Your fake news, our facts: Identity-based motivation shapes what we believe, share, and accept

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Author Note: We thank IBM lab for their comments on our earlier formulations of this chapter and especially S. Casey O’Donnell for suggestions for improvement.
Abstract

In making sense of experience and choosing a course of action, identities matter. People are more likely to accept and share messages that fit the way they make sense of themselves and their world. Messages that fit are more likely to stick and are less likely to be counterargued. One way to create this “fit” is to frame persuasion attempts in culturally fluent terms and yoke a call to action to the social categories people experience as ‘true’ and ‘natural.’ This two-step process (setting a culturally fluent frame and linking action to identity) shifts people from information-based to identity-based processing. Once this occurs, identities shape which facts matter, how much information is enough, how carefully information is scrutinized, and how much people accept, believe, and share rather than reject, disbelieve, and counterargue messages regarding these facts and information. We outline how this works, arguing that by combining cultural fluency and identities, disinformation may be more efficient than information or misinformation in rallying people to action and that undoing attempts must address this culture-identity framing.

Key words: cultural fluency and cultural disfluency, identity-based motivation, culture-as-situated cognition, fake news, Brexit
Our facts, your fake news:  
Identity-based motivation shapes what we believe, share, and accept

Introduction

On June 23, 2016, British voters went to the polls, or rather, seven in ten British voters went to the polls; the others refrained. The less than full turnout was surprising because what was at stake was whether or not they (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) would remain part of the European Union (EU), which they had been part of since 1973. The EU was based on the assumption that members were safer and stronger together --their countries less likely to face war; their economies more prosperous, their citizens freer. A British generation had grown up with London as an EU financial center, with EU research funds flowing into British universities and British products flowing seamlessly through the EU, Britain’s largest trading partner, dwarfing trade with its next three largest trading partners combined. This generation had grown up assuming that they could flow too -- be educated, get jobs, raise families anywhere in the EU. Voting to leave would undermine all of that, leave Britain alone in a connected world, and by creating borders with Ireland, an EU member, undermine a central element of the 1999 Good Friday peace accord with Northern Ireland that ended a long and bloody history of strife. Not only that, but there was no discussion of how borders, trade, and already signed commitments would be handled if Britain exited the EU.

Yet, the “exit” vote won at 51.9%. Not only that, but 18-to-24-year-olds, those with the most time at stake in the future, overwhelmingly voted “stay” but were also much less likely to vote at all than pensioners who came out in force and voted “exit” overwhelmingly. The same was true for Northern Ireland, where only six in ten voters went to the polls (the majority of those who did voted stayed). Why did so many young voters and so many Northern Irish voters fail to vote on a referendum on what their future would be? Why might pensioners set Britain up to renege on the Good Friday agreement and undermine financial certainty? One possibility is that this happened because people did not use the information just described in making their choice and instead reframed their choice (attribute substitution, Gilovich, Griffin, Kahneman, 2002). Instead of trying to address the question of how to synthesize which would be better for Britain’s economic and security future, people addressed a different question. They asked which choice felt like an “us” thing to do and if they could not decide, they stayed home.

How did this reframing occur? That is our focus in the current chapter. We suggest that people shifted from a complicated-to-answer information-based question to a simple-to-answer identity-based question. An information-based approach would have required the integration of large quantities of estimated data regarding how much Britain paid into versus received from the EU and how to maintain peace and secure borders. An identity-based approach required simply that people ask themselves what “stay” or “leave” implied for who they were and might become --whether “stay” or “leave” felt more like an “us” thing to do. We focus on the ways in which people are susceptible to just such reframing from information-based to identity-based reasoning when faced with complex, uncertain, and difficult to process information. In discussing this process, we distinguish disinformation, which is shared with the goal of producing in message recipients a particular judgment, a specific course of action irrespective of the veracity or bias of the shared content, from information, which is shared with the goal of informing. In this chapter, we outline how disinformation’s persuasive power comes from weaponizing people’s cultural expertise to channel them from information-based to identity-based processing, making them particularly susceptible to the disinformer’s call for action.

