Hello ladies, gentlemen, and whoever else might be listening today, and welcome back to another episode of *This is Berthoud*. I am Amie, your local librarian, and this is the podcast where I get to talk about all the things that you are talking about so that together we all have something new to think about. Here's my usual disclaimer, I went to Library School, not medical school or law school or business school—clearly I did it for the money—so that means you'll get information about information in this episode but don't come to me for medical advice or legal advice or any of those kinds of advices. That's not my gig.

What are we talking about today? We're going to look at some things that we learned from having the County ballot drop box on our property during the latest election. If you're diving for the stop button right now because you think I'm going to talk about politics, I'm not, so no worries. The library doesn't endorse any particular political candidate ever, and the only thing I'll say about the election results is thank you for stabilizing the funding of libraries and fire departments and others across the state by repealing portions of the Gallagher Amendment. See, that's it, done, now we're going to talk about what we learned from you by having the ballot box located on our property.

First, have you heard of the concept of cognitive filtering? Here's the thing, researchers have figured out, how I'm not sure, but they have, that we process about 11 million bits of information each second. If that number seems astronomical to you, it does to me too, but the thing is our unconscious brain filters out well over 99 percent of that information. While the brain processes 11 million bits per second, our conscious mind processes about 40. Different researchers have slightly different numbers, but it doesn't change the basic facts. Your brain knows that the clock ticked and the walls are painted purple and something smells dusty in here and you have to remember to pick up milk on your way home and on and on and on, but you don't actively think about all of those things. In fact, you don't notice them at all, because your subconscious brain decides you don't need to notice those things, but you do need to notice the wet spot on the tile as you're walking across the room or the fact that your boss is asking you to do something or whatever your subconscious brain has decided is important in that moment. This is an extremely useful feature that our brains have—if you've ever had one of those times where you've noticed an annoying noise and then you couldn't un-notice that noise, and you remember how distracting that is, you can imagine what it would be like to have to consciously try to filter out all the unnecessary information every moment of the day. In fact, there's a clinical name for the condition where your brain doesn't filter information out fast enough, and it's called Attention Deficit Disorder, or ADD. Contrary to popular opinion, the drug Ritalin doesn't calm people down, it's actually a stimulant that speeds the brain up enough to filter out the extra stimuli and therefore allows the person taking the Ritalin to concentrate without all the mental distractions. Cool, right?

But I know some of you are wondering what on earth this has to do with the election ballot box being located on library property. You wouldn't have to wonder if you'd been working with us for the last month or so, because you would know about the dozens and dozens of people who walked past two or three written notices of the location of the ballot box to ask us where the ballot box is located. Because I can tell you that dozens of you walked past two signs that said "the ballot box is located behind the building" to ask whoever was at the front desk, "Where's the ballot box?"

Now, lest you think I'm being overly critical, I'm not trying to be. Remember that I said that cognitive filtering is a good and necessary brain function, and there are so many signs posted everywhere right now that reading all of them would be exhausting. And we were happy to tell anyone who asked us

exactly how they could drive up to the ballot box, no problem. But I do need to point this out because it shows what happens when we don't ever stop to think about our mental filters. And the effects can be especially harmful when combined with confirmation bias. We've talked about confirmation bias before, but here's your refresher—confirmation bias is when your brain deliberately seeks out information that confirms what you already believe to be truth and rejects information that is contrary to your beliefs—even if the contrary information is the true information. This is harmful enough when it happens on the conscious level, but just think about the fact that your subconscious brain filters out the true but contrary information without ever letting you consider it. Dangerous. Maybe not so harmful when it comes to asking a library staff member a question that we already answered on a sign, and maybe not so harmful when it comes to picking your favorite profession sports team—go Cubbies—in spite of the statistics that suggest they may not actually be the greatest (cough, cough, number of strikeouts for the team this year). But think for a moment about how that unconscious bias and filtering could affect the decisions you make about managing your household finances, or choosing which job candidate to hire, or yes, how to vote in an election. Suddenly this useful filter, when left to its own devices for too long, becomes more dangerous than useful.

So what can you do? Reset the filter, clean the filter, I don't know what analogy to use. Basically you need to temporarily choose to do consciously what you brain normally does unconsciously. One good way to do this is to meditate, if that's your thing. Constantly bringing your focus back to a mantra or to your breath or whatever your focus is when you meditate does help. But if taking up a meditation practice seems like too much work or too much woo-woo, no problem, there's even simpler things you can try. Maybe the next time you're riding in a car, note that I said riding not driving, pick a three-minute span when you'll commit to reading every bit of text that you see—every license plate, every billboard, every street sign, and so on. Flood your conscious mind with the things your brain usually filters out. Or do the opposite. Have you ever noticed that the power went out because you had that thought of "something's wrong" and realized you couldn't hear the refrigerator humming? Reproduce that effect. Put on a pair of noise-cancelling headphones and see if you can figure out which sounds your unconscious brain is frantically searching for. Maybe the best option is to take an issue that you feel passionate about and research an opposing viewpoint. See if you can apply logic tests and statistics to a different stance and make an argument for it, or apply the logic and statistics instead to you own stance and see if you can disprove it. If you need help with that, let us know—we're nerds, we love doing research. But anyway, deliberately bypassing your own filters temporarily helps shake them up a bit. It's a good practice to do sometimes.

