WHEN INFORMING DOESN’T INFORM

[ABSTRACT]

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose  It appears that humans can become mal-informed and often consciously or subconsciously resist revising their mal-informed perspectives

Background  We need to apply behavioral and/or cognitive psychological approaches rather than traditional “educational” approaches

Methodology  Literature review

Contribution  Suggests revising research focus to affective rather than cognitive solutions

Findings  Teaching critical thinking helps but is not enough

Impact on Society  Many important societal decisions may be made emotionally rather than rationally

Future Research  Research affective as well as cognitive factors in decision-making

Keywords  malinformation, information resistance, decision-making

INTRODUCTION

A recent New York Times article recounted the story of a 17-year-old, straight-A student’s bolting from class after being asked to watch a documentary by a Christian climate activist. The film was selected and shown by the student's high school biology teacher in response to her objection that “a belief in climate change does not jibe with Christianity (Harmon, 2017).” In explaining her flight from class, Gwen said: “It was just so biased toward saying climate change is real. And that all these people that I pretty much am like are wrong and stupid.” An honor student, Gwen had the intellectual ability to understand the evidence provided. She was unwilling or unable to accept the evidence.

Perhaps we should expect as much from a high school student in a Trump-supporting town reflecting the views of her family and peers in America’s highly polarized political environment. However, cognitive biases have long been noted in human behavior across all demographics, and these biases...
not only affect our political and religious perspectives but also can affect quotidian decisions, too often impeding the achievement of our actual desires (Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999; Lovallo and Kahneman, 2003).

Informing science is manifestly about using multi-disciplinary approaches to studying how to more effectively convey information presumably for the benefit of the recipient. In his 2009 recapitulation of the “informing science framework,” Cohen (p. 10) acknowledges the human frailties that may distort the informing process and calls for future research concerning bias, misinformation and disinformation on the part of the informer and for client-focused research on “cognitive and psychological elements of informing.” This paper reviews relatively recent research conducted in psychology investigating factors relating to confirmation bias as well as other types of information distortion specifically (Hart & Nisbet, 2011; Hernandez & Preston, 2013; Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz & Cook, 2012; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999; Winkielman, Huber, Kavanagh & Schwarz, 2012) and calls for renewed emphasis in the informing sciences community to further investigate these phenomena with the goal of contributing to the development of general educational strategies as well as specific interventions to ameliorate breakdown or distortion in informing processes.

SELECTED CITATIONS FROM BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHIES

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