

Faking it – how much do facts matter?

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When I was growing up, the Bozeat family enjoyed a good debate on the topic du jour. When faced with a particularly well argued point my dad would sometimes jokingly say, “Stop bothering me with the facts whilst I’m making my mind up”. When I heard him say that I knew I had won the argument, but I think that sentence is a good summary of what goes on in peoples minds when faced with facts that counter their opinions. Facts and opinions have of course been the subject, rather than the content of the news recently. First we had the Stop Funding Hate campaign who were keen for brands to stop advertising with newspapers that held opinions counter to their own and blame those papers for spreading ‘hate’ across society. Now we have have revelations of the proliferation of ‘Fake News’ on social platforms which is being blamed for winning Trump the US election.

In my reading of the of the fake news story I discovered I had indeed been duped. An image which appeared several times in my news feed of a young Donald Trump, overlaid

with a quote saying if he ran for president he would run for the republicans because their voters are idiots, was a fake. Believable to me based on my view of the man and served to reinforce that view. Would it have changed my view were it counter to my opinion? On its own I doubt it and of course, the chances are I wouldn't have even seen it.

Now I'm not for one moment saying that we shouldn't worry about fake news or miss-reporting, we should. I believe it is critical that we demand factual accuracy from news organisations, politicians, advertisers and any figure of authority. This includes the likes of Facebook and Google acknowledging responsibility for their part in content surfaced on their platforms. But let's not kid ourselves in thinking that it will stop people from holding contrary opinions to one another or, would have stopped people voting for Brexit or Trump.

The reality is, facts can be used selectively and spun to justify most arguments and when they can't people are incredibly good at ignoring them. Opinions however, are not built purely on facts. They have their foundation in beliefs which, are all together more emotional and built up over time. This is crucial when you apply to our world of marketing. Binet and Field, Byron Sharp and many others provide us with evidence that emotional messaging works harder than rational. It's not that the rational fact based message isn't important but its role is often to help justify the emotional opinion. And as we know faking emotion is much harder than making up a fact, unless of course you're Meg Ryan.

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