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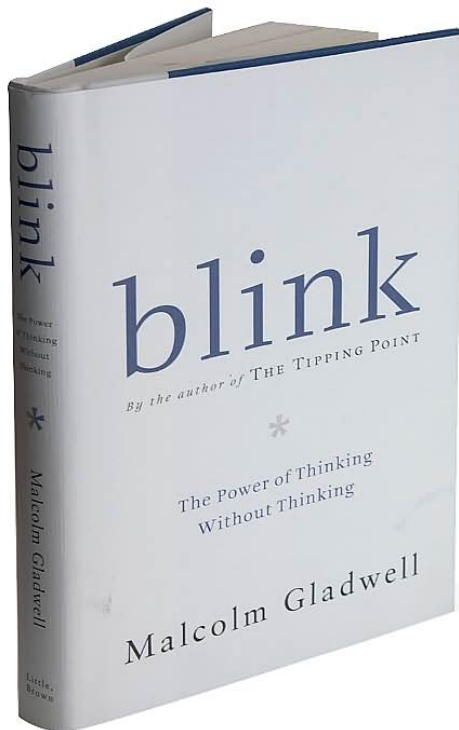
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Blink and the Library

09 11 20'

Written by **Jennie Tobler-Gaston**

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Blink: the Power of Thinking without Thinking by Malcolm Gladwell.

Image obtained from <http://whohastimeforthis.blogspot.com/2006/08/blink-nonsense-of-thinking-without.html>

Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking by Malcolm Gladwell is a book that speaks to the ability to make gut instinct decisions without much logical thought. There are three overlying themes in the book, first humans are usually, but not always, really good at rapid cognition – gut instinct decisions (Gladwell, 2005). The second, is that humans are really bad at explaining why we make the rapid cognition decisions we do (Gladwell, 2005). And finally, humans can sometimes become “mind-blind” where rapid cognition breaks down and fails, and we become extremely bad making sound snap judgements (Gladwell, 2005). Let’s look at each theme and how it impacts libraries and information professionals.

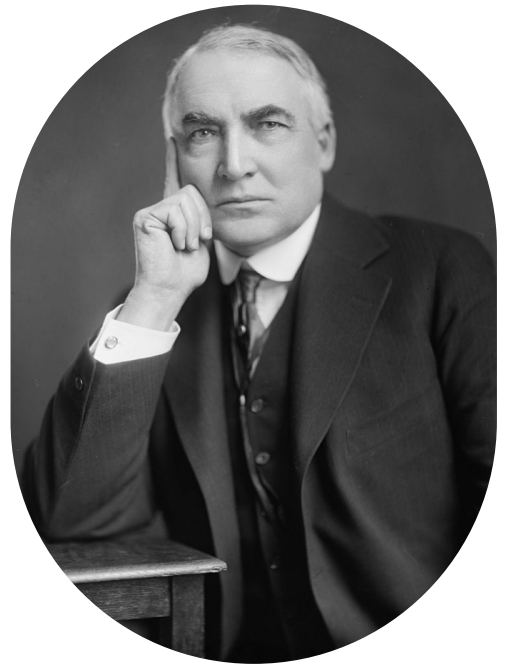
The ability to make good snap judgements is a process known as rapid cognition. It is that gut instinct we have where we know we are right but do not necessarily know why we know. Science has shown that for the most part humans are really good at rapid cognition. Our gut instincts are usually not wrong. But rapid cognition can fail in what Gladwell (2005) calls Warren Harding errors. This when our implicit biases overrides rational judgement.

This can have a great impact on information professionals. Take

the reference interview – if we unknowingly bring in our implicit biases we make poor judgements on what the person is looking for and can utterly fail in our service. This can impact libraries when designing programs and services as well – it is assuming what patrons needs, even after talking with them, and not actually hearing them. It can cause us to create programs and services that fail our patrons and leave us wondering why. The good news is you can counter Warren Harding errors simply by recognizing they exist (Gladwell, 2005). Libraries and information professionals that are self-aware are less likely to make these errors. Casey and Savastinuk (2007) and Matthews (2017) both explain the future of libraries relies on our ability to engage with our communities, and we need to rely on our communities gut instincts for the direction of the library and its programs and services. This, in part, will require information professionals and libraries to radically trust our patrons and communities (Schmidt, 2013; Stephens, 2020; Zulkey, 2019). If we can successfully radically trust and rely on our communities' instincts we will develop valued and used libraries.

Blink also discusses that humans are really bad at explaining their decisions (Gladwell, 2005). Think about it – why is your favorite color your favorite? The more people try to explain why, they begin second guessing their decisions or describe things very poorly. This can really impact libraries and information professionals. Often when we assess programs and services we ask our patrons why. Patrons may love a program, but the minute they have to explain why, all of a sudden they may start seeing flaws or cannot tell us what was good or bad. So they change the rating from great to average. We need to consider different ways to evaluate programs and services. For example, consider a story telling approach to evaluation, creating a social and reflective narrative to tap into the collective voice of our users (Stephens, 2017). Assessments that avoid in depth in the moment explanations of *why* our community likes or dislikes a program, and opening up the conversation and engagement with patrons will improve programs and services.