We outline the steps by which this happens from creating the appearance of a culturally relevant “legitimate” question to framing the issue as an identity-based rather than an information-based concern to presenting a clear identity-based choice and framing alternative choices as identity threatening. At step one, disinformation campaigns use people’s cultural expertise to reframe topics as questions, taking what otherwise would not be considered to be a “legitimate” question because the answer goes without saying, and reframing it into an open question. At step two, disinformation
campaigns capitalize on people’s cultural expertise so that the topic is framed in culturally fluent terms, using culturally recognizable icons, phrasing, embodied, and sensory cues. Having set the stage, disinformation campaigns frame a specific course of action as identity-relevant, what “we” do and for good measure, suggest that failure to take the identity-relevant action threatens the identity itself. Thus, as we outline in this chapter, there is more to the story than simply the lack of information or presence of misinformation. It is really the ways in which people use their identities to make sense of what information implies for action that matters.

To concretize our discussion of these three steps, we use Britain and the 2016 British referendum on whether to stay in or secede from the EU as our concretizing example. The question of whether to stay or secede was framed as whether Great Britain should exit the EU. The referendum was nicknamed “Brexit.” In the next section, we operationalize what we mean by cultural expertise and why it matters for reasoning, which is necessary to understand why we suggested that a first step in the persuasive power of disinformation is creating the appearance of a culturally relevant “legitimate” question.

Cultural Expertise, Cultural Fluency and Cultural Disfluency

From an ecological perspective, group living is a survival necessity and human culture is essential to adapting to group living (Boyd & Richerson, 1988, 2005; Cohen, 2001; Haidle et al., 2015; Kurzban & Neuberg, 2005). Group living requires that people develop “social tuning” (sensitivity to others’ perspectives) and “self-regulation” (the ability to control the focus of one’s attention) skill (Chiu et al., 2015; Oyserman, 2011, 2017; Shteynberg, 2015). These culturally necessary skills are the basis of cultural practices evolved to create “good enough” solutions to the survival problems of coordinating, fitting in, and sharing. These solutions are “good enough,” rather than optimal but, once developed, they become “sticky” by virtue of being the ways “we” do things – “our” structures, practices, norms, and values (Cohen, 2001; Oyserman, 2015a). They permeate all aspects of behavior, constrain and enable perception and reasoning, and provide a shared blueprint or outline for meaning-making across a variety of situations (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010; Nisbett & Norazyan, 2002; Oyserman, 2017; Shteynberg, Gelfand, & Kim, 2009; Shweder & LeVine, 1984; Triandis, 1972, 2007).

In this way, culture is in part a set of associative knowledge networks, tacit operating codes, or meaning-making frameworks through which people make sense of their world, understand what they want, and how they go about getting it. These culturally rooted associative knowledge networks provide mental models, affording people the cultural expertise to predict how situations will likely unfold. Each of a culture’s “good enough” solution entails a knowledge network including the content, procedures, and goals related to its overarching theme --individualism, collectivism, and honor. Each of a culture’s practices does as well, including specific, though often implicit, knowledge about how things work --what brides wear, what breakfast entails. Immediate contexts make some subset of available cultural knowledge networks accessible in the moment and people use this subset to make an automatic prediction about what will happen next.

Cultural mindsets shape accessible mental procedures.

Accessible cultural mindset affects the mental procedure people use. For example, people are better at quickly naming a distinct object in a visual array after an individualistic mindset is primed, suggesting that they are using a pull-apart-and-separate procedure (Oyserman, Sorensen, Reber, & Chen, 2009, Study 3). They are better at recalling where objects were in a visual array (Oyserman, et al., 2009, Studies 1 and 2) but had more trouble ignoring extraneous visual (Oyserman et al., 2009, Studies 4 and 5) or auditory (Oyserman et al., 2009, Studies 6 and 7) information after a collectivistic mindset has been primed, suggesting that they are using a connect-and-relate procedure. Other studies supporting these procedure-based predictions. After a collectivistic mindset has been primed, people are willing to pay more to complete a set (Moore, Oyserman, & Yoon, 2013, Study 1b). They are willing to accept previously undesired options if a set cannot be completed (Moore et al, 2013, Studies 2 to 4), and they have more difficulty finding a best match and ignoring other plausible but
Cultural knowledge shapes what is fluent and disfluent and hence reasoning style.

