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BY RICHARD ELLIS

What Are The Consequences Of Being Wrong?

Recently, I tried to read a classic book about "sleep training" babies—and struggled. *Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child* by Dr. Marc Weissbluth is 816 pages long and doesn't want to be skimmed.

But I just wanted my kid to sleep for more than three hours straight. So, I asked ChatGPT if it was familiar with Weissbluth's book. It was, so I asked how and when to let my daughter "cry it out" according to Dr. Weissbluth.

ChatGPT summarized the book's position, answered my follow-up questions, and led me to a chart showing how long to let our daughter cry before visiting her over the next seven nights. We followed the chart, and four nights later, our daughter slept 11 hours straight.

At first, I worried that ChatGPT would misrepresent Dr. Weissbluth's work, but then I reconsidered that fear. The risks of being misled were acceptable. Either our daughter would sleep better, or she'd continue to wake up every three hours. If I fell for a GPT hallucination, lived experience probably would correct my mistake before it caused lasting harm.

How or if to "consume" information—aka, read, watch, or listen to stuff—is a daily question for us all. We decide when to read headlines and tweets, and when to read whole articles. When to listen to podcasters discuss academic studies, and when to read those studies. When to listen to pundits critique a presidential speech, and when to listen to the speech.

To be misinformed is to believe we have acquired knowledge without realizing that knowledge is wrong, biased, or somehow flawed. Misinformation isn't binary, however. If Dr. Weissbluth read ChatGPT's summary of his work, he might find it misleading. That's not exactly what he meant. That's not quite how he'd put it. For me, the layperson who just wants his baby daughter to sleep, it's close enough.

The reality in ghostwriting—a profession, yes, but really a synonym for living the inquisitive life—is that I can't verify every piece of information I intend to use.

In a forthcoming article, a client and I write about microplastics pollution. We've never conducted studies on microplastics accumulation in the human brain. We've never analyzed samples from local watersheds or grocery stores. We must trust that the peer review processes at academic journals like Nature and PLOS One have served up reliable knowledge.

Yet sometimes, knowledge authorities fail. In science, reproducibility is the principle that if a finding is true, any scientists who repeat the same experimental procedure should achieve the same results. If the procedure leads to different results each time, the conclusion from the original study is probably unreliable.

In 2015, a group of 270 researchers tried to reproduce 98 psychology papers published in academic journals. Only 39% of their replication attempts were successful. In a 2016 survey, 70% of biology researchers said they were unable to reproduce studies by their peers, and 60% said they couldn't replicate their own work.

Even publications with high standards can get things wrong. Unless we reject all knowledge we can't verify personally, we must accept that risk and choose how much trust to place in a given source. I believe the degree of trust should depend on the consequences of being wrong.

Suppose a reader of the microplastics article tosses out every plastic water bottle they own and replaces them with steel ones. Then suppose, for the sake of argument, the dangers of microplastics are completely overblown. If I'm wrong, the reader spent time and a small dollar amount to fix a problem that didn't need fixing. If I'm right, that reader hopefully reduced their risk of developing diseases linked to microplastics.

The consequences of being wrong can be low. Again, if I sleep train our daughter poorly, the mistake will eventually self-correct, and in the meantime, cause little to no harm.

Sometimes, though, the consequences are immense. Information about medicine and health can give or take life. Theories about learning and education can create or kill potential. Warnings about natural disasters can save or destroy lives. Information that influences government policy can prevent or ignite wars.

When the consequences of getting it wrong are irreversible, headlines and hot takes aren't good enough. Taking the statistics for granted is not good enough. The pundit's take is not good enough. The AI summary isn't good enough. We have to think for ourselves.

But "thinking for ourselves" is almost always a matter of judging other people's thoughts. We know very, very little without other people, living and dead, who've contributed to the collective body of knowledge and probably muddied it along the way. Every great thinker got some (or a lot of) things wrong.

When the consequences of being wrong are high, suck it up and read those 816 pages. If not, enjoy the freedom to self-correct through experience.

