural path between prejudice and outrage," trapping us in torpor. Only in seeing history "as it is," can "we halt our thoughtless journey from inevitability to eternity." Narratives can cut both ways.
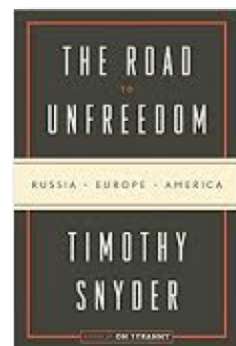
Storytelling with Data: A Data Visualization Guide for Business Professionals
by Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic (Wiley, 2015)

If a picture is worth a thousand words, a good chart may be worth at least as many. A former Google staffer, Knaflic follows Edward Tufte's observation that what is most important in data presentation is figuring out the story the data tells - only then does it make sense to think about the graphic treatment. In other words, meaning must drive design. What makes her book especially useful is the combination of "before and after" treatments of graphically displayed data and the explanations of why the "after" is better. She uses principles drawn from Gestalt psychology (e.g. the law of proximity, which states that objects that appear close together are assumed to be related in a group) and the idea drawn from emphasis framing that people are unable to focus on too many things at once. Importantly, she also stresses the importance of credibility, which is central to effective persuasion.

About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

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