Cultural knowledge also sets up implicit expectations, which if met, make it easier to process the situation at hand and if violated, make it more difficult to do so. This not only makes it easier to process culturally fluent information, but it also helps people know when something is not right, triggering a shift from associative, gut-based reasoning to systematic, rule-based reasoning when the unexpected occurs (Oyserman, 2011). As an example, consider four experiments conducted by Mourey, Lam, and Oyserman (2015). In each experiment, the cultural cue (independent variable) was exposure to a culturally fluent (matched cultural expectation) or culturally disfluent (mismatched cultural expectation) situation or product. The first experiment involved having or not having the color pink as a border on Valentine’s Day or after Valentine’s Day, the second and third involved first rating the quality of photographs of weddings, the fourth involved first making a choice among formats of an obituary for a family prior to the cognitive task. The prediction was that cultural expertise would make the match easier to process than the mismatch and that this cultural expertise driven processing difficulty would trigger a shift to systematic reasoning.

The effect on reasoning (dependent variable) was assessed with a cognitive task that was specifically devised to have both a gut-based and a rule-based answer. Though gut-based responses are not always wrong, they lead people astray in situations in which applying a processing rule does not come naturally but is the correct way to proceed. Here is an example from the original task: “A fishing rod and fishing bait cost $11 in total. The fishing rod costs $10 more than the bait. How much does the bait cost?” The gut-based but incorrect response is $1 based on the gist focus on the “$10” piece of information resulting in simply subtracting $10 from $11 ($11 – $10 = $1). The rule-based and correct response is $0.50 based on the rule-based focus on the “$10 more” as a piece of information resulting in the equation: $11 = n + (n + $10). People give the $1.00 gut-based or $0.50 rule-based response, only a few people give answers that cannot be coded as gut or rule-based (answers other than $1.00 or $0.50).

The first experiment took place in two locations: Ann Arbor, Michigan (United States) and Hong Kong, S.A.R. China, in each location, people were randomly assigned to one of four groups work--groups varied on day (Valentine’s Day or a week later) and color (pink, not pink). The culturally fluent condition group did the task on Valentine’s Day and worked on a screen that displayed a pink colored border. The other three groups were control groups, they did the task on Valentine’s Day but without a pink colored border, or a week after Valentine’s Day (with or without the pink colored border). The people randomly assigned to the cultural fluency group, the group that saw the “right” color at the “right” time (pink on Valentine’s Day) were more likely to stick to gut-based reasoning than the people randomly assigned to the other groups. Match to culturally-based expectations preserved “gut” based reasoning even when rule-based reasoning was needed and as a result, people in the cultural fluency group were more likely to give the wrong $10 answer than participants in the three other conditions - who did not differ from each other.

The finding that even in situations calling for rule-based, systematic reasoning, people stuck to associative gut-based reasoning after receiving culturally fluent cues, was replicated in three follow-up experiments. Tellingly, in these experiments, effects were found even though exposure to the cultural cue that triggered cultural fluency and disfluency was separate from the subsequent reasoning task. In two experiments, cultural expertise about weddings was triggered. In these wedding studies, half of the participants were randomly assigned to rate eight culturally fluent wedding photographs and the other half were randomly assigned to rate eight culturally disfluent photographs. In the culturally fluent photographs, the bride was in white, the groom in black, their tiered wedding cake had white fondant icing, and their wedding party had bridesmaids and groomsmen. In the

Across experiments, people from different countries (the U.S., Norway, Hong Kong, Korea) and different racial-ethnic groups (e.g., Latino, African American, Asian or Asian American) shifted into or out of collectivistic mindset depending on momentary cues. Accessible mindset affected the mental procedure people used. Though not directly tested in these experiments, one way to trigger a collectivistic mindset is to make social (group-based) identities such as British, or rural, or patriotic salient in the moment (Oyserman, 2007).
culturally disfluent photographs, the bridal dress included some green and purple, the groom’s tuxedo also had some purple, their tiered wedding cake was decorated with colorful cogs, and there was no wedding party. In the final experiment, cultural expertise about funerals and mourning was triggered. In this obituary study, half of the participants were randomly assigned to a culturally fluent obituary set and the other half to a culturally disfluent obituary set. In the culturally fluent condition, they saw two versions of the same sad in tone, praising the deceased, obituary. In the culturally disfluent condition, they saw two versions of the same not sad in tone, not praising the deceased obituary. The researchers found the not sad, not praising obituary and created a parallel sad, praising obituary. Thus, “had no hobbies … will not be missed” in the original was edited to “had numerous hobbies … will be missed.” The researchers made two versions of each obituary by rearranging paragraph order.

