

Fact is, facts don't matter much anymore...

One of the things I enjoy most is a lively debate with friends who have differing points of view. I like the way people get charged up about things they really care about, how they shape their thoughts to support their arguments.

I particularly enjoy it when the debate is over and, in the best instances, we've all learned something from each other. And maybe if our minds are not only engaged but "open" we might find our position moving, begin questioning the place where opinion started and reality or facts kick in. Unfortunately, it seems that fact-based debate is a dying art.

A new study from University of Michigan researcher Brendan Nyhan entitled *When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions* shows that people who have based their beliefs on misinformation rarely change their minds, even when presented with the facts. Even more disturbing they often cling even more strongly to their beliefs when they are proven to be inaccurate, a phenomenon Nyhan has dubbed "backfire". Not surprisingly this reaction is most common when it comes to partisan issues around politics and social issues.

Nyhan's recent study is a follow-up to research he completed with associates at the University of Michigan in 2005 and 2006. Those studies showed a basic human tendency to continue to believe

in facts we carry in our heads, even when they've been proven false. Nyhan says this is worse than merely being misinformed, it means our views are entrenched and not subject to sway by any information source. It isn't information that's missing here but rather a basic emotional response that makes smart people hang on to false facts for reasons it is hard to define.

Nyhan's study, as well as previous studies conducted in 2005 and 2006 around facts vs. perception, attempts to understand why intelligent people continue to accept misinformation as fact in the face of contrary proof. This may not be a new practice—people have always shaped facts to fit the outcome they want—but Nyhan and others believe there is more reason for concern now than at any other time.

Nyhan's study suggests the underpinnings on which governments are chosen are becoming more fractured. He says we're filtering the information we receive through a prism, and end up getting a real divergence on all sorts of issues. And that makes it really hard to have intelligent debate. He equates the electorate's view on politics to sport and says people support a team because they are emotionally committed to them; they absorb the misinformation they need to continue their support—for better or for worse.

Nyhan says we need a "supply-side approach" where we try to enforce and



increase the "reputational costs" on people and institutions who promote bad information. Given the numbers it seems unlikely that this is a viable solution. Partisan news hosts and their networks are making millions while more moderate media languishes. The cycle continues because audiences are attracted to news outlets that reflect their beliefs, however inaccurate they may be.

In fairness to media consumers it is often difficult to separate what's accurate and what isn't, particularly within an environment where we get our news in bite-size pieces with little context. But Nyhan says the really frightening pattern isn't just where we get our news but how we use it. If we refuse to change beliefs that are built on inaccuracies the consequences can be devastating.

I read a quote attributed to Kant that seemed appropriate to Nyhan's study: "Mankind may be crooked timber, uniquely susceptible to ignorance and misinformation, but it's an article of faith that knowledge is the best remedy. If people are furnished with the facts, they will be clearer thinkers and better citizens. If they are ignorant, facts will enlighten them. If they are mistaken, facts will set them straight."

Even Kant didn't anticipate the societal impact of spin doctors and media in the 21st century.

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