Finally, there is the issue of becoming “mind-blind,” which is the inability to read other people. An example of this that many librarians have experienced, is when a patron asks for a book about “china” and we load them up histories and geographies on the country when they wanted to know about different china dish patterns. We make a snap judgement that is utterly wrong. Even with all our training we all have had moments when we failed to stop and ask questions to clarify. Gladwell (2005) explained the best way to combat mind-blindness is to stop, slow things down, and think things through. Practicing slowing situations downs actually helps prevent mind-blindness and improves rapid cognition.



The term Warren Harding errors comes from President Warren Harding – he looked like a good president, but he turned out to be one of the worst in our history. People thought Warren Harding would be a good president because he looked the type, but he lacked all other knowledge and skill to be successful (Gladwell, 2005). Photograph by [Harris & Ewing](#), c. 1920 and obtained from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warren_G._Harding



Is Mel being mind-blind in this moment? – Unshelved the Library comic by Bill Barnes and Gene Ambaum – <http://www.unshelved.com/2009-10-26>

I believe mind-blindness and our poor ability to explain why we like something is one reason strategic planning fails. Information professionals and libraries can get so focused on *why* something works or doesn't and trying to predict the future we miss what is happening with our patrons and our communities. I think Matthews's (2017) concept of dynamic steering is much more relevant and plays into making better rapid cognition judgements for libraries. It plays to our strengths rather than our weaknesses. We need to embrace our users and non-users and encourage them to help us – this will help combat our mind-blindness when it comes to our growth as a library and information professional. I believe the theories in *Blink* can help information professional recognize how to improve our judgements and trust the judgements of our communities; thus helping us to better plan for an ever-changing future so that we can effectively engage with our communities.

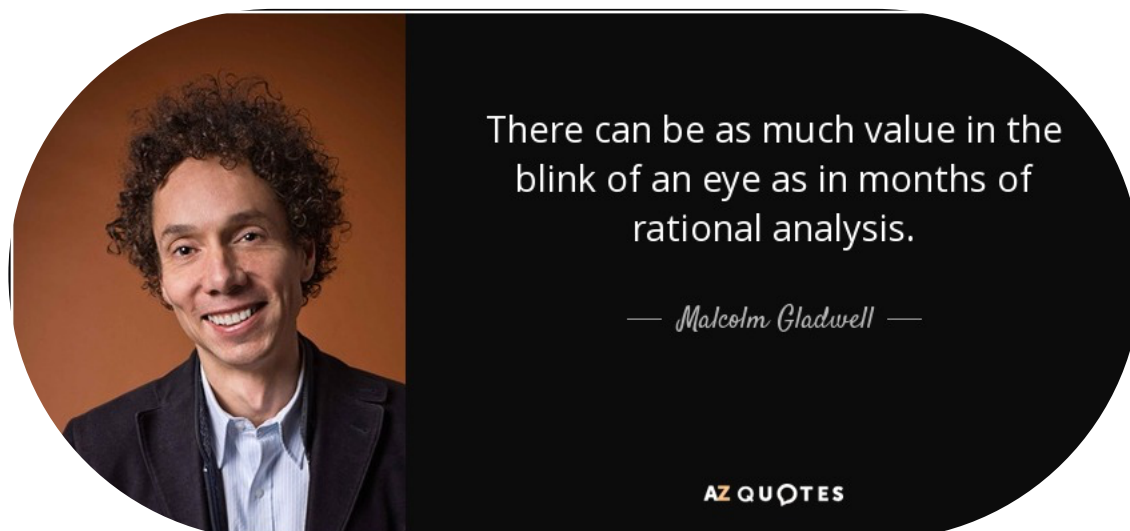


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1.

Nydia said:

[September 12, 2020 at 8:06 am](#)

I find rapid recognition a fascinating concept. It reminds of a short video series that the New York Times posted about implicit bias. In one of the videos, titled Snacks and Punishment, the importance of slowing down was mentioned to combat biases that can surface in day to day interactions. The video reveals that if you are working too fast, your subconscious might make a decision you do not necessarily agree with. As with what you mentioned here, the video underscores the importance of slowing down and being methodical about what we are doing in order to be effective in what our intentions are. I think the application of this critical in LIS professions.

Here is the link to the video incase you'd like to check it out. I have found the set of videos very insightful.

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004818677/snacks-and-punishment.html?playlistId=video/who-me-biased>

Very interesting and thought provoking post, Jennie.
Nydia

[\(Edit\)](#)



2.

deanau said:

[September 14, 2020 at 6:16 pm](#)

Hi [@jennietoblergaston](#)

Thank you for your summary of Blink. I've always wanted to read Gladwell but I haven't yet. The importance of slowing down and asking people questions when providing them assistance is something I always try to remember. Taking the time to make sure we understand what someone needs help with also saves them time. I like your emphasis on how libraries can engage the community which includes being nonjudgmental.

-Deana

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