Across experiments, the people who were randomly assigned to the culturally fluent condition were more likely to use associative, gut-based reasoning than those randomly assigned to the cultural disfluency condition. As these experiments demonstrate, experiences of cultural fluency and of cultural disfluency are the result of the interface between what observers’ cultural expertise leads them to (implicitly) expect, what they actually observe, and the meaning they draw from their ensuing metacognitive experiences of ease or difficulty (Oyserman, 2011, 2017). What makes for a metacognitive experience of ease or difficulty is not the observation itself but the match or mismatch between observation and culturally rooted expectation. Experiencing match or mismatch requires having the cultural expertise to know (implicitly) what to expect. These expectations are rooted in one’s culture – what one has learned explicitly or picked up implicitly through observation and socialization practices.

Cultural expertise and persuasive messages.

Though prior research on cultural fluency and disfluency has not directly assessed the effects of cultural expertise on processing of persuasive messages (for a review, Oyserman & Yan, 2019), in this section we consider how cultural fluency and disfluency of messaging might matter. We operationalize culturally fluent messages as messages that fit what cultural expertise would lead one to (implicitly) expect given the situation. As detailed above, when faced with culturally fluent content, people are less likely to switch to systematic, rule-based reasoning than when faced with culturally disfluent content even when the situation calls for it. Likely reasoning strategy is important to consider in the case of persuasive messaging attempts since people are less likely to notice differences in message quality when reasoning associatively than when reasoning systematically (Petty & Caccioppo, 1981, 1984).

This implies that people may be less likely to reason systematically when confronted with culturally fluent messaging, messaging that uses images, phrasing, and other subtle cues that fit cultural expectations. Because of this, they may fail to distinguish information from misinformation -- messages meant to convey facts as known at the time, from factually incorrect or biased information. Moreover, they may fail to distinguish messages meant to inform judgement and choice from messages meant to produce a particular judgment or choice. We apply the logic of communication, described next, to explain why.

The Logic of Communication

Following conventions of language use, people typically assume that message sharers have a goal of informing (Grice’s maxims of communication or “logic of communication”, Schwarz, 1996, 2014). That is, people assume that message sharers share content they believe to be factually true, unbiased, and potentially useful in informing judgment and decision-making, even if sometimes message sharers get it wrong and unbeknownst to themselves misinform -- share factually untrue or biased content. According to these conventions of language use, unless they have reason to be suspicious, people start with the assumption that communicators are attempting to be informative-- to clearly tell them something that is relevant, something that their audience does not already know (Schwarz, 2014).
The logic of communication and communicative intent.

The logic of communication serves people well when sender and receiver share a goal of informing. Because their reasoning is shaped by the logic of communication, people make (often implicit) assumptions about information from how it is communicated (Gilbert, 1991; Gilbert, Krull, & Malone, 1990; Schwarz et al., 1991; Schwarz, 1996; Schwarz & Sudman, 1996, 2012; Sudman, Bradburn, & Schwarz, 1996). They do so whether or not the communicator intended them to make these inferences and often without awareness of the source of their inference (Schwarz et al., 1991).

The logic of communication however can also shield the intentions of message senders who do not have a goal of informing judgment and choice but a goal of shaping judgment and producing a particular choice. While message veracity and bias are relevant when message senders have a goal of informing, they are irrelevant when message senders have a goal of shaping judgment and producing a particular choice. For clarity, we use the term disinformation to describe this latter form of message content shared by senders who do not have the intent to inform but the intent to shape recipient judgment and decision-making independently of the probative content of the messages they send. Veracity and bias are irrelevant to disinformation messaging, it does not matter if the content is true or unbiased, it only matters if it produces the intended response. What we are proposing is that people are particularly unlikely to notice disinformation if it is presented in a culturally fluent way because in these situations, they are less likely to feel suspicious, notice something is off, and shift to systematic reasoning.

The logic of communication and “legitimate” (versus “illegitimate”) questions.

Continuing with the logic of communication, because people make assumptions based on how information is communicated, communicators can raise doubt by simply asking a question. People assume that the communicator is posing a question because more than one option is possible. Otherwise, the question is not a legitimate one. When the goal is not to inform but to disinform – to change judgment rather than to inform it, raising a question can be a first step in changing judgment. That is why asking “who is buried in Grant’s tomb” (a question that includes its answer, Grant) is puzzling. People assume it is a legitimate question, and hence the seemingly only possible answer (General Grant) could not be true. Following the logic of communication, question recipients typically assume cooperative intent. That would imply that maybe Grant is not buried in Grant’s tomb. But in fact, who is buried in Grant’s tomb is not a legitimate question; it has the intention of sowing doubt and leading people to be open to being told any possible alternative.

