

The backfire effect and the menace of fake news

If you are active online, you will, at some time or the other, have been drawn into an argument you found yourself simply incapable of winning. Chances are the issues at stake involved facts that should never have been up for debate in the first place. And yet it is precisely these sorts of issues—which involve what has collectively begun to be called fake news—that are a lightning rod for online discussion.

There have been efforts to come up with a regulatory solution to mitigate the impact of fake news on our social and political discourse. Many have called for the tech companies most closely identified with facilitating its proliferation to be held accountable. Armies of fact-checkers have come into existence—people whose sole job it is to confirm whether or not what is being reported is true.

And yet it feels like civilized debate is well and truly dead.

One of the reasons why it's so hard to win an argument online is because of the “backfire effect”—a particular type of cognitive bias that makes us all, even in the face of clearly documented evidence, double down on our beliefs, refusing to change our views despite being provided persuasive evidence to the contrary.

One of the best documented examples of this effect came from a study of anti-vaxxers (parents opposed to the practice of vaccinating their children) who, when presented with documented evidence of how no harm could come from it, somehow became less inclined to vaccinate.

Social media seems to exacerbate the backfire effect.

Every time we get into an argument online, the facts we present in support of our position seem, paradoxically, to strengthen the hand of our opponents. They frustratingly cherry-pick those parts of our statements that suit them best and use it to their advantage, in the process turning our own arguments against us without appreciating the merits of our propositions taken as a whole. And as the fervour of their beliefs clashes with our own convictions, we too double down, refusing to give up—in the process pushing each other further and further apart.

The trouble is that we instinctively think that we can change the minds of those who disagree with us, by presenting them with facts that disprove their stated position. We do this assuming that facts inform beliefs, which in turn influence the shared values that lead to the formalization of regional cultural factors that ultimately exert a normative influence on what we do.

As a matter of fact, it works in the exact opposite direction. Our determination of what we should or should not do tends to be based on our regional cultural norms. It is this that informs our values that in turn determines the beliefs that we hold true.

If in the middle of an argument, these beliefs are threatened, we try and find ways to support our beliefs, protecting and justifying them by selectively picking from the facts that have been ranged against us, those that most substantially support our beliefs.

This is why it is so hard to change the minds of those we engage with online. When we argue against them we are attacking the beliefs that are central to their particular regional cultural norms. They are hard-wired to protect these beliefs by attacking the facts that challenge them and, as a result, our fact-based arguments are turned against us with seemingly counter-intuitive logic.

Once you understand exactly how it works, “backfire” is easy to weaponize.

If news can be presented in such a manner that it taps into specific regional cultural norms, it can be made to strike a deep chord in those who subscribe to particular beliefs. It matters not a whit if that news is true or not. As long as it supports a normative belief, the confirmation bias that accompanies the backfire effect will elevate it to the level of an unassailable fact.

Fake news operates at the confluence of precisely engineered information delivered through finely targeted online advertisement. It is strategically aimed at a carefully selected cross-section of people so that when it is presented to them in this manner, the information taps directly into the unique regional and cultural beliefs of its intended audience. Packaged like this, it is impossible to challenge.

Almost everyone involved in the most recent US national election was caught off-guard by the effectiveness of fake news. Since they didn't understand what it was that they were up against, they tried to use truth to fight weaponized facts.

When nothing they did made any difference to the what people were thinking, they couldn't understand how their counter-attacks based on verified facts were being turned against them. By the time they realized what was happening, it was too late.

There is no easy legislative or regulatory solution to the problem of fake news. The only effective remedy is to engage with it at a subliminal level, presenting those who are easily swayed by “alternative facts” with counter-factuals that engage them at the normative level.

As we enter election mode in India it is likely that we will, in this election cycle, be faced with a similar barrage of fake news—statements that will be immune to reason.

We'd do well to recognize the impact that the backfire effect is having on our own political views and opinions and, hopefully, will be able to ignore it so that we can engage in constructive debate regardless of the alternative facts that are thrown at us.

Rahul Matthan is a partner at Trilegal. Ex Machina is a column on technology, law and everything in between. His Twitter handle is @matthan.

Comments are welcome at views@livemint.com

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com