

“Don’t confuse me with the facts.....” – Campaigning in a post-fact world?

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A bat and ball together cost £1.10. The bat costs a pound more than the ball. What does the ball cost?

A number probably popped into your mind before you started consciously thinking about the question. Most people find they’re thinking ‘10 pence’ (it’s 5p), including thousands of student experimental subjects. It’s a small illustration of how faster-than-the-speed-of-thought notions and emotions determine far more of our ideas about the world than we are aware of, or would like to think.

It’s not just ‘the bad and the brainless’ who reject facts that conflict with what they believe or think they already know. We all do it – it’s wired into how human brains work.

This Walk-Cycle-Vote session on 31 March cherry-picked from Nobel Prize winning work on psychology and behavioural economics*. Here are some headlines:

- Auto brain systems throw us instant responses, with all their emotional freight, to everything we encounter, including new ideas. How long does it take to decide if we’re going to like someone? “Reduce town speed limits to 20mph? It’ll take me 50% longer to get everywhere”, cue anger, resentment, worry, frustration, despair, all (literally, no, literally) faster than the speed of thought.
- There’s power in first impressions, and they stick.
- We make sense of the world by stringing things we know or think we know into stories. It’s often easier to make a coherent story out of less rather than more information.
- We react more strongly to loss (which might just be the threat of loss) than to gain. We feel more pain at losing £50 than pleasure in finding £50. People feel the loss of the hope of there being a parking space outside the paper shop. Shop owners feel the loss of the prospect that some big spender can park right outside.
- People who have a belief about something (Brexit, putting a cycleway along a main road) put conscious, reasoning brain systems to work to unpick the opposing argument. (We don’t, of course, go looking for holes in the argument on our side.) So we judge the opposing argument to be a weaker argument, and views can end up even more polarised.
- And lots more....

What does this mean for campaigning, or those conversations with colleagues or neighbours? Some ideas:

- Take a breath, slow down.
- Take note of our own emotions, do our best to feel some empathy with theirs.
- Belief or disbelief is part of who we (or they) feel we are.
- “Well obviously you need *your* car, how would it be if other people felt able to leave theirs at home?”
- Aim to engage curiosity (ours and theirs).
- Belief comes from familiarity, find different ways and times to say what we want to.
- Tell personal stories – they engage feelings, facts don’t.
- (A post-workshop addition) Find respectful, empathetic ways of asking ‘What evidence would you need to change your mind on this?’

- * *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman, Penguin, 2012, ISBN 978-0-141-03357-0
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