In 2016, the question “should Britain exit the EU?” was not, at least initially, a clearly legitimate question. After all, if whether or not to leave the EU could be considered a legitimate question, it would imply that what was assumed to be true might not be so, that maybe being in the EU is a problem, otherwise, why ask the question? By getting the question on the ballot, the secession campaign had already succeeded in making the question seem as if it might be legitimate. Note that even slight changes in public perception and action can have major consequences, making disinformation campaigns tempting to use. To understand what problem the EU might be, we turn to identity-based motivation theory.

Identity-based motivation

Dynamic construction, interpretation of experience, and action readiness.

Identity-based motivation (IBM) theory is a situated cognition theory of self-regulation; which predicts that people prefer to make sense of situations and act in ways that feel congruent with their important social and personal identities (Oyserman, 2007, 2009, 2015). Social identities are identities linked to group membership – being patriotic, nationalistic, British, a Londoner, a European, male, a parent, a taxpayer, which may be linked to a variety of content and in this way overlap with personal identities --as fiscally prudent, proud, loyal. Social identities may reference both semantic and sensory content -- what we value but also what we look like and sound like. People have many past, current, and future possible social and personal identities available to them in memory and these
identities have no preset organizational structure (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). Instead, people are affected by the particular identities that are accessible (“on their mind”) at the moment of judgment, if these identities feel relevant to the task at hand.

Dynamic construction.

To paraphrase William James (1890), thinking (about the self) is for doing. Because doing requires sensitivity to the affordances and constraints in the situation, which identities come to mind, and what these “on-the-mind” identities seem to mean, is sensitively attuned to momentary and chronic features of context (for a review, Oyserman, et al., 2012). People not only pull from memory what an identity means, they also infer from context what an identity must mean given features of the immediate situation. In that sense, identities are dynamically constructed in the moment—the seemingly same identity may imply different actions in different contexts. Thus, in the moment being British may be part of being European—when traveling without need of visas but it could also be in contrast to being European—when people from other countries register their children in your local school. That people are sensitive to the implications of their immediate situation is a design feature, not a design flaw. Sensitivity to social context allows people to make inferences about what people like themselves likely do, which strategies work for them, and what inferences to draw when they progress smoothly as well as when they run into difficulties (Oyserman, Lewis, Yan, Fisher, O'Donnell, & Horowitz, 2017).

Using the logic we outlined in the section on the evolution of culture, messages from in-group members should feel more credible -- in-group members share your values and are less likely to be harmful than out-group members. From an evolutionary perspective, being able to recognize who is in the in-group is critical. The in-group is safe, can be approached. The in-group is unlikely to deceive or pose a threat, reducing the need to be wary, suspicious, and guarded. One’s guard can be let down. But how can one tell who is providing the message? The senses can be a cue – people like “me” sound a certain way, use certain turns of phrase, have certain accents and people like me also “look” a certain way, wear certain styles, focus on certain iconic images. Thus, in-group messages are more likely to “ring true” and to “sound right;” they are more likely to feel familiar and culturally fluent.

Procedural readiness.

Sense-making or “procedural readiness” is the readiness to make sense of new situations in the ways afforded by the cued identities. For example, when collectivistic “we” social identities are cued, people are more likely to use connecting and relating mental procedures whereas when individualistic “I” personal identities are cued, people are more likely to use separating and distinguishing mental procedures (Oyserman, 2007). This implies that if disinformation campaign message content includes social identities, the campaign message carries a trigger to think in terms of connections and associations rather than to focus on a main point. We show examples of this process below.

Action readiness.