So that's the first thing we learned. But wait, there's more! Have you ever heard of the ladder of inference? You're getting all the good psychology terms today. The ladder of inference is a term coined by Chris Argyris, I think I'm saying that correctly, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School, you may have heard of that, to describe the decision-making processes in our brain. Most of us like to think that the way we make decisions is pretty straightforward—take in information, make a decision. So I see an empty parking space, I steer my car into the empty parking space and put it in park. Chris actually says that our brains complicate this a lot more. Basically you brain starts with the data input at the bottom of a ladder and quickly runs that data up the rungs, applying all sort of assumptions and biases and extra data along the way, before reaching a decision at the top of the ladder. So we take in data, we select what data we want to consider, we add meaning, make assumptions, draw conclusions, formulate a belief and act on it, all in the work of a moment.

What does this look like in action? I learned to drive in the Chicago area, where people cut each other off with rather alarming regularity. If the decision-making process looked the way we want it to, then I would notice that someone moved into my lane without enough space and I would press the brakes on my car. Easy peasy. In reality though, my brain runs that bit of data – car moving into my lane too close—up the ladder of inference so quickly that even as I'm braking I'm declaring, usually out loud, that the other driver is an idiot who thinks he's more important than everyone else. I have no actual data about the other person's driving skills or experience, reason for switching lanes, feelings of self-esteem or importance, or even the driver's gender more often than not, but my brain labels that other driver a self-important male idiot anyway, and then I act on those assumptions as though they are fact.

We saw the ladder of inference in action, or rather heard it, in a voicemail left on the library's system on a Sunday afternoon. In that message, the person told us that the ballot information clearly said that the library was open 24/7 for ballot drop-off, and since the library building was closed, we were deceptive and intentionally interfering with this person's right to vote. Now the data input is still pretty simple—the library doors are not opening. But there are multiple decisions that this person could have made starting with that input, and the choice this person actually made tells us a lot about the assumptions and inferences and beliefs that were applied to the data before the decision was made. There are assumptions about the data itself—if the library's address is listed on the page for ballot drop-off, that must mean the building is open 24/7. There are assumptions about intentions—the library is deliberately trying to prevent me from voting. There are assumptions about appropriate next actions—I'll leave an angry voicemail instead of looking for a ballot box.

Now, it's easy to be critical in this instance because the assumptions are obviously false to many of us. The ballot box is open 24/7 during an election, but it's not located inside the library, so the building isn't 24/7. We agreed to let the County install a ballot box on our property because we wanted to make it easier for people in Berthoud to vote, not harder. Alternative next steps could have included double-checking the paperwork included with the ballot or looking around the property for a drop-box. But as easy as it is to judge this response, it's also easy to see how the assumptions dramatically affected this individual's reactions, and if we're being honest we have to admit we do the same thing based on our individual assumptions and beliefs. And unfortunately, if you remember the filtering effect we just talked about, it gets even more problematic if we run certain data up the ladder in the same way too frequently because it can start changing the data we take in. This can become a cycle where the assumptions we make and the way we act on them strengthens our mental filters.

Again, what's the best way to combat the effects of the ladder of inference? Mentally challenge them. The next time someone cuts you off in traffic (and yes, I'm basically talking to myself here), pause for a moment and ask yourself what you actually know about the driver of the other car. Before you make judgements about the person you're talking to, see if you have evidence or data to support your assumptions. Do you actually know how they parent their children, how they'll vote in the next election, or how well they'll maintain their yard based on what they just said to you, or are you making a whole slew of assumptions that you're turning into beliefs. And if you're assuming, stop. The only good way to stop the automatic run up the ladder of inference is to climb up it deliberately and pay attention to each step along the way.

All right folks, I've saved the best for last. Or maybe the scariest for last. I think it's the scariest anyway. One of the most frequent things we heard from people during this election season was a variation on the theme of "my vote doesn't matter anyway." It's a very common assumption, and based on the current state of politics in this country maybe even a valid one, but it leads to an attitude of learned helplessness. Here's your last psychological term for the day—learned helplessness is a condition that we can get ourselves into when we've tried to change something, didn't experience success, and so we stop trying even if we have the power to change the situation. This is a very common stance to take toward national politics right now, particularly if you have fairly moderate leanings in your political attitudes, but while I sympathize with you I also have to remind all of us that learned helplessness can be unlearned. Let me present some evidence that we are not helpless in our politics. Exhibit A, the length of your ballot. If "my vote doesn't matter anyway" is the number one thing you said to us during this election, "the ballot is so long!" was number two.

And what a privilege that is.

Say what? Half of the states in the country don't have any direct initiative or referendum privileges for the average citizen. In those states, the only way to get a law passed or changed or revoked is to convince a state legislator to sponsor and push through that change. Here in Colorado, we live in one of 26 states where citizens can put stuff on the ballot themselves and have pass or veto privileges for initiatives, even some that have already passed in the state legislature. While it makes for a long and sometimes confusing ballot, it's the opposite of "my vote doesn't matter anyway." Remember at the beginning here when I thanked you for stabilizing our funding? Your votes did that.

Now, if you're looking for a pep talk about transforming federal politics, you won't get one here. I have much too great of a cynical bent for you to get that from me. I'm not about to tell you that our great voting privileges will easily transform Washington D.C. But I will say that if we decide we can't have any effect on politics, we will be absolutely correct. Too much learned helplessness will lead to legitimate helplessness.

So to those of you who did vote this year, thank you. For those of you who didn't, I hope you'll consider doing so in the next election. I hope you heard something today that will help you in your thinking and your considering and your assuming and your deciding, and especially in your actions. If you have questions or concerns, or you just want to chat, you can get in touch with me by emailing podcast.bcld@gmail.com or calling the library at 970-532-2757. Well done with the election turnout, and once again I'm proud to say This is Berthoud.