

Tackling disinformation with behavioural science

Our behaviour makes us unnervingly susceptible to believe 'fake news' and untrue information. Want to reduce your gullibility? Here are three recommendations we heard at the recent Behavioural Exchange conference that can help you



Source: The Behavioural Insights team

Untrue messaging appears in trusted sources with a consistent tone of voice, so it's quite easy to take what's said at face value, without double-checking.

And while we might like to think we can spot when things are out of the ordinary, there are a few key behaviours that make us overtly vulnerable to believing what's in front of us.

Should we have to check the validity of 'news'? Ideally not. But new technology has made it much easier to replicate and create fake visuals, voices or words, so being consciously aware is very important. Just take a look at what the experts have to say.

1 Recognise your own bias

Recognise that we select and prioritise information sources based on what we want to see and what we already believe, rather than what's most reliable or correct.

For example, think of your Twitter feed. Are you following people who have similar views to you or people you'd like to emulate?

Tali Sharot, a Professor of cognitive neuroscience finds in her research that we choose information sources that give us what we want rather than those that challenge what we think or make getting the news a chore. A good example of this is her findings that many of us are attracted to news shows that lean towards our political views. Regardless of how reliable these news sources are, we tend to rate them as more reliable if we know they support our political views. This goes for weather presenters as well, even though politics should have nothing to do with reporting that it's going to rain next Wednesday.

The problem with this is that we take face value information simply because of who delivers it – the source matters. This can also lead to polarisation of opinions. People who believe one thing listen to each other and stick together, avoiding the alternative view. Others do the same.

And this plays out in reverse as well. We tend to actively ignore information that goes against our grain. We essentially attempt to block it out and make sure it has little impact on our thoughts. Think you aren't affected? There is mixed evidence on whether intelligence plays a role in what news we are happy to pay attention to. What is evident though is that these biases are present in everyone to a greater or lesser degree.

2 Learning by doing

Move away from debunking and fact-checking. Focus on how behaviour impacts the information we consume and 'pre-bunk' by learning how to identify incorrect information.

Sander van der Linden has coined this term 'pre-bunking'. A social psychologist, he has created a digital training program to educate people on how to actively identify fake news.

He defines fake news as misinformation plus intent, with both required. He also suggests that it's easy to tweak things to prevent the spread of disinformation and aid the spread of correct information. Describing the process similar to a vaccine spreading through a population. Only this time vaccinating against fake information, rather than the flu.

Learning by doing is a well-known technique for getting new skills to stick. And when people play this game they create fake news themselves, as a way of learning how to identify it. Across education, age, gender and political orientation, people who are learning to identify fake messaging within the game environment and are becoming more confident in being able to do so in the real world.

3 Focus on how we process information

Not one for electronic games? You can instead focus on how we process information to form and develop our belief system.

Motivational reasoning explains what can drive us to conclude something different from others, even when we are looking at exactly the same information.

Antonio Silva, an advisor at the Behavioural Insights Team, explains the role of cognitive constraints, such as motivational reasoning, which can affect our capacity to receive information and lead us to favour options that require less cognitive effort.

He also finds that it helps to include alternative views within the same page as the fake news content, such as comments from people who challenge the article or media subject tags which contrast with the subject. These types of interventions reduced the overall belief of fake news.

If you want to be more aware of the prevalence of fake news, think about prevention over treatment and recognise that we are probably already saturated with news that supports what we think. It's acceptable to challenge your ego though and look further to gain a fuller picture.

A video of the talks from these three speakers at BX2019 can be found [here](#).

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