The readiness to act in new or ambiguous situations in identity-congruent ways is referred to as “action-readiness”. If taking a particular action is identity-congruent, “for me” or “for us,” that implies the importance of persisting when difficulties starting or staying on course arise. In contrast, if taking a particular action is identity-irrelevant or even identity-incongruent, people are likely to interpret difficulties starting or staying going differently. In these cases, difficulty implies that the action is not for “me” anyway (Elmore & Oyserman, 2012; Oyserman, 2019b).
Figure 1. Three Interlocking Components

The thing of interest here is not that people can change how they regard themselves after putting in sustained and conscious effort, but rather that small shifts in context can have surprisingly large effects by changing how people regard themselves. Moreover, as illustrated in Figure 1, each of the three identity-based motivation components (dynamic construction of identity, readiness to act, and meaning-making in identity-congruent ways) operates in tandem. This mutuality means that cues to action influence both action and identity and cues to meaning-making influence both understanding and identity. In other words, if in context, an identity comes to mind, its implications for meaning making and action are also afforded. The same is true if an action comes to mind, then its implications for identity and meaning making are afforded. In much the same way, if a way of making sense of experience comes to mind, then its implications for identity and meaning making are afforded.

Identity stability is a useful fiction.

Though dynamic construction is a key feature of the functioning of identity-based motivation, people do not necessarily experience their identities or their motivational processes in this flexible way. Instead, people typically experience their identities as stable across time and space (Oyserman, 2019b). This belief is useful for several reasons. First, it allows people to make predictions about their future preferences given what they prefer now by experiencing current “me” and future “me” as essentially the same “me” (Oyserman, 2019b). Second, it facilitates choice among action alternatives. That is, taking current action for the sake of future “me” -- doing schoolwork (Nurra & Oyserman, 2018) or saving for retirement (Lewis & Oyserman, 2015b), makes sense if current and future “me” are essentially the same. Third, by increasing certainty, it minimizes the extent that people need to seek out supporting information for identity-based choices and sense making.

Consequential Yet Difficult: Shifting from Information-based to Identity-based Reasoning

Of course people do not have to use identity-based reasoning, they can (and do) engage in information-based reasoning. Information-based reasoning entails using the information at hand to
guide judgment and inform choice. People are likely to use information-based processing when the information to be used is easy to access, clear, and limited, then computational processing (e.g., trading off risks and rewards) is possible (Reyna, 2004). Which route is faster can be answered by searching a web-based traffic application. Which product costs more can be answered by price comparisons. Yet, the information to be used is often none of these things, particularly when choice is consequential for the long run but long run outcomes are complex, uncertain, and difficult to process. In these cases, we propose, culturally fluent framing of information facilitates a shift from a difficult to address information-based question to an easy to address identity-based one. We summarize this process in Figure 2.

Figure 2. When Processing Strategy Becomes Identity-Based

Social media and the dissemination of disinformation.

Social media platforms are designed for people to come together and share identity relevant content. These platforms seem free and friendly -- people feel that they are choosing what to engage with and that their choices are not being constrained. Yet by engaging freely and experiencing the context as friendly, people also provide platform organizers with a large pool of rich data on themselves and become the product that platform organizers can sell. This combination of flow of information through personal ‘friend’ or ‘follower’ connections and availability of rich data make social platforms ideal for campaigns seeking to spread culturally fluent disinformation messages targeted to important social identities. Users willingly or even unwittingly turn over their data and other high-resolution behavioral insights to corporations in exchange for the ability to connect and share information. Much of these data can readily be turned into targeting demographics for advertising. Facebook, for example, generates a vast majority of its revenue from advertising, over $55 billion USD in 2018 ("Facebook Reports Fourth Quarter", 2019).

At their core, social media platform systems are highly efficient advertising networks. Their algorithms aim to increase content engagement and time spent on the platform by directing attention to stimulating content personalized for an individual, often with content that fits within a user’s world view or content that is highly affective (Barberá et al., 2015; Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). By allowing for interactivity, these platforms garner not only the information people enter themselves but also the content users engage with. Big data techniques allow abstraction of specific metrics such as demographics as well as psychological abstractions such as personality traits and
more from user engagement (Kosinski, Stillwell, & Graepel, 2013). Facebook produces detailed data profiles on users, including facial recognition data, location information, interests, demographics, behaviors, social network maps, all of which can be used to tailor disinformation (Facebook, "Facebook Advertising Targeting Options"; Shochat et al., 2009). Indeed, Facebook allowed for thousands of targeting options during the Brexit period. Some of which it has now removed as a result of backlash after the Brexit campaign and related campaigns, including the U.S. Presidential election (“Disinformation and ‘fake news’:Interim Report”, 2018). The Brexit campaign could develop many targeted versions of content pieces, see which ones were shared, and continue to develop and craft new ones. That we showed three messages should not be taken to mean that there were only a few messages.

Identity-based motivation and disinformation campaigns.

