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Psychology

Everyone is totally just winging it, all the time

Every time a public figure behaves with less-than-stellar competence, we're incredulous. We probably shouldn't be

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▲ Even this man is essentially just winging it. Photograph: Yuri Corina/Reuters Photograph: VLAD COJOCAR/REUTERS

Amid the acrimony surrounding the firing of Jill Abramson, executive editor of the New York Times, there's one point of near-universal consensus: the whole thing was remarkably poorly handled. (Even the Times's publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, seems to agree about that.) Whatever your views of the people involved, it seemed hard to believe: how could an institution as august and smoothly competent as the Times have stumbled so badly?

There were echoes of that same incredulity in Britain this week when Ed Miliband, the Labour leader, revealed in a car-crash of a regional radio interview that he didn't know who he was campaigning for there. Whether you love him, hate him, or hadn't heard of him before reading this blog post, you'd be forgiven for shaking your head. Surely the head of the most popular party in the world's sixth-largest economy has someone to brief him on such basics?

We're similarly shocked whenever authority figures who are supposed to know what they're doing make it plain that they don't, President Obama's healthcare launch being probably the most serious recent example. We shouldn't really be shocked, though. Because all these stories illustrate one of the most fundamental yet still under-appreciated truths of human existence, which is this: everyone is totally just winging it, all the time.

Institutions – from national newspapers to governments and political parties – invest an enormous amount of money and effort in denying this truth. The facades they maintain are crucial to their authority, and thus to their legitimacy and continued survival. We need them to appear ultra-competent, too, because we derive much psychological security from the belief

that somewhere, in the highest echelons of society, there are some near-infallible adults in charge.

In fact, though, everyone is totally just winging it.

For further evidence, consult this popular Reddit thread, posted on Monday (I found it via Science of Us): "Grown-Ups of Reddit, What is the most embarrassing thing that you should be able to do, but can't?" The short version is that nobody has much of a clue what they're doing:

- Basic arithmetic. Really embarrassing at work when I panic and struggle to add up two small numbers :(
- I'm nearly 30 years old and don't know how to tie my shoes in the normal fashion. Instead I can only do it bunny ears-style.
- Swim, ride a bike, drive a car.
- I am really bad at telling time on an analog clock, I know how it works and I can get there but I can't just glance at the clock and know the time.

I've often thought of my experience of adulthood thus far as one of incrementally discovering that there's no institution, or walk of life, in which everybody isn't just winging it. Growing up, I assumed that the newspaper on the breakfast table must be assembled by people who truly knew what they were doing; then I got a job at a newspaper. Unconsciously, I transferred my assumptions of competence to (among others) people who worked in government. Then I got to know a few people who did – and who'd admit, after a pint or two, that their jobs involved staggering from crisis to crisis, concocting credible-sounding policies in cars en route to press conferences, exactly as portrayed in *The Thick of It*.

And even then I found myself assuming, self-hatingly, that this might be explained by a certain bumbling Britishness, the perverse pride we sometimes take in shambling mediocrity. Then I started working in America. Where, it turns out, everyone is totally just winging it.

This realisation is alarming at first, but it's ultimately deeply reassuring. As the UK organisation Action for Happiness likes to point out, one of the biggest causes of misery is the way we chronically "compare our insides with other people's outsides". We're all mini-New York Timeses or White Houses, energetically projecting an image of calm proficiency, while inside we're improvising in a mad panic. Yet we forget (especially in an era of carefully curated Facebook profiles and suchlike) that everyone else is doing the same thing. The only difference is that they think it's you who's truly competent.

I spent a while trying to think of an ingenious conclusion to this post, so as to give the appearance that I'd been confidently advancing toward it from the start. But on this occasion, more than any other, it would seem appropriate to admit that I failed.

In closing, everyone is totally just winging it.