We illustrate how this process works by returning to the example of the Brexit campaign. To succeed, the secession campaign needed to do two things: it needed to persuade some voters to vote “leave” and it needed to persuade other voters to stay home and not vote at all. To do so, the Brexit campaign used disinformation (content meant not to inform but to produce a particular action) and needed to reduce the chance that voters noticed that they were receiving disinformation. The campaign reduced the chances that voters would notice that messages were disinformative by using culturally fluent materials (reducing likelihood of shift to systematic reasoning) and social identities (increase likelihood of collectivistic mental procedures, that is reasoning in terms of connections and associations). The campaign increased chances that disinformative messages would be accepted by framing judgement and choice in terms of social identities (how “we” think, the choices “we” make). Having done so, the Brexit campaign then framed a particular action (vote “exit”) as the identity-relevant one for some voters. For other voters, the Brexit campaign focused instead on undermining confidence either in the triggered identity or in what the identity implied for behavior. This culturally fluent identity-based reformulation succeeded in two ways. First, it made Brexit a legitimate question. Second, it freed people from having to digest complex, competing, and uncertain estimates of the financial cost of staying or leaving and allowed them to ask instead what a “stay” or “leave” vote (or voting at all) felt like in terms of who they were. Of course, this reformulation from information-based to identity-based choice could not have worked if people did not already have a preference for making identity-congruent choices, taking identity-congruent action, and making sense of their experiences in identity-congruent ways.

To attain these outcomes, two different secession campaigns, the “BeLeave” campaign and the “Vote Leave” campaign hired a digital firm to run their media-based persuasion (“Disinformation and ‘fake news’:Final Report”, 2019). The firm, Aggregate IQ, is a North American firm whose founders specialize in persuasive power on digital platform-based social media, including Facebook. The firm was an established player in the domain of digital mass persuasion, specifically in the political arena. AIQ developed software products for the SCL group, a large “global election management agency” more commonly known by their subsidiary Cambridge Analytica. AIQ’s tools were also used in North American elections by the SCL group, working for the Republican Party (“Disinformation and ‘fake news’:Interim Report”, 2018).

To persuade British voters in the Brexit referendum, AIQ used their knowledge of how Facebook operates to generate thousands of different content pieces for Facebook. They both consulted with the campaigns on the efficacy of pre-existing content and independently created large quantities of new content. They served this content using advanced demographic targeting—that is, they knew who exactly they were targeting with which content pieces, and selected specific pieces for each individual. British citizens were delivered content that would ring true, speak to them, in clear and visceral terms. But what appeared to unsuspecting social media users to be simply catchy what term culturally fluent visuals and tag lines were actually carefully design to use culturally fluent frames to deliver a call to action.
Figure 3. A Culturally Fluent Nostalgic British Identity Framing EU Secession As Necessary For Maintenance of British Identity (reprinted from House of Commons: Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Disinformation and ‘fake news’: Final Report under the Open Parliament Licence v3.0)

Figure 4: A Culturally Fluent Environmentalist Identity Framing EU Secession As Necessary For Maintenance of an Environmentalist Identity (reprinted from House of Commons: Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Disinformation and ‘fake news’: Final Report under the Open Parliament Licence v3.0)
Effects of Culturally Fluent Identity-based Motivational Framing: The Brexit Campaign

Leveraging culturally fluent identity-based motivation to increase “leave” voting.

Figure 3 (teacup) and Figure 4 (polar bear) provide two examples of what content pieces meant to propel “leave” voting looked like. The teacup message takes an identity “British” and dynamically constructs particular content from this identity. It takes culturally fluent visual (Big Ben, red phone booth) and sensory cues (implied taste of British tea and sound of “cuppa”) of “British” and creates a novel meaning that being “British” is best attained by voting the leave the EU. This message is targeted at people for whom Britishness of a certain nostalgic nature might easily come to mind and is multifaceted. That is, not only does cuppa informally mean “cup of tea”, linguistically cuing Britishness in everyday speech, but the saying “not my cuppa [tea]”, means “not for me”, adding more cultural fluency. Not only does the teacup message frame a particular course of action for its targeted audience, but it is also so clearly nostalgic that it is unlikely to be experienced as relevant to other audiences. Hence, it is unlikely to mobilize action among a potential “stay” audience.

The polar bear message frames a different identity, environmentalist, and suggests that having that identity requires a specific action – exit the EU. It is targeted at people for whom social identities other than nostalgic Britishness might more easily come to mind. Much like the teacup message, people who are unlikely to have an environmentalist identity triggered are unlikely to process this information as relevant – if anything it might seem just silly. Lacking a framework to make sense of the polar bear, they are unlikely to respond at all to the message.

Leveraging culturally fluent identity-based motivation to undermine “stay” voting.

To persuade potential “stay” voters to just stay home, the Brexit campaign had two options. It could increase doubt that voting “leave” really was a “we” thing to do or increase doubt that voting at all was something that “we” do. Figure 5 (jet travel) provides an example of what content pieces meant to undermine certainty that voting was a “me” or “us” thing to do looked like. The jet travel message frames two possible identities, a sensible, frugal British identity and an environmental identity. The British identity frame is in some ways similar to the nostalgic teacup frame; in this case, recalling the post War austerity years. Like the teacup frame, there is no ambiguity to the call for
action – vote “exit.” In contrast, the environmental identity frame poses the question of whether staying or leaving is the better environmental choice. Like many environmental choices – is it better to wash the recyclable plastic (wasting water) or to throw it into landfill (wasting energy)? Or is it simpler not to choose? For the environmentalist, the jet travel message undermines certainty as to whether voting “stay” or “leave” is the identity-congruent action. Moreover, with its whiff of potential corruption, the jet travel message undermines certainty that political leaders have anything but their own interests at heart. The message produces a lack of clarity as to which action to take and reduces the likelihood of acting at all. Exposure to this message should reduce the likelihood that environmentalists see voting as clearly identity-congruent while at the same time increasing the likelihood that nostalgic pensioners did. It should undermine certainty that voting at all is identity congruent, given that messages from a corrupt source are unlikely to be providing useful information as to what people like “me” should do.

After the vote: long term effects.

By focusing on culturally fluent identity-based reasoning, disinformation campaigns are likely to have long-lasting effects on judgment beyond the specifically engineered action (in the case of Brexit, the vote itself). This is because by engaging with culturally fluent social identity-based cues, people are likely to actively produce an identity -- being British did not start out as being antagonistic to the EU but once framed in this way, people are likely have this association whenever the linked British identity cues come to mind. By linking action to identity-based processing, disinformation maintains an associative reasoning style beyond the moment. Because social identities trigger a collectivistic connecting and relating mental procedure, people experience the engineered action as identity-relevant, the way “we” act, implying that fits “our” values. As described in the section on dynamic construction, disinformation does not need to rely on already available identity-to-action associations, these can be constructed in context, however, once constructed and engaged with repeatedly, these associations are likely to be triggered whenever the identity is triggered in relevant contexts (as portrayed in Figure 1). Once linked to identity, recall of the source of information is neither necessary, nor useful since disinformation is agnostic as to the veracity of information.

Comparing Effectiveness of Information, Misinformation and Disinformation: A Culturally Infused IBM Perspective

Following conventions of language use, people typically assume that message sharers have a goal of informing (Grice’s maxims of communication or “logic of communication”, Schwarz, 1996, 2014). Informing entails sharing content one believes to be factually true, unbiased, and potentially useful in informing judgment and decision-making, even if sometimes message sharers get it wrong and unbeknownst to themselves misinform --share factually untrue or biased content. Misinformation can result in holding beliefs that are not factually true. We have argued that because disinformation focuses on shaping judgment and engineering behavior, it is more likely to affect action than simple information or even misinformation campaigns. Other informational messaging techniques such as narrative building may effectively change opinion and this may translate the change into action if linked to social identities (Murphy, Frank, Moran, & Patnoe-Woodley, 2011). At the same time, these techniques may yield action by changing not people’s attitudes, but their beliefs about what “we” do and believe an identity-based route via social norms (Paluck, 2009). The implication is that identity-based persuasion techniques can improve information campaigns likelihood of affecting judgment and behavior, whether or not the information can be accurately recalled. The challenge in correcting misinformation and disinformation is that once a question has been framed as “how do we think about this?” it is unlikely that people will switch to a different one “what is the probative value of this information?” Worse yet, once people come to believe that “we” think and act in a certain way, they are more unlikely to consider other information as other than “alternative facts.” Correction attempts that do not focus on triggering construction of alternative identity-based reasoning are unlikely to succeed.
References


Relationship mapping employing multi-dimensional context including facial recognition


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